



Informal religious activity outside hegemonic religions: wild traditions and their relevance to evolutionary models

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ABSTRACT

Evolutionary approaches to religious representations must be grounded in a precise description of the forms of religious activity that occurred before the emergence of state societies and doctrinal religious organizations. These informal religious activities or “wild traditions” consist of services provided by individual specialists, with no formal training or organization, who generally specialize in palliating or preventing misfortune. The anthropological and historical record show that (a) such traditions are present in almost all documented human societies, (b) they have important common features, and (c) they reappear despite the political dominance of doctrinal organizations. The form of religious activity that humans spontaneously create, or re-create in the face of political suppression, comprises no stable doctrine, faith, or community of believers. In light of these facts, important corrections should be made to current models of the evolutionary underpinnings of religious thought and behavior, in particular, by taking into account the great importance of political coercion and the minor role of doctrines in the spread of religious concepts and practices.

KEYWORDS

Cultural evolution;
evolutionary models;
religions; shamanism

Q4 Evolutionary perspectives in the study of religious representations aim to describe the kinds of mental capacities or preferences that (a) occur in human minds by virtue of natural selection and (b) influence the acquisition and transmission of what we usually call “religious” thought and behavior. This enterprise is unlikely to succeed if we stick to a distorted view of religious representations. In particular, reflections on the topic are, in many cases, unduly influenced by the evolutionarily recent and exceptional development of what are properly called “religions,” that is, doctrines supported by organizations. Rather, the study of religious representations should focus on what happened before the emergence of religions in that sense, and also on what happens outside their hegemony, or at its periphery—what I call informal religious activity or wild traditions.

What matters for evolutionary models

In the study of the evolved psychology that made human cultures possible, it is a truism that we should focus on what was around in ancestral times rather than recent conditions, as the latter is unlikely to have exercised much influence on the gene pool because of the relative speeds of genetic selection and historical change (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Our social and political capacities, for instance, are geared to life in small-scale communities rather than mass societies (Petersen, 2012). One must consider such mismatches between evolutionary and present conditions, before

attempting to describe the relevant features of the adapted mind. In the case at hand, when considering the evolutionary dynamics that led to religious representations, we should avoid basing our reasoning on features that probably were not present in ancestral conditions.

Now, many approaches to religious representations seem to be based on (often tacit) assumptions derived from the features of modern “religions,” among which the notion (a) that religious representations mainly come in the form of *beliefs* (i.e., explicit representations held to be true), (b) that these beliefs are organized in systems or *doctrines* (with coherent connections between beliefs), (c) that people in a group do have similar representations, and (d) that having the same representations matters to them, and other related assumptions, discussed below. Such assumptions appear in Western descriptions of “exotic” religions from the seventeenth century onward (Bowen, 2015, p. 36ff.). They became the central tenet of intellectualist interpretations of religious representations as statements about the world (Skorupski, 1975, p. 9ff.), and were implicit, if less central, in classical functionalism (Bloch, 2005, p. 15ff.; McCauley & Lawson, 1984).

These assumptions are taken for granted mostly because they are quite natural—natural, that is, to those familiar with “world” or “organized” religions, a familiarity that results in a distorted picture of religious representations. As Maurice Bloch points out, such forms of “religion,” in the common understanding of the term, only appear with the emergence of states. So, it makes little sense to apply these common assumptions to the study of societies without such organizations and institutions (Bloch, 2008). Instead, we should consider what occurred before doctrinal religions emerged, also what can be observed in places where they did not emerge, and what often reappears at the periphery of doctrinal influence—what could be called wild traditions.

I propose that this very large set of religious systems (a) is very different from what is usually meant by “religion,” and in fact, cannot be explained in the same framework as religions in the usual sense, (b) has important common properties, which (c) matter as this wild form of religious activity is what humans spontaneously created throughout history, and re-created in the most diverse conditions, so that (d) these common features should constitute the empirical basis for the evolutionary models of religious thought and behavior.

Features of untamed religious activities

Anthropologists describe as “religious” a variety of activities and concepts, which like other anthropological notions, are linked by a family resemblance more than defining features (Needham, 1975). The disparate set of “wild” or “untamed” traditions of concern here may include the following:

Dealing with ancestors, ghosts, spirits. In many places, people engage in social relations with deceased members of the group (ghosts or ancestors), or with local spirits said to dwell in particular places or to control particular activities.

Dealing with souls: varieties of (broadly understood) shamanism. This denotes traditions in which a specialist enters a trance or possession that allows him/her to deal with spirits and restore their clients’ well-being (Singh, 2018; Winkelman, 1990).

Dealing with witches. One of the most widespread beliefs, in otherwise very diverse cultures, is the notion that some agents can inflict harm by nonphysically detectable means.

Divination and inspiration. Almost all human groups have some form of divination. People use a formalized technique to determine the contents of a statement and state that diagnoses produced following that procedure are more likely to be accurate than statements from other sources.

