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Functionality of religion in the contemporary culture

Introduction

Religion and religious components are explained in various ways. One of the most intriguing explanatory approach is that one that is looking for their function. It seems that such kind of answers can provide fruitful knowledge about the human „nature” because the most part of humanity have believed and believe today in some supernatural contents. Consequently, knowledge about religion and religiosity is equal to knowledge about human needs, biases, and dreams. Recent development of secularized ideas does not break the human phenomenon of belief in global context. The phenomenon of religiosity is still present and prevalent in many cultures. Recent secularization that develops in the Western Europe, is rather some kind of anomaly than regularity in the human history.

We can try to explain peculiarity of that cross culture commonness of religious beliefs by at least two opposite current research approaches. One of them is provided by Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). The key idea of CSR assumes that religious components are accidentally affected or produced by normally working cognition¹. Here we can talk about cognitive modules and components or about some cognitive devices or cognitive, module tool kids. It is obvious that we cannot find here any evidences for any utility of religious components. In that approach, religious beliefs seem to be something odd and abnormal from natural selection theory point of view because they do not provide any function. Besides this unnatural functionality, they are interpreted within CSR as natural kind of beliefs. The naturalness of religion hypothesis means at least three kinds of naturalness like metaphysical, phenomenological, and developmental naturalness. Metaphysical naturalness means that religious beliefs are not supernatural

¹ P. Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley – London 1994; P. Boyer, *Religion: Bound to Believe?*, „Nature”, 2008, vol. 455, 23 October 2008:1038-1039.

because they are built on natural, normal, psychological and physiological cognitive processes. Phenomenological naturalness means that they are intuitive and cognitively effortless. Here is assumed that human mind does not meet any troubles to acquire religious/supernatural contents, and to explore the world in „religious“ terms of purpose, sense, cause, etc. Finally, religious beliefs are developmentally natural because they are acquired in the early childhood². Their cross culture commonness is explained by cognitive biases that make religious, theistic explanation of the world natural, obvious, and a default cognitive model.

I assume that such approach works in a little bit worse way than adaptationist account. Adaptationist account is also a part of evolutionary study of religion like CSR but it is looking for adaptive function of religious components. It seems that religious components have provided at least in the past many useful functions and we can not exclude that development of religion was a necessary period in human evolution, especially during transition from small hunter-gatherer societies to sedentary large groups. The possible role played by human cognition – if necessary – could be reduced only to providing some kind of cognitive software for development of religious hardware like psychological and societal functions that are necessary for establishing human societies.

Looking for the function of religion

I would like to focus on the current adaptationist account in the study of religion. I find cognitive approach as an account what reduces too much complexity of religious components to accidental and random by-product of cognition. If we accept cognitive approach, what can we say about cross culture complexity and functionality of religions and religious components that have shaped at least partially human culture, politics, ethics. It seems that the only cognitive account is unacceptable research programme for someone who is interested in looking for broader explanation and understanding of the sense of religion and religiosity in human evolution. For this reason adaptationist evolutionary approach seems to be a more promising paradigm.

However, adaptationist account is not a unique possible approach that is interested in explaining religious utility. Looking for utility is a synonym for looking for function, and we can find such ideas among modern philosophers at least since 17th century. Some of them, like Spinoza and John Locke, have found that the Jewish religion described in the Old Testament has provided useful political and social functions for the Jewish population³. The birth of the philosophical radical critique of religion in the

² H. de Cruz, *The naturalness of religious belief: epistemological implications*, in: *The Blackwell Companion to Naturalism*, K. J. Clark (ed.), John Wiley & Sons 2016, p. 486.

³ K. Szocik, *Ateizm filozoficzny*, Kraków 2014.

Enlightenment is an example of functional approach to religion *à rebours*. Philosophers who were engaged in such critical approach have rejected theistic basis of religion and they have criticized their epistemic truth. However, they found other motives that could explain ubiquitous presence of religious beliefs. It can be said they replaced factual realism by pragmatic realism in regard to religious components. Among discovered religious functions they enumerated especially psychological functions like neutralizing fear and providing hope.

One of the most important components of the critique of religion was a trial to unmasking its negative societal and economical roots. Marxian critique of religion works as a standard model for that kind of critique of religion. These two critical paradigms, psychological on the one side, and economical and societal on the other side, overlap in some parts with adaptationist account. Of course, these modern philosophers did not try to explain religion in terms of survival and reproduction, especially it was not possible before 1859 when Darwin has published „On the origin of species by means of natural selection“. Nevertheless, they found some pragmatic basis of religious components. Another difference between the current adaptationist approach and the mentioned past critique of religions lies in the assumption that religion had negative impact. Adaptationist account points out that religion provides positive effects because religious components guarantee fitness maximization, and the survival value provided by religious affiliation is higher than other enhancing fitness value provided by competitive non-religious traits. Philosophers in the past evaluated rather negatively possible functions of religious components. The difference point between the current adaptationist account and these past functional explanations of origin of religion lies in the different ways of evaluation of the same functions. Similarity lies in an assumption that religious components provide useful functions – for individuals or for the groups. In the latter case, if religion was not beneficial for the entire population of believers, it has provided advantages at least for the clergy and/or for political authorities. In evolutionary terms, benefits of these groups meet criteria of evolutionary success, and religion in these cases can be explained in terms of biological adaptation. We can call these philosophers the precursors of adaptationist account when we have in mind that they have found pragmatic functions of religious components.

