

# Is Religion What We Want? Motivation and the Cultural Transmission of Religious Representations\*

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## ABSTRACT

Many psychologists and philosophers have suggested that religious ideas emerge because they are motivationally attractive. This paper attempts to support a version of the motivational thesis by relying on religious creeds as a source of historical evidence. This simple source of evidence indicates that the cultural evolution of religious ideas is partly a function of the motivational attractiveness of the religious ideas.

## **Wish Fulfillment**

The idea that religion springs from deeply felt desires is familiar, and it probably stretches back into the earliest speculations about the natural history of religion. But perhaps the most influential deployment of this idea is in Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*.<sup>1</sup> Freud proposes that the origin of religion lies in our deepest wishes, which include the desire to escape death, the desire for justice, and the desire for a father. Religion emerged, according to Freud, from these desires: "And thus a store of ideas is

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<sup>1</sup>My discussion of Freud's account of religious belief will be restricted to his treatment in *The Future of an Illusion*, and all page references are to this work. Freud offers rather different accounts in other works (1913, 1939).

created, born from man's need to make his helplessness tolerable" (Freud 1927/1961, 23).<sup>2</sup>

According to Freud, religion meets our worries and satisfies our desires in a direct and unified manner:

the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place. (38)

Leaving aside all the nuances for the moment, Freud offers a simple but powerful account of the origin of religious belief. Religious belief emerged because it fulfilled our desires.

Freud's proposal commands interest for a number of reasons. The claim is interesting first simply as an account of the genealogy of religion, a particular story about the natural history of religion. This kind of project attracted the attention of important figures in philosophy, including Hume, Feuerbach, and Marx. Freud's proposal counts as an important (and exquisitely crafted) entry in this tradition.

There is also a more squarely philosophical basis for interest in the Freudian view. Freud's thesis about the origin of religion plays a part in an argument against the rational warrant of religious belief. The argument goes something like the following:

1. Religious belief arises from wish fulfillment; we hold our religious beliefs because they satisfy standing desires.
2. Beliefs about the world that arise from wish fulfillment are not rationally warranted. That's wishful thinking.

Hence, religious belief is not rationally warranted.

Freud himself gestures at this argument. He writes that if we discover the motives which lead to religious doctrines,

our attitude to the problem of religion will undergo a marked displacement. We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who

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<sup>2</sup>The "terror management" theory of religious belief is perhaps the contemporary theory that most closely resembles Freud's account (for discussion see Norenzayan et al. forthcoming).

created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be. (Freud 1927, 42)

Hence, evaluating the prospects for a Freud-style account of religion has big stakes. If such an account is right, it illuminates the natural history of religion, and it also gives us a premise in an important argument against the warrant of religious belief. In what follows, we'll see that Freud's proposal has been roundly criticized, and many of the criticisms hit their target. However, I'll argue that there is good reason to accept a more restricted version of the claim that motivation underlies religious belief.

### **Critique of Freud's Origin Claims**

Despite the renown of Freud's account, his proposal is widely rejected. Of course, part of the explanation here is that Freud's account is tied to psychoanalytic assumptions which psychologists rightly dismiss today. But the problems with Freud's account don't stop with psychoanalysis. The shortcomings of his proposal run somewhat deeper. And the objections come from a number of different quarters. For our purposes, it will suffice to look briefly at some philosophical and anthropological objections to the Freudian account of the origin of religious belief.

Before we look at the critiques, however, it's important to recognize that Freud advances two somewhat different claims about the role of wish fulfillment in religious belief. At some points, when Freud says that religious ideas arise out of wish fulfillment, he is promoting a thesis about the historical origin of religious belief. The thesis is that the creation of religious ideas was a product of wish fulfillment – the individuals who invented the religious doctrines arrived at these doctrines because the doctrines fulfilled their wishes (p. 23). This historical origin claim is at least partly independent of a proposal about the ontogeny of religious belief. According to the ontogenetic claim, individuals who embrace religious views do so out of wish fulfillment (p. 38). Of course the two theses are related, and one can see why Freud pushed the views in tandem; for Freud would maintain that the distant creators of religious doctrines and the contemporary consumers of religious doctrines share the same wishes, and these wishes are fulfilled

by the religious doctrines.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the theses are independent. It's possible, for instance, that the people who created the religious doctrines did so to control the population (as some conspiracy theories of religion hold), but that contemporary theists believe out of wish fulfillment.

In his recent book, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Alvin Plantinga challenges Freud's origin claim in several ways. The first objection simply points to the lack of evidence. Plantinga says that Freud needs to show that "theistic belief really *does* arise from the mechanism of wish-fulfillment." However, "Freud offers no more than the most perfunctory argument here, and one can see why: it isn't easy to see how to argue the point. How would one argue that it is *that* mechanism, wish-fulfillment, rather than some other, that produces religious belief?" (Plantinga 2000, 195). Unless one already embraces the psychoanalytic picture, Freud seems to have no serious argument for his thesis that wish-fulfillment produced religious belief. And, as Plantinga notes, it's not obvious how one could even *get* evidence to support Freud's claim. This charge is especially compelling when we consider Freud's account of the historical origin of religion. Freud maintains that wish-fulfillment is responsible for the genesis of the religious ideas. But the evidence needed to evaluate the origin story is lost to us. We lack the historical records to plumb the minds of the originators of theism.

