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Naturalism and protectionism in the study of religions : summary

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10 SUMMARY

Naturalism and Protectionism in the Study of Religions

I argue in this study that theoretical approaches to religion may be loosely divided into two main paradigms – naturalism and protectionism. The origins of the naturalistic paradigm may be identified in the fragments of the Presocratic philosophers, who aimed to explain religion by means of its reduction to non-religious phenomena and used epistemic justification *per rem*. The origins of the protectionist paradigm may be found in the earliest Christian literature, the leading figures of which rejected explanation and used epistemic justification *per hominem*. I then show how deeply the dichotomy between naturalism and protectionism entrenched itself within the comparatively modern study of religions and assess the place of the cognitive science of religion within the presented theoretical and methodological landscape.

I begin the discussion of Presocratic theories with Xenophanes, a Greek philosopher from the 6th century BCE. In one of his fragments, he observed that “mortals believe that the gods are born and have human clothing, voice, and bodily form” and that “Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired”. This empirical observation was further complemented by a sort of thought experiment in which Xenophanes assumed that animals, were they to possess the necessary abilities to articulate their representations of gods, would make these resemble their own features. In short, Xenophanes seemed to believe that religious representations are, on a general level, products of the human psychological tendency to attribute human features to non-human objects (i.e. anthropomorphism), while on a more specific level, these representations mirror cross-cultural differences between peoples and nations.

Another Presocratic theory of the origin of religion was formulated by Democritus, one of the founders of atomistic philosophy. He believed that “the people of ancient times were frightened by happenings in the heavens such as thunder, lightning, thunderbolts, conjunctions of stars, and eclipses of the sun and moon, and thought that they were caused by gods”. Religious representations are therefore considered to be intellectualistic explanations of meteorological phenomena. The so-called Sisyphus fragment, originally attributed to Critias with recent scholarship arguing for Euripides as the author, first described a primitive human society in which chaos reigned supreme. Members of the society therefore introduced laws that would punish wrongdoers, and yet the problem did not seem to go away because these laws were effective only inasmuch as their application was enforceable and the permanent control of all individuals is a practical impossibility. Consequently, “a shrewd and clever-minded man invented for mortals a fear of the gods, so that there might be a deterrent for the wicked, even if they act or say or think anything in secret”. For the author of the fragment, the purposeful invention of an omnipresent Orwellian god helped social stability. According to the sophist Prodicus, active in the 5th century BCE, “the ancients considered sun and moon and rivers and springs and generally everything that benefits our life to be gods because of the benefit from them, just as the Egyptians considered the Nile”, while Sextus Empiricus, who preserved this fragment, concluded that “because of this, bread is considered Demeter, and wine Dionysus, and water Poseidon, and fire Hephaestus, and so on for each of the things that are useful”. For Prodicus, then, the origin of religion was to be found in a gradual deification of all things beneficial to human life.

More important than the sum of these early attempts to make some sense of religion is their unequivocal commitment to a reductive explanation of religion (with some qualification allowed for Xenophanes). Another common feature of these theories is the commitment to epistemic justification *per rem*. Epistemic justification has been defined as “that which makes probable the truth of the proposition”, and epistemic justification *per rem* is defined as a set of procedures in which an individual (or their specific traits and abilities) may not be used as the truth-maker of a proposition. Commitment to epistemic justification *per rem* is present in virtually all Greek and Roman philosophy and science – Cicero presented it in a nutshell when he stated that “in discussion it is not so much weight of authority as force of argument that should be demanded”.

