

Think Pieces

RELIGION AS ORIENTING WORLDVIEW

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. Religions are complex, and any attempt at defining religion necessarily falls short. Nevertheless, any scholarly inquiry into the nature of religion must use some criteria in order to evaluate and study the character of religious traditions across contexts. To this end, I propose understanding religion in terms of an orienting worldview. Religions are worldviews that are expressed not only in beliefs but also in narratives and symbols. More than this, religions orient action, and any genuine religious tradition necessarily is concerned with normative behavior, whether ethical or religious in character. Such an understanding of religion has several advantages, one of which is its natural relation to current forms of the science-religion dialogue. Not only can the findings of cognitive science and related areas inform us about the nature of religion; scientific discoveries also prove to be important for any religious synthesis that attempts to construct a worldview for the twenty-first century.

Keywords: cognitive science; definition of religion; orienting worldview; science-religion dialogue.

There are few areas of inquiry more familiar and more obscure than the study of religion. Every human society has its own religions and religious traditions. Consequently, every individual grows up being exposed to some version or manifestation of religion. Yet, religious traditions are immensely diverse, and individuals' participation in and interpretation of their religious commitments are equally diverse. The ubiquity and diversity of religion has bedeviled the study of religion since its inception. On the one hand, we all know—or at least think we know—what religion is. On the other

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hand, religions are so diverse that it is hard to make any generalization that is universally valid. Yet, the term “religion” must obviously refer to *something*. Certainly, activities such as prayer, worship, and meditation are religious in character. The question is, what is religious about them?

While many factors contribute to the formation and perpetuation of any religious tradition, cognition plays a central role in the life of a practitioner of religion. That is, a central characteristic and function of religions is the construction of worldviews that guide individuals and communities in normative decision making and action. This is hardly earth-shattering news. The role of beliefs, symbols, and narratives in religious traditions has long been recognized. Indeed, it has frequently been argued that these features of religion have been dramatically overemphasized in the history of the study of religion. While there is some truth to this charge, only rarely are these elements considered in the context of a larger worldview that orients attitudes and behavior. Yet, thinking of religion in precisely this fashion has several distinct advantages, for it can provide a means of integrating scientific and humanistic approaches to religion while at the same time avoiding the naively reductionistic approaches or overly philosophical approaches that have often plagued this element of religious studies in the past.

To this end, I shall present a perspective that understands religion primarily in terms of an orienting (or normatively engaged) worldview. While such an approach may not capture everything that is significant about religion, in abandoning the cognitive element we lose much of what is richest and most important about religious traditions. Such an approach may have some value for the science-religion dialogue as well, which often takes the cognitive elements of religion to be the most important ones.

WHY AN ORIENTING WORLDVIEW?

The understanding of religion in terms of an orienting worldview would likely strike many current religion scholars as either anachronistic or, worse, downright dangerous. There are a number of reasons for these quite different attitudes. The history of the study of religion, after all, is littered with the carcasses of failed definitions, often overambitious in scope or hopelessly mired in preconceptions about what religion is and ought to be. In recent decades, religious scholars have engaged in methodological reflection that has revealed the political and social agendas present in the study of religion the aims of which are ultimately detrimental to the very traditions being analyzed. The result of such research has been taken to imply that any attempt at defining religion is necessarily imperialistic in character, privileging Western secular modes of analysis in a way that undermines genuine understanding or engagement of the radically different categories and presuppositions that underlie any religious tradition.

Such charges should not be taken lightly. The history of religion has often been characterized by a bias that privileges Western categories and even Western (usually Christian) religious claims. This is most obvious in the early history of religious study. Friedrich Schleiermacher's ([1799] 1988; [1830] 1986) definition of religion in terms of a feeling of absolute dependence was not only descriptive but also normative in character, being used to rank relative development of individual traditions with, unsurprisingly, Christianity emerging at the top of the list. Such issues, however, are not limited to the distant past. Within this century, Western scholars' approach to Buddhism has often been greatly influenced by what they thought Buddhism *should* be, so much so that early approaches to Zen Buddhism abstracted away the "Buddhist" context in order to get at the heart of what Zen is about (e.g., Watts 1957). Indeed, a central concern is whether religious traditions can be truly compared at all without doing violence to a proper understanding of the tradition (see Griffiths 1990; Scharfstein 1989). As a Taoist scholar once confided to me, "You can't really understand Chinese religions until you have lived in China for at least ten years." One prominent result of this has been the abandonment of comparative analysis in favor of in-depth studies of particular aspects of particular religious traditions that emphasize contextuality, interpretation, and uniqueness.

