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Beyond Beliefs: Religions Bind Individuals Into Moral Communities

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Abstract

Social psychologists have often followed other scientists in treating religiosity primarily as a set of beliefs held by individuals. But, beliefs are only one facet of this complex and multidimensional construct. The authors argue that social psychology can best contribute to scholarship on religion by being relentlessly social. They begin with a social-functionalist approach in which beliefs, rituals, and other aspects of religious practice are best understood as means of creating a moral community. They discuss the ways that religion is intertwined with five moral foundations, in particular the group-focused “binding” foundations of Ingroup/loyalty, Authority/respect, Purity/sanctity. The authors use this theoretical perspective to address three mysteries about religiosity, including why religious people are happier, why they are more charitable, and why most people in the world are religious.

Keywords

morality, religion, culture, well-being, group processes

When viewing complex phenomena, it’s often hard to know where to look. If a lot of motion surrounds a single object—the football in a football game, the queen bee among her buzzing attendants—we can’t help but look there. In these cases, the focal object really is worth attending to. In a college football game, a vast sea of activity can be understood as two teams of people working together to move the ball in opposite directions. In the case of a beehive, the agents are not conscious of their goals, but their activity nevertheless can be interpreted from a functionalist perspective as a coordinated effort to protect, nurture, and reproduce the ovary of the hive.

For bees, coordination comes automatically. The near-miracle of hymenoptera cooperation came about long ago, and natural selection continues to choose the hives that do it best within a given ecological context. But for humans, the miracle of cooperation happens anew each Saturday when thousands of students who often don’t know each other descend on their football stadium, participate in ritual pre-game behaviors, alter their neurochemistry with alcohol, adorn their bodies with special clothing or body paint, sing songs, chant chants, move together synchronously, and then mourn or celebrate together that evening depending on the outcome of the game. Can all of these behaviors be understood functionally as attempts to move the football up and down the field? No. In this case, another organizing principle—one that cannot be seen or touched—explains why so many people come together on game day: the university. Not the physical buildings or faculty or grounds of the university but the *community*, the emergent entity and identity that is more than the sum of the individuals who happen to be

enrolled in courses in any given semester. A college football game is many things to many people, but to the extent that it is a ritual practice that binds people together and strengthens their commitment to each other and to their university, a college football game is a good analogy—or perhaps homology—for religion. Emile Durkheim (1915/1965) defined religion in precisely this way:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (p. 62)

In this article, we suggest that religion should be studied as a complex system with many social functions, one of which is to bind people together into cooperative communities organized around deities. Beliefs in Gods are important, and it is understandable that so many cognitively oriented psychologists have examined the nature and causes of such beliefs. But, we argue that focusing on these beliefs is like focusing on the football: It seems to be where the action is, but if you stare too long at it, you miss the deeper purpose of the game, which is the strengthening of a community. We

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take a social-functionalist approach to the study of religion, concentrating on the relationship between religion and morality, which many religious people believe are inseparable. We apply moral foundations theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997) to this end, examining the special role in religious morality played by the three “binding” foundations: in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. We use this theoretical perspective to help explain three mysteries about religiosity, including why religious people are happier, why they are more charitable, and why most people are religious.

The Lone Believer

Skeptical critiques of religious beliefs from a purportedly scientific viewpoint have proliferated recently. Thinkers such as Richard Dawkins (2006) attempt to convert readers by dismantling the theological arguments and factual claims of religion: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down” (p. 5). Harris (2006) published a book-length “letter” addressed to a lone Christian believer, beginning as follows:

You believe that the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus is the son of God, and that only those who place their faith in Jesus will find salvation after death. As a Christian, you believe these propositions not because they make you feel good, but because you think they are true. Before I point out the problems with these beliefs, I would like to acknowledge that there are many points on which you and I agree. We agree, for instance, that if one of us is right, the other is wrong. (p. 3)

With such an either/or framework established, Harris then builds his arguments against Christianity on the inaccuracy, absurdity, and immorality of Biblical claims. The implicit assumption of such an approach is that religion is a set of propositional claims set forth in holy books, and religiosity is the degree to which an individual believes those claims. Dawkins titled his book *The God Delusion* to make his argument crystal clear: Beliefs in supernatural deities are false beliefs; religiosity is a measure of one’s delusions.

