

GOG AND MAGOG. Religion and God for the 21st Century Mind

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INTRODUCTION *MIT GRUNDLAGEN*

As long as the belief in God or Plato's realm of ideals is nourished, purity in mathematics, logic, and science will be sustained. As long as purity is sustained the human capacity for problem solving will be compromised.
Sal Restivo

PART I: Grundlagen

- Some things are clearly true, and some things are clearly false. Postmodernism has demonstrated that truth and falsity are complicated, contextual, and contingent not that we cannot tell true from false. It's true that every human will eventually die; it's false that there are humans who can fly without the aid of apparatuses.
- Some people know more than other people. Knowledge is always fallible, corrigible, contextual, and indexical. This doesn't mean people don't know things and know them in ways that have practical and demonstrable consequences. My doctor does not have to be perfect to know more than I do

about how bodies work and to put this knowledge to practical use in, for example, removing my appendix.

- There are things that are demonstrably true and false about religions and the gods.
- Some people know more about religion and the gods than others. The people who know more are not necessarily the most religious or those with the greatest faith.
- Don't be intimidated or seduced by the Socratic and Catersian aporia. Bringing their level of doubt into your worldview requires a highly educated intelligence. Build your life around material, demonstrable certainties. Make these the grounds for living your life and nourishing your worldview. But be careful; certainties are plentiful but they contain many traps for the unwary. Perhaps the rule should be: build on your certainties but keep all of them under aporial surveillance.
- My objective in this book is to write as clearly as I can for the widest audience I can reach. I cannot ask of the everyday reader what I have asked of myself – half a century dedicated to research and writing, teaching and lecturing. I cannot ask that everyday reader to learn as I have how to mobilize the specialized research results that I myself have not been able to make a focus of my research. What I can ask that reader is to try to appreciate that this book does not stand alone, does not represent the “I” of the narrator, does not rest in the end on one person's “opinions,” one person's viewpoint, one person's interpretation. No one is an island. I stand on the shoulders of giants and less lofty thinkers and this book rests on a mountain of other books representing centuries of systematic and cumulative research. Where you disagree with me, you disagree with a community of scholars, a “thought collective.”
- While I will try to write clearly and make a sincere effort to connect with my readers, I don't want to delude the reader into thinking that what we are about is easy, that there are short cuts. I will deliberately challenge you from time with a difficult word or concept (sometimes in a foreign language). These challenges are not overwhelming but they are meant to remind you of the enormous work and energy over centuries that lies beyond my sentences.

There are certain fallacies that follow from a comprehensive interdisciplinary knowledge of and understanding of how the world and human beings work: I have identified the following fallacies:

The Fallacies.

These fallacies are the raw materials for a set of theorems about our nature as social beings.

- *The Transcendental Fallacy* (also known as the theologian's fallacy) is that there is a world or that there are worlds beyond our own – transcendental worlds, supernatural worlds, worlds of souls, spirits and ghosts, gods, devils, and angels, heavens and hells. There are no such worlds. They are symbolic of social categories and classifications in our earthly societies and

cultures. There is nothing beyond our material, organic, and social world. Death is final; there is no soul, there is no life after death. It is also possible that the so-called “many worlds interpretation” in quantum mechanics is contaminated by this fallacy as the result of mathegrammatical illusions. The world, the universe, may be more complex than we can know or imagine, but that complexity does not include transcendental or supernatural features.

- *The Subscendental Fallacy* (also known as the logician’s fallacy) is that there are “deep structures” or “immanent structures” that are the locus of explanations for language, thought, and human behavior in general. Such “structures” are as ephemeral and ethereal as transcendental and supernatural worlds. They lead to conceptions of logic, mathematics, and language as “free standing,” “independent,” “history, culture, and value free” statements. And they support misguided sociobiological, genetic, and brain-centered explanatory strategies.

- *The Private Worlds Fallacy* (also known as the philosopher’s fallacy) is that individual human beings harbor intrinsically private experiences. The profoundly social nature of humans, of symbols, and of language argues against intrinsically private experiences (as Wittgenstein, Goffman, and others have amply demonstrated).

- *The Internal Life Fallacy*. When we engage in discourses about surrogate counters, imitation, and artificial creatures that mimic, we need to remind ourselves that we are working in an arena of symbolic and materialized analogies and metaphors. Such efforts carry a high emotional charge because they take place at the boundaries of our skins. Analogy and generalization, if they can be shown to have constructive scientific outcomes, need not obligate us to embrace identity in, for example, building robots. Robots will not have to have “gut feelings” in the identical sense humans have gut feelings because they are organic machines. Even this “fact” needs to be scrutinized.

