Nicholas Wade. *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures.*
New York: Penguin, 2009

Reviewed by Brian Jackson

People of faith may not warm to the view that the mind's receptivity to religion has been shaped by evolution," writes Nicholas Wade, science writer for the *New York Times*, in his new book *The Faith Instinct* (5). If religion evolves with cultural circumstances, then it loses some of its immutable, supernatural qualities. On the other hand, atheists "may not embrace the idea that religious behavior evolved because it conferred essential benefits on ancient societies and their successors" (5). If we accept the proposition that faith endures because cultures select it (perhaps unconsciously) as a necessary attribute of their survival, then we have to accept the proposition that religion is good—even necessary—for the survival of the species. Though Wade's book will not delight the deeply religious or the defiantly irreligious, it provides an eloquent tour of evolutionary biology's adventure with faith. Like Robert Wright's popular book *The Evolution of God*, published in 2009, *The Faith Instinct* is a journalist's attempt to articulate, in accessible prose for the nonexpert, the salutary nature of religion as a natural phenomenon of group selection. This explanation works well if religions are considered merely cultural or social institutions. However, Wade ultimately cannot account for the essence of religion as we experience it—as a vital, orienting, and motivating force for personal growth.

With *The Faith Instinct*, Wade wades into troubled waters. Evolution continues to divide the public, even though it has long been accepted as fact by the scientific community. It has been nearly a century since the Scopes Trial, and we are still debating evolution, especially when it comes to the science curriculum in public schools. In the last decade, a handful of atheist scholars like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett—the "neo-atheists"—have written popular books in the Enlightenment tradition that criticize religion's influence on science. Within this milieu, the thinking believer searches faithfully for works that take religion seriously without

running away from the mountainous evidence that science presents for natural selection. Wade's book will be best appreciated by readers who believe that religion and science are "nonoverlapping magesteria," as science historian Stephen Jay Gould put it so memorably, rather than incompatible propositions.

Wade defines religion as "a system of emotionally binding beliefs and practices in which a society implicitly negotiates through prayer and sacrifice with supernatural agents, securing from them commands that compel members, through fear of divine punishment, to subordinate their interests to the common good" (15). From the standpoint of evolutionary biology, religion has "survival value" because it strengthens community and thereby protects and fosters reproduction, which is "natural selection's only yardstick of success" (12–13). Religious societies outlast others because the sense of group purpose creates stronger armies, larger families, and more cooperative members. According to this thesis, the genetic imperative to pass along our genes led primitive man to establish religion as a binding social system to reinforce the already hardwired moral instinct. Though religious practices evolved as human civilization evolved, the instinct to rely on supernatural imperatives to reinforce community and family morals remains constant because the need to pass along genes remains constant. Early on in *The Faith Instinct*, we find a fundamental tension between the unconscious genetic imperative that ostensibly governs religious life and the "personal aspects of religion"—like comfort, faith, repentance, transcendence, and closeness with God—that theoretically have no biological function beyond making us feel good enough about religion to participate in it, thereby increasing the likelihood that we will pass along our genes (12).

In his chapter on the evolution of religious behavior, Wade describes how a swiftly modernizing brain could collude with others to create "an emotional commitment to the group so fierce and transcendent that men would quite readily sacrifice their lives in its defense" (39). That need for commitment was found in religious rites of passage, music, dance, and supernatural commandments. What better way to reinforce "society's moral authority" (55) than to imagine an omniscient deity who promises to smite you, your family, and your crops and herds if you do not abide by the group's moral code? And these rituals created the emotional connections necessary to keep the group together. For example, we are told that the all-night ritual healing dance of the !Kung people of the Kalahari "clearly enhances the viability of the !Kung group" through a deep, emotionally resonant communal ecstasy (107). However, the ecstasy—the drums, the chanting, the dancing, the singing, the trancelike state, the communion

with the gods—is not the true essence of religion in this narrative; surviving and reproducing is.

Despite Nicholas Wade's capable storytelling, he can provide only scant direct evidence that this is how and why religion evolved and endures, a point that Wade himself admirably concedes. His thesis rests on three controversial assumptions. First, he claims "the fact that religious behavior is universal strongly suggests that it is an adaptation, meaning a trait shaped by natural selection" (43). Second, he argues, along with cultural anthropologists, that we can look at existing hunter-gatherer communities (like the !Kung or the Andaman Islanders) to see what religious life was like fifty thousand years ago when ancestral man stepped out of the African deserts and started settling the world. Though they certainly are suggestive, both of these perspectives provide indirect evidence at best.

Finally, Wade accepts the principle of group selection, or "the idea that genes can become more common if they confer a benefit on groups of people rather than just individuals" (29). Darwin explored the group selection thesis in his autobiographical writings; however, in the late twentieth century, with scientists focusing on genes as the site where natural selection takes place, group selection was not popular in the biological sciences.

In 1975, E. O. Wilson wrote his controversial *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis,* the final chapter of which explores the biological evolutionary basis of human behaviors. Since then, scientists have debated whether religion or any social morality is adaptive rather than accidental. Wade sides with the adaptation group, which includes popular moral psychologists like Jonathan Haidt, author of the delightful book *The Happiness Hypothesis*. In the nonadaptive group, Steven Pinker and Richard Dawkins, for example, argue that religion is an accidental evolutionary misfiring on par with a moth's navigational weakness for the flames (66). For the time being, according to Wade, group selection is the most convenient and reliable way to describe religious behavior as it evolves through the ages. For all its weaknesses, the group selection theory is a useful way to combine culture and genetics, since "evolution is the bedrock theory of biology and people belong inseparably to the biological world" (123).

