



Uncertainty and the Limits of Culture

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Abstract

Public discourse about religion is increasingly dominated by the assumption that to be religious is to be certain about absolute truths. Broadly shared among pundits and politicians, and widely disseminated in the media, this assumption rests on the idea that religion functions chiefly as a generative source of meaning and is therefore best understood as culture. This essay challenges this reduction of religion to culture. Looking at both scholarly and popular instances of this attitude, it shows how it is insufficient to account for the dynamics of religion in history.

Keywords: religion, culture, certainty, globalization

Introduction

“Religion and culture” is a conjunction whose significance seems to go without saying. Indeed, what could be more obvious than the fact that religion and culture shape each other in important ways, and that one of the urgent tasks confronting us today is to understand better the reciprocal influence between the great variety of religions and cultures in our world? And yet, as deeply interwoven as they no doubt are, religion and culture are not the same thing. This point needs to be stressed, for it has become somewhat commonplace today to think about religion in the same way that we think about culture. Reinforced by the ever-expanding discussion surrounding globalization and multiculturalism, this view takes for granted that culture is the primary matrix of human experience, and that religion is the crucible of a culture’s values. As the foundation for thought and action, religion is what orients people in our increasingly complex world. A good example of this approach is the rationale offered for the *Faith and Globalisation Initiative*. Launched in 2008, under the auspices

of Tony Blair's "Faith Foundation," the *Initiative* promotes research and education on religion at major universities throughout the world.¹ According to its website:²

Wherever you look today, religion matters. Faith motivates. Understanding faith, its adherents, its trends, its structures, can be as important as understanding a nation's GDP, its business, its resources. Religious awareness is as important as gender or race awareness. For politicians, business people, or ordinary interested citizens, to know about a country's faith perspective is an essential part of comprehending it. As religiosity increases in the world, understanding religion becomes ever more crucial to peaceful co-existence.

Of course, the focus here on "a country's faith perspective" reflects an abiding assumption that cultures and nations coincide, and ignores the fact that religion almost always cuts across national cultures. More importantly, it frames globalization as an always potentially hostile encounter between national cultures whose resolution depends on understanding religion. The website thus goes on to say: "As religiosity increases in the world, understanding religion becomes ever more crucial to peaceful co-existence . . . The speed of change is one of the leading characteristics of today's world. Movements, swirls of opinion, waves of change arise, build momentum and come crashing down against our preconceived positions or notions with bewildering velocity." To allay the disorienting effects of global confusion, at least according to the *Faith and Globalisation Initiative*, requires a deeper grasp of the religious roots of how others think and live.

This is not the only view, of course, but it is a popular one, and it is increasingly taking on the hue of common sense. In this essay, I want to challenge the tendency to view religion as the structuring principle of culture by interrogating the assumption that religion provides a stable foundation for values because it is based on certain knowledge.³ Far from always self-conscious, this tendency consists in treating religion as a way of knowing something, about oneself in relation to society, the state, etc., where this knowledge is presented as consisting in absolute claims about a transcendent order. While most commentators acknowledge that religion is a multi-faceted phenomenon that involves practice as well as ideas, there nevertheless prevails a decidedly strong assumption among media pundits, politicians, educated elites, and even some scholars that the core of being religious is being certain about what is real and permanent versus illusory and passing. What is particularly striking is how this assumption is shared by both supporters and critics of religion. In the United States, as James Davison Hunter has shown, there is no shortage of Christians who believe that what is at stake in the so-called culture wars is a battle over values. And these Christians take as their starting assumption that "the reason Christians do not have more

¹ Though I confine myself in this essay to discussing mainly the United States, with an occasional reference to Europe, I think that the attitude might be broadly characterized as "western."

² The *Faith and Globalisation Initiative* website was accessed on July 7, 2014. Since then, the website has been revised and this material is no longer present.