Such a claim is not new, of course, and is evident throughout the history of psychology. Freud’s (1927/1961) *The Future of an Illusion* cast religious beliefs as psychological delusions in need of a cure: “Religious ideas, in spite of their incontrovertible lack of authentication, have exercised the strongest possible influence on mankind. This is a psychological problem” (p. 37). More recent, a meta-analytic review of the mental health literature concluded that “religious people cannot be assumed to be mentally unhealthy” (Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996, p. 448). This statement acts as a rebuke to an implicit assumption operating in psychology

and other academic treatments of religion, namely, that religious people (the vast majority of all people in the world) are deluded or mentally unwell.

Empirical studies of religiosity in psychology rarely display the hostility of Freud or Dawkins, but the general approach to religion is often similar: Religiosity is conceived as a set of propositional beliefs (about God, the afterlife, etc.) held by some individuals, and the scientific challenge is to figure out why those individuals hold such beliefs. Many answers to this challenge have been offered, including several that explain religious beliefs as cognitive errors, often the result of mental systems that were useful for other reasons:

- Beliefs in supernatural agents (from God to ghosts) may be evolutionary byproducts of the Hyperactive Agency-Detection Device, an adaptation that favored humans who erred on the side of overattributing agency when it was absent, rather than missing signs of agency when a person or animal was really present (Barrett, 2004; Guthrie, 1993).
- Beliefs in a benevolent God who influenced our past choices may be a consequence of our inability to recognize our own processes of choice justification (Gilbert, Brown, Pinel, & Wilson, 2000).
- Beliefs in an afterlife may be a byproduct of our inability to conceptualize nonexistence (Bering, 2002).

In addition, several theories have explained religious beliefs in terms of their intrapsychic benefits—their ability to make people feel better:

- Beliefs in God may be a result of the same loneliness that leads people to anthropomorphize animals and toasters (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008).
- Afterlife beliefs may be held by individuals because of their palliative effects, mollifying concerns about the injustices of this world while also addressing existential fears about death and meaninglessness (e.g., Jonas & Fischer, 2006; Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008).
- Beliefs in God may provide a sense of security and affiliation as God acts as a substitute attachment figure (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 1998).
- Religiosity may allow individuals to self-enhance, making them feel better by boosting their self-esteem (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010).

There is some evidence for each of these theories, and all of them contribute to an understanding of why some people

(but not others) believe in some kinds of Gods (but not others) at some times in their lives (more than at others). These belief-centered approaches do not deny the importance of other aspects of religiosity, such as communal worship and ritual practices, but they seem to suggest that the belief in Gods comes first, so if we can explain why people believe in such things, we can then move on to the question of why people do all that other stuff to worship these Gods.

This focus on individual belief as the entry point for the study of religion is apparent in the widely used division between “intrinsic” religiosity (encompassing individual practices and beliefs) and “extrinsic” religiosity (encompassing social aspects such as collective rituals). Even the labels convey the value judgment that intrinsic religiosity is the more worthy and authentic kind. Another example of the individualist strain in social psychology can be seen in research on religiosity as “quest” (Batson, 1976; Burris, Jackson, Tarpley, & Smith, 1996), in which religious belief is characterized as a personal existential struggle often marked by disengagement from the community to find one’s own understanding of the divine.

Why are psychologists—and even social psychologists—committed to such individualist and cognition-heavy approaches to the study of religion? Psychology’s individualist conception of religiosity may reflect a Protestant bias in the field, given that other religions—and even other branches of Christianity—don’t show this strict division between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity (Cohen, Hall, Koenig, & Meador, 2005). Alternatively, the psychology of religion may be another illustration of Don Campbell’s (1994) concern about methodological individualism, which, he warned, “dominates our neighboring fields of economics, much of sociology, and all of psychology’s excursions into organizational theory. This is the dogma that all human social group processes are to be explained by laws of individual behavior” (p. 23). Campbell believed that individual-level explanations had to be complemented by group-level analyses. How can we do this for religiosity?

