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5 Social order or social chaos

MICHAEL J. PUETT

I. INTRODUCTION

Max Weber, writing during a period that he felt marked a shift into a new world of modernity, described that world as follows:

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world.” ... To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him.¹

The emergence of modernity has entailed a loss of the enchanted cosmology that defined traditional societies. Weber characteristically viewed such a rationalization of the world in ambivalent terms. It has led to the recognition that the world is governed by humans, not gods, and it has allowed us to make a rational science of human society. These were, to Weber, overall good things, and the resulting disenchantment of the world ought thus to be thought of as something we must learn to bear as the flip-side of the same coin. Those too weak to face this shift can always return to the churches – the remnants of the traditional world.

This tradition–modernity distinction has dominated not only the field of religious studies but also commonsensical views in the West for the past two centuries concerning religions in general. Humans before the modern period believed themselves to be living in a world created and controlled by gods; according to this framework, in which the cosmos was therefore structured, humanity had a predefined place and purpose for existence, and human societies were given order through religious beliefs and institutions. Such a world was cohesive, harmonious, and

¹ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans H. Gerth, trans. C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129–56, quote on 155.

unified, and religion was the glue that held it together. The dramatic shift in human history, according to this narrative, thus occurred in the modern world, when a loss of belief in the religious sphere led to fragmentation and alienation. Humans no longer had a defined place and purpose in the cosmos and human society no longer had a force leading to harmony and cohesion.

The lessons drawn from this narrative have varied. Some have argued that we need to return to a traditional world of religion so that we can be saved from our fragmented lives, or that we at least need to find some functional equivalent of religion for the modern age. Others have celebrated the shift to modernity without ambivalence, seeing the overthrow of the religious sphere as a good thing, allowing human agents to approach their sociopolitical world as humanly constructed and thus as changeable. And perhaps most have been like Max Weber, arguing that we must learn to accept this existential situation, even as we hold a clear nostalgia for what has been lost.

Regardless of the lessons one draws, however, the narrative has been surprisingly stable over the past two centuries, and underlying the narrative is a remarkably stable view of religion: religion is the force that brings order and cohesiveness to a human world that is otherwise contingent, fragmented, and bereft of higher meaning. Indeed, this definition of religion has been so stable that even those thinkers in the past few decades who have rejected evolutionary readings of human history still continue to define religion as that which gives order to an otherwise contingent and meaningless world.

What are the implications of such a view of religion? Why has it been so recurrent over the past two centuries? And, perhaps most significantly, is such a view empirically correct? If not, are there other ways to frame our understandings of religion – not to mention our narratives of the modern world?

To answer these questions, it will be helpful to first explore some of these arguments in a bit more depth.

II. THE CHAOS OF HUMANITY

Weber positioned himself (albeit not always happily) as a modernist – as someone who understands that the world is in fact governed by humans rather than gods. The social science that Weber championed would thus serve, among other goals, to unmask the traditional, religious assumptions about the way the world operates. Thus, for example, Weber saw one of the roles of religion in traditional societies to be that

of legitimating authority – presenting the contingent world of human politics as having sacred force:

The validity of a social order by virtue of the sacredness of tradition is the oldest and most universal type of legitimacy. The fear of magical evils reinforces the general psychological inhibitions against any sort of change in customary modes of action. At the same time the manifold vested interests which tend to favor conformity with an established order help to perpetuate it.²

The contingent social worlds of humanity were legitimated in traditional societies by making them appear to be sanctioned by sacred powers, and thus as immutable and timeless.

Such a claim of unmasking was a dominant motif in social scientific writings in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Émile Durkheim went so far as to argue that the very notion of the divine was a misguided understanding of society:

Society in general, simply by its effect on men's minds, undoubtedly has all that is required to arouse the sensation of the divine. A society is to its members what a god is to its faithful. A god is first of all a being that man conceives of as superior to himself in some respects and one on whom he believes he depends.³

Society itself defines humans. In traditional cultures, humans, not able to grasp the power of society, mistakenly came to believe in divine powers that were guiding the world. Only the modern social scientist can see that in fact it is society itself that created the notion of the divine.

But, of course, one can hold the same view of religion and reverse both the valuation and the analytic stance. If the social sciences largely took the view that the modern debunking of religion was correct (even if psychologically difficult to accept), several highly influential figures in the early development of the field of religious studies took the opposite view. Mircea Eliade, one of the most influential figures in the development of the field of religion, also defined his analyses in terms of a fundamental distinction between the contingent, human projects in the

² Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 2 vols., ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), vol. 1: 37.

³ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912]), 208.

profane world and the timeless ones of the sacred world, but with the opposite valuation.

For Eliade, what he calls “religious man” sees the world as having been created by divine powers. The world, “has a structure; it is not a chaos but a cosmos, hence it presents itself as creation, as work of the gods.”⁴ Indeed, the sacred is what is real and significant and humans participate in this true reality by imitating the divine:

Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, *homo religiosus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real. He further believes that life has a sacred origin and that human existence realizes all of its potentialities in proportion as it is religious – that is, participates in reality. The gods created man and the world, the culture heroes completed the Creation, and the history of all these divine and semi-divine works is preserved in myths. By reactualizing sacred history, by imitating the divine behavior, man puts and keeps himself close to the gods – that is, in the real and the significant.⁵

Humans do not legitimate their actions by appeal to the sacred but rather, in their attempts to create order, are in fact imitating the gods. The sacred, in other words, precedes us, and we imitate it. The sacred models are embedded in the cosmos and when humans construct order in their own social worlds, they do so by following these sacred models.

Although the general framework – the sacred world as eternal and ordered, and the human world as contingent – is almost identical to what we have seen in the preceding, the valuation is clearly altered. The real is not the contingent world of humanity that is mistakenly legitimated by way of the sacred. The real is the sacred.

And the contrast continues. Like so many figures before him, Eliade contrasts this traditional world of belief in a sacred order with a modern loss of such a belief. But note again the shift in valuation:

It is easy to see all that separates this mode of being in the world from the existence of a nonreligious man. First of all, the nonreligious man refuses transcendence, accepts the relativity of “reality,” and may even come to doubt the meaning of existence. The great cultures of the past too have not been entirely without nonreligious

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1959 [1957]), 116–17.

⁵ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 202.

men, and it is not impossible that such men existed even on the archaic levels of culture, although as yet no testimony to their existence there has come to light. But it is only in the modern societies of the West that nonreligious man has developed fully. Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations. Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.⁶

If the world of religious man is impregnated with the sacred, the societies of the modern West refuse the transcendental. The sacred is still there; but modern man no longer listens.

Despite these different valuations among Weber, Durkheim, and Eliade – three of the most influential theorists on twentieth-century studies of religion – the frameworks are almost identical. Traditional societies believed in a structured, harmonious cosmos controlled by gods, and they believed these gods to be the source of authority in the human realm as well. And the belief in such a structured, harmonious cosmos has been rejected in the modern world, such that humans now believe themselves to be the makers of their own history. Theorists may debate whether this is a good or bad thing, whether the sacred really exists or is just a misunderstanding of human society or a means of legitimating political authority, but the framework is strikingly similar.

III. FRACTURED COSMOLOGIES

But, then, what about the empirical fact that so many religions simply do not posit such a structured cosmos? Throughout much of twentieth-century thought, the answer was simple: any such religious tendency was a precursor to modernity. Indeed, many of Weber's studies of religions throughout the world came in part to rest on the question of the degree to which they did or did not posit a tension between humans and the cosmos. To the extent that they did, they were seen as moving closer on the scale of rationality toward modernity; to the extent that they did not, they were posited as inhibiting that development.

⁶ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 202–3.

For example, Weber read religions in China as emphasizing the necessity of humans adjusting to the larger harmony of the ordered cosmos:

Confucianism meant adjustment to the world, to its orders and conventions.... The cosmic orders of the world were considered fixed and inviolate and the orders of society were but a special case of this. The great spirits of the cosmic orders obviously desired only the happiness of the world and especially the happiness of man. The same applied to the orders of society. The "happy" tranquility of the empire and the equilibrium of the soul should and could be attained only if man fitted himself into the internally harmonious cosmos.⁷

Weber contrasts this with the tensions in Protestantism that would ultimately generate a desire among humans to master and transform the world:

From the relation between the supra-mundane God and the culturally wicked, ethically irrational world there resulted ... the absolute unholiness of tradition and the truly endless task of ethically and rationally subduing and mastering the given world, i.e., rational, objective "progress." Here, the task of the rational transformation of the world stood opposed to the Confucian adjustment to the world.⁸

Protestantism, by creating a tension between humans and God, thus helped to usher in the modern world. In other words, premodern religions are categorized according to the degree to which they emphasize cosmic harmony or begin to push against such harmony by positing a tension with the cosmos. In the latter case, the religions would be pointing toward modernity.