These may seem very diverse, but there are important common features here, among which the following are most relevant to general models of the evolution of religion.

No stable doctrine

In small-scale societies, and particularly in societies without literate specialists, there is generally no religious doctrine in the sense of a (roughly) stable, coherent, and consensual set of representations

about, e.g., gods and spirits. True, people occasionally offer some general statements about these entities and their powers, that spirits, for instance, are not visible, or that ghosts are the souls of recently deceased individuals, or that a particular deity resides in this mountain or that river. Beyond such defining properties of superhuman agents, there is seldom any cultural consensus about them. Anthropologists working on these forms of religious activity know that it is particularly difficult to elicit descriptions of, e.g., spirits or ancestors from most people, and that the versions provided by specialists or eager informants are often exceedingly vague or idiosyncratic.¹ Naturally, anthropologists do their best to extract a set of consistent underlying propositions from people's utterances and behavior (Sperber, 1996, p. 36), but that interpretive activity is necessary precisely because there is no stable explicit doctrine.

Many anthropologists have emphasized this feature. For instance, at the beginning of a piece paradoxically entitled "Zande theology," Evans-Pritchard notes "the amorphous, indefinite, character of the facts themselves [...] The fieldworker therefore has to rely upon a judicious interpretation of these scanty evidences supported by native commentaries which, in the absence of clear-cut doctrines, are often un-illuminating and contradictory" (Evans-Pritchard, 1963, p. 163). In such traditions, as Bloch pointed out, features of rituals, far from supporting the transmission of meaning, often make it difficult or impossible (Bloch, 1974). In a similar vein, Whitehouse described the "imagistic" characteristics of many religious traditions, in which extremely salient ritual events do not provide any clear message, and, in fact, constitute puzzles for people to ponder rather than lessons to remember (Whitehouse, 1992, 1995)—see (Barth, 1975) for detailed descriptions of that process.

Naturally, this does not mean that people's beliefs are entirely chaotic or idiosyncratic, as participation in common religious activities does require common assumptions, e.g., to the effect that there are spirits, that they are involved in misfortune, that they typically dwell near the banks of rivers, and so forth. Beyond these, however, the construction of a coherent system of underlying beliefs, that explains and supposedly underpins people's utterances or behaviors, is bound to be an interpretive endeavor (Sperber, 1985b).

Religious activity centers on pragmatic goals

Most activity in these wild forms of religion is about specific pragmatic matters, for instance, palliating a case of illness, guaranteeing that some crops will be abundant, making sure that a hunting expedition will be successful, ensuring that a deceased person does not turn into a malevolent spirit, and so forth. People will, for instance, think about the spirits when someone falls ill or when they try to protect their herds against diseases. In these forms of religious activity, there is little if any interest in such issues as the origins of evil, the order of the cosmos, or even the salvation of the soul.

Individual specialists (without a guild or corporation)

This form of religious activity consists of services provided by individuals deemed to be specially capable of interacting with superhuman agents. This capacity is generally construed as a personal, essential quality. Although such specialists often undergo some form of training and apprenticeship, that is generally not sufficient to guarantee their ability to produce the desired results, e.g., to palliate or remedy misfortune. The specialists are not members of a special caste or guild with common interests, or a common set of practices. Indeed, in many places, there is some competition between specialists, who offer different ways of dealing with their clients' requests.

Participation does not constitute groups: no community of "believers"

In these wild traditions, there is no clear connection between participating in specific practices, and perhaps holding specific beliefs on the one hand, and being a member of a community on the other.

The point is obvious enough for shaman-like activity. When people consult a diviner or shaman, they are contracting with a specific individual, who in their view has capacities relevant to addressing a specific issue. This does not create specific links with other people who may be interested in consulting that shaman, or another specialist of the same kind. A relevant comparison would be with specialists like craftsmen. People who resort to a potter's services do not see themselves or are considered as having joined a community of pottery users. In the same way, people who consult a shaman are mostly concerned with how genuine his or her reputation is, actual powers, what the costs are, and so forth.

The point is also valid, and perhaps more surprising, when we consider ancestor cults. Obviously, these are connected to a particular community, in the sense that rituals, for instance, are addressed to ancestors of a particular lineage and mobilize only members of that lineage. However, that is clearly not the same as belonging to a religious community. People who, e.g., are involved in sacrifices to a particular ancestor, are not there because of any specific motivation to join that particular ceremony or kind of ceremony. They are there because they belong to the clan, regardless of their interest in its ancestors. In other words, it is membership in a group that leads them to join forces in a ceremony, not the other way around.

This raises the question, to what extent are such wild traditions, with their common features, widespread in the world's cultures? And to what extent were they the default setting, so to speak, for religious activity before the advent of religious organizations?

Pragmatic specialists are the norm: Winkelman's model

In most anthropological discussions of religion, it is generally assumed that the kinds of religious activity described above as "wild traditions" were pervasive before the emergence of religious organizations in large-scale societies. But that is mostly based on educated guesses rather than data.