God as a Maypole

A young woman with flowers in her hair is holding the end of a ribbon, the other end of which is attached to the top of a tall wooden pole. She is dancing while moving forward in a counterclockwise circle, her skipping steps beating out a precise rhythm. She circles the pole several times, but not in a neat circle; she repeatedly moves closer to and further from the pole as she circles. Suddenly, she reverses directions and repeats the process the other way. What is she doing? Seen in isolation, her behavior looks like that of insane Ophelia, performing a pointless behavior on her way to suicide. But, when we add in another 5 young women moving just as she moves, and 6 young men moving in opposite directions, we see 12 young people performing a maypole dance in which

12 separate ribbons get woven into a kind of tapestry that emerges as a byproduct of the dance. Weaving the tapestry is not the true function of the dance; in the many European cultures that performed maypole dances, the dance was not made obsolete by looms that could create such tapestries more efficiently. Even today, the maypole dance remains popular in Europe and the United States, in particular among tightly knit subcultures or ethnic groups: It is a link to ancient fertility rituals for pagan and Wiccan groups and a way to celebrate Celtic, Germanic, or Nordic heritage for ethnic communities in the United States (Beattie, 2006). The true purpose of the dance is to enact the bonds of community in a synchronous, coordinated ritual that symbolizes the fundamental miracle of social life: *e pluribus unum*.

The group-focused approach to religion treats God as a maypole—it is indeed the center of the action, but the action itself is the creation, enacting, and maintaining of an emergent community by the collective behaviors taking place all around it. For Durkheim (1915/1965), the only way to understand the religious thoughts and behaviors of individuals was through this group-level perspective, in which the ultimate object of worship is the group itself: “A society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers” (pp. 236-237). Durkheim focused on social *behaviors*, not just individual beliefs. Supporting the Durkheimian view, there is evidence that shared social practice is a more important determinant of religious conversions than specific beliefs. For example, “enjoy the religious services and style of worship” was the number one reason given for joining a faith, for both the previously unaffiliated and those previously affiliated with another religion (Pew Research Group, 2009). Furthermore, frequency of church attendance predicts health outcomes such as lower mortality, whereas depth of religious belief does not (Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003).

Why are collective behaviors and rituals so crucial to religion? Experimental studies of religious behavior (rather than belief) are rare, and much more social psychological work is needed. As a promising start, Wiltermuth and Heath (2009) demonstrated that groups of participants who walked, sang, or moved their arms in synchrony with each other showed greater liking, trust, cooperation, and self-sacrifice than groups performing the same behaviors while not in synchrony. This experimental finding supports observations made by historians and anthropologists that most non-Western societies, at the time of contact with Europeans, used synchronous dancing, singing, drumming, and swaying to induce ecstatic states of communion (Ehrenreich, 2006; McNeill, 1995; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). Some researchers have speculated that synchronous movement triggers a kind of “off switch” for self-representations in the brain, preparing people for the sort of self-transcendent experience that is a hallmark of

many religious practices (Haidt, Seder, & Kesebir, 2008; Newberg, D'Aquili, & Rause, 2001).

A second and complementary explanation for the importance of collective behavior comes from Durkheim (1915/1965), who saw religious rituals, practices, and beliefs as inseparable from morality. In his view, the individual comes into "moral harmony" with the other members of the congregation, and the collective actions performed for a religious purpose provide a "perpetual sustenance of our moral nature" (p. 242). Similarly, Atran and Henrich (2009) reviewed current thinking about the evolution of religion and suggested that group rituals function to instill commitment to and belief in supernatural agents. Shared belief in these agents—in particular, agents that have evolved (culturally) into "moralizing high Gods"—then solves a variety of commitment and cooperation problems, for example, by helping people to make and keep oaths to each other (Boyer, 2001) and by suppressing selfishness and free-riding (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008), a crucial step in the emergence of very large cooperative groups (Roes & Raymond, 2003; Shariff, Norenzayan, & Henrich, in press). Atran and Henrich (2009) further suggest that rituals provide a "psychological immune system," an impervious shield protecting beliefs against rational counterarguments. Once committed to via the binding force of group rituals, religious beliefs can be held unshakably and unquestioningly, similar in structure and intensity to moral convictions, which have been shown to be distinct from nonmoral convictions in assumptions of universality, felt experience as objective fact rather than opinion, and greater emotional investment (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005).

Moral concerns—in particular, the suppression of free-riding and the creation of trust—are therefore emerging as major elements in recent approaches to explaining the origins of religion (see, in particular, Wade, 2009, and Wilson, 2002). We believe that this social-functional approach is even more promising than approaches that explain religious beliefs in terms of their intrapsychic benefits for individuals. To aid researchers interested in the connection between religion and morality, we now discuss what the moral domain covers, that is, what specifically are morally concerned deities morally concerned about, and why?

