THE OTHER CONFESSIONAL HISTORY: ON SECULAR BIAS
IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

The rejection of confessional commitments in the study of religion in favor of social-scientific or humanistic theories of religion has produced not unbiased accounts, but reductionist explanations of religious belief and practice with embedded secular biases that preclude the understanding of religious believer-practitioners. These biases derive from assumptions of undemonstrable, dogmatic, metaphysical naturalism or its functional equivalent, an epistemological skepticism about all truth claims of revealed religions. Because such assumptions are so widespread among scholars today, they are not often explicitly articulated. They were overtly asserted by Emile Durkheim in his Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912), however, and are implicit in the claims of two other thinkers influential in the study of early modern Christianity in recent years, namely Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault. The use of such theories in the history of religion yields secular confessional history, parallel to traditional religious confessional history only with different embedded metaphysical beliefs. If scholars want to understand religious persons such that the latter would recognize themselves in what is said about them, rather than impose their own metaphysical convictions on them, then they should reject metaphysically biased reductionist theories of religion no less than confessional religious assumptions in the practice of their scholarship. Instead, a study of religion guided not by theories but by the question, “What did it mean to them?” and which is particularized in metaphysically neutral ways offers a third alternative that avoids confessional history, whether religious or secular. When carried out consistently for multiple traditions, such an approach can reconstruct disagreements that point beyond description to historical explanation of change over time.

I will begin with a story.¹ In graduate school I was having lunch with two friends, fellow graduate students. We had gotten our food in a crowded cafeteria and were headed to find a table when one of them spilled his drink on the floor. Immediately, the other student grabbed a handful of napkins, got down on his knees, and started cleaning up the mess. “Thanks a lot,” said the first student, “your commitment to the social contract really amazes me.” “You’re welcome,” said the second, “but I’m amazed by your secular interpretation of my imitatio Christi.”

This incident illustrates how a given human action can be interpreted in radically different ways. More specifically, it shows that behavior enacted within a

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented as the Snowdon Lecture in the Study of Religion at Wesleyan University in 2002, as a Forum Lecture at Brigham Young University in 2004, and at the conference on Religion and History at Wesleyan University in 2005. Among those who offered helpful suggestions on those versions, I am especially grateful to Robert Sullivan, Jim Turner, Gary Shaw, and Craig Harline.
religious frame of reference, but not bearing any overtly religious character, might be viewed in secular terms. Nor would such a reading be obviously erroneous; helping someone in need might indeed be done out of respect for social contract ideals, from simple human decency, in order to make oneself appear virtuous, or for any number of other reasons or combination of reasons. Yet in this case, unless we have grounds to doubt the veracity of the student who helped to mop up the mess, we know that such interpretations, although consistent with the evidence, would be mistaken. The student, who was a believing and practicing Christian, told us how he understood what he had done, and at least implicitly, what had motivated him. It had nothing to do with commitment to the social contract. His frame of reference was not secular political attitudes or values but religious conviction, his language closer to Thomas à Kempis than to Rousseau. This incident suggests an important lesson: an action that might look non-religious and that could be interpreted plausibly in secular terms might have been motivated by and understood by its protagonist in religious terms.

Now for a second story, like the first directly related to the subject of this essay. I began my first year of college at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, as a Midwestern outsider who knew little about Mormonism or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. I had never before met a member of the LDS Church. In northern Utah I found myself regarded as a member of a “gentile” (that is, non-LDS) minority within a dominant and alien religious culture. Struggling to make sense of that culture and its people, I found that the more I comprehended LDS teachings—what the doctrines actually were and implied—the more incomprehensible did it seem that people actually believed and lived by them. As an undergraduate, I entertained any number of explanations for why Mormons believed and lived as they did, ranging from the dismissive and disparaging (they’re crazy, brainwashed, uncritical, sheltered, ignorant) to the more sophisticated (they’re habituated from youth, a strong sense of community keeps them in the fold, they fear the social consequences of rejecting their religion). The more sophisticated explanations or combinations of explanations—to which others could be added, based on social-scientific or cultural theories of religion—generally satisfied me. They were plausible, they produced credible accounts of the data, and they elucidated to my satisfaction what Mormonism was, how it functioned, and why Mormons did what they did.

But there was a nagging problem. However satisfactory my explanations were to me, or to others who shared my assumptions, those explanations failed to help me understand the members of the LDS Church any better, just as reference to the social contract failed to supply a correct interpretation of my friend’s action in wiping up the spilled drink. In fact, because such explanations are inherently

2. James Boyd White has said that, “it seems to be a characteristic of the side of life we call religious that at a deep level it makes no sense at all to those outside the religion in question. The religious stories and myths of another people are to us inherently and permanently incredible.” White, “How Should We Talk about Religion? Inwardness, Particularity, and Translation,” Occasional Papers of the Erasmus Institute (Notre Dame, IN: Erasmus Institute, 2001), 7-8. This describes the situation for those who remain outside the religion in question, but it cannot be the whole story, or else one could not account for religious conversions to beliefs that lost their hitherto incredible character and became believable to a given person.
reductionist, in the literal sense of reducing religion to something else, they led away from any sense of what Mormon experience, beliefs, and behaviors were like. As the colloquial phrase goes, I did not “get” Mormons, not despite but because of my explanations, since all of them implied that Mormonism is not what Mormons take it to be. It became apparent that if I wanted to “get” them, if I wanted to understand Mormons rather than to reduce their religion to something else—that is, if, as an outsider, I wanted to grasp as nearly as possible how they saw the world, why they did what they did, how their beliefs impinged on their social lives, political preferences, and cultural engagements—then there was no choice but to set aside what made sense to me and to endeavor to comprehend the relationship between their religious beliefs and their lives. It goes without saying that variations distinguish local communities and individuals in a thousand and one ways. One cannot deduce specific behavior or beliefs from official ecclesiastical pronouncements; not all LDS men and women believe and behave identically; Logan is not Salt Lake City or Moab; and so forth. But whatever social influences or cultural factors affect individual members of the LDS Church in their respective local communities, on the whole they believe what they believe and do what they do because they regard Mormonism as the one, true continuation and fulfillment of Christianity, revealed by God to his church through a series of latter-day prophets beginning with Joseph Smith in upstate New York in the early nineteenth century. According to them, the LDS Church offers the true, divinely revealed view of reality with respect to human origins, meaning, values, purpose, and destiny. Conversely, not to believe this, at least in substance, is to cease to be a Mormon. This insight about LDS convictions—not recourse to sociological, anthropological, or some other sort of theory—is the key to understanding them, as distinct from reductionistically explaining them.