³ In what follows I refer to "certain" in its everyday, colloquial sense of a person who gives his or her full, conscious assent to ideas or propositions considered beyond serious doubt.

influence in shaping culture is that Christians are just not trying hard enough, acting decisively enough, or believing strongly or Christianly enough” (Hunter: 22). Though Hunter questions whether culture can be reduced to values alone, he helps us see how those leading the fight are certain they will win, not only because they are on the side of right, but because their conviction and commitment guarantees it. In this context, ambivalence or ambiguity are proof positive of the insidious and corrosive effects of secular doubt. It is thus not surprising that, on the other side of the culture wars, atheists are especially quick to point to the danger of a “believer [who] is possessed of murderous certainty” (Ryan: 65). In his account of the new atheists, Phil Ryan points to an underlying symmetry structuring the debate: “The New Atheist asserts that when believers get serious, they get ugly. The defender asserts that when atheists get serious, they get ugly . . . Each side can allow that there are decent members of the opposing camp, but then claim that the decent types are not fully serious, not true to their fundamental world view” (Ryan: 65). This dynamic has only grown stronger in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* murders and similar instances of violence, and talk show host Bill Maher’s denunciations of Islam as “like the Mafia” are emblematic of the trend. But the salient point is that, on all sides, being religious is presented as a state of pure conviction, a certainty about the truth, whose stakes involve nothing short of life and death.

The notion that religion functions chiefly as a generative source of meaning encourages a view of religious people as fundamentally certain about themselves and their faith. This essay explores how justified we are in this assumption. By evaluating a sample of some recent discourse about religion located at the intersection between scholarship, politics, and media punditry, it tries to illuminate how this assumption informs different positions in this discourse. It also suggests ways in which doubt and uncertainty, fear and trembling, ambivalence and even indifference might be better factored into the religious equation. I do not deny that there are many who are certain in their beliefs, and who act on those beliefs without a second thought. But I am skeptical that these people and their particular kind of experience should be the model for understanding the multiple and complex dimensions of religion. The essay argues that we must find room for these facets of experience in how we understand religion, or risk misunderstanding the ways that religion does – as well as does not – shape culture.

Religion as Culture

There is no room here to provide a detailed overview of the transition to culture as a research paradigm in the social sciences and humanities. To be sure, any such history would have to address structural and later cultural anthropology, semiotics, and a range of lesser-known efforts in phenomenology, lifeworld sociology, and philosophical anthropology. One would also have to look at the emergence of a distinct western Marxist critique of culture and its influence in the rise of cultural studies. What is essential, however, is the idea that human life is symbolic through and through. To live and operate in the world – to have a world at all – means to inhabit a dense network of symbols that both enable and constrain how one sees and understands things. Above all else, symbolic networks are what govern the range of possible courses of action one might take and the choices one makes. In what might arguably be taken as the paradigmatic formulation of culture, Clifford Geertz defines

culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitude about and towards life” (89). Culture is thus less a fixed body of folktales, art, literature, or music, than a set of tacit rules for producing what is accepted as intelligible by members of the same culture. These rules can and do change, but are not easily dispensed with, since they form the conditions for any possible understanding of what it means to live in a given place and time. In contrast with the objectivizing imperative of so much older social science, whose mandate was to systematically analyze, measure, define, categorize, and catalogue the range of social practice, culture offers ways of seeing individuals and groups as decidedly active participants in their own – near constant – self-definition and self-fashioning. It also offers new and interesting ways to understand change; for if culture constrains how members express themselves, it also provides important avenues for breaking the rules in ways that have symbolic meaning. To break a taboo in the right way is to exploit the subversive potential of a given culture and to illuminate alternative ways of doing things (Iswolsky and Bakhtin). Having grasped this, many scholars now devote great energy to documenting the subversive strategies of subaltern groups and identifying the often hidden forms of agency through which individuals take some measure of control – however limited – over their own lives, even when subject to the rules of larger symbolic networks (Certeau). To think about religion along these lines provides a powerful explanatory matrix for showing how religious ideas and actions are interwoven within a larger and powerful symbolic order. And it offers a way to see how religion can be internally contested by practitioners whose lack of formal power does not necessarily leave them without resources for articulating alternatives to what religious leaders say is the nature of the faith (Chakrabarty). This is not to deny the ways that religions can and do enforce orthodoxy. But seen from the point of view of culture, the power of religion lies not so much in how its leaders enforce conformity as it does in its capacity to have members internalize these rules as their own.