Big Gods have Broad Moralities

As Boyer (2001) observed, omniscient Gods and spirits are not interested in all aspects of the world equally; they seem to be particularly fascinated by the moral behaviors and intentions of human beings. But what does moral mean? If moral psychology is to contribute to the psychology of religion, it will have to describe a moral domain as expansive as that of the Gods. Until recently, however, moral psychology was devoted primarily to two topics: care (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) and justice (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969). We have argued (Haidt & Graham, 2007) that the moral domain is in fact much broader

than care and justice, at least outside of secular Western subcultures. Drawing on the anthropological work of Richard Shweder (Shweder et al., 1997) and Alan Fiske (1992), we have proposed that there are five sets of evolved moral intuitions, five foundations on which cultures construct a great variety of virtues and vices: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity.

The first two moral foundations correspond to Gilligan's "care" and Kohlberg's "justice." We call these the two "individualizing" foundations because they subserve moral systems that protect individuals and their rights. There can be little doubt that Gods command their followers to build on these foundations and treat other individuals compassionately and fairly. The harm/care foundation is evident in the Hebrew Bible's injunction against murder (Exodus 20:13), in the ancient Hindu praise of the person who hurts nobody and is compassionate toward all beings (Bhagavad-Gita 16:2; Zaehner, 1969), and in the Qur'an's commandment to be kind to "orphans, to the needy, to neighbors near and far, to travelers in need" (4:36; Haleem, 2004).¹

These religions also include moral instruction in fairness and justice. Judaism commands, "You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:15, New Revised Standard Version; see also the Qur'an, 17:35, for a parallel in Islam). The "Golden Rule" of treating others as you would want them to treat you is found in numerous religious traditions. Sometimes, the justice of religious teachings can be a harsh reciprocity, such as the *lex talionis* (e.g., "eye for eye," Exodus 21:23-25). The Christian beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12, Luke 6:20-26) evoke the Hebrew prophets in predicting a coming correction to the unjustness of the world, in which the poor will become rich and the meek shall inherit the earth.

However, religious moralities also include concerns not built on the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity foundations. Dawkins (2006), for example, describes the God of the Hebrew Bible as "a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully" (p. 31), suggesting that compassion and justice might not give a complete portrait of this morally concerned deity's concerns. Harris (2006) echoes Dawkins's charge, explicitly limiting his definition of morality to harm/care: "Religion allows people to imagine that their concerns are moral when they are not—that is, when they have nothing to do with suffering or its alleviation" (p. 25). Dawkins and Harris are certainly correct that the Gods of the world's major religions often do things that are harmful or unfair, but does that mean that they are, by definition, immoral? We propose that there are three additional psychological systems or "moral foundations" at work, which we call the binding foundations because they subserve the social functions of

limiting autonomy and self-expression to bind people into emergent social entities such as families, clans, guilds, teams, tribes, and nations. Understanding the social forces of religiosity depends on understanding moral concerns that can only be seen from a group-level perspective.

Ingroup/loyalty. Religious narratives and teachings are often aimed at the creation and maintenance of a people, church, or nation, stressing the moral obligations of loyalty and self-sacrifice for this group above all other groups. Many of the religious commandments to treat others compassionately and fairly are limited to the treatment of other individuals within the religious community; for instance, the Hebrew Bible's "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) was intended to apply only to other Israelites (Anderson, 1998; Wright, 2009). The Qur'an commands, "Do not take the Jews and Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them—God does not guide such wrongdoers" (5:51; see also 29:68-69). From the perspective of an individualizing morality, such exclusivity is unfair and immoral, but from the perspective of a binding morality, the purpose of which is the creation of an emergent entity, it becomes clear how religious adherents can feel a moral obligation to help and trust their co-practitioners more than those who circle a different maypole, or no maypole at all.

Authority/respect. The world's major religions also include moral instruction in showing proper respect to authority figures, obeying rules and commandments, fulfilling the duties of one's social role, and respecting the traditions and institutions of the religious in-group. Judaism includes commandments to honor one's parents (Deuteronomy 5:16) and to respect and love the Law (Tractate Derech Eretz Zuta, Chapter 1, Talmud). The word *Islam* means "submission" in Arabic, and the Koran contains frequent calls to revere and obey one's parents (31:14), God and His Messenger (24:52), and human authorities (4:59). Christianity also repeatedly calls for obedience to God's commands (John 15:9-11, Luke 11:27-29, John 14:14-16) and echoes Islam's command to extend this obedience to earthly authorities: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1). The Bhagavad-Gita promises salvation through the worship of and prostration before God (18:65) and repeatedly emphasizes the moral importance of carrying out one's own role-based duties, even if one could more effectively play other roles (18:47).

