

There are costs to any individual of being religious: the time and resources spent on rituals, the psychic energy devoted to following certain injunctions, the pain of some initiation rites. But in terms of intergroup struggle, according to ,” David Sloan Wilson , author of *Darwin's Cathedral*. The costs can be outweighed by the benefits of being in a cohesive group that out-competes the others.

There is another element here too, unique to humans because it depends on language. A person's behavior is observed not only by those in his immediate surroundings but also by anyone who can hear about it. There might be clear costs to taking on a role analogous to the sentry bird — a person who stands up to authority, for instance, risks losing his job, going to jail or getting beaten by the police — but in humans, these local costs might be outweighed by long-distance benefits. If a particular selfless trait enhances a person's reputation, spread through the written and spoken word, it might give him an advantage in many of life's challenges, like finding a mate. One way that reputation is enhanced is by being ostentatiously religious.

“The study of evolution is largely the study of trade-offs,” says . It might seem disadvantageous, in terms of foraging for sustenance and safety, for someone to favor religious over rationalistic explanations that would point to where the food and danger are. But in some circumstances, he wrote, “a symbolic belief system that departs from factual reality fares better.” For the individual, it might be more adaptive to have “highly sophisticated mental modules for acquiring factual knowledge and for building symbolic belief systems” than to have only one or the other, according to Wilson. For the group, it might be that a mixture of hardheaded realists and symbolically minded visionaries is most adaptive and that “what seems to be an adversarial relationship” between theists and atheists within a community is really a division of cognitive labor that “keeps social groups as a whole on an even keel.”

Even if Wilson is right that religion enhances group fitness, the question remains: Where does God come in? Why is a religious group any different from groups for which a fitness argument is never even offered — a group of fraternity brothers, say, or Yankees fans?

Richard Sosis, an anthropologist with positions at the University of Connecticut and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has suggested a partial answer. Like many adaptationists, Sosis focuses on the way religion might be adaptive at the individual level. But even adaptations that help an individual survive can sometimes play themselves out through the group. Consider religious rituals.

“Religious and secular rituals can both promote cooperation,” Sosis wrote in *American Scientist* in 2004. But religious rituals “generate greater belief and commitment” because they depend on belief rather than on proof. The rituals are “beyond the possibility of examination,” he wrote, and a commitment to them is therefore emotional rather than logical — a commitment that is, in Sosis's view, deeper and more long-lasting.

Rituals are a way of signaling a sincere commitment to the religion's core beliefs, thereby earning loyalty from others in the group. “By donning several layers of clothing and standing out in the midday sun,” Sosis wrote, “ultraorthodox Jewish men are signaling to others: ‘Hey! Look, I'm a haredi’ — or extremely pious — ‘Jew. If you are also a member of this group, you can trust me because why else would I be dressed like this?’ ” These “signaling” rituals can grant the individual a sense of belonging and grant the group some freedom from constant and costly monitoring to ensure that their members are loyal and committed. The rituals are harsh enough to weed out the infidels, and both the group and the individual believers benefit.

In 2003, Sosis and Bradley Ruffle of Ben Gurion University in Israel sought an explanation for why Israel's religious communes did better on average than secular communes in the wake of the economic crash of most of the country's kibbutzim. They based their study on a standard economic game that measures cooperation. Individuals from religious communes played the game more cooperatively, while those from secular communes tended to be more selfish. It was the men who attended synagogue daily, not the religious women or the less observant men, who showed the biggest differences. To Sosis, this suggested that what mattered most was the frequent public display of devotion. These rituals, he wrote, led to greater cooperation in the religious communes, which helped them maintain their communal structure during economic hard times.