

## Returning God to the Social Scientific Study of Religion: A 'Field' Analysis

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For much of the twentieth century, the social scientific study of religion was essentially a Godless field. Not only because so many practitioners were non-believers, but because little or no attention was paid to God when analyzing religious phenomena. In keeping with Emile Durkheim's solemn assurances, God was banished from definitions of religion and was ignored in both research and theorizing.

In his immensely influential work, Durkheim dismissed Gods as unimportant window-dressing, stressing instead that rites and rituals are the fundamental stuff of religion. In a long review of Part VI of Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, Durkheim ([1886] 1994:19) condemned Spencer for reducing religion "to being merely a collection of beliefs and practices relating to a supernatural agent." He continued:

The idea of God which seemed to be the sum total of religion a short while ago, 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... We might perhaps be able to discover what is thus hidden beneath this quite superficial phenomenon... 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" ([1912]

1995:227). Thus began a new social science orthodoxy: Religion consists of participation in rites and rituals—*only*. In practice, this usually meant nothing more ‘religious’ than comparisons of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews—as in Durkheim’s famous, long-admired, but remarkably flawed, *Suicide* ([1897] 1951).

This set the model for subsequent studies, even though it easily can be demonstrated that rather than being an inessential “minor accident,” conceptions of God are the most fundamental aspect to religions.

One must wonder why anyone can think it plausible that the abundance of religious rites and rituals found in all human cultures are sustained without any apparent rationale. That is, Durkheim and his disciples were not even content to claim that people worship illusions, for then they would have to restore the Gods, illusory or not, to the core of religion. Instead, they have even dismissed illusory Gods, thereby proposing, at least by implication, that people knowingly pray to and worship the empty void. Remarkably, when confronted with this implication of the claim that religions are Godless, some well-known anthropologists have in fact affirmed that religious rites, including prayers, are *not* directed towards the Gods! We are asked to accept that even primitive tribal priests realize there are no Gods and are fully aware that their ritual actions are devoted merely to sustaining group solidarity (Beattie, 1966; Price, 1984; Sperber, 1975). Rodney Needham (1972) has gone so far as to deny that there is any human mental state that can properly be called religious belief, and therefore that all religious activity is purely socio-emotional expression.

It requires a great deal of sophisticated social scientific training for a person to accept such nonsense. People pray to *something*! To something above and beyond the material world. To something having the ability to hear prayers and having the

supernatural powers needed to influence nature and events. Such somethings, are Gods. Variations in how God or the Gods are conceived are the crucial difference among faiths and cultures.

### **Images of God**

The social scientific study of religion has three main components and, whether recognized or not, images of God are of central importance to them all: cross-cultural (including cultural evolution), social-psychological, and organizational.

#### *Cross-cultural*

The fallacy of omitting God from social scientific studies of religion is nowhere more apparent than in relation to Durkheim's most famous proposition, that *in all cultures, religion functions to sustain the moral order*. Many regard this as the closest thing to a "law" that the social scientific study of religion possesses. As formulated by Durkheim, 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" ([1886] 1994:21). In one form or another, this proposition appears in nearly every introductory sociology and anthropology text on the market. But, it's wrong. Even Durkheim might have had second thoughts had he read Edward Tylor ([1871] 1958:446), who was careful to point out that only *some kinds* of religions have moral implications:

To some the statement may seem startling, yet the evidence seems to justify it, that the relation of morality to religion is one that only belongs in its rudiments, or not at all, to rudimentary civilization. The comparison of savage and civilized religions bring into view...a deep-lying contrast in their practical action on human life...the popular idea that the moral government of the universe is an essential tenet of natural religion simply falls to the ground. Savage animism [religion] is almost devoid of that ethical element which to the educated modern mind is the very mainspring

of practical religion. 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.

Tyler was correct. The proposition about the moral functions of religion requires a particular conception of the supernatural as a being or beings deeply concerned about the behavior of humans towards one another. Such a conception of Gods(s) 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—that the moral effectiveness of religions varies according to the moral engagement of their Gods.

Unconscious divine essences such as the Tao or purely psychological ‘God’ constructs such as Paul Tillich’s “ground of being,” are unable to issue commandments or make moral judgments. 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 only lend sanctions to the moral order 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.