Purity/sanctity. Finally, the "Big Gods" are consistently concerned about the state of their worshippers' minds and bodies. The Qur'an is replete with ordinances on how to purify oneself before worship, forbidding prayer when intoxicated or unclean (4:43, 24:30); it also forbids contact with menstruating women who have not been cleansed (2:222) and restricts displays of female sexuality (24:31). The

Hebrew Bible describes God rewarding David "according to the cleanness of [his] hands" (2 Samuel 22:21), and the New Testament pays particularly close attention to the purifications of Jesus and his followers (John 3:25, 11:55; Acts 15:9, 20:26, 21:26, 24:18). Hinduism describes the attainment of *Brahman* as becoming free of impurities (Katha II 5.11, Upanishads; Müller, 1962) and posits a division in the mind between "pure or impure; impure from the contact with lust, pure when free from lust" (Maitriyana-Brahmana VI 34.6, Upanishads; see also Bhagavad-Gita 5:11). Most major religions include some limits on what foods can be eaten at certain times, such as Judaic kosher laws and Muslim hallal laws. The rituals and injunctions related to purity (e.g., limits on food, dress, and sexual behavior) are central to the "costly displays" thought to play a large role in the evolution and spreading of the religion of high moralizing Gods (Atran & Henrich, 2009; Henrich, in press). But, these costly restrictions are not arbitrary. By making mundane choices into religious practices with widely shared meanings, these laws convert the social order into a sacred order (Shweder et al., 1997), the kind of order that all known societies have striven to create, until the emergence of the modern secular West (Eliade, 1957/1959).

Most readers of this article are likely to be members of the cultural group that Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2009) have described as the "WEIRD people in the world" (WEIRD stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic). Members of WEIRD society have every right to ask on what grounds we can call in-group, authority, and purity foundations of morality, rather than lamenting these aspects of human nature as the atavistic roots of human brutality and ignorance. Indeed, when morality is defined a priori in terms of harm (e.g., Harris, 2006) or justice (e.g., Rawls, 1970), then the binding foundations are by definition causes of immorality.

Our goal in creating moral foundations theory, however, was to escape from parochial definitions of morality and be ruthlessly descriptive. If ethnographers tell us that people in traditional societies often prize virtues related to the binding foundations (Fiske, 1992; Shweder et al., 1997), then we think a more inclusive definition of morality is needed. When our own data demonstrate that political conservatives in the United States and other Western nations say the same thing (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), then we are quite confident that the moral domain is (from a descriptive perspective) variable and often includes group-level concerns. Haidt (2008) recently offered a definition of moral systems as "interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible" (p. 70). This definition echoes Durkheim's definition of religion, and indeed religions are complex institutions that influence and integrate all parts of this definition to create a binding moral

community. However, the definition also allows for secular liberal moral systems that have found nonreligious ways to regulate selfishness and make successful, peaceful, and prosperous forms of social life possible.

Three Mysteries that Become Less Mysterious

In this section, we address three mysteries that, we believe, can be illuminated to some degree by thinking of God as a maypole around which moral communities cohere, rather than by approaching religion as a set of beliefs about God, creation, and immortality.

Mystery #1: Why Are Religious People Happier Than Nonreligious People? In *Gross National Happiness*, Arthur Brooks (2008) summarizes analyses from several nationally representative U.S. data sets that yield a consistent finding: “There is an immense amount of data on this subject, and it indicates conclusively that religious people really are happier and better off emotionally than their secular counterparts” (p. 43). The relationship between religiosity and self-reported happiness persists even when controlling for age, sex, race, education, income, and family status (see also Myers, 2000; Seybold & Hill, 2001). What might explain such a robust relationship?