- What we “feel” is given to us by our language, our conversations, our forms of talking. At the end of the day, feelings may not at all be straightforward matters of bio-electro-chemical processes. Electro-mechanical creatures will turn out to be just as susceptible to an internal life as humans once they have developed language, conversation, and forms of talk. This implies a social life and awareness. Roboticians may already have made some moves in this direction with the development of signal schemas and subsumption-based hormonal control (Arkin, 1998: 434ff.). The development of cyborgs and cybrids may make this issue moot.

- *The Psychologistic Fallacy* is that the human being and/or the human brain is/are free standing and independent, that they can be studied on their own terms independent of social and cultural contexts, influences, and forces. This is also known as the neuroistic error. It encompasses the idea that mind and consciousness are brain phenomena. Human beings and human brains are constitutively social. This is the most radical formulation of the response to this fallacy. A more charitable formulation would give disciplinary credibility to neuroscience and cognitive approaches to brain studies. These approaches might produce relevant results in certain contexts. Then there might be fruitful ways to pursue interdisciplinary studies linking the social sciences to the neurosciences. It may indeed be possible to construct a neurosocial model of the self. This would entail that socialization operates on a brain-central nervous system-body (signifying an integrated entity that

eliminates conventional brain/mind-body and brain-mind dichotomies) and not on a 'person' per se.

- *The Eternal Relevance Fallacy* is that ancient and more recently departed philosophers should be important and even leading members of our inquiring conversations about social life. An act of intellectual courage is needed to rid us of Plato and Hegel. Once they are eliminated, an entire pantheon of outmoded and outdated thinkers, from Aristotle to Kant, will disappear from our radar. This move might also go a long way toward eliminating the worshipful attitude intellectuals often adopt to the more productive and visible members of their discourse communities. The caveat here is that some ancient and some modern thinkers (departed ones, as well as some who are still with us) who can be claimed for philosophy are still extremely valuable for us. Marx, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein come immediately to mind.
- The Corollary Intellectual's Fallacy is that philosophers as philosophers (and psychologists as psychologists) have anything at all to tell us anymore about the social world. In the wake of the work of sociologists from Emile Durkheim (1859/1912) to Mary Douglas (1988), all the central problems of traditional and contemporary philosophy resolve into (not "reduce to") problems in sociology and anthropology.

- *The neque demonstra neque redargue Fallacy /The neither provable nor unprovable Fallacy* is that one can neither prove nor disprove some claim, proposition, or statement. Consider: One can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God. This has not kept theologians, philosophers, and mathematicians from Anselm to Gödel from proposing proofs for the existence of God. While all proofs build conclusions into premises, God proofs are universally contaminated by this self-defeating strategy. The fallacy has, on the other hand, kept social thinkers and social critics from proposing proofs for their beliefs about God as a delusion, a myth, and so on. In fact, proofs are situated, contingent, contextualized, community matters, and indeed, social constructions and social institutions. Therefore, within the world of Durkheim's Elementary Forms and what follows a proof that God does not exist is clearly possible.
- *The NOMA Fallacy*. This is the fallacy, made famous by S.J. Gould, that science and religion are non-overlapping magisteria. Once we admit social science into the science and religion dialogue this fallacy takes effect.
- *The Tolstoy Fallacy*: That experience and feeling are trustworthy modes of interrogating and knowing reality.
- *The Napoleon Fallacy*: That heroic larger than life individuals make history.

As in the question of astronomy then, so in the question of history now, the whole difference of opinion is based on the recognition or nonrecognition of something absolute, serving as the measure of visible phenomena. In astronomy it was the immovability of the earth, in history it is the independence of personality- free will.

As with astronomy the difficulty of recognizing the motion of the earth lay in abandoning the immediate sensation of the earth's fixity and of the motion of the planets, so in history the difficulty of recognizing the subjection of personality to the laws of space, time, and cause lies in renouncing the direct feeling of the

independence of one's own personality. But as in astronomy the new view said: "It is true that we do not feel the movement of the earth, but by admitting its immobility we arrive at absurdity, while by admitting its motion (which we do not feel) we arrive at laws," so also in history the new view says: "It is true that we are not conscious of our dependence, but by admitting our free will we arrive at absurdity, while by admitting our dependence on the external world, on time, and on cause, we arrive at laws."

In the first case it was necessary to renounce the consciousness of an unreal immobility in space and to recognize a motion we did not feel; in the present case it is similarly necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious. Leo Tolstoy, Chapter XII of War and Peace.

