

RG ST 292AT - Evolutionary Theories of Religion  
Thursday 3:00-5:50, UCSB (Kerr Hall, Studio B) and UCR (tba)

Instructors: Ann Taves and Uffe Schjødt

This seminar takes up evolutionary theories of religion, a topic viewed as taboo by many scholars of religion. Given the deleterious effects of evolutionary presuppositions on classical theories of religion, which consistently managed to locate Protestant Christianity at the pinnacle of the evolutionary process, most twentieth century scholars of religion retreated from the idea altogether. Although most scholars of religion (and most humanists) continue to share an aversion to evolutionary approaches, scholars in other fields, such as biology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, have proposed a variety of new theories of religion grounded in an evolutionary perspective.

This course is designed to bring students from the humanities and the sciences together to consider these new theories and the research that is being done to test them. The general premises of the course are (1) that viewing ourselves as human animals that are simultaneously biological, social, and cultural offers a broad basis for collaboration between the sciences and the humanities, and (2) that, while specific theories may leave much to be desired, studying the cultural aspects of human behavior within an overarching evolutionary paradigm can significantly enhance our understanding of cultural processes.

The seminar is open to graduate students across disciplines at UCSB and at UC Riverside via videoconference. The course presupposes that students have a research interest, however vaguely defined at this point, which they can bring into conversation with the materials we will be discussing in the class. Faculty and students that are not enrolled are welcome to sit on as many of the sessions as they would like.

#### Course Requirements

- Generate additional bibliography on your topic from a methodological perspective that is not dominant in your discipline, e.g., historical or ethnographic for psychologists and experimental for ethnographers and historians.
- Keep a research journal in which you consider the implications of whatever we are discussing in seminar for your own research.
- Serve as discussion leader – in coordination with instructors and invited guests -- for one of our sessions.
- Post to our discussion forum on Gauchospace at least once before class.
- Write up a brief proposal for testing a hypothesis related to your own research and present it our final class session.

#### General Questions to Guide Weekly Discussions

- What hypothesis is this body of research advancing? What hypothesis might be advanced?
- How is or could the researcher test this hypothesis?
- What implications might this have for your own research?

## Brief Overview of Evolutionary and Cognitive Science of Religion

The phrase “cognitive science of religion” (CSR) is sometimes understood broadly as in the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion or the Cognitive Science of Religion Consultation at the American Academy of Religion and sometimes more narrowly. Where it is construed narrowly, we increasingly find references to the “standard model” in the cognitive science of religion. The so-called standard model of CSR tends to stress universal cognitive mechanisms that constrain mental representations. One of the main issue that divides those who are advancing the “standard model” and others has to do with the relationship of cognition and culture. The Religion, Cognition, and Culture research unit at Aarhus University (Denmark) has taken the lead in advancing a broader approach that emphasizes the interplay between cognition and culture (see: <http://teo.au.dk/en/research/current/cognition> ).

Within the evolutionary psychology of religion, there has been a correspondingly intense debate over whether religion should be considered an evolutionary by-product (or spandrel) or an adaptation. There tends to be overlap between proponents of the standard model of CSR and the by-product approach (cf. Kirkpatrick, Atran) both of which focus on mental modules. Proponents of adaptation generally rely on dual inheritance theories (e.g. Boyd and Richerson) or multi-level approaches (e.g., David Sloan Wilson) and have focused on the way that religion might support evolutionary fitness at the group level.

The first section of the course will feature the work of Lee Kirkpatrick and Scott Atran, who, while disagreeing with each other on the value of attachment theory, both assume the value of the ‘standard model’ of CSR and argue that religion is a by-product of evolutionary processes. We will discuss attempts to test and apply attachment theory (Friedland, Sanderson) and critiques of Atran from an adaptionist evolutionary perspective (Bulbulia). The central issue, according to Bulbulia, is whether or not religion involves “dedicated mental architecture” (Bulbulia 2007, 629). Bulbulia argues that it does. We will return to this issue in the final segment of the course, but first we will turn to experimental work that explores the impact of cultural practices on cognitive processes rather than the other way around.

In the final section, we will return to evolutionary theories of cognition and culture. Although there is increasing recognition that “culture, and the capacity for culture, is in many ways the single most important problem in evolutionary psychology” (Dunbar & Barrett, 554), scholars tend to discuss the evolution of religion in isolation from theories of the evolution of culture more generally. The chief innovation in this course is locating ‘religion,’ first, within the realm of theorizing about the evolution of culture more generally and, second, in relation to animal studies. Locating religion in this way, I will argue, suggests the importance of two key ‘building blocks’ of religion: ritualized responses to death (loss of attachments) and the role of play (and perhaps altered states such as dreams, visions, and trance) in the emergence of a wide range of cultural activities that require a capacity to imagine “alternate realities.”

## Course Outline and Readings

April 1: Introductions and overview of the course.

Reading:

- Armin Geertz, "Religion and cognition: A crisis in the academic study of religion?" *CSSR Bulletin* 37/4 (2008): 91-94.
- Ann Taves, "Fostering collaboration between the academic study of religion and the sciences," forthcoming in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*.
- If feasible, we will attend the Sage Center Lecture on "Loneliness" by John Cacioppo at 4 p.m. Cacioppo is a social neuroscientist at the University of Chicago and author of *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (2009).

### **I: Humans as social animals - modular approaches**

April 8: Evolutionary cognitive science of religion based on theory of mind and commitment theories of solidarity. Reading:

- Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan, Religion's evolutionary landscape: Counterintuition, commitment, compassion, communion, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 27 (2004): 713-770.
- Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The evolutionary landscape of religion* (2002), 51-79.
- Joseph Bulbulia, "Religion as evolutionary cascade: on Scott Atran," in Stausberg, ed. *Contemporary Theories of Religion* (2009), 156-72.

