

Daniel Veidlinger

WHERE does one find examples of Convergent Evolution in Religion?

This paper focuses on examples where religions in different places and eras have evolved certain similar features and analyzes this phenomenon in terms of convergent evolution. In biology, we see examples of convergent evolution occurring quite commonly, where the environment strongly shapes the direction of evolution. For example, while it is not adaptive for all beings to have fins, the pressure is strong to have fins in water, and as such the evolution of many aquatic creatures has converged upon fins, as in the case of the dolphin, which is a mammal, the shark, which is a fish, and the ichthyosaur, which is a marine dinosaur. Evolution is the best system known to optimize an entity for its environment, and therefore once the environment is in place, appropriate forms will tend to emerge over time. Scholars have begun to realize that the evolutionary process is far more predictable and deterministic than has often been assumed, and in fact is marked by the repeated, independent, evolution of the same trait in multiple phylogenetic lineages at different points in geological time.

In religion, we also see examples of convergent evolution, and as with biological evolution, similar environments appear to dictate the directions in which these developments move. The various sects and divergent doctrines that we find throughout the world can in fact be very fruitfully thought of as genetic variants of religion, whose survival depends on forces that are largely out of the control of the people attempting to shape the reception of these ideas, and are rather more powerfully shaped by the technological, economic, physical, and social environments in which they exist. As examples, I will look at a few moments in the development of quite different religions. Buddhism and Islam each have mystical branches that – while coming from very different first principles and lineages – end up with remarkably similar conclusions, doctrines and practices. In the Buddhist world, the Tathagatha Garbha Mahayana schools emerged around the third century CE in North India and in the Islamic world, Sufism containing very similar ideas became popular during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Furthermore, the socio-cultural environment in which these ideas emerged was remarkably similar. Both emerged in urban environments where there were busy trade networks that were bringing various ideas from place to place and tying people from different backgrounds together, in a way far greater than was the case previously. Both were propagated by traders and merchants and both were adopted by rulers who used them to bring large numbers of diverse people under the banner of a common religion. Doctrinally, both emphasized the idea of compassion and love for all beings, the idea of the omnipresence of a transcendent force in the world, an interiorization of the individual spiritual quest and a lessening of importance of rules found in other forms of the religion. As such, they are excellent examples of convergent evolution in the realm of religion.