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Religion: What Is it?

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Scholars broadly agree that no persuasive general theory of religion exists. Recently, however, new efforts at producing one have appeared. These range from wishful-thinking theories to rationalist and linguistic ones, but they increasingly emphasize cognition. This paper reviews several current approaches and summarizes my own cognitive theory: that religion is a form of anthropomorphism.

Earlier writers who have seen anthropomorphism as basic to religion have disagreed about its nature and causes. Most explain it as comforting or as extending what we know to what we do not. Neither explanation is sound. Instead, anthropomorphism stems from a necessary perceptual strategy: facing an uncertain world, we interpret ambiguous phenomena as what concerns us most. That usually is living things, especially humans. Thus we see the world as more humanlike than it is. Religions, this paper holds, are systems of thought and action building in large measure upon this powerful, pervasive, and involuntary tendency.

Scholars agree broadly that no convincing general theory of religion exists. A quarter century or more after Geertz (1966) called anthropological theory of religion "stagnant," writers in every discipline concerned with religion admit that even a definition of the term still eludes consensus. To mention just a few, these writers include anthropologists such as Wax (1984), Poole (1986), Saler (1993), and Boyer (1994); religionists such as Preus (1987), Penner (1989), Lawson (1990), and Masuzawa (1993); sociologists such as Stark and Bainbridge (1987); and philosophers such as McCauley (1990).

Recently, however, new efforts at producing a general theory have appeared. Although these range from irrationalist, wishful-thinking theories to rationalist and linguistic ones, they increasingly emphasize cognition. This paper reviews a few current writers and advances my own, cognitive, theory.

Recent Work on Definition

Before turning to general theories as such, I wish to mention a recent work that helps the effort at theory by throwing light on definitions. In *Conceptualizing Religion* (1993), Benson Saler aims to "transform a folk category into an analytical category" (1993: 1) — that is, to define the term religion so it can be applied outside the culture and period that produced it.

Saler first surveys "monothetic" definitions, which stipulate necessary and sufficient features to qualify as religion. He finds these definitions unsatisfactory, largely because of their essentialism and the resulting futile attempt to classify all phenomena as either religious or not religious. Instead, Saler follows Wittgenstein, and subsequent cognitive psychologists such as Eleanor Rosch, in advocating a "family resemblance" or polythetic approach to definition. Such a definition lists a set of features, varying subsets of which make their bearer more or less exemplary, but none of which is necessary or sufficient for

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class inclusion. The set of features is derived from some prototype. For most anthropologists, the prototype for religion is the Jewish-Christian tradition.

Saler's approach produces open-ended categories with no clear line between religion and nonreligion. It thus leaves open the origins both of prototype phenomena and of other exemplars. This openness encourages us to grasp diversity. However, the approach also seems to undermine the unity of the phenomena in question and thus to discourage unified approaches to explanation. If the term to be theorized denotes only an indefinitely shifting collection, what is it that we are to explain? If the collection does have some unity, what, if anything, underlies it other than an accident of Western cultural history?

Despite these questions, Saler's work provides an incisive critique of current theory and an important corrective to our persistent essentialism. The approach he advocates also corresponds to widespread usage, since the term religion is fact is used for phenomena as diverse as communism (Goodenough 1989) and "civil religion" (Bellah 1967).

Recent Attempts at Theory

Theories of religion may be classified, among other ways, into three groups (which may overlap or combine): wishful thinking, symbolist, and cognitive. Most recent theories lean toward the last.

However, wishful-thinking theories also persist. Joining a lineage of writers including Hume, Feuerbach, Freud, and Malinowski, sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (A Theory of Religion 1987) hold that humans have religious beliefs because these are comforting. Gods "exist as hopes in the human consciousness" (1987: 23). They make up for the real rewards we want but cannot get. Thus religion constitutes "systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions" (1987: 39).

As do other wishful-thinking writers, Stark and Bainbridge tap an aspect of religion with intuitive appeal. Again as do others, however, they fail to explain how wishful fantasies become plausible enough to satisfy us, and especially how this can happen without seriously undermining more realistic orientations. Perhaps most problematically, they fail to explain features of religion, such as hells and demons, that appear to represent fears rather than wishes.

