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Article

B-Side Spirituality: An Empathetic Theory of Religion and Ethnographic Data About Spiritual (but Not Religious) Belonging

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ABSTRACT

According to some cognitive and neuroscientific theories, religion is not an evolved adaptation but rather an artifact, one that may lead to adaptive behaviors. Here I relate (a) an empathetic theory of religion with (b) a functional theory of musicality to clarify religion's adaptive features. This theory contributes to previous research by explaining the link between spirituality and music and makes the nontrivial prediction that increasing numbers of people who are disaffected by traditional religious institutions will find modes of meaning-making and fellow-feeling in contemporary festival and live music scenes.

IN WHAT follows I propose a theoretical approach to religion that does not depend on ethnocentric presuppositions about supernatural agents but that also takes seriously biological foundations of religions. Drawing on recent fieldwork in particular subcultures in North America, I examine the relationship between demographic shifts in religious perception and adherence and new modes of expressing spirituality.[1] Throughout I draw on older works by important social scientists (i.e., Emile Durkheim, and Victor Turner and Edith Turner) who act as a scaffold for more recent scholars who provide insight into the deep evolutionary roots of religiosity. Connecting that past to contemporary music-oriented subcultures is an illustration of how scholars might theorize the broad move away from institutionalized religions.

Some quotes from my surveys and ethnographic work will be illustrative for the case I hope to make here: namely that an empathetic theory of religion depends on pre-linguistic modes of

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[1] To make such an argument, I draw on some of the foundational texts related to cognitive science of religion (CSR) and evolutionary psychology. There have been significant developments in these fields more recently, but here I draw on some of the early assumptions (and debates) within these fields and combine them with anthropological theories (for instance, Victor Turner's ruminations on post-capitalist modes of meaning-making) and contemporary ethnographic data to consider the broad disaffection from the so-called world religions and the explosion in cultural modes of production that are "spiritual but not religious."

communication, one of which is musicality in our (and perhaps other) species, and that such a theory of religion might help to explain why increasing numbers of people who are disaffected from traditional institutional religions fill in such evolutionarily deep proclivities through participation in contemporary music scenes and festivals—instances of transitory *communitas*.[2] As some of my subjects reflected:

> I didn't go to church much, more sporadically throughout the years. Now that I am 'middle aged,' I have learned that spirituality is about so much more than just church. I am Christian and believe God created us and Earth. Because I have expanded my views and experiences, my spiritual connection is much deeper. I owe so much of this to my 25+ years following Grateful Dead, Widespread Panic, Leftover Salmon, Gov't Mule and many other jam bands.[3] (2016)

> I have a great distrust for organized religion. Music and nature [are] my church now. (2015)

> I'm a Deadhead . . . that's my religion, and it brings me inner peace. I believe It can bring peace to all. Grateful Dead forever. I'm a naturalist. (2015)

> Now I am agnostic, but spiritual. Nature is my deity. (2016)

These illustrate just some of the conundrums raised by my research: from professed belief in Christianity to spiritual agnosticism, from complete distrust of organized religion to finding religion in nature—there are nuances in what people mean by "none" or "unaffiliated" when they check that box ("Religion and Unaffiliated," 2014; Ramey 2013; Ramey and Miller 2014). In this particular case interlocuters overwhelmingly made a distinction between religiosity and spirituality, and whether they were religious or not, many considered the jamband scene to be formative for their spirituality.

The "B-side" is a term used in the music business to refer to a song that is typically on the opposite side of a record from a released hit single track back when records were the primary medium for dissemination of music (although the popularity of vinyl records is again increasing). When a single was released on a 45-rpm record, the B-side was a song that you likely would not otherwise hear but that the artists felt was indicative of the style or general thrust of the larger album. For instance, the Rolling Stones'"You Can't Always Get What You Want," one of the most popular songs in their catalog, was a B-side track and certainly more culturally ubiquitous than its associated single.[4] Here I use the B-side as an analog for religion, and here is why. Many scholars (i.e., Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Barrett 2004) imagined religion to be primarily concerned with "beliefs" in and performative propitiation of "supernatural" beings. There are two movements in most explanations of religion related to cognitive science of religion and neuroscience: the first has to do with the *naturalness* of religious and moral ideation and behavior, and the second has to do with the *transmission* of religious ideas and behaviors. In the case of the former, religiosity is "natural," it is universal but ultimately a by-product of other

[2] The sociologist Emile Durkheim popularized the notion that religion was about a sense of collective effervescence, related to what the anthropologist Victor Turner later referred to as a feeling of *communitas*, which extended the sense of self beyond the ego-individual by connecting with collective and performative experiences.

[3] These selections were taken from free response questions on the survey, which was electronically distributed on different forums on two occasions (2015 and 2016). The surveys were anonymous.

[4] It is the B-side for the song "Honky Tonk Women."

adaptive cognitive capacities. In the case of the latter, transmission, some of the most influential approaches focused on the importance of inference (rather than mere imitation) in ritual and practice, resulting in greater variability across cultures. To approach the musical metaphor that frames this piece—religions are the B-side of evolved predispositions in our species, which serve no evolutionary purpose themselves, but which have nonetheless become adorned with all manner of cultural accoutrements, from ritual practice, elaborate dress, dogmatic repetition, textual translation, and everything in between. Even if they are not adaptive in the strict evolutionary sense, they certainly carry cultural baggage that may contribute to or compromise the survivability/sustainability of a particular individual, social group, or institution. They are the flipside of evolutionarily evolved proclivities that are not only colorful and enticing but sometimes more impactful than the single (or, the evolved brain mechanism).

As some scholars illustrated (i.e., Dubuisson 2020; Bulbulia and Slingerland 2012), many cognitive explanations employed tautological definitions of *religion* and its transmission, leaving unexplained how inference operated by divorcing it from the important cultural mediating factors that shape its expressions (see especially Dubuisson 2020). In this, such theorizing re-inscribed problematic understandings of religion as sui generis through just-so stories regarding religion's emergence without supporting explanatory fieldwork (Laidlaw 2007; Whitehouse and McCauley 2005; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2007). So, if, with these thinkers, we imagine that indeed there are universal cognitive capacities for religiosity, yet we also must recognize that they are channeled and constrained by cultural conditions, then we begin to approach a theoretical standpoint from which religiosity is imagined as something common to humans (and perhaps something like proto-religion—at least—is common in our closest mammalian kin) but which is biologically speaking aderivative of other socially mediated behaviors.

