

Rhetorical versus evolutionary origins of early Christianity

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Introduction: the omnipotence of natural selection for Darwinian Dawkins and the self-imposed impotence of Burkeian terministic screens

Let me be frank: I am not at all sure that evolutionary theory can provide an adequate explanation of the origins of religious experience, in particular those of relatively recent religious movements such as early Christianity. As a matter of fact, the tyrannical rule of natural selection as an interpretive principle, whether from the perspective of biological or cultural evolution or that of evolutionary psychology, can be seen as no more than a socio-cultural enquiry into the origins of early Christianity.

Yet Dawkins (2006:163) forcibly imposes this 'terministic screen'¹ when he puts us under the ethical obligation to interpret religious discourse as a product of Darwinian evolution. He writes: "Knowing that we are products of Darwinian evolution, we *should* [my italics] ask what pressure or pressures exerted by natural selection originally favoured the impulse to religion." For Dawkins evolutionary theory as an explanatory paradigm for the continued survival of religious discourse is ethically compelling. In terms of Darwinian evolution theory, then, he analyses religion by pointing out a strange paradox. According to him, religion is "so wasteful, so extravagant", while Darwinian evolution shows little mercy for unnecessary and wasteful activities. Referring to Darwin, he explains that natural selection closely scrutinises "every variation", favouring only those that contribute to the improvement of the organism. If the practice of religion is so wasteful, why does it persist? Driven by the interpretive theory of Darwinian evolution, we need to answer the question why the pressure imposed by natural selection has favoured the persistence of religious discourse despite its apparent

superfluity. Why has natural selection privileged what so obviously has only disadvantages for people, such as exploitation, guilt feelings, misunderstandings and illusory constructions – equipment ill designed for the survival of human beings?

In responding to these questions, Dawkins eventually settles for a definition of religion as a 'by-product of something else'. According to him it should be seen, on the one hand, as a misfiring of the survival mechanism whereby the young heed the advice and instruction of the old and experienced (Dawkins 2006:174-175). He writes: "Natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them. Such trusting obedience is valuable for survival ..." Religious beliefs, handed down for centuries by ancestors, feed into this natural capacity to be programmed by the experienced, acting as a viral infection. Furthermore, following Bloom and Dennett, Dawkins argues that natural selection has programmed human beings to teleologically project entities that could benefit the organism. From childhood human beings equate 'things' with their intention or purpose, because the short-cut thus created permits faster decision making in dangerous situations. This natural teleological inclination, necessary for survival, can then misfire to find an ultimate purpose in everything and this ultimate purpose becomes the purpose of God (Dawkins 2006:181). Finally, the irrationality of religion can be seen as a by-product of a particular "built-in irrationality mechanism in the brain", similar to the act of falling in love. The built-in irrationality mechanism favouring the choice of a partner to raise at least one child, which can be called love, misfires when the positive reinforcement which usually derives from love is derived from religion. This also explains why religious experience is so often expressed in erotic language (Dawkins 2006:185-186). Once such an irrational mechanism becomes culturally entrenched, it can operate "in a manner reminiscent of evolution" (Dawkins 2006:188).

With religion as a 'built-in irrationality mechanism' operating analogously to biological evolution, Dawkins moves closer to the site where he wants to situate religious discourse. Keeping it out of the domain of natural selection, it is shifted to

that of cultural analogy with what in evolutionary terms can be called genetic drift. Genetic drift refers to neutral evolutionary change that is not subject to natural selection. It is within this ambit of genetic drift that language is situated. According to Dawkins "language normally evolves by the cultural equivalent of random genetic drift" (Dawkins 2006:189) and "religions, like languages, evolve with sufficient randomness". Against this background, meme theory as the cultural analogue of gene theory is introduced. A meme is a replicating unit of cultural inheritance (Dawkins 2006:191). The replication need not be exact, but its essence must be passed down unmutated through generations. Those memes that are good at getting themselves copied, irrespective of their truth value, will prevail. They cooperate and cohabit with other memes in meme pools, in which interdependent relations exist. Some memes simply survive because of their compatibility with other memes that are already numerous and thriving in the meme pool. A meme pool, like a gene pool, constitutes the environment of mutually compatible memes. Meme pools, as the environment of mutual compatible memes, are the sites from which memeplexes originate. A memeplex is a set of memes that need not necessarily be able to survive on their own, but "are good survivors in the presence of other members of the memplex" (Dawkins 2006:198).

Memetic theory forms the theoretical framework in which Dawkins positions religious discourse. Some religious ideas, irrespective of their truth value, are able to survive because of absolute merit, whereas others survive because of their compatibility with an already existing memeplex (Dawkins 2006:199). Different religions can be seen as different memeplexes, which survive in the presence of their own memes but not in the presence of others. The evolution of religions is therefore firstly determined by genetic natural selection which provides the brain with its dispositions, and this, vaguely, forms the background to memetic selection. In the earliest phases of a religion's evolution the survival of simple memes is relative to "their universal appeal to human psychology". The later stages in the evolution of religions, when they become organised, is characterised by the development of memeplexes, which can

be seen as collections of memes flourishing in the presence of other memes in the same memeplex (Dawkins 2006:200-201).

The question is whether the explanatory framework Dawkins provides in the terminology of biological evolution theory, functioning both as scenery and as an agency for memetic theory, offers anything to advance our understanding of religious origins, in particular those of early Christianity. There are several problems with his suggestions. Firstly, to Dawkins 'religion' is a very clearly identifiable discourse, apparently so clearly demarcated that its cultural pervasiveness and determinacy do not even warrant explanation. Although religious discourse is sometimes understood in terms of practices and sometimes in terms of ideas, he appears to identify religious discourse with ideas. These religious ideas apparently descend from heaven, since their social and cultural constituents are in no way disclosed and explained. Yes, it is quite true that this descent of ideas is exactly what the adherents of a religion believe, but they do not profess to explain the strange persistence of belief, which Dawkins purports to do. So the notions about the evolution of memes, memepools and memeplexes are rather clumsily pasted on to randomly selected 'ideas'. Such is his zeal to ridicule religious beliefs that the explanatory potential of memetic theory is forfeited (despite being summarised and suggested) and we are left without any indication of how this theory is to fit religious discourse as an integral part of culture, except for a few randomly selected examples (Dawkins 2006:199-200). A distinction is made between memes which are said to have 'absolute merit', that is, memes surviving and existing by themselves, and memes showing a compatibility with other memes and surviving in conjunction. Besides the fact that these memes are not formulated in a propositional manner, so as to at least feign resemblance to their universal applicability, but in a compelling conversational style, we are not told what the criteria are for either the distinction between memes, or for their definition and selection.