While such analyses are needed, the pessimistic conclusions that often result are not wholly warranted. Indeed, a great deal of work has been done to indicate not only how the study of religion should proceed (Smith 1990) but also how such comparative analyses work in practice (Yearley 1990; Cabezón 1994). Although we may never eliminate biases and perspectival starting points, we can make ourselves aware of them. Indeed, why bother studying religion at all if cross-cultural understanding is truly impossible?

Even acknowledging the possibility of cross-cultural comparison, many religion scholars would still resist the idea of viewing religion in terms of an orienting worldview. Indeed, the study of religion has over the past two centuries been dominated by a number of competing paradigms. Theologically minded scholars such as Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto ([1923] 1950) have advocated experiential approaches, viewing religion as originating in a particular experience of the holy or divine. Social scientists, especially sociologists and anthropologists, have typically preferred behavioral approaches that emphasize social function or social conflict (Durkheim [1912] 1963). Consequently, the importance of religion is seen in terms of its ability to create social stability and to suppress discontent, with little attention given to the role that religion plays in individual lives. A somewhat more recent view, by contrast, emphasizes commitment as the proper approach to understanding religion. Paul Tillich's famous understanding of religion in terms of ultimate concern may be seen in this light ([1956] 1986); it has much in common with the more recent work of scholars such as James Fowler (1981) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1998).

These and other approaches have been adequately catalogued and analyzed elsewhere (Pals 1996), and it would be beyond the scope of this essay to fully do so here. Suffice it to say that while these approaches contribute positively to our understanding of religion, they are often incomplete in a dissatisfying way. This is perhaps most obvious with approaches based on religious experience, which frequently have been observed to be crypto-theological and strongly normative in character, clearly differentiating between “authentic” and “inauthentic” religion. While a kind of religious experience may indeed be a desideratum of the fully religious life, not all religious individuals have such experiences or are impacted by such experiences in the same way. Moreover, such experiences never occur in a vacuum but achieve meaning and significance in light of the broader dynamics of the religious tradition.

While behavioral and commitment approaches reveal much of importance about religion, I would suggest that they, too, are incomplete. As with experience, commitment, whether understood in terms of “ultimate concern” or in terms of a kind of faith (as Smith 1998 proposes), is always understood and applied within a larger cognitive framework (worldview). What makes religious commitment so important is that it has consequences; one’s commitment is always commitment to *something*, whether within or beyond oneself. As with experiential approaches, the category of commitment may also take on normative power, distinguishing the truly committed from the culturally conditioned. In this and other senses, commitment is important to any understanding of religion, but it is far from exhaustive. Likewise, behavioral approaches often suffer from the same limitation, brilliantly elucidating important features of religious traditions and institutions while simultaneously missing important elements. To understand a Jesus or a Luther, it is necessary to understand social contexts and social impacts, but this by itself is hardly sufficient.

Asserting that these approaches are insufficient, however, is a long way from claiming that religion as orienting worldview is sufficient. In truth, I doubt that it is, but I do think that viewing religion in terms of an orienting worldview captures much of what is important and, one might say, even essential to understanding religion. It is also an approach that can facilitate dialogue with the sciences, for perspectives from cognitive science and related areas can help us understand how and why we are religious, and a better understanding of how religion operates as a worldview can enlighten how we understand the relationship between scientific worldviews and religious ones.

RELIGION AS AN ORIENTING WORLDVIEW

Speaking of religion in terms of worldviews is common but not universal. Famed cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, for example, describes reli-

gion as a “system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz [1965] 1979, 78; see also Geertz [1973] 2000).

