Judaism in Evolutionary Perspective

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Abstract

The present paper proposes a paradigm to understand the evolution of religious behaviour specifically Jewish religious practice. The theoretical framework rests upon a combination of reciprocal altruism, costly signal theory and cognitive dissonance. It assumes evolutionary theory in general and mimetic evolution in particular. It is unique to the degree that it is authored by an evolutionary psychologist who is also a rabbi. We present the foundations of the three bio-psychological theories; and address Dawkins’ and Dennett’s theories of the scientific study of religion as well as some of the reservations. Finally, we examine briefly certain Jewish rituals in light of the model presented.

Keywords: Judaism, evolution, religions, costly signals, memes

Introduction

Any study of religious practice is, by definition, speculative\(^1\). There is no way to confirm or disconfirm any proposed account of the origins of religious behaviour in as much as we have no true witnesses. To be sure, those who take a fundamentalist approach to religion will claim that the Bible in general and the Hebrew Bible in particular provide us with clear facts as to the origins of the world and of humanity. However, with the advent of scientific inquiry and evolutionary theory, the divine authorship of the Bible has been called into question.

The methods herein do not provide hard and fast proof that evolutionary theory can explain religious evolution. Nor can we conclude that our behaviours, religious or otherwise, evolved in a particular fashion. As such, any paradigm offered to explain a particular set of human behaviours is just that: a paradigm.

\(^1\) The development of this paradigm is an initial product in an ongoing project of the Center for the Study of Bio-social Perspectives on Judaism at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies. I am grateful to Binah Yiztrit Foundation and its founder Rick Goldberg for their continued support.
On the other hand, if we accept that the world is over four billion years old, and
that humanity is a product of biological evolution, it stands to reason that the sum
total of human behaviors evolved over millions of years, from the early hominids to
later homo-erectus and ultimately homo-sapiens. The process of natural selection
leads to the survival of certain traits and behaviors at the expense of other traits and
behaviours. The current paper, therefore, will present a paradigm from which I hope
will emerge scientific inquiry and experimentation as to why Jewish religious behav-
iours have survived for nearly 2000 years.

One may ask how evolutionary theory could be applied to the Jewish people.
Indeed, the primary measure of evolutionary fitness is reproductive success. By this
criterion, Jews have not been very successful. However, we must look at that question
with two significant caveats. First, the number of members of any particular group is
not the only measure of evolutionary success. Indeed, we may say that the fact that
Jewish religious practice as propagated by Jews has lasted for so long, despite the
small number of proponents, suggests a certain success. Indeed, Deuteronomy (7:7)
states explicitly that God chose the Jewish people because their destiny was to be
small in number. Cultural evolutionary theory might well explain this by assuming
that the authors of Deuteronomy needed to provide textual support for the empirical
observation that Israeliite culture did not spread throughout the world; the architects
of that culture were faced with the fact that they were going to be out-numbered by
most peoples.

However, there is another, more important way to address this reservation of evo-
lutionary success. Evolutionary success is not only (indeed usually not) measured by
comparing members of different species. It is measured by comparing the success
within the species. We do not ask if a guppy is more successful than a lion, or if a pea-
cock is more successful than a reindeer. Rather, we attempt to understand how certain
members of the species succeed more than other members of that same species. Here
reproductive success is the primary empirical measure.

From this perspective, we must first look at the term “species” in a metaphoric
sense. Obviously, Jews are not a different species from any other human culture.
Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper that is how I would suggest we look at
them. We will not compare Jews to Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Americans or
Atheists. We compare Jews to Jews. And this makes cultural-biological sense. For
many years Jews tried to mate exclusively within their “species.” Those who did not
were no longer part of the “species.” Therefore, the proper question is which type of
Jews succeeded reproductively. To this question the answer is clear. The more pious
far out-reproduce their less religious coreligionists. The application of evolutionary
theory to Jewish religious practice can help to explain why the most successful mem-
bers of the Jewish “species” tend to be the most religious and, at the same time, shun
modernity, which is assumed to be reproductively beneficial.

There is a certain implied irony to modern reproductive “behaviours”. It is entirely possible that
the least religious members of society are actually more “successful” than their religious compatriots.
That is they may copulate with greater frequency. However, this does not always lead to pregnancy.
In fact it is likely that pregnancy is avoided by birth control methods. The application of reproductive