After drawing attention to the evidential gap in Freud's argument, Plantinga goes on to challenge Freud's ontogenetic proposal that people believe religious doctrines out of wish fulfillment.<sup>4</sup> Plantinga notes that many central religious beliefs are decidedly *not* motivationally attractive: "Much of religious belief . . . is not something that, on the face of it, fulfills your wildest dreams. Thus Christianity (as well as other theistic religions) includes the belief that human beings have sinned, that they merit divine wrath and even damnation, and that they are broken, wretched, in need of salvation" (Plantinga 2000, 195). For many people, Plantinga suggests, even the belief in God isn't motivationally attractive: "many people thoroughly

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<sup>3</sup>Kelby Mason pointed out to me that another reason Freud might have pushed the origin and ontogenetic claims in tandem is that he endorsed the biogenetic law that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

<sup>4</sup>Plantinga might also regard the following objection as applying to Freud's proposal about the historical origin of theism. Plantinga's discussion does not neatly distinguish the origin and ontogenetic claims.

dislike the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient being monitoring their every activity, privy to their every thought, and passing judgment on all they do or think” (Plantinga 2000, 195). Thus, Plantinga charts two sources of disconnect between religious belief and wish fulfillment. Much religious belief is not motivationally attractive; and for some people the very notion of a theistic God is unattractive.

Since Freud claims that all religious doctrines arise from wish fulfillment (p. 40), he seems quite vulnerable to Plantinga’s charge. Many religious doctrines patently do not satisfy any desires we would have, prior to religious commitment. For instance, Christianity is committed to the idea of the trinity, but this does not fulfill any standing wish of agnostics. Nor can Freud blithely dismiss these cases as exceptions and maintain that the doctrines that *do* address our deepest desires are there because they address our deepest desires. For that move is hopelessly unprincipled. Furthermore, there is a familiar explanation for the ontogeny of religious belief that might displace Freud’s account. Most people come to believe in religious doctrines because of testimony from their parents and community. The appeal to testimony is independently required to explain religious diversity. Testimony explains why Christians believe in the trinity and Hindus believe in polytheism. And once we grant that the non-motivationally-attractive elements are acquired through testimony, a similar explanation seems available for how the motivationally attractive elements are acquired.

From an entirely different sector of the study of religion, the anthropology of religion, the Freudian proposal is also spurned. First, when one looks outside of Abrahamic religions, it is apparent that other religions offer immortality and justice without monotheism (Hinduism). Furthermore, many religions simply do not have doctrines securing eternal life or divine justice. As Pascal Boyer makes clear, the anthropological record shows that it’s jejune to reduce religion to wish fulfillment. For, Boyer writes, “in many parts of the world, religion does not really promise that the soul will be saved or liberated and in fact does not have much to say about its destiny. In such places, people just do not assume that moral reckoning determines the fate of the soul. Dead people become ghosts or ancestors” (Boyer 2001, 8). Thus, when we look at the sweep of world religions, Freud’s theory seems thoroughly parochial. Some religions address our wishes for

immortality and justice without invoking God the Father. Other religions do not at all fulfill our wishes for immortality and justice.<sup>5</sup>

There is considerable merit in the foregoing complaints against the Freudian account of religious ideas. Freud's account of how religion emerges from motivation has come to seem rather naïve. But there is another way to defend the idea that motivation plays a key role in religious belief. To explain this will require extending our reach to cultural evolution.

### **Cultural Evolution**

As we've seen, Freud's attempt to give a motivation-based explanation of the history and ontogeny of religious belief faces a buffet of difficulties. However, there is another, weaker, motivation hypothesis to consider. Rather than ask for the origin of cultural items like religious representations, one might try to determine which cultural items are more likely to *survive* in a culture. Such "cultural transmission" stories have been widely discussed for decades (e.g., Dawkins 1976, Dennett 1995). It is not my goal here to review the literature; rather, I want to explore religious representations from within a particular framework in cultural evolution, the *epidemiological* account introduced by Dan Sperber (1996) and taken up by a few colleagues (e.g., Atran 1998, Boyer 1994, 1999, 2001).

The epidemiological approach focuses on a crucial class of cultural items – mental representations. Since our interest here is in religious beliefs, the focus will suit us well. According to Sperber, in trying to evaluate which cultural items (in the form of mental representations) are likely to prevail, one needs to look not only at ecological factors, but also at the details of human psychology. In this section and the next, I want to outline some features of the general epidemiological approach to cultural transmission. I will eventually bring these points to bear on the transmission of religious representations.