The centrality of culture in the humanities and social sciences, though not unchallenged, has had a decisive influence on the study of religion. In their recent summary of “the emerging strong program in the sociology of religion,” David Smilde and Matthew May surveyed 587 articles in three general sociology journals between 1978 and 2007. They found, in addition to an overall rise in the number of articles addressing religion, there was a shift in the way it was perceived. In contrast to social scientific literature from the 1960s and early 70s, when religion was evaluated in light of more basic social processes, religion is now increasingly featured as the primary independent variable. They conclude that the driving force behind this shift is the tendency to consider religion primarily as a phenomenon of culture: “The most basic building block of any strong program is the idea that culture is an autonomous phenomenon that is not reducible to social circumstances. The usual way of arguing for the autonomy of culture is by maintaining that it consists of a system of symbols that are substantially arbitrary” (4). Because these symbols are arbitrary, it is thus their specific way of interacting that endows them with meaning, and “[t]his internal determination of meaning is what then gives culture the power to constitute social reality rather than vice versa” (4). When applied to religion, “religion becomes an autonomous, irreducible phenomenon that can thus function as an independent variable” (4), and this

autonomy, in turn, helps explain just how religion serves as the foundation for meaning in a culture more generally.

For Smilde and May, definite normative assumptions underwrite this view of the autonomy of religion and culture. In their view, treating culture as an autonomous, independent variable involves a deeply political commitment to the “key element of human dignity and freedom” (5). Viewing culture as irreducible helps establish the individual as the primary agent who shapes the social world and is responsible for it, and who is thus not simply the product of larger social forces. At the same time, however, the presumed universality of this subject, rather than effacing real social differences attached to all subjects, normalizes assumptions about the masculine, logocentric – and ultimately western – ideals of autonomous action. Smilde and May also point out that the imbrication of freedom and dignity with cultural autonomy in this way encourages a degree of pro-religiousness to the degree that religion is taken to promote the free, autonomous individual. It furthermore leads to seeing religion a certain way: “When the concept of religion as a deeply-held, autonomous set of beliefs becomes the baseline for conceptualizing religion, religious practices that do not fit this model are often portrayed as insincere, vacillating, superficial, or impermanent” (5). To give an example, one sees this kind of preference at work in the U.S. Department of State’s Annual International Report on Religious Freedom, which is based almost exclusively on the degree to which states acknowledge the individual right to religious freedom, and virtually ignores other modes of religious being. One sees a similar focus on the individual in the Council of Europe’s 2008 recommendation on religion and education. As Hent de Vries points out, to the extent that the document opposes unthinking “cult” to a more reflective “culture,” “what is distinguished and . . . separated here is a certain diffuse and uncritical *appartenance* or ‘belonging,’ on the one hand, and an *autoconstitution* or ‘self-constitution’ on the other” (211).

Clifford Geertz’s essay “Religion as a Cultural System” has been enormously influential in shaping how many scholars view the close connection between culture and religion (Sewell). One might even say that it has been more influential outside of anthropology than inside the discipline.⁴ Geertz defines religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (90). Religions are powerful because they provide an effective means of reconciling people to the “inescapability of ignorance, pain and injustice” in the world. Religious rituals are especially important, because they reassure believers that the transcendent order guaranteed by religion is, in fact, capable of exerting real force in the world. Rituals offer participants an immediate experience of the authority of the order they ultimately find so reassuring: “Having ritually ‘leapt’ . . . into the framework of meaning which religious conceptions define, and the ritual ended, returned again to the common-sense world, a man is – unless, as sometimes happens, the experience fails to register – changed. And as he is changed, so also is the common-sense

⁴ Geertz exerted enormous influence among American academics in large part given his position as founding director of the social sciences section of the Institute for Advanced Study. For more on his influence among historians, see Davis.

world, for it is now seen as but the partial form of a wider reality which corrects and completes it” (Geertz: 122). On this view, the authority of religion is internalized as the certainty that begets a life changing experience. Anything short of this is, according to Geertz, the failure of religion.

