Religion

ATRAN, SCOTT. *In gods we trust: the evolutionary landscape of religion*. xvi, 348 pp., illus., bibliogr. Oxford: Univ. Press, 2002. £39.50 (cloth)

The 'most stable and recurrent cultural patterns', writes Atran in this readable and provocative book, 'are generated by specialized core adaptations of the human mind/brain' (p. 170). Within evolutionary psychology, this is scarcely controversial – 'stone age minds in a space age world' is the fundamental idea. Where Atran differs from his colleagues is in attempting to glue this model to a very different one, in which social strategies, commitments, and institutions loom large. To explain religion, in Atran's view, cognitive approaches will not suffice. Religion for Atran is more than a mass of internal representations flitting between brain and brain. Instead, he defines it as 'costly communal commitments to hard-to-fake beliefs in the supernatural' (p. 9).

I have never seen merit in the idea that biological, social, or historical facts can be psychologically explained. The currently fashionable tenets of evolutionary psychology therefore seem to me a poor substitute for interdisciplinary research into the origins and diversity of human social and mental life. If you believe that gods and goblins – like contracts and promises – are institutional facts, then it is 'human social institutions' whose evolution must be explained. Atran touches on institutions (p. 90), but only marginally and externally – as if the ritual institutions of religion were no more than 'conduits' for the flow of other-worldly concepts whose origins lay elsewhere. It is the passionate commitment of evolutionary psychology to repudiate Durkheim's legacy in social science, and Atran does his best. But one has the sense of a scholar striving to reconcile the irreconcilable, as if seeking to make amends with that very tradition (Marxist, Durkheimian, social anthropological in the widest sense) which evolutionary psychology set out to annihilate and replace.

'Religious ritual', writes Atran in strikingly Durkheimian mode,

> survives cultural transmission by embedding episodes of intense, life-defining personal experiences in public performances. These performances involve sequential, socially interactive movement and gesture (chant, dance, murmur, sway) and formulaic utterances that rhythmically synchronize affective states among group members in displays of co-operative commitment. This is often accompanied by sensory pageantry, which further helps to emotionally validate and sustain the moral consensus. (p. 16)

What I find amusing is Atran's studied refusal to acknowledge the paternity of such ideas. The book's index lists Dostoevsky and Pope Gregory VII but omits Durkheim altogether. Moreover, it remains quite unclear to me how religious transmission's acknowledged dependency on coercive institutions can be squared with Dan Sperber's and Pascal Boyer's antithetical notion which Atran also accepts – namely, that 'religious concepts need little in the way of overt cultural representation or instruction to be learned and transmitted' (p. 96).

Atran is at his most entertaining in pouring acid on every rival theory he can bring himself to acknowledge. Religion, he persuasively argues, did not originate primarily or exclusively to cope with death, maintain the social order, recover lost childhood security, act as a substitute for sexual gratification, explain the inexplicable, or transmit cultural knowledge. Somehow, the puzzle is deeper than such theories can reach. Religion involves belief in patent absurdities – such as virgin birth, transubstantiation, or life after death. It can prompt you to starve, self-mutilate, or adopt lifelong celibacy. To behave in such ways does not appear to be an evolutionary stable strategy. 'Imagine', writes Atran, 'another animal that took injury for health, or big for small, or fast for slow, or dead for alive. It's unlikely that such a species could survive' (p. 5).

So what is the explanation? Atran dismisses Richard Dawkins's 'parasitic meme' idea – the notion of God as rampant computer virus. Neither is he kind to functionalist, behaviourist, group-selectionist, or game-theoretic models. Unlike Dan Sperber and Pascal Boyer – to whom he is otherwise close – he wrestles with vigour against the constraints of narrow cognitivism. Communal commitments? Costly beliefs? Almost every term in his own definition of religion takes us beyond individualistic psychology – and back into the domain of politics, strategies, and power. Such welcome developments only highlight Atran's refusal to take the final step – to acknowledge religious concepts as internally constituted by the ritual processes through which commitments are made.

There is no cheap way of signalling commitment to an alliance. To generate trust, costly signals are required. Among the many possibilities, Atran includes a lifetime of celibacy, building useless pyramids, slaying one's livestock, chopping off a finger, and killing one's firstborn. The more crazy and pointless the gesture, the more likely it is to convince.

