

The Diversity of Religious Systems Across History

An Evolutionary Cognitive Approach

Pascal Boyer and Nicolas Baumard

Abstract

The mental representations and behaviors we commonly call “religious”—everyday supernatural imagination, tribal cults, archaic religions, modern world religions—are amenable to explanation both in terms of computational, information-processing systems and in terms of adaptations that emerged during human evolution. These two research programs, focused on proximate and ultimate aspects of cultural representations respectively, have been particularly fruitful in the last 30 years. Early developments in cognitive approaches ushered in a whole new field in the study of religion. More recently, evolutionary psychology has provided new tools for explaining the emergence and transmission of religious ideas. This chapter aims to show how this cognitive and evolutionary approach can provide a better understanding of the historical diversity of religious systems.

Key Words: religion, evolution, cooperation, morality, Axial Age

C3.S1 **Avoiding Anachronism: Religious Beliefs in Human History**

C3.P1 Most scholars of religion grew up in cultural environments influenced by so-called world religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism), a specific kind of religion that appeared only recently in human history and only in the most developed antique societies (e.g., China, India, Mediterranean) (Baumard & Boyer, 2013; Bellah, 2012). In such cultural environments, it seems obvious that there is a religious domain, quite distinct from other domains of human thought and behavior. Also, it seems obvious that religious behavior always comes with a doctrine and that religious representations are intimately connected to the justification of moral behavior. It also seems obvious that costly behaviors, like pilgrimage, charity, and abstinence, must have been around for as long as humans had religious notions, as they constitute credible demonstrations of belief. Finally, it seems obvious that the actual beliefs of, say, Christians are on the whole described by the Christian doctrine, and that

adherence to this doctrine is the reason why people join that particular community. But all these assumptions are clearly false, as most anthropologists and historians of religion have pointed out (Bellah, 2011; Bloch, 2008; Boyer, 1994b, 2001; Lawson & McCauley, 1990; Pyysiainen, 2001).

As most of the features we spontaneously associate with “religion” are not actually present in human cultures, except for a few recent but familiar exceptions, it is not clear that the term “religion” is of much use to cognitive or social scientists. The term may be similar to “tree,” a category that is of pragmatic value for some purposes, like finding shade or designing landscapes, but of no use to biologists. That is, there is nothing much to find out—for example, concerning growth, reproduction, evolution—that would apply to all and only those things we think of as “trees.” In the same way, there is very little in terms of evolutionary dispositions, cultural transmission, or social dynamics that would apply to all and only those phenomena commonly called religious (Dubuisson, 2003; Saler, 1993).

C3.P3 In this chapter, we place religious representations and behaviors in the context of the archaeological, anthropological, and historical record. We briefly examine four major phenomena relevant to the field: (1) all human beings have a disposition for entertaining representations of supernatural beings, which feed daydreaming, fantasy, and fiction; (2) in most human groups, people engage in cults focused on some products of that imagination, such as ancestors, ghosts, gods, and spirits; (3) in large-scale archaic societies, corporations of priests turned some of these cults into “religions,” that is, organizations with unique doctrines, standardized ceremonies, and ritual specialists; (4) in some large-scale societies during the Axial Age, there appeared a subset of religions that included morality and individual disciplines in the doctrines. (See Figure 3.1 for an illustration of these processes in the creation of diverse varieties of religious representations.)

C3.P4 Seeing religious phenomena in this historical perspective should allow us to dispense with some misleading assumptions that unfortunately crop up in many discussions of religion in terms of cognition and evolution. As mentioned already, our common views about religion stem from the fact that all scholars in this field are familiar with one type of religious system—usually Christianity—that was rather exceptional in human prehistory and history but is common in our modern societies. To get beyond that misleading familiarity, it is important to keep in mind the following points:

C3.P5 1. There is no need to stipulate that humans have a specific capacity for religious representations, since all the cognitive capacities engaged in that domain are also present in some nonreligious domains.

C3.P6 2. For most of human prehistory, there were no religious doctrines, no corporations of specialized priests, no way in which one set of ideas was a “religion” distinct from another one, no interest in cosmogony, little interest in the afterlife, and no religious sanction for morality.

C3.P7 3. For most of human history, in archaic societies, religious doctrines described superhuman agents as interested in people’s obedience, not belief, and in the provision of sacrifices and other ceremonies, not adherence to moral norms. In fact, the gods themselves were usually amoral.

C3.P8 4. Religious doctrines do not describe people’s religious representations—the doctrines are an

