

Unfertile ground: Religious mutations in the scientific community

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Humanists are often amused by slow change within Christianity; for example, it wasn't until 1992 the Roman Catholic Church officially regretted its 17th century inquisition of Galileo for the heresy of promoting a heliocentric view of the solar system. Successful replicators need not evolve quickly to survive. In contrast, the influence Christianity has led to various mutations in other world religions. For example, the founder of Kyoto school of Zen Buddhism incorporated a monotheistic god and the concept of sin and redemption in an attempt to unite Buddhist and "Western" philosophical thought (Nishida, 1921/1990). A Chinese-based Buddhist sect has evolved, in competition with Zen, embracing the notion of redemptive salvation. Similarly, a significant current within Hinduism has reinterpreted that religion's numerous gods and goddesses as manifestations of a less well defined monotheistic god (Gupta, 2011). Changes to competing world religions incorporating Judeo-Christian concepts may be understood as flowing from a dominant political and economic frame: Economic subservience has created "fertile ground" for religious conversion with resultant conformative pressure on indigenous religions. Conversely, the proselytizing success of the Roman Catholic Church in third world countries has made it more resistant to modern notions of human rights and gender equality current in its traditional Western European and North American base.

Protestant Christianity has fractured into numerous sects competing with each other for a limited number of souls, particularly in North America. The resultant evolutionary dynamic is the basis of a "supply-side" model of religious propagation whereby increased competition leads to the creation of superior religious goods with superiority defined as the ability attract more believers. While this model may explain the robustness of Christianity in the United States and the efficiency of missionary activity in those regions dominated the U.S. economically, it fails to

explain the relative decline of Christianity in Canada and Europe. Evolving religions become increasingly efficient at recruiting and maintaining believers, but individuals who no longer have a felt need for supernatural understandings have effectively withdrawn from the religious marketplace (Robertson, 2007). Thus, continuing high levels of atheism in Japan and Eastern Germany are explained despite their integration into a system of U.S.-led global capitalism coupled with extensive missionary activity.

The scientific community is an identifiable group containing individuals who have withdrawn from the religious marketplace. For example, while U.S. America has maintained high levels of religious belief as compared to other industrialized countries, over 90% of recognized scientists in that country continue to describe themselves as either atheist or agnostic (Larson & Witham, 1998). A model of cultural evolution would predict that such a zone of “unfertile ground” would stimulate the production of religious mutations when surrounded by believers. In this article we examine two such evolutionary responses.

Science as a Subordinate Link in a “Great Chain of Being”

Questions were allowed after each presentation at the 2002 national (Canadian) conference of the Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addictions save one. Since this presentation was about something other than science (but which the presenter contended scientists need to “balance” their work), hypothesis testing was considered irrelevant. The presenter advised scientists to recognize their place in “a great chain of being.”

First of all... the universe seems to have organized itself into a kind of hierarchy - like a ladder, or a chain - with matter on the bottom rung, which evolves into life (bodies), which evolves into mind, which evolves into soul and then spirit (if you want to take it that far). This is known as the Great Chain of Being (Bourget, 2002).

Bourget, who credited her ideas to the philosopher Ken Wilber (1999, 2000), held that physical scientists are at the bottom of this ladder while psychologists are one rung up in their study of the mind. Mystics and theologians occupy the top two rungs. In testimony to the power of Darwin's concept, body is said to have evolved into mind, which, in turn, evolved into soul and then spirit. In Darwinian evolution, competition among species leads to adaptations propelling an evolutionary process; however, no comparable mechanism by which a "great chain of being" could have evolved was proposed. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins provided such a mechanism, but its application provides no comfort for the supernaturally inclined.

Dawkins (1976) coined the term "meme" to represent elemental units of culture that move from mind to mind. A quality of memes is that they may exert an "attractive" force on other memes thus bringing stability to complexes of memes that tend to propagate as a unit. Religions are examples of such memplexi, and they compete for mind space within a "cultural soup" (Dennett, 1996). Autobiographical selves also consist of mutually re-enforcing cultural units held together by connotative and emotive valence (Robertson, 2010), and their appearance in humans allowed for the possibility of objective thought (Jaynes, 1976). Since there could have been no agentic self prior to its evolution, what we understand as mind developed by algorithmic cultural mutation (Johnson, 2003). Such a view is consistent with Bourget's hypothesis that mind evolved from material bodies. If soul is viewed as the self or a core aspect of self, then it could be said that soul evolved out of mind stimulated by cultural factors, and that religions do indeed compete for human souls. Religions that anthropomorphize soul as a self that lives on after the death of the body would have a competitive advantage over belief systems not promising eternal life.

