Religion's reliance on structures originally evolved for different tasks is evolutionarily parsimonious and parallels numerous other adaptations, such as the co-opting of insulating bird feathers for flight. Both the ubiquity and ritual commonality of religions across cultures indicate that religion is more than a mere by-product. Religious ritualized behavior has its roots in adaptive solutions to inherent problems of communication in all social species (Sosis & Alcorta 2003). Ritual behaviors, from mating displays to greeting rituals, constitute adaptations that facilitate coordination, cooperation, and conflict resolution among conspecifics. Religious ritual represents a uniquely human adaptation for conspecific communication intimately interconnected with the evolution of symbolic systems. Like nonhuman rituals, religious rituals arouse attention, heighten emotion, allow assessment, and trigger appropriate neuroendocrine responses in conspecifics (whether affiliative, submissive, or aggressive). We suspect that these components of ritual are adaptive, and the calculus of selection has operated on ritual behaviors no differently than other behavioral patterns. In the case of human religious ritual, however, the priming noted by A&N through adolescent rites of passage is critical for associating ritually evoked emotions with symbolic systems and establishing how the costs and benefits of ritual behavior are assessed. There is likely to be a positive relationship between environmental stress and ritual participation, which would increase adrenergic activation and belief in the tenets of the rituals performed, although we are unaware of studies that directly test this claim.

It is noteworthy that Cahill et al.'s (1994) experiments, which A&N discuss, explicitly tested impacts on memory of neuroendocrine function rather than mental constructs. It is likely that anything eliciting pronounced neuroendocrine responses in the individual will have memory-boosting effects. Thus, frightening and physically painful ordeals, such as those endured in rites of passage, will impact memory and belief. Therefore, anxieties may not have to be existential; indeed, existential anxieties may have their genesis in early social and/or physical experiences. It is the conditioning of the neuroendocrine response with the associated symbol or belief that gives the *religious* its emotional power. Why does this so frequently take the form of supernatural agents? Evolved mental domains no doubt pattern this, as A&N argue. Rappaport (1999) has noted that the polarization of such agents into gods and demons, and the attribution of impossible powers render them more memorable and emotionally evocative. However, it is important to note that the particular supernatural agents existent within religious systems are not arbitrary, but reflect the particular social landscape of the cultures in which they exist, as noted by Durkheim (1912/1995) and supported by Swanson (1960). Whether deities are animal totems, clan ancestors, or hierarchical moralizing gods is dependent upon the social environment inhabited. This suggests that religions, and the emotions they evoke as a result of ritual conditioning, serve to regulate social interactions among conspecifics in relation to resources (whether mates or territories), just as ritualized displays do in other species.

A&N clearly explain how cognitive adaptations channel the conceptual landscape of religions. Their tests provide valuable evidence that some constructs are more memorable than others and have greater cultural transmissibility. The main flaw, however, is in A&N's assumption that the conceptual landscape constitutes the core of religion. While they discuss the importance of emotional verification of religious concepts, and note the centrality of emotionally eruptive existential anxieties in the motivation of supernatural beliefs, they assume the primacy of religious *concepts* in directing behaviors. If one assumes, however, that such concepts constitute highly memorable, socially relevant, and developmentally primed *triggers* for conditionally associated neuroendocrine responses, then the adaptive value of religion as a mechanism for the regulation of both in- and out-group social interactions becomes much clearer. The constructs, themselves, constitute associationally conditioned mnemonics that trigger neuroendocrine responses which motivate behaviors. Thus, the adaptive value of these constructs resides in their utility as memorable and emotionally evocative primes. As A&N demonstrate through their experiments, minimally counterintuitive beliefs and belief sets that are mostly intuitive, combined with a few minimally counterintuitive ones, "grab attention, activate intuition, and mobilize inference in ways that greatly facilitate their mnemonic retention, social transmission, cultural selection, and historical survival" (sect. 4, last para.).

This perspective explains how religion promotes in-group trust and commitment through common ritual participation regardless of the particular belief system, how it patterns in-group social interactions specific to particular forms of social organization, and how it directs out-group sentiments and beliefs. Far from being an evolutionary by-product, religion constitutes a uniquely human form of ritualized display that not only regulates social interactions, but also promulgates social cohesion and provides the foundation for social transmission of culture.