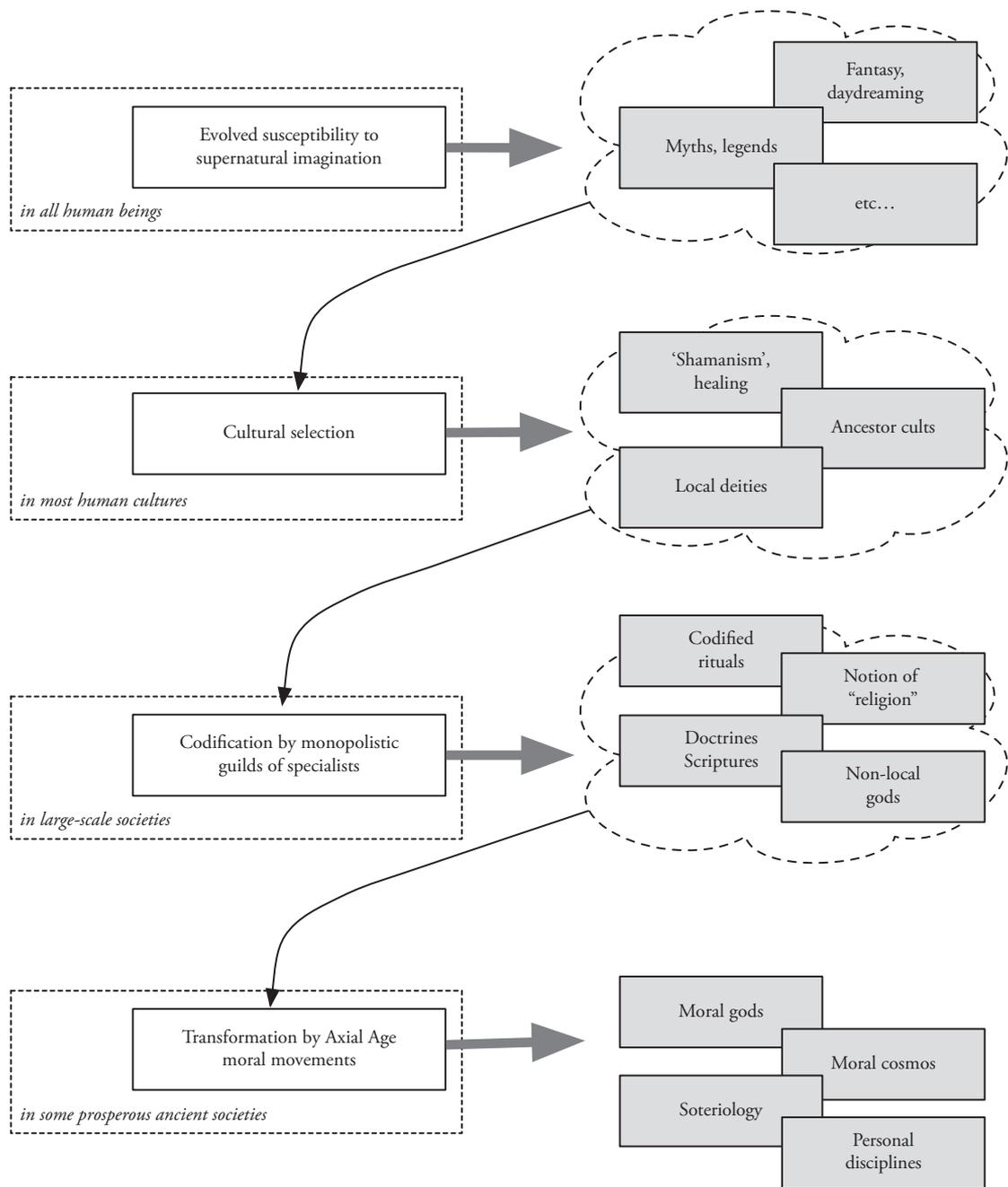
attempt, by literate specialists, to specify what people ought to think. In fact, all the evidence suggests that people’s representations are usually very different from religious doctrines.

In what follows, we outline the main results of C3.P9 studies of religious thought and behavior that avoid anachronistic and ethnocentric fallacies, by paying close attention to human evolution, cognitive processes, and the historical record.

The Supernatural Repertoire

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C3.P10 The concepts that we usually identify as religious (ancestors, gods, spirits, etc.) all belong to a domain of human imagination that we may call the supernatural repertoire. As such, they activate cognitive processes typical of human imagination (Byrne & Girotto, 2009; Harris, 1991; Roth, 2007), as well as more specific processes to do with superhuman agency (Atran, 2002; Barrett, 1996, 2000; Boyer, 1994a, 2001; Guthrie, 1993; Pyysiainen, 2001; Saler, 1993). Specifically, many supernatural concepts can be described as activating two kinds of information: (1) some highly specific information that violates intuitive expectations about a domain of reality (e.g., trees that are plants yet understand speech), and (2) some intuitive, generally tacit expectations about that domain of reality (the listening tree is still solid, in one place, etc.) (Barrett, 1996; Boyer, 1994a). In this description, a “domain of reality” should be understood as a cognitive domain; that is, a large category of objects for which we have systematic expectations, like PERSON, LIVING THING, ARTIFICIAL OBJECT, ANIMAL. The domain-wide expectations associated with these domains are, for example, intentional behavior for animals and persons, physiological processes for all living things, physical properties for all solid objects, and so on (Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1994). As there are only a limited number of fundamental, domain-wide expectations to violate, this suggests that despite the apparent open-endedness of human imagination, there is a limited catalog of such supernatural constructions, at least in terms of their underlying assumptions (Boyer, 2000).

C3.P11 Empirical studies show that some types of supernatural construction are (1) vastly more common than others in human cultures, and (2) more easily acquired and communicated by individuals. In particular, there is a clear advantage, both cultural and cognitive, for concepts of persons with nonintuitive physical properties (e.g., going through solid



C3.F1 **Figure 3.1** A sketch of the processes whereby evolved human capacities combine with different historical circumstances to create different varieties of religious representations.

objects) or cognitive capacities (e.g., knowing people's thoughts) and, to a lesser degree, for notions of artificial objects with mental capacities (e.g., statues that listen to prayers) (Barrett, 2000, 2002; Barrett & Nyhof, 2001; Boyer & Ramble, 2001). Such supernatural concepts are found in individual dreams or fantasies, as well as in socially transmitted

myths, folk-tales, and other forms of fiction and many forms of magic and religion.

The cognitive and cultural advantage for representations of intentional agents (either objects that become agentive or, more frequently, imagined agents with counterintuitive physical properties) over nonagent concepts is related to the central

place of social interaction, especially communication, in human survival. Humans live in a “cognitive niche” (Tooby & DeVore, 1987), in that they depend more than any other species on information provided by others and information about others. That is the evolutionary background for the emergence of an intuitive psychology or “mind-reading” (Frith & Frith, 2007; Leslie, Friedman, & German, 2004). As a consequence of capacities for intuitive psychology, a significant part of human social interaction takes place with non-physically present agents—for example, people who are away, deceased individuals, or of course imagined supernatural agents. Memories of what people did or said, as well as expectations, fears, and hopes of what they may do, are a constant theme of trains of thought and ruminations (and also the quintessential subject matter of social gossip). From an evolutionary standpoint, thoughts about absent agents may be necessary and useful, given the computational constraints of social interaction. Given the potential costs of mistakes in the social domain, a capacity for simulated interaction would provide the mind with a tool for representing and choosing between possible courses of action. There is evidence for the preparation and use of such scenarios in actual social behavior (Malle, Moses, & Baldwin, 2001; Saarni, 2001). In childhood, simulated interaction with imaginary friends also results in enhanced competence (Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Carlson, 1997).