This paradigm has had a long history in twentieth-century scholarship, as various scholars have argued where the significant breaks from the more primordial world of harmony and continuity occurred. K. C. Chang, for example, the leading twentieth-century archaeologist of China, gives a variant of Weber's model, arguing that the shift occurred with the emergence of civilizations in the Near East. To set up the argument, Chang asserts, very much like Eliade, that primitive religion was based upon an assumption of a continuity between humans and the rest

⁷ Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth (New York: Free Press, 1951), 152–3.

⁸ Weber, *The Religion of China*, 240.

of the cosmos: "... continuity between man and animal, between earth and heaven, and between culture and nature." What is distinctive about China, according to Chang, is that this primordial religion of continuity was maintained. As he writes, "the first civilized society of China carried on many essential features of its savage and barbarous antecedents." In contrast, this primordial continuity between heaven and earth was broken in the West. Chang thus defines "... the Chinese pattern as one of *continuity* and the Western pattern as one of *rupture*."⁹

Chang's distinction is between China and the West, rather than tradition and modernity, but the terms of the argument are by now quite familiar: continuity and harmony are more primordial, and the central question is when and why was this broken. The latter is associated with modernity, or with the West more generally.

As is clear from just these two examples, China came to play a significant role in twentieth-century theories of religion precisely because it seemed to exemplify the dominant claims of the time concerning the nature of traditional cosmologies. For the same reason, those cosmologies that arose in premodern periods that appeared to posit a tension between humans and the cosmos drew a significant amount of interest as being possible precursors to modernity. We have already seen the significance Weber granted to Protestantism. Another such religion that generated tremendous interest in twentieth-century theories of religion was so-called Gnosticism, the name given to a number of texts from the Mediterranean late antiquity that claimed the cosmos to have been created by an ignorant or even evil demiurge and that argued true liberation accordingly consisted of transcending this created cosmos.

Hans Jonas's formulations concerning Gnosticism were particularly influential on twentieth-century thought. Jonas describes the modern condition of nihilism in the following terms:

This is the human condition. Gone is the cosmos with those immanent logoi my own can feel kinship, done the order of the whole in which man has his place. That place appears now as a sheer and brute accident.... The utter contingency of our existence in the scheme deprives that scheme of any human sense as a possible frame of reference for the understanding of ourselves.¹⁰

⁹ Chang Kwang-Chih, "Ancient China and Its Anthropological Significance," in *Archaeological Thought in America*, ed. C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 155–66, quotes on 165, 161.

¹⁰ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 323.

And, for Jonas, this is precisely the view one finds in Gnosticism:

There is one situation, and one only that I know of in the history of Western man, where – on a level untouched by anything resembling modern scientific thought – that condition has been realized and lived out with all the vehemence of a cataclysmic event. That is the Gnostic movement, or the more radical ones among the various Gnostic movements and teachings, which the deeply agitated first three centuries of the Christian era proliferated in the Hellenistic parts of the Roman Empire and beyond its eastern boundaries.¹¹

Gnosticism, in short, presages the modern, nihilistic view of humans not having a pre-given place within a structured cosmos.

Jonas is not claiming that Gnosticism led to modernity; absent here are the causal arguments about the emergence of modernity from cosmologies that posit a tension between humans and divinities. But clearly at work is the notion that such tension-based cosmologies involve a break from earlier, structured cosmologies, and that they are akin to modern ones. This reading of Gnosticism would subsequently spawn an entire body of literature equating Gnosticism with various aspects of the modern condition.¹²

Cosmic order or tension with the world. Most of these frameworks (with the exception of Jonas) were either overtly or implicitly based upon evolutionary frameworks. A religious world based upon cosmic harmony is repeatedly seen as the more primordial conception, while in contrast the modern world is cast as one of discontinuity, contingency, and tension with the cosmos. The question then comes down to when the crucial shifts away from this more primordial sense of cosmic order occurred: was it with the emergence of transcendental gods, with the emergence of Gnosticism, with the emergence of Protestantism, or elsewhere? But the paradigm remains the same.

IV. STRUCTURE AND COGNITION

Throughout much of the twentieth century, however, critics have questioned these evolutionary frameworks. Even among these critics, however, one finds amazing constancy in the basic framework and

¹¹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 325.

¹² See, in particular, Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1968); Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

definition of religion. A recent debate among two leading theorists will help underline the point.

