

The Study of Religion: Conversation Point for Theology and Science

PHENOMENOLOGY AND THEOLOGY—
REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY OF RELIGION

by *Alfred Kracher*

Abstract. The academic study of religious belief and practice is frequently taken to debunk the content of religion. This attitude impedes the science-theology dialogue and causes believers to react defensively toward studies of religion. I argue that a large, although not unrestricted, domain exists in which phenomenology of religion is neutral with respect to content, that is, compatible with either belief or unbelief. Theology can constructively interact with secular studies of religion, in some cases even explicitly hostile ones. Three themes emerge that elaborate on this interaction: (1) the claim that a scientific study of religion is capable of refuting belief is a logical mistake; (2) religious practice, and to some extent belief, can benefit from secular scrutiny; (3) the entirety of religious expressions is richer than the content that can be captured by analytical study of the phenomenon.

Keywords: anthropomorphism; asceticism; atheism; belief; credibility; debunking; functional analysis; metaphor; objectivity; phenomenology of religion; ritual; theology; virus theory.

The preceding article in this issue of *Zygon* by Hubert Meisinger evaluates two proposals for relating the religious and biological aspects of altruism. The juxtaposition of the approaches by Burhoe and Hefner casts in sharp relief the contrast between their different methodologies. Meisinger refers

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to Burhoe's proposal as "a functional analysis of religion"; it is a phenomenological approach, trying to understand the role of religion as part of the whole of human experience and activity. Burhoe tries as much as possible to look at religion from outside, from the standpoint of a neutral observer.

Hefner, on the other hand, takes his stand inside a religious tradition. His approach is a version of theology, albeit of an unusual kind (e.g., Hefner 1993). The scientific study of evolutionary biology helps him to make sense of theological concepts such as continuous creation (*creatio continua*), the image of God (*imago Dei*), and so on. To use anthropological terminology, Burhoe's approach is etic, that is, it is of the same kind as that of an anthropologist studying the beliefs and customs of an alien tribe. Hefner's is emic; he takes the position of a member of the tribe explaining his customs and beliefs to the anthropologists after having learned their language. This is not to imply, of course, that the latter approach is more primitive than the former; I am merely trying to illustrate a point of terminology.¹ Nor does it mean that the two enterprises are entirely separate in practice; there is considerable overlap between the methods of Burhoe and Hefner, and either one raises points on both sides; but in their respective methodologies they are clearly distinct.

In fact, both enterprises are in their own way autonomous, and although they can inform each other, they are not in competition. That might be all that needed to be said about this were it not for the historical tension between belief and its critical study. Religion is not primarily an item of academic inspection, nor yet a system of theology, but first and foremost the expression of a faith community. Its primary manifestation is what people believe and how they act on their beliefs, and for the large majority of believers the pressing issue about studying religion academically is whether such an analysis undermines their belief. This issue arises because a functional analysis of the kind that Meisinger ascribes to Burhoe is in fact often considered as debunking religion.² To know what religion as a human enterprise is "good for" is frequently taken to invalidate the content of religious faith. The corollary, sometimes still encountered as an objection to the science-religion dialogue, is that an intellectual analysis of religion puts individual faith in jeopardy. This has been, and in some ways still is, a serious impediment for extending the science-religion dialogue beyond the circle of some academic specialists into the mainstream of major religious communities. This paper seeks to overcome that impediment.

In order to bring out the difficulties in dealing with theories of religion, I shall focus mostly on authors who do not assent to the content of religious belief rather than those who, like Burhoe, seek to reconcile a functional theory of religion with theology. This allows an exploration of the extent to which any theory of religion can have relevance to belief and at what point the concern about belief being undermined may actually be justified.

EXAMINING RELIGION

Referring to the conflict between faith and analysis of religion as historical places its roots in the Enlightenment and the general reliance on scientific knowledge alone that is characterized as *positivism*. In fact, William Grassie claims that one of the fundamental aims of modernity in any field of study has been to uncover the “real” foundations that are supposed to be opaque to the people whose beliefs and practices rest on them and only disclose themselves to the enlightened, objective outsider (Grassie 1997, 84–85). The Enlightenment project thus aspires to what Roger Trigg has called a “God’s eye view” (Trigg 1993), a special insight denied all other human beings. Even though it is none too clear why such a privileged circle of thinkers should exist, the aftereffects of this claim are still with us today, especially in the scientific community.

Stephen Toulmin (1990) has drawn attention to what he calls “the hidden agenda of modernity” and ascribes the attempt to achieve certainty by rational analysis alone to the search for a secure foundation of belief and knowledge amid religious dissent, warfare, and political upheaval. Against this background, as William Placher has argued, “the modern appeal to reason” could at times “appear less a matter of confident optimism than a kind of desperation” (Placher 1996, 5). The study of religion from within the Enlightenment tradition has in particular been investigated by J. Samuel Preus (1987), who tracks the historical development from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century. According to his analysis, the early efforts to find compelling arguments for the belief in some rational “universal religion” later gave way to the universal materialism that rejected all truth claims for anything outside its own rationalist tradition.

Preus’s recounting of this development ends with Sigmund Freud, who is a prime representative of the debunking school of thought (e.g., Freud [1927] 1964). More recently it has come to be recognized that a phenomenological approach to religion is necessarily neutral with respect to faith. Logically the study of a phenomenon should not be affected by whether we believe its content to be valid or not. In this spirit, Stewart Guthrie can write about his agreement with Ian Barbour (especially Barbour 1971 and 1974): “Barbour is religious and defends not only (as I do) religion’s plausibility, rationality, and continuities with science and other secular thought, but also (as I do not) the probable truth of its central claims. Our positions otherwise are close” (Guthrie 1993, 27). This is an astonishing statement, one that would have been unthinkable a century earlier. Guthrie is not talking about some minor detail, a small cog the workings of which can be analyzed without agreement on how the whole machinery functions. Guthrie and Barbour are concerned with the fundamental nature of religion. The point could not be made any more forcefully that this examination is at its outset neutral with respect to religious faith.

