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Why Gods Should Matter in Social Science

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If it is hard to believe that conceptions of the Gods are ignored in most recently written histories, it is harder yet to understand why Gods were long ago banished from the social-scientific study of religion. But that is precisely why I have devoted two volumes to demonstrating the crucial role of the Gods in shaping history and civilization, and to resurrecting and reformulating a sociology of Gods.

If asked what the word "religion" means, most religious people will say it's about God or the Gods. Yet, for a century, most social-scientific studies of religion have examined nearly every aspect of faith except what people believe about Gods. When and why did we get it so wrong?

Emile Durkheim and the other early functionalists, who emphasized the uses of religion, dismissed Gods as unimportant window dressing, stressing instead that rites and rituals are the fundamental stuff of religion. Seen from the perspective of "true" sociology, the concept of God "is now no more than a minor accident. It is a psychological phenomenon which has got mixed up with a whole sociological process whose importance is of quite a different order," Durkheim wrote. "Thus the sociologist will pay scant attention to the different ways in which men and peoples have conceived the unknown cause and mysterious depth of things. He will set aside all such metaphysical speculations and will see in religion only a social discipline."

Fifteen years later Durkheim had not wavered in his conviction that Gods are peripheral to religion, noting that, although the apparent purpose of rituals is "strengthening the ties between the faithful and their god," what they really do is strengthen the "ties between the individual and society ... the god being only a figurative representation of the society." Thus began a new social-science orthodoxy: Religion consists of participation in rites and rituals -- and only rites and rituals.

I have long suspected that the underlying "insight" that directed our attention away from God and toward ritual had to do with the fact that Durkheim and his circle were militantly secular Jews who, nevertheless, sometimes attended synagogue. In their personal experience, the phenomenology of religion would not have included belief in supernatural beings, but only the solidarity of group rituals. Those personal perceptions were then reinforced by their voluminous reading of anthropological accounts of the impassioned ritual life of "primitives" by observers who lacked any sympathy for the objects of those worship services.

Indeed, some of the most famous anthropologists advised against paying any attention to the reasons "natives" give for conducting rites. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown called it a "grievous error" to suppose anyone but a sophisticated outside observer make sense of ritual activity. Thus, it was from his external vantage point that Radcliffe-Brown concluded that although "it is sometimes held that funeral and mourning rites are the result of a belief in a soul surviving death ... I would rather hold the view that belief in a surviving soul is not the cause but the effect of the rites." By the same logic, cultures are said to "discover" the existence of rain Gods as a result of performing rain dances -- never mind how it was that they started doing rain dances in the first place. One must be a highly trained social scientist to believe such things.

This, and a great deal of similar "expert" advice, turned attention to peripheral matters, giving primacy to what people did in the name of religion, which then appeared to be fundamentally irrational to social scientists who, having dismissed the objects of those activities, could not conceive of why people engaged in such actions.

If one truly believes that ritual is the essence of religion, then what is one to make of people who include very valuable "sacrifices" in their ceremonies, thereby depriving themselves? They must be crazy. Which is, of course, what many social scientists who devoted themselves to explaining "sacrifice" concluded. Royden Keith Yerkes stressed the blind irrationality of sacrifices in traditional societies, while Sigmund Freud claimed that the irrationality of sacrificial rites was rooted in the Oedipus complex. He argued that the burning of sacrifices commemorates the "original sin" in which the sons in a primal horde rose up and killed and ate their father and then had sex with his wives. That view was ratified at length by Roger Ernie Money-Kyrle, and, in his influential psychology textbook, Brian Morris referred to Freud's thesis

as "amazing" and "tantalizing."

Eventually, that line of analysis "bottomed out" in such absurdities as Rodney Needham's denial of the existence of any "interior state" that might be called religious belief and S.R.F. Price's claim that religious belief is a purely Christian invention, so that when "primitives" pray for things, they don't really mean it. Indeed, Dan Sperber offered the amazing solipsism that, because it is self-evident that supernatural beings do not exist, it is absurd to interpret religious rituals as efforts to enlist the divine on one's behalf. Even Clifford Geertz went so far as to deny that healing ceremonies conducted by the Navajo are intended to cure the afflicted. Rather, he would have had us believe that those rituals merely serve to provide "the stricken person a vocabulary" to relate her or his distress "to the wider world." Never mind that the ceremony consists almost entirely of the chant "may the patient be well."