A recent paper tested these conclusions, based on data for the United States and 33 other nations (Stark, 2001b). The results were consistent and overwhelmingly supportive. In each of 27 nations within Christendom, the greater importance people placed on God, the less likely they were to approve of committing various violations of the criminal laws. The correlations between God and morality 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 these 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.

These 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 necessary 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.*

This, of course, raises the issue of how societies develop such an image of God. Having banished the Gods, Durkheim and those who have followed his lead could not formulate such a question, let alone pursue it. Yet it retains compelling intellectual merit and priority. Unfortunately, questions concerning cultural evolution are the most difficult matters faced by social science, since, unlike biological evolution, cultural evolution leaves no fossils. To use modern-day 'primitive' cultures as a stand-in for the past may be risky—there may be aspects of their cultures that prevented them from evolving and which greatly separate them from those cultures that did evolve. Keeping that possibility in mind, it still may be useful to examine the religions of contemporary primitives in search of cues as to the cultural starting point. Of course, there have been a number of well-known efforts to examine the evolution of the Gods (Albright, [1940] 1957; Barnes, 2000; Bellah, 1964; Burrow, [1871] 1903; Caird, 1899; Frazier, [1922] 1950; Freud, [1912-1913] 1950; Swanson, 1960; Tylor, [1871] 1958). Aside from the fact that most of these works were done rather long ago, they suffer, in various degrees, from three serious defects. First, most are very descriptive, lacking in both explanatory efforts and clear exposition of causal mechanisms. Second, they tend to rely far too heavily on hypothetical primitive cultures. Third, many of them make no effort to hide their antagonism towards religion and their intentions to discredit it.

Perhaps more trustworthy results concerning these matters could be gained from historical studies. For example, much is known about classical paganism, about Jewish monotheism, about early Christianity, about Islam, about Buddhism and Taoism. Far more can be done with these historical materials to chart the evolution of monotheism than has been attempted. In any event, the cultural evolution of the Gods clearly is a topic presenting immensely attractive challenges. And equally clearly, competition among images of God is a key element in any such analysis.

#### *Social-Psychological*

Here are included all studies of the nature of individual religiousness and of its social and psychological correlates. Here too, God has been almost completely omitted from the research menu.

Early in the 1960s Charles Y. Glock and I began preparing the first two major surveys of religious belief and behavior even conducted in the United States. As we wrote drafts of the basic questionnaire, we consulted some other social scientists and also some religious leaders and theologians. Many of these consultants challenged the emphasis we were placing on belief, claiming that a “common core religion” had come to so dominate American religious life that there no longer were any significant variations in belief—most people having abandoned the literal and unsophisticated beliefs of an earlier, uneducated era. Intellectuals writing about this core religion claimed that it placed little emphasis on doctrine and, perhaps for that reason, they were remarkably vague about what core believers did believe. What was strongly conveyed was that everyone had become a ‘liberal’ Protestant, except, of course, those who were Catholics or Jews (Herberg, 1960; Kallen, 1951; Lee, 1960; Williams, 1952).

Thus, in agreement with Durkheim (whom many cited), religion was not a set of beliefs, but a set of practices. Hence, the appropriate way to measure religion was by asking about the frequency of church attendance and whether one was a Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Other or None. From this perspective it seemed silly to devote many items to belief and it would be especially futile to ask people about their belief in God, because, in some sense, everyone does believe, making such a question largely meaningless. As evidence of this, many cited the Gallup Poll, which had asked several times: “Do you, personally, believe in God?” In each instance at least 96 percent had answered “Yes.” Of course, it required little imagination to wonder if everyone meant the same thing by “God.”

In any event, Glock and I were not deterred by all this advice (some of it remarkably ill-tempered), partly because our pretesting revealed that although “everyone” in the various liberal seminaries may have come to believe the same things (or, more accurately, to disbelieve in them), many American Christians (perhaps most) clearly did not fit the liberal mold. So, not without some hesitation, I wrote an item about God that allowed for degrees of certainty and a slight variation in one’s image of God.

