



Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society

By David Sloan Wilson



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One of the great intellectual battles of modern times is between evolution and religion. Until now, they have been considered completely irreconcilable theories of origin and existence. David Sloan Wilson's *Darwin's Cathedral* takes the radical step of joining the two, in the process proposing an evolutionary theory of religion that shakes both evolutionary biology and social theory at their foundations.

The key, argues Wilson, is to think of society as an organism, an old idea that has received new life based on recent developments in evolutionary biology. If society is an organism, can we then think of morality and religion as biologically and culturally evolved adaptations that enable human groups to function as single units rather than mere collections of individuals? Wilson brings a variety of evidence to bear on this question, from both the biological and social sciences. From Calvinism in sixteenth-century Geneva to Balinese water temples, from hunter-gatherer societies to urban America, Wilson demonstrates how religions have enabled people to achieve by collective action what they never could do alone. He also includes a chapter considering forgiveness from an evolutionary perspective and concludes by discussing how all social organizations, including science, could benefit by incorporating elements of religion.

Religious believers often compare their communities to single organisms and even to insect colonies. Astoundingly, Wilson shows that they might be literally correct. Intended for any educated reader, *Darwin's Cathedral* will change forever the way we view the relations among evolution, religion, and human society.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

God or evolution? Though the debate about our origins has swirled in epic controversy since Darwin's time, David Sloan Wilson bravely blends these two contentious theories. This has been tried before, of course, mainly by religious intellectuals. What makes *Darwin's Cathedral* stand out is that Wilson does not pursue the classic "intelligent design" argument (evolution is God's hand at work), but instead argues that religion is evolution at work.

Wilson sees religion as a complex organism with "biological" functions. He argues that the social cohesiveness of religion makes it analogous to a beehive or a human body--and, in fact, religious believers sometimes employ these metaphors. He writes, "Thinking of a religious group as like an organism encourages us to look for adaptive complexity.... Mechanisms are required that are often awesome in their sophistication." To Wilson, therein lies the astonishing complexity of religion, just as in the biological world.

Following Wilson's argument requires understanding the rudiments of evolutionary biology; a smattering of theology, history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology is helpful, too. But the reasoning isn't as challenging as Wilson warns in the introduction. For educated readers, it's an accessible book.

In just 260 pages, Wilson can't begin to do justice to the broad swath of intellectual work he's cut out for himself. And ultimately, the book's main failing is its simplicity. In addition, his approach to religion is so clearly an outsider's that he is unlikely to win many converts. Adaptive-mechanistic explanations of forgiveness and altruism may be intriguing to the atheist in the ivory tower, but they are likely to elicit little more than a bemused and passing interest from believers. --*Eric de Place*

From Library Journal

Viewing religion from an evolutionary perspective, Wilson (biology and anthropology, Binghamton Univ.) argues that religious belief and other symbolic systems are closely connected to reality in that they are a powerful force in motivating adaptive behaviors. Disconnecting religion from its reliance on supernatural agents as a defining principle, he posits human religious groups as adaptive organisms wherein processes like group selection, evolutionary pressures, and moral systems come into play, offering a new avenue for interpretive insights. To his credit, Wilson looks for a middle ground in this complex confluence of biology, sociology, anthropology, and religion: "I think group selection can explain much about religion but by no means all." He depends heavily on Darwinian theory, sociologists like Rodney Stark, and symbolic thinkers like Emile Durkheim and Terrence Deacon. He ultimately argues for the power of symbolic thinking as a sophisticated adaptive advantage alongside factual thinking. Wilson's readers should be prepared for a tightly argued, highly academic yet satisfying read. Sandra Collins, Duquesne Univ. Lib., Pittsburgh

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Review

"Darwin's Cathedral is a masterpiece of clear thinking and even clearer writing. It is such a joy to read an important original contribution to science such as Wilson makes here, that can be read and valued by both professional and general readers. Darwin's Cathedral will go down as one of the classic treatises on the study of religion, alongside those produced by William James, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud, only Wilson's thesis has the added advantage of being scientifically testable." - Michael Shermer, author of *How We Believe*, Editor-in-Chief of *Skeptic* magazine, columnist for *Scientific American*

Users Review

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