

# MISCONCEPTIONS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by Robert A. Segal

*Abstract.* Scholars in religious studies, or “religionists,” often mischaracterize the social-scientific study of religion. They assume that a social-scientific analysis of the origin, function, meaning, or truth of religion either opposes or disregards the believer’s analysis, which religionists profess to present and defend. I do not argue that the social sciences analyze religion from the believer’s point of view. I argue instead that a social-scientific analysis is more akin and germane to the believer’s point of view than religionists assume. I single out seven mischaracterizations of the social sciences typically held by religionists.

*Keywords:* believer’s point of view; Berger; Eliade; Freud; function; irreducibly religious; meaning; origin; social-scientific.

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“Religionists,” as I call scholars in religious studies, often mischaracterize the social sciences. Elsewhere I argue that religionists wrongly laud *contemporary* social scientists for analyzing religion the way religionists profess to do: from the believer’s point of view (see Segal 1985). In the present essay I argue that religionists wrongly damn *conventional* social scientists for analyzing religion in a way either opposed or askew to the believer’s point of view. Religionists, I argue, misconstrue the conventional social-scientific study of religion because they misconstrue the social sciences themselves. I note seven principal misconceptions.

1. *A social-scientific account of religion ignores the believer’s point of view and is therefore irrelevant to the proper study of religion.* Assume, following Mircea Eliade and nearly all other religionists, that for the believer the origin and function of religion are irreducibly

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[*Zygon*, vol. 25, no. 3 (September 1990).]  
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religious: assume that believers say they become and remain religious in order to get close to God.

No social scientist ignores the believer's point of view. Most social scientists do ignore the believer's explanation as the ultimate explanation of the believer's religiosity, but none ignores it as the *direct* explanation. Any social scientist who did would have little left to explain. The social scientist wants to know why the believer is religious, and part of being religious is yearning for proximity to God. The social scientist wants to know why the believer harbors this yearning, which is therefore not being denied. To refuse to accept the believer's reason for being religious as the ultimate account of the believer's religiosity is not to disregard it.

A psychoanalyst trying to explain a person's killing ten people at random would not be expected to accept the murderer's explanation that he or she had been ordered by God to kill the victims, yet the psychoanalyst would not *ignore* the murderer's explanation. It would become part of the data to be psychoanalyzed. It would surely not fully explain the deed. Saying otherwise would be to confuse the phenomenon being explained with the explanation of it—the *explicandum* with the *explicans*.

Sociologist Peter Berger's appeal to "signals of transcendence" (Berger [1969] 1970, 52–57; [1979] 1980, 58–60, 114–42) typifies this confusion. Pitting his irreducibly religious explanation of religion against conventional social-scientific ones, Berger, who here is more religionist than social scientist, suggests that religion originates in response to religious experience, by which he means the experience not of God but of order, hope, and humor. From these experiences a beneficent God is inferred: "Thus man's ordering propensity implies a transcendent order, and each ordering gesture is a signal of this transcendence" (Berger [1969] 1970, 57).

But the experience of order, by which Berger really means *faith* in an orderly world, is not, as in the teleological argument for the existence of God, *evidence* of an orderly world. Rather, it is the expression of *belief* in an orderly world: "This is the human *faith* in order as such, a *faith* closely related to man's fundamental trust in reality. This *faith* is experienced not only in the history of societies and civilizations, but in the life of each individual—indeed, child psychologists tell us there can be no maturation without the presence of this *faith* at the outset of the socialization process. Man's propensity for order is grounded in a *faith* or *trust* that, ultimately, reality is 'in order,' 'all right,' 'as it should be'" (Berger [1969] 1970, 54 [italics added]). The experience of order is no *explanation* of belief in God but only the *manifestation* of that belief. It is not a religious *explicans*, to be

pitted against a secular one, but the *explicandum* itself. One finds order *because* one believes in God, not vice versa. The believer's explanation of religion must therefore be explained in turn, for it presupposes what it claims to explain: religious belief.

Far from making a social-scientific explanation of religion irrelevant, Berger makes it indispensable. The question is *why* persons experience order, hope, or humor in the first place, not *why* they thereby or thereafter believe in God. Berger's would-be irreducibly religious explanation of religion is not merely an inadequate explanation but barely one at all. It is, instead, part of the phenomenon to be explained. No social scientist denies *that* believers find order in the world. *Why* they do so social scientists want to know.