Specifically, I point to prelinguistic modes of meaning-making that depend on relationality and an affective sense of interrelationship as the ground of what we might think of as spirituality. Indeed, such sentiments obtain even in our closest primate kin and beyond (Goodall 2005; King 2007; DeWaal 2013, 2020; Safina 2019). Even though these universal proclivities are prediscursive they are channeled by cultural variables in their expression. They manifest in various ways, and the ways in which they are expressed are differentially successful, so that some social formations that are "sticky" persist over time (Turchin et al. 2017; Savage et al. 2021). So just as with cognitive and neurophysiological explanations of religions, there are two movements in my argument: one in which I examine the emergence and persistence of empathetic sensibilities that are a sort of social glue that makes spirituality possible, and another in which I try to imagine why one contemporary set of social movements is efficacious in the transmission of such empathetic ideas and practices. Other groups and their cosmographic formulations might be investigated to support or challenge the argument here.

What, then, are the prelinguistic proclivities of our species (and our closest kin) that can be related to the emergence of religion or spirituality? My suggestion is that one (although not the only) avenue where such cultural production becomes important is musicality. More specifically, and to make such ruminations contemporarily relevant, I share some of the ethnographic data that demonstrates that music and festival scenes are some of the places in which spiritual celebrants make meaning and manufacture community outside the bounds of the typical religious community. Indeed, many participants report that they find their primary sense of "self" and "meaning" within these ostensibly recreational communities rather than in more traditional modes of religious meaning-making. I conclude with ways in which other scholars with different expertise might endeavor to challenge or buttress the model of religion advanced here. But for this purpose, I confine my explorations to thinking about the religious dimensions of social movements related to what are commonly referred to as jambands—improvisational

rock music subcultures.[5] The argument suggests ways in which scholars might imagine research programs that combine both lived religious practice, as well as neurophysiological or cognitive studies of religion.

Interrogating the entangled evolutionary roots of both religiosity and musicality, it is possible to see evidence of rhythmic patterns related to altered states of consciousness and highly affective ritual states, which were eventually concretized in the human biological makeup. Today, highly emotional "flashbulb" experiences in collaborative performances inspired many scene participants' moral imaginations, as well as countercultural and communal experiments. In some cases, the most important metaphors and tropes that communicate these values have strong animistic and pantheistic dimensions. The literature review attempts to spell out the evolutionarily deep roots of musicality and how it is related to religiosity. My ethnographic and survey research explores a tension: there are many who perceived participation in music scenes was formative for their own moral and spiritual sensibilities, even as they acknowledged that this is a mode of religiously tinged cultural production that did not fall neatly into the categories of the so-called world religions. This is relevant for those who investigate the increasing numbers of people who do not identify with any religion, but who still evidence religious or spiritual sensibilities.

METHODS

Turning to the ethnographic and survey data, it is important to clarify how this study took shape. I saw my first jamband concert in 1994 and in the subsequent years have attended hundreds of shows and festivals that fall into this broad category. In 2005 the seed for this study was planted, and I began informally gathering data from festival and concert scenes As I became more interested in (and critical of) survey methods that highlighted the increasing numbers of people who identified as "spiritual but not religious," or "none of the above" in studies about religious belonging, I gravitated back to some of the questions that motivated my first ruminations about why people seem increasingly drawn to festival- and concert-centered lifestyles. I formulated a first pass at a survey in 2013. After I piloted the survey, I revised it somewhat, finalizing it in the summer of 2014.

The survey consisted of several categories of questions. The first category included basic demographic information. In addition, questions asked participants to articulate their own political standpoints as well as their perception of whether they were politically or socially active and invested. Sub-questions included specifying social justice-oriented, environmental, or political organizations to which they belonged, or that they supported with their time or financial contributions. A second category teased out festival and concertgoers' perceived relationship to the environment. Many concerts and festival events have now gone "green," and one of my curiosities was whether and to what extent this influenced participants' perception of environmental obligations. The third category included questions related to participants' religious or spiritual

[5] Dean Budnick, founder of jambase.com, *Relix* magazine, and the Jam Nation radio show (who also happens to hold a PhD in cultural studies from Harvard) is often credited with coining the term in the late 1990s. But as Budnick himself noted, he should be imagined as the popularizer of the term, since it was certainly in wide usage by the time the 1992 Horizons of Rock Developing East Coast (H.O.R.D.E.) tour commenced (Budnick 2003, 241). The H.O.R.D.E. tour, organized by the band Blues Traveler, was the first large-scale festival dedicated specifically to this audience. Bands that might epitomize such subcultures include the Grateful Dead (who, in their original musical arrangement long preceded the emergence of the term), the Allman Brothers, Colonel Bruce's Aquarium Rescue Unit, Widespread Panic, Phish, and the Spin Doctors. According to Budnick, the defining feature of jambands was their "musical variegation. . . . [and] a penchant for bending and blending established genres" (Budnick 2003, 242). The social historian and lifelong jamband aficionado Peter Connors put it this way: "At the core of all jam bands is a dedication to improvisation as a chance to create a unique, spontaneous, artistic/musical event shared between band and artist. A jam band cannot reach that point without the energy of the audience. Nor can the audience reach it without the band . . . . That singular, shared musical experience is the beating heart of the jam band scene" (Connors 2013, x).

upbringing, as well as questions that allowed comparisons with their religious or spiritual commitments today. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with participants in the scene, including musicians, professional photographers, road crew, and in some cases families of musicians, and scholars studying these and other similar movements. Participation in festival and concert events, and dozens of informal interviews with people at festival and concert events complimented the survey data.