All cases without exception in which our conception of freedom and necessity is increased and diminished depend on three considerations:

- (1) The relation to the external world of the man who commits the deeds.
- (2) His relation to time.
- (3) His relation to the causes leading to the action.

The first consideration is the clearness of our perception of the man's relation to the external world and the greater or lesser clearness of our understanding of the definite position occupied by the man in relation to everything coexisting with him. This is what makes it evident that a drowning man is less free and more subject to necessity than one standing on dry ground, and that makes the actions of a man closely connected with others in a thickly populated district, or of one bound by family, official, or business duties, seem certainly less free and more subject to necessity than those of a man living in solitude and seclusion.

If we consider a man alone, apart from his relation to everything around him, each action of his seems to us free. But if we see his relation to anything around him, if we see his connection with anything whatever- with a man who speaks to him, a book he reads, the work on which he is engaged, even with the air he breathes or the light that falls on the things about him- we see that each of these circumstances has an influence on him and controls at least some side of his activity. And the more we perceive of these influences the more our conception of his freedom diminishes and the more our conception of the necessity that weighs on him increases.

The second consideration is the more or less evident time relation of the man to the world and the clearness of our perception of the place the man's action occupies in time. That is the ground which makes the fall of the first man, resulting in the production of the human race, appear evidently less free than a man's entry into marriage today. It is the reason why the life and activity of people who lived centuries ago and are connected with me in time cannot seem to me as free as the life of a contemporary, the consequences of which are still unknown to me.

The degree of our conception of freedom or inevitability depends in this respect on the greater or lesser lapse of time between the performance of the action and our judgment of it.

If I examine an act I performed a moment ago in approximately the same circumstances as those I am in now, my action appears to me undoubtedly free. But if I examine an act

performed a month ago, then being in different circumstances, I cannot help recognizing that if that act had not been committed much that resulted from it- good, agreeable, and even essential- would not have taken place. If I reflect on an action still more remote, ten years ago or more, then the consequences of my action are still plainer to me and I find it hard to imagine what would have happened had that action not been performed. The farther I go back in memory, or what is the same thing the farther I go forward in my judgment, the more doubtful becomes my belief in the freedom of my action.

In history we find a very similar progress of conviction concerning the part played by free will in the general affairs of humanity. A contemporary event seems to us to be indubitably the doing of all the known participants, but with a more remote event we already see its inevitable results which prevent our considering anything else possible. And the farther we go back in examining events the less arbitrary do they appear.

The Austro-Prussian war appears to us undoubtedly the result of the crafty conduct of Bismarck, and so on. The Napoleonic wars still seem to us, though already questionably, to be the outcome of their heroes' will. But in the Crusades we already see an event occupying its definite place in history and without which we cannot imagine the modern history of Europe, though to the chroniclers of the Crusades that event appeared as merely due to the will of certain people. In regard to the migration of the peoples it does not enter anyone's head today to suppose that the renovation of the European world depended on Attila's caprice. The farther back in history the object of our observation lies, the more doubtful does the free will of those concerned in the event become and the more manifest the law of inevitability.

The third consideration is the degree to which we apprehend that endless chain of causation inevitably demanded by reason, in which each phenomenon comprehended, and therefore man's every action, must have its definite place as a result of what has gone before and as a cause of what will follow.

The better we are acquainted with the physiological, psychological, and historical laws deduced by observation and by which man is controlled, and the more correctly we perceive the physiological, psychological, and historical causes of the action, and the simpler the action we are observing and the less complex the character and mind of the man in question, the more subject to inevitability and the less free do our actions and those of others appear.

When we do not at all understand the cause of an action, whether a crime, a good action, or even one that is simply nonmoral, we ascribe a greater amount of freedom to it. In the case of a crime we most urgently demand the punishment for such an act; in the case of a virtuous act we rate its merit most highly. In an indifferent case we recognize in it more individuality, originality, and independence. But if even one of the innumerable causes of the act is known to us we recognize a certain element of necessity and are less insistent on punishment for the crime, or the acknowledgment of the merit of the virtuous act, or the freedom of the apparently original action. That a criminal was reared among male factors mitigates his fault in our eyes. The self-sacrifice of a father or mother, or self-sacrifice with the possibility of a reward, is more comprehensible than gratuitous self-sacrifice, and therefore seems less deserving of sympathy and less the result of free will. The founder of a sect or party, or an inventor, impresses us less when we know how or by what the way was prepared for his activity. If we have a large range of examples, if our observation is constantly directed to

seeking the correlation of cause and effect in people's actions, their actions appear to us more under compulsion and less free the more correctly we connect the effects with the causes. If we examined simple actions and had a vast number of such actions under observation, our conception of their inevitability would be still greater. The dishonest conduct of the son of a dishonest father, the misconduct of a woman who had fallen into bad company, a drunkard's relapse into drunkenness, and so on are actions that seem to us less free the better we understand their cause. If the man whose actions we are considering is on a very low stage of mental development, like a child, a madman, or a simpleton- then, knowing the causes of the act and the simplicity of the character and intelligence in question, we see so large an element of necessity and so little free will that as soon as we know the cause prompting the action we can foretell the result.

