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The Two “Religions”: Reconceptualizing What We Mean by the Term “Religion”

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Sociology

by

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Introduction

The search for the origin of religion has been a perennial quest that has engaged countless thinkers and scholar for centuries, if not millennia. Since religion is such a foundational aspect of human life, both past and present, there seems no area of life that isn't touched by religion in some way or another. Religious believers generally take it for granted that the worldviews and lifestyles generated by their own traditions involve some aspect of the truth, not just in a detached, philosophical way, but as a way of connecting all aspects of reality together under a single metaphysical vision. The very centrality of this holistic tendency of religious beliefs has inspired the quest to find the origins of religion because, if the key to explaining religion's power and ubiquitous nature can be found, it promises to help explain, or even justify, all sort of human beliefs and actions. From metaphysical visions of angels dancing on the heads of pins to the constitution of what the particular moral orders of various cultures, societies, and religious groups are, knowing the origins of religion will allow us to get a better handle on how countless historical (and contemporary) developments in human social and spiritual lives impact all sorts of human phenomena. One doesn't even have to be a believer in any religious tradition to appreciate the importance of religion. Secular scientists and atheists also wish to find the origins of religion, sometimes even in the quest to eradicate or minimize religion down to just idiosyncratic beliefs rather than its current expression in various institutional and socio-cultural contexts.

While the quest to find the origins of religion has spawned many attempts and theories that purport to offer the key to unlocking the secrets of religion, I believe that most, if not all, of these theorists, philosophers, theologians, etc. have fallen under the same spell that may be traced back to very holistic assumptions of religion itself. Due to this perception of holism in religion itself, even those who are attempting to explain religion and its origins from the outside have fallen under this spell. Even the popular, contemporary philosopher Daniel Dennett (2006), who purports to explain the naturalistic basis of religion by “breaking the spell” that religion holds over us, as the title of his book Breaking the Spell tells us, has actually fallen under a greater holistic assumption acting as a kind of spell itself.

What is this holistic spell?

It is the spell that religion itself constitutes a singular phenomenon or metaphysical/institutional singularity rather than perhaps it being the product of two (or maybe more) distinct, yet related and intimately connected, processes or phenomena. We are so used to referring to “religion” as a catch-all concept that it has acquired a kind of semantic vagueness in that almost everybody knows what one is talking about if the word “religion” is used in casual speech, and yet it is also very difficult to nail down precise boundaries and a singular definition that captures all the various aspects and components of what we refer to as “religion.”

This vagueness has implications for finding the origin of religion as well, for often those who purport to explain religion primarily in terms of various beliefs or completely naturalistic processes, such as the aforementioned Daniel Dennett,

deemphasize some of the social aspects of religion that also dissatisfies other theorists of religion. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim is the foundational figure in asserting the social reality of religion, as against his predecessors and contemporaries such as Herbert Spencer and Edward Tylor, who, presaging Dennett and others by decades, also offered up psychologistic explanations of their own regarding religious belief and of the origins of religion. By grounding the origin of religion in some kind of animistic process of extending the perception of disembodiment or dream-states into a worldview of the universe being full of souls, spirits, or otherwise self-sufficient entities, Spencer, Tylor, and others did seem to capture some aspect of religion that rang true, and still rings true somewhat for a philosopher such as Dennett, in providing this psychological basis of religion.

As an example of this, in the same book Breaking the Spell, Dennett rests much of the case for the origins of religion upon the psychological feature of humans known as the “intentional stance,” which is the default inclination in humans to attribute intentions and consciousness to all sorts of objects in the world¹. It developed evolutionarily because it was more beneficial, for example, to assume that a snake-like object seen in the bushes was alive and actually a snake in order to avoid disturbing it than to assume that it was just an inert tree branch. Taking from Justin Barrett’s positing of a mental module in humans called the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD), Dennett expands upon this structural feature of humans to attribute agency to all sorts of objects

¹ Dennett is just one of many philosophers and social scientists who hold this view of the “intentional stance,” including the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and the anthropologist Pascal Boyer. (LeDrew 2016)

in the world. Out of this mental feature comes all sorts of belief in ghosts, mystic forces of nature, spirits, gods, and other entities which are a part of our environment and must be acknowledged and dealt with lest we underestimate their power and get harmed or killed by these entities. These posited entities then become the basis for religion and magic.

This line of argument is right in line with the psychologistic explanations regarding the origins of religion that Spencer, Tylor, and others gave a century or more before, albeit it with more scientific sophistication. For Durkheim, however, this psychologistic view of his predecessors and contemporaries never satisfied him, even as he flirted with it in his earlier work. As the contemporary sociologist and Durkheim scholar Alexandra Maryanski has uncovered, Durkheim changed his wording in the second edition of his first great work The Division of Labor in Society in a passage describing the origins of religion in “naturism” versus his earlier views (Maryanski 2014). Durkheim remained dissatisfied with this explanation of the origins being based upon naturism and turned instead towards totemism and the more general concept of “collective representation” in his goal to show the social nature of religion as against purely psychologistic explanations of his predecessors and contemporaries.

The primary goal of this paper is to argue that both explanatory strategies regarding the analysis of the origins of religion, the psychologistic and the sociological, are correct in their own ways and reflect two different aspects of what most of us think about when we use the concept of “religion.”