Secondly, one would have expected that any type of evolutionary theory concerning religious discourse, and especially concerning particular religions, would at least pay some attention to the history of religion. After all, it is almost

impossible to think of evolution divorced from history. And yes, Dawkins does declare that there are “early stages of a religion’s evolution” which must be distinguished from “later stages, where a religion becomes organized” (Dawkins 2006:201). However, historical analysis is reduced to random examples fitting the Dawkinsian version of Darwinian evolution (again!). An a-historical, biological origin of the phenomenon of religion is presented.

Finally, one could have expected that Dawkins would at least engage in conversation with the academic study of religion. If the objective is to understand why this ‘by-product’, this incomprehensible piece of human waste has survived and will probably continue to survive, then surely there is a need for in-depth conversation with those who are also intrigued by the thriving of religious discourse in societies, who are also appalled by its irrationalities, fascinated by its fanaticisms and cringe from coming to grips with its practices. After all, the distinction between studying religion and studies *about* religion has been around for quite a while. Yet such is Dawkins’s totalitarian terminological onslaught on religion that a conversation would probably not have been possible, which explains why there are so few references to scholars of religion in his argumentation, and why those favouring his argument are allowed to survive.²

Dawkins uses evolutionary theory as an explanatory framework to establish why religious discourse manages to survive despite its apparent uselessness. Although the uselessness of religion can be conceded and its potential for the denigration and humiliation of human beings exposed, although its discriminatory beliefs and practices lead to the creation of human hierarchies and its far-fetched illusions evoke arrogant self-deception, the manner in which Dawkins uses evolutionary theory to flagellate and crucify religious discourse betrays an epistemology in which the tension between an object of reality, the referent and the discourse as a set of selected strategies, a ‘terministic screen’, is completely missed. For Dawkins reality presents itself as legible, and there is little doubt that its language is that of Darwinian evolution. In this reality religion is an unwanted, undesirable, useless thing. In terms of evolution theory it should not have survived owing to its non-beneficial

effects, but it is unfortunately still rampant and rampantly growing, which requires an explanation in terminology borrowed from the natural world. If the cultural world is to be integrated, it is in a secondary form, that is, analogous to the natural world.

Let it be clearly understood: my problem is not the analysis of religious discourse; the problem is not asking why religion persists despite its negative, restrictive, often inhumane effects. The problem is not a critique of religion and religious experience, but rather whether an object of reality, a 'thing' dictates the discourse of its description. We may well know that we 'are products of Darwinian evolution', but that does not mean that we have to be surrendered to the interpretive framework of an almost morally compelling evolutionary law of which we are products.

In addressing the problematic relationship between object of reality and scientific object, or referent and critical discourse, Foucault (1998 [1968]: 330) writes:

But it would be incorrect to believe (through an *illusion of experience*) that there are domains of things which present themselves spontaneously to an activity of idealization and to the work of scientific language; that these things unfurl themselves in the order in which history, technology, discoveries, institutions, and human instruments have managed to constitute them or bring them to light; that all scientific elaboration is only a certain way of reading deciphering, abstracting, decomposing, and recomposing what is given either in a natural (and consequently generally valid) experience or in a cultural (and consequently relative and historical) experience. There is an illusion that consists of the supposition that science is grounded in the plentitude of a concrete and lived experience ... that biology gives form to the intimate experience of life ...; therefore that the referent itself contains the law of the scientific object.

What Foucault cautions against is the failure to discover the terms of our 'terministic screens', whether they derive from the

natural or the cultural world, in the making of the referents themselves, and then to live in the illusion of a clearly defined 'reality'. When Kenneth Burke introduced the notion of 'terministic screen' a similar sense was conveyed. He underscores the impossibility of finding in a referent the terms by means of which enquiry proceeds: "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (Burke 1966:45). A terministic screen is the product of strategic selection of the possibilities offered by the repertoire of an interpretive community. Such a strategic selection happens not with the guidance of universal, neutral and formal criteria, not according to something intrinsic to the referent, but under the influence of a host of differential power relations operating within the contingencies of a particular context.³ The notion of a terministic screen as a mediating agency by virtue of its linguistic nature (irrespective of the degree of abstraction and formality) at the same time implies its rhetorical character. In tracing the roots of Burke's notion of the terministic screen to William James's pragmatism, Stob (2008) points out its pervasive melioristic quality. Functioning as a symbolising mediating agency, directing our attention to particular experiences of reality, the nature and quality of the selected symbols and processes of symbolisation constituting a terministic screen decisively determine the nature and quality of the reality we experience (Stob 2008:137). Instead of surrendering us to relativity, the notion of a terministic screen puts us in the ambit of deliberative rhetoric where a decision has to be made on the basis of 'what is better'.

Against the background of this rather elaborate analysis I want to argue that evolution theory in itself and by itself cannot adequately solve the problem of religious origins. Without replacing evolution theory, the question why and how religious discourse originated – how and why, for example, early Christianity came into being – has to be considered in terms of the human capacity to symbolise. However, symbolisation is never neutral, never innocent but always a function of manipulation and persuasion. It is political and rhetorical. The terministic screens we construct for understanding the origins of religious discourse have to avail themselves of strategies aimed at

understanding human interaction and human persuasion. The object is not to oppose evolution theory with rhetorical theory – on the contrary. The object is rather to explore particular uses of evolution theory as a framework for understanding early Christian origins and demonstrate how rhetorical theory establishes a terministic screen focusing on what can be seen as the ‘irrational origins’ of early Christianity, if evolution theory were to function as the domain for selecting interpretive strategies.