Contemporary Utah Mormonism is not Reformation-era Christianity, my field of professional expertise. Nor does one’s individual experience suffice for the historian who seeks to “know the religious belief of the past in ways that might have been recognisable to the people concerned,” as Robert Scribner put it.3 Nevertheless, my Utah experience harbors important lessons not only for the study of contemporary American Mormonism or early modern Christianity but, mutatis mutandis, for the study of various religious traditions in other eras and contexts as well. First, there is a fundamental distinction to be made between attempting to understand a given religion on the terms of those who believe and practice it, and attempting to explain that religion (or religion in general) in terms that reduce it entirely to something else.4 These are two radically different endeavors. In fact, the expression to “lose one’s faith” often means to accept as an explanation of religion what one previously, as a believer, regarded (and rejected) merely as a purported explanation.5 Second, to recognize the religious basis of someone’s


4. I am indebted to Wilhelm Dilthey’s distinction between understanding and explanation, although I use these terms to denote two different approaches to the study of religion. For Dilthey, Verstehen was the mode of intellecution of the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften), Erklärung the mode of the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften).

5. A colleague of mine, for example, explains his undergraduate conversion to and subsequent
Mormonism might be entirely mistaken, and yet it is simply empirically accurate to say that Mormons believe it to be true and endeavor to lead their lives accordingly. Whether LDS claims—or those of any other religious tradition—are true or false is entirely irrelevant to the issue of whether certain people believe and are motivated by them. The careful attempt to understand as nearly as possible and to represent fairly the religion of a given person, community, or tradition has too often been wrongly conflated with questions about whether the religious claims in question are true or not. But the ontological status of religion and the epistemological status of religious truth claims have no bearing on a determination of what religion means to its practitioners, and how it is related to their lives.

All this might seem trivial, little more than an assertion that religious believers believe what they believe, that their beliefs influence their lives, and that understanding religious people requires one to acknowledge these things. Yet the implications of such claims are less banal than they might seem, and run deeply counter to the dominant ways in which many historians of early modern Christianity, as well as many scholars of religion in general, have tended in recent decades to approach their subject matter. By and large, the impetus has been to explain religion on the basis of reductionist theories, not to understand it on the terms of its believer-practitioners.

Traditional Christian church history, known as confessional history for its assumption of particular claims about the truth of this or that Christian confession (for example, Lutheran, Catholic, Mennonite), has in recent decades been rejected by most professional historians because of its biases for and against particular traditions. The analyses of confessional history are skewed by substantive, frequently anachronistic religious claims; or to put it in the terms used above, even at its best, confessional history often privileges and seeks sympathetically to understand a given tradition at the expense of explaining others in reductionist terms. I concur with this criticism, and so reject traditional confessional history as an approach to religious people in the past. It is particularly objectionable in a field such as early modern Christianity, which witnessed the formation of distinct, divisive, and competing Christian traditions that themselves engendered modern

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6. Scholars who think that religious beliefs actually do not make claims about reality, even that religious believers tout court do not regard their own beliefs in this way, are quite mistaken. According to art historian Joseph Koerner, for example, following Dan Sperber, in religion “the objects of belief are not facts about the world but representations. Believers believe in the authority of statements, rather than in what the statements say, as measured, for example, by experience” (Koerner, The Reformation of the Image [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 233-234). One corrective to errors of this sort might be to spend some time among religious believers rather than simply to theorize about them.

confessional history, beginning already in the sixteenth century. Partly (and understandably) in pursuit of impartiality, most recent historians of Reformation-era Christianity have turned to theories of religion drawn from the modern social sciences (most often sociology, anthropology, or psychology) or the humanities (sometimes philosophy, and more recently, literary criticism or cultural theory), in an effort to treat all traditions with even-handed neutrality. Yet at the same time, however well-intentioned, this move is deeply problematic: the means and the end are mismatched, most fundamentally because the assumptions embedded in such theories are almost never impartial or neutral with respect to religion as such; however unprejudiced they might be with respect to any particular religious tradition. The result is not a neutral or objective account of what religion really is, still less a means by which to understand what religion means to its believer-practitioners. Rather, the results yield differently biased accounts that reflect the secular assumptions underpinning the theories.

Confessional history appears in a somewhat different light if we regard its distinguishing mark not as the imposition of particular religious beliefs in the study of religion, but rather, more broadly, as the imposition of undemonstrable metaphysical beliefs, whatever their content, in the practice of that scholarship. In this conceptualization, the adoption of secular theories that overtly or tacitly explain religion by reducing it to something else would constitute a form of confessional history—a secular confessional history—one that in important ways mirrors traditional, religious confessional history. If such an idea seems strange, this derives largely from the fact that the foundational beliefs of the modern social sciences and humanities, notwithstanding the linguistic turn, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and other recent intellectual trends, are by now so pervasive and so taken for granted that they are not even self-consciously regarded as beliefs at all. Rather, they are implicitly considered in academic discourse as true, neutral descriptions of the nature of reality, although this is seldom articulated. Consider the matter-of-fact remarks made without comment or justification by the eminent American historian Richard White in the midst of a recent book, the very terseness of which seems intended to connote their supposed obviousness: “I am a historian. I don’t believe in transcendence. There is only the everyday.”