The second group of theories, often collectively called symbolism, asserts that religion really concerns not the world as a whole but only human society. That is, religious ideas and symbols really are covert means of pursuing varying social purposes, especially social cohesion and order. Though symbolist theories have been dominant in anthropology for the last several decades, none is among the most recent general works. I have recently criticized the chief symbolist, Durkheim, elsewhere (1993), so here I shall merely aver that symbolists try to make one part of religion, namely one of its uses, the whole. If this is so, then their explanations can be only partly successful. Further, they still must explain why a form of thought and action they define by its function (typically to establish and maintain social unity) so frequently seems to work against that function, as in sectarian warfare.

Cognitive, or intellectualist, theorists assert that the leading motivation for religious thought and action is to interpret or explain the world on one hand and to influence or control it on the other. In this view, religious thought may be mistaken, but it is neither irrational nor, in context, even implausible. Nor does religion differ fundamentally from other kinds of thought and action. My own approach belongs here, but I shall begin with three others.

Robin Horton long has been prominent, even preeminent, among intellectualists. While Horton's Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West (1993) mostly comprises essays dating from 1960 to 1984, his new introduction and postcript set them in a more recent context. The main thrust of his work (reviewed in Penner 1986, Guthrie 1993, Appiah 1993, and

Cameron 1994), is to show continuity between science and religion as explanatory enter-
prises and to hold that religion is best seen as an attempt at "explanation, prediction and
control" (1993: 306). Religion differs from science in part by its "personalism" — its mod-
elling of the world in humanlike terms — but this is just its idiom, and relatively unimpor-
tant. Horton summarizes his thesis in three propositions:

> (1) Both [religion and science] enter into human social life to make up for the explanatory, predictive and
> practical deficiencies of everyday, common-sense reasoning.
> (2) Both perform this function by portraying the phenomena of the everyday world as manifestations of a
> hidden, underlying reality.
> (3) Both build up their schemas of this hidden reality by drawing analogies with various aspects of everyday
> life (1993: 347–48).

Horton thus points to similarities and continuities between two domains of thought
often considered polar opposites. Importantly, he gives a rationalist explanation of person-
alism (in my terms, anthropomorphism), a feature of religious concepts usually thought
peculiarly irrational. He argues persuasively that personalistic models of the world operate
much as do scientific, nonpersonalistic ones and may, in principle, be equally reasonable. He
thus undermines the irrationalist approaches prominent in theory of religion ever since
Schleiermacher and dominant since Durkheim, Freud, and Malinowski.

Horton's accomplishment here, however, appears limited by three things: his concen-
tration on conscious, articulated cognition; his omission of the unconscious, perceptual pro-
cesses that seem to underlie that cognition; and his inattention to secular personalism.
These omissions keep him from seeing the depth and breadth of personalism — or anthro-
pomorphism — which he persistently calls a mere idiom. Horton therefore gives personalism
itself only passing and, in my view, inadequate attention.

Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (*Rethinking Religion* 1990) offer another
cognitivist theory, but primarily of ritual, not of religion as a whole. Their work is multi-
faceted. Laying the groundwork for their theory, for example, they offer a careful and
persuasive argument that two terms much contested in recent philosophy of science,
"explanation" and "interpretation," are not mutually exclusive, as often thought, but mutu-
ally dependent and interpenetrating activities.

Centrally, however, Lawson and McCauley draw on linguistic models to argue, as
have others, that ritual can be seen as a reasonable means of storing information and as a
form of communication. Unlike symbolists and structural-functionalists, however, who see
ritual as directed to other humans, Lawson and McCauley see it as aimed at "superhuman
agents," that is, at gods. This has the advantage of squaring with the views of many
religious believers.

However, the term superhuman does not fit agents such as demons and ghosts,
posited in many religions, which often are better described as subhuman. Thus religious
agents as a whole, in my view, must simply be described as humanlike but nonhuman. This
terminological issue is more than a mere rough edge. If we grant that other than "super"
humans may be involved, we also must strip away any assumptions (such as Freudian or
Schleiermacherian ones) tacitly evoked by the familiar but culture-bound Western notion of
superhumanity. In the absence of such assumptions, we must ask once again: why should
humans posit humanlike, but not exactly human, beings at all?

The Lawson-McCauley approach offers no apparent answer. Rather, it substitutes the
problem of humanlike agents for the problem of religion. The issue remains central and
unresolved, a missing cornerstone. Perhaps in consequence, Horton (1993: 350) thinks
Lawson and McCauley represent religion as the "building up of elaborate self-referential
structures, apparently as ends in themselves."

