

Religious thinking and behaviour have a number of universal features. Yet, in spite of the huge amount of attention afforded to religion generally, the origins of these features have never been fully determined. In EXREL, a European team of leading experts is seeking a definitive scientific explanation as a basis for reconstructing the underlying historical processes of their development, as well as attempting to model future evolution. If successful, their efforts could provide an extremely valuable tool for future social policy planning.



Even among professed non-believers, religiously-oriented intuitions and feelings shape our natural responses to people and events. Religiosity can confer palpable benefits in terms of mental and physical health, as well as support pro-social behaviour. Regrettably, religion has also been at the heart of many major global conflicts throughout the ages, and remains so today. A better understanding of how religious thoughts and actions arise would not only answer long-standing scientific questions, but also offer an indication of ways in which current problems of intolerance and fundamentalist extremism might be averted.

According to present knowledge, some central aspects of religious thinking and behaviour are recurrent and stable across humankind, while others vary significantly between traditions and cultures – sometimes even running counter to the normal current.

Natural and variable features

Religious groups exhibit a number of common traits. They believe in gods, spirits or ancestors, and envisage various forms of life after death. They attribute misfortune and luck to transcendental causes, and assume that certain features of the natural world were created intentionally. They perform rituals and endow them with symbolic meanings. They regard scriptures or other kinds of testimony as having been divinely produced or inspired.

Leading experimental psychologists and biologists have suggested that man's universal religious consciousness results from innate characteristics in the evolved cognitive architecture of the brain. In contrast, the differences stem from variable priming of the cognitive mechanisms through creative thinking, memory and acquired expertise.



“Core features of religion arise as outcomes of the activation of particular cognitive mechanisms.”



Religions as systems

Available evidence points to an early emergence of religious thinking and behaviour in childhood, while studies of neurological disorders suggest that the malfunctioning of domain-specific cognitive mechanisms affects key aspects of religiosity and ritualisation.

A possible explanation is that the core features of religion arise as outcomes of the activation of particular cognitive mechanisms. But this alone fails to account for the frequent co-occurrence of phenomena, such as the development of dogmatic structures and the formation of religious institutions.

Furthermore, strong divergences can be perceived between religious traditions. Various elements are differently emphasised, and very distinct doctrinal and cosmological systems are espoused. These distinct traditions incorporate conceptual configurations that seem to correlate with specific types of social structure and/or physical environments. They may be the outcome of cognitive processes that are more domain-general.

In EXREL, ten of Europe's foremost centres for psychological, biological, anthropological and historical research on religion are joining forces to put these theories to the test. The partners aim to develop a computational model of religious dynamics that can be used to explain present and past religious traditions, and to simulate likely future directions. They will be aided by contributions from North American research laboratories.

The initial objective is to consolidate existing data on religious traditions, as a starting point for determining which features are

universal, and the extent to which non-universal features are cross-culturally and historically recurrent. For this purpose, more precise descriptions of the worldwide distributions of religious configurations and their relation to both social structure and the natural environment will be assembled.

Despite a vast body of research on religion, very few people have so far attempted to develop a systematic and precise account of its universal features. In the early months of the initiative, two of the partners will focus on the development of a detailed methodology for coding the elements of practice and belief.

A combination of psychological experimentation and data mining from the extensive repository of ethnographic, historiographic and archaeological information gathered over the past century will then make it possible to reconstruct an ancestral religious repertoire, dating back to human prehistory. This will generate important new data for the explanation of cross-cultural, widespread patterns of religious thought and behaviour.

From this knowledge base, modern computer modelling techniques will permit the simulation of future trajectories of transformation in various religious systems.

The results could be highly informative for the formulation of social policy in such key areas as the teaching of science and religion, and the promotion of inter-religious and inter-ethnic tolerance. They will also shed light on the relationship between religiosity and broader ideological orientations, and on reasons for the rise and spread of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism.

AT A GLANCE

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Project cost

€ 2 123 420

EU funding

€ 1 999 733

Project reference

Contract No 043225 (NEST)

Members of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé pray before taking part in a ritual ceremony in Belém, northern Brazil. © Emma Cohen

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