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1 TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN

> Others said that the earth has nine corners by which the heavens are supported. Another, disagreeing with these, would have the earth supported by seven elephants, and the elephants do not sink because their feet are fixed on a tortoise. When asked who would fix the body of the tortoise, so that it would not collapse, he said that he did not know.
>
> Letter written from India by the Jesuit Emanuel da Veiga (1599)[1]

The idea that the world rests on the back of a turtle has been identified in the mythologies of several North American tribes, as well as in other mythologies from ancient India and China. As a general explanation for the structure of the universe, the proposition has always been found wanting by interlocutors from the West, who logically proceed to ask what, in turn, is supporting the turtle. Historical anecdotes have the natives evading the question. Enthusiastic modern defenders have taken the challenge more seriously, proposing that, obviously, the turtle is supported by another turtle, and dealing with the inevitable riposte with the now classic expression "it's turtles all the way down!"[2]

[1] Charpentier 1924, 320.
[2] Ross 1967, v. Geertz (1973, 28–29) offers an alternative story for the expression.

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It is unfair, of course, to treat myths as physics theories. The purpose of myths is to explain the moral logic of the world, not its physical scaffolding. The Delaware indigenous cultures had a turtle supporting the world because they saw the turtle as symbolizing, through its attributes, life itself. The turtles they knew showed perseverance, longevity, and steadfastness, lived both in water and land, and, like humans, were omnivores.[3]

The problem posed by an infinite column of turtles has nonetheless been used as an illustration of philosophical positions that cannot account for a clear, solid base. The vulgar question about God is an obvious example. God created the world, but then, who created God? If we sidestep the question of absolute origins, the turtle dilemma can be framed as an issue concerning the underpinnings of our ideas about the world. Is there some solid truth under it all that can explain and justify the way we look at things? Or is the world simply what we make of it? In other words, is the turtle, however much we depend on it for holding up everything, of our own making, too?

It is fashionable these days to posit that our social reality is self-made. Activists of the current sexual identity wars insist, for example, that gender, that apparently most self-evident of all human characteristics, is actually "socially constructed." Indeed, it is. While (most) humans are born with either "male" or "female" genitalia (and their corresponding biology), the historical and anthropological record registers a wide variety of customs regarding sexual practices and roles. But this truth is less of a debate stopper than activists usually hope for, because social constructivism is a double-edged sword. To be consistent, one would have to admit that the belief that there are two genders is as much a social construct as the one that posits that there are actually twenty. "Social constructivism for thee but not for me" just doesn't cut it.

Conservatives, for their part, despair with all this "moral relativism." They hope for a real, independent turtle; a solid base of moral certitude, one perhaps supplied by the sacred texts of traditional religions. The idea that social reality is a human construct is, however, not particularly new, and weaves through several Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. Buddhism, notably, holds that

[3] Miller 1974.

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social reality is an illusion (or, rather, a delusion), toward which we need to put some mental and emotional distance.[4] The social nature of our ideas about the world figures prominently in the nineteenth-century work of Nietzsche and Marx.[5] The more recent currents of "postmodern" thought that so unnerve conservatives are just a late chapter in the debate, one that significantly focuses on the role of language in making us believe what we say.[6] In a more pedestrian route, the idea has also been a truism of the field of anthropology since its founding more than 100 years ago. Anthropologists have been, decades in and out, painstakingly documenting quite exotic societies that swear that their view of the universe does not represent one more "culture" to be added to the discipline's catalog, but rather transparent, unadulterated reality. We, of course, believe the same about ourselves.

Admitting to the (mostly) arbitrary nature of our mental world does not necessarily leave us, however, in a moral limbo. Not all anthropologists fell in love with their subjects, even when they tried respectfully and empathetically to record their particular cultural universe. We don't have to approve of other societies in order to respect or tolerate them. We can acknowledge other people's preferences while being at peace with our own. I know the world is full of wonderful women, but that doesn't keep from feeling that I'm married to the most wonderful one of all. When we compare groups or societies we can only, in any case, evaluate them in reference to our own. They can illuminate some of our deficiencies, or point us toward some possible betterment. But these insights are all unavoidably self-serving. We can only be responsible for ourselves, and we have no business telling other people how to live – unless their conduct inevitably affects us.

The best way to handle the pitfalls of a world that seems arbitrary and unstable is to explore its cultural and ideological underpinnings, since that allows us to feel more confident about our own moral choices. The study of our own ideological biases is, however, always a perilous and imperfect business, akin, as the expression goes, to the study of water by fish. But a dynamic society leaves us with no choice,

[4] Wright 2017.
[5] Berger and Lukman 1967.
[6] Lee 1997.

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since if we don't have an informed opinion about these matters, others will have them for us, and will act accordingly. The turtles under the ground have to be uncovered and examined, however partially and deficiently.

Let's start with one that's famous as a destroyer of all civil social intercourse: religion.

