

WHY GOD?



Why God?

EXPLAINING RELIGIOUS PHENOMENA

Rodney Stark



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Introduction

Ungodly “Theories” and Scurrilous Metaphors

*If God did not exist, it would be necessary
to invent him. —Voltaire**

FOR MORE THAN a century, many social scientists as well as liberal theologians have agreed that gods are not a fundamental element of religions. They have not merely proposed that gods—defined as conscious supernatural beings—do not exist, but that religions are not really about gods at all. Rather, leading social scientists have alleged that religions are merely a mask for a variety of ungodly things, from social solidarity to neurosis, and liberal theologians have gladly agreed. As Paul Tillich (1886–1965), the premier liberal theologian of the twentieth century, put it, “God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence.”¹

As will be seen, not only are these ungodly schemes unscientific, they are contrary to obvious facts. Consequently, they are irrelevant to the fundamental task to which this book is devoted: to explain what religion is, what it does, and why it seems to be a universal feature of human societies. Whether gods actually exist is irrelevant. What matters is that all religions assert the existence of a god or gods and that belief in such supernatural beings is fundamental to all religious phenomena.

In addition to being ungodly, many famous “explanations” of religion are nothing but scurrilous metaphors, such as Freud’s claim that religion is “sweet—or bittersweet—poison,” or Marx’s famous

* This was not a cynical remark, but was written as a rebuke to the angry atheist Baron d’Halbach and his friends. Voltaire opposed organized religion, but he believed in God.

assertion that it is “the opium of the people.” These “explanations” of religion reveal nothing other than their author’s animus. But, before turning to more fruitful matters, it is necessary to clear the intellectual horizon of all this antagonistic nonsense by holding a brief demolition derby.

Let me start with the work of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), the most influential of all early sociologists of religion, who has reassured and delighted generations of followers with the aphorism that religion really consists of nothing more than society worshipping itself. Durkheim’s famous definition of religion, which is widely used and appears in all the relevant textbooks, reads, “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 and all those who adhere to them.”² How can we identify things that are sacred? Nowhere in any of his work did Durkheim even attempt to define “sacred,” except to say that it is the opposite of “profane” (which he also left undefined) and that sacred things are “set apart and forbidden.” That is far too vague to be of use. Since most sins are set apart and forbidden, are they, then, sacred? Nor was his failure to define either sacred or profane merely a neglected formality. Clearly, Durkheim had not worked out a definition of either term, as was demonstrated by the fact that when he applied the terms to specific examples, they proved to be “so closely intermingled as to be inseparable,”³ as Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973) correctly complained.

But, whatever Durkheim may have meant by the term “sacred,” it had nothing whatever to do with gods, for he explicitly proposed an ungodly conception of religion. In his view, supernatural beings were “no more than a minor accident” in their connection to religion, and therefore the wise “sociologist will pay scant attention to the different ways in which” people conceive of the divine and “will see in religion only a social discipline.”⁴ In part, Durkheim took this position because he incorrectly believed that many religions lacked

supernatural aspects. As he put it, “One idea which generally passes as characteristic of all religions is that of the supernatural. . . . It is certain that this idea does not appear until late in the history of religions; it is completely foreign, not only to those people who are called primitive, but also to others who have not attained a considerable degree of intellectual culture.”⁵ He went on to argue that there even are “great religions from which the idea of gods and spirits is absent,”⁶ identifying Buddhism as among those lacking a supernatural element. Because of his a priori claim that religion exists in *all* societies, being the source of social integration, Durkheim found it necessary to omit the supernatural from his definition of religion in order to justify his claim of the universality of religion. He was insistent and explicit that “the sacred” did not imply the supernatural—even though he failed to say what it did imply.