On these three considerations alone is based the conception of irresponsibility for crimes and the extenuating circumstances admitted by all legislative codes. The responsibility appears greater or less according to our greater or lesser knowledge of the circumstances in which the man was placed whose action is being judged, and according to the greater or lesser interval of time between the commission of the action and its investigation, and according to the greater or lesser understanding of the causes that led to the action. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Chapter IX

Classic fallacies from philosophy

The **fallacy of misplaced concreteness**, described by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, involves thinking something is a 'concrete' reality when in fact it is an abstract belief, opinion or concept about the way things are.

The fallacy refers to Whitehead's thoughts on the relationship of spatial and temporal location of objects. Whitehead rejects the notion that a real, concrete object in the universe can be described simply in spatial or temporal extension. Rather, the object must be described as a field that has both a location in space and a location in time.

This is analogous to lessons learned from *Flatland*; just as humans cannot perceive of a line that has width but no breadth, humans also cannot perceive an object that has spatial but not temporal position (or vice versa).

...among the primary elements of nature as apprehended in our immediate experience, there is no element whatever which possesses this character of simple location. ... [Instead,] I hold that by a process of constructive abstraction we can arrive at abstractions which are the simply located bits of material, and at other abstractions which are the minds included in the scientific scheme. Accordingly, the real error is an example of what I have termed: The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.

– Whitehead (1925), p. 58. also see Whitehead (1919), Part III.

A **category mistake**, or **category error**, is a semantic or ontological error by which a property is ascribed to a thing that could not possibly have that property. For example, the statement "the business of the book sleeps eternally" is syntactically correct, but it is meaningless or nonsense or, at the very most, metaphorical, because it incorrectly ascribes the property, *sleeps eternally*, to *business*, and incorrectly ascribes the property, *business*, to the token, *the book*.

The term "category mistake" was introduced by Gilbert Ryle in his book *The Concept of Mind* (1949) to remove what he argued to be a confusion over the nature of mind born from

Cartesian metaphysics. It was alleged to be a mistake to treat the mind as an object made of an immaterial substance because predications of substance are not meaningful for a collection of dispositions and capacities.

PART II: HUMAN SURVIVAL AND THE BIG QUESTIONS

We are asking ourselves the big questions about life, the universe, and everything with more sound and fury than ever. The media are overflowing with explanations about miracles, Biblical facts, the life of Jesus, the dogma fights of the fundamentalism wars, and the creationism/intellectual design versus evolutionary theory conflict. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, a work of fiction, spawned an industry of criticisms, commentaries, editions and translations, a Hollywood movie, and a lawsuit. The discourse on the Code continually blurred the distinctions and rules that separate fiction and non-fiction. All of this is being driven more by anger, fear, and ignorance than by sound scholarship and fearless inquiry. And even where sound scholarship gets a foothold, it does so without the fearlessness needed to get to the bottom of the issues.

INTERVENTION 1: For Germany, the *criticism of religion* has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.

The *profane* existence of error is compromised as soon as its *heavenly oratio pro aris et focis* ["speech for the altars and hearths," i.e., for God and country] has been refuted. Man, who has found only the *reflection* of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman, will no longer feel disposed to find the *mere appearance* of himself, the non-man [*Unmensch*], where he seeks and must seek his true reality.

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man* – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence since the *human essence* has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual *aroma* is religion.

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*,
(First published: in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 7 & 10 February 1844 in Paris).

INTERVENTION 2. [W]hat I ask of the free thinker is that he should confront religion in the same mental state as the believer...[H]e who does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment cannot speak about it! He is like a blind man trying to talk about color.

Now I shall address the free believer...Without going so far as to disbelieve the formula we believe in, we must forget it provisionally, reserving the right to return to it later. Having once escaped from this tyranny, we are no longer in danger of perpetrating the error and injustice into which certain believers have fallen who have called my way of interpreting religion basically irreligious. There cannot be a rational interpretation of religion which is fundamentally irreligious; an irreligious interpretation of religion would be an interpretation which denied the phenomenon it was trying to explain. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917).

