ARE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS "ENABLING MECHANISMS FOR SURVIVAL"?

by William H. Austin

Near the beginning of *On Human Nature* Edward O. Wilson declares that "traditional religious beliefs have been eroded, not so much by humiliating disproofs of their mythologies as by the growing awareness that beliefs are really enabling mechanisms for survival."[1] Theologians, if they are to any substantial extent traditionalists, presumably will reply that religious beliefs primarily indicate means of salvation or even, in some traditions, that they *are* means of salvation.

As a historical thesis Wilson's claim is open to serious question. The "humiliating disproofs" probably have been more important than he suggests, and the general awareness that other cultures have other, competing mythologies surely has been a major factor in the overall decline of religious belief in the West since the eighteenth century. But his further claim that a sociobiological explanation of religious beliefs will destroy (rightly) their hold on people still could be correct.[2] It is that claim that I want to examine in this paper. I shall pursue two questions. First, assuming that Wilson's explanatory efforts are successful, is there any reason to think that explaining religious beliefs and their underlying motivations should discredit them? Second, will sociobiological explanations of religion work, or are there major features of religious belief and practice that defy explanation by any theory of the kind Wilson proposes? (I am using the term "sociobiology" to refer to the unified science of evolutionary biology and the social sciences that Wilson envisages, without prejudice to the question how important genetics will turn out to be when we come to explain things like religion.)

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CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In claiming that explaining religious beliefs will undermine them, Wilson seems to be in disagreement with Donald T. Campbell, who suggests (if I read him correctly) that to understand how religious beliefs are or have been adaptive is to have good grounds for respecting them and at least some grounds for accepting them.[3] Not necessarily adequate grounds, but the explanation is a point in their favor, not against them. Wilson's proposed explanations do take the form of showing how religious beliefs and practices are or have been adaptive, so how can he disagree?

Wilson will reply that they are adaptations to environments that are long gone and quite different from ours and furthermore that the new mythology of scientific materialism will have their advantages without their drawbacks. I have discussed these replies elsewhere;[4] here I want to consider another point that Wilson could make.

Suppose it is true that religious beliefs and moral codes have the function of getting people to sacrifice their interests in ways that are necessary if society is to survive and prosper, on the whole and in the long run.[5] Can they continue to be effective when people know that that is their function? Or will people say, "You're not going to con me like *that* any more"? Prima facie, the latter reaction is both the more likely and the more rational.

Or rather it is the more likely and the more rational unless either or both of two conditions obtain: (1) People believe that the survival and prosperity of their societies are more important and valuable than their own; or (2) they believe, more or less literally, in some future life which is so ordered that their really long-term interests will be best served if they make the short- and intermediate-term sacrifices which the moral and religious traditions of their societies demand of them. Obviously both beliefs have often been held.

In analyzing this situation it is helpful to distinguish the case of a person who has independent grounds, besides the sheer authority of moral and religious tradition, for holding one or both of the beliefs just mentioned from that of someone who has no such grounds. In the former case the functional explanation of religious beliefs makes it more rational to accept them than it otherwise would be. This is easy to see in the case of someone who, for reasons independent of authority, values society's interests more than his or her own. For such a person, finding that religious beliefs and practices further society's interests constitutes an immediate reason for accepting them. It also constitutes a reason for acceptance, less immediate and strong but nonetheless real, on the part of the person who meets condition 2

above, perhaps through having been persuaded by some classical arguments in natural theology concerning the immortality of the soul. That person (call him Jones) has independent grounds for believing some of the doctrines of his religious tradition. (We know that the grounds are independent since some people believe in a future life while rejecting other religious doctrines, and, though they may agree with their traditions that one's moral behavior here determines one's future fate, they do not always agree as to the content of the appropriate moral code.) Now insofar as the community's moral and religious doctrines are coherent and systematically interconnected, the evidence for a future life will constitute some grounds for believing the rest of the doctrines, though perhaps not very strong grounds and *ex hypothesi* not enough to convince Jones. Now we are supposing Jones to be more interested in his own future prospects than society's, but still, to whatever extent he also values the survival of his society, the functional explanation of religious beliefs will strengthen the case for his accepting them.

