

Dysoc/NIMBioS Webinar Series on Cultural Evolution  
Questions from *The behavioural ecology of religious beliefs and practices*,  
with Ruth Mace, November 17, 2020

1. What do you think of David Sloan Wilson's approach in his book Darwin's Cathedral ?
2. Do you consider the distinction in motive for religious donations between divine punishment and reputation to be exclusive? What about other motives such as a belief that a religious institution is serving a public good?
3. If religion is based on the cultural evolution of group-level traits, as Wilson, Smaldino and others have argued, and we can even identify phylogenetic trees, can we find replicators or heritable units which specify these traits?
4. Could apocalyptic beliefs be associated with group extinction because the apocalypse never happens, and the belief is abandoned? (Though this would counter other findings that the lack of a world-ending event often leads believers to double down on their beliefs, e.g., they were spared due to their piousness.)
5. Is the first or second son more likely to become a monk?
6. When you're doing studies in China, how do you control for changes to family structures and historical disruptions to monastic life (most obviously the Cultural Revolution, but also ongoing political regulations)? Do you have to control for this by studying, say, Tibetan diaspora populations in India?
7. Did you look at economic factors in households? — i.e. are wealthy households both more likely to be able to afford large families (their sons can have lots of kids) and they can afford to send one son to be a monk and support the monastery. So could monastic decisions be driven by competition for prestige positions among wealthy families?
8. Are richer families (larger donations?) more likely to send a son to a monastery?
9. These results look extremely similar to the modeling of the emergence of homosexuality through increased inclusive fitness: i.e. the non-reproductive sibling as a helper.
10. To what extent do you think that your diagram of religious beliefs, ecology, and behavior may show circular causation rather than be simply linear?
11. Isn't the time frame way too short for inclusive fitness to explain the phenomenon of celibate monks?
12. The phylogenetic approach doesn't work if the system is not neutral or if there is cultural migration or, as in the history of Gansu and neighboring Mongolia, there was a massive invasion by the Yuan empire about 900 years ago.
13. How do you take into account the concept of Exaptation in that these roles may not be for the reason that you are ascribing or that modern society ascribes to them?
14. Is the similarity between studying for a PhD and entering a monastery only superficial?

15. This inclusive fitness matter for families with monks reminds me about the issue of gay brothers being more likely to occur in a family with a high number of male offspring. It looks like, among other evolutionary implications, there is this lowering of competition and perhaps presence of some special talents in that homosexual brother.
16. How might the one child policy have impacted your results?
17. Can the one child policy affect the long term tradition of having your son become a monk?
18. How do benefits of female celibacy compare with male celibacy?
19. Does the model re monks make any predictions about the practice? Or is it just a demonstration that the trait can be maintained evolutionarily?
20. With regard to working through a tree of religious belief, are you familiar with the comedian George Carlin's routine where he starts off saying he saw a man about to jump off a bridge and tries to talk him down, working through their similar religious beliefs until they finally get down to belonging to two very similar but distinct splinter groups?
21. Do you think the monk's sisters would benefit more if inheritance were matrilineal?