

PREFACE

A Modern Evolutionary Approach to History of Religion Studies

Every major religion is a branch of a complex evolutionary tree of ideological diversification. This tree involves many broadly held traditions that have been shaped over time by cultural selection. Countless ideological branches have evolved. Some of them have expanded and continued to diversify, while others have drifted to extinction. Religions have historically been a source of human social cohesion as well as an accelerant of intercultural conflict. A better understanding of how different major religious belief systems are historically interrelated, and the reasons for their diversification, could increase our mutual understanding and respect for each other as members of the same species.

Religions account for only one aspect of human culture. It is one, however, that has had a profound effect on the social development of our species. Religion has sometimes enhanced empathic and altruistic behavior in humans as well as aided in the growth of literacy, writing, and other beneficial aspects of human culture. It has inspired some of humanity's greatest works of art, music, and literature. It was responsible for the early development of higher education and for most of medicine and healing until the twentieth century. However, people have also used religion to inflame deep-seated intercultural conflict and violence. Understanding the broader interconnected histories of religions, and developing a greater tolerance of ideological diversity, may be critical to the survival of our species through the twenty-first century.

The study of religion's complex history has often been contentious and partisan. Here I examine the evolutionary history of major groups of religions in an *agnostic* context. For more detailed discussion of various points touched on briefly

in the chapters of this book, there are boldface, parenthetical references to **Notes** throughout the text. These notes are keyed to more extensive discussions (sometimes several pages in length) located in the back of this book for readers who want more depth on one or more of these points. For example, the *agnostic* approach (just mentioned) is discussed in more detail in **Note PrA**. A glossary at the back of this book defines how I use certain terms that may have variable meanings elsewhere. Consistency and clarity in terminology is key to any study as broad as this one.

In the first two chapters, I introduce certain tenets of *classification* and *evolutionary process theory* to make a case for how it can apply to the study of cultural ideologies by social scientists. I support social scientists who are today attempting to reincorporate the use of comparativism and evolutionary perspective back into studies of human culture, after some badly misdirected colonialist attempts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In chapters 3 through 11, I explore the broad evolutionary relationships among the ideologies of the world's major Organized Religions (explanation of the use of capitalization to follow). I also present simplified hypotheses about how these ideological variants are historically interrelated. My intended presentational context takes a nonpartisan look at the history and diversification of supernatural belief systems. There is no scientific way to know which such systems, if any, are "correct." Advocating for one particular religion or another, or for atheism, is not my goal. If anything, this book advocates for greater tolerance of diversity among belief systems (pluralism). I use the terms *religion* and *supernaturalism* interchangeably, defining this aspect of culture simply as the traditional belief in a realm or spiritual force beyond the physical world. I define *Organized Religion* as a more formalized version that involves institutionalized doctrine, rituals, or practice. *Religion* is a notoriously difficult and controversial concept to define.¹ It is primarily an anthropological term, not a theological one.²

Most branches of what I term *Organized Religion* in this book have been covered in much greater detail by specialists of particular religions. Here I have greatly simplified the characterization of each branch, emphasizing general ideologies (those parts of religion that evolve and diversify) supplemented with contemporaneous written historical records of diversification wherever possible. Collectively, this facilitates the study of broad patterns. I am more interested in the forest than the trees, so to speak. However, there is one type of metaphorical tree I use extensively throughout this book: *phylogenetic trees*. Such trees are simplified diagrams of historical diversification and interrelationships. They are used most often by evolutionary biologists to express historical relationships among different groups. (The use of phylogenetic trees is discussed further in **Note PrB**). The phylogenetic trees in chapters 3 through 11 are hypotheses of how the major named branches of Organized Religion discussed in those chapters are historically interrelated. The tree at

the beginning of chapter 12 (the summary chapter) is a hypothesis of how all of the trees in this book fit together. When group names are used formally (e.g., Organized Religion), they are capitalized as proper nouns to distinguish them from their vernacular usage elsewhere.

As an evolutionary biologist and systematist for more than forty years, I have made considerable efforts to emphasize that modern evolutionary studies are no longer subjective searches for ladders of “progress” or universal “improvements.” Evolution is not necessarily a qualitatively progressive process, nor does it follow predetermined goals. There is no universal pinnacle for evolution. It is simply the process of change and diversification over time: history in the making. Evolutionary research today focuses on deriving hypotheses of interrelationship among different groups, based on historical records and shared, hypothetically derived characteristics (**Note PrC**). A comparative, modern evolutionary approach provides a more inclusive understanding of diversity and historical relationships. It can provide a broader and deeper scientific perspective to studies of cultural history, much like it does for studies of natural history. I broadly synthesize the work of many historians and scientists here. I agree with E. O. Wilson in his assessment of where we are today in the modern information age: “We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.”³

All year dates given in this book conform to the *Common Era* (BCE/CE) system. About forty different calendar systems are used in the world today. Many are specific to particular religions. Just to name a few, year AH 1 (the Islamic calendar) is roughly equivalent to year AD 622 (the Christian Gregorian calendar), year 1166 BE (the Buddhist calendar), and year AM4383 (the Jewish or Hebrew calendar). The Common Era system is used here, because it is currently the world’s most widely used calendar system. Although the Common Era system is numerically equivalent to the Christian Gregorian system, it uses the terms *Before Common Era* (BCE) and *Common Era* (CE) to secularize the Christian terminology of *Before Christ* (BC) and *Anno Domini* (AD).

And so, we begin . . .