The notion that religion is not about belief in Gods also has flourished in less extreme forms. Robert N. Bellah condemned the "confusion of belief and religion" as an instance of the "objectivist fallacy," claiming that the emphasis on belief is found only in "religious traditions deeply influenced by Greek thought -- Christianity and Islam." He contrasted those faiths with the religions of the East, being careful to note only those forms in which the supernatural is conceived of not as a being, but only as an impersonal, inactive "essence." Consequently, all Bellah really said was that Gods are not central to Godless religions.

Bellah also failed to acknowledge that godless religions are not central to the religious life of the East. As I have often reported, godless faiths are sustained only by small intellectual elites, and the popular forms of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism abound in Gods. Obviously, when Gods are many, and each is of quite limited scope, the centrality of any one or, indeed, of all of them together to the religious life will be modest in comparison with the centrality of One True God. But, rather than having identified a fallacy, all Bellah did was to dimly perceive that monotheism is different from polytheism, and that both differ greatly from the godless religions of Eastern philosophers and Western liberals. Perhaps unwittingly, Bellah's work itself stands as evidence that variations in conceptions of the supernatural are the basis from which all comparative analysis of religion, as well as magic, must begin.

The case that the supernatural, not ritual, provides the core of religion can be demonstrated in several quite specific and dramatic ways. The first asks why there is so much variation in the precision needed for the adequate performance of rituals.

When magic fails, it usually is assumed that the fault lay with the performance: that incantations were not precisely correct or that rituals were not done exactly right. The same assumption applies to most ritual actions performed on behalf of the small Gods of polytheism. On the other hand, while there is a correct way to perform the rituals associated with each of the great monotheisms, there is little concern about precision: No sincere Roman Catholic thinks that transubstantiation will not occur during the Mass if the priest gets some of the words wrong or out of order. Indeed, most appeals to Yahweh, Jehovah, or Allah involve a minimum of ritual, often being quite impromptu supplications by ordinary believers.

Recently, a substantial body of anthropological and experimental evidence has been assembled to explain that variations in the importance placed on ritual precision reflect differences in the capacities attributed to the supernatural agent to which (or whom) the rituals are directed. When, as in the case of magic, the supernatural agent is an unconscious entity or is a supernatural creature of very limited capacity (such as a demon or an imp), it will be assumed that each ritual must be performed with extreme precision because the supernatural agency lacks the capacity to know the intent of those performing the ritual and is unable to overlook errors in ritual performance. As the psychologist Justin L. Barrett put it, ritual precision is required when dealing with "dumb gods."

That same logic applies, if to a somewhat lesser extent, to religions based on Gods of limited scope. They, too, may not take note of the intent of rituals, but only of their execution. Indeed, there is a substantial element of compulsion in dealing with small Gods as well as with the creatures that sometimes are invoked by magic. Here, too, the rituals must be perfect, otherwise the supernatural agent will not find them binding. In contrast, the omnipotent Gods of monotheism are thought to be fully aware of the intentions of the supplicant. Consequently, rituals are far less important and precision is barely an issue when dealing with Gods conceived of as all-seeing -- if the priest errs, Jehovah knows what was meant, and the efficacy of a prayer does not hinge on precise adherence to a sacred formula.

An even more devastating case against the primacy of ritual can be made by close examination of the most popular of all functionalist claims about religion: Religion functions to sustain the moral order. That classic proposition, handed down from the founders, is regarded by many as the closest thing to a "law" that the social-scientific study of religion possesses.

In his Burnett Lectures, W. Robertson Smith explained that "even in its rudest form Religion was a moral force, the powers that men revered were on the side of social order and moral law; and the fear of the gods was a motive to enforce the laws of society, which were also the laws of morality." Emile Durkheim, of course, argued that religion exists because it unites humans into moral communities, and while law and custom also regulate conduct, religion alone "asserts itself not only over conduct but over the conscience. It not only dictates actions but ideas and sentiments." And, according to Bronislaw Malinowski, "every religion implies some reward of virtue and punishment of sin."