The assumptions behind such remarks are theologically atheistic, metaphysically materialist, and culturally relativist, framed by the postulates of the natural sciences, and historically derived in part from the unresolved doctrinal disputes over Christian truth in early modern Europe. Whereas traditional confessional historians assumed that a particular religious tradition is true and conducted their investigation accordingly, secular confessional historians assume—based ultimately on a dogmatic metaphysical naturalism, or on its functional equivalent,

8. The two most ambitious, opposed interpretations of the history of Christianity written in the sixteenth century were the so-called Magdeburg Centuries, produced by a team under the direction of Matthias Flacius Illyricus in Lutheran Magdeburg, which appeared between 1559 and 1574, and the Ecclesiastical Annals of the Catholic Oratorian, Caesar Baronius, which was published in Rome between 1588 and 1607. See Pontien Polman, L’Elément historique dans la controverse religieuse du XVle siècle (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1932), 213-215, 527.

a thoroughgoing epistemological skepticism about all religious claims—that no religion is, indeed cannot be, what its believer-practitioners claim that it is. As a result and by necessity, as Clifford Geertz has recently put it, “‘Religion’ is everyone’s favorite dependent variable.”\textsuperscript{10} In both cases, religious and secular confessional histories depend in a substantive way on undemonstrated and undemonstrable metaphysical beliefs. To the extent that the modern social sciences and humanities are framed implicitly by the metaphysical naturalism of the modern natural sciences, they leave no room for the reality of the content of religious claims: in Christianity, for example, content concerning God, Satan, sin, grace, heaven, hell, revelation, redemption, providence, sanctity, and the rest. Consequently, spirituality, for example, can only be approached through secular psychological categories; sacraments only in terms of anthropological rituals and symbols that ostensibly construct and reinforce community identity; sin only in terms of socially and/or politically disapproved behaviors that threaten stability or some other interest. That prayer might really entail relationship with God, or that sacraments might really be channels of grace, or that sin might be an objective category of actions disapproved of by God, are notions that modern social-scientific and cultural-theoretical approaches to religion simply reject as incompatible with their implicit assumptions. Yet such convictions and experiences linked to them were integral to early modern Christians’ lives, in different ways and to varying degrees, just as many of these convictions and experiences are for Christians today. This point holds, it seems to me, for traditions such as Judaism and Islam in their respective ways. Put bluntly, the underlying beliefs of the modern social sciences and humanities are metaphysically naturalist and culturally relativist, and consequently contend that religion is and can only be a human construction. Believer-practitioners in traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, by contrast and in different ways, believe in transcendent reality and divine revelation, and in one sense or another they privilege their respective understandings of reality based on faith, which informs their worldviews, actions, and lives. We have in this opposition, it seems to me, the distilled essence of the post-Enlightenment, rationalist rejection of the claims of revealed religion as such, the modern genealogy of which is traceable back at least as far as Spinoza on the dogmatic side, Hume on the skeptical side. On this view, religion must be reducible to something social, political, economic, cultural, psychological, or natural, because by definition there is nothing more for it to be.

But is dogmatic naturalism a metaphysical belief parallel to religious beliefs, rather than a demonstrated truth or a neutral description of reality? While adequately to address the issue would require a book (or several), the basic point for the purposes of the present argument is clear enough. Any conviction that precludes in principle the possibilities that transcendent, spiritual reality exists, that divine revelation is possible, that divinely worked miracles occur or have occurred, that there is an afterlife, and the like, cannot itself be demonstrated a posteriori, in our present or in any realistically foreseeable state of knowledge.

To verify such a conviction with respect to miracles, for example, would among other things require observation of all natural occurrences at all times and places, including those in the past—a patent impossibility. The undeniably fruitful \textit{a priori} assumption of metaphysical naturalism in the natural sciences is not and cannot be a proof that in fact, for example, no miraculous events of the sort described in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament have ever occurred.\footnote{Correlatively, had some of them occurred, this would have no influence whatsoever, as is sometimes mistakenly claimed, on the findings or explanatory power today of the natural sciences, or of inductive reasoning in general. On this point, see, for example, J. Houston, \textit{Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume} (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 138-142.} Since it is impossible to verify that none of them occurred, it is possible that some of them might have occurred. Therefore to assert that none of them \textit{could} have occurred is to assert a metaphysical belief about reality, to pass from the \textit{postulate} to the \textit{dogma} of metaphysical naturalism. Understandably but fallaciously, this belief gains strength from the ongoing, remarkable technological successes derived from the findings of the natural sciences—as if greater mastery and explanation of the material world could somehow demonstrate the non-existence of spiritual reality, or show that miracles are impossible in principle. If, for example, the personal God of traditional Christianity is real, then all the computer wizardry or biotechnology in the world cannot make God an illusion. Among many academics (although much less so, at least in the U.S., outside the academy\footnote{A 1989 Gallup poll of Americans’ religious views revealed that 82\% of those polled (and they were not simply the uneducated) agreed with the proposition that “even today, miracles are still performed by the power of God,” and only 6\% disagreed completely with the proposition. George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli, \textit{The People’s Religion: American Faith in the 90’s} (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier, 1989), 58, cited in John P. Meier, \textit{A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus}, \textit{vol. 2, Mentor, Message, and Miracles} (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 520-521. Whatever else this finding implies, Meier rightly insists that “the academic creed of ‘no modern person can believe in miracles’ should be consigned to the dustbin of empirically falsified hypotheses” (ibid., 521).}), the belief that miracles are impossible in principle seems natural, normal, obvious, undeniable—rather like religious beliefs in close-knit, traditional societies. The conviction has an aura of neutrality and objectivity, as if dogmatic metaphysical naturalism were somehow not as much a personal conviction as is dogmatic religion, as if rejection of the very possibility of transcendent reality were the default position, one obvious to any intelligent person.\footnote{For those who still believe that David Hume’s criticism of miracles on epistemological grounds comprises the final word on the matter, see Houston, \textit{Reported Miracles}, esp. 121-207; C. Stephen Evans, \textit{The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 153-156; and more narrowly but perhaps more powerfully, David Johnson, \textit{Hume, Holism, and Miracles} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).}