While Geertz’s formulation is complex, the ideas behind it are straightforward. Religion involves conceptions of a general order of existence. That is, one of the activities of religion is to tell us about the nature of the world and how it works. It does so by constructing a system of symbols that inform an individual’s behavior, goals, and aspirations. The link to behavior is important. Accounts of a general order of existence are not, by themselves, religions. Elaborations of natural history and scientific cosmology may give us a general order of existence, but such accounts are not by themselves a religion. It is only when such accounts perform an orienting function that the religious element becomes apparent.

Geertz’s account has been much analyzed and discussed, but it is hardly idiosyncratic. Many introductory textbooks on world religions, for instance, tend to emphasize these very aspects. Thus, Michael Molloy (1999) lists six primary characteristics of religion, three of which deal explicitly with beliefs and behavioral norms. Such an analysis is not limited to textbook writers, either. E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley (1990; 1993) describe religion as a tacit symbol system that informs, among other things, ritual action. Loyal Rue (2000, 594) recently stated in *Zygon* that “we construct and maintain shared worldviews composed of cosmological and moral elements.”

Be this as it may, the term “worldview” or even “general order of existence” is a bit broad. While all religions may include a worldview, not all worldviews are necessarily religious in character. In particular, I would argue, religious worldviews tend to include at least three elements: they are fundamental, explanatory, and global in character.

First, religious worldviews are fundamental in character. That is, those elements of a worldview that are basic are the ones that are, simultaneously, the most religious. Every individual who undergoes a modern education learns that Earth is roughly spherical as opposed to being flat. We might say that such a belief forms part of our worldview—in fact, quite literally so! Nevertheless, such a belief is not religious in character. The spherical shape of Earth is important for us in practical terms, since this information is needed for purposes of transportation, the practice of science, and the like. Most of us, however, do not have a personal investment in the shape of our planet. Whether it is spherical or flat does not affect our motivations for traveling or for doing science. That is, the shape of Earth does not affect us *normatively*; our ultimate goals and desires are not affected by such considerations, however much our practical lives may be affected.

A similar case may be made for the current understanding of the solar system, which for most modern individuals also holds no special spiritual significance. Such a view, however, has not always been the case. Dante's *Divine Comedy* describes the solar system in religious terms as the realm of angels and heavenly beings, a view that was no doubt widespread and that contributed to the ongoing popularity of astrology. For persons of Dante's day, the solar system formed a fundamental part of their worldview. The solar system was not simply a place "up there" but the abode of angels and Christian saints and, if they followed the requirements of the church, eventually themselves as well. The solar system was their final destination and hope of happiness. Thus it acquired personal investment and was tied to normative action. In this perspective, the solar system became tied to other fundamental aspects of the worldview (God, heaven, personal destiny) that together function to orient people's aspirations and behavior.

Note the conflation. For many medievals, the solar system was fundamental in the sense that it guided behavior, but it was also fundamental in another sense. The solar system, which in the Ptolemaic astronomy of the medieval world consisted of a system of rotating shells that included the stars (thus Cicero's "music of the spheres"), constituted the furthest edge of the cosmos. As such, the solar system also represented the limits of knowledge; it was fundamental in the sense that nothing could be known beyond it. One may note that in religious worldviews this is often the case. Those aspects of the world that are fundamental in the sense of revealing the limits of our knowledge or of the cosmos also tend to be those aspects that take on religious significance (i.e., acquire normative value). One reason why the solar system no longer plays a role in religious cosmology may be because it no longer plays a role in physical cosmology. That place has been taken by the universe as a whole, the limits of which have provoked religious reflection in recent decades. One might observe as well that, as late as the 1950s, the religiously and scientifically naive opposed space exploration as a human invasion of the realm of angels (Gilbert 1997).

While what counts as fundamental may vary some from culture to culture, one may observe considerable overlap. Stories of origins (cosmological and human) and accounts of the limits of the world (spatial and temporal) and of the future (cosmological and human) all play important roles in many religious traditions. God, the gods, and related concepts play a similar role, invoking the limits of power.

