

Darwin's Cathedral, by David Sloan Wilson

reviewed by [Greg Peterson](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

Mother Teresa poses a perennial problem for evolutionary biology. How can one explain her selfless giving when natural selection drives us to be selfish? For the evolutionary biologist, Mother Teresa's actions must be either maladaptive or secretly selfish, and some biologists have argued both points. David Sloan Wilson presents a third alternative. Professor of biology and anthropology at Binghamton University, Wilson has built a career on opposing the traditional claim that Darwin's theory of natural selection necessarily leads to selfish behavior. Wilson claims that religion can be fully understood in terms of the forces of human evolution. Why are we religious? Because evolution made us that way. Why does Mother Teresa help others? Because that's what her religion tells her to do.

Wilson's central claim is that the existence, nature and persistence of religion can be understood primarily in terms of group selection. Modern, neo-Darwinism holds that organisms always act so as to promote their own reproductive interests. One should, therefore, expect only limited cooperation in nature. By contrast, Wilson's research has led him to conclude that, in certain circumstances, it is biologically advantageous to engage in strong forms of cooperation and self-sacrifice. In such cases, the group acts as a unit, becoming a kind of superorganism that competes with other groups. When altruistic groups are sufficiently well knit, they will always outperform groups made up of more selfish individuals. Over time, these groups of altruists will be selected for, and genes for altruism will spread through the population. What better cultivates group loyalty than religion? One need only think of the Hutterites and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The first chapters of *Darwin's Cathedral* lay out the methodological groundwork of Wilson's thesis that human beings are significantly a product of group selection, and that we are psychologically driven to religious beliefs because they promote group commitment and self-sacrifice. Wilson then applies his thesis to a wide range of case studies, using it to explain the success or failure of groups ranging from egalitarian

hunter-gatherers to Korean Christian churches in the United States.

Most interesting is his account of Calvin's Geneva, which he presents as a central test case of the theory. Why did Calvinism succeed in Geneva? Because it was able to bring group unity to a divided city in a perilous time. For Wilson, what is primarily important about Calvinism is not its doctrine of the Trinity or its stance on predestination but its encouragement of community aid and its application of strict discipline to those who try to cheat the system. The doctrinal severity of Calvinism can be understood as the high cost of membership required to guarantee loyalty in exchange for the goods the group has to offer.

Like other functionalist accounts of religion, Wilson's theory has a surface plausibility. Certainly religions frequently do serve to promote group unity, and many religious beliefs and directives have a significant functional component. But not all of religion functions this way or supports the kind of strong loyalty that a group-selectionist account requires. Wilson's argument is complicated by the fact that his definition of what constitutes a religious group can be quite elastic, ranging from Calvin's Geneva through Balinese temple worship to the entirety of Jewish history. Indeed, it becomes clear that Wilson's explanation of religion is motivated by a kind of incredulity. He makes frequent references to and jibes at the irrationality of religious belief and describes religious rituals as "hocus pocus." Despite some caveats at the end of the book, a primary motivation for explaining religion from a biological standpoint seems to be to understand how people could believe in something so silly.

Wilson's account of Mother Teresa appears near the end of the book: Mother Teresa helps others because evolution has programmed her to care for the group more than herself, compelled by the delusion of irrational beliefs. I suspect that Mother Teresa would demur, and with good reason.