It is an undemonstrable belief to hold that any religious claim that violates metaphysical naturalism must be false. Therefore to adopt a theory or theoretical hybrid purporting to explain religion in terms dictated by metaphysical naturalism is to work in a manner analogous to that of a traditional, religious confessional historian, insofar as one’s analysis relies substantively on one’s own beliefs. In my experience, even to raise this issue in the setting of secular academia verges on the bizarre—I am tempted to say “heretical”—so pervasive and deeply ingrained are the underlying assumptions of metaphysical naturalism, often coupled with a robust cultural relativism, that it challenges. But if we go back a few generations
we can find a social scientist—one whose sociology of religion remains highly influential today—actually asserting the importance of metaphysical naturalism as the basis for the social sciences in the study of religion. Emile Durkheim did so explicitly in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, first published in 1912.

Near the end of book one, for example, Durkheim states that “Surely, it ought to be a principle [un principe] for the science of religions that religion expresses nothing that is not in nature: There is no science except science of natural phenomena.” Or again, in the most famous chapter of the book, he writes that, “The sensations that the physical world evokes in us cannot, by definition [par définition], contain anything that goes beyond that world.” In dismissing the mindset that accepts the possibility of miracles, Durkheim clearly reveals that he conceives the social sciences on the model of the natural sciences:

Although the principle of determinism is firmly established in the physical and natural sciences, its introduction into the social sciences began only a century ago, and its authority there is still contested. The idea that societies are subject to necessary laws and constitute a realm of nature has deeply penetrated only a few minds. It follows that true miracles are thought possible in society. . . . As regards social things, we still have the mind-set of primitives.

Such people “cling to these illusions that,” Durkheim alleges, “are repeatedly contradicted by experience,” because “they have not yet grasped the need to turn to the painstaking methods of the natural sciences in order progressively to sweep away the darkness.” In the book’s introduction he compares his social-scientific endeavor to the work of a biologist, a physicist, and a doctor. Sounding much like Freud in The Future of an Illusion, and pointing to Durkheim’s phylogenetic method of explaining newer and more complex religions by means of older and simpler ones, beginning with totemism as the simplest of all, Durkheim writes that “To understand a delusion [un délire] properly and to be able to apply the most appropriate treatment, the doctor needs to know what its point of departure was. That event is the more easily detected the nearer to its beginnings the delusion can be observed.”

15. Durkheim, Forms, bk. 2, ch. 7, 226 (my emphasis); idem, Formes, 321. See also Forms, 419, where he calls “salvation by faith” a “mere idea,” and asserts that, “In fact, an idea is but one element of ourselves. How could it confer on us powers that are superior to those given us in our natural makeup? As rich in emotive power as an idea may be, it cannot add anything to our natural vitality; it can only release emotive forces that are already within us, neither creating nor increasing them” (my emphasis). I know of few sixteenth-century Protestants who would have concurred that salvation by faith was a “mere idea”—to say nothing of millions of evangelical Protestants today—yet Durkheim’s dogmatic metaphysical views guarantee that this is all that it can be.
17. Durkheim, Forms, 6; idem, Formes, 10. For the analogy to biology, see Durkheim, Forms, 3; for the analogy to physics, see ibid., 8.
Durkheim’s belief in metaphysical naturalism is foundational for his entire endeavor. Because “by definition” there can be nothing beyond the natural world, all religious claims that refer to anything transcendent, spiritual, or supernatural must be false considered as such, and their referents must be reducible to natural phenomena. Religion, grounded in social experience and so in what Durkheim repeatedly calls “the real,” is not and cannot be what believers think it is, nor can they be consulted for a definition or account of religion, even their own.18 What religion means to religious people is irrelevant to grasping its essence. Small wonder, since when considered straightforwardly, to follow Durkheim’s own characterization, religious claims belong to a “delusion” of primitive-minded people “clinging” to “illusions” and still in pre-scientific “darkness.” What is perhaps Durkheim’s most famous assertion is consistent with this assessment: when religious people think that they are worshipping God or gods, they are really conserving society and renewing the supra-individual social experience whence religious beliefs had their genesis. Durkheim’s constantly recurring references to “the real” refer necessarily to the natural, material world, of which society is the highest expression. The social realm is a natural realm that differs from others only in its greater complexity.”19

We can see precisely where Durkheim moves from the impressive findings of the natural sciences based upon the postulate of naturalism (and determinism), to the specious claim that naturalism is a demonstrated truth. He refers to the modern “awareness that there is a natural order of things, in other words, that the phenomena of the universe are internally linked according to necessary relationships called laws.” He continues: “Now, the idea of universal determinism is of recent origin; even the greatest thinkers of classical antiquity did not achieve full awareness of it. That idea is territory won by the empirical sciences; it is the postulate [postulat] on which they rest and which their advancement has proved.”20 This last claim is mistaken; the advancement of the sciences cannot in principle “demonstrate” that metaphysical naturalism is more than a postulate, nor can present experience possibly “contradict” a mindset that acknowledges the possibility of miracles wrought by God. Clearly Durkheim believed that this was so, and he sought to explain religion as though his dogma were an indisputable truth. In doing so, however, he devised his single-genus, genealogical theory of religion not as a neutral but as a confessional social scientist, an investigator committed to metaphysical naturalism. The nature of reality itself is at stake in the difference between religious and secular worldviews. In treating his own foundational belief as though it were an undeniable truth—in referring constantly to “the real” as though it were a corollary