The sociologist Randall Collins begins his chapter on “The Sociology of God” in his book *Sociological Insight* (1992: 30) as follows: “There are two obvious positions that you can take about religion. Either you believe it or you don’t; in one case it is a supreme Reality that transcends everything sociology is concerned with; in the other it is an irrational superstition about things that don’t exist.” Social thinkers tend to adopt the second position. There is another way to open a study of religion and the gods. We can follow Nietzsche, who wrote this in a letter to his sister Elizabeth:

Every true faith is infallible, it performs what the believing person hopes to find in it. But it does not offer the least support for the establishing of an objective truth. Here the ways of men divide. If you want to achieve peace of mind and happiness, have faith. If you want to be a disciple of truth then search.

If you want to achieve peace of mind, you should stop reading now. If you are ready to engage the world and discover how it works once we give up wishing, hoping, and praying that it works in ways that make our lives happy, worthwhile, and maybe even worthy of the attention of a God and the promise of an after-life, then I invite you to read on. Our goal here is to interrogate religion and the gods fearlessly, courageously, ready to follow wherever our interrogations lead.

Occasionally, a self-proclaimed voice of reason emerges to bring order to the chaos of these debates and conflicts. Philosophers and journalists come to our intellectual rescue with naturalistic explanation for religion based on evolutionary theory, genetics, biology, sociobiology, and brain research. An oceanographer tells us that the Sea of Galilee may have been frozen when Jesus “walked on water.” The new atheists mobilize a logic of anger against the irrationality of religion. The explanations, criticisms, theories, and ideas proliferate without end and without critical stop signs. Physical and natural scientists figure prominently in this discourse, some proving God with science, others using science to disprove God. Notably missing from this dialogue are sociologists and anthropologists. The sociologist Rodney Stark has made it into the bookstores with his *Discovering God*, but Stark is an independent Christian. He begins his book with a welcome critique of the new atheists and concludes it with the claim that the universe is the ultimate revelation of God and that (following Kepler) “science is theology and thereby serves as another method for the discovery of God.” And anthropologist Barbara King has written beautifully about the social roots of the religious imagination in our evolution as a species bound by belongingness. And yet, while she believes that science has something meaningful to say about the evolution of the religious imagination, she cannot bring herself to grant that science might actually “explain” religion. So the problem persists. In spite of the overwhelming consistency of evidences that God and the gods are human creations, very few people seem to have the intellectual and community contexts and

resources needed to give up the belief in God.

Where are the fearless social scientists in these debates, discussions, critical explorations? Why are they silent and silenced? Where are the voices of the intellectuals and scholars who see all of this transparent freedom to explain, criticize, and debate religion and God as another cover up – unintentional and intentional – of the discoveries made by sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and scientific historians? One of the great consequences of the emergence of the social sciences has been the progressive rejection of the idea that there are realms of reality that transcend our everyday world, supernatural realms that escape our social, physical, and natural being.

There are two problems with the analytical and explanatory literature on religion flooding the media today. One is that even writers who are non-believers are hesitant to close off reasons to believe for their readers, even when the evidence they present fairly assessed leads to that conclusion. The second is a social blindness that keeps writers from seeing the sociology staring them in their faces as they propose one genetic or neurological explanation after the other. In his *The Faith Instinct*, Nicholas Wade demonstrates the consequences of this affliction. He reviews the contributions of the classical sociologist Emile Durkheim but doesn't actually hear Durkheim's message. On page 7 of his book he writes:

"The rules of sentence formation are so complex that babies must presumably possess an innate syntax-generating machinery, rather than having to figure out the rules for themselves. The existence of such a neural mechanism would explain why infants learn to speak so effortlessly, and at a specific age, as if some neural developmental program is being rolled out at that time".

The choice isn't between innate machinery and figuring things out for themselves. The choice is between innate, individual, and social (interactional) causes. What makes Wades's statement so curious is that on that same page he writes:

"People survive as social groups, not as individuals, and little is more critical to a social species than its members' ability to communicate with one another".

The other curious thing is that Wade, like Chomsky, appears to have never been a child learning a language or observed a child learning a language. Only a severe case of social blindness could lead them to claim, to quote Wade, that infants learn to speak "so effortlessly."