These fundamental elements of a worldview are, furthermore, often explanatory in character. This is perhaps most obvious with religious narratives of origins, which differ from scientific accounts precisely in their explanatory roles. Scientific accounts of human origins, at least ideally, simply seek to establish the chain of events that led to modern *Homo sapiens* and to provide a theoretical account of why those events took place. Religious accounts of human origins, however, often go beyond this, in-

forming us of our current predicament and providing warnings and guidelines about proper behavior. In the Adam and Eve narrative, one of the most influential of all human origin stories, we are not only told how humankind began but in the process warned about the perils of temptation and the consequences of disobeying God. Hindu accounts of creation, among other things, justify the existence of the caste system. Most notably, scientific theories of human origins provoke controversy either when they are seen to conflict with religious accounts (the Scopes trial, it may be noted, was prompted by the question of human origins) or when they start to take on a normative character. Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, for instance, are religiously controversial not simply because they speak of human origins but also because these accounts of human origins are invoked to explain modern behavior in a way that may be taken to justify or oppose certain moral norms (Arnhart 1998; Peacocke 1994).

Because they are fundamental and because of their explanatory importance, religious worldviews often are global in character. They come to encompass all salient aspects of life. While this may not be a universal feature of religion, it certainly seems a tendency, and globality tends to be a feature of the historically successful (i.e., widespread) religious traditions. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam provide accounts of human and cosmic origins as well as of human and cosmic destiny. Explanations of the extent of the cosmos are given (heaven, earth, and hell) as well as probable expectations for personal happiness and suffering. Many forms of Buddhism and Hinduism also address these questions, albeit from a different perspective. Additionally, the evolution of Confucianism from a primarily moral philosophy to a religion that eventually included cosmological elements (first in *Mencius* and later in the adaptation of Yin and Yang cosmology and, in Neo-Confucianism, salvific claims) arguably represents the tendency of religious traditions to move in this direction.

Globality, however, should be taken as a relative term. Given that the vast majority of religious individuals for the vast majority of history have been illiterate, and given that even today modern lifestyles either prohibit (because of busyness and responsibility) or discourage (because of religious scruples) scrutinizing one's own religious beliefs too closely, most religious worldviews tend to be fragmented in character. While religious professionals may value the idea of a "systematic theology," such issues are only rarely primary for many of the faithful and achieve importance only during times of crisis or division. While religious worldviews may need some minimal coherence, most Christians (for example) do not worry greatly over exactly how the death of one individual can save all, how God can be both three and one, or how Christ can be present in the Eucharist. Often, these are accepted as mysteries beyond human ken or as sacred knowledge held by clergy and religious scholars, in whom trust is placed to provide correct interpretation and instruction.

The preceding analysis would seem to indicate that religious worldviews are largely characterized by propositional beliefs. This would be incorrect. Inevitably, propositional beliefs do play some role, and sometimes a very important role, in a religious worldview. One can see this most clearly in the trinitarian controversies of early Christianity as well as in much of modern analytic philosophy of religion today. Certainly, because propositional beliefs take linguistic form, they tend to be the aspect of religious worldviews most easy to identify and explain. Generally speaking, however, propositional beliefs form only part of the picture and sometimes only a minor part. Religious narratives and parables form the backbone of a number of religious traditions, and one might observe that such narratives and parables are important (officially or unofficially) to all. Narratives may give rise to propositional beliefs, but they are quite distinct. While narratives may have a straightforward surface structure, they are capable of multiple interpretations and depths of meanings emotionally evocative in ways that a simple creed is not. The story of David and Bathsheba, for instance, is more than an injunction against adultery; it is also a tale of the tragedy of power as well as the weakness of great men. Narratives order the world chronologically and spatially and do so in ways more powerful than they are sometimes given credit for.

A close analysis should reveal that a religious worldview often has many constituents that play a role. Symbols such as the cross or a mandala can possess powerful meanings and associations. Our personal history, in turn, is replete with influential individuals and events: the particularly sagacious teacher, the time you got caught stealing. Because of their importance, these too may play important roles, serving as what psychologists call schemas or scripts for future action and belief. Furthermore, all of these are not simply expressions of thought but have deep emotional associations as well.

Religious experiences play a similar role. These experiences are often described as being “ineffable” in quality, exposing one to a transcendent reality beyond the ordinary. Yet, religious experiences are often “cashed out” in the terms of the familiar religious tradition (worldview). Catholics may experience visitations from Mary, but Zen monks experience *satori* as they realize their own Buddha nature. Somewhat paradoxically, religious experiences stand as one of the limit points of religion, claiming access to a reality beyond the conceptual categories that often orient us in life. At the same time, however, religious experiences often retain a normative function, either impelling saintly action or serving as the ultimate goal of religious practice. For some, religious experiences, when interpreted within the context of a larger religious worldview, become powerful motivators of behavior, sometimes spurring the devout to extremes of physical endurance and self-mortification.