18. “Well before the science of religions instituted its methodical comparisons, men had to create their own idea of what religion is. . . . But since these notions are formed unmethodically, in the comings and goings of life, they cannot be relied on and must be rigorously kept to one side in the examination that follows. It is not our preconceptions, passions, or habits that must be consulted for the elements of the definition we need; definition is to be sought from reality itself” (Durkheim, Forms, 21-22). By definition, according to Durkheim, this reality is strictly naturalistic and materialist.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. Ibid., 24 (my emphasis on final phrase); idem, Formes, 36. The entire final sentence in French: “C’est [cette notion du déterminisme universel] une conquête des sciences positives; c’est le postulat sur lequel elles reposent et qu’elles ont démontré par leurs progrès.”
of metaphysical naturalism and a settled issue—Durkheim not only begs a central question, but seems oblivious to the fact.

Durkheim’s dubious insistence on metaphysical naturalism need not be taken to imply, of course, that the entirety of his sociology of religion is without value. His emphasis on the social character of religion, one reinforced by so many other sociologists, has been a major contribution to the study of religion in the past century, one that has been taken up fruitfully by many historians of religion. This social emphasis has helped to breathe life into religion as lived experience among concrete human beings, broadening and enlivening it beyond narrow ecclesiastical histories of institutions and doctrines. Put bluntly, in the scholarly study of Christianity, Durkheim’s emphasis helped to change church history into the social history of religion. Yet to say that religion is deeply social in no way implies that all its beliefs and practices must be reducible to social life within the terms dictated by metaphysical naturalism. Whatever else the latter claim entails, it is guaranteed to prevent one from understanding religion on the terms of its practitioners.

Durkheim looked to the natural sciences as a model for the study of religion, and was explicit about the foundational importance of metaphysical naturalism in the endeavor. Historians of religion today (at least among those who study early modern Christianity) rarely mention either point, although the implicit assumption of metaphysical naturalism—perhaps more often in the form of epistemological skepticism about all religious claims, rather than confident rejection of the possibility that some might be true—is extremely widespread, indeed a virtual sine qua non in the history of religion, perhaps because the only alternative is perceived to be apologetic, confessional history. This makes for a great irony: metaphysical naturalism or at least committed skepticism about religious claims is widely accepted as a working assumption, yet the social sciences and humanities concerned with religion arguably have never distanced themselves further from the natural sciences.21 Scholars of religion today do not avow naturalist metaphysical commitments because presumably they do not need to. Such beliefs constitute part of the assumed background convictions of secular academia, in which ostensibly it is simply “obvious” that claims about miracles or the afterlife, for example, are “not to be taken seriously.” Yet assumptions are no less operative for being unexpressed, and more recent theories of religion with an implicit commitment to metaphysical naturalism are ultimately no less reductionist than is

21. As Geertz puts it with characteristic panache, “the utopianism induced by a misconceived view of pre-twentieth-century physics... that was imported into the human sciences has led not to the gates of paradigm-land, but to a great deal of wasted motion and high proclamation” (Geertz, “The State of the Art: ‘Local Knowledge’ and Its Limits,” in Available Light, 136-137; first published as “‘Local Knowledge’ and Its Limits,” in The Yale Journal of Criticism 5 [1993], 129-135). I exclude consideration of those who aspire to explain religion via fields such as sociobiology or evolutionary psychology, since such explanations have had little if any influence on historians of medieval, early modern, or modern Christianity, the fields with which I am most familiar. Some systematic sociologists of religion, however, have sought to reduce religion to aspects of human beings’ biological constitution. See, for example, the neo-Feuerbachian, projectionist theory of religion conceived as part of human “externalization,” which in his early work Peter Berger claimed was grounded in “the biological constitution of man” (Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (1967) [New York: Anchor Books, 1990], 4). See also ibid., 5, 8, 19.
Durkheim’s sociology of religion. This point can perhaps be made most strongly by turning to the discipline often considered the least reductionist in the study of religion, namely social and/or cultural anthropology. The idea is widespread that the careful application of anthropological methods and categories is a vital tool in the intellectual satchel of the historian of religion.22 And in recent decades within the domain of social and cultural anthropology, perhaps no approach to religion has been seen as more useful, more sympathetic to believer-practitioners on their own terms, than Clifford Geertz’s broad interpretive notion of “thick description,” which he particularized for the study of religion in his famous article, “Religion as a Cultural System.”

In this article, Geertz’s definition of religion is as follows: “a religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”23 At base, according to Geertz, a religion is “a system of symbols.” Fundamental to his definition is his understanding of symbols, by which he means “any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception,” that is, “tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.”24 Conspicuously lacking here, and symptomatic of an underlying metaphysical naturalism, is anything beyond strictly human conceptions and motivations to which the symbols refer, anything beyond the natural world that they symbolize. Regardless of the period in question, it is hard to imagine that any believing Christian (or Jew, or Muslim) would acknowledge Geertz’s implicit starting point: that religion—all religion—is merely one or another “system of symbols,” rather than, for example, a response to God that makes use of symbols. This distinction parallels the one between religion as reducible to social relations, as Durkheim would have it, and religion as a deeply social phenomenon. According to Geertz and other cultural anthropologists who take a similar approach, religion begins and ends with human beings; according to religious believer-practitioners in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, it begins with God, with a divine initiative that solicits a human response and relationship. Note that here, unlike in Durkheim, there is no sharp insistence on avoiding “illusions,” no strong declaration of metaphysical naturalism.25 Why beat a horse that is purportedly dead? Durkheim was writing in 1912, Geertz in 1973. Instead, the starting point tacitly assumes a metaphysical naturalism that reduces the spiritual to the symbolic and religion to

22. For a confirmation of the appeal of anthropological theories of ritual to medieval historians as well as a trenchant critique of the application of such theories to medieval rites and practices, see Philippe Buc, The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 203-261.