Ironically, Durkheim’s exclusion of the supernatural from his definition was not only wrong but quite unnecessary. As Alexander A. Goldenweiser (1880–1940) pointed out in his sixteen-page review of the French edition of Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) in the *American Anthropologist*, “In claiming that primitive man knows no supernatural, the author fundamentally misunderstands savage mentality. . . . [Here] Durkheim commits his initial error, fatal in its consequences.”⁷ It was one thing for Durkheim to claim that when people worship the gods, they really are worshipping society, but it was rather too much to conclude that they don’t even know what gods are. As for his remarkable claims about Buddhism, apparently Durkheim confused the Buddhism of a small intellectual elite with Buddhism in general and seemingly was unaware that popular Buddhism is particularly rich in supernatural beings. This blunder has long been cited as the most serious among Durkheim’s many shortcomings.⁸

Nevertheless, Durkheim’s claim that the gods cannot be part of a universal definition of religion was accepted by most social scientists for decades. In his authoritative and very widely cited textbook on the

sociology of religion, J. Milton Yinger (1916–2011) defined religion merely as “a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problem of human life.”⁹ No gods here.

Nor were there any hints of gods in Clifford Geertz’s (1926–2006) widely embraced definition: “Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of the general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”¹⁰ The question of *why* such a set of symbols is so powerful is ignored. More to the point, applying this definition, it is impossible even to distinguish religion from science.

Worse yet, through the years, many scholars have proposed that religion ought not be defined at all,¹¹ citing Max Weber’s (1864–1920) reluctance to do so.¹² Indeed, in a faculty seminar that met briefly at Berkeley in the late 1960s, the well-known Robert Bellah (1927–2013) condemned all efforts to define religion. He claimed that any formal definition he could imagine would necessarily exclude some things that obviously were religions. When I asked him by what criteria he could tell that these omitted things were religions and why these criteria could not be used to properly expand the definition, Bellah responded belligerently that his whole point was that these criteria could not be identified. In response, I suggested that if he truly had no criteria for claiming that any particular definition of religion was too exclusive, his argument was irrelevant. This led to antagonisms that played a role in the seminar being short lived. Eventually, seemingly in response to his critics, Bellah wrote that “for limited purposes only, let me define religion as a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence.”¹³ Although very ambiguous, this definition is certainly godless.

Godless definitions of religion have not only flourished among social scientists. This view has also been popular among faculty in religious studies departments and even was embraced by the very prominent

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), liberal professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School and world famous for his studies of comparative religion. Eliade also chose to define religion as based on the sacred rather than upon a god or gods to enable him to recognize Buddhism as a religion. This was complicated by the fact that unlike Durkheim, Eliade did define the sacred and saw it as infused with supernaturalism.¹⁴ Moreover, Eliade seems to have been fully aware of the prevalence of gods in popular Buddhism, but he still claimed to share Durkheim’s opposition to including gods in the definition of religion. It appears to me that, like far too many scholars, Eliade tended to conceive of religions primarily as collections of sacred writings rather than as groups of people engaged in worship, and the classic Buddhist texts do tend to be godless. Moreover, when contemplating texts, a scholar is freed from all concerns about what people may believe and do.

Subsequent to Eliade, some social scientists have even gone far beyond Durkheim in dismissing the gods from religions. Indeed, the prominent French anthropologist Dan Sperber has offered the extraordinary claim that because it is self-evident that supernatural beings do not exist, it is impossible to interpret religious rituals as efforts to enlist the gods on one’s behalf. That is, he asserts that people don’t really believe in the gods, hence their prayers may not be interpreted as an actual attempt to make an exchange with the supernatural.¹⁵ S. R. F. Price (1954–2011) even went so far as to claim that religious “belief” is a purely Christian invention, and that when the ancient Romans prayed, they didn’t really mean it, in the sense that they thought prayers were heard. In response to Price, I can only ask what Cato the Elder (234 BC–149 BC) thought he was doing when he prayed:

Father Mars, I beg and entreat you to be well disposed toward me and toward our household. I have ordered an offering of pigs, sheep and bulls . . . on account of this request, so you may prevent, ward off and remove sickness . . . and damage to crops and bad weather. . . . Preserve my shepherds and flocks unharmed and give good health and strength to my

home, and our household. For this purpose . . . Father Mars . . . you shall be increased by these offerings of suckling pigs, sheep and bulls.¹⁶

Indeed, why did Cato publish this prayer in a book meant to instruct others on good farming methods? Could it have been because, although he knew full well that there is no Father Mars, he thought saying this prayer would be good for the morale of his livestock? Perhaps many social scientists, such as Sperber and Price, are too wise to believe in the gods, but they certainly are willing to believe a great deal of more obvious nonsense.