In a fuller treatment of these matters we would have to pay close attention to the distinction between accepting a belief in the sense of acting in accord with it and accepting it in the sense of holding it to be true or adequately supported by evidence. The functional explanation gives grounds for acceptance in the former sense primarily. Primarily, but not exclusively. Traditional apologetics usually has included the claim that adherence to religion will enhance the well-being of the society. The functional explanation tends to confirm this claim and thus increase its rational credibility and thereby (through the systematic interconnectedness of doctrines) the rational credibility of other doctrines in the scheme. The increment may be quite small since the logical connections among the doctrines—in particular, the crucial connections between doctrines about how one ought to behave and doctrines about supernatural beings and their properties—may be quite loose; but it will be positive.

Of course the "independent grounds" we have been talking about may be subject themselves to sociobiological explanation. For instance, someone might have, quite independent of any religious belief, a deep intuitive sense that his country is much greater and more significant than he. If a natural-selection explanation of this deep feeling were then to be given, his case would be like that of the person whose only basis for accepting religious beliefs was the authority of tradition.[6]

Such a person, it seems safe to say, is likely to reject the beliefs if he or she accepts a Wilsonian explanation of them. But is the rejection

rational? Here we can no longer ignore a distinction between two senses of "rational." If we mean "rational" in the sense of the "rational man" of classical economics, calculating his individual interests and acting accordingly, the rejection is clearly rational. (Recall that Wilson's explanation says not merely that religious beliefs further the interests of society but that they do so by inducing individuals to subordinate their own interests.) But if by "rational" we mean "proportioning the degree of one's belief to the evidence," the question is not so easy. Could showing how people's holding a given belief contributes to the successful functioning of society constitute evidence against the belief?

In a way the question might seem academic; one is tempted to say that if a proposition is held only on the basis of the authority of tradition, then the evidence for it is nil and the rational degree of belief in it was nil all along. But this is wrong. Arguments from authority have some inductive strength. Suppose an authority has taught me a number of things, and I find that among those that I subsequently have been able to check most have proved true. The rational degree of belief in them may (or may not) be low, but it is not zero. Is there any reason to think it should be altered by the further information that the belief in question fulfills social functions? We have seen how this information could increase, indirectly and perhaps minimally, the degree to which it is rational to believe something. Is there any way it also could decrease it?

The suggestion may seem paradoxical. But consider a situation in which our best estimate of the probability that individual i has trait t is 70 percent. Now suppose we get further information which justifies putting i in reference class A, 80 percent of whose members have t, but also justifies placing i in reference class B, only 50 percent of whose members have t. If we knew enough about the relations between A and B (especially about their intersection) we could calculate the net effect of the new information. But we may not know that much. We may have to settle for saying that from one point of view the new information increases the probability that i has t and from another point of view decreases it. (An illustration may help here. Suppose all we know about Joe is that he is an American. We might estimate the probability of Joe's having brown eyes as p. If we then are told [1] that Joe has red hair, [2] that he has a Spanish surname, the first piece of information will likely lead us to revise downward our estimate of the probability that Joe has brown eyes, but the second will incline us to revise our estimate upward. If we do not know enough red-haired persons with Spanish surnames to have any estimate of

what proportion of them have brown eyes, we will not be able to determine the net effect of our new information.)

So it is not unreasonable to ask whether knowledge of the social functions of religious doctrines might provide a reason for rejecting them. It would if we had data to the effect that socially functional beliefs are usually false. But we have not; actually it seems likely that most socially functional beliefs are true, since acting on false beliefs is apt to be harmful. But the more strongly relevant reference class is that of beliefs which (1) are socially functional and (2) are now independently testable but have been untestable through most of the period in which they have been held. Unfortunately this reference class is probably very small, in any case hard to delineate, and we know little about the truth values of its members. Is there any other to which we could turn? We might consider the class of situations in which people are trying consciously to get others to do things they do not want to do: Do they lie a lot? If so, arguing by analogy, we would have some reason for rejecting religious beliefs, given a Wilsonian explanation of them. I suspect that statistics on this point would be hard to obtain; my guess, for what it is worth, is that the would-be persuaders offer edited versions of the truth more often than outright falsehoods.