2. *A social-scientific analysis of religion denies the irreducibly religious nature of religion and therefore blocks the proper study of religion.* Undeniably, there must be symmetry between the analysis of a phenomenon and the phenomenon being analyzed. If the true nature of religion is irreducibly religious rather than, say, sociological, religion must be analyzed religiously rather than sociologically. The question is what the true nature of religion is.

No social scientist denies that if the true nature of religion is irreducibly religious rather than sociological, religion must be explained and interpreted religiously rather than sociologically. Nor does any social scientist deny that the *manifest* nature of religion is religious. None denies that believers themselves explain and interpret religion religiously. None denies that believers pray because they believe in God. None denies that believers are stirred by prayer. The issue is whether the *true* nature of religion is religious. The "true" nature need not mean the sole one. It can mean the ultimate one.

Because the manifest nature of religion need not be its ultimate one, the ultimate nature of religion is an open question. To demonstrate that manifestly religious data are better explained or interpreted sociologically is to relabel those data sociological ones. It is, then, dogmatic for religionist Steven Kepnes, for example, to state that "after all, what we [students of religion] want to understand, what we want to study, is religion, and not society or psychology or brain chemistry" (Kepnes 1986, 509)—as if the ultimate, not to say exclusive, nature of religion were knowable *a priori*. The issue must be settled by *research*. It is a misconception of the social sciences to say that in explaining or interpreting religion nonreligiously they are *denying* the ultimate nature of religion. Not only might the ultimate nature of religion prove to be nonreligious, but in any case

the social sciences are merely *proposing* that the “ultimate” nature of religion is nonreligious. The social sciences would be *denying* the irreducibly religious nature of religion only *if* that nature had been established.

It is dogmatic even for Kepnes’s fellow religionist Daniel Pals to appeal to the analogy between religious studies and literary criticism to justify *a priori* an irreducibly religious analysis of religion: “No [literary] critic will be ignorant of politics, psychology, social context or religion, but he would not for a moment relinquish the primacy of *literary* models, forms, and motives. The [religionist’s] approach to religion merely insists on the same right (Pals 1987, 276 [italics added]). Despite the proclamation by the New Critics of the forties and fifties that literature is irreducibly literary, the ultimate nature of literature remains as open a question as the ultimate nature of religion. Literature continues to be analyzed historically, sociologically, politically, and psychologically as well as literarily—and by literary critics themselves. Indeed, contemporary literary criticism is more historical, sociological, and political than ever before. If there still seems to be less of a challenge to an irreducibly literary dimension to literature than to an irreducibly religious dimension to religion, it is because that literary dimension has been demonstrated, not because it has been dogmatically decreed. To declare that literary critics who study literature nonliterarily are historians, sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists *rather than* literary critics would be dogmatism at its most severe.

Yet Eliade, the most celebrated religionist, makes exactly this declaration about the study of religion: “A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false” (Eliade [1958] 1963, xiii). Even if Eliade were appealing to the believer’s view of the nature of religion, he would be waxing dogmatic. For believers are not the automatic arbiters of the ultimate, much less sole, origin, function, or even meaning of their religion. But because for Eliade believers need not be even unconsciously aware of the sole origin, function, or even meaning of their religion (see Segal 1989b), he provides no argument at all for his irreducibly religious characterization of religion. He decrees it so. Are the social sciences dogmatic in spurning dogmatic pronouncements such as his?

3. *A social-scientific analysis of religion precludes an irreducibly religious analysis and is therefore incompatible with the proper study of religion. Like*

other religionists, Eliade rails against the social sciences because he assumes that they bar an irreducibly religious origin, function, and meaning of religion. Hence he says that “it would be useless, because ineffectual, to appeal to some reductionist principle and to demystify the behavior and ideologies of *homo religiosus* by showing, for example, that it is a matter of projections of the unconscious, or of screens raised for social, economic, political, or other reasons” (Eliade 1969, 68). It would be useless because the sole origin, function, and above all meaning of religion are irreducibly religious rather than psychological, social, economic, or political. As Eliade illustrates, “In a number of traditional archaic cultures the village, temple, or house is considered to be located at the ‘Center of the World.’ There is no sense in trying to ‘demystify’ such a belief by drawing the attention of the reader to the fact that there exists no Center of the World and that, in any case, the multiplicity of such centers is an absurd notion because it is self-contradictory” (Eliade 1969, 69).

