



Religious delight: a non-functional approach to playful religious experiences

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Religious delight: a non-functional approach to playful religious experiences

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The *Joy of Religion* documents the multifaceted relation between religion and sensory pleasure. The book provides a scholarly approach to the topic and combines thick-and-rich historical analyses and case studies, with contemporary psychological, neuroscientific, and evolutionary approaches. Professor Glucklich introduces relevant and fine-grained distinctions between different types of pleasure, including novelty, mastery, and play. Building on this distinction he sets out to show how religious traditions cultivate sensory pleasure. In his analysis, Glucklich assumes a functional evolutionary approach, taking into account the proximate neurobiological mechanisms underlying hedonic experiences and the ultimate mechanisms related to enhancing social bonding and well-being. I found much to like about Glucklich's book: he goes beyond the WEIRD criticism (Henrich et al., 2010), by sampling evidence from different times, cultures, and religious traditions. The case studies are telling and along the lines Glucklich integrates a breadth of philosophical, religious, and psychological theories. The book also puts the central topic of "religious experiences" back on the research agenda, which has received relatively little attention in the cognitive science of religion

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(Taves & Asprem, 2017). Perhaps most importantly, through a careful historical analysis Glucklich succeeds in showing that religions can cultivate self-control and constraint, while at the same time promoting religious emotions through their teachings, rituals, and practices.

I commend the author for his interdisciplinary approach and his ambitious attempt to place the study of religious pleasures in a broader historical and evolutionary perspective. At the same time, the theoretical framework and the selection of topics and empirical studies appear to be somewhat single-sided. As such, the book seems to be overlooking important topics such as by-product approaches in evolutionary psychology, issues with replicability, research on pretend-play, and mental imagery in voice-hearing experiences and the role of absorption. Although I completely understand that one has to be selective in the materials sampled while writing a book like this, below I argue that these approaches can challenge some of the central assumptions underlying the proposed theoretical framework.

The book starts off by making an analogy to the study of music and neuroscientific studies showing that music can activate the reward circuitry of the brain. The experience of music can be very pleasurable and could ultimately also subserve such functions as group bonding, moving in synchrony, and fostering one's wellbeing. At the same time, it has repeatedly been suggested that our ability to make and perceive music could be considered a by-product of the way our brain functions (Honing & Ploeger, 2012). Steven Pinker (2003) even goes so far as to say that music can be considered auditory cheesecake, because of its potential to stimulate the auditory cortex, language, and movement-related brain areas. Similarly, next to adaptationist approaches to religion that have argued that religion subserves the function of increasing ingroup loyalty and cooperation, by-product approaches instead argue that belief in supernatural agents evolved simply as a consequence of the way the human mind functions (Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010). On this account, evolved cognitive biases for intuitive thinking, dualistic reasoning, teleological attributions, mind perception, and agency detection provide the necessary ingredients to foster supernatural beliefs. Each of these biases clearly had adaptive value (e.g., to facilitate the detection of predators) and as a by-product they produced supernatural beliefs.

How does this distinction tie in to Glucklich's account of religious pleasure? The theoretical framework in the book starts from the implicit assumption that the cultivation of religious pleasures has an adaptive significance in and of its own. Through the central mechanisms of novelty, mastery, and play religions can increase self-restraint but also encourage participants to enter an altered state of consciousness (e.g., Glucklich, 2020, p. 117). The emergence of these mechanisms is specifically related to the axial age, characterized by a sudden increase in affluence, literacy, technology, and political complexity. However, in the current literature there is an ongoing debate regarding the question whether religion indeed should be considered a by-product or an adaptation. Much of this discussion focuses on the question whether religion is a cause or a consequence of socio-economic changes associated with the emergence of agricultural societies. Adaptationists have suggested that specifically, the belief in moralizing high gods enabled the emergence of these more complex societies (Lang et al., 2019; Norenzayan et al., 2016; Purzycki et al., 2016). In contrast, others have pointed out that increases in affluence actually created the necessary and sufficient conditions to enable the emergence of more complex religious belief systems (Baumard et al., 2015; Whitehouse et al., 2019). With respect to the axial age changes, one could ask a similar question: it could well be that the causation is actually reversed or that a third factor was at play that explained both the observed changes in belief systems and practices to foster self-control.

A first step in addressing the question about causality and the mechanisms involved (e.g., the reward-circuitry and neurocognitive mechanisms related to cognitive control) is to specify detailed hypotheses which can be tested in future empirical studies. Doing so helps us to avoid the use of evolutionary explanations as merely just-so-stories (Gould, 1978). It will also help us to address the question whether the often-described relation between religion and self-control replicates cross-culturally (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). This seems especially pertinent as the replicability of findings from a related domain, namely self-control and ego-depletion, have been con-

tested over the past decade (Hagger et al., 2016). Relatedly, the relationship between religion and

mental health has also been contested and appears to vary strongly across different cultures (Stavrova, 2015; Stavrova et al., 2013). This could indicate that the mechanisms underlying the religion-wellbeing relationship have more to do with adapting to the prevalent cultural and social norms within one's society, rather than religion's potential to foster self-regulation.

Next to these recommendations and concerns, I would also like to point out more recent evidence indicating that religious pleasures may indeed primarily fulfill the need for what Glucklich would define as "play." However, instead of offering a playground for the enactment of self-control, religious pleasures may primarily help us to make what we believe seem "more real" (Lifshitz et al., 2019). That is, religious practices that trigger experiences of the supernatural may act as a reinforcing mechanism that helps believers to sustain their beliefs, even in environments (e.g., secular societies) where those beliefs are looked down upon. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, for instance, has documented a variety of mental practices that are widely used in different religious congregations. Her fieldwork in the Vineyard Fellowship church has demonstrated that through a long and intense process of "inner sense cultivation" members of the church over time start having more frequent and more "real" experiences of hearing God's voice (Luhrmann, 2012). These practices consist of a process that bears similarities to "pretend play" in young children, whereby disbelief is suspended and an imaginary inner dialog emerges in the presumed presence of God. Luhrmann has shown how members of those congregations playfully interact with God, asking Him for advice about which clothes to wear or inviting Him to have a chat during a coffee break. Over time and with increased practice, these experiences increase in their perceived intensity and thereby offer believers the experience that God is real. Luhrmann explicitly avoids a functional-evolutionary psychological explanation of her findings. She points out that whereas some voice-hearing experiences may be pleasant and beneficial for one's wellbeing, in many cases these experiences can also cause distress or even frustration, for instance when one is unable to attain these "peak experiences" that are so strongly valued within the Pentecostal community (Luhrmann et al., 2015). There appears to be a thin boundary between "healthy" and "pathological" voice hearing experiences, for instance psychosis but in ecstatic and presumably joyful religious experiences as well (Luhrmann et al., 2019).

At the same time, Luhrmann's and my own work have pointed out that some people tend to have a proclivity for having these type of "peak" spiritual experiences (Lifshitz et al., 2019). People scoring high on the personality trait of "absorption" can be characterized as having a vivid mental imagery, enjoying immersive sensory experiences and becoming engrossed in their own fantasies and daydreams. These persons tend to have more vivid and positive experiences of hearing God's voice; but they are also more open to mystical-type experiences through meditation, in response to the use of psychedelics, or when immersing themselves in raw nature. They simply take delight in religious experiences for the sake of having those experiences. Any attempt to put these experiences in an evolutionary-functional perspective, would be analogical to trying to explain why we find music so immensely pleasurable. But it maybe just that: auditory cheesecake "*an exquisite confection crafted to tickle the sensitive spots of at least six of our mental faculties.*" And religious pleasures may be especially suited to do so.

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