While the Kalahari !Kung may have remained unchanged over the millennia, other religious societies have shown themselves to be a "superbly flexible genetic framework" for new and changing cultural needs (189). Wade posits that modern societies moved from ritual to belief and sacred text, from egalitarian communities to complex ecclesiastical hierarchies, from personal interfaces with the divine to priestly mediation, from a focus on practical day-to-day needs to salvation in the afterlife. At each step of the way, "the neural circuitry" that predisposes us to faith was

channeled into new religious outlets that ensured survival. The transition was not always smooth: as with the Great Awakenings in U.S. history, there is often "tension between the ecclesiastical and the ecstatic" (133), a point illustrated by the early Latter-day Saints' struggle with spiritual exuberance in Kirtland.

Wade tries to plot as much of this evolution as possible onto a "tree of religion" in much the same way as linguists may plot the world's languages on a single tree. Most religions, writes Wade, are "composite cultural creations," springing from other branches, much as Christianity and Islam sprang from Judaism (147). The tree for the most part keeps its shape, with the occasional new growth like "the exotic flower of Mormonism" (191). It is not clear to me—admittedly, I'm no expert—what biological imperative is served through such rich variation. In the end, it is not clear exactly how biology and culture interact to create new strains of religious practice. Human agency, it seems, makes a mess of evolution when it comes to culture.

In *The Faith Instinct*, the "exotic flower of Mormonism" makes several appearances as the quintessence of group selection. The Latter-day Saints have high barriers of entry into the community, which "raises the level of trust among its members" (59). The early Church permitted individual access to deity through spiritual experience—even ecstasy through speaking in tongues and prophesying—while maintaining a strong hierarchy to control such experiences (138). Like the hellenized Jews in the first century, Mormonism spreads most efficiently through social networks, thereby demonstrating "the evolutionary assumption that religious behavior evolve[s] as a means of group cohesion" (159). For all his insight, Wade misses what I think would be the most conspicuous example of Mormonism's group fitness: the doctrine of family and the importance of procreation. Though we may not hear much from the pulpit anymore about impatient spirits waiting to come down to righteous families, the doctrines of premortal life and the eternal nature of family have resulted in a prolific people, with procreative practices reinforced by divine decrees. Wade misses this essential perspective.

Wade spends three chapters demonstrating how religion takes a vital part in societies old and new by shaping relationships of trust and commerce, regulating reproduction and population, and influencing war. In one of the more incisive passages, Wade defends religious morality against those atheists who argue that religion is not necessary for creating moral people:

> Adam Smith described the marketplace as an invisible hand that induced each individual, by following his self-interest, to serve the

> common interest. But hands come in pairs. An efficient marketplace can operate only on the basis of trust. The counterpart of the invisible hand that works on self-interest is the one that induces moral self-restraint. In most, if not all, societies moral standards have been secured by religion and the fear of divine retribution. (210)

Yet as Wade closes his remarkable book, he notes that the three-hundred-year march of modernity has made secularism a viable and attractive alternative to religion, particularly in the West, a point Charles Taylor so richly made in *A Secular Age*. Could it be that in a post-Enlightenment world religion has lost its power to create commonality within a people, which would, by some inexplicable process, make them less likely to perpetuate themselves? If Wade's narrative carries water, then nations retain their potential for survival insofar as they retain religion. Wade uses the United States as an example of a modern, constitutionally secular state that has somehow preserved, among its abundant religious plurality, a common civil religion, an "overarching faith" (263) or "meta-creed" (265) that binds a people together and, Wade argues yet again, makes more likely the survival of their genes.

And what if the United States declines in religious fidelity? How does its citizenry sustain a moral universe without the divine? Wade's answer is sure to spark controversy. In the last chapter, he argues that because of human agency, religion can be "reworked" to meet the needs of a secular society (280). Just as the military has learned to harness the power of ritual and group movement for secular purposes, so too can future religious leaders in secular societies work creatively to transform religion into something more palatable to people who embrace science and eschew supernaturalism. To Wade, the very fact that humans have agency to change the way we worship constitutes a more-than-human *something* that is very much like "the hand of the deity in action" (283).

Of course, this theory is an unsatisfactory conclusion to those who believe that religion is revealed rather than made. For believers who experience God's direction in religious matters, it may be a salve to think that religion, contra Dawkins and the sour neoatheists, is considered beneficial to societies, but it is nonsensical to believe that we can at will change the way we practice it. And there is an additional troubling aspect of Wade's book, one that I believe has been challenged so eloquently by Marilynne Robinson in her recent book *Absence of Mind*. Religion is not something we practice like automatons, dancing out the rituals while our genes call the tune. We do not experience love, art, and belief as aspects of some buried pulsation urging us to leave surviving offspring. Rather, they are necessities of the abundant life. The evolutionary hypothesis of religion,

no matter how usefully informed by science, is not, as William James might say, a *live* hypothesis to us. In other words, we may nod in agreement as intellectuals interested in science, but we do not *feel* or *experience* this explanation as the essence of our belief. Nor, I imagine, do the tribal cultures. The aborigines, I assume, never stop their healing dance mid-stomp and turn to each other and say, "So glad we're practicing this arduous ritual so that our strong social ties will enforce moral codes necessary for the survival of our offspring!" For all the enlightenment we receive from the group selection thesis of religion, there is something missing here—and that something might be everything vital about living our religion.

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