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Introduction

The most general aim of this book is to enlarge, if only by a little, our understanding of the nature of religion and of religion in nature. Thus, it is about the nature of humanity, a species that lives, and can only live, in terms of meanings it must construct in a world devoid of intrinsic meaning but subject to physical law.

It will be centrally concerned with religion's most general and universal elements, "The Sacred," "The Numinous," "The Occult," and "The Divine" and with their fusion into "The Holy" in ritual. It will also be concerned, both at first and ultimately, with the evolution of humanity and humanity's place in the evolution of the world.

These two concerns may seem different or even antagonistic but they are not. An argument, close to explicit later in this chapter, remaining subterranean throughout most of this book, although surfacing from time to time and becoming central in the last chapters, not only suggests that religion could not have emerged in the absence of humanity's defining characteristic but the converse, that in the absence of what we, in a common sense way, call religion, humanity could not have emerged from its pre- or proto-human condition. It is, therefore, plausible to suppose, although beyond demonstration's possibilities, that religion's origins are, if not one with the origins of humanity, closely connected to them.

The absolute ubiquity of religion, however defined, supports the attribution of such profound significance to it. No society known to anthropology or history is devoid of what reasonable observers would agree is religion, even those such as the former Soviet Union (Tumarkin 1983) which have made deliberate attempts to extirpate it. Given the central place that religious considerations have occupied in the thoughts and actions of men and women in all times and places, and given the

amount of energy, blood, time and wealth that have been spent building temples, supporting priests, sacrificing to gods and killing infidels, it is hard to imagine that religion, as bizarre as some of its manifestations may seem, is not in some way indispensable to the species.

These suggestions concerning religious origins and importance are meant to provide the most general context possible for the more specific arguments and discussions developed in the course of this work. The validity of these less general arguments and discussions does not, however, depend upon the acceptance of the book's more general theses. Nevertheless, the claim that elements of religion may have been indispensable to humanity's evolution may seem to threaten to subordinate the more abstract, rarefied and meaning-laden aspect of human life to so coarse a utilitarian interpretation that its deep meaningfulness is rendered invisible and inaudible. No such reduction is intended, nor will it take place. Neither religion "as a whole" nor its elements will, in the account offered of them, be reduced to functional or adaptive terms. An account of religion framed, *a priori*, in terms of adaptation, function or other utilitarian assumption or theory would, moreover, and paradoxically, defeat any possibility of discovering whatever utilitarian significance it might have by transforming the entire inquiry into a comprehensive tautology. The only way to expose religion's adaptive significance (should such there be) as well as to understand it "in its own right" is to provide an account that is "true to its own nature." This is not to promise that the account that follows is framed in "religion's own terms," whatever they might be. It is not. If it is in the nature of religions to lay special claims to truth, then "religion's own terms" would necessarily multiply into the parochial terms of innumerable religious traditions, and we shall be concerned with human universals, universals of the human condition, universals of religion and the relationship between them.

This book is not a theological treatise but a work in anthropology. As such, its ambitions are more general than those of any particular theology. As an anthropological inquiry, its assumptions are, of course, exclusively naturalistic, but it respects the concepts it seeks to understand, attempting not only to grasp what is true *of* all religions but what is true *in* all religions, that is, the special character of the truths that it is in the nature of all religions to claim. It is further concerned, particularly in the last chapter, with how, and in what senses, the truths of sanctity may become false. Later portions of this chapter and chapters 10, 11, 12 and 14 can almost be read as a treatise on certain forms of conventional truth, on relations among them, and on various forms of falsehood.

It can also, and most obviously, be read, independent of any concern with religion's origins or evolutionary significance, as a treatise on ritual. One of its main theses is that religion's major conceptual and experiential constituents, the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine, and their integration into the Holy, are creations of ritual. To put the matter into logical rather than causal terms, these constituents are *entailments* of the *form* which constitutes ritual. Definition of all of these terms will be postponed for a little while. For the moment it is sufficient to characterize ritual as a *structure*, that is, a more or less enduring set of relations among a number of general but variable features. As a form or structure it possesses certain logical properties, but its properties are not only logical. Inasmuch as performance is one of its general features, it possesses the properties of practice as well. In ritual, logic becomes enacted and embodied – is realized – in unique ways.