It must be emphasized, however, that religion is not simply a worldview, it is an *orienting* worldview, or what I call “normatively engaged.” That is, the important thing about religious worldviews is their ability to guide goals and behaviors, what Geertz ([1965] 1979) refers to as “moods and motivations.” Indeed, it is the peculiar—some might say astounding—claim of many religious traditions that we should consider the ultimate nature of the cosmos when deciding how to act in life. Myths, scriptures, and creeds are important not only because they are said to describe the way the world works but also because they are said to make a claim on individuals, directing and orienting their life goals while at the same time outlining the permissible ways that those goals can be achieved. Furthermore, the kinds of actions that religious worldviews enjoin also have a fundamental character. I may believe, for example, that I should brush my teeth every morning, and I may regret forgetting to do so, but I do not feel guilty for having forgotten to brush my teeth.

Because of the dominance of the monotheistic traditions, most Westerners equate normative action with moral action. Indeed, this is frequently the case. Both Hinduism and Buddhism also encourage ethical reflection and action, and the major religious traditions are often recognizable by their particular lists of moral injunctions alone. Yet normative action can (and often does) include ritual action as well. Indeed, some religious traditions, such as Shinto, place much greater emphasis on ritual action than on moral action. It is noteworthy that the Christian tradition is split on the relative importance of ritual and moral action. Many Protestant denominations give a strong priority to moral engagement, while Catholic and Orthodox traditions give great weight to the sacraments and their spiritual efficacy.

Conversely, moral or ritual action unconnected to a worldview is not fully religious in character. Philosophical ethics is philosophical in character in large part because of this consideration. As is now well noted, civic rituals often seem quasi-religious in character, invoking symbols and aspects of a worldview that may not be fundamental in character but that nearly achieve that status for much of the populace. Religion ties a worldview to action and does so in a way that is both authoritative and compelling.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF SCIENCE TO ORIENTING WORLDVIEWS

The relationship between science and religion is complex. On the one hand, the sciences can play a role in our explanations of religions. Human beings are physical, biological organisms struggling to survive in a physical, biological world. Most important, the construction of viable worldviews is preeminently a cultural and cognitive effort. Consequently, it would not be surprising to discover that data and theories from the cognitive sciences and related areas may have some significance for understanding how and

why orienting worldviews develop as they do. On the other hand, science can and does play a role in religious explanation. Orienting worldviews are, by necessity, interpretations of the world. When science touches on those interpretations or when scientific and religious interpretations clash, conflict and/or dialogue must necessarily ensue. As a result, the sciences become both problematic to and desiderata for religious explanation. It is noteworthy that some of the current science-religion discussion is concerned with the former issue, but much more of it is concerned with the latter.

The sciences, especially the biological and cognitive sciences, potentially have a great deal to contribute to our understanding of the formation and character of religion. Such explanations, however, tend to be complicated by prior intellectual commitments. An initial commitment to ontological reductionism, for instance, often drives the purely reductive explanations of religion that are often given in the social sciences. Scientists and religious practitioners may agree that neural correlates exist for religious experiences and meditative states (e.g., Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998; d'Aquili and Newberg 1999) but disagree on the meaning and significance of such correlates. Even so, the existence of such correlates is significant and can contribute to our understanding of orienting worldviews even as we may disagree over the ultimate meaning of such evidence.

Sociobiology, it turns out, represents a fairly clear example of this phenomenon. The central task of sociobiology, as E. O. Wilson (1975) has noted, is the explanation of altruism. While the focus of this task has been on nonhuman animals, sociobiologists have not been reluctant to apply their analysis to human nature and behavior. Consequently, religion is primarily seen in terms of its ability to support and foster kin as well as reciprocal altruism, sometimes doing so in a way that violates the norms of "healthy conduct," that is, the survival of one's own genes. Stephen Pinker (1997), working out of the framework of evolutionary psychology, speculates that the success of religion is due primarily to a reapplication (or misapplication) of kin terms such as "brother" and "sister" beyond their normal bound to include all of humanity. William Irons (1996), while not seeing religion in quite so negative a light, nevertheless closely ties religion to altruism in a way that provides a functionalist/behavioralist interpretation of religious traditions.