24. Ibid., 91.

25. On two occasions, however, one of which concerns the question of divine intervention in the world, the other the truth value of religious claims, Geertz refers to “the business of the scientist” and to “the self-imposed limitations of the scientific perspective” (ibid., 112, 123).
culture. In certain passages, Geertz seems (whether intentionally or not) to have replaced “God” with “symbol”: He writes that “Man depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creatural viability” (compare with this version, which many believer-practitioners would acknowledge: “Man depends upon God with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creatural viability”).26 The rest of Geertz’s definition, too, implies that religion is something very different from what religious practitioners consider it to be: its “conceptions of a general order of existence” are “cloth[ed]” with “an aura of factuality”—rather than being, for example, articulations of the way things really are. The “moods” and “motivations” it establishes “seem uniquely realistic”—but in fact, the logic of Geertz’s grammar implies, are not. However superficially congenial to understanding religion, the implication of Geertz’s view seems to be that to analyze religion properly entails stripping away its impressive, powerful aura, which enables one to see both what it really is and how it does what it does. Geertz’s reductionism is not as crass as that of Freud or Marx, nor as explicit as in Durkheim, but in the end it reduces religion to culture within the framework of a naturalist metaphysics.

Historians whose analyses of religion depend upon such views are therefore writing a form of secular confessional history, and one that inevitably distorts the views of religious believer-practitioners. If one contends, for example, that, “In the late Middle Ages, Satan was the metaphoric category into which all but a few theologians deposited misfortune and human ills of every kind,” then one will miss and misconstrue the terrifying reality of Satan to those for whom he was (and remains) a terrifying reality.27 So too, if the entire premise of a study on the Eucharist in the late Middle Ages is that it was “constructed as a symbol,” and that religion is reducible to culture and “all culture, all meaning can usefully be studied as a language through its salient symbols,” then one will necessarily miss the meaning of the transubstantiated host for late-medieval people high and low, clergy and laity, according to whom the Eucharist was not merely symbolic.28 Or again, if one claims that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Christians “all acted out their lives in an illusory, enchanted world” which “was not metaphysical as they imagined,” and that they were people who mistakenly believed that “behind the individual actions . . . was God’s great plan of history for the salvation and damnation of souls,” then one is writing as a secular confessional historian.29 That religion is always expressed in cultural forms is not the same thing as claiming that religion is (and must be) reducible to culture.

26. Ibid., 99. See also this sentence: “For those able to embrace them [God], and for so long as they are able to embrace them [God], religious symbols [God] provide[s] a cosmic guarantee not only for their ability to comprehend the world, but also, comprehending it, to give a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it” (ibid., 104 [my interpolations]).


At the same time, without social and cultural anthropology it may be doubted whether interest in medieval and early modern Christianity would be anywhere near as widespread as it is and has been in recent decades. Like sociology, cultural anthropology has helped to create the history of religion out of traditional church history, providing at least some inkling of how ordinary premodern people, most of whom were illiterate, might have experienced the religion that they practiced. Yet one need not assume metaphysical naturalism in order to analyze religion’s cultural expressions and meanings for those whose expressions and meanings they were; indeed, such an assumption precludes understanding those meanings on practitioners’ terms.

The dominant explanation of early modern Christianity in recent decades regards it fundamentally as a means of political control and social discipline. This view has been inspired partly by Gerhard Oestreich’s scholarship on the revival of political neo-Stoicism in the late sixteenth century, but more pervasively and diffusely by Michel Foucault’s neo-Nietschean ideas about power, knowledge, discipline, and control.30 According to this view historians of religion should employ a hermeneutics of suspicion as their chief interpretive assumption, seeing self-professed religious motivations as an ideology for the exercise of power and the assertion of self-interest. All of the sermons, the missionary efforts, the regulation and surveillance, the state support of churches, and the emphasis on obedience in the Reformation era should be understood as means by which authorities sought incrementally to discipline and control a relatively unruly late-medieval population through confessionalization. Unlike Durkheim or Geertz, Foucault did not propound an explanatory theory of religion per se, although there can be no question about the metaphysical naturalism underpinning his thought, the implicit denial of any sort of religious transcendence, meaning, or mystery. One finds overt traces of Foucault’s beliefs relative to religion, as when he refers to the traditional understanding of the soul as “the illusion of the theologians” and, turning Plato on his head, asserts that, “the soul [as created by power relations] is the prison of the body.”31 But as with Geertz, Foucault simply assumes metaphysical naturalism, rather like the French political theorist Marcel Gauchet, who refers in Foucauldian fashion to “our own flesh” as “the archetypal given.”32 At the same time, few historians of Reformation-era Christianity appropriate Foucauldian ideas in a narrow or direct fashion, and so secular confessional assumptions are typically buried still further. For example, the blatantly reductionist explanation of religion


31. Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, transl. Alan Sheridan [1977] (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1985), 30. One of the best orientations to Foucault’s thought, which makes clear his rejection of any truth claims considered apart from the power relations that ostensibly constitute them, remains Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

in Joseph Koerner’s recent study of Lutheran images in the Reformation era is rife with Foucauldian notions, but does not refer explicitly to Foucault.33