*Which of the following statements comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?*

- 1. I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.*
- 2. While I have doubts, I feel I do believe in God.*
- 3. I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at other times.*
- 4. I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind.*

5. *I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.*

6. *I don't believe in God.*

7. *None of the above represents what I believe.*

*What I believe about God is \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (please specify).<sup>1</sup>*

The first survey to use this item was based on a sample of church members in the liberal San Francisco Bay Area, and it produced remarkable evidence against any notion of a common core American religion—Christians even disagreed about God. Only 41 percent of Congregationalists (now the United Church of Christ) expressed undoubted faith (#1) and 16 percent chose the “higher power” response (#4). Among Methodists, 60 percent chose response number one and 11 percent chose number four, as did 63 and 12 percent of the Episcopalians. In contrast, 81 percent of Missouri Lutherans and 99 percent of the Southern Baptists chose number one, and the rest of their fellow members chose response number two (Stark and Glock, 1968).

The second survey was based on a national sample of the adult population. Only 22 percent of Unitarians and 63 percent of Congregationalists selected response number one, as compared with 96 percent of Southern Baptists. Overall, 79 percent of Protestants and 85 percent of Catholics expressed unwavering faith in God (Stark and Glock, 1968).

Subsequently, the same question was asked of a large sample of Protestant clergy in the state of California. Again there were vast denominational differences: 45 percent of Congregationalist clergy selected answer one, as did 52 percent of the Methodists, 64 percent of the Episcopalians, 89 percent of the Missouri Lutherans and 97 percent of the

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<sup>1</sup> Fewer than 1 percent wrote in their own answer, nearly all of them featuring the omnipotent powers of God.

Southern Baptists. Altogether, 67 percent of these clergy expressed unwavering faith in God (Stark, Foster, Glock, and Quinley, 1971).

A similar item about Jesus produced even greater variation. Among California Church members only 40 percent of Congregationalists and a bare majority of Methodists and Episcopalians expressed certainty that Jesus “is the Divine Son of God,” while 93 percent of Missouri Lutherans and 99 percent of Southern Baptists took this position. In addition, 28 percent of Congregationalists and 21 percent of Methodists believed that Jesus was not divine at all, but only a man (Stark and Glock, 1968).

These findings suggested that American religion has not coalesced into a common theological core, at least not a liberal core. Differences remain on matters so fundamental as the image of God. Our analysis of the data showed that the question about God was central to all other aspects of religious belief and commitment. However, this did not restore God to an important place in the social scientific study of religion. In most subsequent studies, the “religious factor” continued to be nothing but comparisons of Protestants and Catholics (and sometimes, if the samples were large enough, Jews were compared as well).

### *Organizational*

Large numbers of studies in the social scientific study of religion focus on religious organizations and groups: on churches, denominations, prayer groups, and the like. Unfortunately, nearly all of these have been case studies; there have been all too few quantitative studies that really used organizations as the units of analysis. Instead, nearly all quantitative studies have used group membership as a proxy measure of individual beliefs and practices, transforming an organizational variable into one that is social-

psychological. As already noted, most studies of religious effects have merely involved comparing members of one group with another.

Recently, this practice was substantially improved when, instead of crude Protestant-Catholic contrasts, denominations were clustered into six categories and Protestants were divided into mainline, evangelical, and African-American (Steensland, et al., 2000). Specific religious bodies were placed in one of these categories mainly on the basis of the distribution of religious beliefs among their members. Thus, many members of groups classified as mainline expressed doubts about such things as miracles, while most of those in the Evangelical groups accepted miracles as true. For analyzing group differences, such as the growth of the evangelicals and the decline of the mainline bodies, this would be an adequate way to proceed. Unfortunately, this denominational variable usually is used, not to analyze groups, but to classify individuals in terms of their religious orientation. That is, *all persons* affiliated with a mainline denomination are classified as being religiously liberal for purposes of analysis. This is needlessly bad measurement—large standard deviations obtain on the belief items, not only within the mainline set, but within each denomination, whether mainline or evangelical. It would be far better to classify individuals on the basis of their actual beliefs, rather than to rely on a crude inference based on their denominational affiliation.

New research by Bader and Froese (forthcoming) ‘correct’ the Steensland et al. approach by using a modest scale measuring images of God to classify individuals and comparing this with the results obtained when these same individuals are classified on the basis of their denomination. Correlations between the God Scale and such things as attitudes about abortion and sexual morality, which are presumably influenced by an

individual's religious outlook, are far higher than when people are characterized by their images of God rather than by their denominational affiliation. Moreover, as a matter of expedience, it is far easier and less expensive to ask people about their beliefs than it is to discover their actual denomination and to code it—unless, of course, one settles for Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Other, and None.