One crucial idea behind the epidemiological approach is that if you want to understand cultural transmission, it isn't enough to look at the cultural items themselves. You need to look at human psychology, because

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<sup>5</sup>Boyer uses these facts to undermine the reach of the terror management account of religious belief (2001, pp. 205-7).

you need to see which cultural items are likely to be *attractive* to creatures who have the kind of psychology that we do. Sperber illustrates this by noting that some variants of “Little Red Riding Hood” are more likely to survive than others, because different versions differ in their “attractiveness”:

In the logical space of possible versions of a tale, some versions have a better form: that is, a form seen as being without either missing or superfluous parts, easier to remember, and more attractive. The factors that make for a good form may be rooted in part in universal human psychology and in part in a local cultural context. (Sperber 1996, 108)

What do we need to know about human psychology to know which cultural items will enjoy greater cultural fitness? Epidemiological theorists have mostly focused on *universal* aspects of human psychology. Sperber adopts the view, now prominent in evolutionary psychology, that the mind is composed of a set of modules that are adaptations to the environment. So, there is a module for reasoning about physics, a module for reasoning about psychology, and so forth. Moreover, these modules are species general – every normal member of the species has the modules. Sperber embraces modules as vital forces in cultural transmission: “Mental modules . . . are crucial factors in cultural attraction. They tend to fix a lot of cultural content in and around the cognitive domain the processing of which they specialize in” (Sperber 1996, 113). Similarly, Pascal Boyer’s deployment of the epidemiological model appeals to species universal, but domain specific, cognitive mechanisms. Boyer focuses on a particular cluster of domain specific bodies of information – intuitive physics, intuitive biology, and intuitive psychology. Boyer maintains that all of these should be considered part of basic “intuitive ontology” (Boyer 1994, 1999, 2001).

To understand which cultural items are likely to survive, then, we need to know as much as possible about universal human psychology. The species-general mechanisms are likely to affect attraction and shape the kind of information that we retain. But of course the attractors needn’t be species general. What matters is simply that you know what the attractors are for a given population. So if, for a given population, there is a clear set of shared psychological features that attract certain kinds of representations, that will help us to generate predictions about the direction of cultural evolution for that population.

The idea that cultural evolution can be illuminated by discerning psychological attractors is both plausible and promising. But this still doesn't give us much guidance about how to measure whether one item is more culturally fit than another. How can we test, experimentally, whether a given cultural item is more likely to survive? There are a number of important factors, but one experimental approach rises to the top of the list for both Sperber and Boyer: cultural items are more likely to survive if they are easier to remember. For instance, Sperber writes, "Potentially pertinent psychological factors include the ease with which a particular representation can be memorized" (Sperber 1996, 84; see also Sperber 1996, 62, 73, 74-75). Similarly, Boyer focuses on differences in whether a representation is likely to be recalled as "one aspect that is crucial to differences of cultural survival" (Boyer 2001, 105). Thus the retention test will provide one way of assessing cultural fitness.

### **Transmission and Motivation**

As Sperber and Boyer develop the epidemiological approach, they recommend that to understand cultural transmission, we attend to species-general information-based cognitive mechanisms like intuitive physics and intuitive psychology. However, affect and motivation also provide important sources of cultural attraction (see e.g., Atran 2002; Nichols 2002, 2004). Since the goal here is to reconsider motivational accounts of religious beliefs, I will focus on motivational factors as attractors.

There are general theoretical reasons to suspect that representations that are motivationally attractive will enjoy an edge in cultural transmission. As we saw above, one crucial experimental assay for cultural fitness is the retention test. Items that are better remembered will have enhanced cultural fitness. It's quite plausible that motivationally attractive items would be better remembered than motivationally neutral items. One reason for this is simply that motivation directs attention. We attend to things that are motivationally salient for us. So if a cultural item speaks to our motivational concerns, we are more likely to attend to it; hence we're more likely to remember it.

Motivationally attractive representations enjoy a further advantage in cultural evolution. The social psychology literature on theory-maintenance and theory-change reveals a number of biases that make us more likely

to retain beliefs that are motivationally attractive. We are less likely to recall evidence that leads to an unwanted conclusion, we are less likely to believe evidence that leads to an unwanted conclusion, and we are more likely to use our critical resources to attack undesirable conclusions than conclusions that are not undesirable. For instance in one experiment, men and women were presented with data that indicated at first glance that women tend to have inferior leadership skills, but on more careful inspection, it's clear that the data do not support this conclusion. Women, who are especially motivated to reject the conclusion, were significantly more likely than men to notice that the data did not really indicate that women had inferior leadership skills (Schaller 1992). This is just one study in a large and fascinating literature that indicates that motivation greatly affects which beliefs we are likely to retain (for reviews, see Nisbett & Ross 1980 and Kunda 1999). But the upshot of this is that it will be hard to dislodge motivationally attractive representations.

The foregoing theoretical considerations generate a broad prediction about the course of cultural evolution, the “Motivated Transmission” hypothesis:

MT. Cultural representations that are *motivationally attractive* will be more likely to survive than competing representations that are motivationally (and affectively) neutral.