Pascal Boyer's *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas* (1994) does address the problem of humanlike agents, among other issues, by offering a "general theory of religion, explained in terms of universal cognitive processes" (1994: xv). Boyer holds that existing anthropological accounts of religion fail because they rely on a naive empiricism. They depict the transmission of culture, including religion, as filling the blank slate of the human mind by an exhaustive but unspecified and undemonstrated process. Such accounts must assert that this transmission is made possible by a rich learning environment, because they are unaware of cognitive contributions made by constraints of the learner's "mind-brain."

To remedy this lack, Boyer advances a "selective" model drawn in part from sociobiology. His model posits "memes," units of culturally acquired information (Dawkins 1982) that are the cultural analogue of genes. As do genes, memes replicate themselves through their bearers. For religious memes, replication depends on striking a balance of "naturalness," which makes them easily believable, and "unnaturalness," which gets them attention and makes them memorable. The natural or intuitive component of religious ideas is the resemblance of religious agents (e.g., ghosts and gods) to humans, for example in their possession of desires and other emotions. The unnatural and counterintuitive component of religious ideas is the difference between such spirits and humans, for example their invisibility and intangibility. Religious ideas, then, combine believable human qualities with implausible but striking nonhuman qualities.

Boyer rightly calls attention to gaps in the anthropological description of cultural transmission and learning, and rightly emphasizes the need to consider cognitive psychology. However, he does not explain why the natural component (human psychology) of religious ideas should be extended to nonhuman phenomena such as clouds and storms, although he mentions such extension as typical. Nor does he offer a genesis of the unnatural components (invisibility and intangibility) of religious ideas. Instead, they apparently arise in the same way as do genes: randomly, by mutation. Boyer's concern is only with why, once arisen, they survive: "People have religious ideas . . . because other people in their environment have had them before" (ix) and because they are peculiarly transmissable.

An apparent problem here is that Boyer's analogy between genes and memes is inexact. In the standard biological view, genes owe their success to some benefit they confer on their bearers. Thus if memes are analogous to genes, they should confer similar success. However, Boyer explains their *appeal* (their accessibility and novelty) rather than their benefit. He does explain half their appeal, their accessibility, by our "mentalistic intuitive psychology," which in turn is explained by the spontaneous understanding it provides of other people's behavior. This psychology is "easy" to extend to nonhuman animal behavior, where it may be partly right, and also to the inanimate world, where it is "entirely wrong" (293). Why we extend it to the inanimate world, however, is not explained. Indeed, the topic of such extension appears only briefly and only at the end of the work. Moreover, the benefit to the bearer of the unnatural components in memes is not mentioned at all.

Further, Boyer's schema raises an issue of ethnographic and ethological fact. The ostensibly unnatural components of religious ideas he most often mentions, the invisibility and intangibility of spirit beings, seem neither universal in religion nor counterintuitive. On the one hand, gods such as those of Homeric Greece may be only contingently invisible (and may be so by such prosaic means as smoke or cloud) and may be tangible as well. On the other, animals in their natural environments, and humans, may be both invisible and intangible. They may be so by using camouflage, by travelling in complex and deceptive flocks, schools, or squads, or by operating from behind the scenes, through sounds, scents, and other action at a distance. Thus invisibility and intangibility both are quite natural. Even Goodall's (1971, 1975, and personal communication) chimpanzees, for example, seem to find nothing counterintuitive in either the invisibility or the intangibility of a storm, although they seem to view it as a sentient being against which they can direct threats.

Cognition and Anthropomorphism

While the cognitive and wishful-thinking accounts described above all make humanlike-but-not-human beings central to religion, none explains satisfactorily why such beings are plausible. (Durkheim and others have thought Buddhism does not have these beings, but they are mistaken; see Spiro 1966 and Guthrie 1993). Some symbolist accounts also make humanlike beings important but again give only cursory explanations of them. In my view, however, the reasons for the plausibility of such beings are precisely the issue. Once these beings are readily believable, and certainly once they are compelling, religion loses much of its mystery.