JESUS IN SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Consider that from the perspective of a sociological materialism, Jesus was either one of the mythical solar messiahs; or the solar messiah mythology was socially tattooed onto the life of an historical Jesus. There is a third possibility, and that is that Jesus was a composite character, a fictional person based on the lives of two or more historical and/or mythical figures. Outside of this perspective, one general strategy tends to be to assume the reality of Biblical stories and then set out to prove or otherwise theorize the facts of the matter. Another is to assume the good intentions of the Biblical writers as news reporters trying to be “objective” and then to pull apart their stories. These are empty exercises given what we know sociologically, anthropologically, archeologically, and historically about the Bible and Christianity (and all other religions and religious texts). Contrary to what Nicholas Wade (*The Faith Instinct*) believes, religion and the social/moral order are not separate units of evolutionary natural selection, and there is no God gene. Society precedes the individual; the individual is a social unit, a social fact. Humans come onto the evolutionary scene not as individuals who then at some Hobbesian point choose to come together socially by way, for example, of a social contract. Rather, humans emerge everywhere, always, and already social. And these humans emerge everywhere, always, and already religious. That is, where we have societies, we have moral orders systematized as more or less distinct religious activities and institutions. We cannot argue as Wade does that the earliest societies vary according to whether they have religion or not and that natural selection selects for religion. Natural selection does operate on the level of culture and social organization, but cannot select for religion per se because religion is one with social order.

The anthropologist Maurice Lehardt was told by his father, a pastor and a geologist, that facts are the word of God. Durkheim taught us that God is society. We could then say that facts are the word of society. For a less mythological way of putting this, we can turn to Nietzsche:

"We are not thinking frogs, nor objectifying and registering mechanisms with their innards removed: constantly, we have to give birth to our thoughts out of our pain and, like mothers, endow them with all we have of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, agony, conscience, fate, and catastrophe".

If we combine this observation with Marx's insights on the social nature of thinking and consciousness, of science and religion, and of the self itself, and with Durkheim's ideas on religion as an eminently social thing, we come up with most of the ingredients of what we can call the social constructionist paradigm for understanding religion and God.

My students sometimes ask me: “If sociologists have discovered God, why isn’t this more widely known and taught?” My colleagues themselves are very tentative, ambivalent, and uncertain about this issue. Some say: “I agree with you that we have discovered God, but I don’t think you should be revealing that sociological truth in your lectures or writings.” Some of them write textbooks that demonstrate this discovery, but in the interest of a kind of misguided tolerance often start or end with the caveat that their findings should not disrupt anyone’s beliefs. Science – systematic inquiry – is nothing if not a continuing process of upsetting and resetting our beliefs. At some point, those of us who are in a position to communicate mundane and revolutionary findings to our students and the reading public need to reveal the nature of our convictions. We need to do this without any intention of imposing our views on others, or with the goal of forcing others to take up our intellectual causes. Keep in mind, though, that education is nothing if it is not about imposing viewpoints. Tolerance and open-mindedness are as much impositions as “facts of the matter.” We do, however, have an obligation as scholars and intellectuals to let people know what we are up to. This is – education is – a dangerous enterprise because it propagates new ideas that may eventually take hold in the future. Secularization is just one sign that the old religions are dead or dying. The web of doubt that spread among nineteenth century thinkers was an early sign of this process – the novelist Thomas Hardy writing a poem titled “God’s Funeral,” Nietzsche infamously proclaiming “the death of God;” H.L. Mencken (whom I cite with misgivings) revealing the names of immortal gods who have died; the disappearance of colleges with religious affiliations; and the very disappearance of God (even as we move from Genesis to Revelations, God progressively disappears).

All of this was foreshadowed by the Enlightenment, and Hobbes’ defense of The Great Separation. Hobbes argued that no just and reasonable political life could be based on a Christian political theology. The modern romantics, following Rousseau rather than Hobbes, sought to implement a political theology grounded in human experience. They did not want to jettison the divine and religious sentiments but wanted instead to purify them in a rational way. In spite of their differences, Hobbes’ and Rousseau’s followers agreed that the Biblical God could no longer be taken seriously. Friedrich Schleiermacher tried to span this difference by claiming that we should refer to our human awareness of our dependence on “something” as God and let this replace the notion of divine revelation. It took someone with a highly developed sociological imagination, Emile Durkheim, to finally see that that “something” was in fact society, the social group.

Let us step back for a moment and recall the great controversy stirred up in ancient Greece when Protagoras (ca.490-420 bce), a pre-Socratic sophist, proclaimed that “man is the measure of all things.” This violated the prevailing idea that the universe was based

on something beyond human influence. Schleiermacher takes the same Protagorean step by making man the measure of theological truth in the midst of a world ruled by a God beyond humanity and human influence, a God we could know through revelation. As Lilla (2008: 228) notes, the revolutionary idea in Schleiermacher was “the unstated assumption...that we can find God by finding ourselves.” When Durkheim and the sociologists decentered the self and put society and the group at the center of the human universe, the rule became we can actually discover God by finding ourselves in society and the group. Durkheim and the sociologists benefitted from the development of modern critical Biblical studies pioneered in the German universities in the wake of the wars of liberation (War of the Sixth Coalition, 1812-1814) that sent Napoleon Bonaparte into exile.