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2 ON BEING RELIGIOUS WITHOUT KNOWING IT

> In reality, then, there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence.
>
> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*

Given how much conflict there seems to be in the world these days around religion, it may come as a surprise to learn that, for anthropologists, defining religion has always been a particularly difficult thing to do. According to Talal Asad, Europeans didn't even start talking about religion as a separate aspect of social life until the seventeenth century, after the Reformation generated different interpretations of how to be a Christian and spawned the religious wars of the continent.[1] The problem with religion is that it normally encompasses ideas and beliefs about topics that are also the purview of supposedly separate areas of social life, such as politics, science, or culture. We tend to deal with these overlaps by assuming that what distinguishes the religious approach is a belief in (a) God and certain "sacred" texts. If only things were so simple.

In the long history of their study of religion, anthropologists have always given a special place to a book by Emile Durkheim, *The*

[1] Asad 1993.

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Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, published originally in French in 1912. Durkheim is considered one of the fathers of modern sociology, but like the anthropologists, was interested in cross-cultural comparisons. What makes his contribution important is that he thought hard about what religion was – and wasn't. Since I'm also a fan of the book, I'll use it as a starting point.

The first thing Durkheim does is to present and argue away the definitions of religion that he finds unacceptable. For Durkheim, religion, in its essence, is *not* about (1) a belief in God; (2) the supernatural; or (3) magic and superstition.

The first point he handles summarily, reminding the reader that there are established religions that don't depend on the existence of a God, such as Buddhism and Taoism. They have all the usual trappings that we associate with religions, such as rituals and spiritual doctrines, but they dispense with the idea of a divinity pulling the strings of human affairs. The rules of the universe regarding humans have either an automatic and autonomous nature (as with karma), or are left vague.

On the other hand, the problem with associating religiosity with the "supernatural" or with "magic" is that these terms inhabit a definitional quicksand. To assert that something is "supernatural" you first have to define what "natural" is. We tend to see this distinction as straightforward, since we associate the "natural" with the phenomena that science has been able to account for. But this also means that the distinction is a very modern one. Before the development of the scientific method, it would have made no sense, in any society, to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. Consequently, to then use this distinction to identify the "religious" part of any culture would make no sense, either.

We also associate the supernatural with some sort of invisibility, but this barely helps, since most societies, including ours, handle some notion of a visible and an invisible world. Humans rarely believe that the world is limited solely what they can perceive directly with their senses. Certainly, there are societies that have very complex invisible worlds, which include all kinds of fascinating entities. Societies with animist beliefs experience an encompassing world of spirits that live in all beings and objects, including animals, plants, and rocks. Other believe in the existence of good and evil spirits that interact with humans. Modern societies tend to limit the invisible

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realm to dimensions of reality that scientists have told us are there but that we don't experience directly. It can be a busy world. There are atoms, neutrons, and electrons; microorganisms of different types; electromagnetic waves and fields; all kinds of radiations; and different forms of energy. Scientists add elements and dimensions to this realm all the time. They initially based their theories on matter; then they discovered antimatter. Since a very small percentage of the population has actually studied any of this, most people take the existence of all these things on faith. I'm not, to be clear, putting in doubt the reality of the "invisible" worlds of science, but simply making the point that the boundaries of the "natural" are not fixed, but are rather moving all the time. Scientists still don't understand how different types of cells "know" what they have to do, or how they communicate with one another, and might perhaps one day indeed discover that all things are "alive," as the animist societies assert.[2] All of which means that the whole topic can easily be handled as a scientific problem rather than as a "religious" one. This point becomes even clearer when we step into the subject of "magic."

All societies need, in order to survive, a minimal body of cause-and-effect theories about the world. Some problems are clearly more easily decipherable than others. If you throw something into the air, it falls back down. That seems simple enough. But what about predicting rain? Or explaining why someone falls ill? The premodern societies that early anthropologists typically studied offered a combination of folk theories in this respect, some of which we could describe as involving elements of magic or the supernatural. Some were effective anyway; some were clearly wrong. Societies, in any case, usually move with the best explanations they have at the moment.[3] When cholera epidemics ravaged European cities in the nineteenth century, the mainstream explanation for disease was the "miasmatic" theory, formulated initially in ancient Greece, and which argued that illnesses were carried by foul odors. Since cholera was transmitted through contaminated drinking water, all efforts to control smells were useless. The great urban sewer and aqueduct works that eventually brought the epidemics under control benefited from the finally accepted waterborne theory that some more observant physicians were pushing. But it would be

[2] See, for example, Lieff 2020.
[3] Shore 1996, 65.

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decades before the real cause was located with the discovery of microorganisms, in this case, the cholera bacillus. By that time, however, the more basic (and incomplete) waterborne theory had done the job.

When an anthropologist observed a rain ritual that combined some practical actions (starting a fire) with an "impractical" one (a dance), the temptation was to classify the latter one under "magic" and send it to the "religion" chapter of the report. But, as mentioned earlier, this only makes sense for societies that distinguish between "natural" and "supernatural" domains. For societies not dominated by the philosophy of modern science, all events are "natural" (or "supernatural"), and every deviation from a natural pattern demands an interpretation. Since the world is not seen as ruled by impersonal, mechanical laws (but, rather, as following a pattern), any unusual event can be taken as an omen, an announcement, or a change in the order of things. This is why the miracles of Jesus are also called "signs" in some of the Gospels, since they announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God. It's also the reason he was treated as a messiah, rather than as a magician.

