

# Why Do Gods Persist? A Polanyian Reflection

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ABSTRACT Key Words: logic of achievement, evolutionary psychology, Deep Darwinism, biology of religion

*Recent evolutionary interpretations of religion can be illuminating. However, by failing to take into account what Polanyi calls the "logic of achievement" they end up attributing to impersonal segments of DNA the personal striving that underlies religious existence.*

Did Darwin get it right? Most of us would respond with at least a qualified "yes." Darwinian science tells us at least part of the story of life. We may disagree on just how far contemporary neo-Darwinian biological explanations can take us toward an adequate explanation of living phenomena. But most of us will agree that they can take us a long way.

Today, however, many biologists and a growing number of social theorists, anthropologists and philosophers have become convinced that Darwin got it so completely right that any alternative accounts of life are essentially vacuous. The leap from "Darwin got it right" to "Darwin tells the whole story" has proven increasingly irresistible. Numerous scientific careers are now being dedicated to the proposition that the modest nineteenth century naturalist's ideas are powerful enough to make complete sense of almost anything in the realm of living and thinking beings. Darwinian explanation can even give us an unsurpassably foundational understanding of human ethics<sup>1</sup> and religion.<sup>2</sup>

Here let us consider what religion looks like when viewed from a Darwinian perspective? For a long time evolutionary biology stayed away from religion. Its proponents were typically reluctant to apply their science's insights to something so apparently *sui generis* as the experience of the sacred. But the characteristic drive of science is to look for purely natural explanations. It is compelled, in fact, to approach its subject matter without bringing any supposed non-natural causes into its account of phenomena. Why not look at religion naturalistically also?

The new science of evolutionary psychology, a derivative of sociobiology, proposes to "naturalize" our understanding of religion completely by way of neo-Darwinian explanation. This means that *cultural* accounts of behavior will no longer play a fundamental role. And it also means that any *theological* appeal to the idea of God or the sacred will no longer be necessary to account for religious life and thought. And we can now explain "the persistence of the gods," so goes this confident new program, without assuming the hidden presence to human consciousness of any ontologically real sacred dimension.

Evolutionary psychology starts with two claims: first, that human behavioral patterns and cognitive responses, no less than anatomical or physiological features, are inherited; and, second, that inheritance in humans, as in all other species, is a matter of genes seeking to get themselves passed on to future generations. Genes, however, exist not only in individual organisms but in their kin as well, and so fitness (the probability of reproducing) means not individual but *inclusive* fitness. This broadly genetic reinterpretation of Darwinian

evolution was worked out by George Williams (in the US) and by William Hamilton and John Maynard Smith (in the UK) during the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s Robert Trivers and Richard Alexander (in the US)<sup>4</sup> argued that the notion of Darwinian selection works best when the units of selection are taken to be genes rather than organisms or populations. Thus, as Alexander writes: “genes are the most persistent of all living units, hence on all counts the most likely units of selection. One may say that genes evolved to survive by reproducing, and they have evolved to reproduce by creating and guiding the conduct and fate of all the units above them.”<sup>5</sup>

Darwinian psychology claims that the ways in which the human brain responds to the world were designed by evolution during the Pleistocene (beginning about a million years ago) specifically for a hunter and gatherer type of existence. The brain comprises distinct systems designed to cope with specific problems related to survival during and prior to the Paleolithic period. Thus, according to Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, the brain is less like a general purpose computer than a Swiss army knife.<sup>6</sup> Its various components are designed for separate kinds of tasks. People today carry around the same kind of brain that our Paleolithic ancestors had; and because this organ was shaped by adaptive evolutionary processes in radically different circumstances from those we face today, contemporary humans often have trouble adapting to the new environments that subsequent cultural developments have brought about.