I then turn to early Christian literature, in which the argumentative strategy changes considerably, although this fact is unfortunately often blurred by the use of imprecise binary analytical categories, such as “reason” vs. “faith” and “religion” vs. “philosophy”. Because of the extreme polysemy of these terms, their application may have completely contradictory results. To use just a single example, Tertullian, in a famous and often misquoted passage in his treatise *De carne*

Christi, wrote: “The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed – because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is immediately credible – because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain – because it is impossible.” Some scholars considered this section to be a “manifesto on behalf of reason in religious faith” and an “exigence of reason”, while others took Tertullian’s words at face value and identified in them a “totalitarian exigence” of faith and the “utter rejection of pagan society and pagan philosophy”. I apply the notion of epistemic justification to Christian Greek and Latin texts of the first two centuries to identify the main warrants of faith.

One of the most important means of epistemic justification in early Christianity is the argument from miracles. In *John*, they clearly function as authenticators for Jesus’ divine origin, but we find traces of this use also in the synoptic gospels – e.g. Jesus did “reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent”. In order to repent, the inhabitants of these cities would have had to recognize Jesus as a messiah first (thereby accepting what he said to be true). The reproach makes sense only if we presuppose, as Jesus, as portrayed here by the author of *Matthew*, certainly did, that epistemic justification has been achieved by his “deeds of power”. The very same conclusion holds for Paul, who uses the miracles he wrought to legitimize himself as a true apostle of Jesus. As he put it in the Fool’s Speech of *2 Corinthians*: “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works.” Apocryphal acts and gospels are full of miracles enacted by Jesus and the apostles, which function as a means of conversion, quite often in contrast with the magic tricks of their opponents, as is the case in the stand-off between Peter and Simon the Mage related in *Acts of Peter*. Jesus says to Peter that “a great mass of the brethren have turned back to me through you and through the signs which you have done in my name” and many more were converted after the “battle” between Peter and Simon came to an end. Early Christian apologists and theologians also relied on miracles as a means of epistemic justification. Origen notes that “wonders wrought by Jesus are a proof of the Holy Spirit’s having then appeared in the form of a dove” and descending upon him, while the miracles of the apostles function as a powerful incentive in the conversion of pagans. Similar conclusions are drawn with respect to “ordinary” Christians and their miracle working by Justin Martyr and Theophilus of Antioch.

Another means of epistemic justification in early Christianity is found in the superior moral behaviour of Christians. Paul asks, “If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it?” The willingness to undergo suffering, even unto death, was deemed as justifying the Christian faith and gave rise to countless acts and passions of martyrs. To provide just a single early example from this vast literature, we may consider the martyrdom of Polycarp. The narrative script is the usual – Polycarp refuses to make a libation to

the genius of Caesar and forcefully identifies himself as a Christian, which eventually leads to a swift death sentence in the form of being burnt at the stake. The execution is complemented by several concomitant miracles: the fire forms an arch around the martyr's body (thus not hurting him) and when a sword accomplishes the deed fire could not, a dove flies out of his wound. The conclusion: "This man was certainly one of the elect, the most remarkable Polycarp, who proved to be an apostolic and prophetic teacher in our own time, bishop of the catholic church in Smyrna." Appeals to superior moral behaviour are also found elsewhere. For instance, Ignatius is vexed by the fact that some people still failed to accept Jesus and "neither the prophecies nor the law of Moses have persuaded them, nor, thus far, the gospel nor our own individual suffering". Another attestation comes from *Didache*, whose author devises an ingenuous system for telling true prophets from false: "Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as if he were the Lord. But he is not to stay for more than one day, unless there is need, in which case he may stay another. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle leaves, he is to take nothing except bread until he finds his next night's lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet." Humble apostles are true apostles; if there is a reason to doubt the moral character of a person (staying for multiple days or asking for money and thereby falling under suspicion of greed), there is a reason to distrust what the person has to say. It is also worth noting that this argument works in the inverse as well: just as superior moral behaviour guarantees truth, wicked moral behaviour guarantees falsehood. This argument is implicit in early Christian critiques of Greek philosophers and Greek gods – both are morally despicable, which is why the former are false and the latter non-existent.