Social psychologists have suggested many answers to this question; most have focused on the content of religious beliefs as the source of happiness. Several studies, for instance, have found support for a “terror-management theory” perspective, in which religious beliefs have a palliative effect, soothing existential anxieties about death and meaninglessness. Priming mortality salience has been shown to strengthen God beliefs (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006) and after life beliefs (Jonas & Fischer, 2006), suggesting that such beliefs are a way of maintaining subjective well-being in the face of one’s inevitable mortality. Religious beliefs have also been experimentally strengthened by threats to personal control, supporting a “system justification theory” view that beliefs in a controlling God make people feel better about the lack of personal control they have in the world (Kay et al., 2008). Putting a different spin on the notion of control, McCullough and Willoughby (2009) have proposed that religiosity leads to greater well-being because it helps to build up self-control and self-regulation; this is supported by the finding that people high in “religious zeal” make fewer errors on the Stroop task and show less anxiety when they do make errors (Inzlicht, McGregor, Hirsh, & Nash, 2009).

So, are religious people happier because their specific beliefs buffer them from threat and uncertainty? Is religion really the “Xanax of the people” (Inzlicht et al., 2009, p. 386)? Experimental manipulations of religious beliefs suggest that this is at least partially true, but there is also evidence that beliefs are only a small part of the story. Brooks

(2008) reports that the relationship between religiosity and happiness is driven by religious practice (e.g., religious attendance or prayer), not religious affiliation (i.e., the specific doctrines and beliefs of any particular faith). Moreover, evidence suggests that social religious practices are more important than individual practices or beliefs: Social practices such as attendance at communal worship services have been shown to be better predictors for attitudes and behaviors than individual practices such as prayer (see, e.g., Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009, on predicting support for suicide attacks). Although the content of religious beliefs may help individuals cope with threats in the short term (such as in social psychology experiments), the source of lasting well-being may come from integration into a religious community (see Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010, on the benefits of religious group membership). Consistent with this idea, measures of social support have been found to mediate the relationship between religiosity and well-being (Salsman, Brown, Brechting, & Carlson, 2005). Arguing that happiness is fundamentally found in social relationships, Diener and Seligman (2002) report that when social relationships are controlled for, religiosity shows no unique prediction of well-being.

In sum, religious beliefs may play a role in protecting people from some threats, but most of the well-being benefits of religiosity appear to come from participation in a religious congregation. This view is consistent with Durkheim’s (1897/1951) finding of lower suicide rates in more integrated religious communities. If God is a maypole, then the health and happiness benefits of religion come from participating in the maypole dance, not from sitting alone at home thinking about the pole.

If participation in a tightly bound community is an answer to the mystery of religion and happiness, then the next task for social psychology is to identify the active ingredients. What is it about the social communities created by religion that makes attendees of religious services happier? Experimental studies are needed to tease apart the different aspects of social religious practice and determine the mechanisms by which they provide happiness and life satisfaction. From the perspective of moral foundations theory, we predict that the creation of moral communities bound together by shared group-level moral concerns is the key to understanding how religions provide both meaning and well-being. Returning to Haidt’s (2008) definition of morality as interlocking systems that suppress selfishness, we can see that all five foundations play a part in encouraging social cooperation, but it is the binding foundations that demote the needs of the self to the needs of the moral community. This fits well with McCullough and Willoughby’s (2009) self-regulation theory, in that the religious exercise of the “self-control muscle” is usually done socially, via group rituals and practices; even prayer done in isolation can be seen as a continuation of this exercise, suppressing selfishness by continually keeping the

moral community and its shared values in mind. We predict that denominations and congregations in which the moral order is based in large part on the three binding foundations (ingroup, authority, and purity) will show a stronger correlation between participation and happiness than will denominations and congregations whose moral community rests primarily on the harm and fairness foundations.

Mystery #2: Why Do Religious People Give More to Charity? A robust relationship between religiosity and charity has also been reported: Religious people are much more likely than nonreligious people to give money to, and volunteer for, charitable causes (Brooks, 2006; Gronbjerg & Never, 2004; Lazerwitz, 1962; Pharoah & Tanner, 1997). This effect persists when controlling for education, age, gender, income, and political ideology (Brooks, 2006). Most notable, religious people are more charitable even when it comes to nonreligious charities and voluntary associations (Lazerwitz, 1962; Smidt, 1999); one study even found a stronger positive relationship between religious attendance and secular volunteering than between religious attendance and religious volunteering (Wilson & Musick, 1997). These findings are supported by Monsma's (2007) review of the relations between religion and philanthropic giving/volunteering, which concludes that religious people better fulfill norms of civic responsibility in general.