That is, representations that are motivationally attractive will have greater cultural fitness.<sup>6</sup>

## Sharpening the Hypothesis

### *A plea for history*

We now have a general theoretical reason to think that religious representations, insofar as they are motivationally attractive, will enjoy an edge in

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<sup>6</sup>As with most predictions, this comes with a hefty *ceteris paribus* clause. And one important defeater here is that the prediction doesn't work if the representation is obviously false. So while it might be motivationally attractive for a 500 pound man to believe that he is at a healthy weight, it will likely be obvious to him that he is not. Although this issue can be messy in many domains, it will not be a problem for us. For the kinds of religious representations that we will encounter below would be hard to refute.

cultural fitness. Still, this general theoretical reason is far from fully satisfying. There might be all sorts of reasons why the general advantages of motivationally attractive representations don't operate in religious contexts. To defend a Motivated Transmission account of religion, we will need to do better than these broad brush suggestions.

Most of the previous work on cultural evolution in the epidemiological tradition has focused on anthropology and psychology. However, a more direct approach to evaluating transmission hypotheses is to consult the history. The central claim of a cultural transmission hypothesis is a claim about historical trends – that certain kinds of representations, if introduced, will fare better than others. What we want to investigate here is whether religious representations that are motivationally attractive fare better than other religious representations across time. To confirm such a transmission hypothesis, one needs information about cultural change. Thus, rather than consulting the range of religions on the globe, a more direct way to test the hypothesis is by considering the patterns of historical changes in religious doctrines. By looking at historical patterns we can try to assess whether motivationally attractive doctrines have greater cultural resilience.

Now, from our general hypothesis MT above, we can extract a more specific historical hypothesis about religion, the Motivated Transmission of Religion hypothesis:

MTR. Motivationally attractive religious representations will be more likely to be preserved in successful descendant religions than motivationally neutral elements.

To evaluate this hypothesis, we need to focus on a particular set of historical developments in religion, and we need to determine which representations count as motivationally attractive. I'll focus here on the historical changes in Abrahamic religions, and I will adopt the view that Judaism is ancestral to Christianity, which is ancestral to Islam. Given the influence of Christianity on Islam and the influence of Judaism on Christianity, this ancestral relationship is independently plausible. It's a somewhat trickier matter to determine which religious ideas count as motivationally attractive.

*Motivation*

Although Freud's discussion of the wishes underlying religion is steeped in psychoanalytic theory, some of the wishes to which he adverts plausibly do count as deep wishes. To defend a Motivated Transmission account of religion, we need to divest ourselves of the antiquated psychoanalytic assumptions. So, for instance, Freud's claim that we have an inveterate longing for a father figure has not worn well, and we would do well to distance ourselves from this Freudian idea. However, it is plausible that the desire to escape death and the desire for justice are deep-seated wishes in the human psyche. At any rate, there is good reason to think that these desires burned in our pre-Judaic ancestors. In some of the earliest texts we have, we already find a preoccupation with death and immortality (e.g., *Gilgamesh*) and with justice and righteousness (e.g., *Ludlul Bêl Nîmeqi*). Concerns over death and justice (or at least fairness) also emerge early in childhood (see e.g., Carey 1985; Damon 1977). It's hard to say whether the desires for justice and immortality are, like modules, species universal. But it's quite plausible that most people have these desires, and that this was also the case in the historical populations in which Abrahamic religions developed. That will suffice for our purposes.

Now, however, there is a further issue. How are these desires addressed by Abrahamic religions? As we saw above, Freud claims that our wishes are addressed as follows:

the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place. (38)

One doesn't have to embrace psychoanalysis to agree with Freud that our deep concerns about death and justice are addressed by the religious ideas he recounts. Our concerns are met by the claim that an eternal, omnipotent, benevolent, attentive God will resurrect the dead, punish the unjust and reward the worthy with a blissful everlasting life. Hence, we can suppose in what follows that the elements of this core package

are motivationally attractive. That is, the core package addresses abiding desires for most people.<sup>7</sup>

*History of successes and failures*

Thus far in this section, I've promoted a historical approach to our question, and I've proposed that we allow that there is a core package of motivationally attractive elements in Abrahamic religions. This suggests an obvious way to advert to history to support the motivational hypothesis concerning religion. We can just assess which religions have succeeded. Unfortunately, as we'll see, this simple approach won't be adequate.

A quick glance at the successful religions (in terms of number of adherents) will please the Freudian. For the most successful religions have been the Abrahamic religions that fit Freud's description precisely. Christianity and Islam are by far the most prevalent religions in history. But this still won't be terribly convincing to the opposition. For there are a number of common features of Christianity and Islam, e.g., monotheism and charity.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these elements, rather than the motivational attractiveness, are what drove the dramatic success of Christianity and Islam. There is no easy way to partial out the contributions of monotheism or charity from the contributions of the motivational considerations. The success of Islam and Christianity might also be explained by virtue of non-doctrinal factors like the economic and political powers that happened to be associated with Islam and Christianity. Hence, merely looking at the successes will not provide clear evidence for the motivational thesis.

