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Since the nineteenth century, various critical objections have been raised against antiscientific uses of evolutionary concepts in the field of religion. To name only a few, Frazer’s idea that religion superseded magic and Tylor’s evolutionary stages of religious forms have a distinctive position in such argumentations. It is in light of this broader academic discussion that we are to read the book under review. To put it briefly, the book aspires to figure out if evolutionary theories of culture found today in the general field of Religious Studies meet the necessary requirements, as specified by the neo-Darwinian theoretical framework, to be legitimately characterized as “evolutionary” (1). In order to accomplish this aim cohesively, the book is divided into three main parts.

The first part, entitled “Classical Cultural Evolutionism,” takes us back to the foundations of the study of religion in order to examine its connection to evolutionary theory. Although Kundt disagrees with J. Harrison’s claims that Darwinism represents the foundation of the study of religions (12), he still acknowledges the significant contribution of evolutionary theory, but not specifically in its Darwinian form (12, 15). He supports the view that Darwin developed his theory to be applied in a limited biological domain, and that it was, as he calls it, the “Generalized Darwinism” that inspired the pioneers and founders of the study of religion (15). Generalized Darwinism includes any attempt to apply the Darwinian core of variation, selection and replication outside of the original biological domain, implying that if we generalize Darwinism when trying to explain social or cultural evolution the result would be social or cultural Darwinism respectively (15). Additionally, even before Darwin’s theory, academia had knowledge of Spencer’s progressive thought of normative judgment; that is, of “Progressivistic Spencerism” (19–20). Systems of thought that originated from the foregoing modes of reasoning resulted in philosophical complexes that tried to capture the universal principle of evolution, and were susceptible to generalizations (24–25).

In the second part, “Contemporary Cultural Evolutionism,” the author critically presents the main theoretical attempts of transferring Darwinian

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evolution to the domain of sociocultural phenomena (33). Three main theories used in the Cognitive Science of Religion are analyzed. Firstly, he refers to various types of group selection, implying any theoretical attempt that considers natural selection operating not only at the individual level but also at the group level (35). Group-selectionist models, Kundt observes critically, neglect the process of the replication of groups and evaluate the success of a religious group based on anthropocentric criteria such as wealth, influence and power (54–55). Additionally, a religious group cannot be considered as an organism in terms of biology, since an organism is defined as a bundle of phenotypic effects which are intertwined in such a fashion that the survival of each gene is dependent upon the survival of other genes (55, 58). Therefore, group selection ignores the fundamental principles and basic criteria of the neo-Darwinian theory of natural selection, leading to a poor metaphor and adding nothing to the understanding of cultural change, which is better pursued with the help of cause-and-effect historical explanations (64).

After discussing the basic conceptual problems of group selectionist theories, Kundt refers to Dual Inheritance Theory. Although Darwin saw the role of natural selection in “civilized times” as marginal, and therefore as a poor model of cultural change, Dual Inheritance Theory argues the opposite (79). However, theories of “gene-culture co-evolution” are challenged by the influence of non-random variation on the system of cultural evolution as well as the related issue of distinguishing the influence of intentional selection from that of natural selection, since in a Darwinian evolutionary framework it is not possible to call processes involving non-random variation “evolution” (79). Kundt then turns to the problem of memetics, suggesting that cultural variants do not meet the definition of replicators due to quantity disparity and quality spottiness by neo-Darwinian standards (93). Quantity disparity refers to the quantity of the transitive properties, which have to be equal, while quality spottiness refers to the quality of the copies, which have to match exactly (96). Nevertheless, “memes” do not share a common definitional magnitude and additionally when these cultural behaviors are to be imitated by others, a new cultural variant is being created in the imitator’s mind (93–96).

The third part, entitled “Evolution Without Cultural Evolution,” constitutes the author’s proposal for the way evolution should be used by contemporary Cognitive Science of Religion. The starting point of this approach is the study of the cognitive architecture of the human mind, including its emotional and intuitive constituents, which was formed by selective pressures within the boundaries of genetic evolution (104). This approach does not see cultural evolution as an autonomous process of
evolution of culture, but attempts to examine how the evolved architecture of the human mind influences the form and the maintenance of multiple cultural variants (99). Theories in the field of Religious Studies inspired by the aforementioned approach can be divided into two groups: adaptationist theories and by-product theories. The former type of theories claim that religion is an adaptation that occurred in our evolutionary history as it constituted a selective advantage, while the latter type of theories claims that religion is a by-product of other adaptations that evolved to solve other problems pre-historical humans were confronted with in their ancestral environment (112). Both groups of theories acknowledge the same argumentation, implying that in our effort to explain a trait of Homo sapiens being so susceptible to religious belief and behavior we are given three possible routes of thought: explain it as a) a product of neo-Darwinian natural selection (adaptation), b) a by-product of adaptations or c) a genetic drift (112). However, major methodological differences are noted. By-productivists begin the study of religion by examining evolved architectural features of the human mind discovered independently from religion stressing the “randomness” of the link between these elements, while adaptionists start from cross-culturally recurrent features of religions, and subsequently infer their fitness consequences and reconstruct environments in which they could have evolved, focusing on the linkage and the functionality of the whole (114–115).

Overall, it is important to underline that this book should not be considered as a complete collection of every contemporary evolutionary theory of culture. Instead, it offers something even more useful for scholars of religion: it provides a systematic classification of some of the leading evolutionary theories of culture in contemporary academia, locates their origins, uncovers the ideological abuse of science in some theorizing, and critically evaluates possibilities of scientifically correct applications. It is a book that will help to clear the fog surrounding the use of evolutionary thought mainly in the field of the study of religion. Its clarity and analytical power will be much appreciated by every scholar who aspires to interweave his or her study of religion with an understanding of the biological, evolutionary underpinnings of humanity and their relevance to culture.