

# Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion

*Collaborative and Co-authored Essays by  
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# Sound and Fury Signifying Nothing

*Matt J. Rossano*

The mere mention of religious pro-sociality arouses strong passions in some. Given this, a constructive discussion obligates scholars to an especially high standard of circumspection and objectivity. Sadly, this paper falls well short of that standard. It whines and preaches rather than enlightens.

While the authors are quick to criticize others' empirical work, their own case rests on little more than unsupported assertions, a quasi-historical anecdote, quotes from (not evidence from) Jared Diamond and Steven Pinker and accusations of money-induced bias on the part of researchers whose findings they don't like. While all these sins deserve reprimand, I'll concentrate on the unsupported assertions, since that's the only part of this paper that the unsuspecting might confuse for real scholarship.

Without any attempt to cite or discuss empirically supportive evidence, we are told at various places in the paper that: "the hypothesis that religious pro-sociality provides a basis for large-group cooperation simply does not account for the diversity, heterogeneity and xenophobia of such human groups" (p. 133); "religions have, from their social origins, been promoters of, perhaps the *primary* promoters of, what we refer to as assortative sociality." (p. 134). "The ingroup cohesiveness of religious beliefs and behaviors clearly undermines openness, individualism, non-conformity, and risk tolerance while fostering collectivism and conformity, ethnocentrism and philopatry (reduced mobility outside one's natal group), intergroup vigilance, and xenophobia." (p. 134). And on and on it goes, page after page of simply declaring as fact that which should be empirically defended and/or demonstrated.

That readers should be skeptical of the authors' claims is born out when we take a little time to evaluate a couple of them. For example: On page 136 we are told that with the exception of a brave few (notably Scott Atran) researchers have neglected to study the "dark side" of religion. Really?

The authors have Galen's (2012) review paper in their reference list. Did they miss table 3 which summarized over a dozen priming studies showing nonsocial and antisocial effects of religion? Similarly, Preston *et al.*'s (2010) review contains both a page-long section on religion's anti-social effects (pp. 7–8), and a table (table 1) listing eleven studies with a range of findings from pro-social to anti-social. Paloutzian & Park's (eds.) *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* contains chapters on religion, violence and terrorism (chapter 29) and fundamentalism and authoritarianism (chapter 21). Mahoney's (2010) review of studies on religion and family concludes that while

religion often contributes importantly to domestic harmony, it can also exacerbate familial conflicts when household members adhere to discrepant religious beliefs and practices. And I could go on. One ought to at least peruse the literature before criticizing it.

Along with perusing it, one might also make the effort to understand it methodologically. Most studies showing pro-social effects of religion could have just as easily found anti-social effects; participants could have been less generous after a religious prime. But they weren't. So just because a study shows pro-social effects does not mean that it was "evading the dark side." It just happened not to find a "dark" result!

Another example: On page 131 the authors' tell us that religion is and always has been "chronically implicated" in "discord and violence." Two comments. First: Beating the 'religion equals violence and war' drum is popular in many quarters, but the only attempt I know of to empirically test this claim came to a rather surprising (and for some, a terribly disappointing) conclusion that less than 10% of wars in human history had a significant religious motive to them (google "War Audit"). A solid majority (60%) had absolutely no religious motive at all. It's only one study, but just a moment of sober reflection would suggest that the results are probably not crazy—after all, where was religion in: The Punic Wars, the Peloponnesian War, the Conquests of Alexander the Great, the Manchu Conquest of China, the Russo-Japanese War, the Franco-Prussian War, the Boer War, the Napoleonic Wars, the Korean War, etc. etc. Second: The Batak are a thoroughly peace-loving, cooperative traditional society where belief in supernatural punishment provides the very backbone of their non-violent ethic (See Endicott & Endicott 2014). For them, religion is chronically implicated in peace and harmony!

Enough cleaning up others' messes. How can we be more constructive on these issues? First, we need to be clearer about what "pro-social" means. Pro-social is still pro-social even if it is targeted exclusively at an in-group. Indeed, for as long as there have been social species, pro-social acts have almost exclusively been in-group pro-social acts. Given the way natural selection works, it simply could not have been otherwise. Those of us who ascribe to the naturalistic origins of religion find it totally unsurprising that religious pro-sociality is largely in-group pro-sociality. Expectations of 'global kumbaya' could arise only in the minds of those blissfully ignorant of evolutionary biology. That universalism of any sort is applied to religion is actually a complement to it, not a derogation. Other than the UN, is there any other human institution that would even be accused of harboring such wide-eyed idealism?