Such explanations are, at best, partially persuasive, for they seek to explain religion in terms of another phenomenon, altruism, which is in turn reducible to issues of genetics and natural selection. A more interesting alternative exists, however, for instead of simply explaining religion in terms of sociobiology, one could see the results of sociobiology as being one of several constraints on how viable orienting worldviews are formed. Religious worldviews attempt to answer many questions and to solve an array of problems, ranging from social cooperation to personal fulfillment and

demands for social justice. While religious worldviews need not take into account the constraints imposed by the findings of sociobiology, such constraints do pose limit conditions that successful religious traditions must take into account. Although moral exhortations encouraging unconditional altruism do exist in religious traditions such as Christianity and Buddhism, they have been at best marginally successful in completely swaying the behavior of the masses. The Confucian emphasis on family and reciprocity within the group (among Chinese but not “barbarians”) seems to reflect much more the shape of human history as well as the findings of sociobiology. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to reduce a religious worldview to considerations of sociobiology, since the claims of religious worldviews are larger than sociobiology or any particular discipline. While traditions such as Christianity may be preeminently concerned with a kind of ethical altruism, they are not limited to such considerations. Furthermore, such interpretations often work only by aggrandizing the status of sociobiology, moving it from the realm of empirical hypotheses to that of metaphysical claim (cf. Hefner 1996).

More than sociobiology, the related fields of the cognitive sciences can help to deepen our understanding of orienting worldviews, which are, after all, constructs of the human mind and human activity. Indeed, there have been a number of groundbreaking approaches in this area, although these works remain quite disparate in their presuppositions and conclusions. Claude Levi-Strauss’s structuralist program (2000) represents one kind of cognitivist approach that can be applied to religious narratives and symbols. Fowler’s *Stages of Faith* (1981) provided a framework for understanding religious development in children and adolescents. More recent works have speculated on a variety of issues. Merlin Donald (1991) has proposed an account of human evolution in which religious cognition plays a crucial role, while Walter Burkert (1996) has tried to build a narrative of religious origins and development. Advances in neuroscience have allowed for a further investigation of religious experiences and their relation to brain activity.

As insightful as many of these approaches have been, they are often rendered problematic by the differing presuppositions about the nature of religion and, therefore, what it is that needs explaining. Fowler’s work, for instance, understands religion primarily in terms of faith development. Faith, for Fowler, is understood not in terms of a set of beliefs but as a kind of commitment that evolves and matures as the child grows into adulthood. Fowler’s approach to religion, therefore, has much in common with that of scholars such as Tillich and Cantwell Smith. Furthermore, Fowler’s research has certainly shed light on how faith development may be connected to more general stages of cognitive development, as well as suggested reasons why some individuals remain committed to literal understandings of religious symbols while some move beyond them. Fowler’s thesis of

distinctive stages of faith has spurred further research in psychology of religion that attempts to either refine the model or offer possible alternatives.

It can be argued, however, that Fowler's research obscures as much as it clarifies. As with most approaches to religion that emphasize the category of commitment, Fowler's analysis is simultaneously descriptive and normative in character. In Fowler's framework, later stages are always better than earlier stages, with the final stage described as a rare achievement of the "religious geniuses" of the world. Because Fowler is committed to understanding religion in terms of faith rather than orienting worldview, there is a temptation to glide over the earlier stages or to emphasize their insufficiency and need for development. But, one might ask, why are these earlier stages so powerful to begin with, and why do they lose their grip over time? Clearly, Fowler suggests (and no doubt correctly) that cognitive maturation can lead to deeper investigation of one's own religious commitments, requiring modification and adjustment as one's knowledge and wisdom grows over time. In a sense, however, the question remains unanswered. Why should religious symbols be so readily understandable by children within the confines of their cognitive development, and why are some of the later stages so difficult to attain?