Although it offers many insights, I found this a patchy and ultimately disappointing

book. 'Because there is no such entity as religion', we are told, 'it makes no sense to ask how "it" evolved' (p. 15). But if the strategy of bonding through absurdities in the human case became evolutionarily stable, is it not precisely the job of a Darwinian to investigate how, when, and why? Bypassing modern palaeoanthropology, behavioural ecology, archaeology, and interdisciplinary human origins research, Atran exempts himself from even trying. He is thought-provoking and enlightening as he seeks to reconcile the 'cognitive' and 'commitment' theories which in recent debates have competed for our support. But the whole endeavour reveals more about the limitations of his own psychological paradigm than about the 'evolutionary landscape' of religion. Darwin himself staunchly resisted all attempts to explain human uniqueness by invoking special minds. Our brains are those of primates – designed to distinguish fact from fiction. Primate cognition is Machiavellian, serving functions in terms of alliance-formation, politics, and power. As far as we know, apes cement their coalitions without needing cognitive absurdities. If humans in this respect are so different, it remains a pressing anthropological task to explain why.

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Gaenszle, Martin. *Ancestral voices: oral ritual texts and their social contexts among the Mewahang Rai of East Nepal*. xviii, 347 pp., maps, figs., illus., bibliogr. London, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2002. €35.90

Much of the material which informs the present study was collected in the village of Baja in Sankhuwa Sabha District of East Nepal, during the mid-1980s and early 1990s. In the course of his doctoral research on Mewahang Rai kinship and mythology along the western reaches of the Arun valley, six days' walk from the nearest road, the author became fascinated with the 'rich and living ritual tradition' (p. 21) of the *muddum* which he encountered almost daily. The *muddum*, variously translated by Gaenszle as a 'living, entirely oral "tribal" tradition which forms the basis of Mewahang cultural identity' (p. 3) and as a 'tradition of speaking, consisting of different kinds of speech events' (p. 4), is performed in a ritual language. Struggling already with colloquial Mewahang, Gaenszle found this important ritual language to be 'totally different, archaic and largely untranslatable' (p. 21). It is a credit to Gaenszle's commitment to learning, analysing, and finally disseminating these findings that this monograph should be published some fifteen years after the commencement of his initial research.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 offers a holistic analysis of Mewahang ritual texts by situating them within their social context, and Part 2 is a detailed corpus of ritual texts together with interlinear translations. The separation works well, allowing the texts in the documentary section to 'speak for themselves' (p. 20). Similarly, the 200 pages of meticulous analysis which characterize the first section are free of dense linguistic explication.

It is the author's contention that among the Mewahang Rai, rituals are essentially speech acts and that these 'speech acts do not differ in a fundamental way from those in ordinary life' (p. 2). The differences that do exist are marked by ritual language which is usually distinct from the vernacular. Distinguishing and defining the salient features of ritual speech and understanding their enduring power in Mewahang social life thus becomes the focus of the study. The strength of Gaenszle's approach lies in his ability to blend textual and contextual approaches. The nuanced analysis which results shows Mewahang ritual speech to be a resource for both the construction of meanings and for social action. Having situated himself within the wider academic discourses on ritual and performance, the author provides a lucid introductory overview to anthropological analyses of ritual and speech, indenting his discussion with subtitles such as 'formality', 'poetics', 'performance', and 'competence and authority'. Gaenszle's cogent presentation of the various debates will be of particular utility to students and scholars interested in textuality and looking for discrete definitions of the anthropology of performance.

The author is careful to pay homage to András Höfer and Nicholas Allen, both accomplished anthropologists of Nepal known for their 'ethno-philological' approaches. While definitional debates are essentially futile, I would feel more comfortable with the label 'linguistic anthropology' or 'ethnolinguistics', since the character and aims of such work echoes the very essence of what drives these underrepresented and often misunderstood subdisciplines. As befits a study of this nature, Gaenszle is transparent about his research methodology. When discussing the dialogue between the ethnographer and his interlocutors, the author shows both sides to have their own perspectives and interests, 'sometimes approaching each other but nevertheless retaining their differences' (p. 22).

Of the six analytical chapters, the first and last are particularly engaging. Drawing on testimonies provided by local experts and village elders, Gaenszle presents a powerful indigenous exegesis of the *muddum*, which he supplements with comparative data from neighbouring Kiranti groups. The recitation of the Mewahang *muddum*, then, restores social