Two aspects of religious pro-sociality are rather surprising (1) its strength and endurance, and (2) that occasionally it extends beyond the in-group.

First on (1). On page 136 the authors question “whether *religious* prosociality is any more (or less) robust than any other basis for group belonging.” Well, once again, a moment’s reflection and at least a casual acquaintance with the empirical literature would indicate “yes.” First, religion is a human universal (google: “Donald Brown human universals”). Largely secular societies are a very recent human phenomenon. The fact that, historically, you simply can’t find a human society where religion was not integral to social life ought to at least peak one’s curiosity.

Second, (the authors think we all need a history lesson, so here goes): The Moabites, Phoenicians, Hittites, Cynics, Pythagoreans, Goths, Vandals, Bourbons, Normans, Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, Whigs, Know-Nothings, Teetotalers etc., etc. have all come and gone—but the Jews are still with us! This suggests that at least some religions have found a formula for extraordinary staying power. In fact, I’d bet if you start listing the human groups that have sustained a continual presence across millennia they are at least disproportionately if not exclusively religious.

Third, empiricism bolsters history. Rich Sosis’ studies have documented how both religious communes and kibbutzim are more cohesive and enduring than their secular counterparts. Furthermore, church groups have been found to be more trusting and committed compared to secular groups such as bowling leagues or parent groups (Rossano 2010: 163–164). Other studies have found that religious belief and practice are significant and often unique predictors of sociological factors such as: social group size and complexity (Roes & Raymond, 2003), technological complexity (Peoples & Marlowe 2012); and proxy measures of commerce and cooperation (Johnson 2005); as well as personal factors such as: the number and quality of one’s social relationships, the number of instrumental acts of social support one receives, and one’s over-all life satisfaction (Rossano 2010: 163–164). One need only be a scientist, not a religious apologist, to begin to wonder if this empirical data might not bear some remote relevance to Jewish longevity.

Based on this, a reasonable hypothesis is that religion emerged from the cauldron of cultural group selection. That is, different human groups with varying intra-group cooperative norms competed with each other over the course of history and those with religious-based or religious-bolstered norms won. Religious intra-group cooperation emerging from inter-group competition provides an explanation (potentially testable) for both the in-group targeting of religious pro-sociality and the often close connection of religion and out-group antagonism.

Moreover (and now moving on to #2), if religion’s origins trace back to inter-group competition, then in-group expansion would have been another

important competitive tool. Any group in competition with other groups gains an advantage through numbers. Reliable and exclusively targeted religious pro-sociality can be understood as a potent expansionist tool (again another potentially testable hypothesis). Not only does this religious pro-social commitment promote high within-group fertility (Weeden & Kurzban 2013) but it can also serve as an attractive force to outsiders whose own groups have become disorganized and ineffectual. Indeed (another history lesson!), Stark's (*Rise of Christianity*, 1996) analysis of the expansion of early Christianity credits the aid and support that Christian communities offered one another during plagues and other disasters as being powerful incentives to pagan conversion. A point not lost on the reactionary pagan emperor Julian the Apostate (or Philosopher depending on one's tastes) who lamented that it was the Christians' "benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that [did the] most to increase [their] atheism." He further complained that "no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galilaeans [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us" (from letter 22, google "Julian the Apostate letters").

Successful expansionism, however, requires more than just attractive display of group benefits. There must also be some willingness to accept out-group migrants. Survival could be jeopardized if the group becomes so ardently insular and unflinchingly hostile to outsiders that potential wannabes are prevented from joining. This leads to another potentially testable hypothesis about religious pro-sociality—that it must have some mechanisms for allowing, and at times even encouraging, immigration. Most of the "world" religions that we see today contain universalist beliefs of one form or another (e.g. "we are all children of the One God."). Some evidence suggests that reminding people of this universalism increases out-group sympathy. Preston and Ritter (2013) found that "God" primes differentially increased people's cooperation toward out-group members, whereas "religion" primes increased cooperation toward in-group members. Yes, religious expansion has sometimes involved violent imposition. But this strategy has costs. It may be that the most effective expansion utilizes a more cost-efficient combination of attractive and credible displays of group solidarity, promotion of high fertility, pathways to immigration, and effective deterrence against opposition and apostasy—another potentially testable idea.

The cognitive science of religion is not about bashing or promoting religion—it's about understanding it. This requires calm, clear-headed thinking. Adolescent temper tantrums should be left to the popular media.

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