Contrary to Eliade, religion, like any other cultural phenomenon, can have multiple origins, functions, and meanings. Surely religion can have an origin that is partly sociological and partly religious. Even if these two origins are exhaustive, they are not necessarily incompatible. They may be merely redundant. Sigmund Freud’s notion of overdeterminism is a case of redundant yet compatible origins.

Even if a multiplicity of origins, while possible, seems unlikely,<sup>1</sup> a multiplicity of functions does not. Admittedly, origins and functions often go hand in hand, especially when they are needs: religion originates to fulfill a need, the fulfillment of which is its function. But religion can also fulfill needs coincidentally, needs unconnected to its origin. While Bronislaw Malinowski’s brand of social-scientific functionalism focuses on the fulfillment of needs that a cultural entity such as religion arises to fulfill, the stricter functionalism pioneered by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown concentrates on the unintended fulfillment of (if one can still use the Malinowskian term) “needs.” Whether or not, then, it is unlikely that religion will have multiple origins, it is not at all unlikely that religion will have multiple functions, of even the most disparate variety: psychological, sociological, economic, and political as well as irreducibly religious. Not coincidentally, historian Samuel Preus says that the conflict between religionist and social-scientific accounts of religion has been over origin rather than function: “One could (and can) investigate the functions of religion, engage in historical-critical studies, and argue about hermeneutical approaches to myths and behavior without any essential

contradiction arising between theology and the [social-scientific] study of religion. But with the question of origins and causes it is a different story; the ways part" (Preus 1987, xvi).

Consequently, even Berger's tame term for the effect of sociology on religion—"debunking"—is too strong. According to Berger, sociology undermines the credibility of religion and other cultural phenomena by exposing their latent rather than manifest, social rather than individual, and mundane rather than high-minded function: "The sociological frame of reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretations of society, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other" (Berger 1963, 38). "For example, the 'manifest' function of education is to transmit knowledge, its 'latent' function to erect and maintain class barriers; or, hospitals 'manifestly' are organized to treat illness, 'latently' to preserve and enforce the prerogatives of physicians; and so on" (Berger and Kellner 1981, 4). "The mystery of faith now becomes scientifically graspable, practically repeatable, and generally applicable. The magic disappears as the mechanisms of plausibility generation and plausibility maintenance become transparent. The community of faith is now understandable as a *constructed entity*—it has been constructed in a specific human history, by human beings" (Berger [1969] 1970, 38).

Berger, like Eliade, goes too far: the latent level supplements rather than precludes the manifest one. A sociological account shows that religion originates and especially functions for a social end—not that it does not originate and function for a religious end as well. In claiming that the location of a village, temple, or house functions to unify a people, the social sciences do not deny that location also functions as the center of the world. The social sciences "expose" the religious explanation as other than the exclusive or main one but not as an explanation at all.

Indeed, a social-scientific explanation at times explains the religious one, which it must therefore presuppose. Whether it does so varies from social science to social science. For sociologists, as Berger's examples illustrate, the latent function is independent of the manifest one. Manifestly, believers gather to worship God; latently, to reinforce, say, secular divisions of class and race. For Freud and other depth psychologists, the latent function is fulfilled *through* the therefore indispensable manifest one, albeit fulfilled indirectly, unconsciously, and sometimes even perversely. Manifestly, believers amass to worship God; latently, thereby to slay their fathers, who

are symbolized by God. The latent level thus explains why the manifest relationship between believers and their God is like that between children and their fathers. Even when, as in sociology, the latent and manifest levels operate independently, the manifest function is not denied. Manifest and latent *meanings* are no less compatible than manifest and latent *functions*. A social-scientific interpretation hardly precludes an irreducibly religious one and can even interpret it.