Guthrie is concerned with the cognitive content of religion rather than its sociobiological function, like Burhoe, but the two issues are closely related, and the point about neutrality applies to both. The etic analysis of a believer and a nonbeliever can be indistinguishable. This is, of course, an argument about scholarly objectivity, currently in postmodernist disfavor. But for the science-religion dialogue, the possibility of such an approach is vital. Guthrie also asserts, however, that this neutrality has limits. At some point, "neutrality subverts understanding" (Guthrie 1993, 212). We will return to the limits of neutrality later. My main focus is to explore the extent to which the scientific study of religion is indeed neutral with respect to belief and the potential consequences of this neutrality for theology and religious practice. A simple metaphor will help us to tie the diverse consequences together.

A METAPHOR OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANALYSIS OF RELIGION AND FAITH

The notion that discovering a worldly function of religion somehow debunks its content is first of all a logical mistake. Both Barbour's and Guthrie's views of religion are not only plausible, they are also quite coherent with the respective beliefs of the two authors. Both views can logically coexist against the background of their mutually incompatible faiths. Function and content of religion (as well as other areas of thought) may not be completely independent, but they are not connected in such a simple-minded way that understanding the one uniquely determines the other. To use an illustration from science, the practice of both astrology and astronomy can be studied academically by similar methods, and both activities have a number of different functions. Yet few of those who study them would claim that their contents must therefore be equally valid (or equally invalid).

Nor would anyone conclude that the study of the chemical composition and nutritional function of food makes food unreal or dispenses with the necessity to eat. This culinary metaphor is more than a simple-minded piece of apologetics; it turns out to be surprisingly fruitful for our consideration, and in the main part of this paper I will expand it in three different ways:

1. The first and most obvious point about food is that knowing what is in it and where it came from does not remove the necessity to eat. Analyzing food does not debunk eating, nor are the two activities in competition.
2. Nutritionists can nonetheless sometimes tell us what kind of food is bad for us, even if it tastes good, and find out what it takes to get a balanced diet. It is often prudent to follow their advice, even if we have to change some cherished habits.

3. A gourmet in a fancy restaurant or a group of people sharing food in a communal celebration are getting much more out of their meal than a nutritionist can analyze.

These three points will help us to gain a better understanding of the relationship between scientific analysis and faith by exploring the uses and limits of this metaphor. The underlying arguments are not new, but their presentation under the umbrella of a single metaphor may illuminate connections that are not immediately obvious from other perspectives and deserve more attention. Using the metaphor of food has, of course, the connotation that something like religion is necessary for staying alive. In other words, nonreligious people are not just missing something that religious people have, but for them something else is taking the place of religion in their lives. Although this is a valid use of the metaphor, the present paper is not concerned with this aspect of it.

ANALYZING RELIGION DOES NOT DEBUNK IT

The debunking attitude is commonly encountered in a mythologized narrative form, in which a rigorous academic analysis of religious belief discloses its invalidity. The actual process of thought leading to this claim, however, is more often the reverse. Scholars who start from a position of unbelief develop an interest in why something that is not true can give rise to such a widespread, indeed ubiquitous, phenomenon as religion. The answer to this question does not necessarily depend on the point of departure, but it is understandable that the question appears more puzzling, and hence perhaps more interesting, to nonbelievers than to those who take their own religious tradition for granted. Unbelief thus stands at the beginning of the investigation. It is a premise rather than a result of the analysis.

As for the answers that an unbeliever can give, they tend to fall somewhere between two extremes. At one end is the narrowly functionalist approach. Anthropologists commonly assume that any feature of a society they study must have some function or purpose and thus tend to have theories of religion that center on some practical benefit. Vernon Reynolds and Ralph Tanner (1983) take the functionalist view to extremes, trying to explain every detail of religious practice on biologically adaptive principles. Guthrie (1993) gives an overview of the most widely known anthropological theories of religion before presenting a new one of his own. At the opposite extreme is the view that religion is entirely dysfunctional and has no practical benefit at all. A number of popular authors portray religious belief as essentially pathological, at least for contemporary society. An early example of this is the position that Freud took in one of his best-known works on religion, *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud [1927] 1964).

Freud speculated that some fairy tale of a divine overseer was required to motivate people to submit to cultural strictures. This makes sense in light of Freud's view of culture as a straitjacket, necessary to curb the antisocial pursuit of innate drives but experienced mostly through frustration. However, with the rational insights gained in the long interval since the first emergence of human culture, religion has become not only dispensable but dysfunctional. This is primarily because rational insight into the necessity of culture now fulfills the function formerly performed by religion. Such rational insight is better than belief, because belief can turn into unbelief, and then, Freud thinks, the motivation for prosocial behavior loses its foundation. In Freud's view, as he stated it in 1927, belief competes with rational insight, the latter being superior to the former.

According to Freud, the reason why religion nonetheless persists is that people have a subconscious desire to have their own goodness rewarded and their enemies punished. Religion thus acts as a wish-fulfillment illusion. We believe it because we want it to be true.³ For modern human beings, no longer in the primitive state they were in before a rational analysis of culture became possible, religious belief is pathological. Freud compared it to the compulsive neuroses of childhood (e.g., Freud [1907] 1950, 32–33; [1927] 1964, 70).

Two brief paragraphs cannot do justice to an essay that runs to more than fifty pages in the edition of Freud's collected works. However, it is important to realize the similarities between Freud's view and later debunking claims, which do not always acknowledge their parentage. Following Freud, it has become a widespread attitude among scholars to see religion as having had a particular function in archaic or primitive society but as being dysfunctional in the contemporary world. This may explain why different academic fields tend to differ in their emphasis on the various aspects of religion, with anthropologists like Guthrie generally being interested in its positive function, whereas psychologists like Freud or sociobiologists like E. O. Wilson are more often concerned with its absurdity.

Although a functional analysis in the sense of Guthrie (1993) and the many functionalist theories he summarizes can supply for a nonbeliever a reason why religion has arisen and continues to exist, it cannot debunk the contents of religious belief. After all, most believers think that religion is functional, too. In the next section we will turn to the consequences this agreement on function has for the theological side of the issue.