A remarkable exception is Michael Winkelman's study of the materials available in the HRAF (Human Relations Area Files™) samples (Winkelman, 1986, 1990). The study used a subset of the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) in the HRAF database, designed to maximize diversity in terms of ecology, economy, social stratification, and political organization. On the materials available for this sample, Winkelman and colleagues coded the value of 268 variables, such as powers of the specialist (political, judicial, etc.), types of training, connection to superhuman agents, contribution to life cycle rites, types of activities (e.g., divination, healing, rituals), types of techniques (trance, inspiration, formal rules), social status, gender specialization, etc. The values for each specialist were entered into cluster analysis algorithms, producing a model of the various clusters that maximize the similarity between specialists—in plain terms, groups of specialists who have most traits in common.

The most salient aspect of the cluster model (Figure 1) is that it segregates the features of practitioners into two large ensembles, corresponding to the left third, and the right two-thirds of Figure 1. There is a clear contrast between clusters called P, positively correlated with MP, M, and H, but with a strong negative link to S, on the one hand, and the S cluster, with negative links to all other types of specialists, on the other. This clearly suggests that the specific features of religious practitioners do not assemble randomly, so to speak, but constitute coherent kinds of practice, so that one trait (e.g., using trance) positively predicts the presence of another (e.g., being involved in palliating misfortune) and negatively predicts another (e.g., membership of a political elite in a stratified society).

Now, to dispel the mystery, the labels in Winkelman's formulation read as follows: S designates those specialists who use a variety of trance, possession, and other altered states of consciousness (a highly diverse set of techniques), in contrast to S/H specialists who mostly use divination, spells, incantations, etc.; P individuals are full-time specialists, often with high social status (often, membership of a high status caste); M-type specialists are those who claim direct inspiration from supernatural agents, often through possession, and address people's requests when they are in that possessed

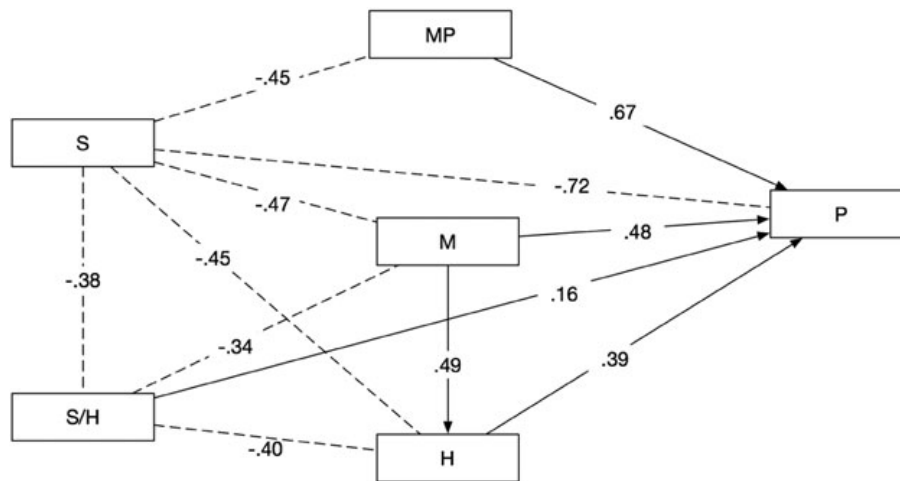


Figure 1. The boxes represent clusters of cases with similar features. Full lines represent positive associations and the dash lines, negative ones. Adapted from Winkelman (1986).

state; finally, MP individuals are the (often imaginary) “malevolent agents” identified in many cultures as responsible for illness and misfortune, and whose capacities are generally construed as a biological inheritance. For convenience, one could paraphrase these as “shaman” for S, “malevolent practitioner” for MP, “healer” for H, “medium” for M, and finally “priest” for P.

The reason I did not insert these terms in Figure 1 is to dispel a possible misunderstanding of Winkelman’s research. Using common terms like “priest” or “shaman” may lead readers to (wrongly) assume that the ethnographic sources were examined for references to such traditionally defined types of specialists, and then scanned for common features. If that was the case, the cross-cultural comparison would reduce to illustrating common themes in the anthropology of religions. Winkelman’s analysis proceeds exactly the other way around. It starts with actual features (e.g., “strength of political influence,” “religious practice exclusive to one gender,” “compensation for religious services,” etc.) and then compiles their actual co-occurrences to create the clusters in question. So, the cluster analysis shows that *some* grouping is justified by the empirical evidence (Winkelman, 1986, p. 27ff).

Winkelman’s data suggest two important points concerning the prevalence of shamans, healers, and other such specialists.