4. *A social-scientific analysis of religion is functional, reductive, and explanatory: these terms are interchangeable. A humanistic analysis of religion is substantive, nonreductive, and interpretive: these terms also are interchangeable.* For example, in his attempt to reconcile a social-scientific approach to religion with a humanistic one, Kepnes, following the religionist convention, refers to “substantive or nonreductive methodologies” (Kepnes 1986, 504), as if they were identical, and contrasts them to functional and reductive ones. Conversely, he says that “those who utilize methods of explanation are often [and rightly] called reductionist” (Kepnes 1986, 508) and contrasts reductionists to those who, using methods of interpretation, or “understanding,” are called nonreductionists. Hence he says that “we need not see the study of religion as either a scientific attempt to *explain* religion [*reductively*] in terms of sociology, psychology or physics, or an intuitive and analogical attempt to grasp the meaning of religion [*nonreductively*] from the believer’s standpoint. The study of religion . . . requires *both* methods of *understanding* and *explanation*. Thus, the so-called *reductionist* and *nonreductionist* approaches to the study of religion are not mutually exclusive” (Kepnes 1986, 505 [italics added]).

Neither “functional,” “reductive,” and “explanation” nor “substantive,” “nonreductive,” and “interpretation” are in fact synonymous. “Functional” and “substantive” refer to *definitions* of religion. “Reductive” and “nonreductive” refer to either *explanations* or *interpretations* of religion. “Explanation” and “interpretation” refer to *methods* in studying religion.

Neither functional and substantive *definitions* nor explanatory and interpretive *methods* correspond to reductive and nonreductive *explanations*. A reductive explanation departs from the believer’s account of the origin or function of his or her religiosity. A nonreductive explanation captures that account. A believer is likely to *define* religion substantively—for example, religion as the worship of God. Similarly, a functional *definition* is likely to be reductive—for example, religion as whatever one values most. But the reductive *explanations* of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Freud, among

others, employ substantive *definitions*, and at least theologian Paul Tillich's nonreductive *explanation* employs a quasi-functional *definition*: religion as whatever one values most. (Tillich's definition is only quasi-functional because, having defined religion functionally as whatever one values most, he distinguishes substantively between true and false ultimate values.)

Nor does the distinction between functional and substantive *definitions* of religion correspond to the distinction between *functionalist* and *genetic explanations*. Where a genetic explanation says why or how religion arises, a functionalist explanation says why or how religion persists. Because the function that accounts for the persistence of religion can be anything, religion can function nonreductively to satisfy a yearning for contact with God, as indeed it does for arch-nonreductionist Eliade. Because Eliade defines religion substantively as the attempt to make contact with God or the sacred, a *functionalist explanation* of religion is compatible with a *substantive definition*.<sup>2</sup>

An *interpretation* of religion is necessarily *nonreductive* only insofar as it seeks the meaning of religion, which is necessarily the believer's own. But that meaning need not be conscious, in which case there can be reductive as well as nonreductive interpretations of religion. Certainly an *explanation* can be either nonreductive or reductive. It can be either the believer's account of the origin or function of his or her religiosity or that of an observer. The accounts can even coincide. The distinction between reductive and nonreductive does not, then, correspond to that between explanatory and interpretive.

The issue here is not what constitutes the real difference between a social-scientific and a humanistic approach to religion (see Segal 1989a, 11, 58). The issue is whether the difference is that between, on the one hand, a functional, reductive, and explanatory approach and, on the other hand, a substantive, nonreductive, and interpretive one. Because "functional," "reductive," and "explanatory" refer to separate issues, so that a functional approach can be nonreductive, a reductive approach interpretive, and an explanatory approach nonreductive, a social-scientific approach can be substantive, nonreductive, and interpretive and so is far broader than religionists usually assume.

5. *A social-scientific analysis of religion is materialist and mechanical. A humanistic analysis is mentalist and intentional.* Just as the social sciences are unjustly confined to functional, reductive, and explanatory analyses, so they are unjustly restricted to materialist and mechanical ones. Just as, on the basis of the first set of characterizations,



religionists feel obliged to transcend the social sciences for the humanities in order to undertake substantive, nonreductive, and interpretive analyses, so, on the basis of the second set, they feel compelled to forsake the social sciences for the humanities in the name of mentalist and intentional ones.