C3.S3 **Small-Scale Societies: Interaction with Superhuman Agents**

C3.P13 In small-scale societies (bands of foragers, tribes, chiefdoms), a range of cultural representations center on concepts of imagined superhuman agents, a subset of the supernatural repertoire described above. Classical anthropology has provided an extensive description of the behaviors centered on such agent concepts, under the labels “primitive religion” or “tribal religion,” so that there is no need to go into much detail here (see, e.g., Child & Child, 1993; Lehmann & Myers, 1993; Spiro & D’Andrade, 1958). It should suffice to mention a few general and roughly defined types that can be found in many different small-scale societies.

C3.P14 A first type is the variety of healing practices thought to involve some communication with souls or spirits. The term “shamanism” may be used here, as a vague but convenient label. The rationale for engaging in these practices is always to address a specific issue, like a case of illness or misfortune. As many people interpret unfortunate events as caused

by spirits or ancestors, they call on a specialist, who is supposed to have special skills in communicating with these agents. Such specialists are hired on the basis of a reputation for successful cures. They trained with other such specialists, from whom they received special recipes, ritual songs, and so forth. In some cases, these shamans or mediums lose their reputation for efficacy, or lose out to more attractive competitors.

By contrast, “ancestor-cults” are carried out by C3.P15 specific individuals by virtue of their genealogical position (e.g., being the eldest male in a lineage). These ceremonies are directed at dead individuals whose protection is deemed necessary (e.g., to ward off misfortune or ensure that crops grow as planned). These cults are more typical of agrarian, sedentary tribal groups than of bands of foragers. There is a great variation in the extent to which ancestors are identified individuals or generic elders. In many cases, the living owe the ancestors sacrifices as a quid pro quo for protection. Sacrificed animals (and more rarely plants) are actually consumed by the participants, although there is generally some local theory about the way some part of the offering is consumed by the unseen ancestors. Rules for the distribution of parts of the sacrificed animals often underscore the genealogical status of different individuals and groups.

Finally, in such societies there is often a host of C3.P16 other superhuman agents, such as spirits of particular places or elements. A mountain or a river may have their particular spirits, who must be pacified to ensure a safe trek or passage. In horticultural and agrarian societies, offerings to these local deities may be necessary before cultivating each garden or field.

It may be of help to summarize the features of C3.P17 such “religious” practices, if only to emphasize how the latter epithet can be misleading when we turn to very different practices and representations:

1. *There is no doctrine.* As most anthropologists C3.P18 found out when studying such “religious” practices, there is simply no agreed description of the superhuman agents, beyond some very rough features. For instance, spirits are described as invisible, but there is often no specific, agreed on understanding of what that implies. Shamans can contact spirits, but most people are content with the vaguest description of how that is done, what language spirits speak, or other details of that kind. When one presses people for more specific information, as anthropologists are wont to do, the

response is embarrassed silence or idiosyncratic speculation. Most people find these questions of no interest whatever.

C3.P19 2. *Practitioners are individuals.* People attribute the practitioner's skill at interacting with superhuman agents to individual qualities, especially in the case of shaman-like healers and other individuals with special access to spirits or gods. These specialists may place some emphasis on their training or initiation, as a guarantee of quality, but the ineffable internal qualities are always required. Obviously, this personal attribution may be quite different in the case of ancestor cults, where genealogical position is the only qualification for office. Note, however, that in many places people in that genealogical position are also said to have inherited a special essence or are initiated in a particular cult before reaching their position.

C3.P20 3. *The goal is to address specific problems.* People sacrifice to local gods because these have the power to dry wells or damage crops. They "offer" pigs to the ancestors because the latter may get angry and make people sick. The point of a shamanistic ritual is to cure some specific person of some specific ailment. People are not motivated to develop a relationship or become intimate with superhuman agents—indeed the point of many rituals is to keep them at bay. Transactions with the agents are most often described in cool bargaining terms, as when illness is thought to occur because the ancestors found the last sacrificed animal insultingly small.

C3.P21 4. *There are no unified services.* Different shamans may provide connection with spirits in completely different ways. They may also provide substantially different services to different people or at different times. This is of course connected to the above feature. As the point of the ceremonies is to address particular cases, the specialists provide equally particular services.

C3.P22 5. *Superhuman agents are local.* That is obviously the case for place-spirits like the god of a river or mountain. Ancestors too are local in the sense that they are bound to a particular group, so that no one would assume that their power extends beyond the boundaries of the lineage. Although myths often mention cosmic gods or mythical heroes that created human culture, these agents are generally not relevant to people's existence and circumstances.

C3.P23 6. *Loose connections to political authority.* In lineage societies, elders are both political leaders

and ex officio responsible for organizing the ancestor cult, mobilizing people and resources for sacrifices, and so forth. Besides this, most activity concerned with superhuman agents is provided by informal specialists, who generally yield little political influence and in many cases are not even of high social status.

7. *There is generally no question of membership, adherence, or commitment.* C3.P24 In many of the situations described here, it would make no sense to ask participants whether they are members of a cult. People who consult a shaman or healer do not generally join a community, no more than would the patients of a particular physician in a modern context. In the case of ancestor cults, the question is irrelevant, as only people of a particular lineage participate in the ceremonies. The main exceptions to this pattern are secret societies, usually marginal in the "religious" activities of such groups.