Wild traditions do show important commonalities

In the subset of SCCS surveyed, 43 out of 45 distinct cultures include some specialists of the healer, healer-shaman or shaman types, while only 24 include the P type, which is found in two very different configurations, either as priests of religious organizations or as ancestor-cult officers. In other words, shaman-like specialists are everywhere. Obviously, Winkelman’s model cannot provide a full quantitative evaluation of the spread of such concepts, since (a) it samples only about *one-third* of the SCCS, and more importantly (b) the SCCS itself was designed to include distinct cultural systems, without considering the number of people concerned or the duration of the phenomena described. Against these caveats, one must also take into account that (a) the sample was designed to maximize cultural diversity; in this sense, the frequency of a particular type of religious specialist is important and (b) the recurrence of such types of shaman-like specialists cannot plausibly be attributed to diffusion.²

In other words, most of the cultures sampled include traditions with the features described above as typical of “wild” traditions. That is, the “magico-religious specialists in question” (described by Winkelman as S or S/H) *share the following features*:

- (a) **They** are not engaged in the codification or transmission of stable, coherent doctrines. In agreement with the anthropological literature, individuals **who** practice shamanism, or deal with ancestors, or provide magical cures, do not generally transmit an explicit and coherent account of a doctrine that would explain the specifics of their activities.
- (b) They are supposed to address specific pragmatic concerns (mostly the prevention of palliation of specific misfortune). Again, this confirms the qualitative conclusion from much of the anthropological literature, that specialists are not consulted to provide moral guidance or cosmological information, but to address **the** specific instance of misfortune, or to prevent it.
- (c) They are generally described as possessing special, internal qualities that make them special, and specially qualified to handle interaction with superhuman agents—that is indeed one of the specific features coded in Winkelman’s model.
- (d) Finally, resorting to their services does not by itself make an individual a member of a community of believers with common interests, and the potential for collective action. For instance, shamanism occurs in many places where group identity and cohesion, as well as collective action, are governed by kinship ties. Consulting the same shaman does not create common interests between two individuals.

Wild traditions persist alongside organized religions

A second point is that in the SCC sample, even the cultures with a strong, historical tradition of organized religions, with scriptures and priests, include some shaman-like practitioners. Table 1 lists all those cases from Winkelman & White’s sample, for which there is clear evidence of **the** stable influence of doctrinal organizations, to which I added short descriptions of the wild traditions mentioned in the relevant sources.

Note that in all these cases, the additional religious traditions that appear or persist alongside organized religions again display the typical features (a)–(d) mentioned above.

This evidence supports the general hypothesis, already suggested by a qualitative reading of the anthropological record, that there are informal or “wild” religious activities even in places where

Table 1. Presence of wild traditions in complement to doctrinal religions, in a subset of the HRAF™ Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, as identified by Winkelman and White (1987), with PB’s comments and additional references.

Culture	Time	Types of specialist	Doctrinal organization	Comments
Igbo	1970	H, P	Christianity	Officially Christianized at relevant period. Lineage priests in charge of sacrifice to ancestors, as well as rain-priests and diviner-healers (Basden, 1921; Ubah, 2011)
Wolof	1940	H, P	Islam	Lineage priests performed sacrifice, healers protected people against witches (Ames, 1959)
Fulani	1940	H, P	Islam	Fulbe denotes many groups with diverse religious practices. Most of the Islamicized groups (in the relevant period) included lineage sacrifice officers (Dupire, 1970) and antiwitchcraft specialists
Amhara	1960	H, P	Christianity	Christian since ≈300CE. At relevant period, zar possession mostly by women (Lewis, 1966). Specialists for attacks by spirits or witches (Young, 1970)
Tuareg	1950	H, P	Islam	Various marabout diviner-healers (Rasmussen, 1989), also ancestral cults by lineage elders (Rasmussen, 2004)
Babylon	1700 BCE	H, P	Priestly caste	Diviners and possessed oracles, exorcist, also hunting magic specialists (Jastrow, 1911)
Rome	100	HS, P	State religion	[see main text for examples and discussion] Various types of diviners, as well as “Oriental” cults
Kurd	1950	HS, P	Islam	Marginal Islamic Sufi practitioners but also healers (seyit, dede) and cults of “secret saints” (Van Bruinessen, 2000)
Vietnam	1950	H, P	Buddhism	Medium-diviners, also varieties of healers (Do, 2003)
Japan	1960	HS, P	Shin-to, Buddhism	Healer-shamans (Ricci, 2014)
Aztec	1500	HS, P	Priestly caste	Diviners/healers, also antiwitchcraft rituals (Bassett, 2015)

doctrinal religious organizations are dominant. Indeed, the frequency of Wild Religion activities at the periphery of hegemonic religions may have been crucially underestimated in traditional accounts of religious history.

Religions never win the war: the persistence of wild traditions

A simple “evolutionist” narrative would suggest that religious organizations emerge and expand because they offer a form of religious activity that more and more people find preferable to their previous activities, like shamanism-like healing, ancestor-worship, and other local cults. In that view, organized religions simply replace the old cults. That process is often taken for granted in general descriptions of religious history, describing, for instance, Algeria as becoming Muslim during the Umayyad caliphate, or Iceland as Christian from the eleventh century CE.