The secularization thesis and process is not dead because there are still vibrant signs of belief and faith anymore than the evolutionary thesis is dead because there is resistance from creationists and intelligent design advocates.

GETTING THINGS RIGHT IS STILL POSSIBLE POSTMODERNISM NOTWITHSTANDING

It is crucial for human survival that we get certain things about how our world works right. Contrary to many of the conclusions reached by scholars and intellectuals in the postmodern world, it is still possible to tell the truth, it is still possible to distinguish what is real from what is not real, it is still possible to make a distinction between right and wrong facts of the matter. All of this has admittedly become more complicated, more subtle, more inspired sociologically. But truth telling has not become impossible. Historically, our collective capacity to solve problems of survival has depended on leaving childish things behind, on reasoning our way past the old myths and mysteries. Traditional beliefs about religion and God have survived the virtual onslaught against traditional beliefs in general by science and technology, but not without giving some ground. The first modern civilizational setback for religious beliefs came in the loss of faith that spread like a wildfire across the industrializing world in the nineteenth century. Of course, religious beliefs have been the object of criticism, skepticism, and theorizing from ancient times to the present. What was unusual about the nineteenth century was that assumed matters of fact started to wither in the face of new archaeological and historical evidence about and the emergence of social theories about religion and God.

What are the consequences of viewing the history of the idea of God (and of gods in general) and religion in comparative and cross-cultural perspective, and intersecting this view with advances in the social and cultural sciences over the last two hundred years? More specifically, what are the consequences for the view of history as the divine unfolding of God’s plan and God’s voice if we adopt a view of history as a human

narrative and moreover as a social and cultural narrative? What is the significance of death of God narratives in theology and philosophy for our understanding of history and time? Physical and natural scientists have had a great deal to say about such issues in dialogue with theologians and believers, both as participants in conflictful dialogues (notably though the efforts of aggressive opponents such as Dennett, Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens using a logic of anger), and in dialogues of harmony, convergence, and détente (most notably and visibly in the works of Karen Armstrong). The logics of anger, mystery, and uncritical skepticism have dominated debates and discussions about God, religion, and society for thousands of years. The emergence and development of the social and cultural sciences has changed the grounds and terms of heavenly discourses, but this change has not penetrated the centers of contemporary or even more broadly modern intellectual and lay circles of inquiry.

There are numerous indications that the continuing tolerance for religious ideas which even atheistic and post-atheism intellectuals and laypeople take for granted is threatening our survival. The 27 million dollar creationist museum recently opened near Cincinnati Ohio flaunts a level of ignorance that is equivalent to putting astrology on a par with astronomy or numerology on a par with mathematics. The problems being generated in the context of contemporary global society will not yield to solutions contaminated by illusory and delusory belief systems.

CLOSING THE DOOR ON PURE REASON

“There is no there, there:” A Manifesto in Defiance of der Kulte of der Reine Vernunft

The first part of my title is taken from a famous remark by Gertrude Stein . Rebecca Goldstein’s beautifully and thoughtfully fashioned study of Kurt Gödel and his famous theorems affords us yet another opportunity to wonder about the resistance of Platonic, transcendental, and supernatural thinking to the lessons of modernity and post-modernity. These lessons, admittedly, are buried beneath the rubble of the wars, holocausts, political economic failures, and ecological disasters of the twentieth and now the twenty-first century. The brilliant flare-up of the very idea of “the social” between 1840 and 1918 and the discovery sciences it gave form to has remained virtually invisible on the intellectual landscape formed over the last one hundred and fifty years. Until and unless we uncover that revolution, we will continue to be haunted by the ghosts of Plato, Descartes, Kant, and God. These ghosts cannot be banished by materialism per se. What is required is a sociological materialism, a cultural materialism. It is no simple ideological or political victory I champion but an adaptation, an evolutionary matter of life and death. So long as these ghosts haunt us, we will be unable as a species to take advantage of whatever small opportunities are left to us to make something worthwhile flourish on this planet for even

a little while. The issues here are that big. So it is that we must chase these ghosts down at every opportunity. I am faced with such an opportunity now. I have before me this intelligent, well-conceived, and well-written work on Gödel and Einstein by Rebecca Goldstein (*Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel*, 2006) and somewhat incidentally on Heisenberg and yet I must caution you about it and not lead you in applause for what Goldstein has achieved.

