CHAPTER 1

Having “The Talk” about Religious Reproduction

Atheism is a religion like abstinence is a sex position.

BILL MAHER

In the academic study of religion the term “sects” is usually reserved for minority religious groups whose beliefs and ritual behaviors are considered (by a majority population) to be abnormal, in contrast to more conventional religious groups such as “churches.” Groups that are able to continue reproducing themselves until they are adopted by a dominant culture (as with early 4th century Christianity) or at least adapt to it (as with early 21st century Mormonism), are no longer considered sects. My primary interest in this book, however, is not in differentiating between such coalitions by measuring their historical longevity or political centrality. Instead, I focus on the distinctive way in which all “religious” social assemblages are constituted by a partitioning (or sectioning) of humanity that is authorized by appeals to supernatural agents who are putatively engaged in rituals performed by the members (or elites) of an in-group.

In this sense, coalitions as diverse as the Peoples Temple cult, the Islamic State, and the Roman Catholic Church, are religiously sectarian. I will use the phrase “religious sects” to refer to all such god-bearing groups and argue that this type of social intercourse, which did indeed help (some of) our ancestors thrive in earlier contexts, is becoming increasingly maladaptive in our contemporary global environment. In order to survive as a social species, we humans are likely to continue needing some kind of sects (as well as sex) for quite some time. But can we learn how to practice safe sects? That is, can we learn how to live together in social networks without bearing gods – without reproducing the superstitious beliefs and segregative behaviors that are engendered and nurtured by shared ritual engagement with imagined supernatural beings?

Below I will explore some of the reasons why a growing number of people around the globe are no longer religiously sectually active. In many contexts, it is becoming easier and easier to make sense of the world and to act sensibly in society without referring to supernatural agents and authorities. Nevertheless, most people on the planet today still like having religious sects. As we will see, some of the evolved cognitive and coalitional biases that lead
to the reproduction of religious beliefs and behaviors played an important role in increasing the chances of individual survival and strengthening group cohesion in early ancestral human environments. Supernatural conceptions are regularly born in contemporary human minds – and readily borne in contemporary human cultures – as a result of an aggregate of covertly operating, phylogenetically inherited and socially reinforced mechanisms that kept our progenitors alive long enough to reproduce sexually and transmit these tendencies to us. And so here we are.

Why fight the urge now? The challenges we face today are quite different than those confronting small-scale societies of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers or Neolithic sedentary-agriculturalists. Most of us live in densely populated, pluralistic, large-scale societies, and all of us live in the Anthropocene – a global environment whose ecological instability is due, at least in part, to the astonishing success of (some) human coalitions in competing for resources. I will argue that participating in religious sects is making things worse, and that we need to find and foster new, explicitly non-religious strategies for living together. Discussing religion (like sex, or politics) can make people anxious and even angry. Nevertheless, if we are interested in contributing to a more peaceable and sustainable environment for everyone, we can no longer put off having “the talk” about religious reproduction.

Where Do Gods Come From?

Empirical findings and theoretical developments within the bio-cultural study of religion have converged in support of the claim that “gods” (in the broad sense of the term explained below) are engendered within the mental and social life of human beings as a result of naturally evolved, hyper-sensitive biases that activate inferences about hidden human-like forms and preferences for distinctive in-group norms, especially when people are confronted with ambiguous or frightening phenomena. Moreover, these cognitive and coalitional mechanisms reciprocally reinforce one another within religious sects. In other words, the evolved biases that generate ideas about supernatural agents and nurture them through ritual practices are mutually intensifying.

These are the basic hypotheses of theogonic reproduction theory. This theoretical framework has been worked out in some detail elsewhere.1 In the current volume, I provide additional evidence for these god-bearing (theogonic) mechanisms.

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