One way to try to supplement the above approach would be to attempt to deploy something like the comparative method in which one evaluates a hypothesis by consulting both successes and failures. So, we might look at failed descendants of Abrahamic religion. Again initial considerations look promising. Descendants of Abrahamic religions that do not preserve the motivationally attractive elements have not fared well historically. Perhaps the most familiar example for philosophers is the Deistic view that God

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<sup>7</sup>Of course the cluster matters. An omnipotent but malevolent God is not motivationally attractive.

<sup>8</sup>Christianity has characteristically been officially monotheistic, but, as Bob McCauley has pointed out to me, the views of actual Christians are not uniformly monotheistic (see Barrett & Keil 1996).

created the world and let her rip, with no guarantee of an after-life or of divine justice. You probably won't be able to find a Deist church in your home town. That religion just did not have much cultural cachet.

Now, although this might seem encouraging for the motivational enthusiast, it is the most superficial kind of support. For *lots* of descendants of Abrahamic religions fail. Presumably most of the cults that emerge do not survive, even though they might well contain all the motivational elements of the core package above. Again, the problem is that it's difficult to partial off the factors that are important from the factors that aren't. So we can't settle whether it is the motivationally impoverished nature of Deism that explains its cultural feebleness, or whether it is something else, something common to other unsuccessful offshoots of Abrahamic religion.

A better case might be made if we look to the early history of Judaism. According to the extant historical sources (Josephus, the New Testament, and the rabbinical literature), the Pharisees and Sadducees differed over precisely the issues at the heart of the motivational hypothesis. The Sadducees wielded the greatest religious power during the late Second Temple period up until the destruction of the temple in 70 ce. This was the religion of the wealthy and the high priests. They occupied a conservative line, acknowledging the authority only of the "written" Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures) (Josephus, *Antiquities*, xii). The Sadducees did not accept the doctrine of an afterlife (Acts 23: 8, Mark 12: 18) or of divine justice (Josephus, *Jewish War* ii). The Pharisees, by contrast, did endorse these doctrines as central (and as revealed by the "oral" Torah). The Pharisees ultimately prevailed, and the history of subsequent Judaism flows from the Pharisaic tradition. This, of course, is exactly what the MTR hypothesis suggests – the Pharisaic tradition had greater motivational attraction than the Sadducean tradition. Interestingly, Josephus himself hints at a motivational explanation for the success of the Pharisees. He writes that the Pharisees

believe that souls have an immortal rigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again; *on account of which doctrines they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people.* (*Antiquities* xviii, emphasis added)

So the Sadducees, with their motivationally impoverished version of Judaism, were displaced by the Pharisees. This fits perfectly with what the Motivated Transmission theorist predicts. However, as a single case, it looks more like anecdote than evidence for the MTR.

*In search of historical data*

Although the record of successes and failures recounted above fits the MTR hypothesis, the record has serious shortcomings as a source of evidence. This is typical of historical enterprises of course. Historical sciences often have to make the best of what they have, as paleontology richly illustrates. In our case, though, we might get more direct evidence for the MTR hypothesis by looking at what gets preserved in the evolution of a given religious tradition. The core hypothesis as applied to the transmission of religious ideas is that motivationally attractive elements will fare better than nonmotivational elements. To test this, we can trace the evolution of a religion into different religions, tracking which elements are preserved and which elements are dropped. In most cases of cultural evolution, trying to determine, in an unbiased way, the elements of analysis will be enormously difficult. In the case of religious doctrines however, there is an obvious, and powerful, source of evidence: creeds.

Like all historical evidence, creeds have manifest limitations. For one thing, they tend to be short, so they provide a smaller body of evidence than one would like. This can be a serious drawback when it comes to attempting any statistics, since the sample may simply be too small to yield significant results, even if there are fairly large differences. Creeds come with no clear scheme for an internal ranking of the importance of the doctrines. Also, creeds play a more important catechistic role in some religions, e.g., Christianity, than they do in other religions, e.g., Judaism and Islam. On the other hand, creeds offer some striking advantages. They are relatively clear, they typically come with their own individuation pattern, and they are (at least in some cases) explicitly canonical. Furthermore, creeds are also the best candidates for representing a religion's *central* doctrines. Indeed, this is true even of religions in which explicit creeds play little role in indoctrination. So, even though creeds are not widely used for indoctrination in Judaism or Islam, these religions

still have distinctive religious doctrines, and the best place to find explicit statements of these central doctrines will be in creeds.

Now, we need to ask, *which* creeds do we consult for the central religions in the Abrahamic tradition? Fortunately, there is one easy answer here. The Apostles' Creed is utterly canonical for Christianity. This creed has roots back before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and the final form that is known today was probably in place by the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is the central ecumenical creed for Christians. Christians of nearly all denominations accept the tenets of the creed. And it is the most clearly canonical creed in any Abrahamic religion.