Wilber (1999, 2000) developed a body of ideas and concepts that are internally consistent using the language of science. Wilber's memplex connected to some core part of Bourget's self and this connection resulted in the production of particular peptides that gave her the feeling that she must tell others. From this perspective, the Wilber memplex was using Bourget as a conduit to replicate in the minds of the scientists assembled by the Institute. The fact that the concept of evolution was poorly understood, even incorrect, is irrelevant as long as it enhances the power of the memplex to so replicate. What of spirit which, we are told, evolved from soul?

So, where does Spirit come into the picture? Well, you might say that it is the whole picture. It is the ladder, it is the rungs, it is the highest rung and it is the wood the ladder is made of. It is All That Is, in all of its patterns and manifestations; it is the driving force behind evolution, and it is the glue that holds it all together. By the way, these are not simply my conclusions, or Wilber's for that matter. These are the findings of people who have pursued investigation of the interiors, of human consciousness, to the highest levels - the spiritual pioneers of the ages: Buddha, Jesus, Saint Theresa of Avila, Zen Masters and so on. (Bourget, 2002)

Bourget does not explain how something that did not previously exist (spirit) could be the "driving force" behind its own evolution. Perhaps this contradiction in her argument occurred because she uses two definitions of spirit. It is not only the highest level; it is also everything.

If spirit means a belief in our common heritage, common humanity, a feeling of connectedness with the rest of the universe, awe and wonder at what we are studying in science and/or a positive and hopeful outlook, then these are all things that could have come from mind and become resident in the "ecosystem" of culture. But Bourget's use of irregular capitalization (as in "All That Is") implies that she means more than the words themselves convey. "Universe" in its original meaning of everything that is, is not big enough. Further, founders of religions think the same way that she does. It does not matter that the Jesus portrayed in the Biblical Gospels believed in a god that was his actual father, a god that had human emotions and was

separate from that which he created. Bourget has superior knowledge that Jesus believed as she does now.

Postmodern Relativism in Psychology

In describing science as a "white, male way of constructing knowledge," Strong (2002) reduced all belief systems to relativistic equality. He received support from Candace Pert (1997) who wrote:

There is no objective reality.... How can we objectively define what's real and what's not real? If what we perceive as real is filtered along a gradient of past emotions and learning then the answer is we cannot (p. 146).

So that we may understand her meaning clearly Pert provided the following example:

When the tall European ships approached early Native Americans, it was such an 'impossible' vision in their reality that their highly filtered perceptions couldn't register what was happening and they literally failed to see the ships (p. 148).

Since we each construct our reality, what is true, according to Strong, depends on the consensus of those who are knowledgeable. Of course, if there is no objective reality then we have no way of ascertaining who is knowledgeable and who is not. How does one investigate a subject like spirituality in this subjective world?

After having watched videos of their counselling sessions, Fuller (Fuller & Strong, 2001) invited five clients of other psychologists to discuss "alive moments" in counselling and their "spiritual significance." They were also asked a series of questions related to spirituality such as: "Can you describe how you understand this moment and its spiritual aspects or not?"; "How does this feeling of being 'alive' for you, in that moment, relate to your views of spirituality?"; and, "Would you say in that moment, that there was something spiritual about that moment?" (pp. 200-214).

Since Fuller was tying these "alive" moments to a "spiritual" experience, it may be that she was looking for moments of deep and felt transcendental understanding described by 1960s Buddhist guru Allan Watts (1963) as "cosmic consciousness." According to Watts, who was given to self-experimentation, these moments of deep spiritual understanding can be obtained through years of dedicated meditation or through the judicious use of hallucinogens. None of Fuller's subjects reported this feeling of "cosmic consciousness."