When Kepnes says that “we need not see the study of religion as either a *scientific* attempt to explain religion in terms of sociology, psychology or physics, or an intuitive and analogical attempt to grasp the meaning of religion from the believer’s standpoint” (Kepnes 1987, 505 [italics added]), he is contrasting the *materialist* and *mechanical explanations* of the social sciences to the *mentalist* and *intentional interpretations*, or *understandings*, of the humanities. For the “meaning” of religion, taken here as the believer’s reason for being religious, is, as a reason, always intentional rather than mechanical: the believer is religious for some end. Because intentions are mental and mechanisms material, the meaning of religion for the believer is mentalist rather than materialist. What Kepnes says of the social sciences *per se*, religionist Robert Fuller says of the social sciences so far: “The problem, however, is that the particular kind of empiricism insisted upon by our modern social sciences fates us to remaining in the dark of night. By restricting the scope of reality to the *material* forces shaping everyday life, the empirical method has shed no light on the great issues that face humanity both as individuals and as a species” (Fuller 1987, 501 [italics added]).

In actuality, even at present the social and natural sciences alike allow for mentalist as well as materialist accounts of human behavior. Social scientists, like natural ones, may *hope* that mental states will one day be reduced to material ones to form a unified science, but they do not thereby consider mental states less scientific than material ones. For them, mental states not only exist but also cause behavior. As anthropologist Melford Spiro puts it: “But the contention that the scientific conception of cause is restricted to material conditions is hardly self-evident. . . . For by the most rigorous conception of cause—any antecedent condition in the absence of which some stipulated consequent condition would not occur—purposes, motives, intentions, and the like, for all their being nonmaterial, are no less causal than hormonal secretions and subsistence techniques” (Spiro 1986, 272–73).<sup>3</sup> By no means are most social scientists either materialists or behaviorists. Moreover, few social-scientific materialists deny the *existence* of culture and other forms of mental life. Even as extreme a social-scientific materialist as Marvin Harris is merely seeking to *explain* culture materially (see Harris 1979). Similarly, few classical, let alone contemporary, social-scientific behaviorists deny

the *existence* of the mind. Only such philosophical behaviorists as Gilbert Ryle reduce mental states to simply a tendency to behave a certain way (see Ryle 1949).

It is not even easy to categorize much of human behavior as purely material. Culinary taste, for example, is as much mental as material, as much the expression of ideas about food as the venting of cravings. Likewise love involves ideas about human relationships as much as instincts.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the relationship between the mind and the body remains an unsettled *scientific*, if also philosophical, question.

6. *A social-scientific account of religion denies the truth of religion.* It is usually said that a social-scientific origin of religion denies the truth of religion, but it is sometimes said that a social-scientific *function* does so as well. This characterization of the social sciences is triply wrong. First, most contemporary social scientists—for example, Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, Clifford Geertz, the earlier Robert Bellah, and the earlier Berger—shun the issue of truth as beyond their social-scientific ken. They restrict themselves to the issues of origin, function, and meaning. Rather than determining whether religion is true, they at most determine why religion is *believed* to be true.

For example, Jung asserts that religion originates in the projection of archetypes of the collective unconscious onto the world yet denies that his explanation has any consequence for the truth of religion: “I approach psychological matters from a scientific and not from a philosophical standpoint. In as much as religion has a very important psychological aspect, I am dealing with it from a purely empirical point of view, that is, I restrict myself to the observation of phenomena and I refrain from any application of metaphysical or philosophical considerations” (Jung 1938, 2). Similarly, the earlier Berger maintains that “religion constitutes an immense projection of human meanings into the empty vastness of the universe,” yet adds that “it is impossible within the frame of reference of scientific theorizing to make any affirmations, positive *or* negative, about the ultimate ontological status of this alleged reality. Within this frame of reference, the religious projections can be dealt with only as such, as products of human activity and human consciousness, and rigorous brackets have to be placed around the question as to whether these projections may [or may not] *also* be something else than that (or, more accurately, *refer to* something else than the human world in which they empirically originate)” (Berger [1967] 1969, 100).