All dysfunctional theories, on the other hand, face the problem of having to rely on some inner dynamic that perpetuates religion in spite of its seeming lack of social benefits. Plausible explanations of what this driving force might be are usually variations on Freud's wish-fulfillment theme. Using our food metaphor, Freud sees religion in contemporary society as addictive drug rather than necessary nourishment and implies that it should be studied accordingly.⁴ In the extreme view of Richard Dawkins (1989),

wishes and desires become the “environment” of memes (i.e., elements of ideas), and the notion of “fulfillment” is equivalent to the “viability” of memes. Just as individuals of a particular species are adapted to an ecological niche, so memes are adapted to certain desires. The metaphors of “fulfilling wishes” and “filling a memetic niche” are in fact nearly identical.

It is important to notice this analogy, because only six years after Freud’s paper on the illusory nature of religion appeared (Freud [1927] 1964), C. S. Lewis developed a relevant counterargument. It is contained in the partly autobiographical allegory *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (Lewis [1933] 1981), but within the fictional framework nonetheless is presented in perfectly clear argumentative form: “The spirit of the age keeps on telling people that God is a wish-fulfillment dream. But is it really true that those who make this claim are going about filled with a longing that there should be a God, a divine law, and an afterlife with the possibility of hell? Surely for them, by their own rules, *disbelief* in God is a wish-fulfillment dream.”⁵

This argument is mostly directed against the considerable number of unbelievers who (like Lewis himself prior to his conversion) rebel against such notions as hell, divine retribution, and God’s alleged cruelty. Freud, influenced by anthropologists who viewed religion as the immature expression of a society that had not yet achieved the scientific stage (Preus 1987), regarded individual belief in God likewise as infantile, something to be left behind by the mature personality accepting the “reality principle.” Lewis, who came to Christian belief as an adult, considered the *flight from* transcendental justice as a manifestation of immaturity and the acknowledgment of the reality of God as self-actualization. Psychologically the second view is at least no less plausible than the first.

Lewis’s argument also has an aspect that works against the “virus” theory. Just as Lewis argued that disbelief as much as belief can be wish fulfillment, so one may wonder whether disbelief rather than belief is the memetic virus by Dawkins’s definition. This comment is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of theovirology and its sociobiological underpinnings. John Bowker (1995) and Ted Peters (1998), among many others, have dealt with that issue extensively. Here I am concerned only with the more limited objective of showing that the dysfunctional theory already assumes disbelief at its outset and asking whether theology can nonetheless engage it in some positive way.

In biological terms, a virus is essentially a piece of genetic information that is independent of and parasitical on the organism that transmits it. Can we make a similar judgment about ideas? Such a judgment is necessarily another idea, and there can be no guarantee that the judgment is not itself the product of a memetic virus. The identification of a piece of genetic material as a virus rests on the recognition that it is not normally a part of the genetic material of the host organism. In other words, in order to truly label an idea as a virus we would have to claim that it is not an

idea—at least not one that occurred to a normal human being. But can it really be true that belief in God is not a normal part of the meme space, or memetic equipment, of world cultures? It would seem that rather the *absence* of religious belief is the anomaly. At the very least the issue of whether belief or unbelief is more like a virus is undecidable on external grounds. Which ideas count as functional and which ones count as viruses must have been decided by criteria set up in advance about their content. Unless we have already decided that belief rather than unbelief requires explanation, and that belief is nonfunctional, we have no basis for thinking that it is parasitical on culture.

Defenders of theovirology might invoke Occam's razor to argue that an extra God in addition to the observable universe is not needed. But that is a red herring. The picture of theism as essentially similar to an atheistic view of the universe with God added on top of it is in any case a caricature. The worldviews of theists and atheists are different in many ways, and no general judgment as to which one is postulating unnecessary entities⁶ can be made from such a superficial look.

The attempt to dismiss some ideas on particular external grounds, such as wish fulfillment, always raises the question whether the same objection can be made against the dismissal itself. The evaluation of an idea necessarily has to engage its content. Unlike the case of a virus, which we can identify as an infectious agent without knowing the genetic information it contains, we have to be convinced of the pathological nature of the *content* of an idea before we are justified in opposing it. This judgment must be made *before* the virus analogy can be applied. Freud, who anticipated the virus metaphor by talking about "some kind of . . . infection" with regard to religious tradition (Freud [1927] 1964, 67), was admirably clear on this point; later expressions of the same idea are often less so.

In summary, any attempt to derive the invalidity of religion (or any other idea) from a functional analysis without engaging the content of belief must necessarily fail, because it violates fundamental principles of logic. One possible reason why this has nonetheless been a popular strategy toward religion in modern thought is that scholarly judgments were tacitly supposed to be superior to the ideas being judged. Scholars have presumed to have something like a God's eye view of the belief of earlier ages, exempting their own beliefs from similar scrutiny. This privileges their own beliefs, including disbelief in religion, without giving adequate reasons why and how such a superior viewpoint might be justified.

Toulmin (1990) has given a historical account of how the attitude of rationalist superiority has developed in Western thought. Today, however, the postmodernist counterreaction to this position sometimes seems as excessive as the original claim. Trigg (1993) has presented an extensive investigation of the epistemological foundations necessary if one is to avoid the extremes of a God's eye view on the one hand and a corrosive relativism on the other.

THEOLOGY AND THEORIES OF RELIGION

At this point we might ask how theories of religion, whether functional or dysfunctional, might be engaged from a theological viewpoint, or rather more generally from the viewpoint of belief. It is one thing to say that the theories themselves are in principle neutral with respect to belief, but quite another to deal with those articulations of such theories that are specifically intended to explain away or debunk the content of belief. We have mentioned how Guthrie appears to endorse neutrality when he compares himself to Barbour (Guthrie 1993, 27). But only a few pages later, he points out that a scholar proposing a theory cannot avoid stating his own position about the validity of belief: "A theory of religion must include a theory of religious belief, and a theory of belief must address the source of belief" (p. 31). Guthrie himself, although not hostile to religion, is a materialist. We will take his theory of religion as an example of how a functional theory of religion might be viewed from the perspective of a believer.