New Testament studies and evolution theory

One can identify at most a very loose relationship between New Testament studies and evolution theory. As a matter of fact, it would not be too far off the mark to argue that anti-evolutionists often were the producers of the link between evolution and biblical interpretation, whereas those clamouring to take the development of the text seriously were probably only indirectly influenced by evolution theory. In this section I argue that, although evolution theory has been relatively useless as a frame of reference for understanding early Christianity, it may sometimes have functioned subliminally, reflecting its rhetorical power and omnipotent status in the 20th century intellectual climate.

Subliminal effects of evolution theory on New Testament studies

One example would be what used to be called ‘progressive revelation’. According to progressive revelation it was especially the life, work and words of Jesus Christ which could be considered profitable for humanity. C.H. Dodd sees this as “the climax of that whole complex process which we have traced in the Bible” – it is described as the “highest spiritual worth” and it must be recognised as “in the fullest sense ... a revelation of God”. The possibility of progressive revelation helps to explain biblical stories, requirements or imperatives which could be regarded as discreditable. These would then be seen as primitive forms belonging to the earlier phases of revelation reflected in biblical discourse (Barr 1973:144-146).

Although I am not aware of a study which has actually pursued this, one could possibly find traces of a subliminal evolutionary motivation behind the formation of the canon, especially the New Testament. In the Christian tradition the canon is taken to be of a special nature,⁴ the product of a long evolutionary process which has proved adaptable to a huge variety of circumstances and has survived the innumerable controversies of early Christianity and the overbearing power of the Roman empire.

The notion of progressive revelation was not particularly successful. Its proponents, coming from what can be called a quasi-liberal tradition, were few and far between. Furthermore, they quite often interpreted elements seen as primitive as forms of degeneration rather than progression, besides the fact that actually no criteria existed for deciding what could be seen as more developed biblical elements (Barr 1973:145-146). Furthermore, one should be very careful about ascribing any reference to 'primitivity', 'development', and 'growth' to Darwinian biological evolution theory. One could easily demonstrate that critical New Testament studies adopted developmental interpretive categories long before the advent of Darwinian evolution theory. Barr, for example, maintains that the teaching of Jesus should be seen as the "basis and presupposition of all that belongs in the history of the development of the Christian consciousness". Dealing with the same problems in more or less parallel terminology cannot serve as a sign of dependence. Otto Pfeleiderer writes in 1887:

So long as Christianity is conceived as a miracle, whether unique or repeated, its truth is always more or less problematical for the men of our critical age. But when it is recognized as the necessary outcome of the development of the religious spirit of our race, towards the production of which the whole history of the ancient world was moving onward, in the shaping of which the mental and spiritual acquisitions of the East and West have found their application, their enhancement, and their higher unity – when this is recognized, it becomes, in my opinion, the most solid and imposing apology for Christianity

which it is possible to conceive (from Kümmel 1973:210).

The problem of miracles is recognised – a kind of necessity is postulated in the development of Christianity; there is the claim of superiority, there is the reference to the 'spirit of our race' which could all be construed as part and parcel of an evolutionary type of ideology, but it does not justify a specific link or dependence on the biological evolutionism advocated by Darwin. The claim to ethnic superiority is also found in the introduction of Schweitzer's epoch making work on the historical Jesus:

When, at some future day, our period of civilisation shall lie, closed and completed, before the eyes of later generations, German theology will stand out as a great, a unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time. For nowhere save in the German temperament can there be found in the same perfection the living complex of conditions and factors ... without which no deep theology is possible. And the greatest achievement of German theology is the critical investigation of the life of Jesus (Schweitzer 1954:1).

Today it would also be possible to add that this type of progression betrays traces of anti-Semitism and is void of any attempt at a contextually contingent understanding. What we see is the principle of hierarchy at work, elevating some biblical elements to a higher level while relegating others to an inferior level.

What is interesting in early New Testament scholarship is the way the notion of uniqueness was introduced, especially where it became clear that the New Testament texts were actually not on the same sophisticated level as, for example, classical material. This uniqueness is substantiated by claiming that it profited the faith of the early Christian communities. Kümmel (1975:37), for example, distinguishes the synoptic gospels as a literary genre from Hellenistic biographies, memoirs and miracle stories on the basis of their different

concern, namely to “evoke faith and to strengthen it”. They are ‘missionary writings’, that is, with the objective to conquer, to take over, to change.

There is also a temptation to discern the influence of evolutionary thought in the historical-critical method, with its differing phases of source, form and redaction criticism. As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, conservative scholarship indeed traced the influence of evolutionism in the development of the pentateuchal tradition, albeit rather illusory according to James Barr (1977:146).⁵ In 1988 Willem Vorster, using a version of Thomas Kühn’s *The structure of scientific revolutions*, argued that New Testament science was on the verge of a paradigm shift entailing a move away from the historical-critical method. He indicated that historical criticism had dominated the methodology of New Testament scholarship since the 19th century. Although he did not explicitly postulate evolution theory as the epistemic framework in which New Testament historical critics operated, there are indications that this was what he had in mind. He describes how oral and folkloristic traditions were seen to have developed ‘by way of evolution’. What was essential to New Testament scholarship was the growth, not only of entire texts but specifically that of each and every fragment of which these writings were composed.⁶ Commenting on the study of the language of the New Testament in terms of the Septuagint and Aramaic originals, he ascribes it to “the emphasis on evolution and causality as principles of explanation and the priority given to parts and not to the whole” (Vorster 1988:35).

Evolution theory as a terministic screen for New Testament interpretation

An example of a more direct engagement of evolution theory with early Christian material can be found in evolutionary psychology, specifically in the work of Patricia Williams (2005). Owing to the inappropriateness of a doctrine of sin and atonement in a theological paradigm taking evolution as its point of departure, Williams locates the relevance of Jesus, especially the historical Jesus, in evolutionary psychology. According to her evolutionary psychology responds to the question ‘how can

humans flourish?' (Williams 2005:133), thereby positioning it in a rhetoric of benefit. Taking the historical Jesus as constructed by current New Testament scholarship as her point of departure, she argues that Jesus would have been an evolutionary psychologist with a keen sense and knowledge of human nature. The notion of inclusive fitness, which functions as an interpretive mechanism to construct and enquire into categories benefiting the survival of organisms, identifies four categories: resources, reproduction, relatedness and reciprocity. Each of these is assigned a negative component determined by excess (Williams 2005:134).