To evolutionary psychologists one of the more puzzling responses the human brain has made to the world is its tendency to create illusions of the sacred and other “counterintuitive” religious ideas garnished with strange rituals and bizarre beliefs. Why, they ask, has religion accompanied us so persistently, apparently since the very beginning of Cro-Magnon humanity? Most representatives of the present generation of Darwinian anthropologists now agree that religion is an irritatingly obsolete but stubbornly ineradicable human tendency. Our religious orientation, though clearly out of date, seems to be so deeply rooted and so pervasive that it cannot be understood simply as an ephemeral cultural concoction. Religion must be connected, instead, to the specific kind of brains we have, to cerebral systems that developed in us because they served the cause of survival during the course of early human evolution. This means, then, that the ultimate explanation of religion has to do with gene-survival. Genes need vehicles that will allow them to replicate faithfully and prodigiously, and it now appears that vehicles equipped with a tendency to be religious have been most suitable to human gene survival.

In his Gifford Lectures *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* the classicist Walter Burkert argues that something “beyond” culture and beyond individual civilizations is needed to account for the *universalia* of religion and its obstinate refusal to disappear. But since for Burkert what lies “beyond culture” cannot possibly be the sacred itself, as religious people have irrationally thought, an adequate explanation must look for religion’s ultimate explanation in the realm of the only other “beyond culture” available. That would be nature. And on the basis of the new Darwinian understanding, Burkert contends, we are in a much better position than ever before to understand just why religion continues to exist and in some places even thrive. Darwinian analysis allows anthropology to conclude that religion, beneath its complex surface manifestations, was ultimately invented by our genes as an adaptive contrivance. Religion is fictitious to the core but extraordinarily effective as far as the survival of the genes that invented it is concerned. In Burkert’s understanding, then, the gods persist because of our genes’ need to persist.<sup>7</sup>

The proximate explanation of religion lies, of course, in specific regions or systems of the human brain; but because the properties of the brain are themselves to be understood as essentially adaptive, the ultimate explanation of our piety lies in segments of DNA. The story, of course, is a bit more complicated than this, as even most of the new biologists of religion will allow. Genes are interwoven with cultural

expressions that vary from place to place and from time to time. There is “coevolution” of genes and culture. Our genes do not directly control our religious ideas. However, they do determine that we will have the kinds of brains and nervous systems that lead us to engage in prayer, myth-making, sacrifice, worship and adherence to sacred codes. In the final analysis we dance to our genes’ music, even when we are convinced that our religions are responses to the “totally other” world encountering us from a sacred beyond.

The latest example of this approach is Pascal Boyer’s confidently titled new book *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*.<sup>8</sup> Patently modelling his title, as well as his philosophical assumptions, on Daniel Dennett’s materialist manifesto *Consciousness Explained*, Boyer, a cultural anthropologist, postulates that our religious attachment to gods is the consequence of our Pleistocene ancestors’ developing brains that aided human survival only by acquiring certain adaptive skills. The brain, Boyer admits, has no specifically religious instinct. In fact, in itself religion is an “airy nothing” that persists only because it is parasitic on several determinable cognitive systems. But the disparate cognitive systems themselves evolved as purely survival mechanisms. One of these systems, for example, is that of predator detection. Our evolutionary heritage, Boyer states, is “that of organisms that must deal with both predator and prey.”<sup>9</sup> Organisms that were not good at detecting predators obviously could not adapt and were therefore unworthy vehicles for gene-survival. Those that were good at detecting predators, on the other hand, are the ones that survived and passed on genes that give us the same predator-detecting cerebral properties we possess now.

A brain endowed with the capacity to detect unseen predators, Boyer’s argument continues, is one that can function readily as a host for parasitic religious ideas. It is only a small step, after all, from being constantly vigilant for hidden predators to looking habitually for hidden *agencies* of all kinds. Natural selection caused our brains to develop in such a way that they would eventually look for supernatural explanations which, like hidden predators, can be taken to be quite real even though they remain out of sight. Hence, from a survival strategy fashioned by ancestral genes human brains have inherited the disposition that leads us even now to persist in the creation of gods. Though our cultural situation is different from that of hunters and gatherers, it is ultimately the remote Pleistocene project of gene-survival that explains, in a purely naturalistic way, just why we still tend to be religious.