One possible answer is simply that any orienting worldview must be readily understandable by children if it is going to persist and survive across generations. Because basic values and commitments are typically formed in childhood, any orienting worldview that is understood solely in terms of abstract philosophical analysis is at an initial disadvantage, since children must reach the appropriate level of maturity and possess the openness to consider the claims of a heretofore unfamiliar way of understanding and valuing the world. Conversely, any religious worldview that is committed to symbols and portrayals natural only to lower cognitive stages will lose adherents as followers reach successive maturity levels. It is unsurprising, then, that all of the largest religious traditions contain a variety of symbols, imagery, and religious language that are understandable in different ways by children and adults. Because of this, the multivalence of myths and narratives becomes extremely important for religious traditions. Children will, for instance, almost invariably understand the Adam and Eve narrative in literal terms, and in those terms such a narrative can retain a powerful religious function. The Adam and Eve narrative, however, is powerfully symbolic, providing possible insight for the mature reader as well. Indeed, the centuries have given witness to the plurality of interpretation of this narrative.

It is worthwhile to note that Fowler's stages of faith have some rough parallels to Donald's account (1991) of the evolution of human cognition, which posits several distinct stages in the course of human evolution. Interestingly, Donald sees ritual and myth as being integral to cognitive development and correspondingly understands human evolution to have

passed through separate “mimetic” and “mythic” stages of cognition. Like all work on cognitive evolution, Donald’s thesis contains a necessarily speculative element, but it provides an insightful way for understanding the importance of religious worldviews in the study of human origins. Despite the different methodologies, the research projects of both Fowler and Donald indicate not only the possible contributions of related areas of cognitive science but also how understanding religion in terms of an orienting worldview can provide coherence to these claims.

Much of the religion-science dialogue, however, is concerned with a quite different question. How can the truths found in existing religious traditions be reconciled or enriched by the discoveries of the sciences? Note that this is very much a worldview question. Christianity, for example, makes potentially radical claims about the nature of the world, its origin, and the destiny of it and its human inhabitants. The physical sciences, however, have in recent centuries also made radical discoveries that any worldview must take into account. Consequently, much of the religion-science dialogue is concerned with the integration or conflict of worldview claims. While this dialogue can become abstract and highly philosophical in character, it is noteworthy that it possesses a normative edge as well. John Haught’s *God After Darwin* (2000), for instance, constructively synthesizes Christian theology and evolutionary perspectives that have implications for understanding human uniqueness, ethics, and environmental responsibility. The work of Nancey Murphy and George Ellis (1996), Philip Hefner (1993), and many others can be seen in a similar light.

Thus, much of the science-religion dialogue is in the business of constructing orienting worldviews that are satisfactory to the modern mind. Furthermore, it does so in a way that is largely theological and theoretic in character. While there is a need for and much profit to be gained from this approach, our previous analysis of the nature of religious worldviews suggests that it is also necessarily incomplete. Successful orienting worldviews are not simply belief systems but contain a range of symbols, narratives, and formative experiences that provide, cognitively and emotionally, important touchstones with the potential to appeal to individuals in a wide range of maturity levels. There is, therefore, room for a different kind of religion-science dialogue as well, one that engages not only the intellect but also the arts and thus possesses a more holistic character. Indeed, there is reason to believe that such a dialogue has been ongoing through at least the latter half of the twentieth century. Science-fiction films and television series such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *The X-Files* may be popular, in part, because of their ability to weave scientific and spiritual themes together. One wonders, however, if much of this part of the dialogue lies significantly in the future. Modern and postmodern art tend to reject both science and religion, and rare is the church that sings hymns that show thoughtful reflection on and engagement with a modern scientific

worldview. Until this happens, the constructive projects of the science-religion dialogue will likely remain largely peripheral to the concerns of the average citizen.

CONCLUSION

Religions are complex, and any one approach to studying them must necessarily leave out some aspects that are important. Categories of faith commitment, social function, and philosophical justification (to name a few) all have their importance and place. Nevertheless, a strongly unitary and integrative account, as I have presented here, can be profoundly useful in thinking not about religion in general but about the religion-science dialogue in particular. The sciences inform how we think about religion. Particular religious worldviews, in turn, inform how we think about the sciences. Yet, neither is reducible to the other, and from each form of dialogue there is much to learn.

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