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The evolutionary emergence of seemingly non-utilitarian behaviors such as artmaking and religion constitutes one of the biggest riddles of human origins. These traits are increasingly receiving attention from various scholarly backgrounds, yet significant debate surrounds the study of both. The definitional boundaries of art and religion, if any, are unclear, whereas archaeological indications of their roots are scarce and difficult to interpret. Many researchers have additionally been engaged in the vivid debate whether art and religion are functional, adaptive traits. Answers vary widely for both, and range from adaptations for cooperation, kin identification, social bonding, cognitive development and mating (e.g. Dissanayake, 1995; Miller, 2001; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Tooby & Cosmides, 2001), to byproduct accounts, where art and religion are seen as arising in a non-functional manner from existing behaviors and psychological mechanisms (Boyer, 2003; Pinker, 1997). The possibility that art and religion may be functionally interrelated has rarely been explored. While archaeologists have repeatedly suggested that religion played an important role in the appearance of figurative prehistoric art around 35.000 BP (e.g. Lewis-Williams, 2002), these accounts remain speculative, and have occasionally been very critically assessed for their supporting evidence (Hodgson, 2006). Moreover, they focus on the proximate level of explanation, hypothesizing the contextual use of prehistoric art in ancestral societies, rather than providing ultimate level, evolutionary explanations for artmaking and religion in themselves.

This presentation develops a new proposal for the evolutionary interrelatedness of art and religion, framed within an extended mind view of the origins of human cognition. The first part of the current hypothesis addresses the earliest stages of visual artmaking. From around 100.000 BP, humans started to engage in abstract mark-making. Rather than the mere material outcome of cognitive capacities or processes, these marks are seen as early epistemic practices, instrumental in the enactive establishment of later, full-blown symbol use (Malafouris, 2013). A co-evolutionary feedback loop between art and the mind subsequently led to advanced levels of metarepresentational thought, or the capacity to reflect on the mental representations created in one's own thinking. In the second part of this hypothesis, metarepresentational thought - co-evolved with visual art - reached a threshold starting from around 30.000 BP. Around this time, enabled by the achievement of the crucial cognitive requirement of reflective thinking, religious belief systems arose under the selective pressures of increasing social complexity. By this time, advanced symbolic cognition was also in place, and visual art was no longer abstract but elaborately figurative. This allowed for a twofold supportive function of art within religion. First, visual images aided in the reliable transmission of religious ideas because of its nature as a material anchor for abstract concepts. Second, imagery helped to achieve the often proposed moral and prosocial functions of religion. In sum, both art and religion can be seen as adaptations, but their origins and nature can only be understood in conjunction with one another, and with the emergence and development of the human mind.