Clifford Geertz, perhaps the most influential anthropologist of the twentieth century, was deeply concerned with emphasizing the importance of the interpreter respecting the beliefs of each culture under study. He thus rejected any reductionistic readings of those religious beliefs and opposed any framework that would lead the interpreter toward such reductionism.

Geertz was equally opposed to Eliade's concern with discovering universal religious archetypes that archaic humanity shared. Geertz on the contrary was hoping to study the cultural assumptions of each society, very much under the claim that these assumptions would be radically different in each society. And, perhaps most significantly, for Geertz, the religious sphere is embedded in an entire belief system, thus rendering a distinction between the sacred and the profane meaningless.

Yet pervasive in Geertz's arguments concerning religion is a distinction between the disordered and contingent nature of human experience and the order conferred by religion. For Geertz, humans live in a world of chaos, and religion serves to give meaning to humans in such a world:

There are at least three points where chaos – a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability* – threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight. Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it – challenges with which any religion, however “primitive,” which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope.¹³

Without religion, our life is chaotic, meaningless, and lacking in any ethical justifications. Religion thus serves to give our lives a fundamental order:

How is it that the religious man moves from a troubled perception of experienced disorder to a more or less settled conviction of fundamental order? Just what does “belief” mean in a religious context?

¹³ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 100.

... It seems to me that it is best to begin any approach to this issue with frank recognition that religious belief involves not a Baconian induction from everyday experience – for then we should all be agnostics – but rather a prior acceptance of authority which transforms that experience.¹⁴

By accepting the authority of religious belief, we allow ourselves to deny our everyday experience and instead accept the existence of an ordered cosmos.

Given his insistence that religion provides order to an otherwise meaningless and chaotic existence, it is perhaps not surprising that Geertz consistently finds in his analyses of religious beliefs a harmonious, ordered world, often based in eternal cycles and a structured cosmos. Whether discussing notions of time in Bali or the nineteenth-century Balinese royal court, Geertz consistently portrays a religious sphere of harmony and order.¹⁵

It is the status of such religious beliefs that concerned Maurice Bloch, another leading anthropologist who criticized Geertz's arguments.¹⁶ Bloch turned his attention in particular to Geertz's study of the Balinese, who Geertz claimed had a fundamentally cyclical notion of time.¹⁷ Bloch's argument was that Geertz had developed his claims by looking only at materials from ritual contexts, and was then taking such ritual claims as being assumptions of Balinese culture in general. Bloch's argument in contrast was that for all humans, the everyday experience of time is linear. Cyclical time is part of a ritual context, associated with religion, and as such it is removed from our everyday lives. Geertz's mistake, according to Bloch, was in reading claims made within a ritual context and then taking these as general beliefs in the culture at large.

At issue here is a significant debate as to whether all humans fundamentally think alike (as Bloch argues) or have fundamentally different assumptions about the world (Geertz). But note immediately that both thinkers in the debate still assert the same distinction between everyday life and religion, here reasserting it at the level of cognition. The only question was whether the religious sphere leads people to think

¹⁴ Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 109.

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, "Person, Time and Conduct in Bali," reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 360–411; Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

¹⁶ Maurice Bloch, "The Past and the Present in the Present," *Man* 12, 2 (1977): 278–92; reprinted in Maurice Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 1–18.

¹⁷ Geertz, "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali."

differently – in this case, whether the ritual claim concerning cyclical time results in people actually believing in cyclical time outside of a ritual context.

The definition of religion, in other words, remains the same. The religious sphere is timeless and orderly; it is contrasted with a world of contingency and change. The debate within the various frameworks thus comes down to whether this religious sphere fully informs people's thinking or not. This is a tremendously important question, but the fundamental definition of religion remains unchanged.

But if religious claims should be read as general assumptions, then how should they be understood? For Bloch, ritual language is based upon a claim of timeless (either unchanging or cyclical) order precisely because it serves the function of providing transcendental sanction to an otherwise contingent human world, the argument formulated so strongly by Weber. Social hierarchies may be a product of power, but if hierarchies are seen by those on whom they are exercised as simple oppression, they will not tend to last for very long – those on the lower rungs will seek to remove those on the upper. Legitimization of such hierarchies thus involves, according to Bloch, the attempt to make the hierarchies seem to be an immutable aspect of ordered cosmos. In other words, religion legitimates the contingent world of humans by making that world appear as divinely sanctioned:

In the political context the elder has to fight off rivals. However, in the role of religion this is not necessary any more. Indeed one can say that a political event becomes religious when individual power struggles have become unnecessary. Formalization thus not only removed what is being said from a particular time and particular place, it has also removed it from the actual speaker, and thus created another supernatural being which the elder is slowly becoming or speaks for. The creation of this other supernatural being is best seen in possession, where the notion that two beings are present, one supernatural and one natural, is explicit. The elder is transformed into an ancestor speaking eternal truth; this transformation seems to me the articulation between traditional authority and religion.¹⁸

The world humans live in is contingent, always changing, and based upon immediate struggles with other humans and ever-changing configurations of power. The sphere of religion, on the contrary, is timeless,

¹⁸ Maurice Bloch, "Symbol, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme Form of Traditional Authority?" in Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power*, 44–5.

based upon eternal moral principles, and run by deities removed from the contingent world of humanity. Traditional authority is based in religion.

So much is this so that religion itself probably had its origins in this need to legitimate authority in traditional societies:

The significance of this is that we should perhaps see the origin of religion in this special strategy of leadership, the use of form for power, which we have found in a lesser form in our study of communication of traditional authority, we would then see the performance of religion as serving a special form of authority.¹⁹

Religion sanctifies an otherwise contingent world, precisely the view we have seen in other forms throughout the twentieth century. Instead of reading the dualism of a timeless cosmic order and contingent human action within an evolutionary framework, Bloch has placed it within a structured distinction between a ritual order and universal world of everyday human cognition. But the definition of religion remains the same.

Thus, even among those thinkers who reject an evolutionary approach, we see a set of endless permutations concerning the status and nature of religious belief, but all surrounding a common assertion about the role that religion plays in positing an ordered, structured, timeless cosmos in opposition to the chaotic contingency of human life.

V. SHIFTS IN THE PARADIGM

Early in his career, University of Chicago historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith worked with a variant of this paradigm as well. Smith posited a distinction between what he called “locative” religions and “utopian” religions. Focused as he was at the time on shifts in the Near East and Mediterranean regions from the ancient period to late antiquity, Smith’s arguments at first glance sound similar to those of Hans Jonas. For Smith, the locative view, which dominated the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world “for some two thousand years,” was based upon a belief in a “cosmic order,” created by the gods, in which humans had a defined place.²⁰ Within such an order, there can be no sustained tension between humans and the cosmos:

¹⁹ Maurice Bloch, “Symbol, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation,” 45.

²⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 132.

There may be periods of tension (such as the myth of the theft of the tablets of destiny by the Zu bird or the imprisonment of Marduk during the New Year festival), but the “reliable” and “unalterable” structures of destiny will ultimately win out. They will be victorious because they are real, having been established by the gods. . . . Man’s responsibility becomes one of discovering, of knowing his place. . . . Man is charged with the task of harmonizing himself with the great rhythms of cosmic destiny and order.²¹

Such a description is almost identical in wording to Eliade’s description of primordial religions or Weber’s description of traditional cosmologies.

Referring to Hans Jonas, Smith argues that the emergence of Gnosticism in the Hellenistic period marked a moment when a “radical reevaluation of the cosmos occurred.”²² The emphasis shifted from one of order to one of liberation – a “utopian” vision, in Smith’s terminology. Another example of a utopian vision rejecting an earlier locative one would be the modern world: “Such a locative view of the cosmos seems foreign to our tendency to idealize openness and mobility.”²³

This certainly sounds like the evolutionary framework we have seen before, with a belief in cosmic order being the primordial position for humanity and with rejections of that position being precursors to modernity. However, Smith explicitly opposes any attempt to see one of these as more primordial than the other:

Is the material Eliade describes best organized under the categories “archaic” and “modern”? . . . Whatever terminology is employed, we must be careful to preserve a sufficient sense of the experiential character of this dichotomy and resist imposing even an implicit evolutionary scheme of development “from the closed world to the infinite universe” (to borrow the title of Alexander Koyré’s well-known work). This requires our resisting as well the frequent tendency to identify the centripetal-closed-locative view with primitive, archaic society and the centrifugal-open-utopian with the modern. Both have been and remain coeval existential possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man’s experience of the world.²⁴

²¹ Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 133. The words “reliable” and “unalterable” are taken from Heidel’s translation of the *Enuma elish*: Alfred Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

²² Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 138.

²³ Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 137.

²⁴ Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 100–1.

If the locative is not more primordial than the utopian, then it would follow that the entire attempt to posit a shift from a primordial, locative vision of the world to a modern viewpoint is mistaken.