Because ritual is taken to be the ground from which religious conceptions spring, the preponderance of the book – chapters 2 through 12 – will be devoted to its analysis. These chapters will, as it were, "unpack" a definition of ritual (to be offered in chapter 2), in the course of which the sacred, the numinous, the occult, the divine, and the Holy, will be derived, and it will further be argued that social contract, morality, a paradigm of creation, the conception of time and eternity, intimations of immortality, and those orderings of the world that we shall call *Logoi* (singular *Logos*) are all entailments of and are generated out of that form.

This book can, then, be taken to be a treatise on ritual: first on ritual's internal logic, next on the products (like sanctity) that its logic entails, and on the nature of their truth, and finally, on the place of ritual and its products in humanity's evolution. During the discussion of ritual that will occupy the early and middle chapters of the book, consideration of humanity's evolution, having been laid out briefly in this introduction to provide the broadest possible context for what follows, will remain in the background, present but largely tacit, emerging only for a moment from time to time, until chapters 13 and 14 when they will again move into the foreground.

We can now turn to the salient characteristics of humanity's evolution and to those of its problems that religion ameliorates.

1. The evolution of humanity

I did not say that this book would be concerned with "hominid" or "human evolution" but rather with "the evolution of humanity." "Hominid evolution," or "human evolution," would have emphasized

what our species has in common with other species, namely that we are animals living among and dependent upon other organisms, and, further, that our species emerged through processes of natural selection no different in principle from those that produced limpets or lions. These commonalties are assumed, but the phrase "evolution of humanity" is meant to emphasize the capacity that sets our species apart from all others. Our forebears became what might loosely be called "fully human" with the emergence of language. All animals communicate, and even plants receive and transmit information (Bickerton 1990), but only humans, so far as we know, are possessed of languages composed, first, of lexicons made up of symbols in Peirce's sense of the word (1960 II: 143ff.) or Buchler's (1955: 99, 102, 112f.): that is, signs related only "by law," i.e. convention, to that which they signify,[1] and second, of grammars, sets of rules for combining symbols into semantically unbounded discourse.

It is obvious that the possession of language makes possible ways of life inconceivable to non-verbal creatures, and even "proto-language" a form of communication making use of limited vocabularies composed of symbols but possessing little or only rudimentary grammar (Bickerton 1990, chapters 6 and 7) must have conferred important advantages upon the hominids among whom they developed. With proto-language, communication could, perhaps (or even probably) for the first time in this world's evolution, not only escape from the confines of here and now to report upon the past and distant but also begin to order, to an increasing degree, the future by facilitating the division of labor and by making more precise planning and coordination possible. Social organization could, as a consequence, become increasingly differentiated, increasingly effective and uniquely flexible, and new dimensions of mutual support and protection could be attained.

Even more fundamentally, it is plausible to assume that increased communicational capacities both indicate and entail increased conceptual capacities. Moreover, the emergence of the symbol not only increased conceptual capacity but transformed it, and new forms of learning became possible.[2] With symbolic transmission individuals can learn from the accounts of others as well as from their own direct experience, and this learning may be transformed in its mere recounting, into public knowledge which can, by further recounting, be preserved as tradition.

The immediate advantages that such abilities confer upon those who possess them are patent, and, in light of them, it is plausible to believe that linguistic ability, once it began to develop, would have been very

strongly selected for, which is to say that the anatomical structures on which it is based may have been elaborated and transformed at rates that were, in evolutionary terms, unusually rapid. Proto-language and language could well have emerged in a relatively short time.[3] Increased ability to plan, to coordinate, to report on the past and distant, to accumulate and transmit knowledge, to learn in new and more effective ways, must all have been among the early factors vigorously selecting for increasing linguistic ability.