We can find in the past philosophical critique of religion also other approach that seems to be more familiar with cognitive rather than adaptationist account. The most prominent representatives of that approach were Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud. They interpreted development of religion as a result of some cognitive and psychological biases (Feuerbach), or some mental problems (Freud). Their approach corresponds in some sense with the current cognitive account in the study of religion because they assume that without specific cognitive and psychological biases and tendencies, religious beliefs probably could not develop and could not be transmitted.

Besides these two philosophical critical approaches, one of important precursors of the current adaptationist account was sociological explanation of religion. Max Weber

and Emile Durkheim have provided pragmatic explanations of the function of religion. Especially Durkheim's approach overlaps with evolutionary functional explanation.

When we are going to talk about the current utility of religious components, we should briefly discuss the basic conceptual framework. The narrow meaning of adaptation in its strictly biological sense means a feature that is important for fitness maximization in comparison with other alternative traits in a given population⁴. Fitness maximization is measured in terms of reproduction rate⁵. Here we meet the first challenge for application of evolutionary biological approach to the study of religion. Some religious components and contexts of their application can not be measured in that way. It is obvious that not only religious components but also many other cultural phenomena do not lead to greater effectiveness in reproduction. Perhaps some of them can affect indirectly an increase of the reproduction rate. There is not clear if any psychological function of religion that is interpreted as the most important and the most commonly shared function of religious components, provides any fitness maximization. Perhaps it would be possible to find some correlation between beneficial impact of religion on mental health and the better effectiveness in reproduction rate. Nevertheless, it seems that there is no direct and obvious correlation between these both factors.

Another challenge for application of adaptationist approach and for calling any religious component „adaptation”, is an ability to find this factor that is really responsible for causing increase in reproduction rate. Consider the following example. The main criterion of adaptationist account is mentioned fitness maximization that – in practice – means the number of produced offspring. There is known a correlation between economic rate, existential security, and the level of religiosity⁶. When we start to consider all of these factors, we can not definitely and precisely show what was the role of religion in fitness maximization in poorer parts of the world. There is no doubt that religious affiliation is collateral feature but there is no clear if it works as a motivational power.

It is worth to talk something about the meaning of the term „function”, the crucial one for that paper. In adaptationist approach, the most important function of a given trait is enhancing fitness. Consequently, mechanisms and processes that are useful and effective for increasing reproduction rate, are getting built into constant structures that – as useful for survival and reproduction – are inherited from generation to generation. We can call these structures „forms”. Form follows function. It means that function is necessary for form to develop. In this adaptationist approach, we can not consider anything in adaptationist terms if we can not find a function for that trait. Here we come to the point in which the majority of scholars of religion do not find any evolutionary functions of religion. If they find any function, they usually treat it as something not

⁴ D. J. Futuyma, *Evolution*, Sinauer 2009.

⁵ J. Garson, *The Biological Mind. A Philosophical Introduction*, New York 2015.

⁶ P. Norris, R. Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge 2011.

necessary and accidental that does not work as an inherent part of religion. I mean the by-product hypothesis that assumes that religious beliefs are accidental side effect of other adaptations like, for instance, cognition⁷. Alternative explanation is offered by evolutionary adaptationist account that explains possible correlation between form and function of religious components in adaptationist way. Here is assumed that religion and religious components work as forms that have structure. That structure is inherited epigenetically from generation to generation because it provides fitness maximization. Consequently, such way of understanding of the term function means that religion is the product of natural selection. Of course, this adaptationist approach should be carefully apply only to some religious components, and some of them could be adaptations only in the past. Other ones do not work as adaptations but they can be explained as something that contains adaptadness.