8. *No specific moral doctrine.* C3.P25 This deserves some emphasis, as it seems clear, indeed self-evident, to most modern people that notions of gods, spirits, and ancestors are connected to specific moral imperatives in the form of moral codes given by the gods or exemplary behaviors demonstrated by these superhuman agents, or because the gods will reward or punish ordinary people as a function of their behavior. This kind of connection, however, is a recent cultural innovation, as we explain later. Spirits will capture your soul simply because they can, whether you were good or not. The ancestors or local deities are frequently said to monitor people's behavior, but that generally implies adherence to specific norms supposedly laid out by these agents, such as wearing particular colors or marrying outside one's lineage. In general, nobody expects the spirits to be aggravated because someone lied or otherwise failed to uphold moral norms.

Obviously, this does not entail that people in C3.P26 such groups have no moral feelings or principles. On the contrary, the ethnographic record and experimental studies so far suggest that there are no substantial differences between different cultural environments in terms of intuitive moral understandings. In such groups, as elsewhere, moral understandings emerge inevitably in normal brains socialized in a normal environment. The contrast is that, in most human societies, people can entertain these moral intuitions without making an explicit connection between their content and the existence of particular superhuman agents.

C3.S4 **Kingdoms and City-States:
The Creation of “Religion”**

C3.P27 Complex polities originated in a few regions of the world, a few millennia ago, and became city-states, kingdoms, or empires. Their complex economies and embryonic markets meant that many activities, craftsmanship in particular, became the province of specialized groups. These guilds or corporations worked as cartels for the provision of particular goods or services. They organized training, often arranged uniform prices, and generally guaranteed a standard of service.

C3.P28 The provision of religious services is no exception to this trend. Together with guilds of merchants, blacksmiths, or butchers, there appeared groups of ritual officers and other specialists of the supernatural. They generally operated a monopoly, with an exclusive right to perform particular rites. They formed centralized organizations that maintained a strict control over new candidates. They tried to bind as closely as possible with political power. They, naturally, promoted the view that their services could not be obtained elsewhere.

C3.P29 The innovations introduced by these organizations are best understood in contrast to the cults and practices described above:

C3.P30 1. *There is a doctrine.* That is, the religious corporation provides a set of propositions that define superhuman agents, describe their characteristic powers, link these powers to various features of the cosmos, specify what ceremonies must be performed and why, and so forth. These propositions are explanatory and generally coherent. Practitioners or the common populace may be required to learn and recite them, thereby reinforcing this internal coherence (Whitehouse, 2000). In most cases, religious corporations make extensive use of literacy—indeed, religious corporations are among the first users of scripts, together with accountants and lawmakers (Goody, 1977, 1986). Writing facilitates the uniformity of service and practice that is characteristic of such professional groups.

C3.P31 2. *Practitioners are licensed by the organization.* Religious corporations describe their members as specially trained, in a uniform manner, so that all members of the corporation provide equally effective services. Individuals who join the organization are generally not deemed to possess specific essential qualities—but in most cases they must demonstrate an ability to acquire the doctrine and perform standardized services as required. Any

appeal to personal charismatic features or personal revelation is strongly discouraged.

3. *Ceremonies focus on general issues.* Ritual services are typically not just about particular issues, such as individual cases of illness and misfortune, but rather focus on cosmic or political themes, as prescribed by the doctrines. One recurrent theme is the protection of the polity and its rulers by the gods. C3.P32

4. *The services are standardized.* It is quite natural for a shaman to use flexible, highly variable ritual recipes. A religious organization, by contrast, is bound to insist on highly codified, inflexible ritual recipes. Members of religious organizations often use written texts to maintain a uniform provision of religious services. A religious organization promises to deliver a stable, uniform kind of service that only it can provide, but also a service that any member of the guild will provide in the same way. Proper service depends not on the personal qualities of the specialists but on their training and membership in the organization. C3.P33

5. *Religious organizations promote concepts of powerful, nonlocal gods.* Religious specialists who strive to reach a large market naturally describe their activity as concerned with highly abstract, delocalized, cosmic gods, in contrast to shamans who deal with local superhuman agents. Religious organizations address not local groups, but the polity as a whole or a global community beyond political boundaries. The religious corporations typically claim connection not to local spirits and ancestors, but to larger-scale supernatural agents with whom the guild proposes to interact with in the same way, regardless of the particular place and customers. C3.P34

6. *Close connection to political power.* Castes or corporations of priests are directly sponsored by kings, provide special services to the political officials, and often put forth theological arguments to legitimize the existing political order. In many cases the religious corporation is part and parcel of the state institutions. The connection to coercive institutions is essential, as the religious organizations generally try to enforce a monopoly of religious provision. The specific “religion” that becomes widespread in the polity usually is the one whose corporation managed to garner the most political influence. C3.P35

7. *Coercive enforcement of participation.* In most historical large-scale societies until the Enlightenment, people were coerced into participating in collective ceremonies, as well as C3.P36

transferring resources to the religious organizations through tithes, donations, or taxes. In many places, forced labor was mobilized to build temples, statues, and other monuments. The state and its religious corporations do not tolerate any contestation or modification of the established religious doctrines and rituals. In other words, the populace cannot be said to adhere to the local official religion or its doctrine, as they generally have no say in the matter.

C3.P37 8. *No specific moral doctrine.* We must mention this feature, though it does not stand in contrast to informal religious practices described above, because it is often misconstrued in evolutionary models of “religion.” People in archaic societies imagined gods with extensive powers over them but little moral concern. These gods were said to monitor what people do, but mostly to check that they provided the prescribed ceremonies or sacrifices, and conformed to established political and social norms. Also, in many cases the gods themselves were described as unencumbered with moral conscience and uninterested in human morality.

C3.P38 One particular development needs emphasis: the emergence of an explicit notion of “religion.” In tribal or foraging societies, there are rituals directed at spirits, other rituals for ancestors, and traditions of magic and various superstitions and mythical lore—but there is no assumption that all these different kinds of practices belong to a single conceptual domain. This was noticed by anthropologists from an early stage; people in “traditional” societies seemed to have no clear notion of “religion.” Missionaries had to create special terms for this domain of ideas and activities. In large-scale societies, by contrast, there is an explicit conception of “religion” as what is provided by the religious organization—ritual services but also doctrines, eschatology, the training of specialists, and so forth.

