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THE EVOLUTIONIST ROLE OF RELIGION; SOME
ARGUMENTS

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Abstract

In this article we analyze religion from the perspective of a stage necessary in the evolution of humanity, contributing to the birth of society, to the creation of specific dimensions of the human mind prior to the emergence of philosophy and then of science. We explore the possibility that mental religious resorts have facilitated the transition from group to society: the existence of a set of mental instruments that can be called the "religious package" has provided integrative meanings and goals, mediating the transition from small groups to large societies, from hunters-gatherers to agriculture and sedentariness. We bring some arguments for the state of religion of social survival strategy: through the cooperation it establishes in the multiple plans of human existence it favours the groups with the highest degree of coherence. Several evolutionary advantages of religion: generates predictability through the systems of human classification and ordering of the possible relationships among the peers (social context stabilization), namely of ordering reality (cosmos), shaping existential models. Religion is an explanatory system of reality and normative for human existence, while ensuring the social framework necessary for outsourcing, thereby facilitating the development of the mind. Religion is an integrative meta-narrative: it is a reference framework for integrative narratives (contexts that make the meaning possible) that reduce the pile of information that invades the mind to some schemes of understanding. Religion could be the most appropriate example of geno-cultural co-evolution, clarifying this assumption being attempted through an appeal to anthropological and neuro-science research.

Keywords: Evolutionism religion; religious package; survival strategy; adaptive strategy; evolutionary advantage;

1. INTRODUCTION

If society is essential to humanity and religion has a well-defined place in human evolution road, then we must meditate on the role of religion in the emergence and existence of society. In this sense, we share the views of authors concerned about this issue regarding its importance. „Explaining religion is a serious problem for any evolutionary account of human thought and society.” (Atran, 2002) We believe

that religion has emerged as a specialized tool in everyday life. We do not exclude the effect of contamination on other groups played by the social success of those who were religiously structured. But its autonomous emergence in different populations seems to indicate that religion is a necessary route in the evolution of any human group. McNamara resorts to a much wider perspective, closely linking the religion to humanity: "Humanity not only creates religion but is also created by it." (McNamara, 2009: IX) While the understanding of the social role of religion risks distorting either perspectives (the positioning of researchers within one or other religion), either by overcoming (at any cost) religion, analyzing the evolutionary role of religion, we believe it is an approach more suited to the cognitive approach of science.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The approach of religion from an evolutionary perspective is not new, and there is already a significant bibliography on the subject. In this article, we refer to the ideas we considered the most important of the works we have gone through. Most often, research is geared toward identifying brain structures specialized in religious experiences and behaviours, trying to demonstrate the causal role of neural correlates. Given that this type of causal explanation proves true, religion could be positioned from an evolutionist point of view and explained according to the brain functions / neural substrates that ensure its existence. One of the authors who proposed an explanation based on the causal role of neuronal correlations of consciousness is Michael Persinger, who attempts to experimentally demonstrate that transcranial magnetic stimulation of the temporal lobe generates religious experiences (Persinger, 2002).

The fact that Granqvist (Granqvist et al., 2005) did not succeed in replicating the results of Persinger's experiment should be interpreted in the sense of an extensive integration of religious experiences into everyday life, as these are part of all the cognitive tools and interpretations used in all experiences. In other words, we believe that religion does not refer to strictly specialized neural structures, and that it is part of all the structures responsible for integrating man into the world. It is true, system dependence is not specific to religion, as it seems to be a feature of all cognitive functions. In a certain sense, the absence of neural regions strictly specific to religious experiences is argued by a radical change in the human brain's paradigm of knowledge, characterized by the shift from the pattern of specific cognitive functions located in the determined areas to the model of cognitive functions generated by the interaction of several brain structures. Given that the latter model analyzes the interaction of brain structures developed at different times along the evolutionary path, it also opens up the horizons of relevant discussions on the minimal brain functions / structures necessary for the emergence of religious behaviour / religious experience. The structural model of consciousness that I have proposed elsewhere (Rotilă, 2013) can be considered as an argument at least for the impossibility of a strong isolation of a structure of the consciousness responsible for religion from its other structures, indicating the need for a systemic approach.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this article is to point out some relevant arguments regarding the status of religion of social survival strategy, showing mainly that, through the cooperation it establishes in the multiple plans of human existence, it favours the groups with the highest degree of coherence. At the same time, we explore the possibility that mental religious resorts have facilitated the transition from group to society: the existence of a set of mental instruments that can be called the "religious package" has provided integrative meanings and goals, mediating the transition from small groups to large societies hunters-gatherers in agriculture and sedentariness.

