

BOOK REVIEW**How religion evolved and why it endures**

By Robin Dunbar. 2022. ISBN 0241431786

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Evolution and religion are not often tackled together by the scientific community. As evolutionary science continues to gain momentum, Robin, most famously known for the Dunbar number of 150 (the suggested cognitive limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships), attempts to make the case 'why believing might be good for us'. Recently, the World Psychiatric Association, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and others have adopted a stance on spirituality and religion and its importance in mental health. Although for many mental health professionals, spirituality and religion are often neglected aspects of the patient interview and formulation.

In this book, Dunbar offers a perspective into if and how religion (both ritual practice and belief) and religiosity may be beneficial not only at the level of the individual but have more substantive benefits for society also. This unique take on the combination of religion and evolutionary science compels reflection on its impact on current psychiatric practice. It offers to represent a balanced, but more importantly a 'useful' perspective in which the conversation can progress to understand the utility religion has in today's world and in our patients.

Dunbar chooses to take a Darwinian approach to religion, referring to it 'as much subject to the processes of Darwinian evolution as any other biological or cultural phenomenon'. Choosing to answer *three of the four* of 'Tinbergen's Four Whys' (named after 20th-century biologist Nikolaas Tinbergen, are complementary categories of explanations for animal behaviour), he retains a measured approach throughout the book, in guiding us from prehistoric ancient times to current religions. In a refreshing take on religion, Dunbar adopts an evolutionary lens and dispassionate stance when evaluating and charting its history. This book does not cover the content of the religion or politics of the time but offers a fresh perspective through neurobiology and psychology via the social brain hypothesis. It seeks to answer the 'seeming universality' of religion, the persistence of religious belief in largely secular countries, and why religions tend to fragment over time. Dunbar claims group-level selection or *mutualism* plays a defining role in the formation and fragmentation of religion, returning often to a wider definition of religion being 'severally and jointly true'.

In the first chapter, Dunbar guides us through the historical development of religions and approaches used to study religion. It is here he makes clear demarcation of the book's conspicuous lack of a theological focus. In the subsequent two chapters, he reveals claims of why religious belief can be beneficial and why humans are predisposed to religion using the 'mystical stance'. Here, Dunbar goes on to make the case that the substantive benefit of religion lies at the societal level in bonding of communities to function more effectively for its individual members.

The fourth chapter details the natural limit that seems to occur with human communities (approximately 150 based on Dunbar's research) and eloquently describes the implication this has for the size

of religions and congregations. The fifth chapter builds on the psychological explanation for the limits to the sizes of these social groups, particularly emphasizing the neurobiological mechanisms of social bonding centring on mentalizing and high-order intentionality.

The sixth chapter examines the neuropsychological mechanisms that underpin rituals and strengthen community bonding. Returning with this framework of understanding back to prehistory, in Chapter 7 we arrive at when exactly a religious predisposition in humans is likely to have evolved. Moving from animist religions forward to the Neolithic Era, Chapter 8 describes a 'series of demographic shocks' that ultimately led to the religions we recognize today. In reference to the rate of violent mortality increasing as living group size increases, Dunbar makes the claim 'organised religions seem to have been part of the machinery used to keep the lid on fractiousness so as to allow large communities to exist'.

Finally, expanding on why religions have a tendency to fragment, in Chapters 9 and 10, Dunbar examines cults and sects and to what extent charismatic leaders have played a role in the development of religion. Here, Dunbar deftly provides answers in the form of processes of social bonding and the nature of charismatic leaders being the cause of schisms and divisions among religions.

Across the 10 chapters, Dunbar elegantly presents his claims and theories with scientific evidence across fields such as neuropsychology and neurobiology. This is an articulate, accessible and logical text that represents nearly two decades of work by Dunbar and his research group. Where appropriate, this evolutionary perspective on religion allows the clinician to confidently incorporate religiosity in their formulations. The ubiquitous nature of religion and spirituality means it is likely to be of interest to clinicians from all fields and at different levels of experience.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Gurjot Brar: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Henry O'Connell:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

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