There are many things to consider when assessing the current preference for seeing religion as essentially cultural, and Geertz’s essay comprises only one of those factors. But what cannot be denied is how influential this way of looking at things has become, even in the face of criticism. One of Geertz’s most incisive critics has been Talal Asad who calls “Geertz’s treatment of religious belief . . . a modern, privatized Christian one . . . to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind” (1983: 247).⁵ He challenges the way Geertz universalizes a conception of religion based on rationalist assumptions, and argues that Geertz’s claim that religion helps people live with “ignorance, pain, and injustice” hardly seems to differentiate religion from any philosophical or ethical system, or address the many facets of real, historical religions (Asad 1993: 27-54). By treating symbols primarily as tools of understanding, Geertz interprets religion as theory, and pays short shrift to how religion comprises historically situated systems of authority for distributing real power in concrete situations. Of course, religious studies scholars have long criticized reducing religion to belief, and there is a solid body of literature that exposes the western, and ultimately Christian, underpinning of that tendency (Bell). Asad’s critique is not so different from what Robert Bellah, writing in the 1960s, called the “objectivist fallacy.” For Bellah, intellectuals primarily concerned with how religion maintained social order “assimilated revelation to an objectivist cognitive framework as though what was revealed were ‘higher’ cognitive truths rather than the direct confrontation with the divine that the Bible is concerned with” (221). This perpetuated “a sophisticated error in understanding the religious life of the ordinary man” as “primarily a matter of objectivist belief” (220). The problem with eliding religion and “faith” or “belief” is that it carries with it normative expectations for how religious people should be able to frame their experience and can thus be used as a way of defining “true” religion (Smith). Unfortunately, this criticism remains largely confined to scholars working in the field of religious studies. Outside the field, simple notions of faith and belief continue to serve as part of the ineluctable *lingua franca* for talking about religion. As such, they reinforce commonsense ideas that what makes one religious is a deep conviction that in turn drives motives about right action in the world.

Taking stock of the ways that religion is conceived as culture is important given how more and more people see religion as the master key to unlocking the sources of global order and disorder. This trend is especially evident in the growing prevalence of what Mahmood Mamdani calls “culture talk” in politics and the media. “Culture Talk assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and then explains politics as a consequence of that essence” (17). Culture talk has emerged in recent decades as an especially potent way of discussing Islam, but is no less active in discussions of Christian and

⁵ Some have argued that Geertz is more sophisticated than Asad allows. In his defense of Geertz, for example, Kevin Schilbrack points out that Geertz does not even use the word “belief” in his essay, and argues that Geertz’s work is too deeply influenced by Wittgenstein’s view on the public character of language to be characterized as preoccupied with private meaning.

other fundamentalisms. It is often validated by citing the work of scholars like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, who offer geo-political narratives of the clash of civilizations that reaffirm the defining role of religion in history (Huntingdon). And it is reinforced by diffuse but nevertheless powerful presuppositions structuring how most people think about the course of modern history itself. To be modern, after all, is to be among the peoples who self-consciously create culture, and who are thus the authors of their own progress. Culture talk presents Muslims and a range of religious others as either pre-modern or anti-modern. In either case, “history seems to have petrified into a lifeless custom,” and culture “stands for habit, for some kind of instinctive activity with rules that are inscribed in early founding texts, usually religious, and mummified in early artifacts” (Mamdani 18).

Culture talk is especially influential among those who claim that religion is inherently violent because it proffers absolute claims. On this view, religion establishes incontestable truths for believers, and so legitimizes violence as an appropriate tool to transform the world in the name of what is known to be good, right, and true. The problem with this view, of course, is that ideological absolutism is not exclusive to religion. As William Cavanaugh points out, the number of Americans “willing to kill for their country” is probably far greater than the number of Americans who would identify themselves as “willing to kill for their Christian faith.” This raises important questions for those who hold that religion “has a much greater tendency toward fanaticism because the object of its truth claims is absolute in ways that secular claims are not.” For Cavanaugh, the claim that religion breeds violence is thus really part of a strategy for legitimizing secular violence. Since the religious violence frequently under discussion today is almost exclusively non-western, the goal is really to establish a dichotomy between a rational, secular, moderate west and those still beholden to absolutist, religious impulses. Exponents of this view “attribute Muslims’ animosity toward the West to their inability to learn the lessons of history and remove the baneful influence of religion from politics.” But, as Cavanaugh points out, this way of thinking depends on a “blind spot regarding our own history of violence,” a violence that is allegedly only ever used reluctantly, in the name of self-defense or lofty and selfless goals such as the defense of international law. The result is an image of the West as “a monolithic reality representing modernity, which necessarily includes secularity and rationality,” and an image of the Muslim world as “an equally monolithic reality which is ancient, that is, lagging behind modernity, because of its essentially religious and irrational character.” Viewed in this way, Western violence is justified because it liberates others from being stuck in a backwards and regressive culture.⁶

When Religion Fails

Treating religion as culture depends on a notion of the human person as a meaning-making machine, ceaselessly navigating her way through dense symbolic networks with the goal of rendering these ever more transparent. This is never explicitly stated. But to the extent that culture is construed as symbols – as so much text to be read – then its