The last way in which epistemic justification in Christianity is achieved is by the claim of the speaker having been divinely inspired, which clearly manifests in revelations. In the one canonical revelation, God sends the message via a trustworthy mediator (in this case, an angel), and it is the word of the mediator, not the word of the author, that the text provides. Paul uses the claim of divine inspiration frequently as well, stating that "the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ". The same applies in the case of other apostles, who speak of the Holy Spirit, and, as Tertullian asks in a rhetorical manner, "Who in his senses can believe that those men were ignorant of anything, whom the Lord gave to be teachers". Likewise, Irenaeus assures us that apostles "had perfect knowledge" thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, who descended upon them.

It may be concluded that early Christian literature employs a very different concept of epistemic justification, which could be termed epistemic justification *per hominem*. It has been shown that Presocratic theories of religion were based on a reductive explanation consisting of reducing religious phenomena to non-

religious ones. Moreover, Presocratic philosophers did not base their claims on authority and indeed opposed this type of argumentation. For early Christian literature, no reductive explanation of religion is possible and the propositional content of *credenda* is justified by an appeal to the specific character of the individual, be it the ability to work miracles, superior moral behaviour, or divine inspiration. This is not to say that epistemic justification *per rem* is completely abandoned. Even an author as hostile to Greek philosophy as Tertullian will claim that “it is possible even on the basis of popular ideas to be knowledgeable in the things of God [...] [f]or some things are known even by nature” – that is to say, some truths can be discovered by means of rational analysis and empirical observation, and yet the central tenet of Christianity, namely that Jesus is Christ, certainly cannot. Paul knew this full well when he wrote in *1 Corinthians* that “Christ crucified is foolishness to Gentiles” but “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom” – whenever the two modes of epistemic justification meet head on, the authority of revelation established by epistemic justification *per hominem* trumps knowledge established by any other means.

I further argue that modern 19th- and 20th-century study of religions preserved the dichotomy between the naturalistic and protectionist paradigms. The naturalistic paradigm, which is based on a reductive explanation of religion, may be found operating primarily in the evolutionary approaches by Comte, Tylor, and Frazer. Notwithstanding important differences, the basic scheme of their intellectualist theories is the same. Comte assumes a progressive evolution from the theological stage (where gods are not explained but, quite to the contrary, serve to explain the natural world) to the metaphysical stage (where their role is taken up by abstract notions or principles) to the scientific stage. For Frazer, progress moves from the Age of Magic (in which people try to manipulate and control nature directly) through the Age of Religion (in which control is hoped to be exercised indirectly through gods) to the Age of Science (in which control is effectively achieved by scientific and technological progress). For Tylor, as for Comte and Frazer, religion is a mere “survival”, a remnant of an ignorant age – or, in the words of one of his recent commentators, a “useless fossil washed up on the shores of the present”.

Psychological approaches are best exemplified by Freud, who believed that “totemism”, considered to be the earliest form of religion, is the result of repressed wishes and a guilty conscience. In *Totem and Tabu*, he proposed the famous theory of a primal band of brothers who kill their father in order to get access to the clan’s women, but when they accomplish this deed, they are overridden by guilty consciences; they reinstate the killed father symbolically as a totem and introduce laws prohibiting the killing of the totem (that is, the father) and instituting exogamy, the abolition of which they had fought for in the first place. Social approaches within the naturalistic paradigm are found in the works of Marx, for whom reli-

gion is a means for the bourgeoisie to repress the proletariat, and Durkheim, for whom religion reflects intrinsic relationships in society, mostly those of a moral nature. What all of these approaches have in common is their commitment to a reductive explanation of religion to non-religious phenomena. It is also important to note that they constitute only a small minority in the history of the study of religions, since the most important actors in the field of religious studies have belonged squarely within the protectionist paradigm, which considers a reductive explanation of religion to be impossible to achieve.