Applied to the historical Jesus, Williams (2005:137) argues that Jesus discouraged excessive concern with everyday material things such as food and shelter and criticised unequal distribution of wealth as the product of exploitation of the poor by the rich. The fact that Jesus did not say much about sex puts his teaching concerning divorce into focus. Since, according to Williams, evolutionary psychology teaches that men are lustful and women sexually cautious, Jesus' prohibition of divorce is seen as a protective measure against the power of men (Williams 2005:138). Furthermore, although the authenticity of the adultery pericope in John is questioned (Williams 2005:53-8:11), it is seen as an example of his understanding of male lust and an attempt to equalise the positions of men and women. Defensively, she also refers to Jesus' celibacy but does not really relate it to evolutionary psychology. Concluding this section, she writes "that he seems to have studied this chapter of his evolutionary psychology textbook even more carefully. Knowing of men's lust and their desire to control women's reproduction, brutally if necessary, he tries to protect and help women, making the reproductive relationships equal" (Williams 2005:139). The way Jesus played down household constraints in his call for discipleship and his appeal to the fatherhood of a God for Jews and non-Jews alike expresses relatedness as category of evolutionary psychology. According to her, relatedness is concerned with helping "those relatives most likely to be carrying copies of its genes" (Williams 2005:134). Finally, reciprocity as a bartering mechanism in evolutionary psychology (you scratch my back, I scratch yours) and essentially ego-centric behaviour, even when ostensibly altruistic, is countered

by Jesus' demands for generosity and forgiveness (Williams 2005:141).

Several problems cast doubt on the paradigm's suitability for the interpretation of early Christian material.

Firstly, whether one accepts it or not, evolutionary psychology attempts to explain how human behaviour, driven by natural selection, ensures survival. Put differently, we would have expected a construction of Jesus as a model opening up possibilities for humans to flourish. Even in Williams's account this is not the case. Her Jesus appears to be quite negative, to the point of irresponsibility, about the so-called natural inclination to secure resources for the survival of the species. Neither should his celibacy be underplayed in this regard. As for his denigration of household commitments, he again disregards the defencelessness of those who most needed protection. And as for reciprocity, his alleged extreme generosity would not have promoted the flourishing of his followers. Van Till (2005), not surprisingly, argues that her proposal actually represents two opposing agendas. Evolutionary psychology offers a theoretical explanation of human behaviour rooted in the practical need for species survival (Van Till 2005:154), whereas Jesus provides a discourse of what *ought* to be done, that is a prescriptive morality which actually contradicts evolutionary psychology (Van Till 2005:155).⁷ This is the verdict when we simply take Williams on her own account. But there is more to it.

Secondly, although Williams claims to follow the constructions of historical Jesus scholarship, not only does she do so very selectively (see e.g. the use of the *pericopae adulterae* and John 4), but she does not consider the cultural conditions that shaped the historical Jesus. An example is her claim that Jesus advocated equality for women, an egalitarian morality (Williams 2005:137-138). His radical prohibition of divorce did not represent equality, especially not the post-Enlightenment type (see Elliott 2003:174). Jesus appears to have used household metaphors deriving from the domestic sphere of his time to explain the kingdom of God – that is, a political metaphor. But these domestic metaphors were pervaded by the rigid hierarchies of patriarchal society. Although it would be possible to quote many texts where he exhibited a different attitude to women, he was a product of 1st century society and as such would have found the

social hierarchies of his day 'natural'. Another interesting point in the very text quoted by Williams (Mt 5:31-32) is the unequal fate of the woman divorced by her husband: by virtue of the divorce she is made into an adulteress and the man who marries her commits adultery. In the first instance his act does not make him an adulterer, but the divorced woman becomes an adulteress; in the second instance, it is her body that functions as the agency making him an adulterer. I fail to see any equality in this.

One of the main problems in this regard is the universalising tendency in the categories used. Besides the fact that biological reproduction is not really the focus of the Jesus material used, reproduction (like the other categories) is seen as if it has always been exactly the same. Yet there is ample evidence that culture or cultural change has a significant impact on the perception of the female body. Sperling and Beyene (1997:137), for example, argue that "the ovary and its functions are shaped by evolution, culture and the ecologies within which individuals develop" and they plead for better interaction between biology and cultural practice. According to them "control does not flow only from the gene outward" (Sperling & Beyene 1997:139) but changes in a community, or prolonged cultural influence may have a significant effect on the hormonal milieu of women, as can be seen in the onset of menarche. A wide variety of factors, such as life expectancy, social pressures or freedoms, social status, economic and political issues constitute the configuration on which the category of reproduction is imposed. Sperling and Beyene (1997:146) complain that "the focus is an ovary that exists in a constantly stimulated hormonal environment, cycling for 35 years or more, and producing both eggs and ovarian hormones. It has universalized this pattern in the belief that it characterizes all women regardless of fertility history and cultural practices." Their target of criticism is clearly a terministic screen where "biology gives form to the intimate experience of life" (see above, Foucault 1998 [1963]:330).

In discussing Williams's work Moritz (2005:149) touches on this problem when he indicates that evolutionary psychology wants to explain altruistic behaviour "in terms of inclusive fitness in the context of Evolutionarily Stable Strategies". He correctly shows that Williams has exchanged these evolutionary stable

strategies via supra-nature to pursue an “eschatologically stable strategy” (Moritz 2005:149) by depicting Jesus as a model of moral resistance. The problem should not, however, be reduced to an exchange of evolution for eschatology; it also concerns the notion of the stability of explanatory strategies. Moritz (2005:149) himself shows how the notion of the ‘selfish gene’, which was widely accepted a few years ago, has already been modified by consensus on “a variety of levels of selection in evolution”. He adds that “investigations into the roles played by symbiosis, self-organization, neutral evolution, historical and developmental constraints, epigenetics, and generic principles in evolution have demonstrated that other forces are at work both in the generation of evolutionary novelty and the way in which biological information is inherited” (Moritz 2005:150).