The attempts to demonstrate the possibility of morality before religion, going until the identification of the roots of humanism among primates, such as Frans de Wall (de Waal, 2013), tend to open up the cognitive context for alternative research: the evolution of humanity in the absence of religion. To the extent that they explore the alternative past, such approaches share all the shortcomings of counterfactual histories, being located rather on the imagination area than in the reality. We believe that humanity has reached its present level going through religion. It is difficult for us to demonstrate a

causal link between religion and humanity because it could be a simple correlation; for example, both may have another common cause. In this article we try to point out some arguments in favour of the evolutionary role of religion for humanity, exploring the variant of religion as a necessary moment in the evolution of humanity. We note, however, that the starting point of this approach, namely the omnipresence of religion over historical periods, is insufficiently substantiated: in the absence of a strong religious definition in religious manifestations, behaviours that may belong to other types of systematization are often included. In other words, we admit that our point of view may be contaminated by the omnipresence of religion in the eyes of the viewer. A change of cognitive paradigm brings with it the possibility of highlighting such a limitation. If humanity can be proved in the absence of religion by moving humanity to hominid destiny, then the fundamental premise of this article - religion as a necessary moment in the evolution of humanity - will be cancelled, leaving behind only the discussion about possible influences

4. RESEARCH METHODS

Assuming that the analysis of religion makes possible several levels and explanatory contexts, we focus our attention in this article on the cognitive and practical benefits of religion, evaluating its role in an evolutionary context. From this perspective, we propose some explanatory interpretations of the emergence and existence of religion, exploring some variants of framing it within the evolutionary mechanisms. None of the variants presented is empirically verified through research conducted by the author, and from this perspective they are speculative. Consistency with other data and plausibility are the main arguments in favour of the proposals we make.

Functionalism takes into account in a considerable measure the method of analysis of the role of religion that we use in this approach, its initiator being Emil Durkheim. Functionalism attempts to demonstrate the practical role of religion and rituals associated with it. The most important role of religion is dealing with life, being an adaptive tool (in an existential meaning). But religion also has significant contributions to the development of culture; for example, it is a fundamental proof of the importance of imagination in the cultural existence of people, this being one of the essential areas in which it has been exerted and developed. Analyzing the impact that a course of neuroscience and religion has on students, Klemm goes even further in the functionalist direction, suggesting the presence of positive effects of religion even in the case of a scientific approach such as the one mediated by neuroscience: "religion should not be dismissed as irrelevant to human experience, but rather that religion not only affects beliefs and attitudes but actually influences brain function and behaviour." (Klemm, 2017) We will continue to indicate other functional roles of religion relevant to the evolutionist context of understanding, trying to argue the relevance of the perspective we are proposing.

We start from the premise that religion is a surviving social strategy with the greatest success of all the competing strategies in its field of existence: meta-existential narrative. The premise lies between a research hypothesis and a personal conviction for both extremes but lacking the possibility of experimental verification. The success of religion can be compared with other narratives that aim at social integration, but the latter influences society only in the context of religion, not in its absence, and can only be the subject of mental experiments. From a historical perspective, we can consider the survival of non-religious societies as unlikely. Even though history records some allegedly a-religious social experiments, we believe that both the members of those societies and their institutions have undergone an intense process of "religious contamination", thus not fulfilling the necessary conditions to demonstrate the possibility of a society without religion.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Individual selection vs. group selection