Applying Evolutionary Principles to Religion

In the past few decades, there has been an increased discussion and debate regarding the evolutionary origins of religion and whether it should be considered an adaptation derived from natural selection, a byproduct or spandrel, or even as what Dawkins (2004) called a “mind virus” that parasitically possesses human minds and is transmitted from mind to mind as “meme” in a manner such as a virus. As I argue later, I believe that there are elements of religion which are derived from natural selection and are based in biology, but that there are also many elements which do act more like Darwinian by-products. While some theorists and researchers incorporate Darwinian evolutionary logic into explaining the presence and development of religion and do believe that religion has some functional relationship with evolutionary fitness considerations, I don’t see many arguing for a kind of conceptual kind of split such that I will do. A theorist such as Pascal Boyer (2002) in Religion Explained derives much of his explanations for religion from underlying Darwinian evolutionary developments within humans, especially in regards to certain developed cognitive capacities, while other more conventional theorists focus mostly on the cultural and historical roots of specific religions rather than attempting to find a more fundamental cause or explanation of religion as a general social phenomenon. Other theorists, most notably Stark and Bainbridge (1996) take a more axiomatic approach to religion and explain some of the underlying logic that drives religion and its development without necessarily getting into the specific evolutionary causes of this logic. While there is a sort of implicit functional

angle here in which certain developments of religious forms are oriented towards meeting certain human needs, such as with their concept of “compensators” and how they act as otherworldly substitutes for this-worldly rewards, there isn’t as explicit a connection of their overall logic with either Darwinian or sociocultural evolution.

Closer to my approach and perspective are theorists such as Robert Bellah (2011), Ara Norenzayan (2013), and Stephen K. Sanderson (2018) who do incorporate both Darwinian and sociocultural evolutionary factors in their analysis. Their analyses typically first involve arguing for the reasons that religion developed in the first place as a part of Darwinian evolution before going on to explore specific religious sociocultural developments as various cultures and societies evolved over time into more complex societies. This increased complexity then is one of the main causes which spawns new sociocultural selection forces which allow for the further development of various sociocultural forms to meet these new challenges. These theorists do a masterful job of bringing various concrete examples and data from historical and anthropological sources towards showing how religion has developed across time. They persuasively show how different societies and their religious forms have both certain commonalities with each other, as well as divergences, and how both of these commonalities and divergences can be traced to both an underlying logic of sociocultural religious development as well as to concrete historical examples involving degrees of contingency and meaningful variation.

My proposed contribution to this literature is to draw a few more fine-pointed distinctions that, at least conceptually, will help us more clearly see how both Darwinian and sociocultural evolutionary forces are involved in religion and how these two have

resulted in two different processes which are somewhat distinct and yet still deeply interrelated with each other. The long-term goal is to show how certain features of religion are based upon their development due to Darwinian selection forces which can't be merely overcome through sociocultural change and which are actually strongly programmed into our biological human nature. I feel that many of the previous theorists and scholars have done an excellent job of explaining the development many religious forms, past and present, without necessarily honing in on a certain feature of religion that I believe may become even more pertinent in future forms of religion. Newer and more unconventional forms of religion may not fit the standard picture of religion that many have held onto and so I think we need to sharpen a few intellectual tools in order to tackle these newer religious forms.

Mapping the Split

As a way of recognizing both the validity of some aspects of the psychologicistic explanations and of some aspects of the sociological explanation, I propose that we “break the spell” of assuming that religion constitutes a holistic phenomenon. I believe that, analytically, religion can be broken down into two broad and separate, yet also interconnected and interactive, processes, each of which has a different basis from the other one². They mutually reinforce each other in many aspects and influence each other

² Contemporary theorists of religion have often recognized how the term “religion” is an “an umbrella term, bundling together different meanings on the basis of a family resemblance (Vaas 2009).” My attempt to split up religion into separate aspects is not

so deeply as to appear to be one phenomenon on the surface. It is meant not to be a literal breaking apart of religion into these two forms, but rather it is meant to be a starting off point for potential future study into how both of these function and how they may change or not change over time. These are “ideal types” and don’t represent actual features of religion that are pristine and strictly modular from each other. Rather, this is a kind of a thought experiment in order to tease apart how religion possess features that are both universal and relatively fixed in the human species, as well as features that are highly variable, especially in context of various ecological and social environments that spawn religious forms and belief systems. While religion as an actual phenomenon contains overlapping elements from both of these processes, at least for analytical and schematic purposes I will now proceed in this analysis as if they were distinct from each other.

These two forms, which I have labeled “Religion-B” and “Religion-M,” may be roughly conceptualized as involving two sub-systems of the conventional or common conception of religion, which I have labeled “Religion-C.” These are two deeply connected sub-systems and so they exert a lot of influence upon each other and it is

new as some theorists have already sought to divide religion into a variety of separate processes or aspects, each of which may be subject to some form of biological evolution (Feierman 2009) For example, Feierman divides religion into “behavior, beliefs, values, moods, and feelings” while Vaas divides religion into the characteristics of “transcendence,” “ultimate relatedness,” “mysticism,” “myth,” “morality,” “rite,” and “community.” While these expanded designations of the internal components of religion may have much going for them, I will use the dualistic model that I’ve developed, both for the sake of simplicity of argument and for my admittedly sometimes too infatuated inclination to look at the world in terms of dualisms.

important to note that this isn't a claim that these two subsystems necessarily have clear and sharp boundaries. I believe, however, that it is an important potential move in helping to analytically separate these two sub-types of Religion-C in order to generate a potential research program that could either support or disprove my assertions, if only they can somehow be operationalized.

For a visualization of this split of religion into two processes, I present the following simple model:

$$(\text{Religion-C}) = (\text{Religion-M}) + (\text{Religion-B})$$

“Religion-C” represents the common way that people represent and talk about religion, both in casual, ordinary language, as well as the way that many scholars tend to refer to religion. While at the purely definitional level of semantic rigor the term “religion” (as represented by Religion-C in my formulation) is pretty loose and it may not always be used in a logically consistent manner. In practical terms of everyday usage, most people seem to use the generic concept of “religion” in a similar way to each other for the most part. For example, many would say that Christianity is a religion, but many would also say that something like nationalism isn't a religion, formally speaking. However, I would argue that something like nationalism can be a form of religion (or may at least be considered as being a “religious” worldview or orientation) in that a phenomenon such as nationalism is specifically grounded upon a form of “Religion-M”,

to be discussed momentarily, and just not necessarily in the conventional way that most people use the term “religion.”