I first disseminated surveys in person at concert and festival events. This presented significant challenges. Because illicit drugs and often alcohol are important elements of the scene for many participants, some lacked either the attention span or the motivation to engage in extended conversation, or to fill out a survey.[6] Further, because of the sometimes heavy use of entheogens, alcohol, and other psychotropic substances, there are typically both uniformed and undercover law enforcement officials present, and thus a natural suspicion of divulging information that they feared might legally compromise them (even if there was no identifying information on the survey). I therefore moved to disseminating the survey primarily online to gather a larger number of responses. This was a representative but not a random sample. The surveys were distributed through official and unofficial social media channels of a representative cross-section of the scene's most important bands.[7] Some of the groups targeted included some of the most well-known contemporary bands in the scene, such as Phish, Widespread Panic, The Allman Brothers, and Gov't Mule. I also gathered ethnographic data at many concert events, primarily in the Western and Southeastern US, and at select festivals, such as Lock'n (Arrington, VA) and Outside Lands (San Francisco, CA). Some archival research at the official Grateful Dead archives at the University of California-Santa Cruz helped to expand the influential tributaries to these contemporary scenes.

STRONG BRAIN, BROAD MIND: IS MUSIC EVOLUTIONARILY DEEP, AND ADAPTIVE?

The blues musician Willie Dixon once opined that "If you got a weak brain and a narrow mind/ The world gonna leave you way behind. If you got a strong brain and your mind is broad/ Nothin' in the world is gonna be too hard." Is it possible that having a "strong brain," one that is well suited to navigating the ambiguous world of a supremely social higher primate, involves being attentive to communicative patterns that facilitate group bonding and survival? Musicality may be one of the earliest (evolutionarily speaking) and efficacious ways of instantiating such intersubjective exchanges. Some would quibble, however, with such a claim.

For instance, the neuroscientist Steven Pinker famously argued that when it comes to human cognition, music is basically auditory cheesecake (Pinker 1997). Many who work on the cognitive science of religion have said the same about religious beliefs and practices: although they may *appear* adaptive (i.e., they may "taste good"), in a strictly evolutionary sense, religions are not "things" that can be said to be the product of natural selection. Now Pinker's judgment should not be dismissed out of hand, for he claims to be an expert on neuroscience. But there is evidence that significantly challenges his conclusions (indeed, commentary on his "cheesecake" hypothesis is ubiquitous in the literature). Some scholars have suggested that indeed, music does have features that can increase individual fitness and that it may be imagined as

[6] Nearly 51 percent of respondents (n = 537) suggested that altered states of consciousness fueled by both legal and illegal drugs are an important part of the jamband scene, however sober groups and camping areas are standard in festival scenes and in many concerts.

[7] Although all now have international followings, many older fans of these bands are geographically close to where those bands gained notoriety. For instance, the Allman Brothers were native to Jacksonville, FL, the Grateful Dead emerged from the Bay Area, Phish originated in Vermont, Widespread Panic got their start in Athens, GA, and the String Cheese Incident are from Colorado.

evolutionarily adaptive (Savage et al. 2021; Levitin 2006, 2008, 327; Sacks 2007; Mithen 2006; Ball 2010, 2–6; 11; Bulbulia 2004). But more importantly for our purposes here, ruminating on the relationship between religion and music opens a nuanced perspective on what is evolutionarily functional and cultivates a model that differentiates between cultural and biological adaptation (Savage 2019; Sosis 2009).

The science writer Philip Bell argued that music "is quite simply a gymnasium for the mind" (Bell 2010, 241). It is a useful tool for synchronizing group behavior, an efficient transmitter of information, and a vehicle for its recall. As the neuroscientist Daniel Levitin put it, "We don't like [music] because it is beautiful, we find it beautiful because those early humans who made good use of it were those who were most likely to be successful at living and reproduction" (Levitin 2008, 225).

There is some debate about whether this selection for musicality is due to a sort of sexual selection, which made more desirable those hominid ancestors who were proficient music-makers, or whether ancient musical savants developed cognitive capacities that gave them a survival edge. For instance, some like Levitin have argued that the musically adept will outperform their peers because the cognitive "exercise" of musical expression enhances certain forms of intelligence by promoting creativity and integrative modes of consciousness, and thus the ability to attract potential mates. Others have suggested that musicality does not directly impact sexual selection, but it promotes social advancement and acuity, which indirectly fosters greater reproductive success. Regardless, neuroscientific research has shown that it is one of the few activities that engages both hemispheres of our brains, as well as both logic and emotion systems (Levitin 2006). Bell concludes that it makes little difference: whether it has direct or indirect effects on selection, music is now an evolutionarily stable human trait that enriches cultures in a variety of ways. Drawing on the notion of "biophilia" offered by the biologist Edward O. Wilson (1984)—the idea that living things exhibit an affinity for other living things—the neuroscientist and bestselling author Oliver Sacks argued that we have an innate "musicophilia," a now biologically entrained affinity for music (Sacks 2007). Wilson hoped that the recognition of a biologically grounded affinity for other living things could translate into a convincing conservation ethic (Van Wieren and Kellert 2013; Kellert and Farnham 2002; Kellert and Wilson 1993). But could it be that there is some link between innate human affinities for music and for some sort of empathetic sentiment toward other humans, and even non-human agents, in our world? This is a question explored below, but it requires a dive into the emotional content of music and the reasons why it persists in human societies.

Emotional arousal is an ingredient in both musicophilia and biophilia, and may be one key to why music has become a stable feature of human societies. Why is the emotional content of music important? In general emotion accentuates memories, increasing their cognitive salience. Moreover, skillfully discerning the emotions and dispositions of others within a social group (a sort of "mind-reading") would almost certainly have been socially (even if not biologically) adaptive, allowing increasingly complex forms of cooperation that would have proved helpful in hunting activities and possibly warfare (Whitehouse 2004, 32; Mithen 1996). Since musicality, including drumming, dance, and loud vocal displays, have historically close relationships with such coordinated activities, we should not be surprised to find musicality closely related to other affective dimensions of human experience. Levitin argued that drumming for warfare and ritual literally helped to make society possible: "I believe that *synchronous, coordinated song and movement* were what created the strongest bonds between early humans, or protohumans, and these allowed for the formation of larger living groups, and eventually of society as we know it" (Levitin 2008, 50, emphasis his). These affectively rich social bonding activities even

today arouse neurochemical activity that facilitates the attribution of agency to forces, causes, or entities that are beyond the individual, such as social groups, gods, or other-than-human agents (Levitin 2008, 56–57).

