

PHIL 1140 (Philosophy of Religion)

Sample answer from Section A of the sample final exam.

“Explain why the existence of religions is (at least initially) puzzling, from the point of evolutionary psychology. Briefly outline two evolutionary explanations of religion, such as the ‘adaptationist’ and ‘byproduct’ theories.”

The existence of religions is initially puzzling because religious practices (rituals, sacrifices, worship, building temples, etc.) consume valuable resources of time and materials. Religious people are spending their time and money in acts of devotion instead of gathering food, building defenses against invasion, etc. Surely natural selection will therefore eliminate religious impulses?

The ‘adaptionist’ explanation says that, despite religion having the costs mentioned above, religions have evolutionary benefits (benefits to survival and reproduction) that outweigh those costs. For example, religious rituals may foster social cohesion, and enable tribe members to trust each other more. This might happen because people fear the gods’ anger if they cheat or steal.

The ‘byproduct’ (or spandrel) view is that religion carries no evolutionary benefit, but is a side-effect of certain cognitive modules that are beneficial. E.g. evolution favours the detection of unseen agents, and finding causes for observed events. And once we have these modules, they also give rise to religious beliefs in unseen intelligent forces.