My approach to this plausibility is through a more general account of anthropomorphism: the attribution of human features to nonhuman things and events. Religion, like secular thought and action, anthropomorphizes the world of phenomena. That is, we invoke its humanlike beings — its gods — not in a vacuum, but to account for particular things and events. We invoke gods or humans (and the two are continuous) especially as interpretations of those things that are ambiguous or go bump in the night: we hear noises in the wind as voices, see shadows as lurking figures, and see patterns in nature as design. In a secular context, when we later decide that the shadows, noises, or patterns had nothing to do with humans, we say we were anthropomorphizing: that is, making a kind of mistake. In a religious context — for example, when we think plagues and earthquakes are the actions of gods — we make the same mistake.

But why do we make this error and do it so pervasively? For anthropomorphism is not limited to religion but is broad and deep everywhere in our thoughts and actions (Guthrie 1993). It colors perception and response throughout life, as when we speak to our computers, find faces in clouds, or see a natural disaster as punishment. Literary critics and art historians find it throughout the arts, where they call it personification, and ethnographers and folklorists find it in every culture. Even the physical scientist, as Nietzsche (1966: 316) observed, "wrestles for an understanding of the world as a human-like thing and . . . regards the whole world as connected to man, as an infinitely broken echo of an original sound, that of man; as the manifold copy of an original picture, that of man."

Despite some recent confusion about its nature (as noted by Kennedy 1992; Mitchell, Thompson, and Miles, forthcoming; and Guthrie 1993 and forthcoming), anthropomorphism long has been recognized as a tendency of thought and as a categorical error. Nonetheless, it has elicited little systematic analysis. That such a general and oft-noted tendency should receive so little close scrutiny is an oddity with several apparent causes. One is that the tendency appears as an embarrassment, an irrational aberration better chastened and closeted than publicly scrutinized. For religionists it limits our conceptions of divinity, and for humanists it limits our rationality and our conceptions of the natural world.

More important, two superficially adequate explanations — familiarity and comfort — are available. Separately and together, they have forestalled better analyses. According to the familiarity thesis, we use ourselves as models of the world because we have good knowledge of ourselves but not of the nonhuman world. By this thesis, our motivation is cognitive. We wish to understand the world, and our first criterion for an understanding is that the model be one on which we already can rely.

This view goes back at least to the first systematic critic of anthropomorphism, Francis Bacon. Human understanding, Bacon wrote (1960: 51–52), "struggling toward that which is further off . . . falls back upon that which is nearer at hand." Spinoza later gave a similar account. So did Hume (1957: 29): humans, faced with an inscrutable universe, "transfer to every object those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious . . . [Hence] trees, mountains and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion."

The comfort thesis, in contrast, asserts emotional motives: we are mistrustful of what is nonhuman but reassured by what is human. We are motivated not by a need to know but by a need not to know: to deny knowledge and to escape into fantasy. People "believe what they want to believe."

In some degree, this view too goes back at least to Hume, where it mingles as a motive with the desire to know. Hume notes that humans are ignorant or uncertain of major factors affecting their fate, and find this unsettling. "These *unknown causes,* then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependance" (1957: 29). Motivated not only by intellectual but also by emotional needs, we form humanlike models to account for and mitigate events.

A more recent version of the comfort theory, that of Freud, assigns wishful thinking the major role and cognition only a negative one. We anthropomorphize the world (and thus establish religions), Freud claimed, in an irrational attempt to feel we can influence it:

> Impersonal forces and destinies cannot be approached; they remain eternally remote. But if the elements have passions that rage as they do in our own souls, if death itself is not something spontaneous but the violent act of an evil Will, if everywhere in nature there are Beings around us of a kind that we know in our own society, then we can breathe freely, can feel at home (1964: 22).

Both the familiarity and the comfort explanations have some small truth. Neither, however, stands up to scrutiny. The familiarity thesis reflects the fact that we do know something of ourselves, without which we could not use ourselves as models at all. To account for our great reliance on ourselves as models, however, our self-knowledge would have to be proportionately great. Yet, in fact, we all, like Lear, know ourselves "but slenderly." Physiologically, psychologically, and otherwise, the ratio of what we know of ourselves to what we do not is no greater than what we know of dogs and cats, or stones and streams. Even so basic a fact as the circulation of blood, for example, became known only rather recently. The unknown within is as deep as that without. Reliable knowledge, then, cannot be why we so heavily use ourselves as models.