Religion-B

Let us start with the one aspect of “Religion-C” which I have called “Religion-B.” The “B” in “Religion-B” represents the concept of “belief” or “belief system.” This aspect of religion roughly corresponds to the psychologistic perspectives that have been given by so many scholars of religion, including the aforementioned Spencer, Tylor, and Dennett. Religion-B deals with all those aspects that are experienced generally at the level of the individual and within individual consciousnesses, though there is a large social aspect that plays out in the intersubjective formation of common religious worldviews as well. Religion-B can be classified as primary dealing with epistemological and metaphysical issues within Religion-C, including issues involving individual perceptions and beliefs in which some aspect of extra-normal reality is presented to the individual as being true and existent. This is the broad realm of dealing with ghosts, souls, gods, voices coming from burning bushes, believing that one is possessed by an evil demon, etc. These are all experienced at the individual level, even though they may have many social elements mixed in there as well. For instance, one isn’t likely to believe in demonic possession if one was raised in a community that doesn’t believe in demons. This social element in the case of Religion-B provides the context and possibilities for how individual beliefs and experiences will be represented to

individuals themselves. In this sense, every experience that occurs to the individual can be said to be an “individual representation,” which to be distinguished from “collective representation” that Durkheim used. The individual experiences something and, just because of the nature of being human, creates some kind of explanation for themselves in terms of representational beliefs. The individual organism may be experiencing extreme tiredness at a biological level, for instance, but at the level of “individual representation,” the individual may represent that tiredness as coming from a curse placed on them by a rival clan, or of eating the wrong kind of food earlier in the day, or of not sleeping well the night before, etc. In the context of this argument, the “fact-of-the-matter” of what is causing the experience of being tired is not of primary importance; rather the crucial point is to examine how individuals represent to themselves why they are experiencing what they are experiencing.

Moving from the construction of individual representations and beliefs to the larger evolutionary development of Religion-B, Religion-B may be considered as an emergent byproduct of a variety of underlying cognitive mechanisms, one of which includes the aforementioned “Hyperactive Agency Detection Device,” each of which may be subject on their own to various evolutionary selectionist forces at the biological level. However, once Religion-B emerges on top of these individual cognitive mechanisms, it may be considered as a kind of vessel whose content becomes much more influenced by sociocultural evolution than the Darwinian, biological evolution of its constituent parts, such as with the HADD. This is important because once Religion-B emerges, it does carry with it more social features than for the underlying components

which compose it and, therefore, becomes more subject to sociocultural evolutionary forces which are beyond the level of individual representation.

Religion-M

In contrast to Religion-B, Religion-M isn't about beliefs. Rather, it is about emotions related to the formation and identification of in-groups and moral communities and how certain emotions get generated which act as a bonding mechanism to maintain and reinforce communities, which in turn acts as a relatively cohesive social unit involved in both intragroup cooperation and intergroup competition. The "M" part of Religion-M can be short hand for that notion of a "moral community." Religion-M is the essentially social nature of religious feeling, bonding, and of collective moral emotions and is the genesis of, and is synonymous with, an important aspect of morality³.

I believe that Religion-M is what Durkheim was fundamentally aiming at with many his theories, both regarding religion and regarding his overwhelming concern with social solidarity, although he too seemingly believed in religion as a singular phenomenon. To reiterate, my schema labels Religion-M as that force which binds

³ To clarify, by "morality," this doesn't mean that it is necessarily "moral" or "ethical" in the traditional sense whereby "morality" refers to some objectively transcendent set of principles acting as the basis for "moral" action. "Morality," in this argument, is "functional", in the philosophical sense of "functional" rather than the sociological sense of "functional," in that anything that functions as a way of achieving group solidarity can be considered "moral," by definition. If human sacrifice acts as one way of keeping a social unit together, then it is "moral" even if many today would consider it "immoral."

individuals together into a moral community. Our evolutionary history is intimately connected with other apes and their comparatively individualistic natures (as compared to other primates such as monkeys), and yet we can come together into some kind of collective or group which would not exist otherwise (Maryanski and Turner 2013). In order to facilitate this bonding of individuals into a larger collective, there must be some kind of emotional predisposition towards the generation of some kind of “collective effervescence,” as Durkheim called that strange feeling that arises over a collective gathering sharing a common experience (Durkheim 1995)⁴. Shared beliefs and shared worldviews are not enough to bind individuals together without the added emotional capacity and inclination to form communities centered around those shared beliefs and worldviews. In fact, emotions are necessary in the coherence of collectives over time.

Different Forms of Selectionism at Work

Different processes of evolution are at play with these two forms of religion because one of them (Religion-M) is primarily derived out of Darwinian processes of biological evolution, while the other form (Religion-B) changes much more in line with sociocultural evolutionary forces. Understanding these two different types of evolution

⁴ This feeling of “oneness,” in which divergent individuals gather together in order to form a singular sense of identity in some kind of community, then may represent itself in the form of some kind of totem, object, or symbol which then becomes “sacred” and imbued with some special characteristic that then comes to stand for the whole community and its identity qua community.

plays an important role in helping to define and distinguish these two forms of religion from each other and what selective pressures are working upon each of these forms.

In terms of selection pressures on various features of our world, from the initial reliance upon Darwin's notion of natural selection as being a biological process which selects for certain traits and biological structures within species over time, the idea of "selection" has been expanded by some to include forms of selectionism that work upon the forms and structures of social and cultural features in humans beyond just biology (Runciman 2009). Sociocultural evolution is the process of social and cultural change over time due to a variety of selection pressures and mechanisms at that level of social structure and culture. It is important to note that sociocultural evolution isn't a "progressive" notion, as the argument isn't that human cultures are converging upon some ideal over time with some forms being "higher" and some being "lower." It is merely the process of change over time without necessary regard as to what is ultimately the "best" or "highest" form of human social organization.

In the biological sciences, there has been a long debate regarding at which levels of life natural selection mostly, or solely, works on (Keller 1999). For instance, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins famously argued in his book The Selfish Gene that it was the gene that is the fundamental level at which selection works (Dawkins 2016). Others have argued for other levels, such as at the cell level, the individual organism level, or the group level (Okasha 2006). There are also a number of biologists and social scientists who subscribe to "multi-level selection" whereby there are selection processes going on at all of these levels (Wilson and Sober 1994). By extension, it has

been argued that culture is itself ultimately a part of the natural world because it developed out of certain evolutionary and social contexts, even to the point where there is a co-evolutionary process of genes and culture (Boyd and Richarson 1988).

Once there is a connection made between biological evolution and sociocultural evolution, then it is only a logical step to claim that forces of selection and selection pressures also impact the development of sociocultural systems, which in turn change over time to meet a whole host of different pressures. The precise mechanisms of social selection are debated, but according to the recent book The Emergence and Evolution of Religion by Means of Natural Selection, the authors have labeled a variety of selection processes that impact how sociocultural systems change and develop, not only in religion but in social processes in general (Turner et al. 2017). For the purposes of this paper, the details of each of these sociocultural selection processes are not important except to note that as one moves into these sociocultural selection processes, the direct impact of biological evolution is constrained in many ways. Biological evolution has resulted in the creation of certain biological and neurological features within humans, but once humans biologically evolved to a certain level of complexity, then sociocultural evolutionary factors come to play an increasingly large role in the actual manifestation of various sociocultural features. I use as support of the contention of my main argument the fact that these authors, as well as others, do draw an important distinction between Darwinian evolution and sociocultural evolution.

Evolutionary Development of the Two Forms

In terms of the origins of Religion-B and Religion-M, both had come about after a long evolutionary development from earlier forms that can be seen in other animal species. Regarding Religion-B, precursor forms of its psychological constituents appear in other animals qua certain psychological characteristics that are analogous to, or even the same as, psychological characteristics and beliefs in humans (Wynne and Udell 2013). One may also conceive of these characteristics as being the precursors to a kind of proto-Religion-B in the sense that these other animals may be experiencing something which, only with later evolutionary developments in humans, came to be the basis for the emergence of Religion-B.

Let us engage in a brief thought experiment. Most of us who have been around dogs have seen them occasionally jerk around or whine while sleeping. Many have concluded that dogs are indeed dreaming and may be experiencing very similar experiences that humans do when we dream (Cohen 2012). Let us presume that these dogs may be “seeing” other dogs, humans, and living beings while they are dreaming, similar to way that people do when we dream. In a sense, they are experiencing a kind of alternate reality or a simulation of reality.

What is the relevance of this point to the development of Religion-B? Herbert Spencer thought that religion for humans, in the form of animism, originated from the experience of dreaming of one’s consciousness (or soul or spirit) disengaging from the body and roaming around, or of seeing the images or “ghosts” of dead relatives in their

dreams (Turner 2017). In this way, in our waking lives, these experiences which have occurred in our dream state form the basis of our extending the notion of there existing disembodied souls out not only in our dream worlds, but in our waking worlds as well. What was previously just a kind of experiential phenomenon occurring when one is asleep takes on the force of an explicit belief while we are awake, which can then be extended and modified to spawn a whole range of other metaphysical beliefs based upon this kind of experientially-based animism.

Looking at dogs, it is unlikely that they have the cognitive sophistication to have the kind and structure of explicit, complex, and higher order beliefs in the same way that humans do. It is largely a definitional and philosophical matter of what a belief even is and belief is defined in different ways by different researchers and philosophers (Dennett 1995). I agree with those who say that it is only with the development of some kind of symbolically complex language that beliefs are able to emerge at the level of being fully-formed, complex and self-conscious representations accessible internally to an individual consciousness as an explicit belief⁵. However, the somewhat similar basis for experiencing dream worlds between ourselves and dogs may point to the fact that many of our non-human, mammalian relatives have the rudimentary beginnings of what could later develop into the emergence of Religion-B in humans.

⁵ Unlike those philosophical epiphenomenalists who argue that beliefs have no causal power, I do think that beliefs can influence behavior and cause action to occur, both at the individual level and even at the collective level. Shared beliefs, or at the very least shared representations, may sometimes form the basis of collective action (Bandura 2000).

In contrast, Religion-M, or at least its potential precursor, would seem to only be present in a sufficiently advanced and complex species that also has some kind of mechanism for sociality and social bonding involving individuals beyond just their structure in a dominance hierarchy. The existence of some kind of collective structure or collective “reality” that can work down from some form of collective representation and involves some sort of collective control mechanism working upon individuals within a collective is also needed. A very individualistic species that somehow developed a certain level of cognitive sophistication without the accompanying need to develop sociality and social bonding could conceivably develop Religion-B without needing to develop Religion-M as a source of social bonding and the forming of moral communities. Conceivably, a species (or even some forms of AI) such as this could believe in gods, spirits, etc. of a metaphysical kind in order to explain or represent their world while not needing the glue of a social cohesion and a social control mechanism such as morality. In contrast, a more social species which requires a greater capacity to coordinate disparate and individualistic individuals into collective action would need some kind of way to coordinate their activities and systems of “morality” to function as a form of a social cohesion and control.

One way of looking to see if this division of Religion-C into Religion-B and Religion-M may be a valid one is to look at how various scholars and thinkers have analyzed Religion-C in the past. If they themselves tend to implicitly divorce Religion-B from Religion-M without realizing it, which I believe many have, then that may provide some evidence that such a division implicitly exists. An example of this implicit division

can be seen in critiques of Religion-C such as those that come from the so-called “New Atheists” of contemporary intellectual life.

The “New Atheist” Critique of Religion

One way to potentially show how there might be these two aspects to Religion-C is to show how self-declared critics or antagonists of Religion-C often tend to focus almost exclusively on the Religion-B aspect without even acknowledging the Religion-M aspect that often gives Religion-C much of its emotional power in driving human action. In this case, I bring in the critiques of Religion-C brought by the so-called “New Atheists,” who have sometimes been called by the self-label of the “Four Horseman,” which consists of the figures of the neuroscientist Sam Harris, the philosopher Daniel Dennett, the author Christopher Hitchens, and the biologist Richard Dawkins (Zenk 2013). When these individuals comment on the subject of Religion-C, I inevitably hear a focused attack on the silliness or harmful nature of the beliefs that Religion-C engenders. They usually focus on some aspect of religious mythology or metaphysical instances of the supposedly supernatural world causing something in the natural world in a direct and obvious way. These beliefs are, to the New Atheists at least, completely irrational and have little to no place in modern and contemporary societies. They may recognize that these beliefs could have had served some functional purpose in the past, but their critiques are almost entirely epistemologically based in the sense of attacking or defending various claims that involve an individual reasoner assessing these claims. This

is still using a form of analysis that is common in the history of philosophy in Western thought, especially since Descartes, whereby a certain form of skepticism is used at the level of an individual subject assessing the truth or falsity of countless “states of affairs” in which the issue involves how an individual’s beliefs and assertions map onto or correspond with the world (Braver 2007).

However, this approach still fails to appreciate the more social aspect of Religion-C as shown in its Religion-M aspect. To be sure, individuals such as the New Atheists do recognize and occasionally comment upon the social nature of religion, especially in critiquing the more herd-like, non-skeptical approach of many religious believers “blindly” following authoritative figures, but they still fail to fully address the social aspect that is built into Religion-C as a phenomenon itself. Sam Harris in his book The Moral Landscape does explicitly say that:

“Clearly, religion cannot be reduced to a mere concatenation of religious beliefs. Every religion consists of rites, rituals, prayers, social institutions, holidays., and these serve a wide variety of purposes, conscious and otherwise.” (Harris 2010: 148)

Harris then, however, goes on to write more about the nature of religious beliefs and rarely brings a social element back into the discussion, indicating that the social aspects derived from Religion-M within Religion-C are much more tangential in his view than the explicitly cognitive aspects concerning beliefs that he focused upon.

Bringing it back to Durkheim, the insightful and important contribution of Durkheim to discussions regarding Religion-C was in recognizing and making much more explicit the social nature of Religion-C itself, which can be represented as being the central feature of Religion-M as I have formulated it. We are not just thinking creatures;

we are also feeling and social creatures and so these aspects of us should not be swept aside in order to focus only on beliefs and cognitive processes.

The Importance of Durkheim, Totemism, and Symbolic Thinking

In many ways, Emile Durkheim should really get credit as the intellectual figure who was really able to implicitly identify Religion-M as coming from an explicitly social process and interaction effect between individuals within a social and moral community. As mentioned before, his thought was an important corrective to the excessively psychologistic explanations of Religion-C given by figures such as Tylor and Spencer. His emphasis on this social aspect allowed for a certain division already of Religion-C into that which is social and forms the bases for collective representations versus that which is more individualized and psychological in individual representation. One can see this clearly in his definition of religion given in his 1912 book The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, which is:

“A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden -- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” (Durkheim 1995:62)

The key phrases in this definition which are important to note are “sacred things,” and “unite into a single moral community.” Durkheim’s usage of the idea of sacredness here without explicitly mentioning the importance of there being a belief in an explicitly “supernatural” world is important to the later part of my argument in which I argue

against the notion, which is common among many other definitions of religion, that religion requires, or is necessarily centrally-based upon, beliefs about the supernatural. In my reading, all sorts of representations of sacredness can elevate a system of beliefs into being religious and sacredness doesn't necessarily have to connect to what is considered the supernatural. Sacredness may connect to what I call the "meta-natural," which is some sacred, symbolic, and perhaps emergent element which is considered as somehow elevated above mere nature (and Durkheim's notion of profaneness) and yet is not elevated into an ontological realm or separate reality, like how supernatural elements tend to be held. Therefore, certain symbolic representations like the "Nation" or the "People" become kinds of meta-natural ideas which is held to be sacred to ideology of nationalism. Yet, these representations are generally not considered to represent something which somehow exists outside of the natural world in a special, supernatural realm⁶. The importance of recognizing this point is that it frankly allows for a more promiscuous usage of the concept of religion to be applied in many instances in which more conventional definers of religion do not wish to apply the concept to. Critics may object precisely to this promiscuity, but I personally welcome an expanded application of the concept of religion to many features of our social world and to our ideologies.

As far as the phrase "unite into a single moral community" in Durkheim's definition, this has explicit impact upon my schema of the division of Religion-C. This

⁶ Certain more mystical types may elevate the "Nation" into a kind of special, supernatural existence, or believe the "Nation" or the "People" as at least being the path through which the supernatural realm acts upon the natural world through some kind of divine providence.

phrase implies that it is a necessary function of what is to be considered religious that it be able to act as a way of unifying individuals into some kind of collective moral community. The “M” of my “Religion-M” is explicitly taken from the notion of a “moral community” and so, if one accepts my division of Religion-C into Religion-B and Religion-M, then one can see that both of them are contained in Durkheim’s definition of religion, but not in many other definitions of religion.

While Durkheim may not have seen things the way that I’m arguing in terms of a division of Religion-C into two aspects, I’d argue that his focus on totemism towards the later part of his career actually represents an implicit attempt to integrate those two aspects of Religion-B and Religion-M back into a more unified phenomenon. Totems and their symbolic importance represent a way in which the collectively emotional feeling of being in a moral community can be joined to specific symbols in such a way as that the totemic symbol can be used as a way not merely to represent the moral community, but to in fact spur the emotional feelings of solidarity within a moral community and in drawing distinctions between different moral communities. Hence the emotional importance of all sorts of totems, including flags, colors for a sports team, and even perhaps abstract identity totems used in contemporary “identity politics” in which a group of individuals will circle around some abstract representation of their collective identity in order to draw a distinction between themselves and others and to generate emotional attachment to the identity totem and, as a result, to each other. In this way, the impulse of the moral community to define itself vis-a-vis Religion-M meets the more explicitly symbolic forms inherent in representations and which, through language,

become the building blocks for higher order beliefs and the basis for Religion-B. These higher order beliefs, which can be consciously perceived in the mind and articulated in a way via meta-cognition, necessarily involve a more sophisticated relationship of symbols to both things in the world and to other symbols.

How Cognition Developed to Enable Religion-B to Symbolically Connect with Religion-

M

These cognitive abilities allowing for the construction of higher order beliefs are important as a way of explaining the nature of Religion-B, and beliefs more generally, and how the symbolic thinking generated from these cognitive abilities allows for the connection of Religion-M to Religion-B. Michael Corballis (2014) argues that it is the feature of recursion within the human cognitive system which allows our thinking, and hence our beliefs, to radically expand our generation of symbols to the point where we are just awash in symbols and symbolic thinking, to the point where Terrence Deacon (1997) has called us the “symbolic species.” Corballis believes that it is recursion, in combination with the expansion of memory capacities, specifically episodic memory, that allows humans to “time travel” in our heads beyond just the present, as well as to formulate complex stories and to engage into cognitive “displacement,” in which things can be thought and talked about which are not directly present to the individual at a particular time and place. Out of recursion also comes the “theory of mind” in which other people’s perspectives and thoughts can be considered within our own thoughts.

There are various levels or orders of theory of mind, and humans appear to be the only species that engages in higher order thinking. There is still much contention and debate regarding the sophistication, or even presence, of the theory of mind that our closest ape cousins (as well as certain other animals like dolphins, elephants, and certain birds) may possess, but chimpanzees do appear to consistently fail “false-belief” tests that young children pass after a certain age (Call and Tomasello 2008). This indicates that chimpanzees may possess a zero-order level instantiation of a theory of mind, but that a first-order level theory of mind is unlikely, and a second-order (and beyond) theory of mind is clearly beyond the capacity of chimpanzees to engage in.

This is all important because the development of language, recursion, and other evolutionary developments have allowed humans to engage in an explosive expansion of cognitive abilities and usage of symbolic thought, which has allowed for the creation of more complex beliefs and social organization. The philosopher John Searle has argued that it is through language that we create and negotiate a larger portion of our collective interaction in the social world and allows for the generation of collective beliefs and “institutional facts” (Searle 2009). This fits into the general Durkheimian perspective, but the main thing to note here is that no other animals appear to be able create these kinds of “institutional facts” and collective beliefs. Some may possess a kind of “proto-language” or “proto-recursion” or “proto-theory of mind.” The presence of these features in other ape species indicates that their development into the forms of actual language, recursion, and theory of mind that we humans possess today was largely the consequence of evolutionary selection pressures that our hominin ancestors were subject to after

hominins split off from the last common ancestor (LCA) that they shared with chimpanzees and bonobos.

In the context of this paper's overall argument, the importance of this is to provide the background for the underlying biological bases that allow for the emergence of Religion-B and how the fundamentally recursive and symbolic nature of Religion-B is what allows for it to be subject to not just biological evolution, but sociocultural evolution. Since symbols and representations are often semi-arbitrary and not necessarily connected to the real world directly, this means that specific symbols, as well as their accompanying symbolic systems, can change relatively rapidly and are often constrained more by historical inertia (i.e. via something like path dependence) than by strict biological necessity. This means that, as being subject to sociocultural evolution, symbols and symbolic systems can then be subject to all sorts of influences and selection forces that otherwise are absent in species that don't possess our level of symbolic usage.

Coming back to Durkheim's totemism, this comes into play here because through the medium of representative and cognitive processes, the more emotional aspects of our social identities as members of moral communities then get transformed and expressed into more symbolic representations of those social emotions. Therefore, what emotionally is a kind of unarticulated sense of "we-ness" of the moral community based upon emotional ties of social connectiveness then gets more explicitly symbolic forms attached to those emotions. In a sense, "collective effervescence" gets converted into "collective representation" through this process of mediation. These "collective representations" then often find themselves expressed in terms of some sort of totemic

image that acts to bind separate individuals together. In terms of my argument, Religion-M gets generally expressed through the mechanisms of Religion-B in this case of “collective representation” via the creation of a totemic symbol. In other words, the social aspect of Religion-C, which is the more emotional part (Religion-M), gets processed through the more cognitive aspects of our psychology, which then provides the conceptual resources to label those emotions and convert them into symbolic form (Religion-B). In this way, Durkheim’s totemism is showing a way how these two different aspects of Religion-C can be integrated under one symbolic form. I’d still argue that the underlying two aspects of Religion-B and Religion-M are still somewhat distinct from each other beneath the surface, but Religion-C, as that which more people reference when they refer to the term “religion,” involves both of these aspects. This is especially true when conceived of under the form of various totemic representations, which reflect our more groupish emotional inclinations, including in all sorts of ethnocentric beliefs and representations. The ability of religious thinking to generate a circling of individuals around a symbolic representation or totem of some sort then becomes an explicit hallmark of the more hidden Religion-M in the creation of a moral order around that symbolic representation. This becomes important in the next stage of my argument in that I argue that many different forms of human sociality which revolve around a central, sacred representation can be categorized as being religious, if not a full-blown religion. How are we then to distinguish between those systems of belief that are religious versus those that are not?

