

Religion: An Evolutionary Perspective

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Fossil records of **graves/burying the dead** are the earliest signs of religious belief in hominids. These sites were discovered in Qafzeh, Israel, and date back **~100,000** years.

Religious Behaviour Involves Mental Modules

Mental modules are said to accidentally give rise to religious concepts. The term for this is: **“mental module misapplication.”**

- Agent detection → this module is adaptive because it prevents **predation**.
This module gives rise to religious behaviour by assigning the cause of ambiguous occurrences to supernatural entities.
- Theory of mind → this module is adaptive because it allows us to **empathize** with others and **predict** their behaviour.
This module gives rise to religious behaviour by being mis-applied to non-conscious agents, as well as by continuing to run when observing a dead body.
The test usually used to assess whether someone has properly developed this module is called **The “Sally-Anne test”/“False-belief test”**.
- Ritual → the example given in class of a ritual performed by the Turkana people of Kenya is called **ariwo**.
 - Increasing cohesion through practice → practicing highly scripted, complex actions as a group tends to increase the group’s efficacy at future similar tasks.
 - Costly signaling theory → costly rituals act as reliable displays of commitment to the group, and non-participation exposes free-riders.
The **prisoner’s** dilemma is a commonly cited example of how cheating operates in the group context (free-loading).

Why are religious beliefs so successful and widespread?

- Minimally counter-intuitive concepts (MCICs) → ideas that violate normal ontological categories are memorized for much longer than normal, intuitive ideas. An example of a MCIC would be: **a thinking tree/a talking orange**.

Adaptive Benefits of Religious Behaviour

- Inter-group competition → religion encourages prosocial behaviour, this is called **“fictive kinship.”**
Groups that are better able to cooperate displace others through **warfare** and **reproductive differentials**.
- Free-rider problem → omnipresent deities discourage free-loading through punishments (also costly signaling hypothesis!).

- Terror management → consciousness allows us to think about death in the abstract sense, which gives us “death anxiety.”

Religion reduces unnecessary anxiety by promising symbolic immortality via an afterlife.

- Health benefits:

Religious individuals
experience lower rates of:

1. Coronary Heart Disease
2. Hypertension
3. Dementia
4. Cancer
5. General Mortality

Religious individuals
experience better:

1. Physical Functioning
2. Immunity
3. Endocrine Function
4. Perceived Health

Space for other notes and answering the discussion questions: