

The Liberation of Religion

In March of 2002, Salman Rushdie concluded an essay written for the **London Guardian** and reprinted in the **Washington Post** with these words:

The political discourse matters, and explains a good deal. But there's something beneath it, something we don't want to look in the face: namely, that in India, as elsewhere in our darkening world, religion is the poison in the blood. Where religion intervenes, mere innocence is no excuse. Yet we go on skating around this issue, speaking of religion in the fashionable language of "respect." What is there to respect in any of this, or in any of the crimes now being committed almost daily around the world in religion's dreaded name? How well, with what fatal results, religion erects totems, and how willing we are to kill for them! And when we've done it often enough, the deadening of affect that results makes it easier to do it again.

So India's problem turns out to be the world's problem. What happened in India has happened in God's name. The problem's name is God.¹

In this paper I will present a slightly different analysis, the central insight of which is that Rushdie's language is misleading. Religion is not the problem. The problem is supernaturalism in general, and theism in particular. Religion is not God and God is not religion, though the two have traditionally been thought to involve each other -- they do not, necessarily. What is called for is not the abolition of religion, but the liberation of religion.

INTRODUCTION

I will offer a new definition of religion that understands religion to be a necessary part of being human. This is because the fragile nature of consciousness requires the mediation of social systems that structure the functioning of the brain while integrating the individual into a social setting. These systems rely on the aesthetic experience of the individual consciousness confronting a complex, ever changing reality; they define the place of the individual in the broader social setting and that social setting's interpreted relation to the whole of this ever changing reality; and they organize and facilitate the social interaction of individuals and groups over time.

There is a basic confusion about the critique of religion that I should clear up first. Very often when people discuss religion, as Rushdie did, they mean a particular kind of religion. More famously, Karl Marx wrote that, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people".² However Marx's critique was not really about religion as a social phenomenon unique to human beings (as far as we know), but about theology or theistic kinds of religion. My project involves religion without theism, and I see religion as an eminently human and necessary thing, which may have historically been associated with theism but need not be; or if we take Rushdie and Marx at their word, ought not be associated with theism. This new definition is generic and applicable to all of the various forms of religion known in the world and in history. It is a "Philosophy Of Religion," which is to say a philosophical analysis of the nature of religion.

Another confusion comes from those who have claimed that since nothing in the theory or practice of religion necessitates a commitment to traditional theism, therefore one may be religious while rejecting supernaturalism. However it is more accurate to say that humans are religious, necessarily, with or without supernaturalism. The former view implies that religion is a choice, whereas in truth the particulars (like supernaturalism) of one's religion are a choice, not religion itself.

Let me explain why using an analogy. If we think of the human brain like a computer, to make it operate -- to create the human mind -- we need software. For the human brain, the software is culture. But more than this, that part of culture called religion is like the operating system, and the rest -- the so-called profane parts of culture -- are like the programs that do particular things.

The Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, from whom I borrowed the computer analogy, has concluded that, "The human nervous system relies inescapably on the accessibility of public symbolic structures to build up its own autonomous, ongoing pattern of activity."³ And, "This in turn, implies that human thinking is primarily an overt act conducted in terms of the objective materials of the common culture, and only secondarily a private matter."⁴ In religion the depth dimension of these

public symbolic structures are acted out in rituals. In other words, religion is the sub-set of culture made up of so-called sacred symbols that reflect and reinforce the world-view and ethos that lie behind culture, through the inducement of certain feelings and behaviors (religious experience and rituals).

Geertz concludes, "Rather than culture acting only to supplement, develop, and extend organically based capacities logically and genetically prior to it, it would seem to be ingredient to those capacities themselves. A culture-less human being would probably turn out to be not an unfulfilled ape, but a wholly mindless and consequently unworkable monstrosity."⁵ As religion is the depth dimension of culture (is that which justifies the culture's particular details to itself), religion is necessary for culture (not logically but practically), and therefore religion is necessary for human life to be human (religion but not supernaturalism).⁶

To finish the analogy, just as your computer requires an operating system and applications to have functionality, so your brain requires religion and culture to function. What we, especially in the west, think of as religion -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam -- are examples of religion, but do not define the nature or limits of religion. Religion is much bigger and more pervasive, much more varied and foundational than the traditional God-centered (or supernatural) understanding appreciates. And, most importantly, religion can be brought under intentional and democratic control through a scientific understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Without further ado, then, religion is: the depth dimension of human culture that exists of necessity to form the human mind and to bring individuals into social units by structuring and facilitating (1) the ability of human consciousness to appreciate reality *aesthetically*; (2) the *existential* need of human consciousness to have coherent conceptions of the nature of that reality and the place of the individual and her or his society within that reality; and (3) the need for ongoing *social* cohesion, which takes many forms with the most significant being the religious, i.e. those integrated with the aesthetic and existential constructions.⁷

AESTHETIC

All the definitions given up till now of the religious phenomenon have one thing in common: each has its own way of showing that the sacred and the religious life are the opposite of the profane and the secular life. But as soon as you start to fix limits to the notion of the sacred you come upon difficulties—difficulties both theoretical and practical. – Mircea Eliade⁸

Mircea Eliade, one of the towering figures in the study of religion, argued that human beings are essentially religious: the human being is *Homo religiosus*. He claimed that we humans find manifestations of the “sacred,” of power beyond us, in almost every type of thing and situation. The world is a seemingly mysterious place in which “spirit” manifests itself in many forms. This “spirit” of Eliade’s is difficult to define, but seems not unrelated to Hegel’s “*Geist*” (which is even more difficult to define, but may be familiar). “Spirit” infuses and permeates the world, so when humans are in times of reflection, crisis, celebration, or despair, this “spirit” is apt to manifest itself—this is called a hierophany. Religious experience, according to Eliade, has to do with experiences of this “spirit,” connections with the sacred. Everything else is profane, to the degree that there is anything else. “What I have just said—that anything whatever can become at any given moment a hierophany—may seem to contradict all these definitions. If anything whatever may embody separate values; can the sacred-profane dichotomy have any meaning?”⁹

For Eliade, ultimately, the distinction was not, in and of itself, very meaningful. What is meaningful are the ways in which people relate to the “sacred.” Extrapolating a bit, it seems that if the distinction between sacred and profane is a thin line, and the thin line is simply what people do, then the world is, at its heart, a sacred place. To Eliade, the whole world is the realm of “spirit”; what really interested him is how, where, and when “spirit” manifests itself. People will take it from there. We ought here be sure of our terms, because Eliade was not interested in drawing distinctions between the older forms of religious behavior that we know from archaeology and the more sophisticated forms we see around us in grand buildings or on television. Religious behavior was for Eliade all a matter of relating to “spirit,” and all ways are equally valid. “This dialectic of the sacred belongs to all religions, not only to the supposedly ‘primitive’ forms. It is expressed as much in the worship of stones and trees, as in the theology of Indian avatars, or the supreme mystery of the Incarnation.”¹⁰ For my

purposes Eliade was describing an aesthetic appreciation of the world and its mysteries, an appreciation that includes our sense of wonder and of exploration, as well as of beauty.

“Everything unusual, unique, new, perfect or monstrous at once becomes imbued with magico-religious powers and an object of veneration or fear according to the circumstances (for the sacred usually produces this double reaction).”¹¹ I find no mystery in human beings attributing a power beyond their understanding to phenomena beyond their understanding. This was the substance of Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity—that we project what we do not understand into the sky, and forms the heart of Rudolph Otto’s insights into religious experience. And even here Eliade informs us: “Even before any religious values have been set upon the sky it reveals its transcendence. The sky ‘symbolizes’ transcendence, power, and changelessness simply by being there.”¹² We ought to understand that in the term “sky” Eliade included all of the “Heaven” talk of the supernatural religions we find around us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And even more, Eliade’s choice of the word “changelessness” is important because it was Eliade’s sense that the constant in the universe is “spirit.” Humans seem to desire some degree of consistency in their world, and “spirit” has often been the rock that grounds supernaturalism. Ironically, people usually claim that things different from ordinary experience point to the changeless “spirit.”

Eliade is mistaken in suggesting that there actually exists a “spirit” in any sense of the word that could manifest itself in a hierophany. This does not answer the question of why people describe some of their experiences as hierophanies. How are we to understand, not just religious behavior, but the reported experiences that motivate religious behavior? I contend that people bring their emotional needs to these experiences and attribute sacrality to that which is unique or awesome. The question then becomes, how are we to understand the “unique”? This is where Frederick Engels and Quantum Mechanics enter the discussion. Engels’ dialectical materialism understands the world to be undergoing constant change—in a sense every moment is unique because it is different from what was. The patterns we see in, or even impose on, the world around us, are a comfort to us. In actuality, the

ever-changing world is changeless only in that change itself is constant. It is no wonder, then, that people occasionally discover things that are different, unique, mysterious, and even awesome. I argue that these things and events are not actually hierophanies in the technical sense, but are so in a more mundane sense because the world seems to us magical by virtue of its change. In Engels' terminology: Motion is the mode of existence of matter. Never anywhere has there been matter without motion, nor can there be.... Matter without motion is just as inconceivable as motion without matter. Motion is therefore as uncreatable and indestructible as matter itself; as the older philosophy (Descartes) expressed it, the quantity of motion existing in the world is always the same.¹³

We know now that this is not quite true, for Einstein taught us that there is a constant relationship “between the mass (inertial property of matter) of a system and its capacity to undergo transformation from one level of organization and integration to another (energy).”¹⁴ Thus, “dialectical materialism in this century, especially after Lenin’s infinity of matter, focuses on the changes in the hierarchical structure of systems of matter resulting from the interpenetration of oppositional tendencies and forces among the different structural levels as well as within the individual levels.”¹⁵ This is the point at which the sacred becomes relevant. The “sacred” is a concept we use to express that which we cannot understand and therefore must appreciate on another level— aesthetically. This relates to changes because that which we cannot understand is usually a change from what was, what we thought we understood before it changed, especially when that change involves something that seems counterintuitive like the interpenetration of opposites, or qualitative change out of quantitative changes.

Religion has always helped us to think that we understand the world. If we could not understand the immediate reasons for the mysterious ways in which the world moves, we could at least point to the sky, and believe that we have a relationship with the force(s) that cause the movement, the changes. There is really nothing so mysterious about human beings projecting an imagined power into the sky that can then answer the great questions, and soothe the great fears. This projection is about as human a behavior as one can conceive. However, understanding is also part of the human equation. With thoughtful analysis, especially including the tools of dialectical materialism, we can see that this

activity of projection is unnecessary. We now know that the universe moves of its own accord; the nature of the universe is matter in motion, constant change. There is no mystery to this, except insofar as we do not understand the motion or change. There is “magic” in the universe and in the world, but the magic is only that which we do not (yet) understand. And this mystery is good. It is the pursuit of mystery, the desire to understand that which we do not yet understand, which drives the human imagination in its most positive exemplars.

Theology has traditionally said that the mysterious is beyond our understanding, at least beyond the understanding of the masses. The great mysteries have been the domain of the priests and the saints, those closer to God. An inherent differentiation in power comes with theism, and with all idealist philosophy. So the ruling class of any society has always had a built-in motivation to play upon the mysterious, to encourage the priests with their talk of the divine and sacred. If there is power in understanding, and power in apprehending and influencing change in the universe, then it has always been in the interest of those who rule to keep this realm to themselves and their allies. The world is mysterious at times, but perhaps not nearly so mysterious as we have been led to believe.

This is the first function of religion—the aesthetic: to explain, or at least to appreciate, the unexplained. Theology has done this by appealing to our sense of magic, of awe, and of fear. But *Homo religiosus*, living conscious of the dialectical nature of change in the universe, need not be subject to this manipulation any longer. The magic of dialectical change imbues reality with a sense that the concept “sacred” may well describe. It is our task, the task of humanity, to determine what we are to make of a world that moves in wonderful, seemingly unpredictable ways. Einstein once said that he refused to believe that God played dice with the universe. This is the magic of dialectical change: it certainly *looks* like God playing dice, Einstein to the contrary notwithstanding. Even without supernaturalism, the magic remains, and perhaps we can better appreciate the world’s beauty if we do not have God in the way.

EXISTENTIAL

The fundamental dialectic process of society consists of three moments, or steps. These are externalization, objectivation, and internalization.... Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment by the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of subjective consciousness. – Peter Berger¹⁶

We move now to the second of religion's principal functions. The first function was personal to the individual experiencing it; this next function is social as the aggregate of all individual experience. Even the narcotic effect described by Marx is both individual and social. The social effect extends far beyond pacification. Religion has always had the dominant role in defining reality. Different religions have different understandings of the nature of reality. These differences seem to be eroding in the modern world, as traditional ways of living pass into history, but a socially defined reality is still necessary for us to be able to talk with each other, as well as to share culture more generally. The socially defined reality is the groundwork from which all higher human activity (culture) is built—it is the why, the reason for doing what we do.

The sociologist Peter Berger, in concert with Geertz, argued that because human beings are “curiously unfinished” at birth—that is, our bodies and brains (especially) have not finished their formation at the time of birth—we end up relating to the world in a myriad of ways that are simply not possible for nonhuman animals. Nonhuman animals have instincts; we do not. We may have drives that could be argued to be innate (certainly a drive to survive fits this understanding), but where nonhuman animals “know” how to be in the world, we must define our own way. The process by which this defining is done is a social process, because by virtue of our unfinishedness we are social creatures, and our reality is a social construction.

The nonhuman animal, Berger said, “lives in a world that is more or less completely determined by its instinctual structure.... By contrast, man's instinctual structure at birth is both underspecialized and undirected toward a species-specific environment.”¹⁷ Berger went on to argue that the basic biology of humans determines that these definitions of our social environment must

come out of activity—this is, of course, the position of earlier thinkers like Marx, who discussed the phenomenon in terms of species-being, the activity of humans as a group.

Our sociological understanding of the particular ways in which humans actually live their day to day lives has grown much more sophisticated over the years. Berger's work is quite informative in this regard. "The understanding of society as rooted in man's externalization, that is, as a product of human activity, is particularly important in view of the fact that society appears to common sense as something quite different, as independent of human activity and as sharing in the innate givenness of nature."¹⁸ Of course, we do know now that there is no givenness of nature (a predefined way for humans to live), but only our developing relationship with nature (though these ways may seem predictable, if one had sufficient knowledge). The details of this relationship change with our development, with the deepening of our understanding of the ways in which matter changes.

Perhaps, though, we get a bit ahead of ourselves. The question for Berger would be how this unfinishedness relates to religion in particular. "A meaningful order, or *nomos*, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals. To say that society is a world-building enterprise is to that it is ordering, or *nomizing*, activity."¹⁹ Because we do not have a sense of the order of the world hard-wired into us in the form of instinct, Berger argued, this order must, of necessity, be constructed. The construction itself is complex, and ultimately involves entire societies, and must account for that which is not understood (the magical) as well as that which is already understood. The social construction of reality must incorporate the unusual as well as the ordinary—or to use Eliade's terms, the sacred and profane. "Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects or experience."²⁰

If there is no God, no sacred, no power beyond the material world—in all its "magic"—then supernatural constructions of reality have in common that they appeal to a false power for their

justification. The point made earlier about the class interests involved in the construction of reality is important in this regard also. The point is not that the social construction of reality must appeal to the sacred—and it is not clear if this is Berger’s point or just the facts of history—but that a social construction of reality must be accomplished, and is accomplished by any and all societies to the degree that they survive (in my definition anything that accomplishes this is called religion). There is another, more ordinary level, at which this social construction is accomplished that relies on the day-to-day experiences of individuals in interactions with friends, coworkers, neighbors, and others.

So what would it mean for a social construction of reality to be done in the conscious absence of the “sacred”? The social construction of reality must rely upon majority consensus—and here some may argue that it always has, but that it was the limited consensus among the ruling class. The masses are more accustomed to a social construction of reality that seems necessary, and there are those who are made anxious by the prospect of rationally configuring a social construction of reality that fits the needs of the whole species, of all members of society. It is my opinion, however, that this project of constructing society democratically, rationally, and scientifically, is timely. Our coming out of the Dark Ages has been the steady progress toward this goal, steady but slow. This process is necessarily complicated, multifaceted, and time-consuming. Human beings may be fairly elastic, but they are also conservative. Change in the way people ordinarily conceive the world takes generations to accomplish, especially when the kind of change that must unfold is change to our very basic sensibilities of meaning and purpose, the existential side of being human.

SOCIAL

This definition of religion transcends the normal understanding. I am concerned with the religious person—*homo religiosus*—the tendency of human beings to re-link, re-bind, re-connect, and re-concile themselves with each other and nature. This is precisely what the Latin `re-ligare’ (from which the English word `religion’ is derived) means. Whenever people are in the process of restoring life to wholeness, integration and unity, they are engaging in religious activity. – Ira Zepp²¹

Religion is a matter of what people do, how they behave. Religion (in this generic sense) is, at one level, a traditional source of connecting with the deeper levels of our humanity—what some call

spirituality, here called aesthetics. But we should be clear about the implications of generic, non-idealist, religion. Some people meditate to get in touch with reality or self; some people climb mountains. Some people go to sporting events with friends to help them feel in touch with their shared humanity; some go to prayer meetings. It is not the activity—no matter how passive or active—that is so important. We humans will inevitably take from any and all forms of behavior that have helped human beings keep in touch with their humanity, in all its fullness. We must understand that some of these forms of behavior are not identified as religious—but actually are in the generic sense of religious, for these behaviors are the ways in which people experience themselves, their community, and the world.

Drawing on traditional work in the history of religion, Ira Zepp has described what he sees as the religious dimension of shopping malls. Shopping malls, per se, are not my concern, except to note the implicit argument in Zepp's work that malls have replaced more traditional religious centers. He does not explicitly explore the reasons for this, but it is obvious from the statistics about church attendance versus mall patronage—many more people go to malls than churches today.

Zepp offers a very interesting analysis of the ways in which malls can be seen as analogous to traditional religious expressions. I have argued that religion ought to be understood as a human expression of the quest to experience our humanity. Zepp argues that religion has always served this function, that this is a necessary function (as I have argued), and that religion can be found in malls where it has actually been disappearing in the rest of America and the world (save some obvious fundamentalist holdouts).

The point Zepp makes is that religious behavior relies centrally on concepts of sacred space and sacred time—providing for the aesthetic experience of being human, as I have discussed above. Zepp relies on an argument developed in part by Eliade and on work by the anthropologist Paul Wheatley. Wheatley described sacred centers in a comparative fashion in the late 1970s. Wheatley traveled the world and discovered that most, if not all, religions have constructions of a center as a central aspect of

their activity in the world. There are cathedrals, mosques, temples, notions of center of the world at the headwaters of the Ganges in India, notions of the center of world being in Rome, as well as more mundane manifestations in village and regional centers.

The one thing that many of these traditional centers have in common is that they were integrated into people's daily lives via exchange. The most dramatic examples were the bazaars of Egypt and Persia, and others may be found throughout history and across the planet. By virtue of being social animals, people have always had a need to exchange goods and services; religion has had a place in this—recall Eliade's point that almost anything, anywhere can be a hierophany. And it is a "sacred" place that would be chosen as a center—it would be the place to which people would congregate. Zepp points all of this out in making a case that shopping malls (and he could have added sporting events or a myriad of other communal activities) have taken over this function in our society—the social function of defining time out, and a space for this time out. Ceremonial Centers—which is how Wheatley describes them—have the function of allowing for meaningful human interactions, as well as a break from ordinary daily experience to get in touch with the fully human. In short, Ceremonial Centers have provided for the basic interchange that is our social being, as well as defining the space and time for groups to experience the existential and aesthetic functions of religion.

In the final analysis, religion must be understood as defining or delimiting truly human interactions—interactions with self, others, and the world. To do this, religion needs concepts of space and of time for these interactions. On a practical level, exchange has always formed a material justification for human beings to come together (we are social animals) so that these interactions can be meaningful (existentially and/or aesthetically). In the shopping mall, the meaningful side is exploited to bring customers to sellers. In supernatural religion, the meaningful side has been used as a narcotic to distract people from the pain they suffer the rest of the time, rather than as a pure expression of the pursuit of the experience of being human. What is needed today is a recapturing of

the human facilitation that the great markets of the Middle East and Mexico had in common (without the exploitative side that has always been a feature of religion in class-based society).

CONCLUSION

Theology's roots are in the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible speaking truth to power. In its best exemplars it is this still, albeit more concerned with the logical and systematic expression of what exactly is the truth that is spoken to what power exactly. But Theology got off the track along with its progeny, idealist philosophy, into an Epistemological trap. Theology had to be concerned with how one knows or discovers what God is saying. In Idealist philosophy this became the question of how one knows truth, because God was truth and God was elusive, so truth must be allusive. But this is not the case, truth is there for all to see, it is discovered and known in our experiences. And so now theology, or rather "A/theology," can reclaim its roots and once again speak truth to power, the truth we all know to the power that still oppresses the majority of people in the world.

This is the project of my dissertation, and the next year and a half of my life. Stay tuned.

¹ Salman Rushdie, "Slaughter in the Name of God," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2002, A33.

² Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 54.

³ Clifford Geertz, "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 83.

⁴ Geertz, "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind", 83.

⁵ Geertz, "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind", 68.

⁶ The sociologist Emile Durkheim was the first to put forth these conclusions in his 1912 book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, although they were hinted at in the Ludwig Feuerbach's 1841 book *The Essence of Christianity*.

⁷ The form of this paragraph is an homage to Clifford Geertz, who used it in his famous definition of religion.

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: New American Library, 1974): 1.

⁹ Eliade, 12.

¹⁰ Eliade, 30.

¹¹ Eliade, 13.

¹² Eliade, 39.

¹³ Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, vol. 25 *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected works*, (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 55-56.

¹⁴ Erwin Marquit, Letter to author, December 23, 1998. (Marquit is Professor Emeritus, Physics, U. Minn.).

¹⁵ Marquit

¹⁶ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 4.

¹⁷ Berger, 5.

¹⁸ Berger, 8.

¹⁹ Berger, 19.

²⁰ Berger, 25.

²¹ Ira Zepp, *The New Religious Image of Urban America: The Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center*, (Niwot, Colorado: Univ. Press of Colorado, 1997), 14.