Below I would like to discuss some cases in which we can look for utility of religious components. I understand the term utility first of all in mentioned adaptationist sense. However, in some cases we can not probably find clear boundaries between biological and non biological meanings of adaptation when we want to explain adaptation in broader sense as something what has beneficial impact not only for reproduction, but also (or only) for survival. It seems that many religious components and ways of application of religious practice do not correspond with reproduction rate but they are useful for survival of believers. This distinction is important because adaptation in narrow and strictly biological sense means a trait that maximizes survival and reproduction, not only survival. However, we can use it in a broader sense to describe these traits and mechanisms that are used only to enhance survival. Lee Kirkpatrick points out that religion can not be interpreted as adaptation because it is too complex and too unnatural to being favored by natural selection. According to Kirkpatrick, the most important argument against adaptationist explanation of religion has methodological and conceptual nature. Adaptation is about reproduction, religion is about survival. Consequently, in that approach we can talk about survival value of religion and religious components but we can not talk about them in adaptationist terms⁸.

I use the term function in broader sense. I mean not only a beneficial impact on reproduction rate but also beneficial impact for survival (or only for survival). There is no doubt that religious components have provided and provide today both kinds of benefits⁹. I assume that it is the most important reason for their development¹⁰.

⁷ J. L. Barrett, J. J. Matthew, *Evolutionary Byproducts and Imago Dei*, in: *The Emergence of Personhood: A Quantum Leap?*, M. Jeeves (ed.), Eerdmans 2015.

⁸ L. A. Kirkpatrick, *Religion is Not an Adaptation*, in: *Where God and Science Meet*, P. McNamara (ed.), v. 1, London 2006.

⁹ A. B. Cohen, H. G. Koenig, *Religion and Mental Health*, "Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology", 2004, vol. 3.

¹⁰ K. Szocik, *Religion and religious belief as evolutionary adaptations*, "Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science", 2017, vol. 52, Issue 1, March 2017.

The function of religion in the past

It seems that it is a little bit easier to find more examples that can prove assumption discussed here, rather in the past examples of application of religious components than in the current culture. I mean especially Polish and European culture. A feature that is called adaptation, can work as adaptation in the past, and then it could lose its adaptive function in new environmental conditions. In some sense this process refers to many technological tools that could be necessary in the past, but in subsequent periods they have lost their adaptive function and they were replaced by other tools. It can be stated that the most religious components in Poland and Europe in general have played an adaptive role at the group level in the past but today their impact is reduced to individual level adaptation.

Religion in Poland has played an important role and there is no doubt that the current relations between the state and the Church in Poland are the by-product of that past impact. It seems that the current political impact of the Church in Poland after the fall of the Berlin wall is much greater and more powerful than its real utility and social need¹¹. Such disproportion may suggest the mentioned case of the past adaptation that was useful in specific environmental conditions in the past but that does not work adaptively any more in the new environment.

In the past, the Church has played a definitely important role and has been one of the most crucial factors in evolutionary terms. Firstly, Latin cultural tradition and Latin cultural roots made Poland a part of the western civilization and they opened an opportunity for some alliances. Secondly, during wars in the 17th century religion has worked as an in-group marker for a breeding population. This term used by Jay Feierman means that religious components can work as signs that are used to differ one group from another¹². Consequently, we can talk about some kind of religio-species¹³ when religion is used to separate various ethnic and/or language groups in such a radical way that they make them species-like entities which can fight with each other. The Roman Catholic religion has provided clear and distinct boundaries between the Polish nation and other nations that have been fought with Poland like Sweden (Lutheranism), Russia (Orthodoxy) or Turkey (Islam). Religious affiliation has provided effective signals that marked in-group ties. We can find the same role of providing social cohesion and establishing „signals of coalitional affiliation”¹⁴ in the next centuries until the fall of the Berlin wall. The church has substituted the state, and it has been its adaptive value for

¹¹ K. Szocik, A. Szyja, *Poland: A Dark Side of Church Cultural Policy*, "Studia Humana", 2015, vol. 4, Issue 4, December 2015.

¹² J. Feierman, *How Some Major Components of Religion Could Have Evolved by Natural Selection?*, in: *The Biological Evolution of Religious Mind and Behavior*, E. Voland, W. Schiefelhoevel (eds.), Springer.

¹³ I. Wunn, D. Grojnowski, *Ancestors, Territoriality, and Gods*, Springer 2016.

¹⁴ P. Boyer, *Religious Thought and Behaviour as By-Products of Brain Function*, "Trends in Cognitive Sciences", 2003, vol. 7, no. 3, March 2003.

the entire nation. In communistic period after the second world war, the church was used to provide resistance against the state. This historical case shows that the church was a signal of in-group membership, and that epistemic value did not matter. It is in accordance with adaptationist theory of religion. The fall of Berlin wall is a turning point not only for social and political reasons but also for a new function of religion in Poland. We can try to discuss it also in adaptive and functional terms in the next subsection.

