

Bill Maher's film is controversial. He raises many questions about the nature of belief and the role religion plays today in various societies around the world. Maher is essentially a comedian and a talk show host ("Real Time" with Bill Maher on HBO) who takes on serious issues.

- 1) What does Maher mean when he says he wants to "peddle" or "sell" doubt? Why is it important to him to "preach the gospel of I don't know?"
- 2) What does he mean when he distinguishes between Christianity and being "Christ like?"
- 3) Does the comedic approach to this subject in some way influence your interpretation of the message?
- 4) Is Maher fair in how he portrays all religions?
- 5) What role does Maher believe religion will ultimately play in today's world?
- 6) What is the ultimate message in the film?

**ASSIGNMENT: Answer any of the above questions with a clearly defined thesis. Follow the essay protocol in the "Essay Guide" for students.**

**Jeremiah Cummings Blames His Misfortune on HBO Host Bill Maher's 2008 Film 'Religilous',** By EMILY FRIEDMAN, Sept. 24, 2009 —

Preacher Jeremiah Cummings says his life was changed forever – and not for the better – after he appeared in political commenter Bill Maher's documentary "Religilous."

According to Cummings, Maher "ruined [his] life."

Cummings sued Lionsgate Entertainment, the film's distributor, for defamation of character and sought \$50 million in damages. He later dropped the case, but says the film has triggered lawsuits against him and impoverished him. The preacher wants his life back, he says.

"They are not telling the whole story the way I gave the interview," Cummings, 58, told ABCNews.com of his appearance in the 2008 film in which Maher interviewed the Orlando-based evangelist.

As a result of the film, Cummings says that he's now unable to pay the rent on his Orlando home that he shares with his wife and three of his children, and has stopped getting requests for speaking engagements.

"This film hurt me tremendously," said Cummings.

Cummings said that his troubles began in November 2006 when he was approached to be in a documentary for the PBS Broadcasting Network titled "A Spiritual Journey," in which he was to discuss his "faith and conversion." Cummings, who was a member of the Philadelphia soul group Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes in the 1970s, is a former Muslim who converted to Christianity in 1997.

But that documentary was not at all what it seemed, according to Cummings, who says in the complaint that his "true character was totally distorted on screen before millions of viewers for laughs."

In the film, Maher asks Cummings to discuss how rock icons and religious leaders always seem to be dressed in "elaborate costumes."

When Maher presses Cummings about his outfit during the interview, the reverend responds, "I always dress well" and notes that his shoes are not made of alligator, as the host suggested, but are lizard skin.

Maher does not let up, asking Cummings if it's not true that Jesus "championed the poor." The film then cuts to Cummings saying, "I like gold" and "People want you to look well."

A Lionsgate spokeswoman dismissed Cummings' complaints, noting that he dropped the case voluntarily. She said the company "had no further comment."

In a 2008 interview with The Los Angeles Times, Maher was asked how he was able to get people to agree to talk to him for the film. Maher told the paper, "It was simple: We never, ever used my name. We never told anybody it was me who was going to do the interviews. We even had a fake title for the film. We called it 'A Spiritual Journey.'"

Cummings says that he "didn't even know Maher" was going to be interviewing him until he sat down for the taping in November 2006 and that he's sure "things were added" to the segment that he appears in during the editing process.

In June, after Cummings decided to drop the lawsuit "for the sake of his children," the reverend says that a Maher producer offered him the opportunity to appear on Maher's HBO talk show to discuss his gripes with "Religilous."

"That's not what I wanted. I didn't want to go on his show," said Cummings. "I wanted a financial settlement because [Lionsgate] is making millions of dollars using me in the wrong way."

But dropping the lawsuit wasn't the end of Cummings' legal woes. Just three weeks before the suit with Lionsgate was dropped, Cummings was sued by two former parishioners from a ministry, the Amazing Life Outreach Church, that he started in Raleigh, N.C., in the fall of 2006.

The parishioners, Elsie Carter and Rodney-Daryl Jones, claim in the suit filed in Wake County that Cummings stole at least \$400,000 from members of the ministry for his "personal use."