Other rather less obvious but by no means obscure entailments of language may, however, have been as consequential in the long run. With language, discourse not only can escape from the confines of here and now to recapture the concrete past and distant or to approach the foreseeable future. It could also eventually escape from the concrete altogether. It may be suggested that the transcendence of the concrete and the emergence of grammar were mutually causal,[4] but, be this as it may, when discourse can escape from the concrete as well as the present, and when it is empowered by grammar, it finally becomes free to search for such worlds parallel to the actual as those of "the might have been," "the should be," "the could be," "the never will," "the may always be." It can, then, explore the realms of the desirable, the moral, the proper, the possible, the fortuitous, the imaginary, the general, and their negatives, the undesirable, the immoral, the impossible (Rappaport 1979b). To "explore" these worlds is not simply to *discover* what is there. It is to *create* what is there. Language does not merely facilitate the communication of what is conceived but expands, eventually by magnitudes, what can be conceived. This expansion of conceptual power as much as the ability to communicate to others the products of that expanded power – accounts, understanding, abstractions, evaluations – underlies the general human mode of adaptation and the specific adaptations of the many societies into which the species is ever redividing itself. As such, language and proto-language before it, have been absolutely central to human evolutionary success. It would not, indeed, be an exaggeration to claim that humanity is their creation.

2. Adaptation

The term "adaptation" has just been introduced. Its full discussion will be postponed until chapter 13. For now it is well to note that although the concept is central to much thought in biology as well as anthropology, it is slippery. Because not all writers mean the same thing by the term, it is always useful, if not downright necessary, for those involving it

to make clear what they do mean. In this book the term designates the processes through which living systems of all sorts – organisms, populations, societies, possibly ecosystems or even the biosphere as a whole – maintain themselves in the face of perturbations continuously threatening them with disruption, death or extinction. Gregory Bateson (1972) put the matter in informational terms, stating that adaptive systems are organized in ways that tend to preserve the truth value of certain propositions about themselves in the face of perturbations continually threatening to falsify them. The preservation of "the truth" of these propositions is associated with, or even definitive of, the persistence or perpetuation of the systems of which they are elements. In organisms, these "propositions" are, as it were, genetically and physiologically encoded descriptions of their structure and proper functioning. In human social systems, however, regnant "propositions" may be propositions properly so-called: "The Lord our God the Lord is one," the invalidation of which would signify the demise of Judaism.

Adaptive responses to perturbations include both short-term reversible changes of *state* and longer-term irreversible changes in *structure*. Although the two classes can be distinguished from each other, they are not separated from each other in nature. Adaptive responses are seldom, if ever, isolated but seem, rather, to be organized into sequences possessing certain temporal and logical characteristics (Bateson 1972h, Rappaport 1971a, 1979a, Slobodkin and Rapoport 1974) commencing with quickly mobilized easily reversible changes in state (if perturbation continues), proceeding through less easily reversible state changes to, in some cases, the irreversible changes not in state but in structure that are called "evolutionary." The generalization connecting reversible "functional" to irreversible "evolutionary" changes is sometimes known as "Romer's Rule" after the zoologist, A. S. Romer (1954 [1933] I: 43ff.), who illustrated it in a discussion of the emergence of the amphibia from the lobe-finned fish during the Devonian period. These air-breathing, bottom-feeding, bony-finned denizens of shallow ponds did not first venture onto dry land in order to take advantage of a promising set of open niches. Rather, they were frequently left high and dry during that time of intermittent dessication. Under such circumstances relatively minor modifications in limb structure (heavily boned fins into legs) and other subsystems were strongly selected for because they facilitated locomotion over land back to water. Thus, the earliest terrestrial adaptation among the vertebrates made it possible to maintain an aquatic way of life. To put it a little differently, *structural transformations in some*

subsystems made it possible to maintain more basic aspects of the system unchanged. This proposes that the fundamental question to ask about any evolutionary change is "*What does this change maintain unchanged*?" To translate the matter once again into informational terms, modifications or transformations in the descriptions of substructures may preserve unchanged the truth value of more fundamental propositions concerning the system as a whole in the face of changes in conditions threatening to falsify them. More detailed discussion of adaptation will be postponed until later chapters, but two brief comments are in order.