Boyer’s Darwinian perspective maintains that we are a religious species not because we have ever encountered God, or because we have been grasped by any actual divine revelation, but simply because our ancestors were genetically endowed with an adaptive brain that *per accidens* also possessed a propensity to create illusions of the sacred. So the *ultimate* explanation of religion and its persistence, at least when viewed from Boyer’s perspective, has more to do with what our genes needed in order to survive than with later cultural conditioning or alleged encounters with transcendent reality.

The working assumption here is that any behavioral characteristic that enhances the prospects of gene survival may be said to be “adaptive.” Genes that make a snow rabbit white, for example, heighten the chances that the whitest snow rabbits and their genes will be the ones selected for survival. Likewise genes that molded predator detecting systems in human brains long ago, in coordination of course with genes for other adaptive traits, have made it possible for humans not only to survive, but also to be ready receptacles for the woolly notions of religion. Indeed all of the characteristics we associate with religion—its rituals, doctrines, stories, institutions and theologies—are fully understandable if we realize how readily they attach themselves to cognitive and other organic systems that were originally selected by nature only for their survival value.

Boyer's interpretation of religion is much more circuitous and subtle than that of other evolutionary psychologists. He has carefully framed his thesis in such a way that the "airy nothing" that is religion may now quietly evaporate without causing irreparable damage to our physical constitution or our survival prospects. But according to most other evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists (following E. O. Wilson's own approach) religious ideas themselves have played a much more directly adaptive role than Boyer's thesis acknowledges. In fact, there is a suspicion among many of the Darwinian interpreters that in an unfriendly universe religious ideas kept our ancestors from having to look into the abyss of the world's impersonality. By constructing mythic visions of eternal cosmic order, for example, religions provided illusory but effective shields against the terrors of existence. And by favoring our species with fictitious phantasms of a purposeful universe, religions gave our human predecessors a reason to keep on living, to bear offspring, and thus keep their genes from perishing.

This "biology of religion," while still in its infancy, has begun to gather momentum in academia. Its practitioners now include Walter Burkert, Robert Hinde, Daniel Dennett, Pascal Boyer, Steven Pinker, Michael Shermer, Loyal Rue, and many others. What all of these interpreters—writing out of diverse disciplines—agree upon is that with Darwin's (and E. O. Wilson's) help we now have scholarly access to a more deeply naturalistic explanation of our ageless and persistent longing for gods than ever before.

The neo-Darwinian debunking of religion, of course, is not the first instance of the post-Enlightenment claim that religion is "nothing but" this or that. During the modern period a number of candidates have sought the office of Ultimate Explanation of religion. Religion has been explained—or explained away—as the projection of infantile desires, the reflection of societal ideals, or as the longing for pattern and meaning.<sup>10</sup> Rationalism and science have allegedly demystified spiritual longing, showing it to be a product of human weakness, fear, resentment, repressed sexuality—in general, of an inability to face "reality." But evolutionary psychologists, without necessarily rejecting the earlier theories, are convinced that by dint of Darwinism we have at last hit upon *the* rock bottom reason for religion. It can all be explained ultimately by the simple fact that our genes are seeking immortality.

## The Whole Story?

If neo-Darwinian evolutionary psychology is giving us an adequate explanation of religion, if it is telling us the *whole story*, then of course we would now have to concede that our religious ideas are cognitively empty. They are pure fictions, and lovers of *truth* should be willing to give them up—as apparently the new Darwinian debunkers of religion have done themselves

However, it is interesting to watch how the Darwinian anthropologists deal with the notion of truth. While they claim at last to be in possession of the final facts about religion, they are not terribly annoyed, as were many earlier critics of religion, that most of humanity still wallows in the essentially *false* comforts of sacred ideas. There is even a coddling tolerance of religious illusions, an indulgence that critics such as Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, W. K. Clifford or Jacques Monod would have found highly objectionable on moral grounds.