It has become clear that evolutionary theory in the form of evolutionary psychology runs the risk of a terministic screen that depicts the referent in terms of the laws of scientific discourse. Its totalitarian claims are not constrained by alternative strategies backed by a whole history of research. As in Dawkins’s explanatory framework, neither culture nor history is taken into account (despite claims to the contrary). Williams (2005:133) maintains that evolutionary psychology provides an answer to the question of who we are: “[F]or the first time in history,” she says “we have a scientific theory of human nature.” That may well be true, but it is disputable whether the strategies which this theory of human nature has currently appropriated are equally applicable to human beings two millennia ago.

Rhetoric, evolution and the origins of early Christianity

According to evolution theory natural selection has predisposed the human body to “maximize reproductive success” (Kirkpatrick 2000:387), thereby exerting pressure on men and women to copulate. However, to treat reproduction purely as product of natural selection is another instance of the referent incorporating the scientific law of its construction. In a discussion forum on evolution and homosexuality Dickemann (2000:400) illustrates the complexity of human sexual reproduction:

[R]eproductive success in humans depend not on some innate instinct but solely on the undirected, 'polymorphous perverse' drive for sexual release, with its concomitant capacities, the vagaries of childhood sex/gender identity formation, desire for emotional relations, the emotional and strategic calculations of future parents, and the coercive force of social rules and concepts. In brief, the continuation of our species depends on the sex drive and *social* processes alone.

Williams (2005:402) concurs, writing that "what gets lost in all of this discussion of evolutionary advantage is the simple fact that, for primates the stimulation of genitals is pleasurable". What we see is a movement away from a reductive biological evolutionary terministic screen, from natural selection as the sole determinant of human reproduction, towards the inclusion of a whole array of strategic possibilities.

Returning to religious discourse, but moving away from the experience of pleasure to the experience of pain, Dawkins (2006:169) poses the problem in Darwinian fashion when he enquires into the effectiveness of torture in the perpetuation of religious experience. He writes: "[N]atural selection has set up a perception of pain as a token of a life-threatening bodily damage, and programmed us to avoid it." Yet the infliction of pain, torture and suffering is not uncommon in religious experience and is often effective. Why does the insistence on martyrdom or even rites such as self-flagellation continue to flourish among religious?⁸

In this final section I want to demonstrate how rhetoric may function as a terministic screen for understanding pleasure and pain in early Christianity. The objective is not to refute evolution theory, but to make room for deliberation.

Evolution, cultural construction and the construction of suffering

If natural selection works towards favourable conditions for the survival of a species, how should the early Christian pursuit of martyrdom and suffering as catalysts of growth and development be interpreted?

When theology or religion attempts to answer this question within the ambit of evolution theory, the result is amazing. It revolves mainly around the theodicy problem. God is brought on to the scene and the question, somewhat loosely formulated, becomes: if God operates via the laws of nature, and if evolution constitutes a law of nature,⁹ how are God and the perpetuation of suffering to be reconciled with natural evolution, which is driven by natural selection intent on genetic fitness? Although Ayala (2008) is not a theologian, there is something peculiar about his approach to this problem. On the one hand he points out the explanatory potential, not only of biological evolution, but also of socio-biology as manifested in evolutionary psychology and he argues in favour of human beings' biological inclination to conduct themselves morally (Ayala 2008:185-187). However, the moral rules for deciding whether an action is right or wrong belong to the sphere of cultural evolution and are not biologically determined. And yet, despite their non-biological determination, the moral norms that ultimately prevail are not those that are detrimental to a community. A loophole is opened for God to exit from the problem, in that the infliction of pain can now be ascribed to cultural evolution and he need not be responsible for human infliction of pain, because there must be a measure of free will; neither need he take responsibility for natural catastrophes, because they could be seen as mishaps of nature (Ayala 2008:189).

There appears to be a strange rhetoric at work here. On the one hand, theology theologises nature by making God enter a scene where he or she actually is not wanted nor appears to have role to play. This allows for the use of strategies which evolution theory has not been designed to provide. The theodicy question should not be part and parcel of evolution theory, whichever variant we use. On the other hand, by the same action theology is naturalised, because the strategies designed to understand evolution are implemented in theological discourse, making the God-question or idea a necessity to a natural human being. However, the theodicy problem distracts us from the question why suffering, the infliction of pain, self-destruction and martyrdom fulfilled a catalytic function in the growth of early Christianity. If human beings are biologically motivated to avoid suffering, if natural selection has pro-

grammed us to avoid what can be life-threatening, what happened in early Christianity that made believers embrace suffering?

To my mind a more plausible explanation is provided by cultural construction rather than cultural evolution. Before we pursue the example of suffering any further, let us briefly look at how cultural construction works.

Way back in 1963 Kenneth Burke defined a human being as follows:

Man [sic] is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative) separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order) and rotten with perfection (Burke 1966:16).

Although each of these phrases that Burke uses to define a human being requires explanation, the objective here is simply to emphasise the human capacity to symbolise. It has been shown that the ability to symbolise is not restricted to human beings, but at the same time it should be recognised that it is via that capacity that we experience and create our realities. Our ability to symbolise is natural and we know and experience our realities by no other means. Our symbolising capacities have developed to such an extent that we are also capable of second-order symbolising, that is, of reflecting on the symbol systems we have constructed.