C3.P39 This must be emphasized as the origin of a misunderstanding about “religion” in small-scale societies. Cultural anthropology and other social sciences, as well as history or philology, emerged as systematic disciplines in societies with organized doctrinal religions. They naturally assumed that other types of societies, including small-scale tribes or bands, must also have some form of “religion,” some organized domain of representations and practices centered on a doctrine of supernatural agency (Saler, 1993; Smith, 1982). More recent cultural anthropology has largely abandoned this assumption. It does not

generally treat “religion” as a useful analytical concept (Bloch, 2008).

The Axial Age Movements

C3.S5

Religions are special institutions that only appear in large-scale, mostly state societies with an extensive division of labor. But not all religions are the same, and one development in particular is worthy of attention because of its importance for the world we now live in—the appearance and great cultural success of what are called “Axial Age” religions (Arnason, Eisenstadt, & Wittrock, 2005; Bellah, 2011). The term was coined by Karl Jaspers, who noted that most so-called world religions had appeared at a specific time, roughly between 600 BCE and 100 CE; were very similar in their prescriptions; and could be traced to a small set of original doctrines (Jaspers, 1953).

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In three distinct places—northern China, the Ganges valley, and the eastern Mediterranean—at the time mentioned by Jaspers, there appeared doctrines that emphasized cosmic justice (i.e., the notion that the world overall is fair), that described the gods themselves as interested in human morality, and that promoted all sorts of personal or “spiritual” techniques to do with moderation, self-discipline, and withdrawal from excessive greed and ambition. That is the case, despite many obvious differences, for Buddhism, Jainism, and various forms of reformed Hinduism (Bronkhorst, 2007; Gombrich, 2009; Obeyesekere, 2002; Olivelle, 1993); for Taoism and Confucianism (Katz, 2009; Slingerland, 2007); and for Orphism, Second-Temple Judaism, Stoicism, and Christianity (Bremmer, 1983, 2002). The similarities in doctrine are dramatic, including, for instance, quasi-identical formulations of the Golden Rule (Baumard & Boyer, 2013). These doctrines described a just world in which bad deeds are punished, but also a world in which transgressions can be redeemed by penance and self-sacrifice. Finally, the new doctrines described a variety of moral paragons, saints, or sages, whose behavior should be emulated to the best of one’s capacities (Baumard & Boyer, 2013).

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These moralizing religious doctrines projected onto the gods, in an explicit form, principles of moral reasoning that are actually present, albeit in an intuitive form, in everyday moral reasoning. From an evolutionary standpoint, many moral intuitions and feelings can be explained as the outcome of principles that guide cooperation, by motivating people to seek mutually beneficial arrangements, for example, a repartition of the

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fruits of labor that matches different people’s contributions, an equitable distribution of available resources, and so forth (Baumard, André, & Sperber, 2013). These intuitive assumptions are made explicit, for instance, in the Golden Rule, following which an interaction is just if positions are interchangeable—if I would not lose out by being you, nor you by being me. In the same way, one of our implicit moral principles is that transgressions should be punished by a decrease in welfare that is proportional to the undue benefit (Baumard, 2010). Once translated in explicit religious terms, this motivates the notion that sinners should give alms and extend charity as reparation, for example. So, in various domains, the religious doctrines that originated in the Axial Age seem intuitive, and compelling, because they explicate and extend our preexisting moral intuitions (Baumard & Boyer, 2013).

C3.P43 Axial Age movements fostered personal discipline and moderation, and provided various techniques aimed at controlling the self, taming desire, limiting appetites, and so on. This was consistent with a notion of the “soul” as a personal, highly individual entity that could be made better or purer, and crucially could be “saved” through moral behavior (Bremmer, 1983). The various techniques were supposed to curb essential evolved motivations in human beings—the desire to have food, shelter, and resources, to gain social status, and of course to maximize reproductive potential. Ascetic doctrines described all these motivations as negative, inferior to the cultivation of a pure soul, and generally counterproductive. The prescribed way was to constrain oneself and lead a decent life (Confucianism), to demote pain and suffering as transient (Stoicism), or to renounce the material world altogether (Buddhism).

C3.P44 This raises the question: Why should the notion of a moral cosmos, the conception of gods as moral, a preoccupation with the soul, and the cultivation of self-discipline all occur together, in similar ways, in these specific places?

C3.P45 Quantitative history studies may provide the answer by evaluating levels of economic development and material affluence at different times and in different places in history (Morris, 2013). A variety of proxies (e.g., size of houses, number of hearths per house, extent of craftsmanship, traces of pollution, and many more) provide a convenient index of prosperity and show a remarkable pattern of development. There was a steady increase in energy extraction from foragers to horticultural and agricul-

tural societies, and then a sharp amplification with large-scale societies, like Egypt, the Inca and Mayan empires, early Chinese kingdoms, and the Sumerian city-states. But that progress is dwarfed by the remarkable uptake that occurred around 1000 BCE in three specific regions: the Ganges valley in India, the Yellow and Yangtze valleys in China, and the eastern Mediterranean (Baumard, Hyafil, Morris, & Boyer, 2015).

Note that the Axial Age movements all developed first among the upper classes. Gautama, founder of Buddhism, was a prince. Indian and then Chinese Buddhism spread first among the aristocracy. Greek Stoicism too was an aristocratic fashion. Obviously, the movements then spread and were appropriated by other social groups, and sometimes turned into protest movements by the dispossessed. But the appearance of moral-spiritual concerns, as connected to gods and religious activities, was clearly characteristic of the affluent upper classes.

This in turn raises the question: What is the mechanism? Why should extreme prosperity lead to these specific concerns for morality and self-discipline?