Guthrie proposes that religion is systematized anthropomorphism. How is the presentation of the theory affected by the author's unbelief, and how would the perspective of a believer have to differ in order to engage the theory constructively?⁷ Guthrie carefully examines anthropomorphism in art, philosophy, and science before he articulates the core of his thesis: Ultimately, although anthropomorphism is present in all of these endeavors, it does not constitute their content. But as far as religion goes, anthropomorphism *is* its content; it has no other, regardless of what a believer may suppose.

As soon as one disputes the premise that religion has no other content, Guthrie's evidence, without being in any way invalidated, changes its character. In fact, in keeping with the views of Barbour (1974), science and religion become even more similar from this viewpoint. Anthropomorphism is present in both and has exactly parallel functions, helping us to understand (within limits) nature in the former and the divine in the latter. Thus, Guthrie's theory is not hostile to belief, but it does look very different from the viewpoint of a believer, whether theologian or not, than from the author's own. Something very similar might be said about most functional theories of religion. We might here use the analogy of the duck/rabbit gestalt sketch made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein and reproduced many times since, notably by Guthrie himself (1993, 42). Let the lines on the paper stand for the substance of the theory. Guthrie describes it as a duck. But the believer's interpretation of it as a rabbit fits the picture equally well.

In this shape Guthrie's theory does have bearing on the question of anthropomorphism in theology, although it does not uniquely determine the answer theology might give. One possible reaction is hostility from those who seek to expunge anthropomorphism from theism, citing Guthrie's conclusion simply as showing that anthropomorphic theology opens itself

to being misunderstood as vacuous. A more constructive engagement with the thesis, however, could take its departure from the parallels between art, science, and religion and show how a more nuanced anthropomorphism aids understanding.⁸

The fact that at some level anthropomorphism is inevitable even in science—and that both Guthrie (1993) and Barbour (1971; 1974), for all their differences, agree on the similarities between science and religion in this regard—would appear to support the notion of Ferré (1984) that the rejection of anthropomorphism in theology is misguided. Guthrie contends that the object that is thus anthropomorphized is unreal. But much of what he says about the cognitive and emotive phenomena that lead to anthropomorphism does not depend on his disbelief. It might therefore be quite useful to study his theory in some detail from a theological point of view and evaluate how it affects arguments for and against anthropomorphism in theology. I believe that such a constructive engagement has sounder epistemological and theological foundations than an outright rejection of Guthrie's thesis. Many similar arguments could likewise be made about other functional theories of religion. Rethinking a functional analysis, even one that was not presented in a way sympathetic to belief, can thus provide insights that advance theological understanding.

DYSFUNCTIONAL THEORIES

Dysfunctional theories would seem to offer less opportunity for constructive engagement from a believer's viewpoint. However, there are many exceptions. Even the most dismal view of religion, as perceived by a secular critic, might find assent from a Manichean dualist, who after all agrees that his religion is opposed to all the things that the secularist values. But in practice such a view can hardly be the perspective of more than a small group of fanatics.

Representatives of a more mainstream religious viewpoint may, of course, pick and choose isolated points of agreement even from a dysfunctional theory. Peters (1998), for example, takes the metaphor of God as virus quite seriously but considers the possibility that some of its aspects might be viewed in a more positive light from a Christian perspective. Likewise John Haught (2000) deliberately takes on the most antireligious popularizers of evolution in order to show that even their views contain many aspects of value to an emerging theology of evolution.

In a different sense, believers might agree that certain aspects of a particular religion, including their own, might be dysfunctional but would maintain that this is an abuse, or an unintended side-effect, of what religion is. The second part of Bowker's *Is God a Virus?* (1995) is an appraisal of religious warfare and violence on a sociobiological basis, but Bowker's aim, unlike that of atheist sociobiologists, is not a blanket indictment of religion but an effort to remedy the problem from within.

Any such use of secular theories presupposes, of course, that there is a standpoint from which religious practice and belief can be improved. A secular critic might object that this already amounts to abandoning religion as the ultimate source of value, since one has now chosen a value system that can actually arbitrate which religious manifestations are better or worse than others. But it does not necessarily follow that in order to make this judgment one has to adopt a standpoint outside of religion. To correct one's practice on the basis of a secular theory may simply mean that one has discovered an inconsistency between the old practice and the inner core of one's belief. If functional analysis reveals that some cherished religious tradition is oppressive, we may well have religious as well as secular reasons for changing the practice. This reflection brings us to the second line of thought emerging from our culinary metaphor.

ANALYZING RELIGION CAN MAKE IT MORE WHOLESOME

Food in general is a necessity, but particular kinds of food can be good or bad for us, depending on the circumstances. The same is true of belief, but the assessment is more complex.

It is usually not too difficult to identify beliefs that, at least from the vantage of hindsight, are unquestionably pathological. Mass suicides among members of religious or quasi-religious cults surely demonstrate that something can go seriously wrong with our beliefs. The members of Heaven's Gate, for example, apparently believed in a spaceship that would carry them to eternal bliss. It is thought that this belief led to the collective suicide of its members in March 1997 in San Diego.

It does not follow that any belief in an afterlife is the hallmark of a suicidal maniac. On the other hand, believers would not allow secular criteria of wholesomeness to be the sole determinant of their religious beliefs and practices. This would degrade religion to a level of secondary importance; besides, secular criteria of such generality are themselves much too ambiguous to merit so much power over individual lives. If we already know what is good for us, and let that knowledge determine how we think about God, then we may have little reason to believe that thinking about God is actually good for us.

The history of Christianity is full of examples of practices that might strike an unbelieving outsider as harmful but a practicing believer as necessary. Indeed, some kind of asceticism, of personal sacrifice for a greater good, is such a characteristic feature of religions that we might regard it as constitutive. Unbridled hedonism, the pursuit of one's pleasure as a principle of life, does not really qualify as mainstream religion, even if it surrounds itself with ritual and mythology. To call a belief religious means that we acknowledge an obligation toward its object that must be fulfilled, even if this sometimes goes against our personal interest.