Clarifying What Can be Considered “Religious”

One of the potential problems with the analysis done so far is that one could argue that practically everything in our social lives has a religious element of some sort or another. In some sense, from a certain point in the development of human culture, everything was infused with religious aspects. Beyond conventional definitions of Religion-C that correspond to our identification of “religion” with specific existent religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., I would argue that so-called “political religions” and “civic religions” fit into the category of being religious according to my formulation of involving both elements of Religion-M and Religion-B. The objection to this is that, generally speaking, these latter sorts of religions don’t have certain traditionally conceived features of religion with the creation and maintenance of certain formal institutional structures or a belief in the supernatural. While it is true that these kinds of religions do not fit into traditional definitions of religion, I argue that they can be considered as being religious because, as with such things as nationalism mentioned earlier, there is a kind of totem involved around which individuals place some kind of sacredness upon it and it specifically acts as a source of social distinctions, social bonding, and social exclusion. If it were just a certain kind of belief system or worldview that didn’t have that element of sacredness and of social cohesion, then it would lack the features of Religion-M and would be closer to a “pure” type of Religion-B in which there was some kind of systematic web of associated beliefs and practices but without the force of morality and of making social distinctions of a moral nature.

A key linguistic distinction here is between the term “religion,” (as Religion-C), which is a noun and indicative of some kind of thing or object, with the term “religious,” which is an adjective and adjectives act as a modifier or descriptor to nouns. In this way, a “religion” has a connotation that lends itself to a kind of reification and in which, as a noun, it brings with it a kind of semantic essentialism in the sense that a noun indicates that the thing described as some sort of coherence or essence internal to it and which can also correspond to something specific, whether concrete or abstract, that the noun points to. This is why it is much more difficult to identify worldviews or ideologies like scientism and humanism as being religious. However, as an adjective at least, the term “religious” can also be applied to a whole range of social phenomena that don’t often get thought of as being traditionally “religious.” While many may not see the utility of drawing such a finely pointed difference between the words “religion” and “religious,” and may say that this tactic just complicates things unnecessarily, I believe that it is important to draw this distinction if only to act a kind of tool for showing how traditional, more narrow conceptions of what a “religion” can be seen as being somewhat continuous with my more broad conception of what counts as being “religious.” Ultimately, I’m calling for an extension of the usage of term “religious” to include all sorts of belief systems or ideologies that contain a strong element of Religion-M within them.

An Unorthodox Example: Scientism and Science

As an example of something that fits the criteria of both Religion-M and Religion-B, I submit that what some have called “scientism” fits into the same category and form as being a “religious” worldview, even if it is not a full-blown religion. “Scientism,” as I define it, is the worldview that consists of the proposition that science is the only real, or at least the only legitimate, form of knowledge acquisition available to humans. All other forms of knowledge are either false, illusory, or merely degraded or debased forms of science. In contrast to “scientism,” “science” itself is not a “religion” or “religious” but is instead to be considered most basically as both an intellectual framework and as a widespread social institution. The label of “science” describes a process of knowledge acquisition that, if one takes a Popperian perspective, generates certain propositions that themselves can be falsified, at least in theory. As a practice or process, science can generate these propositions without necessarily connecting all of them together into a grand, unified perspective or comprehensive worldview. In order to knit together all the individual scientific propositions into a singular worldview in which all scientific propositions constitute a single body of knowledge, it takes human minds (or consciousnesses of some kind) to enact this project of constructing a whole. At this point, the process of “science” may become “scientism” and take on a “religious” character, as I’ve defined “religious,” because of how the enterprise of science can take on a sacred character to its practitioners and create a sacred community of “those who do science” versus those who do not. This then becomes a social distinction and a

moralizing element in which a group of individuals circle around the totem of “Science,” and this process clearly has an element of Religion-M to it. There comes to exist a community of scientists in which not everyone is automatically let in. Many individuals may “do” science, but the social category of being explicitly a scientist has a boundary, however fuzzy or porous that it may be, that draws a kind moral distinction for those who subscribe to scientism. When science just remains a set of propositions which, although interconnected with each to some degree or another, is used to describe some domain of knowledge, then it is not inherently moralized. The process of science does contain a significant social element to it, but the propositions and beliefs themselves are not individually social, for it is conceivable for a non-social species (or other form of consciousness, such as some possible artificial intelligence) to derive individual scientific propositions without a social or moralizing aspect to them.

Going back to the discussion of how using the Durkheimian definition of religion allows for the articulation of there being a process and unification for both Religion-B and Religion-M through totemic representation, this definition can be extended to cover scientism because it contains both the Religion-B aspect and Religion-M aspect in it. Scientism inherently contains both “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things”, which is its Religion-B element, and also the tendency to desire to “unite into one single moral community called a Church”, which is its Religion-M element. Scientism develops not just an epistemological stance and methodology towards reality, such that science itself does, but it also carries with it a normative worldview which has a moralized exclusivity built into in that has pretensions toward comprehensive, unified

knowledge of all aspects of reality. As a comprehensive, metaphysical system, those who adhere to scientism, as being “Science” as a kind of sacralized practice that only those trained and specialized in specific forms of knowledge, this kind of worldview is strikingly similar to many forms of traditional religion in which there is a sacred realm of reality only accessible through the knowledge and action of specialized experts. These specialized experts are then called upon to spread the word and enlarge a cadre of followers towards understanding this truth while also allowing for an exclusive caste of experts to really generate knowledge⁷.

