RELIGION’S EVOLUTIONARY LANDSCAPE: COUNTERINTUITION, COMMITMENT, COMPASSION, COMMUNION

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Religion is not an evolutionary adaptation per se, but a recurring by-product of the complex evolutionary landscape that sets cognitive, emotional and material conditions for ordinary human interactions. Religion involves extraordinary use of ordinary cognitive processes to passionately display costly devotion to counterintuitive worlds governed by supernatural agents. The conceptual foundations of religion are intuitively given by task-specific panhuman cognitive domains, including folkmechanics, folkbiology, folkpsychology. Core religious beliefs minimally violate ordinary notions about how the world is, with all of its inescapable problems, thus enabling people to imagine minimally impossible supernatural worlds that solve existential problems, including death and deception. Here the focus is on folkpsychology and agency. A key feature of the supernatural agent concepts common to all religions is the triggering of an "Innate Releasing Mechanism," or “agency detector,” whose proper (naturally-selected) domain encompasses animate objects relevant to hominid survival - such as predators, protectors and prey - but which actually extends to moving dots on computer screens, voices in wind, faces on clouds. Folkpsychology also crucially involves metarepresentation, which makes deception possible and threatens any social order; however, these same metacognitive capacities provide the hope and promise of open-ended solutions through representations of counterfactual supernatural worlds that cannot be logically or empirically verified or falsified. Because religious beliefs cannot be deductively or inductively validated, validation occurs only by ritually addressing the very emotions motivating religion. Cross-cultural experimental evidence encourages these claims.