⁶ I certainly do not mean to ignore those who cite their religious certainty as the ground for violence. That would be irresponsible in the extreme. But religion is not reducible to the violence carried out in its name, and there is a distinct circularity in so many accounts that seek to explain religious violence by claiming that religion is inherently violent.

intelligibility remains the implicit goal of cultural analysis. This is underscored by the fact that the failure of meaning, while always acknowledged as a possibility, is largely treated as peripheral. For Geertz, the failure of meaning is precisely what religion ensures against by serving as a bulwark against the “tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but interpretability” (100). The failure of meaning only becomes central when it is so widespread as to initiate a meltdown. It is not, in principle, part of the system itself. Above all, religion does not itself encourage vacillation, much less serve as a source of welcome, compelling, or even productive confusion. Indeed, religion is taken as the paradigmatic case of certainty, precisely because it resolves existential difficulties and provides a blueprint for action. It provides believers with desperately needed answers in the face of a threatening and complex world. And this is not just Geertz’s view. In his recent account of the ways humanity seeks to escape the “terror of history,” Teofilo Ruiz writes:

Religion or religious experiences, in its (or their) many different variations means essentially the way in which one (or the many) places oneself in the hands of god (or the gods). Religion posits the terrors besetting one’s own personal life and the weight of collective history as part of a divine plan and as the sum total of inscrutable but always wise actions of an all-powerful, all-knowing deity (or deities). The religious man or woman will often find great solace in belief. Though god’s (or the gods’) actions often seem inexplicable and cruel, there is always the reassuring belief that the deity knows why such things need to happen. There is, after all, a higher purpose. In the end, all events, awful and good, form part of an over-arching sacred project in which we all play a part (18).

It is remarkable how broadly both proponents and opponents of religion share this view, namely, that religion supplies people with answers, and that the ultimate impulse driving people towards religion is a need for certainty in the face of meaninglessness. Iconic figures such as the monk, the activist, the convert, the missionary, the pilgrim, the hermit, the martyr, the saint, virtually define what it means to be sure, so sure that one pursues a goal at all costs. This, in spite of the fact that the real lives of so many people – religious *virtuosi* included – often involve sustained and serious doubt. Though it is not something I can pursue here, I propose that an alternative approach to these figures might just as legitimately interpret them as tools for managing uncertainty. On this view, such figures are deployed in conjunction with a narrative that features doubt and crisis, but only as a prelude to arriving at a new level of religious awareness and devotion. From this perspective, one might read Augustine’s *Confessions* as paradigmatic of a whole genre of writing that treats crisis as a kind of spiritual deficit brought on by a surfeit of intellect whose resolution is nevertheless a new level certainty. After all, Augustine “is led . . . to prefer the Catholic doctrine” because it is “more unassuming and honest, in that she required to be believed things not demonstrated . . . whereas among the Manichees our credulity was mocked by a promise of certain knowledge, and then so many most fabulous and absurd things were imposed to be believed because they could not be demonstrated” (83).

Contemporary discussions depend heavily on the presumption that religion is (and must be) a pursuit of meaning; that religious experience does not consist, perhaps, to some very great extent, in having meaning thwarted, in having questions not answered, in being

unsettled rather than reassured. What about those instances when people are not certain? What about those instances when they know little, or are incorrect, even about their own faith traditions? In 2010, results from the Pew “U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey” suggest that Americans know surprisingly little about religion. Knowledge of world religions was especially poor. Only about half of those surveyed knew that the Koran was the Islamic holy book. Less than half knew that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist. And only 27% of those surveyed knew that Indonesia is mostly Muslim. Knowledge of Christianity was better, but even here only about half of respondents knew that the Golden Rule was not one of the Ten Commandments. Slightly less than half knew that Martin Luther inspired the Reformation, and only 11% knew that Jonathan Edwards participated in the First Great Awakening. But even more startling, perhaps, was the lack of knowledge about key Christian doctrines. Only slightly more than half of Catholics knew that the bread and wine do more than symbolize the body and blood of Christ, and only 16% of respondents knew that Protestants (and not Catholics) taught the doctrine of salvation by faith alone.

