Variation and Levels of Analysis in Religion’s Evolutionary Origins:
Comment on Johnson, Li, and Cohen (2014)
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The target article divides religious variation into four core dimensions, each of which encompasses both individual and group-level phenomena. It examines these phenomena through the lens of seven “fundamental social motivations,” providing evidence that ecological and psychological factors affecting these motivations could connect variation in religions and religious individuals to evolutionary processes. The authors broaden the idea of what it would mean for religion to have evolved, and we believe that this is a useful theoretical contribution to the adaptation/byproduct debate.

The major challenge for this all-encompassing framework is that religions and religious individuals are not merely different levels of analysis of the same phenomenon – they are fundamentally different entities. Correspondingly, we would expect different evolved mechanisms to elicit change in each. But the categories of variation and its elicitors in this article collapse across phenomena ranging from individual psychological processes to the effects of chronic ecological conditions on religions themselves. “Self-protection,” for example, includes responses to everything from drought to existential uncertainty (p.14). The former constitutes an ecological source of variation that might shape actual religious traditions and institutions, whereas the latter is a psychological factor that shapes individual religious attitudes, often in a transient way. Such extreme breadth in what belongs to each category of social motivation threatens the theoretical coherence of the model, as the theory does not treat such psychological/ecological distinctions systematically or explicitly.
The dimensions of religious variation, too, suffer from conceptual vagueness due to their breadth. Rigid social hierarchies that may result from Status-Seeking motivation fit well with the idea of variation in Community Structure. But in the Self-Protection section, the Community Structure dimension includes increased individual group loyalty and “agreeableness” (p.14). Are the latter truly a manifestation of variation in Community Structure? Would these individual psychological constructs reasonably be categorized with the organization of actual social roles in any other context? Across the paper as a whole, the Community Structure dimension becomes a rather awkward collection of diverse elements, and such extensive internal conceptual variety raises concerns as to whether the authors are broadening these dimensions of variation beyond conceptual coherence simply in order to be able to capture some element of each dimension of religious variation under each category of motivation.

A related concern is that the two major elements of the theory’s central mechanism—“activation” and “motives”—are applied to both groups and individuals, but are not concretely defined with respect to either. In some cases, it can be reasonably inferred that the “activation” of a motive constitutes an increase in the salience of a particular psychological construct in the consciousness of an individual. Indeed, many of the authors’ references regarding the activation of social motives at the individual level are examples of direct cognitive activation of concepts through methods such as priming. But is an individual motive thus construed actually comparable to – or classifiable with – a social “motive” conceived as something belonging to an entire group? When it comes to group characteristics, what is the locus of the motive, and how is it actually being acted upon by selection pressures and ecological circumstances? Take, for example, the Status-Seeking “motivation.” It may be that under some circumstances, societies that possess strong vertically arranged social hierarchies are likely to flourish, and thus that
under those conditions their particular religious practices are more likely to endure. In such a case, the group itself would be the locus of evolutionary change. But does this imply that societies are “motivated” to be hierarchically ordered or highly differentiated with regard to status? It is unclear how a “motive” can be construed as belonging to an entire group, other than as an explicitly-stated shared goal, in which case the motive is merely the sum of the motives of the individuals. Is this the manner in which the authors mean to present groups as being responsive to changes in fundamental social motives? If not, what is the mechanism that connects social motives to religious and social groups?

Though it is not fleshed out explicitly, when it comes to how their interpretation of religious variation bears on the evolution of religion, the authors’ argument seems implicitly to consist of two basic premises, and a deduction. The first premise (which occupies the bulk of the paper) is that religions and religiosity vary as an expression of fundamental social motives. The second premise (which appears to be taken essentially for granted) is that those fundamental social motives are themselves a direct product of evolutionary processes. The deduction appears to be that if 1) religious variation is directly elicited by fundamental social motives, and 2) those fundamental social motives were shaped directly by evolution, then 3) we can consider religious variation itself to be explained by evolutionary processes. This presupposes, of course, that religion actually does satisfy these evolved social needs and motives, since if it did not, it is unlikely that it would have become a lasting feature of human cognition and culture. There is plenty of evidence presented that religion does effectively satisfy social motives in ways that could be considered adaptive. But it would benefit the theoretical interpretation of the evidence if this connection were to be laid out explicitly.
As a review of the literature, the article reaps the full benefit of its innovative structure, making manifest many of the central, recurrent themes in the patterns of religious variation and their psychological and ecological elicitors. To that end, the article is extremely informative, but the explanatory power of this approach at a theoretical level is limited by its vague treatment of mechanisms, and lack of attention to the relationship between the psychological and ecological levels of analysis. It is a promising start to an innovative approach that wed evolution and variation, but we expect that when it comes to direct empirical testing, the model will show itself in need of narrower scope and greater specificity.