Historians, of course, generally emphasize that such descriptions are simplistic. Conquests and conversion are gradual processes, during which many areas or many groups in a polity may resist or ignore the religious change. More important, though, is the fact that conquest and conversion may not actually have the results we anticipate. In particular, the cults and religious organizations associated with central political power may not exhaust the varieties of religious activities that people engage in. This can be documented at various stages, from the beginnings of social and religious stratification all the way to entirely dominant religious organizations.

Illustrating this, we find that shaman-like specialists remain active, and central to people’s religious activities, in those small societies that develop stratification, with the emergence of priest-chiefs. That is the case, for instance, in Polynesia, where local and paramount chiefs, and the priests associated with chiefly authority, were seen as imbued with special powers that made them *tapu* (hence our “taboo”) as opposed to shamans variously called *taula*, *tau’a*, *kaula*. Valeri notes this opposition between *kaula* (shamans) and chiefs in Hawaii. The chiefs were closely associated with the gods, who guaranteed food production and prosperity. Priests (*tohunga*) associated with the aristocracy perform rituals that maintain the gods’ protection (Valeri, 1985, p. 139ff). Political power depends on maintaining production, as is clear in the case of Niue, where the chiefs lost power and some were killed, after a series of ecological disasters (Thomas, 1996, p. 25). By contrast, the shamans are in charge of interactions between humans and spirits. As Nicholas Thomas points out, there is a clear political competition here: “[priest-]chiefs tend to be prominent where shamans are marginal and vice versa” (1996, p. 15).

Does this opposition subsist when religious organizations are not just supported by the state but, in fact, part and parcel of state institutions? A good example is that of the Roman official cults at the time of the Empire. Outside the state-sponsored rites, there emerged many alternative religious movements, among which is the cult of the Great Mother, Cybele (Vermaseren, 1977). The goddess and the traditions were imported from Asia Minor. We know of the cult from the scandalized reactions of many traditionally minded Roman authors to the “excesses” of its priests and their ceremonies.³ Another source of information about these cults comes from increasingly influential Christians, anxious at the possible confusion between the Cybele cult and their own innovative tradition, because of their similarities, as both traditions emphasized the immortality of the soul and centered on the figure of a resurrected messianic figure.⁴ At most times, however, the political-religious elite tried to suppress the alternative cults. For instance, in 213CE, a large decline in worship of the official gods led to an official decree that Romans should give back to officials their books or prayers and manuals for sacrifice directed at the new gods. The decree also prohibited any new “foreign” cults (Vermaseren, 1977, p. 38).

The emergence of parallel cults, in competition with established organized religions, extends to places where the latter seems to garner considerable political power, and in fact, reached a complete monopoly of overt religious activity. In places as thoroughly Christianized as classical France, religious activities included such practices as the “cult of stones” in Brittany (contact with some large rocks would bring about desired outcomes) until the nineteenth century. In the same way, bishops

reported that most cases of disease and misfortune were handled with spells (Le Bras, 1956, p. 73). In contrast to their enthusiastic adherence to these (very vaguely described) “superstitions,” people seemed very reluctant to participate in Catholic worship. Bishops and priests tried to impose a minimal level of attendance among peasants who rarely showed up. This was the case for most of the Classical period, including in large cities (Le Bras, 1956, pp. 48–51). In other words, the indifference or resistance to organized religion, and engagement with alternative traditions, were far from marginal in a geographic or demographic sense. They occurred in places that were very much in the center of the Christian world after more than six centuries of Church domination.

In some cases, people created wild religious traditions in the face of intense oppression and at great potential cost, as in the case of “slave religion” in the antebellum South. From the outside, it would seem that slaves brought to the USA were almost entirely Christianized (Herskovits, 1990). However, it would be misleading to see their participation in plantation churches as the substance of their religious activities, as two other traditions developed in that period. First, there was what came to be called the “invisible institution” of independent Christianity preached in clandestine meetings, in the woods and other “hush harbors,” away from the slave drivers’ scrutiny, and often at great risk. Sermons focused on the figure of Jesus, on the themes of redemption and liberation, in contrast to the official church gatherings, where slaves were admonished to accept their earthly fate and abstain from stealing (Raboteau, 2004, p. 212). Second, the tradition of conjure, of using spells and rituals to extirpate some evil presence from a patient, was central to people’s treatment of illness and misfortune. The specialist, commonly called “hood-doctor” or “two-facer,” could extract invisible scorpions or snakes from people’s bodies, inserted in the body of a victim by ill-intentioned individuals.⁵ There is very little documentation of these unorthodox and largely clandestine practices. But we know that they spread in most plantation areas and that people resorted to them for most cases of otherwise unexplained misfortune, as “unpredictable occurrences of misfortune were [seen as] the result of another’s animosity” (Raboteau, 2004, p. 276).