April 15: Evolutionary psychology of religion based on attachment theory.

Reading:

- Lee Kirkpatrick. 2005. Religion is not an adaptation. In Patrick McNamara, ed. *Where God and Science meet (Vol 1): Evolution, genes, and the religious brain* (Westport, CT: Praeger/Greenwood, 2005), 159-79.
- Pehr Granqvist, Religion as a by-product of evolved psychology: The case of attachment and implications for brain and religion research. In Patrick McNamara, ed. *Where God and Science meet (Vol 2): The neurology of religious experience* (Westport, CT: Praeger/Greenwood, 2005), 105-150.
- Pehr Granqvist and Lee Kirkpatrick, Attachment and religious representations and behavior, in Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver, *Handbook of attachment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (NY: Guilford, 2008), 906-33.
- BK Sahdra, PR Shaver, and KW Brown, A scale to measure nonattachment: a Buddhist complement to Western research on attachment and adaptive functioning. *Journal of Personality Assessment* 92:2 (2010), 116-27.
- Roger Friedland, Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at UCSB, will present research designed to test attachment theory.

April 22: Evolutionary anthropology of religions based on attachment theory.

Reading:

- Stephen K. Sanderson and Wesley W. Roberts, The Evolutionary Forms of the Religious Life: A Cross-Cultural, Quantitative Analysis, *American Anthropologist* 110/4 (2008): 454-466.
- Stephen K. Sanderson, "Salvation and transcendence: Religious attachment theory

and the evolution of the major world religions," unpublished draft.

- Stephen Sanderson, Professor of Comparative Sociology at UC Riverside, will join us for the discussion of his work.

## **II: Studying the effects of cultural practices on cognitive processes**

April 29: Neuroscientific critiques of 'standard CSR' and new directions in the experimental neuroscience of religion. Readings:

- Uffe Schjødt, "The religious brain: A general introduction to the experimental neuroscience of religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (2009).
- Patrick McNamara, *The neuroscience of religious experience* (2009), ch 5: "Neurology of religious experience."
- Schjødt et al, "Rewarding prayers," *Neuroscience Letters* (2008) and Schjødt, et al, "Highly religious participants recruit areas of social cognition in personal prayer," *Soc Cog & Affective Neuroscience* (2009).

May 6: Combining methods for studying the effects of cultural practices on cognitive processes: Historical, comparative, ethnographic, and experimental

Part I: Field experiments with Gaudiya Vaishnava practitioners in India.

- Justin Barrett, "Cognitive constraints on Hindu concepts of the divine," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37/4 (1998): 608-619.
- Nicholas Gibson, *Experimental investigation of religious cognition* (2005), selections.
- Travis Chilcott, Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies, will discuss his research in progress on the cultivation of divine intimacy and its relation to anthropomorphic attribution among intensive and intermittent practitioners

Part II:

- Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson, "Meditation and the neuroscience of consciousness: An introduction" (2007).
- Clifford Saron, "Shamatha Project: Exploring Human Transformation: Overview and Preliminary Findings" (2009).
- Jared Lindahl, Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies, will discuss his research on ascetic mystical practices in Orthodox Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism in light of contemporary experimental research.

May 8 (Saturday): Southern California Working Group in Cognition, Culture, and Religion will hold its first one day conference at UCSB. Students are strongly encouraged but not required to attend.

## **III: Humans as cultural animals: Evolutionary perspectives on culture & cognition**

May 13: On the cultural origins of human cognition

Readings:

- Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Harvard, 1999).
- Alan M. Leslie, Pretense and representation: The origins of 'theory of mind,' *Psychological Review* 94/4 (1987): 412-26. From physical to mental play.
- Maurice Bloch, Why religion is nothing special but is central, *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci* 363:1499 (2008), 2055-61. From 'transactional' (face-to-face) to

‘transcendental’ (imagined) social.

- Gordon M. Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play*, 45-180 (recommended).

May 20: On the evolutionary origins of culture, I: How is religion like other cultural forms: literature, art, aesthetics?

Readings:

- Joseph Bulbulia, “Religiosity as cognitive adaptation,” in Dunbar & Barrett 2007, 621-36.
- John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, “Does beauty build adapted minds? Toward an evolutionary theory of aesthetics, fiction, and the arts,” *Substance* (2002).
- Ellen Dissanayake, “The arts after Darwin: Does art have an origin and adaptive function?” in K Zijlmans & W van Damme, *World Art Studies* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 241-63.
- Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2009), pp. 69-98.

May 27: On the evolutionary origins of culture, II: How is religion different: playing, reality, and credibility displays. [These readings are still in flux]

Readings:

- Joseph Bulbulia, “Religiosity as mental time travel: Cognitive adaptations for religious behavior,” in *The Believing Primate* (2009).
- Joe Henrich, “The evolution of costly displays, cooperation and religion,” *Evolution & Human Behavior* (2009).
- Gustavo Benavides, “From need to violence: On Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred* (1996),” in Stausberg, ed., *Contemporary Theories of Religion*, 53-65.
- Anthony F. C. Wallace, “Revitalization movements,” in Robert S. Grumet, ed., *Revitalizations and Mazeways* (Nebraska, 2003), 9-29.
- Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, “Consider the source: The evolution of adaptations for decoupling and metarepresentation,” in Dan Sperber, ed., *Metarepresentations* (Oxford, 2000), especially pp. 89-107 (recommend?).
- Jonathan Lanman, “Toward a cognitive anthropology of secularization” (recommend, if written in time for us to read).

June 3: Presentation and discussion of student research proposals