Second, contemporary social scientists who do assess the truth of religion—for example, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, the later Bellah, and above all the later Berger—typically say that the social

sciences either do or should assume the *truth*, not the falsity, of religion. Turner berates his fellow social scientists for denying the truth of religion (see Turner 1975, 195–96). As a relativist, Douglas considers true the beliefs of all cultures (see Douglas 1975, ix–xxi; 1979). The later Bellah declares religion true, although he simultaneously declares that religion makes no truth claims about the world itself, only about human experience of the world (see Bellah 1970, 252–53). The later Berger argues that the social sciences can confirm the truth of religion (see Berger [1969] 1970, 52–97; [1979] 1980, 58–60, 114–42).

Third, classical social scientists who do pronounce religion false—for example, Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Marx, and Freud—do not argue on the basis of their social-scientific findings. Rather, they do the reverse: they argue for a secular origin and function and, even more, for the harmfulness or futility of the function on the grounds of the falsity of religion. For them, religion is false on philosophical, not social-scientific, grounds.<sup>5</sup>

For Marx, for example, religion is dysfunctional—not because it fails to accomplish its intended function but because the escapist and justificatory functions it accomplishes are more harmful than helpful. Religion would not, however, be escapist if Marx believed in the place of escape: heaven. Marx, then, deems religion dysfunctional because he deems it false, but he does not deem religion false because he deems it dysfunctional. Someone else might invoke economic harm as an argument against the existence of a fair or powerful God, in which case the dysfunctional effect of religion would argue for the falsity of religion. But Marx himself disbelieves in a God of any kind—and does so on philosophical, not social-scientific, grounds.

For the Freud of *The Future of an Illusion*, religion is, as for Marx, dysfunctional despite the fact that it accomplishes its intended function. But where for Marx religion is dysfunctional because the accomplishment of its function is harmful, for Freud religion is dysfunctional simply because the accomplishment of its function presupposes a false belief in a kind and fair God. Like Marx, Freud disbelieves in God on independent grounds, not on the grounds of its effect. By vaunting a benevolent God, religion does not so much exacerbate human suffering as deny it. Still, Freud, like Marx, is saying that religion is dysfunctional because it is false. The comfort religion provides would be unobjectionable if Freud believed in God—but, again like Marx, Freud is not saying that religion is false because it is dysfunctional.

For the Freud of *Totem and Taboo* and to a lesser extent *Moses and*

*Monotheism*, religion is dysfunctional because it fails to accomplish its intended function: alleviating guilt over parricidal deeds or urges. At the same time, religion here is not even dysfunctional because it is false. Although Freud again scarcely believes in God, he objects to what believers do in the name of God: strive in vain to repress irrepressible desires—a striving that would be no less vain and harmful even if God *did* exist.

It is Frazer above all who considers religion dysfunctional because it is false. For him religion is certainly not dysfunctional because of its intended function, providing food. Rather, religion is dysfunctional because it fails to accomplish that function, and it fails because God, from whom believers seek food, does not exist for Frazer. Yet precisely because he judges religion dysfunctional because it is false, Frazer least of all judges religion false because it is dysfunctional.

Even if the social sciences uniformly denied the truth of religion, that denial would be unwarranted only if religion were true. The truth of religion must therefore be established.

In his attempt to reconstitute the social sciences, Fuller faults the sociology of religion less than the sociology of knowledge for deeming religion false. “Rooted in Karl Marx’s proposition that human consciousness is wholly determined by the forms and structures of social existence, the sociology of knowledge interprets *all systems of thought* as [mere] projections of humanity’s efforts to symbolize and legitimate the brute realities of everyday life” (Fuller 1987, 499 [italics added]). This view of the sociology of knowledge is common. But in the first place only extreme sociologists of knowledge—for example, Douglas and above all the Edinburgh School of Barry Barnes, David Bloor, and Steven Shapin—maintain that *all* “systems of thought” arise for sociological rather than intellectual reasons. Most classical and contemporary sociologists of knowledge—for example, Karl Mannheim, Robert Merton, Imre Lakatos, Thomas Kuhn, Larry Laudan, Durkheim, and even Marx—distinguish sharply between true or rational beliefs, which ordinarily are to be explained intellectually, and false or irrational beliefs, which alone must be explained sociologically. Still, religious beliefs are for them the most conspicuous of false and irrational ones.

