

# TEMPLETON REPORT

NEWS FROM THE JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

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## The First Religions

“Imagine a great mound 70 feet high and about 750 feet wide, made up of mud-brick houses built on top of each other.” That is how the archaeologist Ian Hodder of Stanford University describes the site known as Çatalhöyük in central Turkey. Hodder has been directing work at the Neolithic site since 1993, but over the past several years, with two major grants from the John Templeton Foundation, he has expanded his research. “We are doing something novel, bringing together people from related disciplines—anthropology, religious studies, philosophy, sociology—so that they can engage first-hand with the site, and interpret it based on their wider understanding of religion.”



Archaeologists excavating at Çatalhöyük, with embedded bull horns at lower left.

Hodder estimates that there are some eighteen layers of rebuilt houses at Çatalhöyük, which dates back to approximately 7,500 B.C.E. Many of those layers are extraordinarily well preserved, with skeletons buried beneath the floors and parts of bears and bull horns attached to the walls. (For extensive photos of the site, visit <http://www.catalhoyuk.com/media/photography.html>.)



Photos: Çatalhöyük Image Collection

A Neolithic burial at the site.

Harvey Whitehouse, a social anthropologist at the University of Oxford and a member of the Çatalhöyük research team, calls the site a “time machine.” Its inhabitants, he told the *Templeton Report*, were “all living on top of one another, literally.” Every time they abandoned a house, they collapsed the walls onto the ground. “People knew where to go to find the skull of an ancestor under their floor.”

All of which is interesting not only from a historical point of view but from a religious one as well. As Hodder says, “When you have people who are removing skulls from their dead and keeping them, re-plastering them, painting them, and handing them down over generations, it’s fairly clear that such evidence is about the spiritual.”

Hodder emphasizes that there is still a great deal that his team does not know about the people who lived at Çatalhöyük. “We don’t have any names. We don’t know what language they spoke. They were probably some form of early Indo-European, but they have no direct link with any people living today.” The artifacts and pictorial evidence at the site do suggest, however, “a highly arousing major ritual” going on during the first half of Çatalhöyük’s history.

“These were not parties of the kind we’d recognize,” says Whitehouse. They seemed to involve the baiting of wild animals prior to slaughter. They also had “some kind of cult of the dead,” involving the manipulation of human remains. In terms of religious evolution, Whitehouse sees Çatalhöyük as an example of what he calls “imagistic” religion, based on low-frequency rituals of memorable, highly emotional content. The practices of the small, cohesive group that lived there were very localized and dependent on direct experience. He contrasts such early religions with their more recent “doctrinal” successors, whose rituals are more regular and whose key ideas are preserved less by the memory of particular events than by texts and oral traditions—factors that have made it possible for them to spread more easily.

Other researchers involved in the project include the archaeologist Peter Biehl of the State University of New York at Buffalo; the psychologist Justin Barrett of Oxford University; the anthropologist Maurice Bloch of the London School of Economics; the literary scholar and philosopher René Girard of Stanford University; the theologians F. LeRon Shults of Agder University in Norway and Alejandro García-Rivera of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley; and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, who specializes in the relationship between theology and science at Princeton Theological Seminary.

The research team is particularly interested in trying to understand how the emergence of religion affected ideas of property and power in the earliest civilizations. As Hodder points out, some early religious sites in Turkey existed before the advent of agriculture. “It seems to make a very good case that people came together for religious and symbolic reasons initially, and it was that coming together which then led to settlement and the domestication of plants and animals.”

Paul Wason, the director of life sciences at the John Templeton Foundation, describes the Çatalhöyük project as an important effort to solve an “old conundrum”: “Do religions change mainly to adapt to changes in other areas of culture? Or are there times when religions change for some other reason—such as being open to new knowledge and ideas—and so become the source of innovation in other aspects of civilization?”

## NOTEBOOK

### Evolution & Human Nature at Yale

Three experts explored the question “Does evolution explain human nature?” at a panel discussion in late September sponsored by Yale University, *Discover* magazine, and the John Templeton Foundation. The discussion was based on the Foundation’s recent Big Questions essay series, which can be found online at [www.templeton.org/evolution](http://www.templeton.org/evolution) and is available in booklet form by request. Video of the event can be found at <http://discovermagazine.com/videos/05-does-evolution-explain-human-nature>.

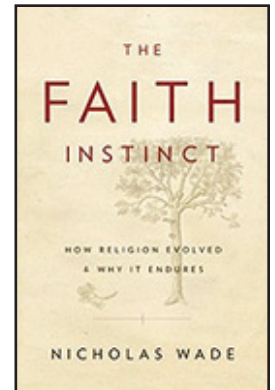
The discussion was moderated by Corey Powell, the editor of *Discover*, and featured Kenneth Miller, professor of biology at Brown University and author of *Finding Darwin’s God: A Scientist’s Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution*; Laurie Santos, a psychologist at Yale University who studies the roots of human behavior through research on primates; and David Sloan Wilson, an evolutionary biologist at Binghamton University and the author of *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin’s Theory Can Change the Way We Think About Our Lives*.



VIDEO: Miller, Santos, and Wilson at the Yale panel discussion.

*The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures*

What explains the universality of religious behavior? How did it become hardwired into human nature? In his new book, supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the acclaimed *New York Times* science writer Nicholas Wade traces how religion grew to be so essential to early societies in their struggle for survival. He describes how religion influences morality and trust, governs people's reproductive practices and demography, motivates soldiers for warfare, and unites social organizations as small as parishes and as vast as civilizations. A compelling and original contribution to the scientific study of religion, *The Faith Instinct* examines both the weaknesses of modern religions and the strengths that account for their remarkable persistence.



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