Early proponents of comparative religion, such as Max Müller and Cornelis Tiele, considered religious experience to be the product of the human faculty of perceiving the infinite, which presupposes that this infinite really exists, and here we may speak about explanation, but certainly not a reductive one. For these scholars, the central task of the study of religions is to purify it of all overly human additions and return it to a pristine state, a task Müller and Tiele shared with Robertson Smith and others. Contrary to many scholarly assessments, the first critics of evolutionist theories were also not naturalists. Lang was drawn by his interest in parapsychology to postulate another mental faculty not unlike that of Müller and Tiele; Marett, in his own words, has “not sought to explain so much as to describe”; and Father Schmidt mounted vitriolic attacks against the idea of reductive explanation in the study of religions. Early in the 20th century, methodological discussions in the study of religions came under the sway of phenomenologists of religion and this approach dominated the field throughout the 20th century, at least in Europe. Phenomenology defended the essential irreducibility of the human response to the sacred and the model of epistemic justification *per hominem* crept in its petty pace back into the study of religions, this time with the axiom that only believers have anything worthwhile to say on the topic of religion.

Schleiermacher noted already in 1799 that personal religious experience is required to talk about religion. His great admirer, Rudolf Otto, asked his readers to recall a strong incident of religious experience; if they were not able to recall any, they were kindly asked not to read further. Brede Kristensen wrote that “we make use of our own religions experience in order to understand the experience of others” because “we should never be able to describe the essence of religion if we did not know from our own experience what religion is”. His former student Gerardus Van der Leeuw claimed that “it must be demanded from the scholar in the field of religion that he be religious himself”. Max Scheler argued that those who do not possess faith in a religious reality are not qualified to discuss it. For Friedrich Heiler, a prerequisite for the study of religions is personal religious experience because without religiosity in the widest sense one cannot accomplish anything in this field. Joachim Wach, who brought phenomenology to the United States, drew on Schleiermacher and claimed that “we must learn from our own religious life in order to encounter the foreign”. Wilfred Cantwell Smith noted

that “no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers” and Jouco Bleeker, the long-time Secretary General of the International Association for the History of Religions, stated as late as 1979 that “the true evaluation of methods [used in the study of religions] would be to retain only those methods which let religious people themselves testify their faith”.

Phenomenology established itself as a leading paradigm, and it is remarkable that even competing methodological approaches, such as the field’s historical branch (represented by, e.g., Ugo Bianchi) and the British school of social anthropology (as established by Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard), considered using a reductive explanation to be a methodological error. Although protectionist phenomenology started to encounter more vocal resistance – in the 1970s in Europe in the form of the Groningen group (with the likes of Jacques Waardenburg and Theo van Baaren) and in the 1980s in North America, where an entire group of researchers left the American Academy of Religion and founded the North American Association for the Study of Religion in 1985 – it was not immediately clear how exactly to replace phenomenology with an explanatory theory of religion. Such an attempt was made only at the end of the century by the founders of the cognitive science of religion (CSR).

The cognitive approach to religion has tried to explain religious representations as by-products of our evolved cognitive machinery. What is important from a methodological standpoint is that the CSR is all about the return of explanation to the study of religions. In *Rethinking Religion*, Lawson and McCauley “maintain at the metatheoretical level not only that explanations of religious behaviour are possible, but also that the theories which motivate them can productively constrain interpretive efforts”, where “interpretive efforts” is just another way of stating the variety of phenomenological approaches mentioned above. The return of explanation may be trivially documented also in the very titles of CSR publications – Pascal Boyer’s first systematic summary of decade-long research bears the title *Religion Explained*. Furthermore, the CSR represents the full acceptance of the principle of “conceptual integration”, which denotes the “principle that the various disciplines within the behavioral and social sciences should make themselves mutually consistent, and consistent with what is known in the natural sciences as well”, as put by Leda Cosmides and her co-authors, and the principle of “consilience”, as formulated by E. O. Wilson, which amounts to virtually the same. Turning again to Lawson and McCauley’s *Rethinking Religion* (which predates both of these principles), the authors note that an explanation should “prove empirically tractable in domains beyond that to which it was initially applied”.

