

## Foreword by Richard Dawkins

In one of the great understatements of history, *The Origin of Species* confines its discussion of human evolution to a laconic prophecy: “Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.” Less often quoted is the beginning of the same paragraph: “In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation.” Dr. Thomson is one of the evolutionary psychologists now making Darwin’s forecast come true, and this book about the evolutionary drivers of religiosity would have delighted the old man.

Darwin, though not religious in his maturity, understood the religious impulse. He was a benefactor of Down church and he regularly walked his family there on Sundays (then continued his walk while they went inside). He had been trained to the life of a clergyman, and William Paley’s *Natural Theology* was his favored undergraduate reading. Darwin killed natural theology’s *answer* stone dead, but he never lost his preoccupation with its *question*: the question of function. It is no surprise that he was intrigued by the functional question of religiosity. Why do most people, and all peoples, harbor religious beliefs? “Why” is to be understood in the special functional sense that we today, though not Darwin himself, would call “Darwinian.”

How, to put the Darwinian question in modern terms, does religiosity contribute to the survival of genes promoting it? Thomson is a leading proponent of the “by-product” school of thought: religion itself need have no survival value; it is a *by-product* of psychological predispositions that have.

“Fast food” is a *leitmotif* of the book: “if you understand the psychology of fast food, you understand the psychology of religion.” Sugar is another good example. It was impossible for our wild ancestors to get enough of it, so we have inherited an open-ended craving that, now that it is easily met, damages our health.

These fast-food cravings are a by-product. And now they become dangerous, because, uncontrolled, they can lead to health problems our ancestors likely never faced....Which brings us to religion.

Another leading evolutionary psychologist, Steven Pinker, explains our

love of music in a similar “by-product” way, as “auditory cheesecake, an exquisite confection crafted to tickle the sensitive spots of at least six of our mental faculties.” For Pinker, the mental faculties supernormally tickled as a by-product by music are mostly concerned with the sophisticated brain software required to disentangle meaningful sounds (for example, language) from background bedlam. Thomson’s fast-food theory of religion emphasizes, rather, those psychological predispositions that can be called *social*: “adaptive psychological mechanisms that evolved to help us negotiate our relationships with other people, to detect agency and intent, and to generate a sense of safety. These mechanisms were forged in the not-so-distant world of our African homeland.”

Thomson’s chapters identify a series of evolved mental faculties exploited by religion, each one beguilingly labelled with a line familiar from scripture or liturgy: “Our Daily Bread”, “Deliver Us from Evil”, “Thy Will Be Done”, “Lest Ye Be Judged.” There are some compelling images:

Think of a two-year-old child reaching out to be picked up and cuddled. He extends his hands above his head and beseeches you. Think now of the Pentecostal worshipper who speaks in tongues. He stretches out his hands above his head, beseeching god in the same “pick-me-up-and-hold-me” gesture. We may lose human attachment figures through death, through misunderstandings, through distance, but a god is always there for us.

To most of us, that arms-extended gesture of the worshipper looks merely foolish. After reading Thomson we shall see it through more penetrating eyes: it is not just foolish, it is infantile.

Then there is our eagerness to detect the deliberate hand of agency.

Why is it you mistake a shadow for a burglar but never a burglar for a shadow? If you hear a door slam, why do you wonder who did it before you consider the wind as the culprit? Why might a child who sees blowing tree limbs through a window fear that it’s the boogeyman come to get him?

The hyperactive agency detection device evolved in the brains of our wild

ancestors because of a risk asymmetry. A rustle in the long grass is statistically more likely to be the wind than a leopard. But the cost of a mistake is higher one way than the other. Agents, like leopards and burglars, can kill. Best go with the statistically unlikely guess. (Darwin himself made the point, in an anecdote about his dog's response to a wind-blown parasol.) Thomson pursues the thought—oversensitivity to *agents* where there are none—and gives us his elegant explanation of another of the psychological biases upon which religiosity is founded.

Our Darwinian preoccupation with kinship is yet another. For example, in Roman Catholic lore,

The nuns are “sisters” or even “mother superiors,” the priests are “fathers,” the monks are “brothers,” the Pope is the “Holy Father,” and the religion itself is referred to as the “Holy Mother Church.”

Dr. Thomson has made a special study of suicide bombers, and he notes how kin-based psychology is exploited in their recruitment and training:

Charismatic recruiters and trainers create cells of fictive kin, pseudobrothers outraged at the treatment of their Muslim brothers and sisters and separated from actual kin. The appeal of such martyrdom is not just the sexual fantasy of multiple heavenly virgins, but the chance to give chosen kin punched tickets to paradise.

One by one, the other components of religion—community worship, obedience to priestly authority, ritual—receive the Thomson treatment. Every point he makes has the ring of truth, abetted by a crisp style and vivid imagery. Andy Thomson is an outstandingly persuasive lecturer, and it shines through his writing. This short, punchy book will be swiftly read—and long remembered.

# why we believe in god(s)

A Concise Guide to the Science of Faith

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with Clare Aukofer

*Foreword by Richard Dawkins*

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