From the perspective of evolutionism, the most appropriate theory for analyzing the role of religion is that of multilevel selection, combining genetic evolution with cultural evolution and individual and social perspectives. Edward Wilson provides an evolutionary explanation of good and evil through multi-layered selection (Wilson, 2013): Individual selection is responsible for competition for survival

and reproduction within the group, generating selfish tendencies while group selection characterizes competition between societies, being responsible for the altruistic tendencies towards the members of their own group. Man is trapped between these tendencies, respectively between good and evil, his oscillations generating a necessary adaptive flexibility in the order of evolution. In terms of multi-level selection proposed by Wilson, religion corresponds to group selection, which is the specific level of promoting virtue (Wilson, 2014: 27). Some religions contain complex encodings of the prohibition of the individual selection mechanism (being directed against sin). It is obvious that the article is quite close to the role that Wilson attributes to religion through belief: "From a biological point of view, faith can be seen as a Darwinian instrument of survival and increased reproduction." (Wilson, 2014: 123)

If society can be thought of as a self-contained entity, an over-organism emerging in the history of evolution, then religion has its place on this path, being one of the great ferments that have contributed to the emergence of the present dimension of the society. The key concept is cooperation, religion being a relevant mediator of success in this field. The later life promised by most religions has an ideal community structure, the beyond society being a form of organization freed from temporal conditioning.

5.2 Religion as a survival strategy

Religion is a social survival strategy, favouring groups with a higher degree of coherence. It is obvious that belonging to different religions generates different levels of coherence, the history of humanity permitting an analysis from this perspective; the social survival provided by one or other of the religions in the context of significant group competition is discussed. If we admit the differences between religions in terms of social successes, we have to agree that they involve various ways of mental structuring, the latter involving both specific forms of the use of brain resources and specific forms of structuring of the minds of the members of each of the religions. These differences may explain the differences between the results of the numerous researches aimed at identifying brain areas activated during religious prayers / meditations specific to some religions, as presented by Bulbulia and Schjoedt (Bulbulia et al., 2012: 171-173).

From this perspective, we consider religion as an adaptive strategy, the diversity of religions indicating solutions developed by different communities for the existence of various social models. We can assume that switching from small groups of hunter-gatherers to bigger ones and then switching to agriculture and sedentariness are made possible by the set of mental instruments and social innovations that are part of the "religious package", which provides integrative meanings and goals from the social point of view. The last stage of the evolution is the society, to the emergence or development of which seems to have decisively contributed agriculture (stabilizing factor) Either agriculture or directly the society was influenced by religion, as mediator of the social life.

The meme hypothesis, launched by R. Dawkins, a promoter of the reductionism of religion to evolutionary explanations (Dawkins, 1976) (the hypothesis was explored by other authors, eg Atran (Atran, 2002: 236) brings to discussion the possibility that religion-specific survival strategies and religion as a macro-survival strategy to explain the omnipresence of religious behaviours. If the hypothesis turns out to be correct then the contamination explains the success of religion, cancelling its character of necessary road in the evolution to humanity. In this variant, copying behaviours and what makes this copying possible (common transcendence) would be one of the possible common causes.

We agree with Atran that religion implies cognitive mechanisms to respond to fragmentary information under conditions of uncertainty (Atran, 2002: 78), but we prefer to think about that from a functional perspective. Insofar as it constitutes a condensation of experience, religious principles offer the templates of answers to the everyday questions of people. The specific moral code leads to a form of cognitive structure of reality, prescribing its horizons of possibilities. From this perspective many of the religious behaviours must be interpreted from the perspective of specific cognitive strategies developed by different societies.

5.3 Dealing with death

If we consider some studies results showing the role of death reminders in amplify religious commitments then we came in to the conclusion that a function of religion is to suppress death-anxiety, thus sharing one of Persinger's arguments (Persinger, 2009). The fact that religious people have better cognitive and (consequently) emotional stability in confronting the unknown, because of the belief system

they adhere to, is a common place in everyday thinking. To the extent that this intuition is scientifically proven, we can talk about a functional role of religion in increasing the capacity of confronting people with the unknown and with death. The association of religious beliefs with the reduction of anxiety level in the face of the unknown, as indicated by Inzlicht et al. is one of the possible explanations, the cerebral mediator being anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) (Inzlicht et al., 2009: 389). Even if it is only a correlation, as the authors suggest, it is not clear whether religious beliefs reduce reactivity in ACC or "lower ACC activity and its associated cognitive style) incline people toward religious belief" (Inzlicht et al., 2009:391), the effect is to increase the ability to confront the unknown (including the supreme one, death) at least for certain categories of people. If the proofs allow the transition from correlation to causality then they will emphasize the functional role that religion plays in the anguishing encounter of human consciousness with its own disappearance.