And, just as importantly, it would follow that religious orientations do not necessarily posit a cosmic order. Thus, for example, Bloch would agree that at any given time, one could posit either a claim of cosmic order or a lack thereof. But for Bloch this would amount to a distinction between a ritual order versus the world of everyday experience. For Smith, however, a claimed lack of cosmic order can be every bit as religious as its claimed existence.

Smith went on to develop his critique. Noting the degree to which the field of religious studies had been built out of a basic claim concerning the primordially of religions that emphasize harmony, continuity, and order (the "locative," in Smith's terminology), Smith pointed out that the field has therefore largely failed to deal with those religions that do not fit this paradigm:

It strikes me that historians of religion have been weakest in interpreting those myths which do not reveal a cosmos in which man finds a place to dwell and on which he found his existence, but rather which suggest the problematic nature of existence and fundamental tension in the cosmos. I have in mind such traditions as dualistic creation myths, Earth-diver traditions, Tricksters, or the complex narratives of Corn or Rice Mothers who create by "loathsome" processes (e.g., rubbing the dirt off their bodies, by defecation, secretion). Clearly these mythologies, many of which are extremely archaic, point to a different spiritual horizon than that described by Eliade as the fundamental "archaic ontology."²⁵

By treating religious conceptions not based on placing humans within a structured and harmonious cosmos as later reactions against a more primordial worldview pointing toward the modern world or as part of a universal world of everyday experience outside of the ritual sphere, our understandings of a substantial body of religious phenomena have been greatly impoverished.

VI. THE HISTORICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC RECORD

Smith's point should be amplified. As we have seen, the study of religions has been dominated for roughly two centuries by essentially one

²⁵ Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 100.

definition: the sacred is consistently portrayed as being based on a vision of cosmic order. In a modernity narrative, world history is then read as a shift from a traditional world, in which religion provided order to the contingent struggles of humanity, to a modern world, in which the loss of religious faith has resulted in – for better or worse – a loss of that grounding in a higher order. Even those figures – such as Geertz and Bloch – who opposed such evolutionary claims (and disagreed strongly among themselves about the status of religious beliefs) still defined the religious sphere in much the same way.

It is rare when one finds a view concerning religion so constant and so universally agreed upon – not just in the field of religious studies but throughout the social sciences as well. And this theoretical unanimity is made all the more remarkable when one considers the fact that, in the ethnographic and historical record, this is, to put it politely, a very one-sided view of the religious sphere. Yes, one can certainly find example after example of places where the religious sphere is presented as a timeless or cyclical cosmic order. Political leaders have certainly throughout history legitimated their rule through appeals to divine powers and a stable cosmic order. But alternative religious views and practices, as well as modes of dealing with the divine, are at least as common. And yet, despite their constant presence in our ethnographies and historical works, it is striking how rarely religious views and experiences that contradict the accepted definition are discussed in our theoretical literature – unless that literature is directed to explicating shifts related to the rise of modernity or to distinctive features of Western civilization.

Moreover, even many of the cosmologies presented as what Smith has called *locative* are perhaps still being misdescribed. Claims of cosmic order are rarely as seamless and lacking in tension as they are so often presented in our theoretical discussions.

An example will help to underline the point. Mention was made previously concerning the recurrent claim that, prior to the twentieth century, the divine sphere in China was seen as harmonious and structured, with humanity having a predefined place and role. Such a claim has played a dominant role in theoretical and comparative claims concerning traditional China. We saw previously Weber's argument that such a cosmology resulted in the Chinese not developing the kind of tension with the world that one sees with the rise of Protestantism and that became (he claimed) so dominant in modernity, as well as K. C. Chang's argument that China maintained the kind of continuous cosmology found in primitive religions.

And, yet, as historical research has clearly shown, claims of harmony were only one possible way the divine sphere could be seen. Moreover, and tellingly, such claims tended to be associated not with common practice but rather with millenarian movements set in opposition to contemporary practice.

