

Book Review

D. Jason Slone and James A. Van Slyke, *The Attraction of Religion: A New Evolutionary Psychology of Religion* (“*Scientific Studies of Religion: Inquiry and Explanation*”, 3), London and New York: Bloomsbury 2015, xvi + 252 pp. £85 (hbk). ISBN: 9781472534620. £27.99 (pbk). ISBN: 9781350005280. £27.99 (PDF/EPUB eBook). ISBN: 9781472531728.

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In the conclusions of *The Oxford Handbook of Sexual Conflict in Humans*, Gregory Gorelik and book co-editor Todd K. Shackelford remarked that “instances of religious manipulation and hypocrisy may exemplify the deceptive use of ideology to further one’s reproductive success at the expense of one’s fellow group members”. Thus, they “encourage[d] biologists and population geneticists to produce a scientific account of cultural norms, values, beliefs, rituals, and institutions, if they wish to understand the manipulative and cooperative dynamics inherent within human culture” (Gorelik and Shackelford 2012, 343).

The Attraction of Religion, the latest addition to the Bloomsbury book series *Scientific Studies of Religion: Inquiry and Explanation*, edited by Luther H. Martin, William W. McCorkle, and Donald Wiebe, extends the collaborative call to scholars involved in the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion (henceforth, CSR and ESR). Subtitled *A New Evolutionary Psychology of Religion* and edited by D. Jason Slone and James A. Van Slyke, the book theoretically builds on a previous article by co-editor Slone (2008), and explores the pivotal role of sexual selection theory within religious contexts.

As the two editors underscore in the introduction, the specific hypothesis examined by the volume as a whole is that “religion is widespread because it is attractive to people, and it is attractive to people because it helps to

manage the suite of adaptive problems related to reproduction via the costly signalling of strategic information useful for attracting, acquiring, and retaining mates, ensuring paternity certainty, preventing mate defection and infidelity, encouraging parental investment, and more” (3; unspecified parenthetical referencing is from Slone and Van Slyke’s *The Attraction of Religion*). In particular, sexual selection theory predicts that costly or glaringly useless phenotypic traits are selected because they act as “signals of strategic information”, insofar as they reliably enhance someone’s fitness (2). Each chapter of the volume focuses on a precise case study.

In the first contribution, Van Slyke seeks to determine the incidence of differential mating strategies among adolescents and adults, and their relevance for religious abstinence education programs in the U.S.A. As the author states, “religion may act as a causal variable in human cognition and behavior as it activates a suite of preferences and biases associated with long-term mating strategies” (27).

Joseph Bulbulia, John H. Shaver, Lara M. Greaves, Richard Sosis, and Chris G. Sibley examine the relationship between social-network reputation, sexual signaling on fidelity, fertility rates, and church attendance in New Zealand via a series of social-psychological measures and statistical models. Correlations between variables are carefully described, yet causal

direction is still open to debate.

Michael Blume contends that religion evolved for supportive cooperative breeding, while using present demographic data to buttress an epistemically unwarranted prehistoric narrative of female primordial religiosity akin to [Bachofen's *Mutterrecht* \(1861\)](#). Throughout the chapter, the author fails to grasp that female self-reflective acceptance of social roles might mirror the dominants' coercive perspective (e.g., 69; cf. [Bourdieu 2002](#)).

Jason Weeden starts from the U.S. National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, begun in 1997, to investigate the steady decline in religious attendance and the sexual mores of the Millennial Generation against the backdrop of parental control, underscoring that implicit knowledge of religious attendance as a social tool is determinant in lifestyle patterns. Both neuroendocrinological features and social-technological history of pregnancy-prevention tools, aspects here overlooked, might help developing further the subject.

Craig T. Palmer and Ryan O. Begley review the epistemological and trans-generational background of the costly signaling theory and find it flawed. Thus, they advance a descendant-leaving hypothesis which assesses the transmission of beliefs on the basis of "parent-offspring conflict and the parental manipulation explanation of altruism" (102), and includes the religious recourse to ancestors' traditions as a multi-generational re-enforcement of costly acts.

Yael Sela, Todd Shackelford, and James R. Liddle deliver a most poignant contribution on the religious exacerbation of intra- and intersexual violence as a way to promote androcentric control and to support institutionalized patriarchal power. Religious beliefs promoting violent behaviours are described and analyzed (e.g., male/female genital mutilations, honor killing, child abuse and/or maltreatment, filicide, ban on certain sexual behaviors, supernatural sexual rewards, etc.). The evolutionary roots of such sexually-mediated religious violence are also proposed (i.e., as a tradeoff between sexual selection, parental investment, mate-retention behaviors, etc.).

Matthew Martinez and Pierre Liénard focus on public manifestations of religiously motivated self-inflicted pain. They discuss previous evolutionary hypotheses for extensive cooperation (kin selection, reciprocal al-

truism, tit for tat) as well as for costly signaling in human cultures (handicap principle, credibility enhancing displays, and deliberate self-harm). The authors posit that, all else being equal, deliberate self-harm might explain the attraction of such rites for the "lowest, poorer young males" (140) involved in the harsh competition for the ranking of social agents. The explanation appears to be supported by a comparative search through 281 cultures recorded in the Human Relation Area Files database which highlights the socio-political background of similar religious practices.

Panagiotis Mitkidis and Gabriel Levy bash the ultimate explanation of religion as a booster of prosocial commitment (165). Inspired by Pascal Boyer's economic insight on religion as a brand ([Boyer 2001](#), 275-277), and by the fact that morality evolutionarily precedes religion (see, for instance, [de Waal 2013](#)), they deliver a clever rebuttal arguing that religion has parasitized the idea of morality: "religion is the brand platform, the idea of morality is the product; religion markets the idea of morality" (163). However, this kind of advertising is false because "religion is not the only institution that primes people into prosocial tendencies" (167). The authors locate the successful moral rebranding of religion in the Axial age (167).

David Bell expounds the supposedly positive effects of religion in promoting long-term commitment in paternal care and parental investment while boosting paternity confidence. Specific collective religious rituals can be described as a neuroplastic way to trigger (epigenetic) "feedback loop(s)", whose endocrinological effects on pair-bonding and paternal care may be subjected to sexual selection (186). Yet, a shortage of examples and a misplaced focus on a re-imagined Paleolithic religion to explain religious commitment as a reliable signal of paternal behavior, diminish the overall impact of the chapter.

The last contribution by Andrew Mahoney deals with the evolutionary roots of acquiring and accumulating extremely complex and weird knowledge about non-existent, invisible, supernatural forces and/or agents. Building on Harvey Whitehouse's modes of religiosity theory, the author concludes that theology is a cultural technology with no biological utility but which represents an important tool to help solving cooperation dilemmas in densely populated settlements. As such, theology exerts both a costly signaling function and an attractive epistemological adornment. By

doing this, the author takes a stand against the handicap principle which excludes verbal language from the reliable vehicles of signaling (see Zahavi and Zahavi, 1997).

The Attraction of Religion daringly succeeds in presenting a scientific framework that will serve as a secure starting point and a useful reference for future, in-depth inquiries. However, while most chapters deliver thoughtful analyses and critical surveys of the subject matter, the vivid shortcomings of relatively few chapters highlight the fact that the volume as a whole constitutes also a missed opportunity to advance the unification of sex and gender studies, historiography, and CSR/ESR. Notwithstanding some potentially groundbreaking essays included in Slone and Van Slyke's book, much remains to be done in order to thoroughly revise intertwined and fallacious assumptions like presentism, Eurocentric conceptualization of religion and sexual mores, and prosocial religious bias.

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