Unfortunately, neither Judaism nor Islam has any statement approaching the status of the Apostles' Creed. Historically part of the reason for this is that Christianity had a centralized body that could deliver definitive edicts. There is no Jewish pope, no Islamic Council of Trent. In Judaism, the best candidate for a representative credal statement is Maimonides' 13 Principles, published in 1168. It was, of course, written in full knowledge of the Christian tradition; however, Maimonides maintained that it represented the traditional beliefs of Judaism. Although the 13 Principles is not an *official* creed of Judaism, it is more widely known and accepted than any other contender.

In the Muslim tradition, no statement reaches the status even of Maimonides' 13 Principles. There are, of course, many creeds in the Islamic tradition (see e.g., Wensinck 1932; Watt 1994), but none has achieved singular prominence. Furthermore, the extant creeds often contain elements that are divisive within Islam. I hope to avoid such controversy as much as possible by relying on the list of core doctrines presented by the Islamic scholar W. Montgomery Watt in his treatment of Islamic creeds (Watt 1986).

Now that our primary source of evidence about religious doctrines has been described, we can formulate a sharper prediction. When we consult the credal doctrines of a religion, the MTR suggests that we will find that the motivationally attractive doctrines of an ancestral religion are differentially preserved into its descendant religion. This generates two different predictions, depending on the direction of one's historical gaze:

*Forward-looking prediction:*

Motivationally attractive doctrines in a creed will be more likely to be preserved into a descendant religion than other doctrines in the creed.

*Backward-looking prediction:*

The creed of a descendant religion will differentially preserve motivationally attractive doctrines from the ancestor religion. That is, the credal statements that agree with the ancestral religion will be more likely to be motivationally attractive.<sup>9</sup>

Confirming either prediction would support our hypothesis. But having both forms will provide us with greater flexibility in exploiting the creeds as evidence.

To avoid misunderstanding, I should stress that *of course* there are lots of forces involved in the historical unfolding of religious beliefs. Politics, military strategies, and historical accidents all presumably played a role in the development of religious ideas. The motivated transmission hypothesis merely proposes that motivational factors will be one discernible force within the din. If our predictions are borne out, that will support the idea that motivational forces did indeed play an important role in the cultural evolution of religious ideas.

### **Testing the Hypothesis**

To assess our predictions, we need to determine which doctrines are motivationally attractive and whether the doctrines are shared with the cognate religions. My coding procedure for this was straightforward (see appendix for full codings). Any elements that belonged to the cluster of motivationally attractive elements taken from Freud above (section 5.2) were coded as motivationally attractive, as were any other elements that are plausibly widely attractive; otherwise the doctrines were coded as not

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<sup>9</sup>Although it will not affect any of the analyses below, there is one complication with the backward-looking prediction. If there are motivationally attractive doctrines in a creed that do not correspond to any element in the ancestral religion, those doctrines would need to be excluded from the analysis. For the Motivated Transmission theorist would happily admit that successful descendant religions might add *new* motivationally attractive doctrines.

motivationally attractive.<sup>10</sup> Each doctrine was also evaluated for whether it was part of the ancestral or descendant religion. For the most part the answers were obvious; a few cases required judgment calls (again, see appendix for details).<sup>11</sup> One other important feature of the coding is that in a few cases, a credal statement included elements that pulled clearly in two directions. For instance, in the Apostles' Creed, the principle of divine justice is yoked with the idea that Jesus will be the judge. For both Judaism and Islam, divine justice is crucial, but Jesus will not be the arbiter. In these kinds of cases, the credal item was split into two claims (see appendix).

Even a casual glance at the credal differences between Judaism and Christianity and between Christianity and Islam reveals clear trends of exactly the sort that MTR predicts.<sup>12</sup> In each case all of the motivationally attractive doctrines are shared, and many of the other doctrines are not shared. Furthermore, if we do some simple statistical analysis, we will see that this pattern is statistically significant.

### *Judaism and Christianity*

Using Maimonides' 13 Principles, our forward-looking prediction is confirmed. Motivationally attractive elements were more likely to be part of the descendant religion (Christianity) than the motivationally neutral elements ( $\chi^2(1, N = 14) = 7.778$ ,  $p < .01$ , one-tailed,  $\Phi^2 = .56$ ).

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<sup>10</sup>Matters are somewhat delicate here. It's likely that, for believers, it is motivationally important for them that *all* of their religious beliefs be true. So, if you already believe that God spoke to Moses, it will be motivationally attractive to you to retain this belief. This might lead one to worry that it will be impossible to investigate the role of motivation in the cultural transmission of religious beliefs. However, there is a relatively principled way to cleave off the kinds of core desires that Freud promoted. We can focus on doctrines that would be motivationally attractive to an agnostic. An agnostic would assign no prior attractiveness to whether God spoke to Moses, but she would likely assign prior attractiveness to the doctrine that immortality awaits the worthy and that one's past sins can be forgiven.

<sup>11</sup>Even if my judgment calls are off (which is certainly possible), the manifest differences to be discussed below would not be erased.

<sup>12</sup>Given the important influences Christianity had on Islam, I'm focusing on the comparison between Christianity and Islam, and not the comparison between Judaism and Islam. But a similar pattern exists between Judaism and Islam, as is evident from inspecting the Islamic doctrines from Watt (1986).

