

Morality and Mind in Early Christianity

www.religionandcognition.com/courses/morality

Course description

It has been long observed that a link exists between morality and religion, yet the exact nature of their relation has not been clarified until the present day. Do humans behave morally because they are religious? Or did morality come first and caused belief in moral gods? Recent work on social cognition and morality proposes interesting new answers to these age-old questions. Cognitive research on cooperation, altruism, and morality has direct implications for the study of religion and the understanding of early Christianity. In this course we will focus on issues of morality and mind in early Christian religion.

Humans are social animals. Our evolutionary past has equipped us with capacities of elementary social cognition (such as imitation, joint attention, and joint action), as well as with higher social abilities (such as empathy, altruism, and cheater detection). According to Pascal Boyer, moral intuitions that originally developed to safeguard cooperation underlie belief in moral gods, who have full access to socially strategic information. Such a view of God is reflected in different biblical sources: God examines people's "kidneys" and sees people's evil or good intentions.

In subsequent meetings, we will address various aspects of social cognition and examine how they influenced the formation of early Christian traditions. For example, empathy and the theory of mind (the ability to think about what other people think and feel) played an important role in the development of ideas about afterlife and post-mortem punishment in hell.

Instead of asking about the contribution of social cognition to religion, some authors argue for the decisive role of religious faith in the evolution of humankind. We will also become acquainted with the position of scholars who pursue such research perspectives: e.g. David Sloan Wilson, Joseph Bulbulia, and Richard Sosis. Relying on the work of these authors, we will ask about the particular kind of moral reasoning that emerged in early Christianity. Understanding the radical ethos of some early Christians requires an approach that moves beyond the notion of cooperation, and deals with altruism as a behavior seeking other people's benefit. Learning some game theory will help us in understanding the significance of this aspect of Christian morality.

In the final part of the course, we will examine the effect of early Christian moral attitudes on the formation of social networks. Sociologist Mark Granovetter has shown that weak social ties (such as connec-

tions among acquaintances) are crucial for the spread of information in society. In early Christianity, a number of pro-social attitudes helped the formation of such ties, including the participation of women, the practice of charity, and the entertainment of visitors – as attested by the Pauline epistles and the Didache. Due to these factors, early Christianity developed a social network structure that enabled the successful cooperation of quite diverse social and ethnic groups, facilitated the emergence and circulation of competing theological views (eventually leading to the selection of cognitive optimal variants), and strengthened the resistance of the Church against external attacks.

Requirements

For each session, students are expected to read assignments (articles or book chapters). The readings will be discussed during the session and familiarity with them is necessary for following the lectures. In addition to the reading assignments, students will be asked to write a short essay (3000 to 4000 words) on a subject related to the course.

Bibliography

In this course we will read and discuss selected articles and book chapters. Photocopies will be handed out in the meetings and/or can be downloaded from the course website:
www.religionandcognition.com/courses/morality

Schedule

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| Week 37 | 1. Introduction (Sept 9) |
| Week 38 | 2. Cognitive science in biblical studies (Sept 16) Reading: Barrett, “Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion”; Czachesz, “The Promise of the Cognitive Science of Religion for Biblical Studies” |
| Week 39 | No class. |
| Week 40 | 3. Social cognition and morality (Sept 30) Reading: Clark, “Social Actions, Social Commitments”; Barrett and Henzi, “The Social Nature of Primate Cognition” |
| Week 41 | 4. Moral intuitions and moral gods (Oct 7) Reading: Boyer, <i>Religion Explained</i> , Chapter 5 (Why Do Gods and Spirits Matter?) |

- Week 42 5. Empathy and religious ethics (Oct 14)
- Reading: Decety, "A Social Cognitive Neuroscience Model of Human Empathy"; Kazen, "Empathy and Ethics: Bodily Emotion as Basis for Moral Admonition"
- Week 43 Fall break. No class.
- Week 44 6. Morality and afterlife (Oct 28)
- Reading: Gibbs, *Embodiment*, Chapter 2 (Bodies and Persons); Czachesz, "Grotesque Bodies in the Christian Underworld: The *Apocalypse of Peter*" and "Metamorphosis and Mind: Cognitive Explorations of the Grotesque in Early Christian Literature"
- Week 45 7. Religion as costly signaling (Nov 4)
- Professor Risto Uro will be our guest.
- Reading: Sosis and Alcorta, "Signaling, Solidarity, and the Sacred: The Evolution of Religious Behavior"
- Week 46 8. Is religion the source of morality? (Nov 11)
- Reading: Bulbulia, "Meme Infection or Religious Niche Construction? An Adaptationist Alternative to the Cultural Maladaptationist Hypothesis"
- Week 47 9. The power of the weak (Nov 18)
- Reading: Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties"; Czachesz, "Women, Charity, and Mobility in Early Christianity"
- Week 48 No class.
- Week 49 No class.
- Week 50 10. Deadline for essay. Final discussion (Dec 9)