As a final note on Scientism, and my schema more broadly, I wish to point out that calling Scientism as being religious doesn't mean that Scientism isn't actually the correct way to view reality. There seems to be an inherent tendency among more conventional and atheistic intellectuals and scientists to call those things judged as being religious as being somehow automatically engaging in superstitious thinking or as engaging in a kind of mythological mode of perception. However, just as most traditional religions assume that their comprehensive belief systems are completely true, so too would scientism believe itself to be true and, since there is ultimately no way to arbitrate between comprehensive belief systems in such a way as to convince everyone of one system being true over another, then so too may scientism actually be true and should

⁷ As a caveat towards who believe that this analogy is stretched too far, I remind the reader again of the difference between Scientism and science, in that it is Scientism which has a religious character while science itself allows for a kind of non-verification of its own propositions, which is something that also generally makes it different from being religious.

be considered a correct way of understanding reality. In other words, calling scientism as being religious isn't to invalidate it; it may in fact be the one, true religion that all of us have been searching for all along!

Why Does This Matter?

Going back to the original formulation of “Religion-B” and “Religion-M” after that diversion regarding scientism, the question arises as to why, even if this is a valid distinction between these two aspects of Religion-C, would this distinction be useful or important? First of all, it allows for a certain division of labor, both in terms of scholarship and of conceptual analysis, for this approach provides a justification for looking at the cognitive aspects of religion in terms of how specific beliefs function in the actions of individuals in one way, with a justification for looking at the social and “moral” aspects of Religion-C in another way. As mentioned earlier, this division may also provide a blueprint for how the study of Religion-C can be looked at in the academic fields of psychology (and its associated fields cognitive science, philosophy, and more) and sociology in semi-independent ways.

On a different level, in terms of the analysis of the role of Religion-C in the flux of real social life, I believe that this distinction may also be valuable in the analysis of the differences between more conventional religions and other worldviews such as nationalism (and other “political religions”) and potential secular religious “worldviews” such as the aforementioned “scientism,” as well as “humanism,” and certain forms of

atheism. Through the division of Religion-C into these two aspects of Religion-B and Religion-M, I believe that there can be a certain amount of justification in calling these unconventional worldviews as being “religious” because they contain strong elements of Religion-M within them. Assuming for the moment that the dominant scientific view is largely correct at the “objective” metaphysical level, meaning that there is no evidence for metaphysical entities such as gods, angels, spirits, etc. which are fairly ubiquitous in most religious traditions, there are still often strong Religion-M elements in the scientific (and humanistic and atheistic) “worldviews” which center around notions of social unity and of forming a kind of moral community. There are even elements of totemism in that many scientists may circle around an abstract totem called “Science,” or humanists may circle around a totem called the “Human”, or atheists may circle around a totem called “Reason.” The argument is not that there isn’t such a thing called the “Human” (in terms of “humanism”) or “Science” (in terms of “scientism.”) Rather, the argument is regarding the apothotic impulse to make something that is human into something that is sacred or even “divine”.

These perspectives are not just neutral, value-free perspectives but they contain, in fact, implicit moral perspectives as well. In my schema, the fact that there still exists this implicit sense of a “moral community” of “believers” is evidence that what I’ve been calling Religion-M still exists behind these systems of beliefs. Therefore, when certain atheists or rationalists or scientists argue that “religion” can (and sometimes MUST!) be eradicated or minimized, they are still arguing from a competing “religious” perspective in the sense defined by me earlier whereby all of reality is contained within a particular

worldview. What these atheists and rationalists are saying is, in effect, “our version of Religion-M should minimize or displace all those crazy versions of Religion-B that are all about these strange beliefs that the scientific worldview has displaced.” In other words, many think that they are “anti-religious,” but they really are so only in the sense of how they view religion to have been constituted and expressed up until now.⁸ They are, in effect, partisans for a different kind of religion or “religious” worldview rather than being anti-religion. The social aspects of Religion-M are as strong as ever in these kinds of “religious” worldviews and I believe that there is wisdom in recognizing this truth rather than in assuming that things like humanism and atheism are overthrowing Religion-C altogether.

Conclusion

This is obviously a very speculative thesis and may ultimately prove itself to be more a piece of philosophy than of social science. Using the popular criterion of “falsifiability,” as derived from the work of the philosopher of science Karl Popper, it may likely be impossible to operationalize the claims made in this thesis. I believe that some distinctions, such as the ones that I’ve laid out, are useful in the very least in applying the perspectives and intellectual resources coming out of the sociology of religion to more unconventional systems like those “worldviews” contained in political,

⁸ They also still have some kind of Religion-B in the sense that all worldviews do involve certain beliefs and propositions that are representational and symbolic. It is impossible to completely eliminate those aspects.

civic, and social ideologies. The upshot to this entire argument is that I believe that we should conceive of a lot more aspects of our social worlds as containing an implicitly religious element to them and to examine how certain totems become the symbolic center of moral communities. In the current climate of political fractioning and the growth of “identity politics,” we need to better understand how all these identities that we’ve crafted can have that religious quality to them regarding the circling of a moral community around an abstract representation of a particular identity. Notions of orthodoxy and apostasy are increasingly coming to the forefront in these identitarian phenomena and, instead of believing that we are on the path of eliminating all aspects of religion from humanity, we should apply the means and methods of a sociology of religion to these kinds of socio-political movements.

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