First, even this brief account of adaptation indicates that adaptive systems are generally hierarchical in structure. The parable of the transformation of lobe-finned fish into amphibia indicates that they are hierarchical in the unavoidable and irreducible sense of wholes made up of parts: changes in *subsystems* preserve the continuity of the system as a whole living entity. They are hierarchical in the secondary and derivative sense of superordination and subordination. The subsystems of a normally functioning adaptive system are subservient to the perpetuation of the system as a whole or, to put this in informational terms again, to preserve the truth value of the system's regnant proportions subordinate propositions may be modified, transformed or replaced.

Secondly, flexibility is central to adaptation so conceived, and the adaptive flexibility of humans following from the possession of language seems to be unparalleled. When social organization and rules for behavior are stipulated in conventions expressed in words rather than specified in genes inscribed on chromosomes they can be replaced within single lifetimes, even sometimes, overnight. This has made it possible for a single interbreeding species to enter, and even to dominate, the great variety of environments the world presents to it without having to spend generations transforming itself into a range of new species.

3. The symbol

Language and its entailment, culture, the general way of life consisting of understandings, institutions, customs, and material artifacts, whose existence, maintenance and use are contingent upon language,[5] must have emerged through processes of natural selection as part of the adaptive apparatus of the hominids.

But even such far-reaching claims as "Language is the foundation of the human way of life" do not do language's importance justice, for its significance transcends the species in which it appeared. Leslie White used to say that the appearance of the symbol – by which he meant

language – was not simply an evolutionary novelty enhancing the survival chances of a particular species, but the most radical innovation in the evolution of evolution itself since life first appeared. Inasmuch as the symbol seems to be unique, or virtually unique, to humanity, such a claim may be uncomfortably reminiscent of theological assertions of a status for humans only one step lower than the angels but, bearing in mind the dangers of such assertions and insisting that humanity remains squarely in nature, we should recognize that White's claim was not extravagant. A quibbler could argue that the development of language was nothing more than the most radical innovation in the evolutionary process since the appearance of sex, to which it may be likened in some respects. Both, after all, are means for recombining and transmitting information, and sex laid the groundwork for a sociality that language later elaborated. The significance of language, however, is not confined to the recombination and transmission of the already existant class of genetic information. With the symbol an entirely new form of information (in the widest sense of the word) appeared in the world. This new form brought with it new content, and the world as a whole, not merely the genus *Homo*, has not been the same since.

The epochal significance of the symbol for the world beyond the species in which it appeared did not become apparent for many millennia – perhaps hundreds of millennia – after it had emerged. But earlier effects of language and even proto-language upon the lifeways of the hominids in its possession must soon have become enormous. That language permits thought and communication to escape from the solid actualities of here and now to discover other realms, for instance, those of the possible, the plausible, the desirable, and the valuable, has already been emphasized. This was not quite correct. Language does not merely *permit* such thought but both *requires* it and *makes it inevitable*. Humanity is a species that lives and can only live in terms of meanings it itself must invent. These meanings and understandings not only reflect or approximate an independently existing world but participate in its very construction. The worlds in which humans live are not fully constituted by tectonic, meteorological and organic processes. They are not only made of rocks and trees and oceans, but are also constructed out of symbolically conceived and performatively established (Austin 1962, see chapter 4 hereafter) cosmologies, institutions, rules, and values. With language the world comes to be furnished with qualities like good and evil, abstractions like democracy and communism, values like honor, valor and generosity, imaginary beings like demons, spirits and gods,

imagined places like heaven and hell. All of these concepts are reified, made into *res*, real "things," by social actions contingent upon language. Human worlds are, therefore, inconceivably richer than the worlds inhabited by other creatures.