WHY GOD?

In any event, Durkheim and his many admirers were dead wrong on their most important claim. Belief in gods was not a late development in human history. Rather, as is now fully established, belief in the existence of a god or gods has prevailed in every known society from earliest times (see chapter 9). Consequently, it not only is unnecessary, but it is misguided to omit the gods from the definition of religion. It is misguided for two reasons. First, without limiting the definition of religion to bodies of thought including the existence of a conscious supernatural being, it is impossible to separate religion from what we ordinarily would regard as unreligious phenomena—various philosophies of life such as secular humanism, existentialism, or, indeed, science. Nor can such a definition even separate religion from anti-religious perspectives such as communism, Nazism, postmodernism, and the like. The second reason is not intellectual but empirical: all attempts to sustain godless religions are a resounding failure. As I demonstrate in chapter 6, to the extent that various Christian denominations have modified their teaching in response to “modernist” theologians who reject the existence of a conscious divine being, they have suffered rapid and massive declines in membership. This is because “Godless religions” can offer no otherworldly rewards, no miracles,

not even any reason for prayer or worship. Indeed, the phrase “godless religion” is a self-contradictory oxymoron. Therefore, mine is a godly theory of religion.

ON THEORIES

Although I have referred to ungodly theories of religion, neither Durkheim nor any of the other famous social scientists who attempted to explain religion actually proposed a *theory* as that term is properly understood. What they offered were merely definitions or metaphors. Let me explain.

The best way to approach this subject is through the lucid explanation of what constitutes a scientific theory, offered by the philosopher of science Karl Popper (1902–1994) in an essay published in 1957 and which became the first chapter in his famous *Conjectures and Refutations* (1968).

The start of the essay recounts Popper’s student days in Vienna in 1919 when four theories dominated student discussion: Marx’s theory of history, Freud’s psychoanalysis, Alfred Adler’s individual psychology, and Einstein’s theory of relativity. Popper became increasingly uneasy about the scientific standing of the first three, but not because they were less mathematical and exact. Rather, he came to the conclusion that, because of their logical structure, each was merely posing as a scientific theory. In fact, as he put it, each of the three “resembled astrology rather than astronomy.” In particular, he faulted these three theories because they seem to have *too much* explanatory power. Thus, while that year Eddington had journeyed to an island just west of Africa to observe an eclipse of the sun—hoping thereby to *falsify* Einstein’s theory—Popper’s friends who advocated Marx, Freud, or Adler claimed that the power of each of these theories lay in the fact that it couldn’t be falsified, in its capacity to incorporate *all possible* events and outcomes. As Popper wrote, “They were always confirmed—which in the eyes of their admirers constituted the strongest argument in favour of these theories. It began to dawn on me that

this apparent strength was in fact their weakness.” Thus did Popper discover, or at least make explicit, the proposition that a real theory must be “incompatible with certain possible results of observation.” Aside from Einstein and his handful of followers, no one at this time really believed that light was influenced by gravity. Therefore, scientists around the world assumed that Eddington would not observe light to bend when an eclipse made the appropriate observation possible. But Einstein’s theory did not predict that light might or might not bend, but explained why it *must* bend, which it did. Had it not done so, the theory of relativity would have been falsified—that is, we would have known that Einstein’s explanation of how the universe works was incorrect.

A real theory must predict and prohibit certain observations; some things must happen and some things must not. That is, in order to try to *explain* something, a real theory must make predictions that could turn out to be false. Systems of thought that can accommodate all possible observations explain nothing. They are merely classification schemes capable only of description. Fully spelled out: *A theory is a set of abstract statements that explain why and how some aspects of reality are connected and from which some specific empirical and falsifiable conclusions may be derived.*

Unfortunately, most things social scientists have been content to call theories of religion do not come close to meeting this standard. Indeed, Daniel Pals’s widely used textbook, *Nine Theories of Religion* (3rd edition, 2014), does not include a single real theory. Consider that Durkheim claimed religion exists because it unites societies into moral communities. That sounds as if it would be falsified if we were to discover a society with one religion, but many moral factions, but Durkheim didn’t say that such a society could not exist. Worse yet, based on his definition, we can’t even determine how to distinguish religion from other aspects of society. Even so, Durkheim came closer to actually formulating a theory of religion than did most of the other famous social scientists who addressed themselves to the subject. Most of them were content to hurl insults.

