**Religion Promotes a Love for Thy Neighbour: But How Big is the Neighbourhood?**

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**Abstract**

The term ‘prosocial’ has often been taken to mean ‘nice’ or ‘neighbourly’, but many acts that further ingroup interests are hostile and aggressive towards outgroups. According to Norenzayan et al., religion’s ability to foster social cohesion *within* religious groups has been a key factor in the human transition to complex societies. But what are the prospects for non-parochial ‘religious prosociality’?

*“…love thy neighbour as thyself...”*

(e.g., Leviticus 19:18)

*“When Joshua killed twelve thousand heathen in a day and gave thanks to the Lord afterwards by carving the ten commandments in stone, including the phrase ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ he was not being hypocritical”*

~ *Ridley (1996, p. 192)*

The work of Ara Norenzayan and his colleagues on the evolution and psychology of ‘prosocial religions’ impressively integrates theory and data from multiple disciplines, including economics, anthropology, history, evolutionary biology and social psychology. Although this is in many respects a rich and fertile approach, the fact that notions of ‘religious prosociality’ differ across disciplines can give rise to serious conceptual confusions.

In an influential review, Norenzayan and Shariff (2008, p. 58) defined ‘religious prosociality’ as “the hypothesis that religions facilitate costly behaviors that benefit other people.” Although they noted that such behaviours can produce victims as well as beneficiaries, their focus on nice, ‘neighbourly’ aspects such as generosity and trust was consistent with a standard social psychological conception of ‘prosociality’ (Batson & Powell, 2003). Subsequent authors (e.g., Preston, Ritter & Hernandez, 2010; Galen, 2012) have reinforced this usage, contrasting religion’s ‘prosocial’ effects with its ‘antisocial’ or ‘nonprosocial’ effects, the latter including aggressive and prejudicial behaviours. Thus evidence that participants passing a Christian landmark express more negative attitudes toward Christian outgroups than those passing a civic landmark (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson & Finkle, 2012) has been taken as evidence *against* the religious prosociality hypothesis (Galen, 2012).

This might have less serious consequences theoretically were it not for Norenzayan et al’s cultural evolutionary argument. According to Norenzayan et al., the advent of cultural notions that intertwine the ‘supernatural’ with the ‘prosocial’ has been a key factor in the human transition from small-scale, kin-based groups to complex large-scale societies. On this view, the ‘religious prosociality’ hypothesis is not the hypothesis that religion promotes indiscriminate sharing and caring, but rather the hypothesis that religion fosters social cohesion *within* religious groups – favouring their “stability, survival, and expansion, at the expense of less successful rivals” (Norenzayan, 2013, p. 30). As the current target article makes clear, Norenzayan et al. view ‘prosocial religions’ as religious groups that encourage cooperation among their adherents, and – when intergroup threat is perceived – *hostility and aggression towards out-groups*.

From this perspective, it is no paradox that the holy books of the two most dominant ‘prosocial’ religions, Christianity and Islam – whose adherents include the majority of the world’s people (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015) – contain numerous exhortations to violence against outgroup members. As unpalatable as it may seem, even the barbaric treatment of outgroup members by groups such as ISIS/DAESH is not necessarily ‘antisocial’ on this conception. Indeed, aggression, murder and even genocide can be viewed as prosocial acts insofar as they facilitate success in intergroup competition and conflict (McKay & Whitehouse, 2014). By contrast, a paradigmatically antisocial act might be a cyber attack on social institutions carried out for mere personal satisfaction, rather than in the service of some group cause.

So, does the evidence indicate that religiously-motivated altruism is always parochial, i.e., preferentially directed toward ingroup members? Interestingly, several lines of recent evidence suggest otherwise. Reddish, Bulbulia, & Fischer (2013) found that social synchrony*,* a key feature of many religious rituals, evoked cooperation with both ingroup members (with whom the synchronous action was performed) *and* members of a non-performance group. Meanwhile, Everett, Haque and Rand (2015) found that religious participants gave significantly more money to other players in an economic game than did atheist participants – irrespective of whether the recipients were co-religionists or atheists. In fact, only the atheists in this study discriminated between religious and atheistic recipients, transferring marginally more money toatheistrecipients.

Do such findings count against Norenzayan et al’s cultural evolutionary story? Not necessarily. In the case of the synchrony study, cooperation with outgroup members may represent a spillover effect. That is, it may be that synchronous behaviours promote generalized cooperative sentiment, ordinarily applied toward co-religionists in the immediate performance vicinity but here – in the artificial context of the experiment – extended also to outgroup members. As for Everett et al., one possibility is that as prosocial religions grow and prosper, the decidedly parochial mores of their initial manifestations transmute into more benign, universal forms, forms that contemporary adherents adopt. According to Hartung (1995), whereas the biblical context of the injunction to ‘love thy neighbour’ clearly indicates that one’s neighbour is a fellow ingroup member, most contemporary Jews and Christians view the law as applying to everybody, i.e., *everybody* is ‘thy neighbour’.

For Hartung, attempts to present religious in-group morality as universal morality are disingenuous, defying the clear intent of the texts upon which such moralities are based. As he documents, certain religious texts (e.g., Maimonides' Codes) have been “strategically mistranslat[ed]” to obscure the parochial intent of the original variants (e.g., replacing the words ‘single Israelite’ with ‘human being’). While we understand the impulse to expose the parochial underbelly of prosocial religions, we should also be exploring ways of making the ideals of universalistic prosociality achievable (Whitehouse 2013a, 2013b). The interesting research question is whether certain elements of the universal religious repertoire (e.g., notions of hell; kinship cues) are especially geared toward motivating parochial as opposed to universal conceptions of morality. If so, do these mechanisms exhibit plasticity such that, for example, religiously motivated ‘prosociality’ is more parochial in the presence of outgroup threat and more universalist in conditions of ‘existential security’? We hope that future research will elucidate the prospects for harnessing the various cognitive and cultural mechanisms that Norenzayan et al. discuss in the service of implementing a more universally applicable conceptualisation of ‘prosociality’, in which the ‘neighbourhood’ of ‘love thy neighbour’ expands without limit.

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