Cummings, who says he has not been served with paperwork to appear in court, called Carter and Jones' allegations "false" and accuses them of suing him for money they thought he'd get in a settlement with Lionsgate.

"I think it was done basically to continue to defame me and discredit me as a person," said Cummings. "These folks thought I was going to get a settlement."

Reached by phone at her Raleigh home, Carter said "No" when asked if she sued Cummings in hopes that she would get some of the money he had requested from Lionsgate.

Today, Cummings says he regrets ever going to North Carolina, a decision he said led to him having to contemplate filing for bankruptcy and worrying how to feed his family.

"I need to start thinking about food stamps," said Cummings.

"The biggest mistake I ever made was going to Raleigh," he said. "I should have remained out on the road and kept going as an evangelist, teaching people about faith."

"I want my life back."

## A Commentary on "Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought"



Submitted by Jen on Mon, 12/17/2007 - 8:44pm

Where do we get our religious concepts from? Why do some concepts, such as the existence of one God who knows all, the existence of souls, of an afterlife, of karma, and so forth pervade throughout the spiritual lives of very different people? Why do these concepts persist for thousands of years? How do these concepts gain a following? In *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* anthropologist Pascal Boyer attempts to answer these questions in terms of what we know about cognitive psychology and evolutionary biology (1). Where once it was believed that these were silly questions to ask, Boyer believes that we now have the tools to treat them as a series of problems rather than complete mysteries (1). Boyer does not make an attempt to take an atheist stance and explain away God as a figment of our imaginations, but rather to explain why we believe what we believe and why some beliefs are so persistent.

Boyer begins the book by dismissing previous explanations for the origins of religion. For example, one of the most appealing accounts of the origin of religion is that people need explanations for everything in their lives, therefore they invent supernatural forces to account for the things they experience. However, there is a problem with this view in that many people are unconcerned with the workings of things unless they have been trained to appreciate that. In order to illustrate this concept, Boyer points to a tribe which believes that witches are at work just below this surface. One day, a man's house falls on his head, and the villagers are convinced it is the work of witches. Even after it has been pointed out to the villagers that termites were the root of the problem, this still does not dissuade them from their belief in the witch. They are not so much as concerned with how the collapse of the house came about as they are with why the house decided to collapse at the moment, what the witch could have possibly had against the man, what could that man have done in his lifetime to make him a target for the witches, and so forth. The mechanical whys of this event are unimportant and do not reflect on the supernatural whys at all.

The other problem with this account of the origin of religion—where religion is used as an explanation for natural events—is that religious concepts tend to make things more mysterious and complicated than other types of explanations. For example, if we go back to the man and his house, explaining away this occurrence by termites is a much more simple solution than explaining it in terms of witches. If we explain it in terms of witches, we now have to invent a whole personality for the witches, and we have to describe their powers, and their domain, and so on. It is far easier and more logical for the human brain to give a secular explanation than a religious one.

Continuing on, Boyer next makes some additional observations about how people choose their religious concepts, beginning with a discussion of Richard Dawkin's meme concept. Memes are programs (or in this case, cultural concepts) which implant certain behaviors in people, much like genes. When people express these behaviors or ideas, the meme is transmitted, perhaps even copied. At this point it is easy to say that those concepts which get passed on are the ones that are somehow most appealing; and those that are not appealing are reworked. It is an easy assumption to make that those concepts which are not appealing are the ones that are worked on. However, it takes just as much brain power to maintain the same concept in one's mind, as, unlike genes or computers, we do not merely copy programs and store them in our memory. We must first process them and see if they fit in with us. The question is, why are people so selective about the concepts they will believe in? Boyer says that he will help explain this question by "show[ing] how religion emerges (has its origins, if you want) in the selection of concepts and the selection of memories" (1). The question is, what is our selection process? How does religion emerge?