5.4 Religion contributes to social fitness

The idea expressed by Azari et al., "The results suggest that an essential dimension of religious experience involves social-relational cognition" (Azari, 2005), may constitute a proof of the social role of religion. We believe that religion is a form of social organization that brings it closer to the structure of an over-organism. It may have generated the essential framework for the cooperation needed to move from group to society. It is certain that religion participates in the existence of the social through: the ethical norms it contains, being a form of being together by adherence to sets of common beliefs, and other effects; by encoding the rituals - organizing them in systems - and organizing the space by participating in donating the character of place (the social organization of space reproduces the relationship here and there based on the sacred-profane model); through the specific temporal organization it generates, intervening with its own forms of ordering in the course of time; by donating group identity, generating sufficient differentiation criteria from other groups. The identity of the context / likeness facilitates the semiosis, increasing the efficiency of the group. Religion is one of the facilitators of collective consciousness, that being a necessary characteristic of the group identity.

The religious mind has prepared humanity to look for what is "beyond", thus arranging a part of the field on which science subsequently developed. The role of religion in the emergence of science can be explored on the basis of analysis of current practices specific to scientists. Generating the cognitive context that allows the progress and contribution of the community dimension are important variables, both contributing to the emergence of scientific thinking and practice.

5.5 The Role of Rituals

The social impact of rituals is analyzed from a variety of perspectives by a number of authors: Atran has an analytical approach to the impact of rituals, showing that they "conceptually forge personal identity and memory according to cultural parameters" (Atran, 2002: 149). Boyer and Lienard's. Research developed by Boyer and Lienard (Boyer et al., 2008) indicated a particular functional dimension of the rituals: the reduction of behaviours determined by the "precaution system" through movement-distractors. McNamara is of the opinion that religious practices contribute to the creation of a unified self-consciousness and an ideal "executive Self." (McNamara, 2009: XI-XII). At the same time, the author indicates that religious practices can determine a form of self-decentralization, which is replaced by a more ideal or complex Self-concept (eg that of the saints). From our point of view, this decentralization has two essential characteristics for the perspective of the evolutionary role of religion: it is a temporary (temporary) re-centralization on ideal forms of the self common to a religious belief, being a form of meeting of individuals in common perspectives that contribute to the birth community, and generates the possibility of another perspective, thus participating in the process of complex understanding of reality.

Analysis of rituals from the perspective of cognitive adaptive strategies should focus on the crucial role they play: centering. Religion is a center-building (centers), with rituals bringing about behaviours designed to express these kinds of positions. The centering of the person is essential for the birth and the maintenance of the orientation, that is of meaning, both in its linguistic-cognitive meaning and especially in the existential one.

5.6 Religion generates predictability

Because it generates a system of classifying the humane and of the possible relationships among the people with an important predictive role (thus stabilizing the context of existence), religion offers an

evolutionary advantage. It accumulates the descriptive role (the historical organization of cognitive experiences) with the prescriptive role (ordering behaviour on rituals and ethical criteria). If we admit the assumption from which Bulbulia and Schjoedt start in analyzing the role of religion, ("From a biological perspective, neural circuitry evolves for prediction and control: prediction of the world and control of body states and processes, in response to the world" (Bulbulia et al., 2012: 169)), then we have to identify the contribution of religion to the advancement of predictive and control processes. But even if we agree with this simplification of the role of the brain, it does not exclude the possibility that religion is not related to the causes that led to its appearance, being a by-product. In other words, this approach does not necessarily help to solve the problem.

5.7 Religion meets the need for meaning

A strong argument in favour of integrating religion into the dynamics of evolutionism may constitute its role in the history of the need for meaning of humanity, offering a use of the "excesses" that the need for meaning knows. Religion means specialized operation with symbols, mediating forms of entry into culture. Moreover, religion provides a set of narratives generating meaning, that is, explanations that mediate individual and social self-understanding. It thus manages to provide a (yet unparalleled) meaning to human life through the milestones it establishes in individual existence, the most visible being rites of passage. The rites of passage are powerful social reference points, integrating the individual's life into that of the community and the community in the individual's existence. If the will of purpose is a by product, to the extent that religion has emerged to meet this need, it can be considered a derivative product or a by-product of existence.