So, the label "magic" only makes sense as a conceptual imposition from a scientifically minded observer. But since we are the ones making the distinction, it comes as no surprise that our own world can be divided in such a way, and, more importantly, that we live surrounded by plenty of magic ourselves. Durkheim explains that the scientific method had only been applied to a limited number of problems, mainly pertaining the physical world. In the domain of social life, science had much less useful things to say, so people just carried on with their usual, and unexplained, cultural patterns. (Indeed, this situation persists today, where scientific notions in the social sciences are less definitive, more incomplete, and more contested.) The result is that people failed to realize how bizarre (magical) their actual conduct was. Perhaps the best example I can offer is the use of money. The fact that the world can be so dramatically transformed through the exchange of small pieces of colored paper could certainly seem an amazing magic trick to an outside observer. (Although nowadays money is not even that, but rather numerical digits on an electronic screen.) Money works only because we all have implicitly decided that it is what we say it is – a representation of worth and value, rather than just pieces of processed linen and cotton. In this, the mechanism is barely distinguishable from the rituals of many "primitive" peoples that relied on collective suggestion and ceremony to make participants

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believe in what they were seeing.[4] To understand "scientifically" the nature of money, we would have to throw the whole weight of the scientific method onto the riddle, making use of controlled experiments, and insights from psychology, anthropology, sociology, and economics, among other disciplines. Of course, no banker is going to wait for the results. This is why Durkheim concludes that "It is science and not religion which has taught men that things are complex and difficult to understand."[5]

The view of religion as something immersed in superstition and opposed to science has a long pedigree in the modern era, and shows, unfortunately, no signs of abating, being the basic idea behind the militant atheism of our day. It was also the position, of course, of many of the key architects of the modern worldview. For Freud, religion had three main functions: to provide an explanation for the world, to provide ethical guidance, and to console the suffering.[6] In his opinion, all three functions could be assumed in time by science and rationality. As science advanced, religion would surely retreat. People would come to appreciate the superior explanations of science, would understand social norms as the result of "social necessity" (rather than of divine commandment), and would maturate psychologically enough to be able to dispense of imaginary fathers and paradises. Marx focused more on the consolation component. For Marx, religion provided the poor with an inverted image of their real, dystopian world. It provided a vision that was the exact opposite of what they experienced every day. Religion was "the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions,"[7] a compensatory fantasy that nonetheless revealed what the oppressed should have in this world anyhow. Attacking religion meant attacking the social conditions that made religion necessary. In a truly just world, religion would have no place. Enlightenment and psychological maturity were thus the enemies of religion according to Freud; according to Marx, it was social justice. In both thinkers, religion appears as a shoddy substitute, a recourse for people who are missing the real thing. And in both cases, modern science had the critical role to play, by providing

[4] Douglas 2002, 86.
[5] Durkheim 1915, 27.
[6] Freud 1961a [1927].
[7] Marx 2002 [1844], 171.

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rational explanations and proposals for everything, from the laws of physics, to the laws of the psyche, to the laws of social coexistence. Of course, both Freud and Marx lived in an era of unbound optimism toward science, before it had become a handmaiden of nuclear bombs and environmental destruction.[8]

So, going back to our original inquiry, if religion is not essentially about God, the supernatural, superstition, or magic, what is it about, then? For Durkheim, religions had two main characteristics: (1) they consisted of a set of beliefs and practices that formed a moral community and (2) they concerned the sacred. The first aspect means that religions provide a moral grid for the group, thus defining notions of good and evil, and supporting these notions through established rites (Freud correctly identified this dimension). Religion is thus part of the general practice of mythmaking, through which societies define where they come from, where they're going, and what their ultimate purpose is. It gives moral meaning and direction to the world, unifies the community around a vision of the good life, and establishes what is important and what is not.

It is crucial to note that science cannot play this role. Science can tell us that if we do X, Y will follow. But it cannot tell us if X or Y are good or desirable. Science is mostly concerned about the mechanical logic of the world, not its moral one. Its main mission is explanation, not discernment. As John Gray writes,

> Science cannot replace a religious view of the world, since there is no such thing as 'the scientific worldview'. … Science cannot close the gap between facts and values. No matter how much it may advance, scientific inquiry cannot tell you which ends to pursue or how to solve conflicts between them.[9]

There are certainly many "secular" views of the good life, and today's modern societies guide themselves by making use of many broadly consented visions, such as the one offered by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But, as many authors have pointed out, most of these ideas have their origin (acknowledged or not) in religious doctrines

[8] It should be noted that Freud and Marx were reacting to the dominant version of Christianity of their day, a version that was substantially incompatible with modern science – what theologian Torres Queiruga (2000) calls "pre-modern Christianity" (which, in his opinion, needs to be now abandoned).

[9] Gray 2018, 12, 21.

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