SCURRILOUS METAPHORS

Consider Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the French founder of sociology. He believed that human society has evolved through a series of stages, the most primitive of these being the “theological,” or religious, stage. During this stage, humans blindly believe whatever they are taught by their ancestors, and religion results from “the hallucinations produced by an intellectual activity so at the mercy of the passions.”¹⁷ If religion persists, it is only because the subsequent evolution of society has been imperfect. All of this is mere assertion, not explanation, and there are no potentially falsifiable conclusions.

Then there is Karl Marx’s (1818–1881) “theory” of religion: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world. . . . It is the opium of the people.”¹⁸ This is very poetic, but it really is nothing but a scurrilous metaphor. If one squeezes it very firmly and engages in much second-guessing, something beginning to approach a theory could be constructed: *that the primary function of religion is to assuage the suffering of the less privileged*. That is not yet a theory because it fails to say why and how religion serves this function, but at least it is a statement that could be falsified. And, in fact, *it is falsified*. Religion has greater appeal to the privileged, as detailed in chapter 8.

Now consider Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). He identified religion an “illusion,” a “sweet—or bittersweet—poison” an “intoxicant” and “childishness to be overcome,” all on one page (88) of his famous *The Future of an Illusion*. This is merely name-calling. Elsewhere in the book, Freud proposed that religion is the “universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.” So long as religion per se is *defined* as mental illness, Freud’s claim is immune to falsification. If squeezed into a falsifiable statement—such as, “People with poor mental health will tend to be more religious”—it is, in fact, false! People with poor mental health tend to be less religious.¹⁹

More recently, the British biologist Alister Hardy (1896–1995) proposed that religion is based on a human instinct that closely resembles

the one that causes dogs to be devoted to their masters: “The behavioral relation of the dog to the man is not just an illustrative analogy. . . . It is a clear demonstration that the same biological factors . . . have been involved in the formation of man’s images of God.”²⁰ Along the same lines, Pascal Boyer claims that human brains are hardwired in a way that causes them to mistakenly believe in God.²¹ There is no obvious way that such claims could be falsified, and they are no more scientific than it would be to propose that our fate is to believe in God.

Many more such scurrilous metaphors about why people are religious could be quoted, but enough! The theorizing I lay out in subsequent chapters involves no sleights of hand, no metaphors, and no sloganeering. I attempt to say clearly what I mean and to formulate falsifiable explanations. And I also embed my major propositions in historical and statistical bodies of evidence appropriate to their potential falsification.

ON DEFINITIONS

It is impossible to formulate fruitful theories unless the fundamental concepts involved are clearly and efficiently defined. Even if gods were not a necessary element for a valid definition of religion, Durkheim’s definition would be useless because he provided no effective means for isolating religion from other aspects of human culture. Unfortunately, there are no “true” definitions of terms such as religion (or anything else) hovering in hyperspace and awaiting discovery. Rather, although scientific definitions are meant to classify things that are real, the definitions themselves are purely intellectual conventions and have no concrete reality, as is evident by the fact that no matter how we define religion, for example, nothing in the empirical world is changed thereby.

That does not mean, of course, that just any definition we make up is adequate. The purpose of scientific definitions is to identify a set of phenomena as alike and to exclude everything else. That is, a definition must be clear and applicable, but that is not enough. Definitions also

must be *efficient*; they must facilitate effective theorizing. Hence, the many popular definitions of religion as systems of thought that generate a substantial degree of conviction²² create a clearly distinguishable cluster of phenomena. Unfortunately, that definition lumps together things that otherwise would be regarded as incompatible since invincible convictions are frequently an aspect of what are antireligious perspectives; most village atheists epitomize the true believer in this sense. To ward off such confusions, some social scientists have resorted to identifying groups such as the Communist Party, existential philosophers, postmodernists, and even Amway as “implicit religions,” “quasi-religions,” or “para-religions,”²³ while leaving these terms essentially undefined. Some mess!