Those behaviors have their roots in our pre-hominid past. A host of interesting research reviewed by the cognitive archaeologist Steven Mithen made a case for why hominid predispositions for vocalization and musicality have a history older than humans. For instance, he illustrated that the vervet monkey (an Old-World monkey) used distinct vocalizations depending on the nature of a perceived threat—there are different calls for leopards, snakes, and other types of predators (Mithen 2006, 107–9). Gelada monkeys, by contrast, had variable calls that utilized rhythm and melody to communicate. As Mithen put it, "The geladas used changes in rhythm and melody to designate the start and end of an utterance; to parse an utterance, so allowing others to follow along; to enable others to appreciate that the utterance was being addressed to them" (Mithen 2006, 110). He argued that the use of such rhythmic and melodic patterns is directly analogous to the pre-linguistic modes of infant-directed speech in humans (Mithen 2006, 69–84). The posture of the hominid body as bipedalism developed would have dramatically increased the range of possible sounds they might make. The increasingly dynamic use of emotionally evocative vocalizations led to another cognitive explosion best explained, according to Mithen, as the product of "selective pressures for enhanced communication, resulting in a far more advanced form of [communication]" (Mithen 2006,153). These modes of communication Mithen referred to as "Hmmmm" vocalizations—they were "holistic, multi-modal, manipulative, and musical" (Mithen 2006, 138), rather than compositional and referential. That is, the utterances were not specific words cobbled together to refer to some external state or thing; they were instead meant to influence the behavior of other social agents. Such holistic modes of communication were foundational to social life for about two million years of hominid and early *Homo* species (Mithen, 2006, 268). Indeed, according to Mithen, all human ancestors, including *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo floresiensis*, utilized this mode of communication. It was only among modern *Homo sapiens* where music and language became distinct, the former emerging into a system for the communication of emotion, the latter concerned primarily with transmitting information (Mithen 2006, 267; Rappaport 1999). It is somewhat unsurprising, then, to see the evolutionary histories of music, emotion, and ritual intertwined (Rappaport 1999). Music continues to be one of the primary arenas in contemporary culture in which it is possible to find emotional modes of communication, oftentimes with overtly spiritual themes. It is possible, then, to place the emergence of ritual in such contexts as a practice of enacting social reciprocation or as a mode of technical action designed to propitiate or otherwise engage in exchange relations with some of the other agents with whom humans shared their habitat or cosmos (Rappaport 1999; Whitehouse 2004, 58; Pyysiäinen 2001). Is musicality evolutionarily deep? Clearly. Is it adaptive? Such a question should be nuanced by distinguishing between biological and cultural adaptiveness, but it certainly has been adaptive in the latter sense, even if its biological adaptivity remains contested (Sosis 2009).

MUSICALITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF RELIGION

To unpack my claim that musicality and religion both draw on similar cognitive predispositions, we can inquire about the universality of music and religion and relate them to ritual action. As the anthropologist Michael Winkelman put it, "The strikingly similar ritual practices of hunter-gatherer societies around the world reflect biogenetic foundations . . . [which] illustrates

[8] Winkelman, obviously, saw himself in the adaptationist camp. He utilized the term *shamanism* to refer to all prehistoric modes of ritual and socially synchronous behavior guided by ritual specialists. This stretches the typical scholarly use of the term beyond the Siberian ritual specialists to whom the term is usually traced (see Jakobsen 1999, 1–17; Dioszegi and Hoppal 1996).

the foundation of humanity's original spiritual practices" (Winkelman 2009, 462).[8] Winkelman and others argued that there were strong parallels between contemporary shamanic rituals and the routinized behaviors of our primate kin, such as practices involving drumming and strong vocalizations, which promoted community cohesion and provided an outlet for emotion. In other words, "the universality of drumming in shamanism reflects a widespread mammalian signaling mechanism that . . . has adaptive effects" by scaring potential attackers, communicating vigilance, and promoting coordination with the social group (Winkelman 2009, 463). These adaptive effects of ritualistic behaviors are evident in our evolutionary kin and provide the foundations for the unique manifestations of musicality in our species (though as evidenced above, humans are not the only music-makers).[9] Humans have more than a mere ability to make and appreciate music, however.

Music has effects on our brains and given the long evolutionary presence of music in our own species, it is plausible that humans and music have coevolved. Music activates both the autonomic nervous system and emotion centers of the brain, variously eliciting relaxation, arousal, sadness, or joy. Highly emotional events such as ritualized performances may activate opioid systems, fostering a sense of attachment and fellow-feeling. These experiences may catalyze integrative modes of consciousness characterized by brain discharges that cross the neuroaxis and inhibit some of the brain's regulatory mechanisms. This facilitates communication between the attentional, behavioral, and emotional centers of the brain, synchronizing their discharges and projecting these neurological firings into the frontal lobes (Winkelman 2009, 472). This integrative mode of consciousness lies, Winkelman says, at the root of both musicality and religiosity. Helpful research by Patrick Savage et al. (2015) and Peter Turchin et al. (2017) utilized quantitative analyses that demonstrate statistically universal characteristics of human musicality and social organization, reaffirming what Winkelman predicted.

One of reggae artist Bob Marley's best-known songs states, "When music hits, you feel no pain."[10] But that is not quite right, since we know that music evokes emotions that can run the gamut from elation and joy to terror and madness. When music hits our ears, this information is transmitted from our inner ear through our brain stem and from there into the auditory cortex. Almost immediately, our reptilian brain responds as the cerebellum is activated to pick out rhythm, and the thalamus assesses the sound for any possible need for alarm. The hippocampus activates memory systems, and pitch and harmony are processed by a variety of brain systems. The combination of emotional states with associated memory stimulates responses in the form of arousal or in some cases soothing responses (Bell 2010, 245).

Some of these are, of course, individual responses to music. But when musical stimulation occurs in a group setting there are additional physiological responses, including the release of oxytocin, a trust-inducing hormone also connected to ritual performance (Levitin 2008, 198; Mithen 2006, 216). So maybe Marley was partially right: in most cases, on balance, the positive social potential of music outweighs any individual interpretive baggage it carries. It is possible that music provided a foundation for the emergence of society by making communal rituals more memorable and fostering a mode of fellow-feeling that encouraged habitation patterns that included more than direct kin relations (Levitin 2008, 192; see also Winkelman 2009, 470–71). There are, therefore, both neuroscientific and cognitive approaches to understanding the significance of music that consider it an adaptive advantage. But to stay for a moment with Marley's contributions to the relationship between musicality and religion, the highly emotive

[9] Much depends, of course, on how we define *music*, and operationalizing it is unimportant for any case I wish to make here. A broad definition of *music* as "organized sound" is close enough to a definition to guide us here.