It would be foolish to deny that religion can be, often has been, and continues to be cynically manipulated for self-serving purposes. But this is a matter to be shown on the basis of evidence, not assumed as a matter of course about entire epochs, religious traditions, or religion as a whole. If one writes from a position based on beliefs in metaphysical naturalism or thoroughgoing skepticism about the claims of religion as such, however, then blanket claims about religion as a tool of power and domination are much more likely, simply because the referents of religious belief are denied from the outset. Once the claims of revealed religion are rejected a priori, it is obviously impossible for any Christian ever really to have experienced, for example, the “power of the Holy Spirit.” Power in human relationships and institutions, on the other hand, seems readily comprehensible and visible, as near as the most recent faculty meeting or hiring decision, and many of the actions of early modern Christian magistrates and ministers can plausibly be interpreted as attempts to discipline people through an ideology of obedience cast in religious language.34 Such plausibility is reinforced by a besieged but still dominant and mostly approved liberationist narrative of secular modernity, in which early modern individuals and groups gradually freed themselves from the assumptions of hierarchy and the demands of tradition. In this account, traditional religion and the societies that it informed, with their dogmas, morals, prescriptions, and sanctions, comprised perhaps the single greatest impediment to the establishment of the individual freedoms embedded in the institutions and ideologies of Western modernity. Men (and later, women) became modern, liberated, autonomous, secular individuals (a good thing) by casting off premodern, restrictive, authority-bound, religious participation in traditional communities (a bad thing). Hence the politically intelligible tendency to ascribe self-professed early modern religious beliefs to base motives wherever it offender modern or postmodern secular sensibilities.

The mere fact that early modern Catholics and Protestants believed and did things noxious to current secular sensibilities, however, cannot in itself somehow render their motivations cynical instead of sincere, or secular rather than religious. Religious convictions deemed objectionable or strange by whatever criteria, in the past or present, do not thereby lose their religious character. Individually and autobiographically, I first learned this as an outsider among Mormons in Utah; widely and disturbingly, it has been confirmed in the U.S. beginning on September 11, 2001. The rejection by militant Islamist extremists of modern Western

33. See, for example, phrases such as “positioning bodies in a social space,” “the ‘order’ word” that makes persons into governed subjects,” and the “panoptical ideal” (Koerner, Reformation of the Image, 379, 401, 421, and more generally, 377-440). Elsewhere, Koerner is explicit about his belief that Durkheim’s sociology of religion is true: “Although its beliefs and rituals seem to concern a spiritual order, under scrutiny religion in fact serves to place individuals within their natural and social worlds, and to cause them to accept those worlds to be the true ones. . . . functional analysis can process all expressions with equal ease” (ibid., 419-420 [my emphasis]).

34. It should be remembered, however, that in early modern Christianity, pastors and priests did not exempt themselves from the same strictures, and often held themselves to a more rigorous standard than those expected of the laity, a point made well by Thomas N. Tentler, Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), xx, 364.
conceptions of the distinction between religion and politics, or their refusal to recognize where Westerners draw the line between private and public spheres, does not somehow alter their religious motivations. Deploiring their values or considering them perverts of Islam does not make their actions “political” rather than religious. Rather, it demonstrates that they have radically different beliefs about the justifiable expression of religion in the world. Whether Reformation-era Christianity was fundamentally an exercise in social-control ideology cast in religious terms, or whether instead concerns about authority, obedience, and orthodoxy were integral expressions of religion itself as understood by those with responsibility for the care of souls, is an open question that should be approached on a case-by-case basis and, as with all historical questions, within the limitations imposed by the surviving evidence. Recourse to theories of religion that rely on metaphysical naturalism cannot settle the question, but will rather yield some form of secular confessional history. Such theories of religion cannot substitute or compensate for the paucity or thinness of sources, nor can one simply infer meanings and motivations from past prescriptions and behaviors. In the case of my graduate student friend who wiped up the spilled drink, the interpretation that he was acting out of commitment to the social contract was mistaken, even though it was consistent with his actions.

To sum up the argument thus far: a secular bias proceeds from explanatory theories of religion that assume metaphysical naturalism or epistemological skepticism about religious claims. In the history of religion, a substantive reliance on such theories yields a secular confessional history. This goes unrecognized to the extent that such metaphysical beliefs are widely but wrongly considered to be undeniable truths. These beliefs necessarily distort the character of religion and what it means for religious people: “No religion can be what its adherents allege” is a less than promising maxim on the basis of which to penetrate the character of religious belief and practice, yet such a maxim is implicit in metaphysical naturalism. Consequently, if one seeks to “get” religion on the terms of religious people, one must avoid imposing secular beliefs on them.

Where does this leave us? A reactionary resumption of traditional confessional history is not the only alternative, nor is it desirable. There is a third way, one already employed by numerous scholars in one form or another.35 The point is not to impose any metaphysical beliefs or moral judgments on religious

people, for the purposes of understanding them.\textsuperscript{36} To reject the partisan religious convictions of traditional confessional history does not force one to adopt the metaphysical naturalism of secular confessional history. Instead, an approach that is metaphysically neutral neither privileges a particular tradition or specific religious claims, nor does it imply that scholars of religion must conduct research as if no religious claims could be true. It seems that few central contentions in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—for example, the Jews are God’s chosen people, Jesus is the incarnation of God, Mohammed is Allah’s greatest prophet—could be proven to be false. Given the fact that respective adherents of these traditions believe such things (pace Koerner) and incorporate them into their lives, that to religious people “belief matters, and matters terribly,” as Geertz has recently put it, it seems incumbent on scholars of religion to proceed as if the religious beliefs of their subjects might be true, a possibility that a metaphysically neutral methodology leaves open.\textsuperscript{37} On what basis could one justify the contrary, other than dogmatism? “Thick description” is a good phrase for the objective of such an approach—only it needs to be thicker than that permitted by Geertz’s metaphysically reductionist assumptions.