One way to read the results, of course, is to conclude that Americans know much less about religion than perhaps they ought to, given the relatively high levels of religious membership in the United States.⁷ Another possibility, however, is to ask whether there really are specific things that religious people ought to know, and that by not knowing them, they therefore compromise their religious authenticity. Would better scores really tell us something significant about what religion means to people? The very preference for asking about people like Martin Luther and Jonathan Edwards betrays a kind of canonical approach that hardly gets at the way religion is lived in everyday life. But even more important: to understand religion, should we focus on what people do not know? Or is it perhaps better to try and understand what they do know, and how their knowledge and ignorance work together to sustain religious life day in and day out? Is it really that surprising that just under half of the Catholics polled failed to identify the doctrine of trans-substantiation? Is not the more interesting question how these Catholics maintain their Catholic identity in the face of what clearly is a doctrinal blind spot? Could not one speculate that the manifest difficulty of accepting this particular doctrine, in a scientific age such as ours, reflects a distinct and calculated preference for not knowing certain things? Is not the real issue to find out just how the great variety of religious people participate in their religious communities: on what terms, with what hopes, desires, questions, and, yes, even mistakes? If people lack knowledge about their own religious traditions, does that mean that they are less religious? Does it mean they are insincerely religious? It does, if we take as our working hypothesis that religion consists in knowing for sure. But what if we are prepared to accept that a lack of knowledge might itself be woven into religious experience in certain ways? What if being religious means abiding faithfully with ignorance, and maybe even longing for it to some extent?

⁷ Many assume that the erosion of religious knowledge in the U.S. is the direct result of a secularist agenda. Stephen Prothero argues that the real cause lies in the historical decision to tone down religious education that stressed doctrinal and other differences in order to provide a common Protestant basis for hostility to what were considered the “real” enemies, namely, Catholics and Jews. This common Protestant identity was further reinforced throughout the century as Protestants sought common ground when working together on a range of issues from abolition to temperance to civil rights. In all of these cases, American Protestants downplayed differences that otherwise might have prevented them from banding together as effectively as they did.

These are important questions if one wants to understand what actually happens in the many and varied lives of those people who call themselves religious. But to answer them requires accepting that these lives are as fraught with experiences of inconsistency, contradiction, and meaninglessness as any other; that religion does not immunize anyone against these very human realities. What is especially interesting in Ruiz's characterization of religion as an escape from the "terror of history" is how it fails to sufficiently appreciate what it means to gamble everything on faith. Far from simply taking the easy way out, the person who assigns responsibility for the terror of history to God (or the gods) – with nothing less than a promise that this will be made good in some unknown future – actually holds God responsible for things that are otherwise more easily explained away as history. Looking for the answers in history is much less risky, since historical understanding finds specific and local causes for events that hardly implicate God (Pocock). To be sure, placing the blame for history at the feet of God might be comforting, but it might just as well place one's faith in serious jeopardy. Viewed in this way, religion might involve accepting a level of anxiety that challenges facile conclusions about how religion serves primarily as a source of comfort and certainty. At the very least, it should prompt a more critical response to those, like Peter Berger, who insist that "[m]odernity . . . undermine[s] the taken for granted certainties by which people lived through most of history," and therefore "religious movements that claim to give certainty have great appeal" (11).⁸ Given religions' central place among these older certainties, one must ask just why religion persists when other pre-modern certainties dissolve in the face of modernity. What particular quality does religion have that other "taken for granted" certainties do not? Could it be that it is not certainty, as such, but perhaps rather a certain rhythmic encounter between doubt and certainty that – far from being resolved by ritual or other means – is placed perpetually before the religious as a burden to shoulder or a challenge to meet?

Of course, to even contemplate looking at religion this way flies in the face of the common sense view that holds that what makes people religious is their fidelity to ideas that are beyond doubt. According to this line of thought: To be religious is to believe, and one must accept at least the basic tenets of the faith in a way that concedes to them some authority, even if one does not agree with everything. And in religions that are not based on formal doctrine, practice is the essential characteristic. To be religious is to do what is consistent with the religious community, and to do it appropriately, that is to say, in the right place, at the right time, and in the right way. One can be doubtful, but doubt constitutes a measure of the distance from being truly religious. While there is a kind of doubt that precipitates crisis and deeper religious devotion, anything else is ultimately corrosive. Religious fundamentalism, religious violence, religious bigotry illustrate only too well the immutable kernel of religion, which consists in a desire to impose a truth, held to be absolute, on the world. Those who call themselves religious moderates might reject violence and bigotry in pursuit of this goal, but they do not thereby reject an exclusive claim to truth in principle. To do so, after all, would entail not believing what one claims to believe. Sam

⁸ In this essay, of course, Berger is actually stepping back from his own famous secularization thesis, and his comments are aimed at trying to understand the resurgence of religion, not its demise. Nevertheless, the statement quoted here reflects his (and many others') abiding commitment to some version of modernization as historical progress.