[10] The song is "Trenchtown Rock" on the album *African Herbsman*, released as a single in 1971.

content of music and the ways in which it is produced and received in social groups also make it a vehicle for overturning ingrained social mores and expectations—what we might call rebel music.

ENCOUNTERING AN EMPATHETIC THEORY OF RELIGION

We remain at some distance, still, from the question "why an empathic theory of religion?" Many in the cognitive study of religion (CSR) argued that whatever religion is, it derived from social cognition mediated through a modular theory of the brain (Tremlin 2006; Sperber 1994, 1996). These modules, it was imagined, defaulted to the over-attribution of agency to non-agentic things or beings. This hyperactive agent detection device in the brain projected agency where there was none (Barrett 2004). An accompanying Theory of Mind ascribed to these over-detected agencies mental states that were purposive (like our own minds—because we do not know what it is like to be anything else) (Kelemen 2006; Sperber 1994). To make the case that such evolved traits were phylogenetically beneficial, it would be necessary to pin down precisely how natural selection could be said to act on a culturally mediated thing like "religions."

These thinkers argued that religion was a spandrel, something parasitic upon other naturally evolved cognitive proclivities (such as the hyperactive agent detection device and Theory of Mind) (Guthrie 1995; Atran 2002; Boyer 2001; Pyysiäinen 2001; Sperber 1985, 1994, 1996).[11] For them, religion derived from a set of natural cognitive responses to environmental stimuli and was parasitic on functional and thus adaptive cognitive and neurophysiological architecture. In their explanatory models, functional features of human cognitive processing (i.e., the Hyperactive Agent Detection Device hypothesized by Barrett and others) predisposed humans to "see" agency in inanimate objects. It might increase fitness, to elaborate on the example above, to mistake a tree stump for a bear and burn a few calories running. Although to make the opposite error—to mistake a bear for a tree stump—might mean removal from the gene pool (Tremlin 2006). The tendency to overestimate agency in the natural world is functional and adaptive in that sense. Extending such agency detection to invisible or otherwise preternatural beings represents a natural response from a developmental perspective, but one that is a by-product of the evolved tendency to detect agents in a variety of natural objects (Sperber 1994, 1996). Explanations that depend on neurophysiological modularity, however, sometimes underplayed the efficacy of social systems in generating moral values. To illustrate, some have argued influentially that *group*-level selection may be operative to the extent that common cultural perceptions and rules better equip social groups for survival (Kiper and Sosis 2014; Purzycki and Sosis 2014; D. S. Wilson 2002; Bulbulia 2004; Bulbulia and Slingerland 2012; B. Wilson 2011; Sosis and Bulbulia 2014).

The empathic theory of religion I advance posits a different biological foundation for religiosity, one that includes and accounts for the different approaches detailed above. Specifically, I suggest a hybrid model much like the one advanced by the psychiatrist Burgess Wilson in which the activation of pre-conscious neurological processing occurs through the stimulation of mirror neurons in the brain (Wilson 2011). According to this hypothesis, mirror neurons, as their name implied, were stimulated when observing other agents' movements, triggering inferences about non-movement-related information, such as prior knowledge of similar circumstances

[11] A spandrel is an architectural term that refers to the space between the supports of two adjoining arches. The space serves no real architectural function but was often decorated with ornate designs, sculptures, or paintings. The biologist Stephen Jay Gould used this term to describe religion, which is not necessarily functional in the evolutionary sense, but which, when "decorated" with cultural accompaniments, draws more attention than do the underlying functional traits that support its persistence. Darwin was perhaps the first to offer a spandrelist explanation for human religiosity after noting that his dog attributed agency to a windblown umbrella (Darwin 1871, 64–66). In his discussion, he cites theories of religion offered by E. B. Tylor and Herbert Spencer.

(Wilson 2011, 311). Evidence from such studies strongly suggested that observers "automatically and unconsciously reproduce or 'simulate' in their brains the body movements they observe" (Wilson 2011, 308). Moreover, there is evidence that illustrated that mirror neurons are also involved in recognizing agential intention as well as emotion. All of this happened at a pre-conscious level. Secondarily, such perceptions were seized and explored by inferential knowledge-based systems at a conscious level. This was a crucial, although derivative step in the processing. The result, said Wilson, "is a shared functional state which produces a direct embodied experiential form of knowledge" and resultant interpersonal connectedness (Wilson 2011, 311). "The result," he says more pointedly, "is empathy" (Wilson 2011, 311).[12]

If the drumming displays mentioned above are enactments of empathetic awareness, then as Winkelman argued we can trace this tendency back even to our closest primate kin. Chimpanzees have been witnessed engaging in "waterfall dances" (Goodall 2005), or producing sharp verbalizations either to communicate,warn, or to express what we might construe as mourning for lost relations (Goodall 2005; Bekoff 2006; Safina 2019). Rituals were tools for channeling social relations and managing subsistence, which required negotiation with the other-than-human plants and animals humans prey upon. For instance, the anthropologist Roy Rappaport argued that religion, and specifically ritual, was what made our species uniquely "human" (Rappaport 1999). In his research on the Tsembaga peoples of Papua New Guinea, Rappaport illustrated that the *kaiko*, the ritual pig slaughter, served several adaptive functions. First, it provided a highly affective site for social bonding, both through the ritualized violence of the slaughter but also because the distribution of the kills was a sort of redistribution of wealth. Large proportions of the meat were gifted to allies who had no pigs. Moreover, Rappaport found, those rituals often corresponded to times of enhanced intergroup conflict. The social cohesion generated from an emotionally evocative but periodic ritual would have come in handy in battle, and, pragmatically, the increased protein load in the diet would also help to gird warriors for battle (Rappaport 1966, 1979, 27–42; *cf.* McCauley and Lawson 2002; Pyysiäinen 2001: 77-142).