It has been suggested that charitable giving by religious people can be explained away using a belief-focused rational choice framework: If religious people believe that they will be rewarded or punished in heaven for their deeds on earth, then charity on earth is really just enlightened self-interest (e.g., Harris, 2006). However, Brooks (2006) finds that religious affiliation does not matter—those who attend religious services regularly give to charity the most, whether their religion teaches about a morally determined afterlife (e.g., Christianity) or does not (e.g., Judaism). This finding also addresses the possibility that tithing requirements account for the religious differences in charity; even in religions that don't require tithing, religious attendance strongly predicts charitable giving.

Social psychological work on the links between religiosity and altruism has also tended to concentrate on the intrinsic content of religious beliefs, for instance, showing that the perspective-taking explicitly taught by the Golden Rule—"Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31)—can increase altruistic behaviors (Batson et al., 2003). Social psychologists have also addressed the question of whether religious prosociality is really just disguised egoism that is carried out for reputational rewards (e.g., Batson et al., 1989). In their review of work on religious prosociality, Norenzayan and Shariff (2008) conclude that the religiosity-prosociality link is indeed strongest when reputational concerns are salient.

From our perspective, however, these findings do not show that religious charity is really "just" reputation management; they show that participation in a moral community that explicitly values charity and selflessness increases

charitable behavior. Supporting this view, Shariff and Norenzayan (2007) found that although priming religious concepts (God, spirit, divine) increased prosocial giving in a prisoner's dilemma game, priming secular reminders of a morally concerned community (police, civic, contract) had just as strong an effect. Similarly, Putnam (2000) found that participation in tightly knit secular groups such as bowling leagues predicted charitable giving comparable to participation in religious activities. Building on the study of social capital, Wang and Graddy (2008) found that social trust—measured by self-reported trust of those in the immediate community, such as neighbors, coworkers, fellow church congregants, local police, local store employees, and so on—positively predicted amounts of both religious and secular charitable giving. Both religious and nonreligious associational ties predict secular volunteering and giving, and in fact, participation in church groups was more predictive of charity than attendance at the main church services (Jackson, Bachmeier, Wood, & Craft, 1995). Finally, Monsma (2007) specifically examined the unique roles of social networks and religious beliefs and concluded that social networks play a larger role than do religious beliefs in explaining why religious people give more to charity.

As with happiness, it seems that being embedded in a tightly knit community with shared ideals is the best explanation for why religious people give more to charity. From a moral foundations perspective, we think that here, too, the binding foundations will be key to understanding the phenomenon. Individuals are more charitable and helpful when they are personally moved by suffering (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Slovic, 2007), suggesting that individual differences in sensitivity to harm/care concerns may predict charitable giving. But, we predict that the greater sense of connectedness and interdependence that arises in communities and teams with a five-foundation morality makes it easier to extract money, volunteer time, and blood donations from them, in particular when the request is made by a member of the community. (In other words, we expect that some portion of the pro-charitable effects of team participation, including bowling teams, comes from the greater openness to charitable appeals made by teammates.) The more that a moral community is based on ideals of interdependence rather than autonomy, we predict, the more that involvement in such communities will lead to a willingness to part with one's own time and money.

Mystery #3: Why Are Most People Religious? When an aspect of human behavior or cognition is found in nearly all societies, psychologists often turn to evolutionary explanations. But, evolutionary accounts require that a trait confers some adaptive advantage, and for evolutionary theorists who follow Williams (1966) in insisting that the advantage cannot be to a group, the advantage of religion has been awfully hard to identify. A person with a religiously inclined mind holds many apparently false beliefs, makes sacrifices to a

nonverifiable deity, and spends large amounts of time in prayer, worship, and other nonproductive activities. How could such a person prosper and leave more surviving offspring than his or her less religiously minded neighbor?

There has been some speculation that religious behavior is a kind of costly signaling device (Atran & Henrich, 2009; Sosis, 2005) that helps individuals find other trustworthy individuals. But, several recent evolutionary approaches to religion search for an advantage conferred on individuals, fail to find one, and then conclude that religion is a “bug” rather than a “feature” of the evolved mind. Dawkins (2006), Harris (2006), and Dennett (2006) all conclude that religious belief is not a biological adaptation but is rather a kind of cultural parasite that hijacks other cognitive mechanisms that were originally adaptive for individuals. The most widely discussed cognitive adaptation is the Hyperactive Agency-Detection Device (HADD; Barrett, 2004). If early humans had a mental module that was hypersensitive to signs of agency and animacy, then perhaps cultural innovations or meme systems arose to explain people’s misperceptions of agency for important events (e.g., the Gods who caused thunderstorms, sunrises, and illness). These culturally evolved religions are therefore portrayed as parasites exploiting a cognitive error and conferring no benefit on the individual. The prescription is clear: Get rid of religion, and human beings will flourish.