Why then do the new Darwinian critics treat religion so much more amiably, even if still condescendingly? Is it perhaps because a gene-focused Darwinian unmasking of religion is obliged to conclude that if our ancestors had adhered to a modern scientific ethic of knowledge we would not be here to point out their naiveté? If Paleolithic and later humans had been in a position to face the “truth” head-on, or if they had idealized “objectivity” in the way our Darwinian scientists themselves are supposed to, would they and their genes ever have survived? Lacking our scientific and technological ways of coping, our ancestors could not have adapted to the natural world without the illusions of religion—at least if we follow the logic of the new Darwinian critics. Happily for us, nature endowed our species in its infancy and adolescence with a glorious capacity for self-deception. Our ancestors’ and our own reluctance to face truth has been one of our most adaptive and even endearing features! Thus the evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists are in the interesting position of having to embrace the objectivist (naturalist) ideal of knowing as far as their own work and educational vocation is concerned, while at the same time implicitly rejoicing that our ancestors did not share this ideal themselves.

Some would go so far as to encourage even now the persistence of religious illusions into the future for the sake of our gene-survival. Influenced heavily by E. O. Wilson and Darwinian anthropology, for example, the philosopher of religion Loyal Rue has recently argued that our own continuation and thriving as a species is in great measure the consequence of a genetically based capacity for lying and self-deception that comes to expression, among other ways, in our religions. From a biological perspective the propensity for “guile” can be viewed as a kind of saving “grace.”<sup>11</sup> Among animals, for example, nature tends to select deceivers, while those incapable of deception do not survive and reproduce. Likewise, “the role of deception in human adaptive strategies has been so important that we may suspect it to be essential to our survival.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Rue, the rationally and scientifically awakened human mind must now embrace *nihilism* as the only “truth” that faithfully reflects the real world. But, thank goodness, we have been endowed by evolution with a capacity, especially in our religions, to spin noble lies that allow us to deny this truth and keep it out of view! Humans happily have evolved the cerebral equipment to cover over the “real” world with colorful and inspiring “lies” that give meaning to our lives and the universe.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the capacity for deception and self-deception must be nourished, not eliminated, if we hope to survive as a species.

Earlier Otto Rank and his disciple Ernest Becker—in opposition to Freud—had maintained that in order to maintain our psychic equilibrium we humans have to create “vital lies” by which to live. Otherwise we will fall into psychic illness. Apparently it is just those who are courageous enough to look at reality nakedly and without illusions who will be most prone to psychosis. The healthy-minded among us should give thanks for our species’ capacity to evade truths that would surely sicken us if we looked straight at them.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the new Darwinian anthropologists are not the only interpreters of religion to have worshipped privately at the shrine of naturalistic objectivism while publicly tolerating a less severe devotionism for the herd of humanity on the other. A kind of neo-Catharist tolerance of “fiction for the fortuneless” is the accommodating posture of the new brand of critique. The truly enlightened and courageous among us will now take pride in realizing that we have at last—especially with Darwin’s help—looked into the emptiness of the cosmos without blinking. Now that we know that we had been tricked into our false states of belief by the crafty evolutionary mechanism of gene-survival, perhaps we can look for more realistic reasons to go on with our own lives. Of course, this may not be easy. If the biologists of religion are correct, then, as Holmes Rolston, III has put it, the scientifically minded among us, “those who get it right” and have to face the truth, are most

likely to be disabled, “and those who continue the traditional mythologies, and get it wrong, will outproduce them.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, though, out of compassion for our fellow humans we should tolerate, and in Rue’s opinion even encourage, their persistence in vital lies that will propel the human gene pool into the indefinite future.

### A Polanyian Perspective on “Deep Darwinism”

Let us call the proposal expressed by Burkert, Boyer, Rue and others “Deep Darwinism,” since it claims that we can gain no more profound understanding of all manifestations of life, including human ethics and religion, than those provided by the evolutionary idea of reproductive fitness. Deep Darwinism contends that we can account for nothing in the life-world, including religion, more objectively and foundationally than in terms of adaptation.<sup>16</sup> Though many of us will initially balk at such a claim, an increasing number of books and academic careers are now dedicated to promulgating it.