In one form or another, that proposition appears in nearly every introductory sociology and anthropology text on the market. But it's wrong. Moreover, it wasn't even handed down from the founders, at least not unanimously! Indeed, the founder of British anthropology, Edward Burnett Tylor, and the founder of British sociology, Herbert Spencer, both took pains to point out that only some kinds of religions have moral implications. "Savage animism [religion] is almost devoid of that ethical element which to the educated modern mind is the very mainspring of practical religion," Tylor reported. "Not, as I have said, that morality is absent from the life of the lower [cultures]. ... But these ethical laws stand on their own ground of tradition and public opinion, comparatively independent of the animistic beliefs and rites which exist beside them. The lower animism is not immoral, it is unmoral." Spencer also noted that many religions ignore morality, and he went even further by suggesting that some religions actively encourage crime and immorality: "At the present time in India, we have freebooters like the Domras, among whom a successful theft is always celebrated by a sacrifice to their chief god Gandak."

Although little noticed, that dissenting view has continued among anthropologists. In 1922, J.P. Mills noted that the religion of the Lhotas includes no moral code: "Whatever it be which causes so many Lhotas to lead virtuous lives it is not their religion." In his distinguished study of the Manus of New Guinea, Reo Franklin Fortune contrasted the moral aspects of their religion with that of the typical tribe, agreeing that "Tylor is entirely correct in stating that in most primitive regions of the world religion and morality maintain themselves independently."

Ruth Benedict also argued that to generalize the link between religion and morality "is to misconceive" the "history of religions." She suggested that the linkage probably is typical only of "the higher ethical religions." Ralph Barton reported that the Ifugaos impute their own unscrupulous exchange practices to their Gods and seize every opportunity to cheat them. Peter Lawrence found that the Garia of New Guinea have no conception whatever of "sin," and "no idea of rewards in the next world

for good works." And Mary Douglas flatly asserted that there is no "inherent relation between religion and morality: There are primitives who can be religious without being moral and moral without being religious."

Tylor's observation that not all religions support the moral order always should have been obvious to anyone familiar with Greek and Roman mythology. The Greco-Roman Gods were quite morally deficient. They were thought to do terrible things to one another and to humans as well -- sometimes merely for amusement. And while they were quite apt to do wicked things to humans if they failed to propitiate them, the Gods had no interest in anything (wicked or otherwise) humans might do to one another. Instead, the Greek and Roman Gods concerned themselves only with direct affronts.

For example, no religious sanctions were incurred by young women who engaged in premarital sex unless they immersed themselves in sacred waters reserved for virgins. Because Aristotle taught that the Gods were incapable of caring about mere humans, he could not have concurred that religion serves the function of sustaining and legitimating the moral order. Indeed, classical philosophers would have ridiculed such a proposition as peculiar to Jews and Christians -- and they would have been correct. The proposition about the moral functions of religion requires a particular conception of supernatural beings as deeply concerned about the behavior of humans toward one another. Such a conception of the Gods is found in many of the major world faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. But it appears to be largely lacking in the supernatural conceptions prevalent in much of Asia and in animism and folk religions generally.

It would seem to follow, therefore, that the moral behavior of individuals would be influenced by their religious commitments only in societies where the dominant religious organizations give clear and consistent expression to divine moral imperatives. Thus, for example, were proper survey data available, they should show that those who frequented the temples in Greco-Roman times were no more observant of the prevailing moral codes than were those who were lax in their religious practice. As Tylor pointed out, that is not to suggest that societies in antiquity lacked moral codes, but only that they were not predicated on religious foundations. It follows that the moral effectiveness of religions varies according to the moral engagement of their Gods.