These short examples should illustrate the great variety of historical and political contexts in which we can find wild traditions alongside doctrinal religious organizations. They should also suggest that wild religions are extraordinarily persistent and recurrent. To coin a phrase, one might say that established doctrinal religions win many battles but lose the war, in the sense that some form or other of wild religious tradition is likely to reappear, often in the face of considerable opposition or suppression.

Confusing political hegemony with cognitive entrenchment

The historical development of organized religions and their political and cognitive influence illustrates the trite aphorism that history is written by the winners. In the case of religious activity, the (political) winners are, in fact, the only ones who write any history. Religious organizations generally produce both an account of who they emerged and an account of what people supposedly believe as “members” of a particular faith. This official discourse specifies what the beliefs are, their rationale, their coherence, and so forth.

That is by nature a hegemonic discourse, in the sense that it is created by a particular group (a) with exclusive access to the relevant techniques, literacy in particular, and (b) with the required cohesion and internal organization to produce a consistent account, and most important (c) the political means to impose that account and exclude (i.e., silence, ostracize, excommunicate, etc.) possible dissident narratives. That discourse should be studied by historians, but not mistaken for historical evidence, for an accurate description of beliefs and practices.

For instance, the nontraditional, perhaps subversive cult of Cybele is known to us mostly because of the Roman religious elite’s rejection of the cult, and also because of the many literate sources, traditional or Christian, that inveighed against that “foreign” and supposedly primitive tradition. As Beard points out, there was probably much more “shamanism” in Rome than is documented in the extant sources (Beard, 1996, p. 166). Similarly, the history of Christianity was, until very recently,

written by sources from within the Church, both because the clerics had a quasi-monopoly on literacy and because the Church has sufficient political clout to stamp out divergent narratives. It is only indirectly, reading between the lines or reassembling fragmented evidence, that we can measure, for instance, the extent to which the spontaneous worship of saints or resort to miracle healers constantly challenged the Church's dominance.

Politically influential religious organizations may well achieve a monopoly on the official expression of religious ideas—but that does not entail that their doctrines constitute the whole or even a large part of people's actual representations. In other words, we should be careful lest we misguidedly assimilate *political hegemony* and *cognitive entrenchment*. Religious organizations often become hegemonic in a polity, in the sense that they gain political influence, and in many cases are an integral part of the state institutions. As a result, these religious organizations generally provide all the official discourse about religious matters. Indeed, they often enjoy a monopoly over religious discourse in general. They often deride or downgrade the competition as marginal, unimportant, deviant, etc. This, of course, is orthogonal to cognitive entrenchment, that is, the extent to which specific religious representations are frequently evoked in people's minds, govern people's views about their social and natural environment, and drive people's motivations.

Consequences for cognitive and evolutionary models

The anthropological record, as well as historical scholarship, strongly suggests that wild traditions, as defined here,

- are found in (virtually) all societies in the record, with important common features;
- are present and important at the periphery of even the most strongly dominant religious organizations, and by implication were most likely the form of religious activity present in human ancestral environments, before the advent of states and religious organizations.

These facts carry important implications for any explanation of religious representations in terms of human evolution, of capacities and motivations brought about by natural selection. The ubiquity and persistence of wild traditions emphasizes the importance of four characteristics of religious representations in most human societies.

Explicit beliefs are not central

The influence of organized religions on models of religion results in an understandable focus on *beliefs* as the crucial component of religious activity. However, ambiguities about the very notion of belief (Needham, 1972) create considerable confusion about what is being described. The standard, ordinary language notion of explicit descriptions held to be true, does not square with most anthropologists' descriptions of "beliefs" that no one ever expressed (Sperber, 1985b). More important, beliefs may only play a small role in the dynamics of religious representations. That is true, in particular, because of the phenomenon of "theological correctness" (Barrett, 1998; Barrett & Keil, 1996; Slone, 2004). Experimental studies show a discrepancy between people's explicit beliefs about superhuman agents, beliefs that are typically influenced by religious doctrines, on the one hand, and their implicit assumptions and expectations on the other. For example, Christians may state that God is a cognitively superhuman agent, who can attend to all worldly events at the same time. Memory experiments, however, show that these same people implicitly expect God to attend to one situation and then to another, in the serial manner we expect of human agents (Barrett, 1998; Barrett & Keil, 1996). The phenomenon is widespread, especially in organized religions in which the official doctrine is highly unintuitive. As Bloch points out, the set of representations that support people's inferences, "is often quite at odds with explicit beliefs declared by the people studied" (Bloch, 2005, p. 98).

Theological correctness is the fact that people do not (just) believe what they believe they believe, which shows the limits of cognitive entrenchment. Even in a situation in which people have actually adopted the tenets of the official doctrine, their mental representations add a whole variety of additional assumptions. Those, rather than the explicit doctrine, are what drives people's expectations about spirits or gods. So, it would be misguided to use official doctrinal statements as a "window" into people's actual representations of superhuman agency.