Following the social scientist Gregory Bateson, Rappaport insisted that such social groups were cybernetic systems and that their essential characteristic was the capacity to change over time through exchange of information with the environment. Rappaport's theory suggested that ritual and language coevolved in our species, with ritual becoming a mechanism for coping with the expressive and cognitive flexibility that came with language. As Mithen argued, then, it seems probable that expressive modes of communication such as song antedated the emergence of syntactic language—they were prelinguistic ways of constructing meaning. Moreover, if viewed as a form of embodied empathy, then the neurobiological basis of religion goes even deeper than the emotive signaling correlated with singing or speech. Wilson claimed that the "MNS [mirror neuron system] sensitivity to the natural landscape, in so far as it underpins animism and promotes empathy, is a phylogenetic adaptation to promote ecological stability through its promotion of prosocial behaviors vis-à-vis the natural environment" (Wilson 2011, 320).

In summary, the hybrid theory offered here accounts for existing evidence and improves on the theoretical frame of the field in three ways. First, it fits with but does not depend on the ultimate success of the modular model of the brain or of simulation theory. It explains the same effects noticed by those working with modular models of the brain but points to a prior arousal of embodied empathetic relationship through a prelinguistic stimulation of the MNS.

[12] Wilson defined empathy as a "capacity to directly grasp the meanings of the action, intentions, emotions, and sensations of those we experience" (311).

In addition, this theory does not depend on clarifying whether religion is or is not adaptive. Second, it therefore also nudges away from the computational metaphors that have characterized the field of CSR for decades. Such a move is, in my judgment, a positive development, for it opens the possibility of exploring the covert religious conceptualizations that surreptitiously lurk in the background of cognitive science and CSR (Modern 2021). Third, it allows scholars to integrate into the study of religions research about spirituality or proto-spirituality in other-than-human creatures. For instance, the "rights of nature" movement or international human rights violations related to the environment extend the notion of rights to whole ecosystems (UNEP 2022; State of the Planet 2021; Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature [GARN] 2021). Finally, in what follows I offer some observations of contemporary sites of cultural production where these deep evolutionary proclivities may be observable in liminoid departures from dominant modes of religiosity.

Many participants in the improvisational music subcultures I investigated reported a heightened sense of empathy, unity, and interdependence at concert and festival events. So, the notion that those perceptions could be grounded in very ancient biological predispositions may help explain why these scenes continue to grow today. For instance, one survey respondent suggested, "I practice spirituality by . . . putting my faith in human beings, nature, animals, and all that life has to offer. . . . I treat everyone I come across with respect and try to understand and empathize with whatever their situation may be. I believe that passing on goodness to others is the foundation of religion and spirituality!" Or more pointedly, "I think that overall this musical experience is a spiritual one where the ego is melted away and the connectedness to the universe is revealed." Variations on such sentiments were commonplace both in conversations with interlocutors, as well as in survey data.

In addition to his hybrid theory, Wilson claimed that mirror neuron stimulation is reduced in large-scale, urban societies and offered a theoretical frame for investigating the frequency and intensity of ritual. I pondered whether participation in jamband subcultures provided a smaller, "tribal"-scale sense of community. Might participation in such activities reinvigorate atrophied neurophysiological mechanisms that promoted empathetic or other religious perceptions and promote fellow-feeling and pro-social and behaviors?

As one scene participant told me, "The music is the fuel for the continuation of the memory of the connectedness." The jamband scene, for another, entailed "being a part of a community that constantly tries to make a positive impact [and] helps social consciousness become a habit." It is a community in which people are participants, not observers, co-creating new modes of fellow-feeling and exchange, fostering "a connection to the world socially and spiritually through the power of music, a way to bring people together."[13] To put it in terms that anthropologist Victor Turner would recognize, those musical happenings appeared to be liminoid detours within a society characterized by doctrinal modes of religiosity. And because they are always grounded in affective states that are given their context through the engagement with other agents and their cues, they are, even if subconsciously, grounded in empathy.

LIMINOID DEPARTURES WITHIN DOCTRINAL MODES OF RELIGIOSITY

Imagistic modes of religiosity are found in small-scale, traditional societies and are characterized by less frequent but more emotively rich ritualistic practices (Whitehouse 2004; Wilson

[13] Survey data, collected 2016.
[14] These should be imagined as ideal types not as an intentional subsumption of difference into stereotypes.

2011).[14] In contrast, doctrinal modes of religiosity are found in large-scale societies characterized by organic solidarity (i.e., they are highly complex and stratified).[15] In addition, doctrinal modes tend to emphasize more frequent, lower-affect forms of ritualization. In Wilson's terms they are less emotively rich and more abstract because they are further removed from the natural referents upon which most religions depend. Most of the major so-called "world religions" are examples of the doctrinal mode of religiosity, with the Abrahamic religions perhaps the prototypical exemplars. So how do scholars of religion understand the increasing defection from the major religions, or at least from the liberal mainstreams of these traditions?

The bureaucratization of the global north and the rising disaffection from traditional institutionalized religions did not eliminate or even discourage individual spiritual seeking or the deployment of religious and spiritual narratives and tropes in the identity formation of groups. Rather, people manufactured meaning from a variety of sources, both old and new (Taylor 2002; Benthall 2008; Harvey 2013). In many cases, arguably increasingly, people included in their spiritual bricolage some of the natural referents that are noticeably absent from many of the institutionalized global religions. Such spiritual seeking was evidence of efforts underway to build affectively rich arenas of meaning-making within societies dominated by the more routinized, less emotive religiosity are characteristic of large-scale societies. They were, in Wilson's language, examples of empathetic embodied enactments of spirituality that contrast with the prevailing doctrinal modes of religiosity.

So how does such an empathetic, embodied theory of religion explain my most recent research on improvisational rock music and festival scenes? I propose that these rock music subcultures and the events that sustain them are a geographically specific manifestation of modes of religious seeking and meaning-making that is also evident in other parts of the world. Such events are ultimately empathy-cultivating experiences, which participants describe as characterized by a fellow-feeling, unity, or community with other humans and often other-than-human creatures or geological features. Those experiences are precisely the sort of ritualistic entanglements that Turner explored as liminoid phenomena.

