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### January 29, 2010: Pascal Boyer's Explanation of Religion

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Title: Pascal Boyer's Explanation of Religion

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1/29/2010—I am working my way through Boyer's 2001 book, *Religion Explained*. I cannot figure out, however, whether his evolutionary brain approach can explain anything. For example, Boyer shows that we can only have certain kinds of religious concepts because of the way our brains work. Undoubtedly this is true. If we were lizards, our God would have the qualities of a lizard. It must be true, but so what? I have heard from others that Boyer makes a different claim. The claim is that because our brains work a certain way, we are fooled, so to speak into having religious concepts. (By religious, Boyer means supernatural). This seems similar to the statement, "you feel love for your daughter for evolutionary reasons". Certainly that is true. Human beings would not have survived without such feelings. But what effect is this supposed to have on me? People who make such statements seem to think that they should change the way we feel about our children. But, of course, if the statement were altogether true, then nothing said to me could change anything about the way I feel, anymore than knowing about digestion keeps me from getting hungry. If knowing natural history could alter love, then love would by definition not be just a matter of biology. Boyer is very good at debunking the usual accounts of religion. He says in answer to the claim that we invent religion to avoid thinking about death, he writes, "The common...explanation—people fear death, and religion makes them believe that it is not the end—is certainly insufficient [to explain religion] because the human mind does not produce adequate comforting delusions against all situations of stress or fear. Indeed, any organism that was prone to such delusions would not long survive." 21. I have left out the basic question about equating religion with the supernatural. It would presumably come as a surprise to Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. Yet, there is something to what Boyer says. How many religions lack the supernatural altogether?