The Deep Darwinians will admit that religious people *think* that their stories about the sacred put them in the presence of what is ultimately Real. But the salient evolutionary “discovery” is that all religious ideas, no matter how seemingly realistic, are really fictitious because they ultimately serve the powerful mechanism of gene-survival. This *non sequitur* is usually inexplicit, but it lurks in the background of most evolutionary accounts of religion. It may be called the “if-functional-then-untrue” argument.<sup>17</sup> Holmes Rolston has given a thorough analysis and critique of it in *Genes, Genesis and God*.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond this questionable kind of reasoning, however, there are other logical peculiarities in the new Darwinian criticism, as Michael Polanyi’s philosophical reflections on the nature of life and human knowing will be able to show. Polanyi’s profound understanding of the ineradicably personal character of knowing, and his description of what he calls the “logic of achievement” are especially pertinent to our question as to whether the Darwinian psychologists are telling us the whole story about either life or religion. Deep Darwinism, viewed in Polanyian perspective, may turn out to be rather shallow.

I should say at once that Polanyi would find nothing inherently problematic about an evolutionary or even a gene’s-eye perspective on life or any of life’s manifestations, including religion. While the joint meaning of life’s substituent particulars, including its genetic units, is momentarily lost sight of in any atomizing focal survey, there is always the possibility of arriving later on at richer cognitive integrations as the result of such specification. Hence something useful may be learned about religion through our focusing on the complex genetic history that builds the kind of minds that are able to engage in religious worship. A biological approach may have something very important to teach us about religion.

The interesting issue here, however, is the claim (often tacit but sometimes explicit) by deep Darwinians that a genetic-adaptationist account gives us an *ultimate* explanation of religion, thus making all religious or theological explanations superfluous. In one way or another, of course, the naturalizing of religion has been going on ever since the birth of science, and in a more diffuse way even from the time of Greek and biblical antiquity. But nowhere that I know of has the attempt to understand religion been carried out with more confidence that a purely “natural” explanation of it has finally been reached than in recent writings influenced by evolutionary psychology.

The Darwinian naturalizing of religion not only professes to show that the reality of the *divine* is not a necessary part of the explanation of religion; just as remarkably it has also made the human *subject* itself only incidental to a radical explanation of the persistence of the gods. Though implicitly aware of the intermediary role our brain mechanisms, cognitive systems, subjective thoughts, emotions and desires play in the making of religion, the new biological explanations now formally dispense with human subjectivity or “personality” as far as any truly fundamental account of religion is concerned. Our subjective desires, if we can attribute any significant agency to them at all, are in the service of a much deeper kind of natural striving, that of our genes. It is in the “beyond” of a genetic river flowing out of Eden that we will find the deepest roots of spiritual desire.<sup>19</sup>

From a Polanyian perspective, however, there is always a striking futility in any attempt to objectify, naturalize and depersonalize human knowledge completely: under the pressure of attempted objectification, “personality” does not disappear at all, but keeps showing up—sometimes in twisted ways and strange places. The deep Darwinians, for example, try to *objectify* life, human beings and religions as radically as they can. In accordance with modern naturalistic assumptions, the whole idea of subjectivity remains taboo.<sup>20</sup> But, in point of fact, the banished subjectivity is simply displaced from human centers onto impersonal genetic units and processes.

The Deep Darwinians cannot avoid attributing to the domain of allegedly impersonal genes a clearly centered and personal interest, a *striving*, or a “commitment” to achieving a goal—that of survival. And in spite of attenuating comments that they are not attributing personal agency or intentionality to genes in a literal sense, the Deep Darwinians’ inability to avoid use of terms like “striving,” “cooperation,” “success” and “failure” in the struggle by genes to survive, can make sense only if genes are being understood in terms of what Polanyi calls the *logic of achievement*. Contemporary gene-enchanted Darwinism has exiled living beings, including human subjects, from their natural home in the sphere governed by the logic of achievement. Simultaneously it has projected the deracinated attribute of centered striving onto genetic units that both physical science and common sense are normally obliged to consider incapable of any kind of commitments or personal agency whatsoever.