Turner suggested that liminoid social experiments, although they appeared earlier, evolved primarily in late modern capitalist modes of production, spawned by societies that had complex, hierarchical social structures that allowed for the possibility of leisure (Turner 1982, 53). Importantly, however, they were also "often parts of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestos—books, plays, paintings, films, etc., exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations" (Turner 1982, 54–55). So as societies developed from small-scale communities into larger ones (as Wilson put it), from mechanical to organic solidarity (as Durkheim and Turner would have it), or from imagistic modes of religiosity toward doctrinal modes (as Whitehouse contended), liminoid forms emerge as a mechanism for social critique and self-reflection. For Turner, liminoid forms of cultural production are for large-scale societies the functional equivalent of the liminal phases of life characteristic of rituals in small-scale societies:

> Just as when tribesmen make masks, disguise themselves as monsters, head up disparate ritual symbols, invert or parody profane reality in myths and folk-tales, so do the genres of

[15] Sociologist Emile Durkheim distinguished between two types of social solidarity: mechanical and organic solidarity. The former referred to groups characterized by interpersonal accountability, and relatively homogenous cosmological, axiological, epistemological, and praxeological commitments. Societies that exhibited organic solidarity were highly individuated owing to an increasing specialization of labor and pluralism. Organic solidarity was typified in the societal impacts of the industrial revolution, where individualization and bureaucratization might produce in individuals a sort of alienation, what Durkheim referred to as *anomie*.

> industrial leisure, the theater, poetry, novel, ballet, film, sport, rock music, classical music, art, pop art, etc., *play* with the factors of culture, sometimes assembling them in random, grotesque, improbable, surprising, shocking, usually experimental combinations. . . . within each allowing lavish scope to authors, poets . . . musicians, actors, comedians, folk singers, rock musicians, 'makers' generally, to generate not only weird forms, but also, and not infrequently, models, direct and parabolic or aesopian, that are highly critical of *status quo* as a whole or in part. (Turner 1982, 40, italics in original).

But there is another potentially subversive feature of liminoid ritualization that is related to the highly emotive content of these events. According to Turner, they are typically "flow-inducing" events, with flow described as a holistic sensation related to complete surrender to a unitary experience of ego dissolution (Turner 1982, 55–56; *cf.* Csikszentmihalyi 1974).[16] The bureaucratization and individualization of large-scale societies pushed flow experiences into the leisure genres of sport and art. But artistic performance still exercised influence as significant as the ritual experience in smaller communities by retrieving—*within* the doctrinal modes of religiosity dominant in larger societies—the highly affective, imagistic modes of religiosity typical in small-scale societies. Characteristic of such perceptions among jamband participants was the observation that "overall awareness is heightened in people who stop the rat race, reflect and enjoy life." Whatever "real life" was, it was something suspended as people went to shows or participated in entire tours. One person remarked that the jamband scene "makes you appreciate the little things while still seeing the big picture as you go back to 'reality' (aka school, work, etc.)."

Before they go back to reality, though, they participate in the ritual enactment of a highly affective group experience focused on a sense of kinship and belongingness that shapes the worldviews and ethical mores of participants. For as Turner put it, "Flow reaches out to nature and to other men. . . . all men, even all things, are felt to be one, subjectively, in the flow experience" (Turner 1982, 57). "To flow," he continued, "is to be as happy as a human can be. . . . it suggests that people will culturally manufacture situations which will release flow, or individually seek it outside their ascribed stations in life if these are "'flow-resistant'" (Turner 1982, 58). Festivals and concerts have become one of these manufactured, temporary transitional zones in which deeply seated human desires for inter-personal (and perhaps inter-species) connections are fostered, where unitary, ego-dissolving experiences are nurtured, and where "flow-resistant" occupational and everyday routines are shed. The Grateful Dead were one band whose devoted fans came in significant droves for either whole tours or legs of a tour. Analyses of Deadheads have included investigations of the transitory economies that sprung up around concerts and festivals, the spiritual elements of the music and the scene, the ways in which such cultural production focused desire, and much more (The Grateful Dead Studies Association).[17] As one participant noted:

> The Grateful Dead brought the attention of rainforest destruction to me and how we impact it with our choices at home. I believe that I have to also give credit for my shift in consciousness to the substances that I ingested which opened these doors of perceptions in my brain. Without them, I would be behind instead of ahead. *It was the entire ritual experience that brought me back to my core existence . . . music and the mind meld.*

[16] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was the first to deploy "flow" as a psychological state, but best-selling authors and lecture circuit agents of self-actualization have made the "flow state" widely popular and economically beneficial.

[17] The Grateful Dead Studies Association has regular meetings, and many of the members also meet annually at the Southwestern Popular/American Culture Association.

As noted, several of my interview subjects and contacts suggested that concerts and festival scenes were an opportunity to inhabit their "real" selves, something that their work habitat or their other life responsibilities did not allow consistently. Can such "flashbulb" experiences generate novelty and renewal within doctrinal modes of religiosity? Maybe. My argument is that Are these and similar experiences are one of many forms of cultural production with significant religious and spiritual elements, which are all haphazardly packed into the categories of the "nones" or the "religiously unaffiliated."

There remain questions about the social and political efficacy—the social reach—of those novel experiences. As historians of jamband scenes pointed out, what was special was that the shows were not for observing; they were participatory events. In conversations with interlocutors I was interested in how and to what extent interpersonal empathy, reinvigorated by periodic re-enactments of *communitas*, translated into the rest of their lives. Many enthusiastically said that participating in this scene was formative morally and spiritually for them, and proportionally larger numbers of the respondents than the public belong to, financially support, or advocate for environmental and social justice-oriented groups.

One advantage of deploying an empathetic theory of religion is the possibility that it can provide an anchor during a time when increasing numbers of people identify as spiritual but not religious or "none of the above." Perhaps it allows scholars to see what religion looks like post-disaffection, as people identify less with institutionalized religion and manufacture spiritual belongingness by cobbling together new identities. Scholars have overestimated the reach of global religious traditions by imagining that religions are mutually exclusive, by underplaying the mundane manifestations of multiple religious belonging. The scholar of religions Graham Harvey highlighted the common claim that "Nigeria is fifty per cent Muslim, forty per cent Christian and ten per cent traditionalist could perhaps be tested in relation to such labelling traditions" (Harvey 2013, 33). "The countersuggestion," he continued, "that in fact Nigeria is fifty per cent Muslim, forty per cent Christian, and *ninety* per cent traditionalist" becomes clearer if one looks behind the curtain to "the back rooms to see if 'traditional' amulets . . . are present alongside the affirmation of Islam or Christianity on the public face of the building" (Harvey 2013, 33). If the objects of study for curious cultural detectives are populations where hybridity is the rule not the exception, and religious cultural production takes the form of building out social experiments in ego-dissolving, flow-inducing experiences, then a broader and more basic construction of *religion* grounded in empathy is one way to track such developments.