But, even if beliefs in Gods began as cognitive errors, it is hard to believe that religious minds and religious practices did not quickly come under selection pressures, in particular at the group level (Wilson, 2002). Let us assume that the HADD was in place by the beginning of the Holocene era, around 12,000 years ago, when agriculture, larger settlements, and bigger and more moralistic Gods were emerging (Shariff et al., in press). Let us further assume that human cultures are extraordinarily creative and that they wove religious practices and institutions around these Gods in a great variety of ways. We therefore have the three essential ingredients for evolution: variation, heritability (because culture is a second system of inheritance; Richerson & Boyd, 2005), and selection (because various forms of lethal and nonlethal intergroup competition appear to be constant features of human history and prehistory; Bowles, 2006; Keeley, 1996). In such a competitive scenario, cultures in which individuals burned up their resources in individual attempts to appease their private Gods would indeed lose out, to atheists in their group as well as to atheistic groups. But, cultures that used these Gods as maypoles to bind the group together, increase trust, and increase the monitoring and punishment that are so effective in suppressing cheating and free-riding (Fehr & Gächter, 2002; Gurek, Irlenbusch, & Rockenbach, 2006; Haley & Fessler, 2005) would gain an enormous advantage over less cohesive neighboring groups, while at the same time imposing enormous costs—perhaps even death—on nonbelievers within their ranks (Wilson, 2002).

Such groups would meet Haidt’s (2008) definition of a moral system: They created an interlocking set of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological systems (including the HADD as well as the five moral foundations) to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life—with a high degree of cooperation—possible. Understanding how this was possible will require broadening the definition of morality to include the group-strengthening moral foundations of in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity.

Is there anything special or necessary about religion? If we can see the wonders of group cohesion in maypole dances or college football games, then why can’t we get rid of Gods and religions and swap in secular practices? In our view, religious practices and rituals co-evolved with religiously inclined minds, so that they now fit together extremely well. (Our view builds on recent discoveries that genetic evolution happens very quickly; a few dozen generations is enough time for new traits to emerge. See Voight, Kudaravalli, Wen, & Pritchard, 2006; Williamson et al., 2007.) Modern cultural creativity can generate endless practices that trigger or exploit many of the same mental systems (e.g., the cult of Harley-Davidson motorcyclists), and in some cases, such proxies might be so satisfying that they reduce the need for religion. But, because of our biological and cultural-evolutionary history, it’s hard to come up with anything that “fits” or satisfies as many people as does religion. God is the original maypole, and groups that do maypole dances well have outcompeted those that don’t, for many thousands of years.

Conclusion

In this article, we’ve concentrated much more on the benefits of religiosity (happiness, charity, community) than the costs (prejudice, intolerance, intergroup conflict), so some readers might wonder whether we intend our descriptive account of religion to act as a prescriptive defense of religion. We do not. Although there has been much impassioned argument about the costs and benefits of religion, we feel that the prescriptive work—figuring out whether religion should be protected or abolished—cannot take place until a more complete description is in place. A social-functionalist perspective on religious practice complements the more widespread belief-centric approach, increasing our understanding of what religion is, and why it makes people do the things they do.

Atran and Henrich (2009) conclude their review of religion’s evolution by calling for the wedding of insights from two lines of research: the study of religious cognition and the evolution of cooperation. We think that social psychology is the ideal field to preside over such a wedding. It is our hope that moral foundations theory can be a bridesmaid, or at least help with the catering, by expanding the psychological conception of what morality is. Religions bind people together into moral communities, just as Durkheim said. You can’t

see this if you approach religion as a matter of individual beliefs and if you define morality in terms of harm and fairness. But, if you stop looking at the pole itself and look at the people circling around it, you can see the tapestry being woven.

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1. These scriptural references are meant to illustrate that a wide range of moral concerns can be found in the sacred documents and narratives of various religious traditions; they are not meant to be representative of the content of the texts or the behavior of modern adherents.

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