Unconscious divine essences are unable to issue commandments or make moral judgments. Thus, conceptions of the supernatural are irrelevant to the moral order unless they are beings -- things having consciousness and desires. Put another way, only beings can desire moral conformity. Even that is not sufficient. Gods can lend sanctions to the moral order only if they are concerned about, informed about, and act on behalf of

humans. Moreover, to promote virtue among humans, Gods must be virtuous -- they must favor good over evil. Finally, Gods will be effective in sustaining moral precepts, the greater their scope -- that is, the greater the diversity of their powers and the range of their influence. All-powerful, all-seeing Gods ruling the entire universe are the ultimate deterrent.

Two conclusions follow from this discussion. First, the effects of religiousness on individual morality are contingent on images of Gods as conscious, morally concerned beings; religiousness based on impersonal or amoral Gods will not influence moral choices. Second, participation in religious rites and rituals will have little or no independent effect on morality.

Recently, I conducted an elaborate research study to test those conclusions, based on data for the United States and 33 other nations. The results were consistent and overwhelmingly supportive. In each of 27 nations within Christendom, the greater the importance people placed on God, the less likely they were to approve of buying goods they knew to be stolen, of someone failing to report that they had accidentally damaged an auto in a parking lot, or of smoking marijuana. The correlations were as high in Protestant as in Roman Catholic nations and where average levels of church attendance were high or low. Indeed, participation in Sunday services (a measure of ritual activity) was only weakly related to moral attitudes, and those correlations disappeared or became very small when the God "effects" were removed through regression analysis. That is, God matters; ritual doesn't.

The findings are similar for Muslim nations, where the importance placed on Allah is very strongly correlated with morality, but mosque attendance is of no significance. In India, too, concern for the Gods matters, but temple attendance has no detectable effect on morality. But in Japan, where the Gods are conceived of as many, small, and not particularly interested in human moral behavior, religion is irrelevant to moral outlooks -- concern about the God(s), visits to temples, prayer and meditation, all are without any moral effects.

Nor are there God or temple effects on morality in China. However, in China prayer does matter, but in the wrong direction! That is, the more often they pray, the more tolerant the Chinese are of immorality. I suggest that result is due to the fact that, in China, "prayer" seldom implies a longstanding, deeply felt relationship with a God, but merely involves requests for favors from various divinities of small scope. As such, praying tends to reflect a quite self-centered and self-serving

activity, consistent with rapidly shifting from one God to another on the basis of results, or even taking a stick to the statue of a God who fails. Seen in that light, a question about prayer is likely to select those somewhat lacking in terms of a social conscience.

My results show that, in and of themselves, rites and rituals have little or no impact on the major effect universally attributed to religion -- conformity to the moral order. Thus, it seems to amend the "law" linking religion and morality as follows: Images of Gods as conscious, powerful, morally concerned beings function to sustain the moral order.

Clearly, Durkheim made a major error when he dismissed Gods as mere religious epiphenomena. Unfortunately, his error had severe, widespread, and long-lasting consequences, for it quickly became the exclusive sociological view that religion consists of rites and ritual, and that those exist only because their latent function is to integrate societies and to thereby lend sacred sanctions to the norms. In retrospect, it seems remarkable that such a notion gained such rapid acceptance and went unchallenged for so long. Stripped of its functionalist jargon, the basic argument seems to have been that, since "we" know there are no Gods, they can't be the real object of religion -- the truism that things are real to the extent that people define them as real failed to make any headway in this area of social science.

So then, let us finally be done with the claim that religion is all about ritual. Gods are the fundamental feature of religions. That holds even for Godless religions, their lack of Gods explaining the inability of such faiths to attract substantial followings. Moreover, it was not the "wisdom of the East" that gave rise to science, nor did Zen meditation turn people's hearts against slavery. By the same token, science was not the work of Western secularists or even deists; it was entirely the work of devout believers in an active, conscious, creator God. And it was faith in the goodness of that same God and in the mission of Jesus that led other devout Christians to end slavery, first in medieval Europe and then again in the New World.

In those ways at least, Western civilization really was God-given.

Rodney Stark is a professor of sociology and comparative religion at the University of Washington. This article is adapted from *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*, to be published this month by Princeton University Press. Copyright © 2003 by Rodney Stark.