DISCUSSION: HOW THIS STUDY CHALLENGES ASSUMPTIONS AND RAISES PROBLEMS

The jamband scene emerged as a counter-cultural scene in the 1960s but has developed into a tremendously successful model for manufacturing spiritual belonging, whether that success is measured in economic terms, cultural reach, or material culture (Adams 2000; Johnston 2016). One aficionado put it this way: "I believe in the counterculture, but more has been learned about hyper culture, a term I use to describe the social structure that emerges within a festival or vacation environment." The political and social work of such groups can be traced through the ways in which they constrain or channel exchange relations, focus desire, and bind communities of people together (Chidester 2005, 5).

The ethnographic and survey data illustrates some of the ways in which contemporary populations found a sense of fellow-feeling and meaning-making *outside* of traditional institutionalized religions. Consider that 64 percent of my survey respondents reported that they grew up in a "religious" home, with an overwhelming 92 percent of those claiming their upbringing was Christian in orientation. Only 12 percent reported their upbringing was "spiritual but not

religious," and 25 percent (slightly more than the general US population) reported that they grew up in neither a religious nor spiritually focused home space. Contrast that with their present orientations: only 17 percent reported being religious, but more than 56 percent considered themselves spiritual. Over 53 percent of the cohort who reported growing up Christian no longer identified with the religion of their youth (n = 639). More than 60 percent of the participants surveyed from this scene suggested that concerts and festival events inform their spiritual sensibilities, whereas less than 2 percent reported that they informed their religious sensibilities (n = 566).

So, it is clear that these scene participants distinguished between religiosity and spirituality; that for many of them, spirituality was informed by festival and concert experiences; and that they represented some of the shifting character of US society as people found spiritual fulfillment in venues outside the traditional, institutionalized religions. Importantly, at least to the case I wish to make here, such deeply affective experiences were important to the ways in which contemporary populations who are disaffected from traditional institutionalized religions found a sense of fellow-feeling and belongingness in these unique opportunities for interpersonal exchange.

Here I pursued a theoretical framework for understanding the impacts of musicality, in particular performance-oriented subcultures, which are elaborations of alternative or countercultural exchange relations and social experimentation. Responses from interview and survey participants indicated that they have multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting communities to which they feel some accountability. Interestingly, most of the survey respondents reported that even if they belonged to specific religious traditions or institutions, the spiritually eclectic music subcultures informed their spiritual (but not religious) sentiments. If these people were committed to various communities of accountability to varying degrees, and if these communities held overlapping and sometimes contradictory sets of values, then how did this challenge attempts to assess religious belonging? A study by the Pew Charitable Trusts in 2012 made headlines when it stated that for the first time since such measurements were in place, over 20 percent of the US population checked the "none of the above" box when reporting their religious orientation (Pew 2012a, b). But such reporting, and such surveying, is problematic at best, since, as I have suggested here, people are (and probably always have been) religious bricoleurs, cobbling together a sense of self and community from multiple sources. More recent surveys indicate that even the number of those who self-report being both spiritual *and* religious dwindled from 59 percent to 48 percent between 2012 and 2017. Meanwhile, those who identify as spiritual but *not* religious rose from 19 percent to 27 percent in the same period (Pew 2017). Yet, many of those who do not believe in God(s) still imagine that there is a higher power of some kind. The trick, then, is how to assess multiple religious belonging among persons who belong to many communities of accountability, many of which have spiritual elements. Hybridity and syncretism are the norm, not the exception in most of the world (Harvey 2013, 33). And conducting research as though people are automatons who fit neatly into boxes tells us more about the interests of the researchers than it does about the religious belonging of the target population. This is the first problematic that this study exposes: the assumption that the populations we study are "boxable"—that they have a singular primary community of accountability (Pew 2018).

When I began this project, my prediction was that larger populations of those under study would assent to being "spiritual but not religious," but that their spiritual affinities would be related to these festival and music scenes rather than the institutionalized activities of the so-called "world religions." That seemed to be true in general, but a minority of the surveys revealed many who were spiritual *and* religious, although the reasons given by respondents were kaleidoscopic. The music subcultures under study were characterized by affectively rich

experiences of kinship, metaphysical presuppositions inspired by the musical forms that were the anchor for these communities, and an ethic of empathy (Johnston 2016).

Music is a focusing technology, one that brings people together through emotively evocative experiences of kinship and belonging narrated by improvisational and experimental musical forms. Studying those who participated in performance-oriented subcultures foregrounded multiple religious belonging, as well as religious/spiritual flow-inspired moments of *communitas* that are outside the bounds of what is typically considered religious.

Certainly, there are other cultural practices that have been profitably explored as exercises in constructing collective spiritualized identities (Gilmore 2010; St. John 2008, 2012). It is therefore unsurprising that participation in music and festival subcultures activate cognitive mechanisms that facilitate pantheistic or animistic forms of belongingness, interdependence, and communalism (Johnston 2018). Many of my interlocutors explicitly attached spiritual significance to their participation in these scenes. And the practice of re-enacting meaningful moments of *communitas* rippled into their lives behind the scenes in higher than average self-reported political and social awareness.

Are the B-side benefits of participating in the jamband scene an increased social and environmental awareness and advocacy? Or perhaps a cultivated sense of empathy, that deep-seated propensity for fellow-feeling? Even if so, among these positive outcomes for participants there remains a shadow side to the festival scenes. As they have grown into economic juggernauts, many festivals have also become a new way to display status, and, in contrast to their professed environmentalist sentiments, festivals have an enormous footprint (socially, economically, and ecologically). They provide fertile spaces for the exchange of illicit substances and attract the negative attention of (social, economic, and political) authorities. More focused studies may reveal additional data related to these enticing questions and conundrums.

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