If the duty flowing from our religion coincides with values that are easily intelligible in secular terms, no problem arises. Someone who helps the poor out of a sense of religious duty can easily be admired by an atheist. But not all sacrifice is of this immediately beneficial nature, and not all behavior that purports to be sacrifice is wholesome or even ethical. It is a situation that calls for discernment, and the viewpoints of both the believer and the secular scholar have something to contribute to it. For this reason, looking at ascetic practices is a good way to study the different viewpoints from inside and outside the practicing community, although asceticism is only one example among many.

Before considering how the respective viewpoints of believer and secular scholar might profitably interact, we need to be clear that we are *not* talking about the use of scientific insights in a merely instrumental function. The latter is of course often necessary. If we want to help the poor, for example, we need some kind of analysis of the situation that tells us which measures actually do help and which ones, in spite of good intentions, are likely to be useless or counterproductive. In such a case, the secular analysis is simply a means to an end. We employ it after we have already decided on the goal for other reasons. The situation I have in mind differs from this instrumental use, as will become clear in a moment.

Let us return to the issue of sacrifice that does not have an obvious secular point. From the very beginning of Christianity the value of strong forms of self-denial has been controversial. In the early fourth century, Jerome had to hastily leave Rome after being held responsible for the death of a young woman due to excessive penance (Pagels 1988, 90–91). Her death was probably due to what we would today call anorexia (Shlain 1998, 246). And even 1,600 years later, a fatal case of penance was still considered plausible enough to serve as plot for the bestselling mystery novel, *A Blessed Death* (Lachnit 1996).⁹ The intervening centuries could be filled with countless and unfortunately all-too-real examples.

In spite of the danger of abuses, however, there is obviously an underlying principle here that many Christians consider valuable. Some modern critics may think that Christian martyrs in Roman times were nearly as deliberately suicidal as some present-day cults (Shlain 1998, 252–56), but in many Christian denominations remembrance of the early martyrs is an integral part of worship. Obviously the issue can be seen from different perspectives, but here we are only concerned with a limited question: Does the outside academic study of the phenomenon have anything to say to the believer? Is the situation in fact analogous to a nutritionist telling us which kinds of food are healthy and which ones are not?

The reason why this question arises especially with regard to asceticism and penance is that they do not seem to have a purpose intelligible to an outside observer—at least as long as we discount the somewhat procrustean efforts of Reynolds and Tanner (1983) to fit all religious practices into a

natural selection scheme. But this is not the end of the matter. If it were, an ascetic would be entirely without guidance as to what was good or harmful other than some common-sense notion that God probably does not want people to starve themselves to death. At the same time, anthropologists, psychologists, and other scholars would seem to be amassing data on phenomena that are truly beyond their comprehension, at least unless they are themselves believers.

Of course, that is not the real situation. The same things that some people do for the sake of getting nearer to God, others do for the sake of fitness, beauty, or other secular goals. The same abuses that have plagued Christian asceticism surface in the secular world as overtraining, exercise addiction, and eating disorders. This is not a contrived comparison. Paul's metaphor of the Christian as athlete (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9:24–27) was in fact common in early Christianity (Pagels 1988, 83–85). In today's culture it is almost impossible to conceive of someone who does not see the point of athletic competition. But if we try to imagine such a person (perhaps an extraterrestrial scientist visiting earth), we would find him no better off trying to understand the often health-endangering training practices of athletes than an atheist trying to understand Christian ascetics.

This is why the situation differs from the one in which the secular analysis is merely a means to the achievement of a goal. In the latter case the goal—for example, “help the poor”—has already been formulated in a way intelligible to the nonbeliever. Freud, for example, speculated extensively on obsession¹⁰ as the source of religious practices (Freud [1907] 1950). But his focus on the repressive aspects of culture, and thereby of religion, largely deprived him of the possibility of assessing positive aims that might justify some practices but not others. Unless such a critical evaluation is made, however, a diagnosis is of no real practical value.

We seem to have drifted from the initial goal of looking at the *content* of belief to a consideration of religious *practice*. In order to sustain the original claim that a study of religion can help to make it more wholesome, there has to be a particular relationship between these aspects. But this is not difficult to establish. Belief in a vengeful, punitive God entails a view of penance that is impervious to arguments from secular conceptions of health and wholesomeness. The ascetic who believes this can always retreat to a claim that what he does is “for the glory of God” or because “it is God's will,” and secular analysis is in no position to gainsay this.

On the other hand, a belief that takes seriously the positive value of the created world has to be open to critical outside analysis. In this case, religious belief and practice must in some sense engage the world as it exists. There have lately been a number of theologians who have stressed this engagement as necessary for a credible theology. Hefner (1993) emphasizes the positive role of human beings in the world as “created co-creators.” Haught (2000) calls for a theology that fully embraces the significance of

evolution. Arthur Peacocke (2000) discusses the kind of worldview that theology would have to adopt in order to remain credible in an age of science, and David Pailin (2000) further develops the epistemological side of this enterprise, including a critique of some apparent theological dead ends.

These are just a few of the growing number of voices who reject any retreat into some preconceived notion of "God's will" and instead advocate a willingness to look at the created world as the unfolding of God's plan. All of them would, I think, disagree with a tradition claiming that the true home of humanity is beyond and outside this world. On this view, doing something for the sake of the glory of God, or to fulfill God's purpose, requires a discernment process that starts with the world as we find it and in which secular sources of information therefore have a proper place. It is also useful to know how other religious traditions conceive their spiritual goals and by what means they try to achieve them.

To Hefner, for example, secular criteria of wholesomeness and theological expressions of the will of the creator are simply different aspects of the same reality. In his view, a phenomenology of religion (together with evolutionary interpretations of human behavior and critical thinking) can help us discern which parts of belief and ritual are obsolete and which ones "hold possibilities for the present and future" (Hefner 1993, 150–52).