The comfort thesis also seems plausible at first. Certainly humans are gregarious, and solitude may be lonely. But while other humans are our greatest pleasures, they also are our greatest perils. Correspondingly, while much anthropomorphism is comforting, much is frightening. When the householder hears the night wind slam a door and imagines an intruder, her mistaken interpretation is not reassuring. The grain of truth in the comfort thesis is that any interpretation may be better than none. But this does not explain why the interpretation we choose so often is humanlike.

My own explanation — a cognitive, evolutionary, and game-theoretical one — is that in the face of chronic uncertainty about the nature of the world, guessing that some thing or event is humanlike or has a human cause constitutes a good bet. It is a bet because in a complex and ambiguous world our knowledge always is uncertain. It is a good bet because if we are right, we gain much, while if we are wrong, we usually lose little. To call it a bet, however, is not to say it is conscious. Instead, like most of the perceptual process, it remains out of our awareness (Kahneman and Tversky 1982). As a strategy, it results from natural selection, not from reason.

This involuntary and mostly unconscious perceptual strategy nonetheless resembles a conscious one known as Pascal's wager. While we cannot ever know whether God exists or not, Pascal held, we should try to believe that He does. If we do and are right, we may be rewarded by eternal joy, whereas if we are mistaken, we lose only the minor pleasure of indulging in a few sins. Conversely, if we disbelieve and are wrong, we risk eternal

damnation. The two outcomes are so disproportionate that even if it seems unlikely that God exists, we are well advised to bet that He does.

Put another way, our strategy consists in seeing the world first, neither as what we "want" to see nor as what is most likely, but as what matters most. We scan an ambiguous world first with the models generated by our most pressing interests. Although our interests vary, humans, because they are highly organized and powerful, figure in them frequently if not constantly. By virtue of their high organization, real humans also appear in a variety of guises and generate diverse phenomena. Scanning uncertain fields with models whose importance and diversity correspond to those of actual humans, we often suppose we have found the humanity for which we are so alert when, in fact, we have not.

The account given here of anthropomorphism, as an unavoidable product of a necessary perceptual strategy, applies also to a related tendency, animism. As defined by Piaget (1933) and most subsequent psychologists, animism is the attribution of life to the nonliving. This definition appears broader than, and inclusive of, animism as meant by religionists and anthropologists (i.e., as the attribution of souls or spirits to things that do not have them). It also appears to include an error made by nonhuman animals as well. That is, many animals occasionally mistake nonliving things for living ones: birds peck at twigs resembling caterpillars, horses shy at blowing papers, and dogs howl in concert with sirens. This might also be called zoomorphism, the attribution of animal characteristics to nonanimal things and events. Animism (or zoomorphism) as a category of mistakes springs from the same strategy as does anthropomorphism: in the face of chronic uncertainty, we all look first for what matters most. For all animals, that usually is other living things. For humans and a few other animals, it is living things but especially humans.

Thus anthropomorphism, usually considered an aberration of thought, wishful thinking, use of what we know to explain what we do not, or all of these, fundamentally is none of them. Instead, it is a reasonable, though in hindsight mistaken, attribution of aspects (appearance, behavior, intention) of what is most important to us, to parts of the world that do not have them. It is a class of perceptual errors that is natural, universal, and inevitable. These errors are a cost of our necessary vigilance for the presence of what most concerns us. Rather than resulting from conscious intellection, they result from a strategy that usually is out of our awareness and always is out of our control.

CONCLUSION

What, then, is religion? First of all, it is a concept stemming from a particular culture at a particular time. Applying the concept across cultures thus requires adjustments such as abandoning boundaries and, perhaps, replacing them with family resemblances. But if we do use the metaphor of family, then we should use as well its implication of shared ancestry, from which the prototypical resemblances of families derive. The progenitors in the present case, my theory holds, are our interest in humans and our perceptual and cognitive uncertainty. This interest and this uncertainty give rise to interpretations — variations on a theme of humanity — that resemble each other in positing humanlike features in things and events of all kinds.

While religions defy boundaries, they nonetheless share an assertion that the nonhuman universe somehow is significantly like us. That assertion is seminal, and it is pervasive. Far broader than religion in scope, anthropomorphism informs our thought and action more than we recognize. Most relevantly for students of religion, it engenders the resemblances by which we see religions as a family.

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