Using the Apostles' Creed, we find that the backward-looking prediction is also confirmed. The credal statements in the Apostles' Creed that are shared with Judaism are more likely to be motivationally attractive ( $\chi^2(1, N = 13) = 9.479$ ,  $p < .01$ , one-tailed,  $\Phi^2 = .73$ ).

### *Christianity and Islam*

To compare Christianity and Islam, we can use the Apostles' Creed to test our forward-looking prediction. And the result is again a significant difference. The motivationally attractive doctrines in the Apostles' Creed were more likely to be part of Islam than the other doctrines ( $\chi^2(1, N = 13) = 6.964$ ,  $p < .01$ , one-tailed,  $\Phi^2 = .53$ ).

Using Watt's list of fundamental Islamic doctrines, our backward-looking prediction is also confirmed. The credal elements that are shared with Christianity are more likely to be motivationally attractive ( $\chi^2(1, N = 24) = 14.505$ ,  $p < .001$ , one tailed,  $\Phi^2 = .60$ ).

Although all of the differences are statistically significant, perhaps even more important is the (considerable) magnitude of the effects. The MTR hypothesis seems to be an extremely powerful predictor of the character of religious evolution.

### *Intra-Christian differences*

Of course, Christianity has had significant outgrowths apart from Islam. The emergence of Protestantism and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormonism) are two of the most important cases in the last 500 years. In these cases, our reliance on creeds breaks down. For the Apostles' Creed is wholly embraced by most Protestant religions, and it's almost entirely accepted by the Mormon Church as well. Hence, our simple strategy will not serve us here. However, it's worth noting that the same bias for preserving motivationally attractive doctrines is quite apparent if one considers the catalogue of differences between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics and Protestants agree that the faithful go to Heaven where justice is served. Disagreements come over whether the Eucharist is genuinely the body of Christ, over the role of confession, over baptism rites, over the marriage of ministers, and

so on.<sup>13</sup> For Mormons, the differences go deeper. Mormons diverge on the nature of the Trinity, the existence of contemporary prophets, the continuing nature of revelation, the ontogeny of divinity, and the received body of scripture. Nonetheless, the motivationally attractive doctrines that characterize Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam persevere in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Although the MTR hypothesis stresses the cultural strength of motivationally attractive religious doctrines, it does not propose that other religious doctrines are inconsequential to believers. Religious disputes frequently get waged over precisely the doctrines that are not motivationally attractive. Christians and Muslims have often been deeply divided despite their agreement on the fundamental motivationally attractive elements of the Abrahamic tradition. So non-motivationally attractive religious doctrines are taken very seriously by the devout. Nonetheless, the point of the foregoing is that the motivationally attractive elements get differentially preserved across the historical sweep.

### **Meeting the Complaints**

The preceding section attempted to support a claim that Freud also tried to support, namely, that theists believe what they do because of the operation of motivational forces in human history. The cultural evolution of religion seems to be driven by, *inter alia*, our desires for justice and immortality. If so, this might still contribute to an argument against the warrant of religious belief. However, I won't try to defend such an argument here. I would, however, like to conclude by revisiting the complaints against Freud's account. For I think that the approach taken here evades these complaints.

As we saw, Plantinga charges that there is no evidence that religious belief arises from motivation. Although the historical evidence recounted

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<sup>13</sup>They also differ on whether justification is reached through works or faith alone. But it's not obvious that one of these doctrines has significantly greater motivational attractiveness than the other. Rather more challenging is the denial of free will in Calvinism. The denial of free will is, I take it, motivationally *unattractive*. This is an interesting case to bring against the MTR. But it's worth noting that, at least in American religious history, Calvinism did not fare well when pitted against Protestant denominations that endorse free will (see e.g., Slone 2004, 93-6). Moreover, it's important to keep in mind that the MTR is a prediction about trends. It can't be overthrown by a counterexample.

here does not provide direct evidence for the Freudian idea that religious belief arises from motivation, the fact that motivationally attractive doctrines are differentially preserved down the ages does provide evidence for an important connection between motivation and religious beliefs. In particular, motivation apparently plays a considerable role in shaping the evolution of religious belief. Nonetheless, it remains true that there is no evidence here that religious belief has its historical origin in motivation. On this point, a transmission theorist might sensibly agree that we lack the evidence to settle debates about the historical origin of religious ideas.

Plantinga also maintains that the Freudian view that religious belief emerges from motivation is threatened by the fact that many religious beliefs are not motivationally attractive. The Motivated Transmission account can, of course, acknowledge that many religious beliefs are not motivationally attractive. Indeed, the presence of doctrines that aren't motivationally attractive plays an important role in evaluating the Motivated Transmission hypothesis. In addition, Plantinga objects that many people don't like the idea of God. Even, he might add, some theists do not like the idea of God. Although this might be a problem for Freud, it is clearly not a problem for the Motivated Transmission account. We can perfectly well allow that some people do not find it attractive that there might be a benevolent omniscient God who secures justice and immortality. The MTR account need not demand that the cluster of doctrines be *universally* motivationally attractive. It will suffice if the doctrines are motivationally attractive to most people in the focal population. And it seems quite plausible that the idea that a benevolent god secures justice and immortality is motivationally attractive to most people.