Applied to our current example, it will help God's athlete to know that not every desire for exercise is necessarily inspired fervor, but that phenomena like compulsion and exercise addiction can under certain circumstances lead asceticism astray. The presumed fourth-century case of anorexia has already been mentioned. Today this affliction more likely arises from secular conditions like supermodel syndrome rather than excessive religious fervor. But the parallels should give us pause. In general terms, the scientific analysis tells us that we have to take at least two factors into account when we analyze the behavior of athletes or would-be supermodels: the propriety and adequacy of the overall goals for whose sake one makes sacrifices, and the danger of falling into compulsive behavior. The latter is by definition nonrational and largely subconscious, but the first is not by any means always rational either. I find it impossible to accept, for example, that professional sports are so beneficial to society that they justify the destruction of the long-term health of athletes.¹¹

The importance of such nonrational factors in secular circumstances, which, as I have argued, parallel in many ways religiously motivated sacrifice, must make us cautious about judging beliefs and practices. After what we have learned in the last few decades about exercise addiction, anorexia, and other similar compulsions, we are forced to be extremely critical and discerning in evaluating the goals and psychological circumstances of asceticism. The fact that compulsive behavior is widespread in secular circumstances makes us question the belief that it is really God who "wants" believers to behave in this way.

The problem is not new. Spiritual direction has always had to take false trails into account (Lincoln 1984 cites some examples from the sixteenth century). It may even be a case where mining the saner parts of the spiritual literature of the past could yield insights helpful to present-day therapists. More pertinent to the overall theme of this article is that a secular study of the rational and irrational aspects of ascetic behavior is of direct relevance to its theological evaluation.

We now have some plausible evolutionary explanations for certain unhealthy habits. For example, it is no longer puzzling why a species that evolved under conditions where obtaining high-calorie food was difficult and dangerous tends toward obesity when such food is continuously plentiful. It may be equally enlightening to explain some of the more bizarre expressions of religious self-denial by more mundane causes than that they are pleasing to God. Perhaps this will force us to reject some practices that have long been thought to be admirable, but in the end it can only be beneficial to religion.

ANALYZING RELIGION DOES NOT EXHAUST ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Religion is multifaceted and holistic. Any academic study can analyze only one facet at a time and is always in danger of overemphasizing the importance of whatever it is attending to. Thus, for Freud religion had a mostly psychological function, for Guthrie a cognitive one, and so on. When we investigate, as Meisinger does in his review of Burhoe (Meisinger 2000, 752–57), the relationship between our bioevolutionary ancestry and the role of religion, this appears as a fundamental function, in the sense that the necessity for religion is built into what we are. But it is only in the light of a historical science, evolutionary biology, that the older appears as more fundamental. From a different point of view we could equally well argue for the precedence of whatever has the strongest existential impact, or even for a fundamental hierarchy of entities transmitted entirely by some tradition.

The notion of a fundamental function of religion is, in fact, artificial, a product of our desire for academic analysis. To a committed member of a religious tradition (as opposed to a secular student of the same), it is religion as a whole that is fundamental. It is true that not all its aspects may be considered equally important, but the natural way to express this is to say that the less important aspects are *peripheral to* (this particular) religion, not that they are less important *functions* of this religion.

If a functional analysis is to have any consequence for the tradition itself, it must first come to terms with its own limitations, one of which is the linearity of academic study, which can keep only one function in focus at a given time. This makes it difficult to do justice to the complex, multidimensional nature of religion. When we try to connect the insights of functional analysis to religious belief and practice, as we began to do in the last section, we have to bear this limitation in mind.

If we start with the assumption that religion has a particular function X, it is tempting to prescribe some kind of optimization of its content that makes it most efficient in accomplishing X. Realizing that there are multiple functions, we might look for some algorithmic solution that optimizes X, Y, and Z rather than X alone. For example, we might ask it to be psychologically satisfying while fulfilling its cognitive functions and also providing a framework for ethics. This is rather similar to the efforts at the beginning of the Enlightenment to find a rational “universal religion” (Preus 1987). Tempting as the deliberate design of such an optimized belief system might be, it will ultimately have the same drawbacks that equally “well-designed” political systems have manifested—they might conceivably work if its members were likewise optimized beings, but they are useless and potentially repressive to real human persons.¹² The assumption that such idealized conditions are possible ignores the likely fact that one primary source of religion is our awareness of ourselves as decidedly non-ideal, fallen human beings (Ricoeur 1967).

Real people are also not entirely unaware, of course, that their religious affiliation has to afford them a multitude of functions, and that they cannot expect an apparatus that is optimal for all of them.¹³ Besides, not all deviations from the optimally functional are due to personal or institutional shortcomings. When people deviate from their dietary plan, even though they believe that it is optimized for nutritional wholesomeness, they are not always the victims of insatiable craving; they may just be attending a birthday party. Different functions, of both religion and food, can take precedence at different times and under different circumstances.

The comparison with a festive meal, whose meaning to the participants cannot be exhausted by nutritional analysis, recalls the importance of ritual for practically all religions. This deserves to be emphasized, because it is particularly the autonomous role of ritual that is often overlooked in a functional analysis of religion. Studies that deal with the cognitive aspect of religion have a tendency to treat ritualistic religion as merely a prequel to the “proper” focus on cognition—in much the same way that Auguste Comte treated religion as a whole as merely a prequel of science (Preus 1987, 107–30). If, on the other hand, the function of religion is conceived of in terms of survival value, the scientific analysis tends to treat the content of belief as rationalization of religious practice.

Jonathan Z. Smith contends that the dismissal of ritual as an autonomous feature of religion is an essential aspect of the modern mindset. As a result of Cartesian dualism (Smith prefers “dual monism”), something has to be thought of as *either* a symbol *or* the thing being symbolized. Therefore a functional approach to ritual has to see it either as “mere” gesture, always subject to being replaced by “the real thing,” or ascribe to it some kind of secular practical function, however implausible that may turn out to be (Smith 1987, 99–100).