A possible explanation is in terms of life-history strategies (Figueredo et al., 2006; Nettle, 2010). There is a wide variety of such strategies in humans, triggered by such external information as birth weight, nutrition during childhood, the state of the reproductive market at puberty, and the risk of early death in adulthood (Ellis, Figueredo, Brumbach, & Schlomer, 2009). As a result, people intuitively prefer to behave at different points on the spectrum between moderate conduct and wise investment in long-term prospects at one end, and the furious satisfaction of urgent needs on the other. As extreme affluence may predispose people toward patience and long-term perspectives, they would find ideologies of moderation and preservation of the soul intuitively appropriate and therefore compelling (Baumard et al., 2015).

This life-history approach also explains other features of Axial Age doctrines. First, the doctrines generally promoted a restricted sociosexuality and a heavy investment in the family. This specific value distinguished, for example, early Christians from Pagans (Brown, 1988; Harper, 2013). Second, the movements emphasized hard work, self-discipline, and frugality. Long before the Protestant Revolution, *acedia* or sloth was one of the seven deadly sins. This nonmaterialistic orientation fits naturally with a slow strategy in life-history terms. A high investment

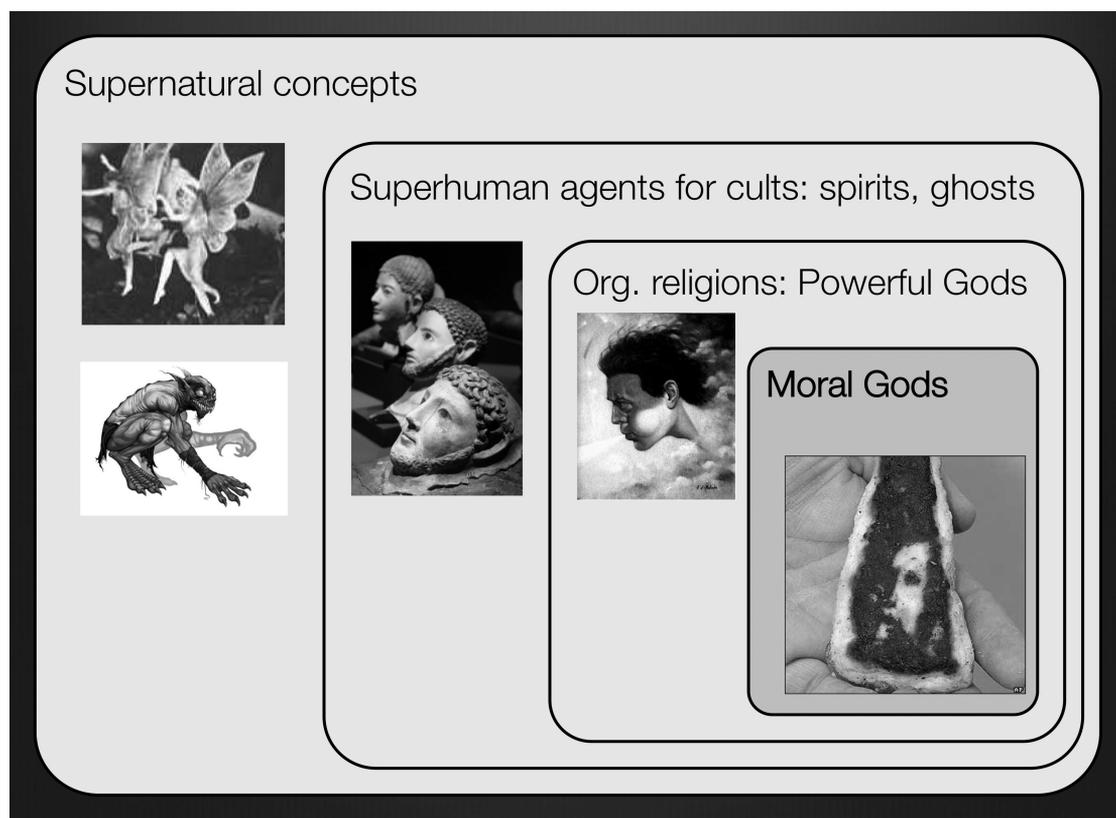
in work and one’s children’s upbringing only makes sense if it is likely to pay off in the future—that is, if the environment is stable enough to make such bets sensible. By contrast, in a harsh and unpredictable environment, it is more profitable to consume than to invest.

C3.P50 Although a future-oriented strategy is beneficial in an affluent and stable environment, it is vulnerable to exploitation. Moralists, philosophers, and religious thinkers, from Plato to Dostoevsky, have long considered this vulnerability as a central problem for cooperative strategies. To solve this solution, many of them have resorted to the idea that the universe is somehow in favor of those people who cooperate. A belief in supernatural punishment can then be used strategically by future-oriented people to legitimize their way of life and their moral condemnation of sexual promiscuity, limited cooperation, and present-oriented behaviors (Kurzban, Dukes, & Weeden, 2010; Trivers, 2011). To sum up, moralizing religions could be used to legitimize a new, future-oriented way of life characteristic of the most affluent members of antique societies.

The religious systems and organizations we are C3.P51 most familiar with, especially in modern Western environments, are the cultural descendants of these Axial Age movements—of a highly specific perspective on supernatural agency and its connection to morality, which was imposed on very large populations through conquest, invasion, and colonization yet remains fairly special among the varieties of supernatural representations entertained by human minds. Figure 3.2 illustrates this specificity of the Axial Age doctrines and their descendants.

Why Religions Never Completely Eliminate Local Cults C3.S6

Our succinct account of various processes relevant to C3.P52 what one usually calls “religious” representations starts from universal human capacities, notably the capacity to imagine counterintuitive entities and to entertain social interaction with physically nonpresent agents. Part of the products of individual imagination may spread in the minds of different members of a group, thereby becoming “cultural.” Some of these cultural representations are the object of



C3.F2 **Figure 3.2** An illustration of the ways in which cults emerged from the supernatural imagination, religions (with doctrines and organized personnel) emerged from informal cults, and Axial Age doctrines emerged from archaic religions.



collective projects such as cults or rituals. Some of the latter are codified into doctrines by religious organizations in large-scale polities. And some of the doctrines were transformed into moralistic, soteriological movements in the Axial Age.