### **Studying Images of God**

About twenty years ago, Andrew Greeley began to support the frequent inclusion of a set of items about images of God in the General Social Surveys. Respondents are told: “There are many different ways of picturing God,” and then presented with sets of paired attributes and asked to place themselves on a continuum stretching from one attribute to the other. Several examples are:

Mother 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 Father

Judge 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 Lover

Although the items have been repeated in most General Social Surveys, they have been put to very little use—even Father Greeley has made very little use of them. For one thing, it is not clear what these dimensions mean. In addition, the distributions are quite skewed. Typically half or more of the respondents place themselves at 7 Father, while fewer than 2 percent opt for 1 Mother. In similar fashion, most respondents see God as a Judge, few as a Lover. This is not to suggest that Greeley chose invalid attributes to which to apply Semantic Differential techniques, but that the items aren't very subtle and thereby push Americans into substantial agreement in choosing among these particular features. On the other hand, there is sufficient variation to permit Bader and Froese to include four of these items along with two other questions to build their scale and to

discover the centrality of images of God in studying the consequences of individual religiousness.

Moreover, Greeley's items and Bader and Froese's scale are a great improvement over the single question about belief in God I wrote in the early 1960s (although this remains the 'standard' item in surveys). Even so, there is far too little basis for imposing these options (such as Father/Mother), rather than some others, on respondents, and quantitative studies necessarily impose a set of options. Before formulating any new survey items to assess images of God, it would seem wise to more carefully explore *qualitatively* what dimensions are pertinent. Without adequate knowledge of what people do believe about God, one runs the risk of missing the essence of their religiousness in precisely the way as happened in this survey interview conducted in Great Britain several years ago (Davie, 1994).

Interviewer: "Do you believe in God?"

Respondent: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth?"

Respondent: "No, just the ordinary one."

There is reason to suppose that this respondent would have firmly agreed that God can do miracles, but did not when this definition of miracles was substituted for the term. To discover what this respondent actually believes, one would need to probe her inner religious life more deeply than has been typical. Tactically speaking, we need to do considerable qualitative research in preparation for more fruitful and valid quantitative research. Then, we can create more penetrating and revealing items about conceptions of God.

An interesting possibility is to explore variations in the images of God across occupations and social structures. One would suppose that the images of God prevalent among academics, for example, would differ rather sharply from those prevalent among stockbrokers or military officers. Indeed there are substantial reasons to predict that physical scientists, especially mathematicians and physicists, will hold a more active image of God than will social scientists or professors in the humanities (Stark, 2003). But it will require some sophisticated explorations to develop and ask the appropriate questions.

In similar fashion, qualitative work should precede efforts to study cross-cultural variations in the images of God(s) and the social consequences of such beliefs. In the study of religion and the moral order discussed above, images of God were based on the dominant religion of a society (Christian, Muslim, Shinto, etc.) and the actual item used to classify individuals was not their image of God, but their answer to the question: “On a scale of from 1 to 10, how important is God in your life?” The rather powerful results obtained by such a vague measure strongly suggest that deep insights can be gained into cultures if we can accurately isolate their dominant image of God and/or the distribution of various images of God. And this, of course, ties back to questions concerning the cultural evolution of the Gods.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly there is much to be done. Among the pending matters, work on the cultural evolution of the Gods requires only time and talent, since no original data collection would seem to be needed. But, these cultural studies can benefit greatly from improved and extended study of images of God from the social-psychological

perspective. Among the questions that can be addressed and which may be of considerable interest to those studying the evolution of the Gods are these: Why do intellectuals seem so inclined to foster vague divine essences rather than conceive of God as an active, aware, concerned being? Can such impersonal images of God actually sustain the levels of individual religious commitment needed to sustain vigorous religious institutions? Or, can religions lacking both creeds and congregations, as is the case in what is referred to as New Age Spirituality, actually meet most people's needs? What are the social effects of creedless, unorganized, religions? The point being that in the end all major approaches to the social scientific study of religion are closely intertwined and mutually informative.

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