Harris makes just this point very forcefully in his *The End of Faith*. For Harris, moderates are especially troublesome because they provide cover for fundamentalism to continue. Quite simply, moderates delude themselves about the true state of their beliefs, presenting their tolerance and pluralism as products of religious enlightenment rather than as the fruits of a secular culture.

The only reason anyone is “moderate” in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought (democratic politics, scientific advancement on every front, concern for human rights, an end to cultural and geographic isolation, etc.). The doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the *inside*. The moderation we see among non-fundamentalists is not some sign that faith itself has evolved; it is, rather, the product of the many hammer blows of modernity that have exposed certain tenets of faith to doubt. Not the least among these developments has been the emergence of our tendency to value evidence and to be convinced by a proposition to the degree that there is evidence for it. Even most fundamentalists live by the lights of reason in this regard; it is just that their minds seem to have been partitioned to accommodate the profligate truth claims of their faith (18-19).

For Harris, to be religious is to believe with full confidence in the literal meaning of sacred texts and/or the pronouncements of religious authorities. The religious moderate, by contrast, really wants to be something else, but fails to take seriously how doubt is the mind’s natural (and non-religious) desire to free itself from the confines of ignorance.

In their important book, *American Grace*, Putnam, Campbell, and Garrett observe that the number of religious moderates is declining in the United States. Drawing from an analysis of data from the “Faith Matters Surveys,” administered to thousands of respondents in 2006 and 2007, they argue that American society is becoming increasingly polarized on the subject of religion. This is particularly interesting, given the very fluidity of religion in American life. A defining fact of American society is that people are much more likely to change religious affiliation than in almost any other society. There is thus, in this country, what the authors call a “thriving religious ecosystem” in which “[r]eligions compete, adapt, and evolve as individual Americans freely move from one congregation to another, and even from one religion to another” (4). But outside of this ecosystem, things are not so harmonious. An intense polarization surrounds religion today. In contrast with fifty years ago, when what mattered was if you were a Catholic, Jew, or Protestant – more specifically whether you were Irish, German, or Polish Catholic, or a Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian, what matters now is whether one is religious or not. This polarization is shrinking the ranks of religious moderates, as people of faith square off against an increasingly determined secularist critique. And here it is worth speculating whether one relevant factor driving this process might be the degree to which moderates feel pressure to be more committed than they otherwise might be, given the emerging standard of certainty in the public discourse about religion.

There is no room in this essay to go into the larger and vexed issue of how reason and religion have come to be seen, by some, as opposed. But one thing that any future discussion

will have to address is the puzzling way that Harris, and others like him, ascribe a strange mix of reasonableness and gullibility to those allegedly ensnared by religion's promise of certainty in an uncertain world. Why does Harris believe that the same person who so easily succumbs to the lure of faith will be awakened by the "many hammer blows of modernity that have exposed certain tenets of faith to doubt?" This seems a strange conclusion, at best, given his derisive treatment of religious believers as, basically, stupid. Harris offers two answers, neither of which are satisfactory. On the one hand, he argues that religion is a relic of humanity's ancient past that, over time, has been supplanted by the "tendency to value evidence" and other mental aptitudes absent in the past. But one has to wonder: if what is requisite to make good judgments about modernity and its supposed advantages are precisely those self-same mental aptitudes, then how does one suddenly come into possession of them (since the religious person, is by definition, without them)? On the other hand, he argues that people persist in being religious by partitioning their minds in such a way that truth and error are unable to mutually interrogate each other. But here too, one has to wonder: if one recognizes the validity of the truth enough to see it as a threat to belief – enough to shut it out – then the mind is not truly partitioned. On the contrary, what this suggests is that such people ultimately take on a burden of cognitive dissonance; that they live with a kind of ambivalence that hardly squares with benign reassurances that one's faith is simply "right."