C3.P53 It would be a grave mistake to take these different processes as different, consecutive stages in the development of religious representations. First, obviously, the capacity for supernatural imagination is present in all humans and all cultures. Most important, psychological and anthropological evidence shows that, appearances notwithstanding, most organized religions (1) do not succeed in implanting their doctrines in their followers' minds, and (2) generally fail to reach the monopolistic position to which they naturally aspire.

C3.S7 **Theological Correctness**

C3.P54 Consider first the question of doctrines. It may seem that religious doctrines, as exposed by the specialists of different traditions, provide a good guide to what is believed, or at least represented, by members or followers of these different traditions. This is very much the accepted view in most public discussions of religion, debates on the conflict between religion and science, and in debates between religious specialists. However, that assumption is extremely misleading (McCauley, 2011). Indeed, demonstrations of the noncongruence of doctrines and actual representations were among the first developments of the cognitive approach to the field (Barrett, 1996, 1998).

C3.P55 In particular, we should not assume (1) that people's statements (e.g., that spirits live in the forest or that Buddha is infinite compassion) are the straightforward expression of beliefs, (2) that people indeed entertain a set of stable beliefs about superhuman agents, (3) that they have conscious access to all these beliefs, and finally (4) that they strive to be consistent in their beliefs. Unfortunately, a lot of history and sociology of religions is written on the basis of these simplifying assumptions, which turn out to be very misleading in this domain.

C3.P56 Point (3) is particularly important. We can assume that people have a "concept" of Buddha, for example, by which we mean that stored semantic memory information allows them to think about Buddha, have conversations about it/him, and behave in particular ways in certain situations, and so forth. But is that information accessible? After all, the reason for having cognitive psychology and neuroscience is that we do not have access to the

information underpinning our ordinary concepts. Why should that not apply to the domain of superhuman agents?

Indeed, experimental evidence shows that religious concepts are informed by a set of tacit assumptions and information structures that are not accessible to conscious inspection. For instance, concepts of superhuman agency "piggyback" on a number of tacit assumptions and principles of intuitive psychology that people need not—and often could not—represent explicitly. The fact that tacit assumptions are added to explicit information is most visible in the experimental studies of discrepancies between these two kinds of information. Justin Barrett coined the term "theological correctness" to describe situations in which people express a commitment to a specific, explicit statement *p*, while their inferences are driven by tacit assumptions that sometimes amount to *non-p*. For instance, Barrett elicited descriptions of "god" from Protestant believers, who seem to place superhuman mental powers (prescience, omniscience) at the center of that concept. However, implicit tasks like story recall or the choice of themes for prayers reveal that the same people tacitly assume ordinary limits to god's mental powers, such as serial attention (Barrett, 1996; Slone, 2004). Generally, there is a discrepancy between professed doctrine and actual inferences, as the latter are based on nonreligious, indeed non-culturally specific intuitive principles. The same phenomenon has been observed in Hinduism, Japanese Buddhism, and various Protestant denominations (Barrett, 1998; Malley, 2004; Slone, 2004).

The Failure of Monopolization

Doctrinal religion does not displace other kinds of religious thought and behavior, but it adds to it an extra layer of official concepts and norms. This new layer is characterized by explicit and coherent links between the various concepts; a definition of a domain of "religion" as specific, *sui generis*; and the presence of an organized group of religious scholars or specialists.

In most complex polities, there is an organized guild of religious practitioners, as described here, but also a variety of informal providers, local shamans, wizards, healers, inspired idiots, and ominous dreamers. Their claim to efficacy is based on local reputation, on apprenticeship with a famed specialist, on supposed connections to local supernatural agents, in general on their individual characteristics.

In most cases, the dominant religious organization uses whatever political clout it can garner to dissolve this competition, demote it, relegate it to unimportant or local rituals, and hinder its operation and the transmission of its recipes. That is the origin, in many traditions, of explicit conceptions of “magic” or “superstition” as supposedly distinct from the domain of “religion” (Tambiah, 1990).

C3.P60 However, as religious specialists know all too well, the war against what they call superstition is never-ending. For instance, consider the fact that in most Muslim societies, there are informal cults of saints and marabouts—that is, supposedly holy individuals—whose intention is required in case of personal misfortune or social conflict. In many cases, these activities are frowned upon or outlawed by the official establishment—that is, the *ulema*, the legal scholars with strong political clout—in charge of the doctrine (Gellner, 1981; Lambek, 1993). The same conflict has been pervasive in Christian societies, ever since the Christian churches became politically influential and could use that influence to exclude magicians, healers, and other informal competitors (Brown, 1981).

C3.P61 Such examples illustrate the more general point that established institutional religious groups in many different places simply fail to enforce their monopoly of ritual provision. The competition from informal, smaller-scale providers seems impossible to eradicate, even though the official religious groups frequently resort to oppressive tactics against them. Why is the resurgence of competition seemingly inevitable?

C3.P62 One possible explanation may lie in the fact that literate specialists are bound to create theories that move further and further away from intuitive expectations, because the tools of literacy and of systematic argument allow the emergence of such theories. Starting with concepts that include an optimal balance of counterintuitive statements and intuitive assumptions (e.g., a god that watches you), theologians are wont to create much more abstruse concepts (e.g., three persons that are one person). By contrast, shamans, mediums, diviners, and the like, generally utter statements that are much closer to the most easily acquired and transmitted religious representations—that is, closer to the spontaneous supernatural repertoire described at the beginning of this chapter.

C3.P63 Another factor may be the special qualities of the official services. As mentioned above, religious institutions must provide unified, identical services for a whole polity, or even beyond political boundaries.