I attempt to define all of the concepts I use in this book so clearly that no ambiguity remains as to what they include and exclude. In doing so, my primary concern is to formulate definitions that facilitate the task of theorizing—of explaining religious phenomena. Why do people believe in gods? Why do they pray? How do revelations occur?

PRIOR EFFORTS

Since this is my third book mainly devoted to theorizing about religious phenomena, it is appropriate to explain again what brought me here.

My first scholarly effort to analyze religion appeared just over fifty years ago as the first chapter in a collection of our papers that Charles Y. Glock and I published under the prosaic title *Religion and Society in Tension* (1965). “A Sociological Definition of Religion” was an unrevised term paper I wrote in 1962 for a graduate course in social theory at the University of California–Berkeley. Looking back, this essay includes a great deal of founder-mongering, as would be expected in student work, but at least I had the good sense to distinguish between religious and humanistic perspectives and to identify as religious only those including “the existence of a supernatural being.” I took this position because it was otherwise impossible to distinguish the Communist Party from the Catholic Church, which seemed to me

to be absurd if for no other reason than the ability of only the latter to promise otherworldly rewards. Of course, making that distinction put me quite out of step with the times, but I was not contrite.

Nor did I relent when William Sims Bainbridge and I published *A Theory of Religion* in 1987. Our definition of religion still included the supernatural.²⁴ That book attempted to state a fully deductive theory of religion. Eventually it was well received, but I soon found the theory to be very flawed and the text to be very heavy going. The flaws involved a much too limited treatment of the phenomenon of religion that omitted many of its most significant emotional and expressive components as well as typical elements of religious practice such as ritual, prayer, and sacrifice. I also came to realize that the use of the term “compensators” to identify otherworldly rewards implied an unintended value judgment.

So, a few years later, with the help of Roger Finke, I presented a new theoretical attempt. In it I dispensed with the full deductive apparatus and settled for a set of interrelated propositions. Unfortunately, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* was a poorly conceived book in that it included a number of chapters irrelevant to the primary theoretical enterprise. Its real shortcoming, though, was that once again I had failed to address many important aspects of religion, including mysticism, morality, revelations, miracles, evil, and sin. I also paid far too little attention to the scope and character of the gods and completely ignored religious conflict and hostility.

Consequently, in recent years I have increasingly become aware of the need to attempt a theory of religion one more time. I know a lot more now than I did when I wrote *Acts of Faith* nearly twenty years ago, and I have scattered many relevant insights in various essays and in my more recent books. So, last year I tried it again, and this book is the result. Although I have retained many of the propositions and definitions presented in *Acts of Faith*, I have very substantially revised many of them and added many more as I have greatly expanded the scope of the theory to encompass a number of religious phenomena neglected or ignored in my earlier work. Moreover, since a proper the-

ory is falsifiable, I will often summarize studies and data pertinent to particular propositions. In addition, focusing tightly on a set of formal propositions and definitions results in a very sterile narrative and frequently fails to convey the substance of what is meant and its relevance to the real world. Consequently, I draw upon my many studies of social history to illustrate and contextualize the theory as it is assembled. There will be less of this in chapter 1 than in the other chapters.

WHY?

My editor suggested that I explain briefly to readers why I wrote this book. There were two basic reasons. The first is rather specific, the second extremely general. The specific reason is the inadequacy of existing attempts to explain religion (including my own), as well as the obnoxious character of many so-called explanations offered in the social science literature. I can now produce a better theory than I have done before, and it would be difficult *not* to produce something better than the nontheories and scurrilous metaphors that have long dominated the field.

The second reason that brought me here involves the question of why anyone does social science. If this question seems naïve, that is precisely the reason it so seldom is confronted. Those of us who do social science assume that what we are up to is worthwhile, even important. We almost never ask why, or even think about it. But we should.

My primary reason for doing social science involves the ubiquity and significance of curiosity. Asking “why?” is primarily what sets us apart from all other creatures. Indeed, I have tried to capture this essential aspect of humanity in a fundamental proposition of the theory I begin to assemble in chapter 1: humans seek explanations. We want to know why and how things happen or exist. That characteristic underlies the evolution of human culture. By asking why, we discovered agriculture. That is also how we discovered religion. And I assume that because you share my interest in what religion is and why it exists, you are reading this sentence. That’s enough for me.