Boyer says that we as humans gain most of our knowledge about the world through *inference* systems. As an example of an inference system in action: when we see an exotic variety of a small, fuzzy rodent from another continent, we assume that it must sleep sometime during the 24 hour day, that it consumes some kind of food in order to generate energy for itself, and it somehow replicates itself, most likely through sexual reproduction. Yet how do we know all this information about the rodent before we have actually studied it? The answer is that we have seen similar creatures before in our backyard: squirrels, mice, rats, chipmunks, and so on. These animals are all organized on a template, one that is titled "Small fuzzy rodents" and has some basic properties which outline the template. Using this template, we can infer information about new small fuzzy things we meet.

We have been using this template method from the day we began to experience new things, we began taking those things and separating them into categories and making new entries in the encyclopedia of our mind. A concept, on the other hand, is the equivalent of a specific animal, that is, a subcategory of information that fits into our "small fuzzy rodent" template. For example, in North America we have a conception of white-tailed deer, since we see them in our backyard all the time, but we do not really have as much of a hands-conception of a platypus as say a resident of Australia might have. However, we do have a template of what an animal is ("moves, eats, reproduces"; this is separate from our fuzzy animal template) and therefore we can make inferences about what the platypus does without actually having studied it.

When we apply this concept specifically to religion, we find that people have similar religious templates about what supernatural forces should be like, but the concepts vary significantly across regions. So we may all agree that supernatural forces are unseen (the template); but we disagree about what they actually do in our lives (concept). From this point forward in the book, Boyer discusses specific properties of the human mind, for example, how we produce our inferences, and how they affect our inference systems and our templates to generate different kinds of information about religion. He also discusses which concepts are most likely to be

adapted and which ones are not. For example, those religious concepts that are most likely to be adapted most easily are those which do not violate the template of a concept. For example, let us make up the religious belief that this statue in front of us is special because not only do you see it here, but you see it the world over. Now most of us would not find this a very logical belief because in our minds, we have a template for statues and one of the things in this template is that we expect it to have a specific defined location in space. However, if the belief were “this statue has magical healing properties”, it would be more likely that someone would believe this as this information can easily be added as a concept into an information box inside the template. This is a statue, but it is a different variety of statue. It has all the properties of normal statues except for this small detail.

This idea can also happen with the conception of God; for example, we may believe that he is a special type of person. But if we say he only exists on Wednesdays, we will get really confused because this doesn't fit our template for person; persons do not exist some days and then exist others (1). They are extant or they aren't. However, if we say God is omnipotent, this fits in with our template, as we are adding an additional concept about this person to their template.

Even though this book was more about the transmission and development of ideas than solid biology, there was still a lot to be gained in context of our biology class. I think one of the most important concepts that Boyer covered was that diversity can rise out of simplicity. Here we have very simple templates about the way the world works, and we have inference systems that help us piece together new bits of information and create new information. Using these inference systems, we are able to build up a more complex body of knowledge about the supernatural, thus creating very complicated religious concepts from very simple beginnings. Just as different varieties of atoms can arise from a few changes in electrons and just as complex macromolecules and organisms can be built from different arrangements, so too can complex ideas and supernatural agents be built from humble templates.

I also found Boyers' explanations of the way the human brain works very revealing. In this book, I found a satisfactory answer (though a theoretical one) for how knowledge is developed and how ideas are transmitted. On a personal level, I found that Boyer's theories helped explain why I sometimes do not communicate well with others when I am giving or receiving directions. For instance, if I have stronger powers of inference than someone else (or at least, more predisposed to inferring about my world instead of relying on hands-on observations), in speaking with them I may give them less information, and so they may misconstrue my meaning. Oftentimes when I am speaking with my mother, she knows exactly what I am saying because we both make the same exact inferences about certain ideas. On the other hand, I have to give my father more and different information when giving directions because he assumes a lot less about what we are doing at that particular moment.

All in all, I highly recommend Boyer's book for those who are interested in topics concerning cultural transmission, the transmission of ideas, story telling, the development of religious ideas and their origins, the reasons certain ideas manifest themselves in the human psyche over other ones, and why certain people believe and why others do not. Compared to William James lecture of 1897, "The Will To Believe", it is a light read with a lot of depth based on relevant, contemporary findings.

**References:** (1) Boyer, Pascal. Religion Explained: the Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought. New York: Basic Books, 2001.