Obviously, such standardized services do not vary with the specifics of particular cases. So two people afflicted with misfortune may be required to pray to the same god in the same way and perform the same rituals. By contrast, informal specialists provide services focused on the specifics of the cases at hand. For instance, a shaman’s patient is provided with a ritual aimed at recapturing his or her particular soul from specific spirits, who stole the soul for specific reasons to do with that person’s circumstances. We do not know enough about the cognitive processes whereby people represent misfortune, which is why it is difficult to explain this urge to provide particularistic explanation and remedies. However, the urge is certainly there, and may pose a fundamental challenge to the ambitions of religious corporations.

Conflicting Goals Within Official, Post-Axial Religions

C3.S9

Many of the religions we are familiar with were created, transformed, or influenced by Axial Age movements. As a result, their doctrines to this day give pride of place to moral transformation, self-discipline, and cosmic justice. This emphasis may seem quite natural to more affluent believers, especially to a cultural and political elite, whose chosen behaviors (e.g., in terms of moderation) are given cosmic legitimacy by the doctrines. By the same token, however, Axial Age doctrines of moderation may seem irrelevant to the populace, buffeted by disease, hunger, and violence. These people generally favor religious activities that will address their immediate and critical problems, for instance through the supposed efficacy of prayers, sacrifices, or other rituals.

C3.P64

In the post-Axial civilizations, this has resulted in the familiar tension between a relatively austere, nonpragmatic version of the doctrine and a limited accommodation, on the part of religious authorities, of people’s demand for efficacious rituals. In effect, the dominant religious organizations may to some degree avoid the direct competition with informal providers described above by offering some elements of ritual efficacy as well as doctrine and values. For instance, Tibetan lamas do not just transmit abstruse doctrine and personal discipline; they also provide farmers with ritual protection against caterpillars (Ramble, 2008). Muslim clerics occasionally sanction the cult of saints and relics (Bowen, 1993), in between periodic returns to doctrinal orthodoxy (Gellner, 1969, 1981).

C3.P65

The history of Christianity provides many illustrations of this tension (Brown, 1988, 2013; Harper, 2013; Stowers, 2001; Veyne, 2010). It started as a

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typical Axial Age movement, focused on salvation and antimaterialism. It garnered considerable popular support by accommodating the cults of saints and relics, as well as the cult of the Virgin. This in turn gave rise to periodic outbursts of dissent, from groups trying to return to voluntary poverty, moderation, or even chastity (Cathars, Waldensians, Franciscans, etc.) (Little, 1983; Vauchez, 1993). Both sides in these disputes used the same scriptures in contrasted ways, the ritualists seeing Jesus as a great magician and a powerful warrior against Satan, while the spiritualists described him as a paragon, a moral exemplar of poverty and chastity. In the end, the Christian churches did manage to acquire an official religious monopole in the West, but at the price of diversifying its “offer” so much that the official doctrine diverged from the actual practices and beliefs of many participants.

C3.P67 More generally, this conflict is inevitable in religious institutions influenced by Axial Age doctrines. On the one hand, if official religions align with the need of the affluent elite, they fail to get the adhesion of the population, who may turn to old gods and folk rituals. On the other hand, when official religions make room for the needs of sacrifice and prayer, they appear to degenerate into ritualistic cults, a change that drives away people motivated by the prospect of spiritual transformation. This conflict explains why official religious organizations constantly struggle to impose an official doctrine that accommodates both ritualistic needs and spiritual needs, and why they are constantly contested on both sides.

C3.S10 **Religious Representations and Human Evolution**

C3.P68 From an evolutionary perspective, the dispositions and processes involved in what people commonly call “religion” result from a number of distinct adaptations, all of which underpin some “religious” phenomena as well as many “nonreligious” ones, if one really wants to use these labels (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2008). For instance, supernatural imagination is an evolved characteristic of human minds, with consequences in the construction of fiction, superstitions, and daydreams as well as “religious” and magical concepts (Harris, 2000; Roth, 2007). Humans readily conceive of superhuman agents, found in stories and myths, as well as in “religious” accounts of gods and spirits (Barrett, 2000). Evolved mechanisms of threat-detection account for many fears, obsessions, and phobias, and explain some common themes of “religious” and “nonreligious” rituals

(Lienard & Boyer, 2006). Dispositions for mutualistic cooperation explain universal moral intuitions that occur mostly in “nonreligious” situations, even though they were in some places reformulated and codified by Axial Age “religious” doctrines (Baumard & Boyer, 2013). The human skill at building and maintaining complex coalitions makes it possible to set up all sorts of productive organizations, in most cases of a “nonreligious” kind but occasionally, in large-scale societies, as “religious” organizations (Boyer, 2001; Ekelund, Hébert, & Tollison, 2006). Each of these domains can be illuminated by taking into account cognitive adaptations and historical conditions. None of them is explained any better by separating the “religious” from the “nonreligious” parts of their effects.

In the modern, generally Western places where C3.P69 scholarly studies of religion take place, it is quite clear that there is such a thing as “religion,” with specific cultural, social, and political consequences (Dubuisson, 2003). This explains, as noted above, the anachronistic and ethnocentric temptation to project features of such systems onto human prehistory. It also explains why there is a strong social demand for “explaining religion” or replacing “religion in the context of evolution,” as well as investigating how “the brain creates religion” or “how science conflicts with religion” (Smith, 1982). For all these reasons, one may predict that “theories of religion” will continue to flourish, even though they do not focus on a coherent domain of cognitive or cultural phenomena.

Despite this confusion, there is ample scope for C3.P70 the evolutionary study of things usually identified as religious, because they provide salient cases in which we can investigate evolved human cognition and its cultural effects. For instance, the study of religious thought and behavior in various cultures may lead to a better understanding of the human capacities for imagination, of our understanding and enjoyment of fiction, of moral intuitions, and of the construction of stable institutions, as diverse consequences of human evolution by natural selection.

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