Agency, religion, and magic

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Abstract: Atran & Norenzayan (A&N) ask: "Why do *agent* concepts predominate in religion?" This question presupposes that we have a notion of religion that is (1) well enough defined, and (2) characterized independently of that of supernatural agents. I question these two presuppositions. I argue that "religion" is a family resemblance notion built around the idea of supernatural agency.

It is very gratifying to see the kind of cognitive and epidemiological approach to culture and to religion in particular that I had long been advocating (Sperber 1985) developing in such fruitful ways in the work of Pascal Boyer (1994; 2001), of Scott Atran (2002a), and in the present article by Atran & Norenzayan (A&N). There are many cognitive issues worth discussing here, but in this commentary, I will focus on an anthropological issue.

A&N ask: "Why do *agent* concepts predominate in religion?" (sect. 1, their emphasis). This question presupposes that we have a notion of religion that is (1) well enough defined, and (2) characterized independently of that of supernatural agents. I want to question these two presuppositions.

Today, most anthropologists would agree that "religion" is a polythetic or "family resemblance" notion (Needham 1975) under which it may be convenient to lump together a wide variety of related phenomena, but it is not a natural kind category calling for a unified theory. Laymen and earlier anthropologists who have thought otherwise may have been unduly influenced by the case of centralized religious organization such as Christian churches, where, or so it seems, everything religious is codified and organized in an integrated way, and where individuals *belong* to a given Church and *have* a given religion to the exclusion of others. With its organization, integration, inclusiveness, and insistence on faith, Christianity (or, for that matter, Judaism or Islam) is far from being a good model or a paradigmatic case of religion as found across cultures. Let me illustrate the point with the case of the Dorze of Southern Ethiopia, among whom I did my fieldwork. If asked what their religion was, Dorze would answer that they were Christians, referring to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and indeed they had Christian churches and priests, and followed Christian rituals. However, since no Dorze word could, even approximately, translate "religion," you had, in order to ask the question "What is your religion?", to resort to Amharic, the dominant language of Ethiopia, and use the word *haymanot*, which denotes faith-based integrated religions such as Christianity and Islam. The Dorze answer, "We are Christian," was sincere, reasonably accurate, politically prudent, and profoundly misleading. At the same time as

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they practiced Christian rituals, the Dorze performed, in every household, prayers, offerings, and sacrifices for their ancestors; they sacrificed to a variety of supernatural agents linked to forests and rivers; and they had spirit possession groups, a complex system of taboos, hereditary village sacrificers, diviners, and so on. To an anthropologist, it goes without saying that all these activities and institutions were religious, and were also political, economic, and kinship-related – with "politics," "economy," and "kinship" being, just like "religion," family resemblance notions. The Dorze themselves had neither the interest nor the lexical tools to lump these religious phenomena under a single label. Most human societies in history have practiced religion in a way more similar to that of the Dorze than to that of empires or nation-states with institutionally integrated religions.

Probably the main criterion used by anthropologists and others for calling some practice or belief *religious* is the role that supernatural agents play in it. A standard anthropological distinction, going back at least to Tylor (1871/1958) is that between "religion" and "magic": both involve supernatural powers, but in religion, these powers are typically those of agents (gods and spirits in particular), whereas in magic, they are typically those of mindless substances or objects (e.g., a magic powder or a magic well). Of course, because both religion and magic are family resemblance notions, the agentive or nonagentive character of the supernatural powers involved is not an automatic and absolute criterion: Many religious practices (e.g., the use of relics) are somewhat magical, and many magical practices (e.g., the conjuring of demons) are somewhat religious by that criterion. Still, the question "Why do *agent* concepts predominate in religion?" has a simple answer: because this very predominance is used to identify religious phenomena. The real question – and the one A&N are in fact addressing – is: Why are agent concepts invoked well beyond their empirically justified reach, or, in other terms, why is the "actual domain" (Sperber 1994) of the Theory of Mind Module so extensively peopled by cultural constructs, religious ones in particular?