We encounter the first case, for example, in the form of the suggestion that rather than offering a mass for good weather we might more profitably consult a meteorologist. This is one of many variations on the theme of denouncing all religious ceremony as superstition. Smith (1987, 96–103) expounds the historical roots of this attitude. An approach that is in many ways the reverse of this is taken by Reynolds and Tanner (1983), who see any ritualistic act under the aspect of potentially enhancing inclusive fitness. The former position makes ritual meaningless and thus superfluous; the second secularizes the ritual activity by explaining away its symbolic character. In either case ritual becomes an epiphenomenon of religion without a proper religious role. In our metaphor, the difference between a drive-through hamburger and Christmas dinner with the family is reducible to the difference in nutritional content. Again, we realize from this metaphorical comparison that this kind of reductionism is absurd. What has made it plausible in this particular instance, Smith suspects, is the nonverbal nature of ritual. In other words, ritual can be talked about only in the way that an art critic can talk about a concert; the music itself defies representation in purely cognitive categories. Nor is ritual (or attending a concert) merely an act of socialization. Thus, a phenomenology of the social (Burhoe) or cognitive function (Guthrie) of religion can capture aspects of the phenomenon but does not exhaustively explain it. And even a functional atomism that attempted to compile an exhaustive list of all the academically accessible aspects would miss the fundamentally holistic character of the phenomenon.

Some theories take ritual to be the *primary* function of religion (see Wallace 1966). In these cases it is belief that is the epiphenomenon, whose only reason for existence is the justification of ritual. From this viewpoint ritual does have to have some function, or even a multiplicity of functions, mostly of a social nature. Secular versions of this theory are often closely related to the inclusive-fitness explanation mentioned before, except that inclusive fitness is replaced by social cohesion, therapeutic value, or some similar function.

Our banquet metaphor suggests here that the unwary observer can be easily misled. Seeing a celebration taking place, he or she mistakes the undoubtedly real social function of the banquet for the whole of its purpose. That people are also nourished by the food, as well as by the beliefs of the religion whose rituals they perform, can under these circumstances easily escape notice. But even if the observer could list all the observable functions exhaustively, satisfying all of them *separately* would still differ from what a participant in the banquet experiences. For the latter it is not a contingent matter of convenience to have several functions fulfilled by the same event, but rather it is essential to the character of the event that it brings these functions together. Academic study cannot, as a matter of principle, overcome the gulf between functional analysis and holistic experience.¹⁴

There are, then, certain occasions in which the functional and the symbolic cannot be separated and that therefore defy complete analytical apprehension. It is this peculiar property that the word *sacramental* aims to characterize. Nonetheless, one should refrain from associating the reality of such events too readily with an irreducible characteristic feature of a particular religion, perhaps even some kind of supernatural warrant for its truth. As the example of a symphony concert shows, manifestations of religion are not by any means the only phenomena that cannot be exhausted by analytical study.

This does not make ritual immune to critical evaluation. Belief and ritual do not uniquely determine each other, but neither are they completely independent. Not all forms of ritual and beliefs are compatible with one another. There are, for example, theological as well as practical reasons why major traditions have given up sacrificing animals as part of their ritual ceremonies. The same view is expressed by Hefner, who tersely states that “myth and ritual can be *wrong*” (Hefner 1993, 174). They can “cover up self-interest and dishonesty” (p. 150). If myth and ritual are important to the way in which our individual lives can be brought into harmony with the world as a whole (how, in alternative language consonant with Hefner’s theology, we are led to follow God’s will), and if there is a possibility that we do so poorly, it follows that inappropriate or inadequate myths and rituals may be one reason. If all of them were equally adequate, we could not really claim that they are an important determinant of human life (Hefner 1993, 187–94).

This is practically important, because in certain cases a particular ritual can be shown to be an expression of religious prejudice.¹⁵ In such a case it will be essential to acknowledge that the study has indeed uncovered a problem rooted in the underlying belief, not merely in a contingent form of expressing it. But if this leads, as it should, to a change in ritual practice, one must also realize that the practitioners of the (old) ritual are being asked for a sacrifice that is larger than it appears to the secular eye. If ritual is indeed a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, then the effects of changing one part will be much more deeply felt than a superficial observer might assume.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION VERSUS FAITH

Having discussed the three points that the food metaphor for religion has provided, I now turn back to my starting point, the question whether a functional analysis of religion can undermine religious faith. I have so far established that an analysis itself is not necessarily hostile to religious belief and that, where claims to the contrary are put forward, the unbelief is a premise of the argument, not its conclusion. For that reason the results of scientific study of religion are open to a range of interpretations compatible with either belief or unbelief, at least up to a point.

Why, then, is the notion widespread that the scientific study of religion has an aspect of debunking, both among those who have the ambition to debunk and among believers who fear that any analysis of their belief amounts to its being debunked? I have already suggested that the desire to *explain* religion may be more urgent among those who ultimately wish to *explain away* its content, since those who believe in its content necessarily take the existence of religion for granted. This would account for the higher volume of debunking claims relative to studies sympathetic to religious belief.

But there is more. To see this, we return to the functional theory of Guthrie, whose sympathetic reference to Barbour served as an example of the neutrality of theories relative to the content of religion. Immediately after the statement quoted above, Guthrie goes on to say that this neutrality has limits. Citing scholars who claim to maintain neutrality with respect to the content of belief, he asserts that “such neutrality subverts understanding” (Guthrie 1993, 212 n. 140). Even if the statement is accepted at face value, this cannot be generally true of phenomenological studies in the social sciences. Sociologists can adequately study theory change in physics without even *understanding* all the finer details of the theories involved, let alone judging whether they are correct. Why should religion be different?

There are at least two reasons, one historical and the other rooted in the nature of religion itself. As noted by Preus (1987), the “science of religion” was not from its outset conceived as a descriptive enterprise but as a search for a “universal religion” that could replace the turmoil and confusion of the post-Reformation period. Whatever our position today, this history still overshadows the relationship between the study of religion and theology.