This fiction is important to Deep Darwinians, however, since it allows them to wrest the roots of religion from the murkiness of human personality and to understand spiritual passion as the helpless consequence of a homunculus-like struggle that goes on in the psychologically distant realm of DNA. The dimension “beyond culture” in terms of which they may now “explain” religion in an ultimate way, and without having to posit an ontological horizon of transcendence, is the purely physical realm of nucleotides. In Deep Darwinism the genetic dimension of our being has taken center stage as the foundationally energizing source of the striving that renders us religious.

If we could be assured that the idea of “genes striving to survive” were simply a convenient way of speaking, not to be taken literally, then we might have reason to be less concerned about this dramatic displacement. However, the new Darwinian relocation of centered striving from personal subjects to the impersonal realm of genes is more than an innocent literary device. Matt Ridley’s lucid summary of the new evolutionary thinking clearly demonstrates that much more is going on in Deep Darwinian discourse than linguistic playfulness. He observes that a generation ago most biologists would have been quite reluctant to personalize genes, instead viewing them as unconscious and inanimate. But, he goes on,

... in the last few years the revolution begun by [George] Williams, [William] Hamilton, and others has caused more and more biologists to think of genes as analogous to *active and cunning individuals*. Not that genes are conscious or driven by future goals—no serious biologist believes that—but the extraordinary purely logical fact is that evolution works by natural selection, and natural selection means the enhanced survival of genes *that enhance their own survival*. Therefore, a gene is by definition the descendant of a gene that was *good at getting into future generations*. A gene that *does things* that enhance its own survival may be said, *teleologically*, to be doing them because they enhance its survival. *Cooperating* to build a body is as effective a *survival strategy* for genes as cooperating to run a town is a successful social strategy for human beings.<sup>21</sup> (Note that the italicized words all have to do with *achievement*.)

Ridley's book *The Red Queen* repeatedly attributes to genes activities and intentions that we formerly had associated only with centered (personal) striving. Genes are said to "cooperate," and their main achievement is "survival." "A gene has only one criterion by which posterity judges it: whether it becomes an ancestor of other genes. To a large extent it must *achieve* that at the expense of other genes."<sup>22</sup> It is a mix of cooperation and competition among striving and achieving genes that, according to Ridley, accounts for the evolutionary invention of gender-based behavior. Sex is the outcome of genes devising *strategies* to avoid their demise at the hand of parasites.<sup>23</sup> In a similar way, according to evolutionary psychology, our genes give rise to religious instincts in human vehicles so as to help the genes *succeed* in their own effort toward self-perpetuation.

If genes are "strategizing" and "striving" to survive, then of course they can also "fail" in such endeavors. The point is, we are apparently to understand lifeless and mindless genes in accordance with the logic of achievement. But the logic of achievement—implying the possibility of success or failure—as Polanyi has consistently attempted (often without success) to get across, is simply inapplicable to impersonal processes. Striving, succeeding and failing are attributes logically attributable only to living subjects and personal centers. Indeed it is only because they strive (for a goal), and are therefore subject to failure, that we can recognize living beings as living at all. In the brave new biology, however, life and striving are no longer identifying marks of organisms, let alone human persons. The latter are simply passive mechanisms or "vehicles" of a more fundamental kind of striving. Centered striving is now the defining attribute of genetic monads, or perhaps arrays of genetic units, that can be "cooperative" or "selfish." It is how they behave among themselves that will determine whether they will succeed or fail.

The Deep Darwinians have taken what most cultures and "folk psychologies" call "personhood" and projected it onto the world of genes. This displacement of tabooed subjectivity onto our genes may seem rather inconsequential until we notice that in order to understand religion "objectively" or naturalistically Deep Darwinism must first divest it of almost everything religious people have themselves always thought essential to it. A major fact about religion, after all, is that religious persons are themselves engaged in a most intense kind of striving. At the very heart of religion there is aspiration, hoping, struggling to overcome obstacles. Religious persons and groups strive to find a path through the most difficult obstacles to the continuation of life.<sup>24</sup> It is only because even Deep Darwinians recognize—tacitly and personally—the fact of religious striving and "route-finding" that they are enabled to identify and name the phenomenon of religion in the first place. But in their theoretical "explanations" of religion they ignore as inconsequential the personal striving that allows them to take note of religion at all, relocating all relevant endeavor in the impersonal chemical constituents of genetic processing.