Although her subjects tended to a more secular definition of spiritual, Fuller admitted that she was uncomfortable with that development, and that she "made them feel as though pre-existing meanings were inadequate." They then attempted to modify their definitions of spirituality to fit lesser moments of perceived understanding in an attempt to answer the questions of the primary researcher. They were then left with the task of deeply felt relating to a moment that was not "deeply felt" (at least in a cosmic consciousness sense), but was none-the-less, "alive." Further, they were expected to accomplish this while using a transcendent definition of spirituality. Fuller reported that her subjects made progress in accepting her definition of spirituality. One client stated that Fuller's approach resulted in her being "transported to a higher level". Another spoke of "moving beyond the world as we know it". Fuller admitted that her objectives included introducing spirituality to psychotherapy and asked "Does this mean that there was some internal shift, an opening of their hearts and minds to spirituality?" (p. 208).

In a world where objective reality ceases to exist, there can be no empirical research. The world operates according to subjective mental models. Pert does not have to cite a reference for her contention that early Amerindians could not literally see ships; she just "knows" it is so. In

scientific terms, Pert had a hypothesis but failed to look for evidence to disprove her hypothesis. Such evidence was provided by a long-deceased Micmac elder:

When they got up in the morning, they saw what seemed to be a small island that had drifted near to the land and became fixed there. There were trees on the island, and what seemed to be a number of bears were crawling about on the branches. All the Micmac men seized their bows and arrows and spears, and rushed down to the shore to shoot the bears. But they stopped in surprise when they saw that the creatures were not bears but men. And what seemed to be a small island with trees was really a large boat with long poles rising above it (Ray, 1996 pp. 39-40).

Of course, if there is no such thing as objective reality then this quote is only a "Micmac, male way of knowing." Strong suggests that truth is arrived at through the discourse of those who are knowledgeable, but on what basis do individuals undertake that discourse?

A personal friend of mine, a Saulteaux (Plains Ojibway) elder, holds that the "old people" (his elders) taught him that the Sun goes around the Earth while scientists teach that the Earth goes around the Sun. He has said that he chooses to believe the "wisdom of the elders". His memory of people who are now dead constitutes his reference of people who are knowledgeable. How would Strong propose arriving at a consensus with that elder? What would Strong say about the school system that insults the elder by teaching his grandchildren that the earth goes around the sun? In a purely subjective world there can be no rational basis for deciding one belief is more correct than another. All discourse must end. So why do subjectivists like Strong, Pert and Fuller write books and articles to convince us of the correctness of their views?

To exist memplexi must be successful replicators. From the vantage point of Fuller's memplex, her study was an opportunity to replicate. Had Fuller's questions successfully implanted the idea that progress in client counselling was connected to her definition of spirituality, then the clients in question could have experienced an "aha" moment, a feeling that they now have a greater understanding of how the universe works. They would have then

experienced the chemical rush that accompanies such moments thus emotionally committing themselves to this new understanding. Fuller's memplex would have replicated successfully.

Reclaiming Spirit

We began this discussion with the prediction that the withdrawal of individuals from the religious marketplace results in increased mutations of the displaced religions. In both exemplars studied, religious memes were packaged in belief systems that were characterized as non-religious. The role of the scientific method was reduced to colonial and sexist way of understanding the world in one case, and to a lesser way of knowing in the other. In both cases the package of mutually re-enforcing religious memes was described as “spirituality.”

It is not clear how many scientists, if any, were persuaded to re-enter the religious marketplace as a result of these mutated belief systems. Whether pseudo-evolutionary “chaining” or postmodernist sophistry was used to engender a sense of legitimacy, the result was an attempted diminution of our will to determine objective reality. While we may predict that such mutations will continue algorithmically, it is not clear that any combination of memes that reduce our capacity to objectively reason will be successful on a body that is trained to engage the world in just that way.

Humanists are concerned with the larger body politic and in some quarters the term “religion” is going the way of the term “ghost” to be replaced with the term “spirit” which carries less negative connotative baggage. It may be pre-emptive for humanists to reclaim a secular definition of spirituality to include peak emotional experience, valuing, finding beauty and love, and having awe and wonder at the universe before us. Human beings evolved in a material world with the ability to create and enjoy our own spiritual moments. Let us seek to keep this ability pure, away from the control of systems of religious belief.

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