We need to go one step further. Not only do we symbolise, but products of our symbolisation processes have also been embodied, have also structured and produced our bodies. The same Burke (1966:6) writes: "An 'ideology' is like a spirit taking up its abode in the body; it makes that body hop around in certain ways; and that body would have hopped around in different ways had a different ideology happened to inhabit it." We can indeed go further and ask, following cultural constructivism, whether there is a material quality to the body which is ontologically distinct from its cultural construction. Has symbol-

making not become so integral to a human being's bodily capacities that it has become virtually impossible to maintain the distinction between a natural, biological body and its cultural construction? Foucault has indicated how our bodies are sites for the inscription of power regimes and to that extent are also products of discursiveness (see e.g. Foucault 1978:12, 42-45, 47-49, 101-108). The problem is indeed whether we should or could speak of a human body, prior to discourse, as an ontologically distinct, natural 'thing'. So ingrained has the dichotomy between nature and culture become in our thinking and so effective was the disciplinary distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities, that we can hardly bring ourselves to abolish these boundaries. Even Foucault's work displays the tension, since to him the body becomes a site for the inscription of a societal values and norms, a site on which society's history is written. The question is, did he not presuppose a body that is ontologically distinct, given and prior to its cultural construction, as pointed out by Judith Butler (1989; see also McWhorter 1989)? It could be that Foucault did not succeed in completely disengaging himself from an ontologically, distinct, natural or biological body, but he did make the point that it has become virtually impossible to maintain the dichotomy between nature and culture. 'Body' in Foucault's work offers resistance not to culture, but to discourses cultivating the nature-culture dichotomy (McWhorter 1989:613). It is understandable, then, that one of his followers in classics, in a study of the *kinaidos* in Greece, encourages us to read 'natural' as 'cultural' (Winkler 1990)!

Once the tension between nature and culture is resolved we can see how the naturalisation of the body happens through social production. Over an extended period of time everyday practices structure and give coherence to societal realities. Via repetition and success as structuring mechanisms they obtain the power of natural phenomena, that is, they become objectified. Here Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* is pertinent. *Habitus* is defined as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in

order to attain them” (Bourdieu 1980:54). Owing to the practical circumstances of a society’s existence the conditionings which emerged to secure and guarantee that existence produce the *habitus*. Produced and structured by a group’s conditionings over a long period, the *habitus* forms the basis of both perception and evaluation. As such it is not only a product of history but also produces history, because it generates experience in terms of schemes which are in their turn historically generated. Put differently, the *habitus* deposits the past experiences of a group in each of its organisms, thereby rendering the past present while at the same time structuring perception, thought and action (Bourdieu 1980:55).¹⁰ Such is the power of the *habitus* over the body that it can be seen as a somatisation of the *habitus*. The body materialises as a fundamental structure of the group. Its primary experiences, thoughts, actions and behaviour reflect the structures of the group formed by processes of symbolisation. As a matter of fact, Bourdieu (1980:71) indicates that the body is constituted as an analogical operator when social meaning qualifies its experiences, movements and properties.

In similar fashion, but from a completely different perspective, Kuberski (2000) proposes the notion of ‘worldliness’, reflecting the ‘other’ as a necessary condition for bridging the gap between brain, firing neurons and consciousness. Although in completely different terminology, his proposal to a certain degree overlaps Bourdieu’s culturally produced body. According to Kuberski it is not the physical qualities of the brain that make it a brain, but its incomparable complexity and its existence are part of a living world. There is in fact no real gap between the world and the brain, but consciousness comes into existence by virtue of worldliness as a context for the brain. For aeons the world has generated and organised the brain through “dynamic interactions and natural selection”, with the result that our consciousness is the world which interacts with bodily receptors “wired into a nearly infinitely complex neural network” (Kuberski 2000:20).¹¹

It is against this background that we have to rethink ‘religious experience’. Religious experience or religiosity should not be equated with the worldliness of consciousness, neither should it be equated with Bourdieu’s fundamental, generative

social principles which allow for the emergence of the *habitus*. It is also not the same as 'belief'. Bourdieu (1980:69) defines belief as the "collectively recognised capacity to act in various ways on deep rooted linguistic and muscular patterns of behaviour". A religion may be one these various ways of acting, but belief is a state of the body, it is a collectively recognised, embodied capacity to act. Although there may be tendency (especially among theologians and scholars of religion) to grant religious experience the status of ultimacy or primacy, religiosity lives parasitically on primary experiences shaped by the most fundamental structures of a society. Religious experience should rather be seen as the product of a society's generative principles.

Constructing suffering in antiquity

Returning to early Christianity's experiences of bodily pain and torture, we now look at how religious discourse has accommodated the endurance of suffering and pain. At the same time we consider biological evolution as an independent interpretive paradigm for understanding human behaviour. The origins of early Christianity can be traced to a period when suffering gradually surfaced in discursive practices. The experience of bodily pain and suffering has always been part of humankind, but it has not always been given any visibility, and when human experiences are not given visibility they are to some extent immaterial, as if they do not exist (see Brown 1992; Perkins 1995; Clark 1998). During the period of the late Roman republic and early empire suffering slowly but surely moved into the public eye. There were several reasons for this, but one should keep in mind that this was an era of consolidation of the Roman empire after the numerous wars their great generals had fought. This was also the era in which the emperor cult gradually developed and in which absolute power was vested in his person. But it was also the era when public spectacles became one of the favourite pastimes of the Roman urban population.

The violence and bloodshed displayed and encouraged in the Roman arenas and theatres were horrendous. Suetonius, the Roman historian, tells his readers that even magnificent sea battles were staged in the arenas. In one of them, under the

emperor Claudius, 19 000 people were killed. Roman history, specifically the greatness of the Roman people and their superiority on the battlefield, was re-enacted in the arena. Prisoners of war and condemned criminals had to act the victims and were mercilessly slain (Coleman 1990). To a certain extent the theatre was open to every level of Roman society, from the emperor and the senators (the aristocracy) right down to ordinary citizens and the poor; all levels of Roman society were allowed to share – via the most brutal violence – in the supremacy of Rome.

This was also the time of the emergence of the gladiator. The person of the gladiator was in some ways paradoxical. On the one hand he was seen as a worthless person, the scum of society. He was described as “crude, loathsome, doomed, lost”, a man “almost without humanity” (Barton 1989:2); on the other hand he was the epitome of aggressive, violent, physical manly conduct – on the one hand without status, facing almost certain death, on the other engendered, agonistic status, representing male, Roman superiority.