Coercion is crucial to explain the success of organized religions

Models of cultural evolution are generally based on the idea that cultures change as a result of aggregated individual behaviors, including individual innovations and reconstructions of the cultural input (Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Sperber, 1985a). For example, change in language (e.g., modern English is abandoning "wait *for*" in favor of "wait *on*") is simply the cumulative effect of individual choices (in this case, people exposed to both forms are slightly more likely to use "wait *on*"). The same goes for changes in dress, or cuisine, or many other aspects of cultural phenomena. There is no reason to assume that some external agency is pushing people's choices in a particular direction. This reasonable assumption, which is common to all modern models of cultural transmission, obviously does not entail that all historical change is the product of such aggregated individual choices.

Indeed, the situation is very different in the spread of doctrinal religions. As mentioned above, these spread not just because growing numbers of individuals adopt their practices and concepts, but also, and in many cases mostly, because political elites impose those practices on the populace. It would be very strange, indeed perverse, to describe historical change in people's practices and overt statements of belief, in these religions, as the effect of aggregated individual choices, when it clearly results from political imposition. In the example of Roman religion, we see that state coercion was involved in maintaining worship to traditional gods, in the face of various "Oriental" competitors, in opposing and then trying to regiment the cult of Cybele, and finally in opposing before regimenting the Christian cult. So, state officials were involved in the major changes observed in the overt, official forms of religious activity. In Egypt, the monotheistic cult of Aten (Re) was imposed by Amenhotep IV but then abandoned after his death as the priestly elite, who had been more or less put out of their jobs by the new religion, used their influence to reinstate the traditional rites (Hoffmeier, 2015).

To be sure, the tendency to mistake the diffusion of a doctrine with popular adhesion to its tenets is not confined to religious representations. It is related to the notion of a "dominant ideology," the assumption that the dominant group in complex societies manages to get other groups, social classes, castes, etc., to accept a general worldview that legitimizes dominance (Turner, Abercrombie, & Hill, 2014).⁶ There is, however, massive evidence that members of dominated groups do not actually accept elite ideology (Turner et al., 2014). Dominated individuals are, in many cases, coerced into overtly agreeing to this discourse or even expressing it themselves, but there is considerable evidence that they do not, in fact, accept it. For example, many members of the untouchable castes do not believe in the Brahmanic ideology of purity (Juergensmeyer, 1980). Outsiders may be led to believe that the "dominant ideology" is pervasive because it is the only explicit discourse about society that can be expressed in public (Scott, 1990). As Scott sums up, silent forms of resistance always accompany the official display of dominance (Scott, 1990, p. 105).

Religious doctrines may not be a simple cause of human cooperation

Are religions involved in social evolution? Some evolutionary anthropologists have proposed that some forms of religious representations, notably the notion of punishing gods with cosmic powers, may have played a role in the transition from small communities of related individuals to large societies, including kingdoms and empires (Norenzayan, 2013; Shariff, Norenzayan, & Henrich, 2009). The reasoning starts from the assumption that belief in deities who (a) perceive everything

people do and (b) are concerned that people should follow moral norms, would foster prosocial attitudes. Those attitudes are required for bringing together large numbers of unrelated people without creating a Hobbesian war of all against all.

The notion that a belief in punishing gods contributes to social order is, of course, a very old one, but more specific formal models and careful empirical studies have made it of great interest for understanding cultural evolution. Cross-cultural studies do suggest a positive correlation between explicitly stated religious belief and prosocial attitudes (see, e.g., Lang et al., 2019; Purzycki et al., 2016; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011). For instance, Purzycki et al. (2016) selected as experimental material, in a variety of cultural environments, a deity most likely to be associated with punishment, as per the doctrine of the relevant organized religion, as well as a local deity or spirit. Experimental results with allocation games show the expected priming effect that individuals, who consider the punishing god as especially punishing, are also more motivated than others to allocate some resources to a co-religionist, even if that unknown target belongs to a distant community (Purzycki et al., 2016). This careful study nicely illustrates the contrast proposed here, between the concepts of doctrinal, organized religions, which often focus on social order, as compared to wild traditions as described above, which are generally indifferent to cooperation and social order, as they focus on specific welfare and misfortune. And, as the results show, it is not the presence of a doctrinal religion that makes people prosocial—it is the fact that the doctrine is interpreted as especially punitive by some individuals that makes those same individuals more cooperative.

This suggests that the possible effects of religious doctrines on cooperation, if any, may be modulated by (a) the extent to which people actually adhere to the doctrine, i.e., the extent to which they are “theologically correct” (Slone, 2004) as well as (b) the special, individual conditions that make some individuals more “prosocial” to start with. This may be why the results of general studies of religious attitudes and cooperation are not as conclusive as one might have wished (Van Elk et al., 2015), and sometimes downright puzzling. For example, a cross-cultural study by Decety and colleagues demonstrated a negative correlation between religious education and sharing dispositions in children (Decety et al., 2015).⁷

More generally, accepting for the sake of argument that religious doctrines may indeed foster prosocial motivations—but see (Boyer & Baumard, 2016)—we would be left with the problem of cognitive entrenchment. To support a causal link between notions of punitive gods and some prosocial motivations, the fact that people know a doctrine, and can state it when required, is not enough. Knowing that the doctrine is promoted by authoritative and powerful individuals is not sufficient either. We must also assume that people’s representations of these particular superhuman agents do have an effect on motivation and behavior. But in the case of many religions, that is not quite clear—indeed there is a lot of evidence that these representations are not actually cognitively entrenched in that sense, as illustrated above.

