

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

The Body of Faith: A Biological History of Religion in America. By Robert C. Fuller

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6h3724kx>

Journal

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 82(3)

ISSN

0002-7189

Author

Taves, A

Publication Date

2014-09-01

DOI

10.1093/jaarel/lfu025

Peer reviewed

The Body of Faith: A Biological History of Religion in America. By Robert C. Fuller.

University of Chicago Press, 2013. xiv + 231 pages. \$35.00.

Robert Fuller's *The Body of Faith* is a wonderfully ambitious and wide-ranging effort designed to bring the biological body into the history of religion in America and by extension into the study of religion more generally. In contrast to works that focus on discourse about the body, Fuller focuses on the evolved biological body in order to suggest what an interdisciplinary approach informed by recent work in the natural sciences can add to our understanding of historical events and processes. His thesis that "explaining religious thought or feeling requires at least some attention to their biological substrates" (183-184) is straightforward and at the same time challenging. It is no longer adequate, he argues, to assume that "humans come into the world as blank slates awaiting culture's imprint" (viii). Although he does not reject the postmodernist approach to the body as a site for the contestation of power, he thinks it has over-accentuated differences and underestimated the potential contributions of the biological and psychological sciences (viii-ix). Locating historical research at the critical intersection of various humanistic and scientific approaches, he argues that "historians must become more interdisciplinary or risk having their technical skills appear woefully out-of-date" (180).

Fuller is an Americanist by training and the book is published in the Chicago History of American Religion Series, which has consistently offered innovative contributions to rethinking American religious history. In offering a new approach, Fuller was faced with the challenge of making a largely synchronic argument for the importance of research on the biological body in a book series in which authors typically trace a theme from the colonial era to the present. His solution—to focus on a chronologically arranged series of puzzles on which the biological approach can shed light—gives an elegant nod to the expectations of the series, while at the same

time focusing our attention on specific problems in American religious history (p. xiv). In taking up these puzzles, he indicates that a greater attention to biological processes “should be able to help us account for features found in nearly all religious groups (or features that characterize certain types of religious groups), variation between different religious groups, and individual variation with religious groups” (180).

Chapter One, “History’s Body,” takes up the question of beginnings and, as “a story about religion born of American’s biological bodies,” he opens his narrative by locating “the human species in the grand scheme of evolution” (1). Given the many different starting points for understanding both religion and evolution, Fuller is commendably explicit about his choices. We can contrast his approach with that of Robert Bellah. Where Bellah framed *Religion in Human Evolution* in relation to the biologically evolved capacity for play and drew heavily from theories of gene-cultural coevolution, Fuller chose to focus on the “biologically evolved bodily mechanisms [that he thinks most] directly influence religious behavior,” particularly mechanisms designed to forge cooperation, identify agents, attach ourselves to protective figures, and explore and creatively engage the world around us (9-10). Fuller’s choices dovetail nicely with his Jamesian understanding of religion as “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (10), just as Bellah’s emphasis on play fits with his characterization of religion as involving entry into non-ordinary realities. Fuller’s overview also does an impressive job of acknowledging the controversies among evolutionary theorists, while at the same time positioning his argument so that it is not dependent on any one resolution. Sensitive to the constant interactions between humans and their social and increasingly cultural environments, he stresses that humans have evolved to pursue many interests that are “far removed from the typical pressures ... of physical survival and

reproduction” (9). The result is a truly remarkable chapter that could easily stand on its own as an assigned reading in courses on theory and method.

Subsequent chapters take up topics examined in his own and other’s previous work to illustrate what a biological perspective might add. Chapter Two – “Incorporating a Civil Body Politick” – focuses, among other things, on the effects of the Great Awakening, building on the work of William McLoughlin to ask how the awakening, with its focus on individual conversion, it could facilitate renewed communal commitments (34-45). Noting the revivalists’ efforts to evoke a fear of hell, as well as shame and guilt for sins, he uses research on the biology of fear, shame, and guilt to illuminate the way that conversion might literally have reshaped people’s bodily experience and, in doing so, helped them adapt to change. In Chapter Three, he picks up on William Clebsch’s discussion of the emergence two different spiritual sensibilities -- ascetic and aesthetic – during the early national period, using research on individual differences with respect to evolved “security and precaution networks” to suggest a bodily basis for divergent sectarian styles. Relying on the work of Jan Shipps and others, he then turns to early Mormonism, where he suggests that the vastness of Smith’s claims and his outsize personality may have evoked feelings of awe, which recent research connects not only with vastness but also willingness to subordinate oneself to others (62-63). Chapter Four–Varieties of Emotional Experience –takes up emotions that he thinks may have been evoked by apocalypticism (fear and guilt) and nature religion (wonder). In Chapter 5–Pain and the Creative Imagination–he considers the place of healing in a wide swath of traditions, building on the work of Ariel Glucklich to suggest the role of pain in triggering the body’s capacity for self-dissolution and ecstasy, to confirm and to violate cultural norms, and to make and remake our religious worlds. In Chapter 6–Passion, Devotion, and Religious Transformation–he takes up sexual desire,

drawing on the work of Jeffrey Kripal, Leigh Schmidt, and others, to argue that it can trigger many of the same effects as pain, while at the same time fueling passionate attachment (devotion) to something beyond the self. Chapter 7—Denominational Bodies, Individual Postures—focuses on how biological differences influence in personal religiosity and, conversely, how religious traditions use ritual to create collective religious bodies. Noting that not only denominations but also individuals within denominations can be placed along a liberal to conservative continuum, he explores the contribution that heritable personality traits may make in shaping these inclinations (144-151). He also argues that we should look beyond socialization to consider how gender differences with respect to religiosity (higher in females) and criminal behavior (higher in young males) might be linked to different levels of risk tolerance, personality traits, hormones, and mating strategies (151-158). In Chapter 8—Body of 21st Century Faith—Fuller considers the increasingly bimodal religious landscape in the U.S. in light of American’s increased ability to seek out and cultivate distinctive religious niches.

The chapters offer a stunning array of illustrations of the way that biological research might add to our historical understanding. Some readers may feel overwhelmed by the wealth of examples and the vastness of the literature from which Fuller draws. Others, with expertise in particular areas, may question his specific suggestions. I would offer the following takeaway points:

- 1) For scholars of religion, Fuller makes the point that research on the biological body (evolutionary, biological, psychological, cognitive) can shed light on historical puzzles. In some cases it can help us to identify cross-culturally stable human biases and in others it can highlight a range of individual variations that may interact differently with various socio-cultural

processes. I think Fuller is absolutely right on this score and I agree with him that historians ignore this research at their peril.

2) Fuller discusses a vast amount of scientific literature, but there is always more. As he acknowledges, there are many ways to bring biological research on the evolved human body to bear on historical events. While he has illustrated a variety of ways this can be done, he has not exhausted the possibilities. Scholars can follow up on his leads and explore others as best suits their historical data.

3) Scholars of American religious history should note that throughout the book Fuller stresses that he is offering *suggestions* that he thinks might add to our ability to explain events. His suggestions, in other words, should be understood as hypotheses, which in the spirit of scientific inquiry need to be tested and evaluated by those with expertise in particular sets of sources and historiographical debates. He is not trying to offer the last word on these matters; he is encouraging us to explore this research and consider its implications.

4) Finally, although Fuller anticipates that biologically derived explanations will add to our explanatory range, supplementing but in most cases not replacing other explanations, he does not provide a model for how these different processes (biological, social, cultural) interact. To understand historical events more fully, we will not only need to take account of bodily process but develop frameworks that allow us to consider how these processes interact to give rise to different historical phenomena.