Finally, let's consider the problems posed for Freudian accounts by the range of religions. It's true that some religions address our wishes for immortality and justice without adopting monotheism. But this in no way vitiates the Transmission hypothesis. For in the context of cultural evolution, you work with what you have. And in the Abrahamic tradition, you have monotheism. In a similar spirit, the Motivated Transmission account need not claim that *all* religions will have the motivationally attractive features. For again, the forces of cultural transmission work with the ideas that arise in the culture, and the idea of divinely directed immortality and justice might not arise in every culture. The Motivated

Transmission theory only claims that when such motivationally attractive ideas emerge in a religion, they will enjoy enhanced cultural fitness.

## Conclusion

The idea that religious beliefs derive from our deepest desires has been both one of the most captivating and one of the most widely assailed proposals in the natural history of religion. The epidemiological method in cultural evolution offers a new way to approach this hoary issue. There are general theoretical reasons to expect that motivationally attractive representations will enjoy greater cultural fitness. I've tried to provide evidence for this pattern in the history of religion by relying on religious creeds as historical evidence. Creeds constitute relatively crude evidence, but this crude evidence certainly indicates that motivation plays a powerful role in the cultural evolution of religious ideas. Although the historical case has focused on religious representations, the evidence also supports the broader claim that motivation plays an important role in driving cultural evolution. If the evolution of religious ideas is representative, then we have reason to believe that motivationally attractive representations do indeed enjoy enhanced resilience in the irregular march of cultural history.

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## Appendix

### *Creeds with coding*

Coding scheme:

M+	Motivationally attractive
M-	Not motivationally attractive
J+	Shared with traditional Judaism
J-	Not shared with traditional Judaism
C+	Shared with Christianity
C-	Not shared with Christianity
I+	Shared with Islam
I-	Not shared with Islam

### *Maimonides' 13 Principles*

1. God exists	M+C+
2. God is a perfect unity (not trinity)	M-C-
3. God is incorporeal and has no physical properties (e.g. no speaking)	M-C-
4. God exists for eternity/everlasting	M+C+
5. God alone is the proper object of prayers (no saints, etc.)	M-C-
6. Revelation through his prophets	M-C+
7. The preeminence of Moses among the Prophets	M-C-
8. God's law given on Mount Sinai	M-C+
9. The immutability of the Torah as God's Law	M-C-
10. God's knows the actions and intentions of people	M+C+
11a. Divine justice	M+C+
11b. Justice according to following the Torah	M-C-
12. The Messiah is yet to come	M-C-
13. Resurrection of the dead	M+C+

### *Apostles' Creed*

1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth	M+J+I+
2. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord	M-J-I-
3. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary	M-J-I+
4. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried	M-J+I-

5. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again	M-J-I-
6. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father	M-J-I-
7a. Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead	M-J-I-
7b. Divine justice	M+J+I+
8. I believe in the Holy Spirit	M-J-I+
9. the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints	M-J-I-
10. the forgiveness of sins	M+J+I+
11. the resurrection of the body	M+J+I+
12. and the life everlasting	M+J+I+

*Main Islamic Doctrines, Watt 1986*

1. God is one; he neither begets nor is begotten	M-C-
2. God exists	M+C+
3. God is eternal/everlasting	M+C+
4. God is different from created things; not a body or a substance So God cannot suffer	M-C-
5. God will be seen by the faithful in the world to come	M-C+
6. God is eternally omnipotent, omniscient	M+C+
7. Koran is speech of God	M-C-
8. God's will is supreme and always effective	M+C+
9. Man's acts are created by God but are nevertheless properly attributed to man. They proceed from a power in the man, but this power is created by God	M+C+
10. God is characterized by active attributes such as creating and giving sustenance	M+C+
11. Only those names (or attributes) are applicable to God which are to be found in the Koran and sound traditions	M-C-
12. The questioning by Munkar and Nakir are realities	M-C-
13. God will judge all men on the last day	M+C+
14. Certain persons, notably Mohammed will be permitted by God to intercede	M-C-
15. Paradise and hell already exist and will continue to exist eternally	M+C+
16. Prayers for the dead are advantageous to them	M+C+
17a. God has sent prophets	M-C+
17b. Mohammed is the most excellent prophet	M-C-
18. Prophets are preserved from sin by God	M-C-

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|---|------|
| 19. The best men after the prophets are Abu Bakr. . .                                 | M-C- |
| 20. No companion of Muhammad is mentioned except<br>for good                          | M-C- |
| 21. Unbelief does not necessarily follow from sin                                     | M+C+ |
| 22. Faith is knowing in the heart, confessing with the tongue<br>and performing works | M-C+ |
| 23. Faith and belief are due to God's guidance  | M-C- |

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