These facts would suggest that the connection between doctrines of punishing gods and large-scale cooperation may at least be more complex than that described in the model of prosociality triggered by beliefs in powerful, punishing gods. Indeed, the most recent, large-scale quantitative studies of comparative religious history suggest that such gods with moralizing and punishing features appeared *after* the consolidation of large-scale societies, states, and empires (Whitehouse et al., 2019).

Outstanding questions: what is to be explained?

The kind of informal religious activities called “wild traditions” here have common features in different social and historical conditions: (a) throughout human prehistory, when there were no religious organizations or doctrines, (b) in most small-scale societies in historical time, before they were engulfed in larger kingdoms or nations (and some of them never were), and (c) at the margins of all organized religious systems.

The most important common features include the presence of individual specialists, considered to have a special skill in handling interaction with superhuman agents like spirits and ancestors; a focus

on preventing or repairing misfortune, in the form of illness or accidents or other untoward outcomes; the assumption that specific ritualized actions are required to achieve these pragmatic goals; and the use of divination to produce guaranteed statements about inscrutable matters.

Why these properties of informal, spontaneous religion? In the cognitive approaches to religion, one expects to explain the recurrent features of religious systems in terms of panhuman cognitive capacities or motivations (Boyer, 1994; Lawson & McCauley, 1990) which themselves are grounded in the way natural selection resulted in specific cognitive adaptations (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2008). So, what are the specific cognitive capacities involved here? As far as shamanism, in particular, is concerned, Singh recently proposed to explain its particular combination of features (individual specialists, the use of trance, the focus on palliating misfortune) in terms of their fit with (a) the attractiveness of claims to control otherwise unpredictable events and (b) the salience of claims that some individuals are essentially different from typical human beings (2018). This amounts to describing the shaman concept as a cultural attractor, with higher transmission potential than alternative concepts, given human cognitive dispositions (Claidière, Scott-Phillips, & Sperber, 2014; Claidière & Sperber, 2007). In a similar way, one can interpret the extraordinary success of divination in the world's cultures as a cultural attractor, brought about by the social need for particular diagnoses of crucial situations (e.g., someone is ill and the group must decide who is the witch), combined with the perceived costs, for any individual, to propose such a diagnosis as their own interpretation of the situation (Boyer, 2019). Those are two examples of speculative proposals that, of course, can only be judged in terms of the empirical predictions they will generate.

More generally, the extraordinary and persistent success of wild traditions as described here, compared to the coercive and often unsuccessful imposition of religious organizations' doctrines, would suggest that these wild traditions are the place to start, if we want to understand those features of the human evolved cognitive architecture that produce varieties of religious ideas.

Notes

1. A typical example is Århem's description of Tukano representations of the afterlife: "At death, the soul is separated from the body. The corpse joins the River of the Underworld [...] another version has it that the soul of the dead follows the body down into the Underworld, where it joins the Underworld people [...] A third version states that the soul of the dead [...] ascends to the Sky World" (Århem, 1981, p. 79).
2. These are local traditions, not the outcome of conquest or political domination, as is the case for widespread organized religions. So, in this sense the frequency of shamans or other specialists of this kind is not really vulnerable to "Galton's problem," to the possibility of nonindependence.
3. Ritual specialists donned spectacular garments, often dressed like women, and were said to have castrated themselves. Also, their rituals included the *taurobolium*, as participants would cover themselves in blood from a sacrificed bull, and some of them would cut themselves to draw more blood (Beard, 1996, p. 172).
4. Indeed, Julian the Apostate tried to integrate some of the Cybele cult into state religion as a way of limiting the influence of Christianity (Fear, 1996, p. 44), and Claudius tried to have the cult regulated by state officials (Vermaseren, 1977, p. 99).
5. It was commonly assumed that one may have to react by returning the powerful charm to its sender—hence the reputation of these specialists as "two-faced," that is, capable of inflicting harm as well as protecting against it (Herron & Bacon, 1973).
6. That is, for instance, manifest in Marx's idea that aristocratic or bourgeois domination results in the diffusion of an aristocratic or bourgeois ideology even among the dominated groups, or in Dumont's assumption that the hierarchical caste ideology is accepted by all groups in India, including the ones described as the most impure ones by that ideology (Dumont, 1970).
7. Note that the article was retracted because of coding errors, which, however, leave the main (surprising) result unchanged, that "children from highly religious households do appear slightly less generous than those from moderately religious ones" (Shariff, Willard, Muthukrishna, Kramer, & Henrich, 2016).

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