

Darwin's Cathedral
David Sloan Wilson

A book whose time has come. Immensely relevant in 2019.

Amazon reviews are consistently among the best written, most intelligent commentary on the Internet. The early reviews of this book by Rob Hardy, Todd Stark and Herbert Calhoun are up to the highest standard.

I am giving the book itself a five-star recommendation, and I give these reviews an equally high recommendation. Read them to convince yourself that you need to buy it.

What can I add, 17 years after publication?

Evolutionary psychology has made immense progress in this period. Our understanding of the human genome has progressed extremely rapidly. Among the things we have learned is that somewhere on the order of 85% of our genome is dedicated to brain function, and that heritability affects human intellect and personality more than could have been imagined as this book was written.

Wilson addresses a few related themes:

(1) Fitness can be defined, and organisms can evolve as groups as well as individuals. Although genes obviously have to be passed down from individual parents to individual offspring, the genetic makeup of a larger unit of selection effects the fitness of the individuals within the group.

(2) Human beings all belong to numerous, disjoint groups, of which the church is usually one. Every group offers the individual some advantage, and demand something in return. The exchange is not made on the basis of rational considerations of quid pro quo – the thesis that Wilson goes out of his way to dismiss. Participation in groups is often unconscious, and follows rules of unconscious evolution.

(3) Human beings are not able to be fully rational in any circumstance. Even scientists, who stated objective is dispassionate objectivity, cannot manage it. To reject religion as irrational doesn't make sense. Nothing we do makes total, abstract sense. Though Wilson doesn't make the case, the most basic measure of fitness – number of children – itself is irrational. Having children is simply not a rational decision. It is not irrational – it is beyond rationality. So is religion.

Wilson's unique contribution is to apply the tools of evolutionary biology to the evolution of religion, as a group phenomenon involving in itself, and as a manifestation of religiosity among individual people.

The book is worth reading simply for the beautiful examples he uses to illustrate his point: the Nuer a tribe of tall warriors in South Sudan, the Balinese water Temple system and guppy populations of South American streams and rivers.

Wilson mentions in passing the fact that many belief systems other than religion are held with the same unexamined tenacity as religion. In this day and age, I would number among them climate change and the denial in the face of overwhelming evidence of the genetic differences among human populations. In short, diversity.

Religion is coming back in fashion among evolutionary psychologists. This book was recommended by Dr. Edward Dutton via his YouTube channel "The Jolly Heretic." A look at Dutton's work will convince the reader of how absolutely relevant Wilson has become. A five-star effort all around.