This displacement of “striving” from human persons onto an impersonal flow of genes is a matter of considerable irony. While explicitly *striving* to avoid the embarrassingly “unscientific” use of anthropomorphic projections characteristic of naive religious people, our deep Darwinians lavishly indulge their own proclivity for the very same kind of projection—in this instance projection of subjective striving onto the “beyond” of impersonal nature. Thus they end up attributing to mindless genes the very human subjectivity that they first subtracted from *us* in order to view our religiousness “objectively” or “naturalistically.” But in *subjectifying* our genes the scientists have put themselves in a situation where *objective* knowledge of the coveted realm “beyond culture” remains logically inaccessible after all. If genes are centered, striving *subjects*, then objective, impersonal (scientific) knowing could never penetrate to their inner reality. The quest for objective knowledge of the roots of religion ends, then, in the aporia of DNA’s own supposed subjectivity. Like our hunter-gatherer ancestors, the Deep Darwinians’ own predator detecting cognitive systems appear to be hosts to (parasitic?) ideas about hidden subjective agencies, namely genes, that can explain the puzzling persistence of religion.

Meanwhile the Deep Darwinians themselves keep striving. For what? Perhaps for truth? Perhaps to deliver religious persons of the conviction that their beliefs have anything to do with what is ultimately real? Whatever their objective, the point is that the Deep Darwinians are in any case *striving*. And like all striving, theirs also confronts the possibility of failure. In fact, if Polanyi is correct, their attempts to give an ultimate explanation of why gods persist is rooted in the habitual failure of modern thought to welcome subjectivity *explicitly* into the sphere of true being, and personality into the heart of genuine knowing.

## Conclusion

Once again, I am not claiming that Darwinian explanations of religion are devoid of illuminating merit. I believe that neo-Darwinism, including evolutionary psychology, may be one layer in a whole hierarchy of explanations needed to account for religion richly. But for all we know, another important dimension of a fertile explanation of religion may be the one that religious persons themselves have given, namely, that “the sacred” has in some way (sacramentally, mystically, apophatically) broken into their awareness.

Acknowledging the reality and power of the sacred would not rule out an explanatory pluralism that gives ample room to Darwinian accounts as well. Indeed it would only make the human quest for ultimate reality all the more fascinating. A suitable theological method will make ample room for whatever light biology can shed on religion. For example, we may assume that a human response to the sacred would in some way promote the cause of gene survival, and that our genetic endowment disposes us to be religious. If religion had not been genetically adaptive, at least in a general way, we would not be here. And if our genes had been configured in some completely different way—for example like an alligator’s—we would not be religious. All of this goes without saying.

What is questionable are three claims commonly made by our Deep Darwinians. The first is that genes themselves can be personal centers of striving and, therefore, themselves subject to success or failure. The fact is that genes do not really strive at all, and so they are not appropriately understood in terms of the logic of achievement as implied in recent Darwinian discussion.

The same must be said, incidentally, of the atomic cultural units that some evolutionists refer to as “memes.” Memes, according to Richard Dawkins, the inventor of the term, are virus-like bits of information such as tunes, ideas, catch-phrases or fashions that allegedly make their way from one mind to another.<sup>25</sup> Like genes they are said to be self-replicating units, only of culture rather than biological traits; and, consistent with Dawkins’s understanding of genes, they are held to have a life of their own. That is, they are portrayed as centers of striving such as we associate with living organisms. Memetics, like genetics, however does not belong to the sphere of the logic of achievement, though this is where its advocates typically place it.

The second questionable assumption of the Deep Darwinians is that once we have (naturalistically) detected the hidden genetic stratum that allegedly underlies the persistence of the gods, we have arrived at the ultimate explanation of religion and in doing so divested all religious teachings of any plausible claims to truth. What is problematic here is both the if-functional-then-untrue argumentation and the arbitrary substitution of a single-level (physicalist) approach for a rich hierarchy of explanations.