So long as we allow ourselves to be deluded by Goldstein's "transparent" claim that Gödel, Einstein, and Heisenberg have given us the three most important insights into who and what we are we will be stuck on a path of almost daily and almost universal suffering, and a world that can only promise more of the same without respite. It is to Darwin, Marx, and Durkheim that we must turn for the more important insights. We do great harm to ourselves and our planet if we rely on Gödel, Einstein, and Heisenberg for our self-image as persons and as a species. We are, indeed, thermodynamic systems and we run at some level according to the laws of physics, biology, and chemistry. But what we are above all is a social and a cultural thing, a society, a social being, a cultural entity *sui generis*. We are, individually and collectively, social facts. Before I go any further, I will acknowledge the gendered danger of standing on the shoulders of these six giants but remind you that they and I stand on the shoulders of so many other giants that gender, race, and class may not matter. If I contradict myself, if I fail to stand apart from my own gender, race, and class I can remain silent or carry on. I choose to carry on. Let me recognize that we have enriched the achievements of these six figures through the writings of women from Madame de Stael to Harriet Martineau, Emma Goldman, and Rosa Luxemburg, and from Sojourner Truth to Betty Friedan, Angela Davis, Germaine Greer, and post-colonial feminists such as Chandra Mohanty.

The mysteries of intuition, genius, and eternal truths outside space and time nourished by books like Goldstein's are no mere exercises in pure reason for the sake of pure reason. They sustain a worldview that is more medieval than modern. We social ones must take our stand again and again against those, however well intentioned, who continue to support knowingly and unknowingly, the One Logic, the One God, and the separation of the realm of faith and belief from the realm of science and knowledge. The most pernicious dogmas flourish in this atmosphere. For example, undergraduates are fond of repeating this "truism" learned from the masters: "You can't prove or disprove God." And what leg do you stand on when public intellectuals of unimpeachable brilliance like the late Stephen Jay Gould argue for the separation of science and religion. Proofs are social constructions, social institutions, indexical. Claims such as this one can only make sense in a world of science that excludes social science. Once we admit social science to the halls of verifiable, validated, discovery sciences, and proof communities such claims

evaporate. Within a framework that includes the social sciences we can determine what God (in whatever guise and context s/he-it appears) is, that is, the referent for whatever a people mean by “God.” That referent is always going to be a socio-cultural one, rooted in the material earth and its human populations and not in some transcendental or supernatural realm.

Even the strongest opponents and upholders of this claim tremble as they make it. They tend to leave openings for believers, including themselves in some cases, because the barriers to banging the last nails into the coffin of religious faith and belief are, let us admit, formidable. They are formidable, as both Marx and Durkheim recognized, because they have something to do with keeping society and individuals from becoming unglued. So let’s vanquish this bogey man once and for all. It is not religions and belief in God or gods that are universal but rather moral orders. All societies, all humans, require a moral order to survive, to move through the world and their lives. That is, they require, to put it simply, rules about what is good and bad, right and wrong. Religion is just one way to systematize these rules. There are other ways to do this: we can organize moral orders around almost any human interest from politics to physical fitness. And there are ways to construct moral orders that do not depend on unREFERRED entities. The more general problem we are faced with here is the problem of abstraction. How does one account for abstract ideas without falling into the traps of transcendental and supernatural realism? The solution is to stop making a distinction between concrete and abstract ideas. It is important to realize that the distinction between concrete and abstract is really a distinction between two different kinds of concreteness. A materialist sociology of abstraction reveals it to be the form of concreteness found in highly professionalized intellectual work. We must escape the idea of “abstractions,” an idea that is a companion and surrogate for “purity;” for wherever we find the “abstract” and the “pure” there also we find the danger of falling into the trap of believing in supernatural and transcendental realities.

Karen Armstrong is the most intelligent and knowledgeable contemporary writer on religion. Her ecumenical strategy has much to recommend it. She wants to build a more peaceful and just world around the insight that religion is universal and its universal characteristic is compassion. She argues that since all religions are grounded in compassion it should be more or less straightforward to link up all the compassionate systems and build a world community. The problem is that compassion is a centripetal force in societies. It organizes within groups and societies and as it does so creates a more or less self-defining but impenetrable identifying boundary. To the extent that compassion is a centrifugal force, it is much weaker. So we need to do more than

recognize the nature of compassion. We need to recognize that it is not an automatic link across equally compassionate societies.

References

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CHAPTER 1. SOCIOLOGY CHANGES EVERYTHING