The function of religion in the current culture

What is the role of great historical religions in the current cultures? There is no doubt that religion can be still useful and necessary but its functional context has evolved. New functions are context dependent. Christianity in Europe has evolved in great extent. We can say that Christianity in general has lost its group level adaptive nature. It means that christian denominations has stopped work as adaptation for the entire groups, like nations and countries. It refers to Western Europe in which there are no religiously marked wars and conflicts. However, we can mention some recent religiously marked conflicts in the Balkan part of Europe. Also recent conflicts in Northern Ireland were marked by religious affiliations. In these cases religion worked as in-group marker. Religious components did not affect conflicts and violence but were convenient tools for fast warning and signaling about enemies and allies. In Western and Middle Europe religions are not used any more in that way like they were in the past. However, religious affiliation is used today sometimes to underline coalitional affiliation in immigration-crisis debate in Europe. I mean some groups that underline Christian roots and cultural nature of Europe, as something opposite to the native culture of immigrants from Muslim countries. Is such religious impact adaptive today? It seems that in the context of global world, high migration rate, and people who are looking for support and help, such attitude is not a right approach. Consequently, religiously strengthened inter-group boundaries can be interpreted as maladaptation that can affect aggression and violence. Religion does not affect any more group development in Europe. It does not exclude another important impact of religious beliefs, individual level adaptation. Although religion can not work longer as group level adaptation, it can still work as individual level adaptation. In Poland, as well as in Western Europe, religion is still used at the individual level adaptation.

Religious components are still attractive as motivational cultural tools for some believers. If we accept the mentioned above broader sense of adaptation that means not only reproduction but also (or only) survival, religious beliefs and especially participation in religious rituals provide adaptive positive impact on health. This individual level adaptive nature of religious components works especially in secularized countries in which religion has worked as adaptation in the past. However, there are some parts of the world in which religion works as group level adaptation also today. Among them

are protestant denominations which are very helpful for immigrants, especially in the United States. David Sloan Wilson gives an example of Korean Christian Church in the United States¹⁵. Another example is a case of Islam. We can interpret it as a group level adaptation that provides evolutionary advantage in fitness maximization for Muslims.

What about negative impact of religion?

If we treat religion and religious components in adaptive terms, how could we try to explain correlation between religion, conflicts, and violence? There are possible various explanations of that correlation. Evolutionary adaptationist account points out that religious components are morally and behaviorally neutral. The mentioned above concept of religion as in group marker for a breeding population means that religion does not affect inherently nor right nor wrong behavioral patterns. Moral nature of given patterns is provided by environmental conditions of a given population that affects the most optimal behavioral strategy.

We can consider this approach on historical example of Christianity. The early Christianity has built its ideological and moral identity on promoting mercy and charity that have included also self-sacrifice. Such strategy has worked as adaptation for believers. After implementation of Christianity as a state religion, Christianity has been used instrumentally as an ideological tool for providing supernatural legitimization for political and economical purposes. Such instrumentalization was associated with conflicts, wars, and violence, and, for this reason, religion – not only Christianity – was accused on motivating to morally wrong patterns. From adaptationist functional point of view, religion lies beyond morality. However, its connection with morality is highly context dependent. We can say that religion (religious components) itself is morally neutral but particular interest group can put directly into religious texts and religious practice particular moral norms. Religion is considered as important or even necessary cultural tool for evolution of cooperation. Some scholars, like Ara Norenzayan, points out that some religious contents, like especially the concept of supernatural agents/agent, could affect morally wright behavioral patterns¹⁶. There is no doubt that religious beliefs have potential to affect human behaviors.

Conclusion

The current scientific research approaches to the study of religion are going to implement research results and methods from empirical fields and then they try to apply

¹⁵ D. S. Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral. Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*, Chicago – London 2002.

¹⁶ A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, Princeton 2013.

them to the study of religion. Naive, pre-scientific observation and common knowledge suggest that religion have played various pragmatic role in the human history. In that pre-scientific context it may seem a little bit surprising that one of the current scientific approaches, cognitive account to the study of religion, rejects that pragmatic and functional context of religious components. Religious beliefs were adaptive especially in the past and their main function has been associated with providing social cohesion. Among other pragmatic functions we can find providing psychological health and ordering social structure.

In the current culture, we can observe cultural evolution that goes from religious to nonreligious phenomena. Consequently, current populations are organized according to secularized rules. Especially in western Europe religion has lost its dominant role as in-group marker. Group level functional organization has been replaced by individual level adaptive function of religious components. They are still useful even in secularized societies.

Konrad Szkocik – FUNCTIONALITY OF RELIGION IN THE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Religion and religious components were and are commonly shared probably in the entire world. It is worth to ask about the origin of their ubiquity. Cognitive Science of Religion explains their cross culture ubiquity in terms of by-product of cognition. Consequently, cognitive account excludes any functionality of religion. However, it seems almost impossible to exclude any pragmatic application of religion and religious components. Here I show that religion was and is also today pragmatic and functional cultural phenomenon. Although religious components have played adaptive role especially in the past, they can work as adaptation or adaptive traits also in the current secularized culture.