"Human worlds." Each human society develops a unique culture, which is also to say that it constructs a unique world that includes not only a special understanding of the trees and rocks and water surrounding it, but of other things, many unseen, as real as those trees and animals and rocks. It is in terms of their existence, no less than in terms of the existence of physical things, that people operate and transform not only their social systems but the ecosystems surrounding them which, in all but the cases of hunters and gatherers, they have dominated[6] since the emergence of agriculture 10,000 or so years ago. Since then, language has ever more powerfully reached out from the species in which it emerged to reorder and subordinate the natural systems in which populations of that species participate.

4. The great inversion

Although it conforms to this account to say that language is central to human adaptation, it is also clear that such a statement is so inadequate as a characterization of the relationship of language to language user as to be dangerously misleading. If, as agents, people act, and perhaps can only act, in terms of meanings they or their ancestors have conceived, they are as much in the service of those conceptions as those conceptions are parts of their adaptations. *There is, this is to say, an inversion or partial inversion, in the course of human evolution, of the relationship of the adaptive apparatus to the adapting species*. The linguistic capacity that is central to human adaptation makes it possible to give birth to concepts that come to possess those who have conceived them, concepts like god, heaven and hell. To argue that all such concepts or the actions they inform or guide enhance the survival and reproduction of the organisms who maintain them as a simple adaptive theory of language would have it, is not credible.

That language is central to the human mode of adaptation is the truth, but it is far from the whole truth. If adaptive systems can be defined as systems that operate (consciously or unconsciously) to preserve the true value of certain propositions about themselves in the face of perturbations tending to falsify them, and if the metaphor of inversion (surely an oversimplification) is at all apt, then it is appropriate to propose that the propositions favored in human social systems are about such conceptions

as God, Honor, Freedom, Fatherland, and The Good. That their preservation has often required great or even ultimate sacrifice on the parts of individuals hardly needs saying. Postulates concerning the unitary or triune nature of god are among those for whom countless individuals have sacrificed their lives or killed others, as are such mundane apothegms as "Death before dishonor" or "Better dead than red."

That the implications of such an inversion for evolution may be obvious does not make them any the less profound or epochal. First, whatever the case may be for explanations of the behavior and organization of other species, and of their evolution, the extent to which concepts like "inclusive fitness" and "kin selection" can account for cultural phenomena is very limited. Secondly and related, whatever the case may be among other species, group selection (selection for the perpetuation of traits tending to contribute positively to the survival of the groups in which they occur but negatively to the survival of the particular individuals in possession of them) is not only possible among humans but of great importance in humanity's evolution. All that is needed to make group selection possible is a device that leads individuals to separate their conceptions of well-being or advantage from biological survival. Notions such as God, Heaven, Hell, heroism, honor, shame, fatherland and democracy encoded in procedures of enculturation that represent them as factual, natural, public, or sacred (and, therefore, compelling) have dominated every culture for which we possess ethnographic or historical knowledge.

Language, in sum, makes for profound changes in the nature of evolution and, even more profoundly, in the nature of evolving systems. Non-human systems are organic systems constituted largely by genetically encoded information. Human systems are cultural-organic systems constituted by symbolic (linguistic) as well as genetic information. Whereas the transformation from organic to cultural-organic must have been strongly selected for, we are coming, in this discussion, to see that the consequences of the emergence of language and its concomitant, culture, were not unambiguously advantageous to those in their possession. We may note in passing a seldom-remarked evolutionary rule: every "advance" sets new problems as it responds to and ameliorates earlier ones. Language was no exception.

We have been led from a panegyric to language to a recognition of its vices. In addition to setting up possibilities for unprecedented contradiction between the symbolic and genetic such that the propositions that