But in the second place the origin of no “system of thought” determines the veracity for moderate and even extreme sociologists of knowledge. Both groups of sociologists are concerned with *explaining*, not *judging*, beliefs. The fact that extreme sociologists of knowledge explain even true and rational beliefs sociologically *demonstrates* the separation for them of truth from origin. Moderate sociologists of

knowledge do explain sociologically only false or irrational beliefs, but they judge those beliefs false or irrational *before* seeking their origin. Not even Marx, though admittedly some Marxists such as Lenin and sometimes Engels, explains beliefs entirely nonintellectually. Only Douglas and the Edinburgh School do.

Just as the social sciences are mischaracterized when it is said that they judge religion false, so they are also mischaracterized when it is said that they dare not judge the truth of religion. The conventional view is that the origin and function of religion have no bearing on its truth and that to assess the truth of religion on the basis of either its origin or its function is to commit the genetic fallacy or its functionalist counterpart.

In the first place the fallacy is the claim that origin and function *necessarily* bear on truth—not that they have any bearing at all. The bearing must simply be *shown*. In the second place the bearing of at least origin on truth *has* been shown. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud argues that the origin of religion in a wish renders religion likely false: “We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be” (Freud [1961] 1964, 52–53).

Freud is saying that it would be an extraordinary coincidence if our wishes about the world, constituting as they do “the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind” (Freud [1961] 1964, 47), matched the world. The challenge to religion stems not from its origin in wishes—to say otherwise *would* be to commit the genetic fallacy—but from the rarity with which our mildest, let alone fondest, wishes are fulfilled. A wish to believe that God exists does not *preclude* the existence of God, but it does make the existence of God improbable.

Extending Freud’s point, I have argued that the origin of religion is not only a wish but also projection lessens the probability of its truth (see Segal 1980). While the object of a projection can still exist on its own, projection itself nevertheless constitutes error. Whoever projects God onto the world does not discover God in the world but rather imposes God on it. Should God exist after all, the projection would represent no insight on the believer’s part. It would represent mere coincidence. The extraordinariness that such a coincidence would represent challenges the truth of religion. Projection challenges the truth of religion not because projection fails to establish the truth of religion but because a belief originating in projection is statistically unlikely to be true.

Not every social-scientific explanation of religion involves either projection or wish fulfillment, but every social-scientific explanation does involve a naturalistic rather than divine origin. Where a divine origin automatically justifies as well as explains belief in the existence of God, a naturalistic origin, *if* accepted, automatically challenges the justification as well as the explanation of the belief. A naturalistic cause reduces the effect to error, which lies not in the postulation of a being who does not exist but in the postulation on a basis that does not warrant the postulation. Should that being exist, the postulation would again represent a remarkable coincidence. The unlikelihood of the coincidence constitutes the challenge. In short, peremptory dismissal of any effort by the social sciences to assess the truth of religion is unjustified.

7. *The failure of a social-scientific account of religion confirms an irreducibly religious one.* Suppose that not only all past and present but all possible social-scientific accounts of religion proved unconvincing. An irreducibly religious account would not therefore be established. The failure of the social sciences to explain why believers are religious would not establish that believers are religious for irreducibly religious reasons. It would mean only that the origin and function of religion had yet to be discovered. An irreducibly religious account must stand on its own. It cannot rest on the failure of its rivals. As Freud wisely says of his religionist opponents, “The weakness of my position does not imply any strengthening of yours” (Freud [1961] 1964, 87).<sup>6</sup> Religionists ought not, then, invoke any failure of social-scientific accounts of religion to bolster their own accounts.

#### NOTES

1. For the classical argument that the same cultural phenomenon *can* have multiple origins, see (Boas 1940, 256–57, 273–76, 278–80).

2. Contrary to Berger (1974, 126)—among others—a *functionalist explanation* does not entail a *functional definition*.

3. See also Hempel (1965, 463–87); Grünbaum (1984, 69–94).

4. I thank Merrilee Salmm for this point. On the interlocking relationship of the cultural and the biological, see Berger ([1967] 1969, 4–5); Berger and Luckmann ([1966] 1967, 47–52); Geertz (1973, ch. 3).

5. I take the following examples from Segal (1989a, 89–90).

6. Adolf Grünbaum called this remark of Freud’s to my attention.

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