Selective Reading and Selectionist Thinking: Why Violence Has Been, and Should Be, Important to the Cognitive Science of Religion

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We agree with Martin and Wiebe that CSR researchers would benefit from the insights of ethnographers and historians and we commend them for drawing attention to both the prosocial and violent aspects of religion, as we think both are crucial for understanding religion’s role in human sociality. Here we stress this point by drawing attention to the socioecological conditions under which we expect violence associated with religion to occur between, as well as within, groups.

We begin, however, by noting that Martin and Wiebe’s reading of the CSR literature is selective; despite their protestations, violence has been a topic of considerable interest to CSR researchers for some time. In fact, major contributors to CSR including Scott Atran, Dominic Johnson, and Harvey Whitehouse have all written books and numerous articles focusing on the violent side of religion (e.g., Atran 2003, 2010; Johnson 2008; Johnson & Reeve 2013; Johnson & Toft 2014; Whitehouse 1995, 1996; Whitehouse & McGuinn 2013). The second author of this commentary has also written various pieces that aim to explain religious violence (e.g., Alcorta & Sosis 2013; Sosis 2011; Sosis & Alcorta 2008; Sosis et al. 2007; Sosis et al. 2012). And most notably, Norenzayan, who takes the brunt of Martin and Wiebe’s criticism concerning CSR’s alleged prosociality bias, has published several important papers on religious violence (e.g., Hansen & Norenzayan 2006; Ginges et al. 2009). All of this literature was curiously ignored in the target article. In light of Martin and Wiebe’s concern that Templeton is leading CSR’s supposed ‘Kumbayah’ festivities, we should also point out that Templeton has funded all of these researchers. Ultimately, to assess Martin and Wiebe’s contention, we recommend a systematic meta-analysis to determine whether a prosociality bias genuinely exists in the CSR literature. Argumentation without the support of carefully collected data is subject to a whole host of pitfalls, not the least of which is the tendency to find support for one’s ideas due to confirmation biases (Nickerson 1998).

For the sake of this discussion, however, we entertain the possibility that there is a disproportionate focus on prosociality by CSR scholars and consider the source of such a bias. Rather than machinations of Templeton, we suspect the substance of Martin and Wiebe’s alleged prosociality bias may be the result of CSR’s recent encounter with selectionist thinking (Bulbulia
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Evolutionary scientists recognize that we live in a world of finite resources and consequently all organisms compete over those resources (e.g., energy and mates) or the means to them (e.g., territories). Conflict and competition between individuals—from mothers and their offspring, to members of opposing warring parties—are therefore inherent to all possible dyadic interactions. Conversely, cooperation in such a world is unanticipated and hence its presence and persistence are puzzling. Thus, for those within CSR who engage in adaptationist investigation, an interest in the prosocial aspects of religion derives from the fact that high levels of prosociality among non-kin are rare across species (although not absent, West et al. 2012), yet clearly evident among humans.

When religions are understood to confer benefits and costs to individuals within specific socio-environmental contexts, explanations for both the prosocial and conflictual aspects of religion are drawn into sharp focus. Understanding how conflicts of interest among individuals are resolved or minimized is essential to any explanation of religious prosociality. Various theorists have suggested that resource benefits available to the members of religious groups can be protected from freeriders when individuals pay costs for group membership (Bulbulia 2004; Iannacconne 1992; Irons 2001; Sosis 2003). These costs vary ecologically and are expected to increase as a function of the quality of collective resources they are protecting, and the risks of exploiting these resources via freeriding. As countless ethnographers have documented, these membership costs, typically in the form of initiation rites, often entail substantial violence inflicted by other ingroup members (e.g., Alcorta 2006; Tuzin 1982; Whitehouse 1996).

This approach, commonly referred to as the costly signaling theory (CST) of ritual, may at first glance seem to disproportionately focus on the prosocial benefits of religions. However, as many have noted, cooperation is often an effective means of competition (e.g., Alexander 1987). And indeed, much research that has applied signaling theory to religion has focused specifically on how the prosocial consequences of religious signaling facilitate intergroup violence and warfare (Ginges et al. 2009; Matthews et al. 2013; Johnson & Reeve 2013). For example, in environments with high levels of intergroup warfare, where cooperation in defense and raiding is critical, rituals are the most violent and extreme (Sosis et al. 2007). High levels of ingroup prosociality, it appears, can be driven by socioecological variance in the frequency of outgroup violence. Rather than viewing religion as a cause of warfare, these findings suggest that warfare may motivate an increase in the intensity of religious commitments, including violent rituals and initiation rites.

Signaling theory emphasizes that the costs and benefits of religious displays are not equal for all members of societies. Notably, the signaling approach