On this view, the most important prerequisite for analyzing religion consists in seeing that one’s own beliefs, regardless of their content, are simply and literally irrelevant to understanding the people whom one studies. At a time when some would construe all scholarship as displaced autobiography, many regard the idea of bracketing one’s own convictions as a naïve chimera. While such bracketing might well be impossible to realize perfectly, those who have had the experience of self-consciously restraining their own convictions know that it is not something of which scholars are constitutionally incapable. Imperfect self-restraint is better than none. To paraphrase the economist Robert Solow: just because a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible does not mean that one should conduct surgery in a sewer.\textsuperscript{38} The key distinction to be made is not between purportedly neutral, sophisticated, critical secular views and biased, naïve, uncritical religious ones, but rather between our convictions and assumptions, whatever they are, and those of the people we want to understand. The first prerequisite is one of the most difficult: we must be willing to set aside our own beliefs—about the nature of reality, about human priorities, about morality—in order to try to understand them.

The rejection of reductionist theory does not imply a “naïve positivism,” as though we are intellectually rudderless without the claims of modern or postmodern thinkers, and so condemned to read unthinkingly through our sources. This is simply not the case. The understanding of religion should start not with reductionist theories that assume the necessarily illusory character of the subject matter, but with questions about what we want to know. And the umbrella question,

\textsuperscript{36} This does not mean that one cannot ask questions about the truth of religious claims made by a given individual, group, or tradition, or that one cannot raise moral questions about religious believers or the human past, but only that such questions are distinct and should be kept separate from the attempt to understand religious believers.

\textsuperscript{37} Geertz, “Pinch of Destiny,” in \textit{idem, Available Light}, 179.

\textsuperscript{38} Solow is referred to by Geertz in “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in \textit{idem, Interpretation of Cultures}, 30.
“What did it mean to them?” precludes the use of reductionist theory, however the question is particularized in specific inquiries.

One great advantage of the guiding question, “What did it mean to them?” is that in principle, one can apply it to anyone and everyone in the past, regardless of religious tradition, social status, political standing, educational level, gender, degree of devotion, or any other variable, without favoring some individuals or groups more than others. Because it forces one not to indulge but to restrain one’s own sympathies (whether atheistic or religious, Christian or Jewish, neo-Marxist or conservative, feminist or anti-feminist), it points the way to a genuinely non-reductionist history of religious traditions, something that cannot be achieved through confessional history, whether in a traditional religious or a reductionist secular form. The challenge of understanding people on their own terms remains constant regardless of whom we are studying, including the members of mutually antagonistic groups—Jews and Christians in the late first century, for example, or medieval Iberian Muslims and Christians, or central European peasants and those who repressed them in 1525, Mormons and their enemies in the late nineteenth century, Muslims and Hindus in northern India today. Because it remains self-consciously neutral in its metaphysical assumptions, such a project entails no judgment about the truth of the beliefs or the morality of the behaviors of those studied. In the first instance it simply seeks to know, as accurately and completely as possible, what those beliefs and behaviors were, what they meant to their protagonists, and how they were embedded in their lived contexts. Needless to say, to understand religion means to contextualize it as fully as possible, not to create for it an unreal insularity, as if it were untouched by the rest of life. Such contextualization is part and parcel of “what it means to them”—for religious people did not and do not separate religion from their familial relationships, their institutional participations, or their social interactions, any more than these were and are hived off from religion.

The point, the payoff of antireductionism, lies simply in this: to know, as nearly as we can given the limitations of our sources and the reach of our analytical and imaginative powers, what religion is and means to those who practice it. Would they, whoever they are, recognize themselves in what we say about them? Pursued systematically, this question will yield analyses of religion very different from those seen through the lenses of modern or postmodern theories of religion. It might enable us to grasp why, for example, in the Reformation era, correct exegesis and true doctrine and proper worship mattered so much to their protagonists, rather than rendering their religion accessible at the expense of making it seem absurd or contemptible. Indeed, who would argue over “systems of sym-

39. James Boyd White contends that this entertainment of beliefs that we ourselves neither share nor can imagine ourselves accepting is a form of “patronization,” but this seems unduly negative. Indeed, it is simply false in the case of converts who originally could not imagine accepting beliefs that they later came to embrace. It is an intellectual and imaginative challenge to try to understand what one might still, in the end, individually reject and explain according to one’s own beliefs. Attempting to understand beliefs and practices that one does not share, and to write about them such that one’s depictions would be recognized among those about whom one is writing, seems far less patronizing or condescending than does writing about them based on reductionist theories. White, “How Should We Talk?,” 1, 8, 12.
bols” or “cultural constructions” for decades, even centuries, on end? Who would endure hardship, persecution, even death for them? What would have been the point then? What would be the point now? In recognizing that reductionist modern and postmodern beliefs no less than traditional religious partisanship inhibit understanding, one attempts to correct what E. P. Thompson famously called “the enormous condescension of posterity”40—not to mention the enormous condescension of contemporaries in the study of present-day religious believers.

An antireductionist, “thicker description” of the religion of individuals within communities within traditions does not simply leave us with a static snapshot of believers who believe what they believe and do what they do. Paradoxically, it provides the foundation for explaining (and here I do mean explaining) change over time, at once the central and the most difficult challenge that historians face. By reconstructing with sympathy and sensitivity everyone’s beliefs and behaviors, within and across traditions, one discloses the ways in which disagreement has been a fundamental motor in human history. It need not be religious disagreement—the same principle can be extended to beliefs and behaviors in the broadest sense—although the history of human civilizations, from the ancient world to the Middle East at this very moment, makes clear how central religious disagreement and conflict have been for processes of historical change. In the Reformation era, intractable, violent disagreements over Christian truth were a leading factor in fostering, unintentionally and over the longue durée, a Western world dominated by secular institutions and beliefs. Ironically, especially in the last century, some of those secular beliefs have become so embedded in the very endeavor to explain religion that they themselves are now widely but wrongly regarded as neutral, self-evident truths about reality. A critical self-awareness should lead us to acknowledge this fact and to move beyond secular confessional history in the study of religion.

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