Many philosophers argue that causal explanations of how people come to have beliefs are entirely irrelevant to the question of their evidential justification. Whether or not this thesis is correct, it does seem that in the present state of our knowledge (and of the development of inductive logic) we are not going to be able to show how a sociobiological explanation of religious beliefs would substantially alter their rational credibility.

INEXPLICABLE FEATURES OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The second question I have to discuss is whether sociobiological theory can adequately explain religious practices and beliefs. According to Wilson the function of primitive myths and rituals is to generate intense and unquestioning loyalty to the society and obedience to its leaders' decisions in situations where there is neither time nor capacity for rationally weighing their merits. Throughout most of the history of mankind, societies commanding such loyalty were more likely to survive than those that did not; consequently genes favoring readiness to be indoctrinated were selected for. (Presumably the same could be said of cultrual practices.) In modern times the link between religions and societies has been weakened, but the readiness for indoctrination remains. (So when people have lost faith in traditional

religion they turn eagerly to cults.) The main features of "advanced" religions are also to be explained, at least in outline, by natural selection. Those sects whose practices enhance in the long run the Darwinian fitness of their adherents are the ones that prosper.[7]

I will leave it to anthropologists to assess the adequacy of Wilson's theory for tribal religions. But there are two features common (though not universal) in the major world religions which he might well find hard to explain: proselytization and world renunciation.

To see why proselytization is a problem, consider the delicate balance that must be struck if the evolution of self-sacrificial group loyalty is to be explained at all. On the one hand, societies whose members are loyal to the point of self-sacrifice may be supposed likely to win out in competition with others, because more unified and fervent in warfare and other dangerous activities. So at the level of group conflicts, genes promoting willingness for self-sacrifice will be favored. On the other hand, within the group, those individuals with less disposition to self-sacrifice are more likely to survive and reproduce. Individual-level and group-level selection thus work in opposite directions. Most sociobiologists agree that in most circumstances individual-level selection will predominate unless the society consists of closely related individuals.[8] In that case the phenomenon of "kin selection" may tip the balance the other way, and Wilson thinks this is what happened in early tribal societies.[9]

One might wonder whether the members of a tribal society are really that closely related. It seems likely enough that the earliest bands of hunter-gatherers consisted of close relatives, but it also seems likely that in such bands intense group loyalty would be instinctive rather than having to be inculcated. Once the group becomes large enough for indoctrination to be needed, would it also be too diverse for kin selection to be a major factor?

If we set this worry aside, we may find it plausible that in tribal societies a fierce group loyalty, evoked and mediated through the tribal religion, should evolve. But how could it ever come about that converts from outside the tribe should be sought? Adding unrelated individuals to the in-group for which one is prepared to sacrifice oneself seems doubly disadvantageous to each member of the original tribe. It adds to the number of competitors within the group, and it dilutes the advantages of belonging to a strong group by reducing the average proportion of genes one shares with the beneficiaries of one's self-sacrifice.

The answer presumably would have to be that the effectiveness of the enlarged society in competition with others is enhanced suffi-

ciently to compensate for these disadvantages. But this might be quite difficult to establish, especially since nontribal religions tend to be less clearly and consistently instruments of competition between societies than tribal religions. Warring societies may share the same religion, and loyalties thus may be divided. Ideals like universal brotherhood arise and sometimes are valued more highly than either individual or group welfare.

Another ideal which sometimes is valued more highly than individual or group welfare (as most people understand them) is that of liberation from the world with its strivings and cravings. When people withdraw from the world to seek enlightenment on the mystic's path they seemingly enhance neither their own reproductive fitness nor their societies' survival prospects. How could such behavior be selected for?

In the classical Brahmanic tradition it was held that the proper time to retire from the world and seek enlightenment is after one has raised a family, seen grandchildren through the perils of early childhood, and fulfilled one's duties as a citizen.[10] Under these conditions world renunciation seems harmless to society's survival prospects, and perhaps even helpful, in at least two ways. The crude way in which it could be helpful would be by reducing the competition for scarce resources. More subtly, when people renounce the world and its goods for the sake of the values proclaimed in the religious tradition, they may well increase the reverence in which it is held, and the fervor with which it is obeyed, by others.