Third and finally, the Deep Darwinians’ own unmasking of religion ends up unmasking itself. Their own agency-detecting systems (presumably employing the same cognitive mechanisms that arose by selection for predator detection thousands of years ago) leads them, no less than their religious ancestors, to look for what lies *hidden* beyond appearances. They start out also looking for a hidden agency, one that will “explain” religion. And they end up locating this agency in a fictitious realm of subjectivity (that of selfish genes) which, when it comes right down to it, is no less inaccessible to objectifying comprehension than the explanations given by religious persons themselves.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Ruse and Edward O. Wilson, “The Evolution of Ethics,” in James Huchingson, ed., *Religion and the Natural Sciences* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), 308-11. See also Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Two recent books on religion deeply influenced by Darwinian biology are Robert Hinde, *Why Gods Persist: A Scientific Approach to Religions* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (New York: W. H. Freeman & Co. , 2000).

<sup>3</sup> George C. Williams, *Adaptation and Natural Selection: a Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1996); William D. Hamilton, “The Genetical Evolution of Social Behavior,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1964), 1-52; John Maynard Smith, *The Evolution of Sex* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Robert L Trivers, *Social Evolution* (Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin Cummings, 1985); Richard D. Alexander, *Darwinism and Human Affairs* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, *Darwinism and Human Affairs*, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, edited by Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, John Tooby (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press. 1996). A parallel argument is given by Robert Hinde, *Why Gods Persist*.

<sup>8</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Boyer, *Religion Explained*, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Shermer interprets religion as the product of the need to see patterns in the universe. See his book *How We*

*Believe.*

<sup>11</sup>Loyal Rue, *By the Grace of Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 82-127.

<sup>12</sup> Rue, *By the Grace of Guile*, pp. 125-26.

<sup>13</sup> Rue, *By the Grace of Guile*, pp. 261-306. After insisting that only nihilism can be *true*, Rue arrives at the following breathtaking conclusion to his book: “. . . it is now for us to thank the nihilists and to send them on their way. We have a story to tell.” And what is this (admittedly untrue) story that we need to tell if we are to survive? Rue answers: “Biocentrism is your story and mine. It is everybody’s story. It presumes to tell us how things are and which things matter. It is, nevertheless, a lie. It is a lie because it is not nature’s own story, not told by the earth, not the authorized version. It is merely a tale told by humans, full of contingency and distortion, signifying hope. But it is a noble lie, one that washes down with a minimum of deception and offers up a maximum of adaptive change. And if it is well and artfully told, it will reenchant the earth and save us from the truth.” One can only ask whether Rue is asking us to accept as true what he has just told us.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973). “The neurotic opts out of life because he is having trouble maintaining his illusions about it, which proves nothing less than that life is possible only with illusions.” (p. 189). Becker quotes Rank also as saying: “With the truth one cannot live. To be able to live one needs illusions . . . [T]his constantly effective process of self-deceiving, pretending and blundering, is no psychopathological mechanism . . .” (pp. 188-89).

<sup>15</sup> Holmes Rolston, III, *Genes, Genesis and God: Values and Their Origins in Natural and Human History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 339.

<sup>16</sup>Whether Deep Darwinism can also provide logically coherent grounds for the assumptions made by Deep Darwinism itself is an interesting question. Can the evolutionary psychologist coherently naturalize human culture without sabotaging the authority of Darwinism itself?

<sup>17</sup>See Rolston, *Genes, Genesis and God*, p. 347.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 335-70.

<sup>19</sup> The reference here is to the title of a book by Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

<sup>20</sup>See Alan Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup>Matt Ridley, *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 92-93. (Emphasis added)

<sup>22</sup>Ridley, *The Red Queen*, p. 94. (Emphasis added)

<sup>23</sup>Ridley, *The Red Queen*, *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> John Bowker, *Is Anybody Out There?* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, Inc., 1988), pp. 9-18; 112-43.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).