I would be surprised if A&N radically disagreed with me regarding the polythetic character of the notion of religion or with my rephrasing of their question about the role of agent concepts in religion. My reason to make the point is neither to express a substantial disagreement nor to recommend a mere reformulation. It is to underscore, with a specific illustration, that special care must be taken, in interdisciplinary research, to avoid comforting the simplistic or obsolete views scholars of one discipline may have of the achievements and issues of another. In particular, a number of researchers from cognitive psychology and from evolutionary biology have approached issues in anthropology without awareness of the ways in which these have been redefined. Of course, some of these redefinitions may be misguided – I believe that most of those associated with "postmodernism" are – but many are justified. In particular, the radical reconceptualization of the basic categories of the field advocated long ago by Edmund Leach in his *Rethinking Anthropology* (Leach 1961) can today be given a more positive content by adopting a serious cognitive and evolutionary perspective, as A&N do. But for this, one had better make it clear that *religion* is a mere pointer to a range of related anthropological issues, and not the name of genuine kind of social phenomena.

After the fall: Religious capacities and the error theory of morality

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Abstract: The target article proposes an error theory for religious belief. In contrast, moral beliefs are typically not counterintuitive, and some moral cognition and motivation is functional. Error theories for moral belief try to reduce morality to nonmoral psychological capacities because objective moral beliefs seem too fragile in a competitive environment. An error theory for religious belief makes this unnecessary.

Atran & Norenzayan's (A&N's) evolutionary approach to religious belief bears important similarities and differences to the view of moral belief among naturalistic moral philosophers like Hume (cf. Mackie 1980), Mackie (1977), and Harman (1977); biologists like Waddington (1960); and sociobiologists like Ruse (1986). Given their propositional form, for example, "cheating is wrong," moral beliefs appear to make statements that could be true or false. But according to the error theory of moral belief, such statements are neither true nor false because there are no objective moral properties that could be possessed (or not possessed) by the things said to possess them. Nonetheless we are evolutionarily primed to respond to moral beliefs as if they had a truth value, and indeed, as if they were mostly true. According to the error theory, this is because moral beliefs enable us to cooperate when we might otherwise be tempted not to, just because they strike us as being objectively true, whereas they really serve our own advantage.

That underlying psychological mechanisms must exist in support of this view is more an article of faith among error theorists than a well-articulated empirical claim. According to Hume and Mackie, in thinking about things as morally good or bad, the mind simply "projects" mental properties onto the world as if they were real properties of things; for example, we dislike cheating, and so cheating is seen as objectively unlikeable. According to Harman and Waddington, the illusion that things are morally good or bad is the result of something like a Freudian superego, although what this something is, and what evidence for it might look like, remains mysterious.

With recent empirical work on moral cognition, serious cracks are beginning to appear at the foundation of the error theory. Like us, other primates seem to react to certain aspects of their environment that we humans are able to identify as being morally bad. Capuchins, for example, respond cognitively and motivationally to unjustifiable inequality (Brosnan & de Waal 2003). They notice its presence, and they do what they can to eliminate it. One capuchin's getting a slice of cucumber while observing others getting a much nicer reward in identical circumstances leads to cucumber slices being hurled at human experimenters. Howsoever other primates mentally represent the badness of unjustifiable inequality, it is clear that they often get the world right in this regard. Being able to see that unjustifiable inequality is bad in their social groupings is likely to be almost as important to most primates as noticing that snakes, for example, are predators. Just as "predator" and "prey" are real biological categories that primates get right a good deal of the time, so are categories like "unjustifiable inequality." (Collier & Stingl 1993; Stingl 2000)

Against such primate studies, the error theorist might appeal to the biological equivalent of the fall of humankind, or perhaps more appropriately, our expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Other primates may have knowledge of good and evil, but it is unreflective knowledge. The fall of humankind came with our capacity to reflect on the potential sources of our beliefs about good and evil precisely because such reflection destroyed the unreflective moral knowledge we previously had. We could no longer simply observe that unjustifiable inequality was morally bad; we

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