The first example in our extant corpus of a group claiming the divine world to be hierarchical, structured, and morally just, providing a place and role for humanity in the larger cosmos, are the Mohists, a utopian, antiritual movement that began in the fifth century BCE. Comparable cosmologies are found consistently throughout Chinese history among millenarian movements. But all of these movements were opposed to common religious practice, which consistently saw the divine sphere as populated by dangerous and highly capricious demons and ghosts. Humans were thus constantly undertaking an endless number of sacrifices aimed at mollifying the demons or transforming them into ancestors and gods who would then be called upon to work on behalf of humanity. Much of religious practice throughout Chinese history can be characterized as an endless domestication of the divine sphere – trying to take a highly dangerous corpus of spirits and transform it into a hierarchical pantheon that would help human endeavors. Far from a harmonious, structured cosmos that was then available to sanction to human authority, the divine sphere was consistently seen as inherently dangerous and capricious, in need of dramatic transformation so that humans could thrive. Indeed, the domestication of the divine sphere was often compared with the domestication of the natural world through agriculture and the domestication of human emotions through ritual.²⁶

When the human domestication of the divine was successful, the result would be a cosmos much like that often described in the theoretical literature: a structured cosmos run by a hierarchically arranged pantheon of gods and ancestors organized much like a patriarchal lineage structure. But such a pantheon was seen as the ideal result of human domestication: it is not that humans were modeling themselves on or accommodating themselves to a structured, harmonious cosmos but the precise opposite. And, at least as importantly, the domestication of the divine sphere – like the domestication of the natural world and the

²⁶ Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002); Michael Puett, "The Offering of Food and the Creation of Order: The Practice of Sacrifice in Early China," in *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China*, ed. Roel Sterckx (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 75–95.

domestication of human emotions – is never complete. The deities are more powerful than the human domesticating rituals, so they often do not act according to those categories. The gods and ancestors always tend to revert to being demons and ghosts haunting humanity, just as dangerous human emotions continue to emerge against other humans and just as droughts and floods (the parts of nature humans cannot domesticate) continue to cause hunger and starvation.

This is most certainly not a utopian vision, but it is also not a locative vision, at least not in the sense of positing a cosmic order to which humans must accommodate themselves. On the contrary, the perceived tension here between humans and the cosmos is quite extreme. But our paradigms concerning religious order have led to a consistent misunderstanding of the practices in question.

Similar points can be made concerning the entire issue of legitimization, to which figures such as Weber and Bloch devoted so much attention. One of the terms used by rulers in China was “Son of Heaven.” This was certainly a claim to the legitimacy of the ruler’s position by reference to the high god in Heaven. But it was clearly understood to be a ritual claim: no one ever claimed that Heaven had actually given birth to the ruler. (When a shift in dynasties occurred, the new ruler would be able to take the title only after performing the proper rituals. He certainly never claimed in retrospect to have been born from Heaven.) And the ritual claim was that Heaven would, it was hoped, act like a proper (that is, properly domesticated, with dangerous emotions kept under control) father, just as it was hoped that the ruler would act like a proper son.²⁷ But, of course, neither tended to actually do so on a consistent basis. Heaven would send down disasters for no reason, and the ruler would often act arbitrarily. So, yes, it was legitimization, but it was also an attempt to domesticate both the divine and the human – and was always seen as an endless process that could never fully succeed. And explaining such legitimization through a distinction between ritual and everyday cognition would also miss the point. It is not that participants in ritual contexts believed that Heaven was a moral deity operating in an ordered cosmos and then thought differently outside of those ritual contexts. Heaven was seen as dangerous and capricious in both contexts, and the goal of ritual was to domesticate both Heaven and human alike.

²⁷ Michael Puett, “Human and Divine Kingship in Early China: Comparative Reflections,” in *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond*, ed. Nicole Brisch (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2008), 199–212.

Ancestor worship went along the same lines. Recent scholars, building out of the same theoretical concerns we have been discussing, have argued that humans in traditional China thought of themselves as existing “under the ancestor’s shadow,” trying to follow the wishes of the ancestors.²⁸ In fact, deceased humans were seen as dangerous ghosts, and one of the goals of the rituals was to form these dangerous ghosts into ancestors who it was hoped would then act on behalf of the living, just as it was hoped that the living would then behave better as well by thinking of themselves as descendants. But here too the ancestors would often revert to being ghosts and would inflict illnesses upon the living and the living would have to continue trying to form them into ancestors.

In short, there certainly was never an assumption in China that the divine world was naturally harmonious. When one reads a statement from China that the world is harmonious, one needs to see the tremendous agony that underlies such a claim and the tremendous effort expended in trying (and in the long run always failing) to create such a unified system. Accommodating oneself to a pre-given cosmos of harmony is hardly an accurate description.

And, of course, the implicit violence does not simply lie on the side of the undomesticated world of human emotions, wild animals, and dangerous ghosts. The point of critique of the various millenarian movements in China that have arisen in opposition to these practices of domestication is precisely that human efforts to transform the divine and human worlds simply create yet more violence, as they often did. In other words, domestication leads to as many horrors as a lack of domestication. It is, to paraphrase Geertz, violence all the way down.