In order to generate meaning, reducing the notion of information that invades it to some schemes of understanding, our mind needs integrative narratives. For a long time, religion has played the role of a reference framework for integrative narratives, being an integrative meta-narration: it provides the necessary explanatory closures (often just symbolic) for questions that would otherwise not find the answers. In its absence, we are witnessing a context full of explanatory gaps, losing the construction of a coherent discourse universe, so necessary for the birth and the maintenance of meaning, respectively of the society.

Religion is an explanatory system of reality, being the first form of systematic organization and codification in an intelligible system of human experiences, doubled by the prescriptive dimension of behaviours. In other words, religion integrates a cognitive ensemble with a set of behaviours consistent with prescriptions developed on the basis of a specific form of knowledge. Its continuation, philosophy, rarely managed to maintain this unity of knowledge with behaviour, being part of the lost paradise of philosophers (the ritual remembering of Socrates belonging to the remembrance / recall paradigm). Only the rupture of the theory of practice, that is, the breaking of the coherence between knowledge and behaviour, is the end of the religious period.

5.8 Externalizations

Religions also fulfil one of the essential conditions for social existence, namely externalizations. Externalizations define the exteriorization of some of the cognitive processes in the charge of social mechanisms, which take over the tasks of the individual mind / consciousness. The full meaning of the term we consider to have its outline by reference to the pre-IA IT tools, but it fulfils a way of being the humane being outlined throughout its social existence. The writing and set of practices that we consider to be related to the field of consciousness are relevant examples of externalization. The specialization of people in different cognitive domains can be seen as a specific form of externalization. In case of religion, externalizations can include cognitive processes who take place "elsewhere" (for example, by people specializing in certain practices) and, in particular, cognitive shortcuts, that is, predetermined answers to people's possible questions.

5.9 Some ideas on the relationship between conscience and religion

In the context of neuroscience, religious consciousness exists only in the sense of a field of consciousness. The concept of the field of consciousness (the structural vision of consciousness) provides a possible explanation for the relationship between consciousness and religion, and can contribute to clarifying the hypotheses of causal relationships between the two. Augustin Fuentes suggests an explanatory theory for the emergence of religion that is based on the theory of mind. (Fuentes, 2017);

Kapogiannis et al. bring arguments for the causal link between the theory of the mind (ToM) and the emergence of religion (Kapogiannis et al., 2014), thus suggesting the dependence of religion on the structure of our neural networks. Even if it tends to suggest that religion has a by-product character in relation to brain evolution, this research direction is an implicit argument in favour of religion as inherent thing to the emergence and development of humanity. We believe that the possibility of co-dependence between the birth of consciousness and the emergence of religion cannot be ruled out, the latter being an integral part of the society (participating in the contribution of the social to structuring of consciousness).

6. CONCLUSION

We believe that the mere existence and spread of religion is a sufficient argument in favour of its importance to the humane. For example, if we accept in principle that most of the rules established by religions participate in the construction of a moral system, then the role of the social structuring of religions becomes visible. Religion may be the first attempt to systemize the experience; which makes it essential to the process of learning and of social adaptation. Given that evolutionism is the appropriate context (at this moment) for the study of humanity then the analysis of the meaning of religion should be performed against this explanatory background.

Even if it proves its limitations, we must observe that religion has been and is a good mediator of the transition to another form of humanity's positioning, namely that before nature, taking into account the change of paradigm specific to the birth of science. One of the challenges posed by the analysis of religion is the moment when religion exhausts its positive role for humanity, passing the other side of the barricade. Obviously, it first assumes accepting such a position, provided that its scientific evidence seems impossible at this time. In the absence of such a distancing we are still deprived of the proper context for a complete understanding of the role that religion has in the evolution of humanity. For now, it is enough to take steps in this direction, this being the main purpose of this article.

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