Preus’s own work bears evidence that to some degree the confusion about the exact nature of their relationship still persists. He frequently talks about the study of religion as a *paradigm* in the sense of Kuhn (1970). This is obvious enough, but one can understand it in two different ways, and Preus never makes quite clear which one he has in mind. The study of religion could be understood as an entirely new enterprise, something that emerges from a pre-paradigmatic situation in which the phenomenon in question (religion in this case) was not considered a proper object of study. Or it could be understood in the sense of a *paradigm shift* from theology to phenomenology of religion. The second sense would be clearly at odds with my fundamental thesis that each enterprise is autonomous. Yet a number of the scholars of religion studied by Preus (particularly Comte and Jean Bodin) held such a view, and in some places Preus himself seems to agree.

I have argued here that the first view is the correct one. The study of religions has emerged as a new enterprise *alongside* theology, without replacing it. However, theology has not been left unaffected by this development.

In this sense, a paradigm shift has taken place *within* theology as a result of the newly emerged field. Perhaps even more than one such shift has taken place, because it would seem that the theological side has been forced into a decision on whether to delineate itself sharply from the “worldly” enterprise or accept it as another aspect of its own effort to come to terms with reality. Both alternatives are to some extent represented in modern theology.

Another reason that a study of religion cannot be entirely neutral lies in the central importance of religion. Even those who are antireligious hold to some central belief that is quasi-religious, or, as many of them would phrase it, that *takes the place* of religion in their lives. The same is true of society as a whole.¹⁶ Anyone who does not proceed from an acknowledgment of this centrality, even in a secular study of religion, misunderstands religion so completely that the study is simply not credible. In order to be taken seriously as a scholar of religion one must take religion itself seriously, and in the case of religion, taking seriously means having a personal position. Someone who thinks religion can be studied like elementary particles in physics probably does not really understand religion. To acknowledge this, however, imposes limits on the distance of scholarly detachment that can be brought to the study.

Hefner (1993, 149) makes a similar point when he discusses the inadequacy of purely descriptive studies of religion. Description of religious practices and beliefs is necessary for collecting ethnographic data, but it is of limited use when applied to ourselves. We know by and large *what* the practices of our own culture are; what is at issue is their function and meaning. This can be discussed only from a viewpoint that takes a stand on whether or not religion is functional and meaningful.

This does not mean that any study of religion is so deeply tainted by subjectivity that anyone who does not share its author's beliefs can safely dismiss it. As I hope to have shown, even in cases where the secular study is cast in terms hostile to the belief under study, this hostility cannot be warranted by the analysis itself but is brought to it by the author. This implies that the author's attitude can in principle be separated from the results of the study. Furthermore, theological positions that are open to the relevance and importance of the created world as we find it can benefit from a dialogue with secular studies.

Extremists on both sides may suspect that such a dialogue amounts to capitulation, whereas radical integrationists will claim that the two enterprises can be entirely merged. I have suggested that there is a range of topics open to fruitful dialogue, but there are also domains on each side that are independent of and inaccessible to the other side. This situation may at times cause tension, as the dialogue partners need to map out domains of both commonality and separation. Genuine dialogue will respect separate as well as common domains and will neither declare them unreal nor ask the dialogue partner to give them up.

NOTES

1. Even though in the study of alien tribes we may take the anthropologist's approach as the more sophisticated and convincing one, the situation is usually reversed when it comes to science. Most beneficiaries of the technological age assign much less importance to the etic studies of philosophers and sociologists of science than to the emic explanations of its practitioners. The contrast underlines the autonomy of each enterprise.

2. Functional analysis in the sense of studying the presumed function of religion with the methods of secular sciences (anthropology, sociology, biology, etc.) should be distinguished from what has come to be called functional theology.

3. The origin of this idea is often traced to Ludwig Feuerbach. According to at least one of his biographers, however, Feuerbach's functional analysis "far surpassed the religion critique of enlightenment, which saw in religion only despotism and error, the work of impostors" (Biedermann 1986, 78–79). In my opinion, the only substantive insight that sociobiologists hostile to religion have added to the crude Enlightenment view is that the impostor benefits from believing his own imposture.

4. This, of course, is much more explicitly contained in Karl Marx's famous dictum of religion as "opium for the people." However, since Marx was interested in society as a whole rather than in the individual, this is a judgment about social function, albeit one that benefits only the oppressors.

5. This is a paraphrase of Lewis ([1933] 1981, 63–64), where a number of attitudes and philosophical positions as well as God, divine law, and so forth are represented by allegories. The parsing, or resolution, of the allegorical terms in my paraphrase is in accordance with the author's own afterword (Lewis [1933] 1981, 200–209) and the further explanations in Hooper 1996, 181–85.

6. Although the formulation *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* (entities are not to be multiplied unnecessarily) is a late paraphrase not due to William of Ockham himself, it is an accurate expression of what contemporary scientists understand Occam's razor to be.

7. A more extensive discussion can be found in my review of Guthrie's book archived at the META Internet site: <http://listserv.templeton.org/scripts/wa.exe?A2=ind99&L=metaviews&D=1&P=8529>.

8. The full implications of this proposal cannot be discussed here. This is only a very brief sketch of how theological debates might make use of functional theories. On anthropomorphism see Kracher forthcoming.

9. Although the story itself is fictional, the self-torture that forms a key plot element is a "penance" that is actually practiced.

10. An insightful science fiction story centered on the theme of pathological obsession and religious belief is Orson Scott Card's *Xenocide* (1991).

11. The sports pages of newspapers routinely praise athletes even at the high school level for playing despite injuries and taking serious health risks. By contrast, such feats are rarely even mentioned, and certainly not found praiseworthy, in the service of helping the poor.

12. A whimsical billboard captures the situation pointedly: "Stop complaining about the church; if it were perfect, you couldn't belong."

13. Guthrie also notes that "religion [does not] always function well, either in establishing meaning, or in other ways" (1993, 33).

14. This is inherent in referring to the study as *analysis*, which implies (even etymologically) taking apart the components and considering them separately.

15. For example, there are instances where long-standing local customs reflect ancient anti-Semitic legends. For a relevant contemporary case study, see Fresacher 1998.

16. Preus credits Giambattista Vico and Comte with the realization that "every society . . . must have at least the *functional equivalent* of religion" (Preus 1987, 109, emphasis in original). Civil religion, sports, and science have all been nominated as candidates for our own times.

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