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Supernatural Selection: How Religion Evolved

Matt J. Rossano, Oxford Univ., \$29.95 (288p) ISBN 978-0-19-538581-6

The existence of God has been part of human discussion for centuries. Believers point to evidence of design and rationality as convincing proofs of divine presence. Rossano, head of the psychology department at Southeastern Louisiana University, looks instead to notions borrowed from anthropology and sociology to construct a purely nonreligious view of the evolution of religion. Favoring science over sentiment, he takes great comfort in the idea that "pieces of our evolutionary puzzle are now falling into place." He suggests that religion, which he describes as an "evolutionary adaptation," arises from intergroup competition and is the result of the inevitable struggles that occur when groups compete for the same prizes (in this case, adherents to their message). To true believers, this is a grim assessment of the religious notions that underlie their lives. Casual readers will find this book tough going and, in some instances, overly technical. But with patience, most will find food for thought. (June)

Sacramento Book Review

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Supernatural Selection: How Religion Evolved

By Matt Rossano

Oxford University Press \$29.95 294 pages

Rossano, head of the Psychology Department at Southeastern Louisiana University takes the approach that religion is a form of "relating," and explains how the various forms of relating have served us in the world. What was the time like before religion? Just as a time before trade, government, and agriculture there was a time without religion. Five hundred thousand years ago our ancestors began chanting, singing, and dancing together. This was the beginning of social bonding. One hundred thousand years ago our ancestors made their first forays out of Africa only to retreat back. Seventy thousand years ago our ancestors nearly went extinct as did 99 percent of life that ever existed.

It was religious rituals, Rossano writes, which gave us supernatural gods and spirits, both comforting and menacing, just as the religions do today in keeping us competitive and aggressive. Religion was adaptation, it was a way to ensure morality, a way to get the crops to grow, or to explain why they didn't grow, or to be successful in killing a walrus, or in understanding the drowning of a hunter in pursuit of the walrus. And then there is death. Humans have a difficult if not impossible time imagining death. Religions conceptualize the experience for us. A few thousand years ago, thousands of religions arose from thousands of places for specific reasons unique to those times and places. And the rest is history.

Is religion still adaptive? What about the many people who are not religious but really materialist? Many of them go to the church not to bring rain for the crops (though they might like a new car or computer). Or the many who might be called spiritual but not followers of organized religion. Or atheists and agnostics? Can religion really be eliminated? After all for many religions, they're now down to their one god. Isn't the next adaptive step logical and rational? Is the cost of religion really worth it today? Probably not, says Rossano. Not with biocentrism – espousers of environmental, ecological, and animal rights activity. Is (was) it even true? *Supernatural Selection* can't help the believers or nonbelievers in the God Wars. The evidence leads to a final conclusion even more than heretical. This is an important book and we'll be seeing many more studies like it. After all, we used to not believe in gravity.

Reviewed by Phil Semler