

## **Kyle J. Clark & Craig T. Palmer**

The most fundamental assumption in explanations of religion as an evolutionary adaptation is that religion somehow increased the inclusive fitness of its practitioners. This assumption makes God's directive to Abraham to kill a son as puzzling to evolutionary theorists as it has been to people using non-evolutionary perspectives. This paper puts forth a hypothesis to explain how ancestors who transmitted a tradition encouraging their descendants to be willing to sacrifice their own fitness (by sacrificing their lives or the lives of their offspring) may have eventually left more descendants in distant future generations than those ancestors who did not transmit such traditions. The explanation starts with the concept of parent-offspring conflict and its prediction that "parents are expected to attempt to mold an offspring, against its better interests," to value their siblings as much as they value themselves (Trivers 1974: 29). When such parental molding becomes traditional by being copied by the offspring when they themselves became parents, the same evolutionary logic predicts that natural selection will favor ancestors who transmit traditions that mold their distant descendants to value all of their co-descendants (e.g., siblings and cousins of various degrees of relatedness) as much as they value themselves. Although some degree of compromise between the evolutionary interests of ancestors and descendants is expected, just as it is in parent-offspring conflict, it seems likely that ancestors who were better able to mold the behavior of distant descendants through traditions would have been favored by natural selection over those who were less able. This is why the evolutionary success of parental (and grandparental) behavior is best judged not by the number of offspring, or even living grandchildren, but by the number of distant descendants (Dawkins 1982: 184; West-Eberhard 1975: 29). This hypothesis is consistent with the ancestor-like God's promise to Abraham that his willingness to sacrifice his son will lead to descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. It is also consistent with traditional stories in the ethnographic record encouraging the willingness of parents to sacrifice their offspring under certain circumstances, as well as the ubiquitous examples of traditional stories encouraging descendants to be willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their co-descendants in the context of war.

Dawkins, Richard 1982. *The Extended Phenotype*. Oxford: WH Freeman.

Trivers, Robert L. 1974. Parent-Offspring Conflict. *American Zoologist* 14:249–264.

West-Eberhard, Mary Jane 1975. The Evolution of Social Behavior by Kin Selection. *Quarterly Review of Biology* 50(1):1–33.