Conclusion

Religion and culture are being elided in ways that make it hard to account for how religious people actually live, with all the challenges, compromises, and contradictions this entails. To remedy this state of affairs will require a better grasp of the historical pressures that shape the category "religion" and its attendant meanings, and a better grasp of the shifting historical position of different religious groups.⁹ This means more than simply saying that religions change, a fact that religions themselves acknowledge but generally downplay by saying that the forces of change are extraneous to the core of ritual and belief. What is needed is a deeper appreciation of the dynamic nature of religion. To call religion dynamic is to place change at the heart of religion and shift the focus away from an almost singular concern over tradition and the past to better appreciating the role of the future in shaping the ways that religions overwhelm their own traditions. To approach religion as dynamic means looking at how people strike a balance between keeping faith with one's spiritual ancestors and preparing oneself for living in the present and future with integrity. This is a point that Peter Slater makes in his *The Dynamics of Religion*, in which he argues that "[f]ailure to acknowledge the future orientation and changing patterns of religious ways of life" means that "we cannot account for the growth of traditions and convergence of conflicting points of view, except in terms of nonreligious factors. A definition which emphasizes only the sacred past . . . can only describe change as decline." Without a keen sense for the internally dynamic nature of religion, "[n]ovelty in religion . . . appears not as creativity but as an invitation to disaster" (8).

⁹ It is worth noting that the charges of anti-modernity levied against Islam today are not that much different from those levied against Catholics a century and a half ago. For a good introduction to the vexed position of Catholics vis-a-vis modernity see Clark and Kaiser.

To approach religion as dynamic offers us new possibilities for understanding the tremendous fecundity of religion, whose history of schism, apostasy, and reformation might just as easily be written as a story of evolution, innovation, and creativity. It offers a way of conceiving of religion as something other than merely a brake on change. This is something that James Carse tries to show in his *The Religious Case Against Belief*, in which he argues that religious identity is always much bigger and more complex than the specific beliefs that are taken to define religions at any given moment. Belief defines what is right and wrong, and serves to police the boundaries of a community. But belief founders precisely to the extent that it seeks wholly to explain all things. By promulgating what is wholly certain, belief invariably defines a realm of what is outside of belief, what is false. But what is false, of course, is always in principle an alternative belief. Viewed in this way, belief and unbelief are necessarily constituted by each other.

[B]ecause belief is always belief against, it is itself an act of unbelief. It is the active refusal to take a rival position. To believe something, one must disbelieve something. Each belief must not only have an opponent; it must have an opponent whose (dis)beliefs are a perfect match. For this reason, each is largely defined by its opposite. If beliefs die when their opposition disappears, they are obliged to mimic any changes the opposition makes of itself. Belief and unbelief are therefore locked into mutual self-creation (42).

To ignore this dialectic between belief and unbelief is to ignore the creative, adaptive and sometimes downright revolutionary impulses in religion, and how religion continually undercuts the certainty of so much that is professed as belief. To assume that to be religious means being always and everywhere certain is to assume that being religious is fully satisfying, that it brings ultimate repose instead of restlessness. It assumes that religion fills human beings to the brim, without any lingering doubts about religion's adequacy in confronting a complex world. For Christians, as James Davison Hunter argues, perhaps the central tension that persists is the call to fulfill the absolute "spiritual and ethical requirements of the gospel" in a fallen world. To be in that fallen world, however, means that any use of earthly "power is inherently tainted and its use inherently compromising of the standards to which Christ beckons." Thus it is never the case that one can simply Christianize the world by acting on deep and certain convictions about God's will. On the contrary, "[i]n this world, the Church can never be in repose," and so the best one can do is "abide in the will and purposes of God in the present world disorder with integrity" (183).

The tremendous diversity of religious experience is often taken as the ground for rejecting a unified definition of religion. I am inclined to turn this around and say that the difficulty in conceptualizing "religion" suggests that this is a dimension of experience and history unlike any other. While the many and varied attempts at defining religion yield nothing like an essence or singular activity, taken together, they do suggest that religion – whatever else it is – is a tradition of sometimes ecstatic and sometimes agonizing debate over the place of humanity in the cosmos. Religion is a tradition of thinking about life at the limits of existence, in its becoming and its passing, its fullness and its emptiness, its certainties and its uncertainties. When it comes to thinking about religion, therefore, what is important is not only that we recognize that the term is contested. Just as important is to ask whether this conflict over its meaning tells us something about what it means. Religion is a contested

category precisely because there are multiple possibilities for what it means to be religious. Though we may not be able to define it, we know religion by its un-paralleled presence in almost every historical place and time. And viewed over time, religion expresses a restlessness with every place and time, a dissatisfaction that enables the religious to cultivate a range of ideas and practices that transcend easy classification. In the end, how we understand religion will be one of the most demanding critical endeavors we have yet undertaken. Of that, we can be certain.

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