Given the explanatory nature of the CSR and its commitment to the principles of conceptual integration and consilience, it is very interesting that cognitivists are generally very reluctant to accept the fact that their theory has a bearing

on the epistemic justification of religious propositions entertained by believers. A case in point may be seen in reactions to Daniel Dennett's book *Breaking the Spell*, to which an entire special issue of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religions* was dedicated and to which responses were overwhelmingly negative. There are two strategies generally used by some cognitivists. The first argues that the CSR is "independent of whether someone should or should not believe in God. Whether God (or most other gods) exists cannot be proven or disproven by science. Metaphysical concerns such as this remain in the domain of philosophy" (Justin Barrett). This approach essentially consists of something that could be termed a "deistic charade" in which a religious representation is reduced to an abstract deistic concept, which is all the more ironic since the CSR developed the notion of "theological incorrectness", which states that religious representations must have specific minimally counter-intuitive qualities to enhance their success in cultural acquisition and transmission. Even Blaise Pascal knew that Christians (himself included) believe in "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the one of philosophers and scientists". The vast majority of Christians would be completely unfazed or even be alienated by the notions of "ultimate concern" or "demythologization" – sure, whether God exists cannot be proven or disproven by science, but a plethora of factual propositions entertained by believers can, and a CSR that aims to be consilient with other branches of human knowledge cannot just sidestep this fact by reducing normative questions about religion to the question of whether God exists.

The second strategy argues that CSR "is no threat to Christian belief, since it can handily be complemented by a theological account of the development of religion" (Nancey Murphy). If the first approach made a caricature out of religion, this one makes a caricature out of science. One can, with Bertrand Russell, surely complement the inventory of today's astronomy with a teapot orbiting the Sun; one can surely complement our universe with invisible and undetectable flying spaghetti monsters, as Bobby Henderson would have us do, but that would blunt one of the most important instruments science has at its disposal, namely Ockham's razor. If the CSR professes to be based on a methodology endorsing empirical verification (or falsification) that is consilient with natural sciences, it is hard to see any meaningful way of complementing the explanation it provides with anything at all, be it a theological or any other account.

The dichotomy between naturalism and protectionism is not a new idea – Donald Wiebe formulated it in discussion with Robert Segal about 30 years ago when he noted that "reductionist interpretations of religions are the only possible for sceptics (nonbelieving interpreters) if they are to remain nonbelieving interpreters [...] and the opposite holds for the devotees if they are to remain believers"; Jacques Waardenburg spoke about "idealists" and "realists" and Wiebe's former student Russell McCutcheon about "caretakers" and "critics". In my study, I tried

to identify the historical roots of this division, track its way through 19th- and 20th-century study of religions, and show how the emergence of the CSR marks a return to the naturalistic paradigm. In conclusion, I note that the majority of researchers in the field of religious studies still believe in some sort of magical phenomenological *epoché* and hope for the prospect of a “neutral” study of religion that would not affect the epistemic justification or truth value of religious propositions in one way or another. One does not necessarily have to accept the “methodological atheism” that Peter Berger advocated, but the CSR, with its commitment to a vision of a study of religion consilient with other domains of human knowledge and capable of formulating empirically testable hypotheses, has hardly any other choice. Joachim Wach once wrote that “there is something pathetic about the modern historian of religion who uses strong words only when he wants to convince us that he has no convictions. [...] The West had to relearn from Kierkegaard that religion is something towards which ‘neutrality’ is not possible.” The CSR, as I argue in the conclusion, might in turn learn from Wach, since an attempt to negotiate between naturalism and protectionism is bound to share the fate of the artless creation imagined by Horace: “If a painter chose to join a human head to the neck of a horse, and to spread feathers of many a hue over limbs picked up now here now there, so that what at the top is a lovely woman ends below in a black and ugly fish, could you, my friends, if favoured with a private view, refrain from laughing?” (transl. H. Rushton).