In short, it is not just that we have failed to account for utopian, antilocative movements in religion. We have also mischaracterized the religions that have been treated as locative, as assuming cosmic order. Many of the common examples pulled from China to show that it is a culture that emphasized the importance of imitating the cosmic order of the divine (ancestor worship, the title of the ruler as a “Son of Heaven,” and so on) reveal a very different set of religious concerns.

These examples from China can be multiplied throughout the world. Our theories posit traditional or archaic humans as assuming a harmonious cosmos, but such a claim is rarely anything but one claim

²⁸ The phrase comes from Francis L. K. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow: Kinship, Personality, and Social Mobility in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967).

among many concerning the divine; it is usually posited as the ideal (and by definition never to be fully realized) end point of ritual action. A world of harmony would be the ideal result of these rituals, an ideal that by definition would never be achieved. Yet it is this ideal that has been consistently treated by scholars as an assumption, as, indeed, a prototypical example of a traditional religious order.

VII. THE RELATIONSHIPS OF RELIGIONS

A more promising approach would be to shift away from frameworks focused on the end point of human action and instead focus on the processes of religious life themselves. As Robert A. Orsi has written:

Religious theories that emphasize meaning focus on the end-product, a story that is said to link heaven and earth, but the solidity and stability of this dissolves if you focus instead on the processes of religious meaning-making. What we see if we do this is the wounding; in this devotional world, as in others, meaning making is wounding.²⁹

Such a focus on meaning-making operates, as Orsi notes, in the “register of the tragic.”³⁰ Even for those religions that call for the creation of an order linking humans to the larger cosmos – the religions that Smith would define as locative – the process of trying to create such an order is inevitably painful and very often filled with violence. As Orsi describes his grandmother’s relationship to Saint Gemma Galgani:

What the saint seems to have offered was companionship on a bitter and confusing journey – bitterness and confusion to which the saint’s own stories had contributed. My grandmother asked no grace of Gemma other than that of accompaniment, no miracle beyond the recognition of shared lives. But the sharing was costly. As Gemma’s and Giulia’s stories teach, in between a life and the meanings that may be made in it, for and against that life is the wound. Meaning making begins in wounding, and the process of meaning making is wounding.³¹

Orsi’s approach thus shifts the focus from the end points of religious practice (the ideal creation of a perfectly harmonious world with humans

²⁹ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 144.

³⁰ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 170.

³¹ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 145.

properly situated in a defined cosmic order) to the endless dynamic of relationships. Relationships always veer between order and chaos. They can be both loving and abusive; filled with care, yet equally filled with angers, jealousies, and resentments. And so it is with gods and goddesses, with ghosts, with ancestors. Pain is very often present in these relationships. At times, the relationships become so fraught that the situations degenerate into horrific violence – not always, perhaps not even often, but the potential is always there.

Those involved in these relationships may claim that the bonds, whether with other humans or with gods and ghosts, are stable, orderly, and morally clear. And from particular points of view, they can sometimes be described as such, but only by willfully ignoring most of what actually goes on in the relationships. Such claims are very interesting and very telling, but they are hardly an accurate vision on which to base our theories of religion.

To return to the religious practices in China: are the divine powers moral gods or dangerous ghosts, and are the humans moral agents or violent creatures? The answer, of course, is all of the above. Neither humans nor divine powers are either inherently orderly or chaotic. The dynamics of the relationships are such that both are always present to varying degrees. And it is almost never the case that only one side in the relationship is creating all of the violence. The violence is a product of the dynamics of the relationships themselves.

What would be the implications of shifting the focus away from our commitment to the claim that religions create social order – giving up, in other words, one of our most cherished, even if empirically indefensible, claims about religion? It would mean allowing ourselves to study, analyze, and theorize the complex dynamics of relationships through which religions operate without resorting to the frameworks of harmony and coherence that have so dominated our analyses and so limited our understandings. It would mean accepting that there is no clear order or coherence in religions except as claims made by participants in certain circumstances – claims that must then be analyzed as such. And it would mean recognizing that the dynamics of these relationships – the dynamics on which and through which meaning construction and ritual action take place – involve a potential to create violence at every level.

It would mean, in short, ending our distinction between contingent human action and timeless religious order (along with the various evolutionary and functionalist frameworks in which the distinction has been employed) once and for all, and focusing instead on the complex

and difficult processes by which humans attempt to work through the relationships of their lives and the tensions and potential violence that emerge from this work.

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