Two intersecting, socially generative principles are at work here. The arena is the site of the agonistic, of competition. Here indeed it is a matter of the survival of the fittest! The site, the battles, the roles, the liturgies all suggest that what is at stake is the principle of competition. I will formulate this somewhat daringly and it should be read metaphorically. The principle of competition, which had already become part and parcel of the Greek citizen’s DNA was also at work in the Roman spectacle. Remember, this has got little to do with religious experience – the principle of competition operates on a more fundamental level. To conquer, to compete, to win, whether in sport, debate or in battle, was ‘natural’ to the Roman citizen. There was another principle intersecting the principle of competition, namely that of engendered hierarchy. Formed by centuries of warfare, tribal strife, the drive to protect the home, the warrior male had supreme status. The principle of engendered hierarchy produced over centuries by practices entrenching and confirming male domination found a very visible expression not only in the person of the emperor, but especially in the role and person of the gladiator.

Enter the early Christians. Although early Christian historians recorded massive persecutions by the Roman authorities, this was not the case at all. Despite the fact that resistance to the emperor cult was taken as a direct insult to the emperor and therefore a culpable misdeed deserving the death sentence, the Roman authorities were quite lenient towards other religions. What motivated early Christians to opt for suffering the most severe forms of torture were the two generative principles of competition and engendered hierarchy. This can be seen in the way martyr narratives consistently highlighted the superiority of early Christian martyrs, either by claiming sheer physical exhaustion on the part of the torturers who were unable to elicit submission, or by an account of the most horrific mechanisms of torture. The focus is not on violence but on bodily ability to withstand the power of Rome. But the fact that competition and hierarchy are operative in the formation of this movement can also be seen in the adoption of the gladiator model. The gladiator model provided a technology of the body claiming victory and superiority for the tortured and slain bodies of early Christians. Just as the gladiator pledged an oath of loyalty to the emperor, the martyr confessed loyalty to Christ; just as the gladiator was driven by love of death, so was the early Christian martyr; just as the gladiator proved superiority through endurance, so did the early Christian; just as the gladiator proved his manliness in voluntary suffering, early Christians emphasised their voluntary martyrdom; just as the gladiator aspired to social status, early Christian martyrs were depicted as the nobility. The bodies of early Christian females were likewise modelled by the principles of hierarchy and competition. In many instances female martyrs were depicted as women who could stand their ground alongside men and, for example in the case of Perpetua and Felicitas, even became men! That *even* women could resist the power of Rome was in itself a victory for Christianity.

What has this got to do with evolution theory and with the probable evolutionary roots of religion?

Firstly, suffering, and specifically voluntary martyrdom, can be seen as catalytic constituents in the formation of early Christianity (Perkins 1995; Middleton 2006). According to Darwinian evolution theory the body has been programmed to

avoid suffering and pain. Yet some early Christian bodies rushed into it and the narrative display of their suffering facilitated the emergence of this 'religion'. Strictly speaking the early Christian movement was bent on self-destruction in terms of natural selection ... or maybe in Dawkins's terminology, a mishap. As part of the human species they went out of their way to adopt life-threatening behaviour. And yet, within 400 years early Christianity emerged as the survivor, with the Roman empire in decline.

It is difficult, therefore, to explain the origins of early Christianity from the perspective of evolution theory and alternative strategies are required to plausibly explain its formation. Secondly, if the cultural rhetoric of suffering, pain and institutionalised violence of antiquity is integrated as an interpretive strategy, our observation changes. An interesting paradox appears, in that, while voluntary suffering contradicts evolution theory's principle of natural selection, the principles of competition and engendered hierarchy exposed by taking cultural rhetoric into account are much closer to evolution theory! The cultural rhetoric of the body in antiquity identifies the body in pain as a mechanism of endurance, a site of resistance ... and early Christianity capitalised almost parasitically on the generating principles of competition and engendered hierarchy. The principles of competition and hierarchy, which have for centuries produced bodies, produced a regulatory body in early Christianity whose persuasive force ensured more benefits, more advantages than the Roman empire could offer.

Constructing sex and abstinence

A second example takes us to the other end of bodily experience – that of pleasure as expressed in sexuality. I shall again work with two principles: balance and hierarchy. One of the main regulative ideals of antiquity was self-control. A self-controlled body was a balanced body. Their natural science told them that a body whose humours (blood, bile, phlegm) were in the correct proportion and whose fundamental bodily qualities (heat, moisture, dryness and coldness) were in equilibrium was a healthy body. Since antiquity was completely patriarchal, the perfect body, the body in perfect balance was obviously a male

body. As a matter of fact, the female body was seen as an imperfect version of the male body. In terms of gender one could very well argue that ancient society was a one-sex society; the female body was seen as constantly aspiring to emulate the more perfectly balanced body of the male ... and to them this was 'natural' (Laquer 1990).

As we all know, sexual desire has an uncanny way of jerking bodies out of control, and sex is said to cause a certain degree of exhaustion. The ancients however, went a little further. Some firmly believed that excessive sexual indulgence could result in epileptic fits and, worse still, coupled with excessive dining and drinking, in death (see Foucault 1986:109-110). Not surprisingly, therefore, moderation and self-control were propagated, also in light of the need to reproduce (see Foucault 1985).

It should be kept in mind that average life expectancy was considerably lower than in our day – approximately 25 years. Four out of every 100 men were destined to live beyond fifty. Furthermore, epidemics, poverty and hunger were the lot of the majority of people (Brown 1988:6). Infanticide, especially by leaving baby girls outside the city gates either to be picked up or simply to die, is proof of the struggle for survival of people in ancient times.

For the sake of survival and of ensuring strong citizens a balanced body was of extreme importance. Exercise, a dietary regime, recipes, laws, techniques of surveillance were applied to promote bodily control. But self-control did not mean sexual abstinence; as a matter of fact, it improved the chances of reproduction. It was with a view to producing legitimate, noble, aristocratic, genuine Roman offspring that Octavian promulgated laws governing marriage among the elite of Rome. It was also during his reign that the so-called romance narratives originated in order to propagate the nuclear family. The problem in Roman society was to structure desire, to keep it under control. One of the mechanisms was to restrict it to the boundaries of marriage; another was to brand unbridled and excessive desire a female problem, thereby preventing 'real' men from indulging in unbridled sexual escapades (Vorster 2005:747-752).

