

Abstract of the Dissertation

Homo religiosus Spinning a Web of Narrative Self:
Insights from the Study of Religion for an Understanding of the Self
As Historical Development

by

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The purpose of this work is to demonstrate that to be human is to have a self composed of words and deeds that are founded on an emotional appreciation of reality, which includes notions of what reality is really like; an existential sense of what it means to be human, either abstractly or as part of one's specific culture/religion; and a sense of how human beings relate to one another, as part of a social system that includes morality.

To accomplish this task I compare insights from neuroscientists, conclusions from social scientists and historians of religion, and philosophers and theologians writing about the human condition. In particular I use the metaphor of the human self as a web of on-going narration. I argue that the self so understood—as a Narrative Center of Gravity—is an abstraction in itself but is always concrete in its actuality as an individual. Further, I observe, based on widely accepted views of religion, that religion has historically provided vital cultural material for this tri-partite construction of selves (emotional, existential and social). My argument is that this is a vital function of religion understood apart from the claims adherents to any particular religion may make about the nature of ultimate reality.

Contemporary research in the neurosciences helps shed light on the necessity for certain types of cultural material. As a complex system, the human brain requires mediating structures called culture, which must be concrete. As part of the brain's interaction with the world cultures are formed and change thereby providing differing cultural material for different selves over time. This material provides content with which the brain works to form an evolving self through history. Since the human self is social and arguably egalitarian by nature and exists in cultures that change, I conclude that one can see an evolution—albeit very slow and uneven—towards mutually respectful and supportive relationships.