However, in practice things did not always work out according to the official prescription. When young men became convinced that the world's cravings are a snare and liberation from them the supreme value, they tended to retire to the forest to get on with the quest for enlightenment and did not wait for the officially prescribed time.[11] And this would seem to be hard for a selection theorist to explain.

There appear to be two possible patterns of development here. One (which seems to me the more likely, though I am not historian of religion enough to argue the point) is that as soon as religions develop the idea of a transcendent good, conceptually distinguishable from society, there will be people who will be moved to pursue it rather than their own or their communities' temporal welfare. Schemes like the classical Brahmanic life plan could be interpreted then as theologians' ingenious attempts to accommodate and tame an impulse fundamentally at war with their aim (unconscious or semiconscious) to ensure the survival of their societies. (Compare the Buddhist teaching, made possible by the doctrine of reincarnation, that only monks

have much chance of attaining Nirvana, and the way to get into a position to be a monk in a future life is to be a good moral citizen in this one.)

Alternatively it could be that the tendency to world renunciation originally developed in the Brahmanically prescribed form, where it was arguably adaptive, but then got out of hand. Whichever the pattern of development, it appears that religious traditions can generate values with the potential to threaten the welfare, and even the survival, of the societies in wich they arise. Consider the nineteenth-century American sectarian communities whose ideal of universal celibacy led to their extinction.[12]

"Just so," Wilson might say, "consider them and their fate. A tradition that jeopardizes the survival of its society shares the jeopardy." Granted, once a dangerous development has arisen within a tradition, the subtraditions that find ways of curbing it (if any do) will be the ones that survive. But there is no guarantee that ways will always be found. It is possible in principle, though no doubt improbable, that religious concepts of salvation could lead to the demise of humankind. Improbable, but, in an era of atomic weaponry and resurgent religious fanaticism, not astronomically so.

NOTES

1. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 3.

2. Ibid., p. 192 and chap. 8 passim.

3. Donald T. Campbell, "On the Conflicts between Biological and Social Evolution and between Psychology and Moral Tradition," *Zygon* 11 (September 1976): 167-208.

4. In my review essay on Wilson's book, *Religious Studies Review* 6 (April 1980): 99-104.

5. Wilson, p. 176.

6. The situation is trickier if the independent grounds consist simply in good evidence for the belief in question. When someone holds a belief on the basis of adequate evidence, is his believing subject to sociobiological explanation? Could there be a sociobiological explanation of why the accepted canons of evidence and inference are what they are? If so, would the explanation discredit them? Why not, if the corresponding explanation of religious beliefs discredits them? These notoriously thorny questions cannot be pursued here. In practice it seems that when someone's belief or behavior is seen to be rational in either of the senses distinguished above (next paragraph), we usually regard it as thereby explained and seek causal explanations only for irrational or nonrational behavior and beliefs. Intuitively this procedure seems reasonable enough; but I know of no well-worked-out rationale for it.

7. This bare outline of Wilson's theory is based mainly on chap. 8 of *On Human Nature*, though it draws also on other parts of the book. It is taken, with minor modifications, from my review (n. 4 above), as is much of the discussion of proselytization.

8. However, see Michael J. Wade, "A Critical Review of the Models of Group Selection," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 53 (1978): 101-14. Wade argues that the mathematical models which have led most theorists to conclude that true group selection could occur only in very unusual circumstances are based on simplifying assump-

tions which are inherently likely to lead to an underestimate of the role of group selection and which should be modified in view of some experimental results of Wade's. See also John Cassidy, "Philosophical Aspects of the Group Selection Controversy," *Philosophy of Science* 45 (1978): 575-94 (and literature there cited).

9. Wilson, pp. 153, 158-59. Very roughly the idea behind the kin selection theory is that since I share half my genes with my sister, risking my life for her is a good bet for my genes if her reproductive prospects are enhanced by more than double the degree of my risk.

10. John B. Noss, *Man's Religions* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1969), p. 196.

11. Lectures by Prof. Norvin Hein of Yale University. It is also worth noting of course that in many traditions there are no restrictions as to when one should undertake the quest for enlightenment.

12. Jerald C. Brauer, *Protestantism in America* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 51-53.