Enter again early Christianity, even as early as the apostle Paul himself. While the regulatory mechanisms of Roman society all cooperated to maintain the institution of marriage so as to maintain the social order and keep the social fabric intact, early Christians advocated sexual abstinence – even within marriage. Early Christianity again appropriated the generative principles of Graeco-Roman society. The one-sex model, in which the male body was the criterion of bodily perfection, observed the twin principles of hierarchy and balance.

However, as in the case of suffering, early Christianity opted for a radicalised version. Whereas in the one-sex model the problem of desire centred on penetration, in early Christianity (still within the ambit of the one-sex model) the focus was on erection. The problem of desire was no longer a matter of controlling the phallus, but of establishing control over desire itself and preventing even erection. Whereas the Roman world was intent on controlling desire specifically as a means of maintaining social order, early Christianity was intent on eradicating it (Foucault 1997 [1981]:181; Boyarin and Castelli 2001:362).

As in the case of the embrace of suffering, a life-threatening option was chosen, an option designed to halt the perpetuation of the group. And again we are faced with a paradox. The force of natural selection to prompt sexual desire, genital stimulation and reproduction conflicts with a regulated, self-controlled body, the eradication of desire and abstinence. On the one hand early Christian (non-)sexual conduct constituted a threat to the continued existence of the community. On the other hand abstinence culturally signified self-control, a balanced, perfect, strong, healthy male body. The tension is not easily resolved, but it was living with this tension that secured and maintained order and made inroads into chaos.

Concluding remarks

Evolution theory should be seen as what it is: yet another terministic screen like any other, and not *the* explanatory paradigm for all realities. As a terministic screen its strategic possibilities should be recognised but not exploited, as for example in the tendencies of theologians to naturalise theology.

As a terministic screen, it should not be regarded as fixed and stable, but as dynamic, capable of modification, adaptation and incorporating strategies deriving from other spheres. As far as its explanatory potential for religion is concerned, it is limited. Although it can be applied fruitfully in the field of early Christian studies, its limitations should be recognised.

On the other hand, a terministic screen allowing for the integration of rhetorical strategies, more specifically categories concerned with a cultural rhetoric of the body, focuses on cultural forces at work in their historical environment, thus destabilising sweeping generalisations concerning the origins of religious discourse. It is important, therefore, to resist the dichotomous 'nature'-'culture' distinction that haunts and permeates the sciences and scientific activities. The notion of a terministic screen allows for the integration of strategic possibilities from different spheres and their application in a particular field of study.

Religious discourse should also not be divorced from its cultural origins and moorings. As a matter of fact, terministic screens isolating religion or religious discourse from culture lack a sense of and sensitivity to history and display a severe lack of understanding of the processes of symbolisation. Demarcating, defining and isolating religion in a particular field makes it impossible to recognise the emergence of new religious discourses, the cultural mechanisms at work in the formation of religious discourse and the *modus operandi* of religious discourse in its parasitic self-maintenance.

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Endnotes

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- 1 For 'terministic screens', see Burke (1966 [1965]:44-62) and for its roots in William James's pragmatism, see Stob, P (2008:130-152). He argues that this phrase often features in social constructionist discourse, usurping Burke's position as pioneer social constructionist, whereas James's pragmatism should be taken as the interpretive context. In this paper the term is used in the sense of a terministic 'catalyst', that allows not only for the screening effect, but also incorporates the meliorist attitude in its constructive effect.
 - 2 See for example his use of Geza Vermes (Dawkins 2006:206), where Jesus is categorised as a charismatic personage in the same manner as in cargo cults, actually not a remarkable new idea and again a simplification of the problem, as evidenced by the complexities of historical Jesus research. And Vermes is quoted again when it is argued that the New Testament is actually no better than the Old Testament, since both centre on the abhorrent "no atonement except through blood", be it the blood of a child or of another (animal) (see Dawkins 2006:251-253). Besides the fact that it can be and is disputed whether this is a central Christian doctrine, or indeed whether we can still identify 'central doctrines', it is undoubtedly an abhorrent practice. But have we explained and understood it by condemning it? And is it possible to explain and understand this practice divorced from the cultures it derived from? Finally, the competence and expertise of Geza Vermes is indisputable, but his is only one voice in a remarkably discordant chorus of voices on the historical Jesus. When it comes to linking Paul with the doctrine of atonement, Paul appears all of a sudden to have written the letter to the Hebrews as well (Dawkins 2006:253)!
 - 3 See in this regard Foucault's *The discourse on language* sometimes also referred to as *The order of discourse*.
 - 4 See for example Kümmel's apologetics for the inclusion of its formation in his *Introduction to the New Testament*, 29.
 - 5 Barr (1977:146) writes: "It was wholly mistaken, however, to suppose that evolutionary views of this kind were logically and intrinsically connected with source analysis of the pentateuch or of other Old Testament documents."
 - 6 He writes: "Knowledge is obtained by taking apart the New Testament material without studying sections or traditions as parts of a whole. This atomistic approach is applicable to most aspects of investigation" (Vorster 1988:35).
 - 7 In this regard also see Moritz (2005:148), who points out that her interpretation calls for a self-denial programme which conflicts with our genes' striving for fitness rewards, to some extent a course of self-destruction.
 - 8 To link it in the rather shoddy manner he does with entrance into a part of paradise "where you will enjoy seventy-two virgins" does not really provide an answer, quite apart from the ethic nature of this interpretation.
 - 9 See for example the *ex cathedra* statement of Russell (2005) in his indictment of Intelligent Design theory. According to him, "God does act within nature ... and Darwinian evolution is the result." Darwinian evolution may provide us with the best clarificatory paradigm at the moment, but should it acquire the status of 'god-like inspiration'? The stability assigned to the evolutionary strategy appears to undermine the very destabilising function it performs.
 - 10 The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms (Bourdieu 1980:55).
 - 11 See also Perkins's remarks, following Foucault, Morton and Zavarazadeh (Perkins 1995:4). Humans do not possess a nature, they acquire a nature through the various self-understandings offered to them by the discursive practices in which they engage. They do not have a timeless essence, "a consciousness that places him [sic] beyond historical and political practices; rather he [sic] is considered to be produced by these practices or as an effect of these discourses."