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ON THE NATURE OF THE SUPERNATURAL: THE RECIPE FOR RELIGION REVEALED

Abstract. *Religion is not a biological universal, an evolutionary adaptation characteristic of all individuals that benefits survival. It is a cultural universal that characterises all human societies. It is a spandrel, a chance side-effect of our adaptation to language. Since language is not an organ but a skill, it gradually developed in a co-evolutionary process, from exclusively specific to increasingly abstract use. In the analysis, the author argues that the capacity for religion emerges with concrete language, which enables man to construct imaginary behaviour with the aid of animism and anthropomorphism, fuelled by superstitious thinking in contingent situations. However, to create religious cognition, another ingredient is needed: transcendent experience with the help of hallucinations of the external world and incongruent bodily sensations.*
Keywords: *religion, imaginary activity, concrete language, superstition, transcendent experience*

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Introduction

It is the very nature of the supernatural that it does not exist. This is true in at least two senses. In the wider sense of the meaning, the supernatural does not exist because it is merely a product of our cognition of concepts and not a perception of phenomena. Supernatural is a way of categorising the world. When Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd stated that there was nothing intrinsic in the classical Greek conception of the naturalness of natural phenomena, this implied that the idea of '*phusis*' had to be invented first by Milesian philosophers (1992: 2–3) to categorise the world. Similarly, '*nomos*' (laws and costumes, things that are the result of human convention) was also just another way of categorising which enabled the Greeks to consciously distinguish the natural and cultural domains of their world. Thomas Aquinas defined the domain of miracles in 13th century Europe as being an exception to the laws of nature (Murray, 1992: 49–50) and, in so doing, was again categorising the world with the aid of an abstract concept. All three domains

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(nature, culture and supernatural) are thus products of abstract thought concerning the background of specific aspects of the human lifeworld, products of the cognition of concepts rather than of the sensory appropriation of phenomena.

Mycenaean Greeks could only reflect on the material world they perceived with their senses. They solely had concrete language at their disposal to correlate the world of their perceptions with the vocabulary of specific concepts for these perceptions. In classical Greece, it also became possible to reflect on nature (*phusis*) and how it functions (*prophasis*), from earthquakes to rainbows. The world of '*nomos*' was separate from it, yet it was clear that humans were also part of nature. Thus, mental illness was part of the natural domain (the 'sacred' disease has its nature and causes), but laws and costumes were nevertheless distinguished from nature. In a world of people skilled in abstract thinking, the supernatural was transformed into a residual domain, namely, that which remained after the world was divided between the natural and the cultural.

There is another, narrower sense in which the supernatural domain does not exist. While abstract concepts of nature and culture have an obvious referent (in time and space, in self and collective), this is not the case with concepts of the supernatural domain which are hidden from view. Nature and culture are concepts which denote empirically observable phenomena (e.g. the motion of planets around the sun or interaction of individuals in social networks such as a family), while the domain of miracles, which are "against the common course of nature" (ibid.: 49), cannot be observed. Miracles as an observable irregularity of the supernatural domain cannot be empirically verified or falsified. From a scientific analysis perspective, the supernatural domain is meaningless. One must trust the word of those who have purportedly had a personal experience of the supernatural. Therefore, one can only have opinions about the supernatural.

In scientific inquiry, supernatural phenomena do not form part of the explanation. As the French astronomer Laplace told Napoleon who had asked him why God was left out of his astronomical equations (Koyré, 1988: 233): "I did not need this hypothesis".

For the scientist, the supernatural domain does not exist. The scientist presupposes that miracles are not a by-product of human interaction with gods, but are imaginary constructs of our abstract conscious cognition. It is thus not surprising that neuro-theologians like Dean Hamer cannot find the god module in the human brain (Vörös, 2013: 95–96). The reason is very simple: since the world of miracles does not exist, the module does not have miraculous information available to process. Consequently, a module in its absence did not evolve.

How then do humans construct the supernatural domain? This is the topic of our inquiry. Other animals have the genome (which shapes the architecture of the organism and its automatic response) and 'neuronom' (neurons in the brain that create unconscious memories of relevant past events, enabling an animal to respond in a more qualified way to stimuli in the future). Humans also have 'linguonom' (a language which enables us to construct a conscious hypothetical cognition we can respond to, thereby allowing us to free ourselves from total dependence on the stimuli response in the 'here and now') (Tomc, 2018: 311, 323). With the help of language, humans can create imaginary worlds embedded in neither the natural nor the cultural domain. Language underpins our ability to construct stories as well as myths, science as well as magic.

Religion as the side-product in the evolutionary adaptation of language

In the last 3 million years of hominid evolution, the volume of the brain has tripled, from 450 ccm to 1350 ccm, or 10,000 neurons per generation. When we consider that the brain is a very energy wasteful organ (modern children spend 50% of their energy intake on neuronal functioning, while adults still use 20%) (Flinn and Coe, 2007: 340), there needed to be a good evolutionary reason for such expansion. Conscious symbolic communication in production and reproduction was an obvious advantage of humans over other hominids. Speech enabled humans to plan and coordinate their actions with others (e.g. toolmaking or hunting) with others using heuristic thinking (consciously recalling relevant past experience and applying it to future action).

However, there was an accidental side-effect of this evolutionary adaptation for speech and consciousness. Language is not an organ we simply inherit at birth, but a skill we must learn and improve in the course of life. Language in this regard is unlike the eye, which permits us to perceive the outside world through mere unconscious experience of visual stimuli. It is a skill that must be mastered by learning from others. It is a co-evolutionary phenomenon: biologically, it is an evolutionary adaptation of consciousness (which defines us as a species bottom up) while, on the cultural level, the adaption is developed by learning (within the genetically given limitations top down). While it is true that the human species can be defined as a language species, the level of linguistic skill entails two culturally distinct phases of development: concrete and abstract language.

By concrete language, we mean the speech capability held by hunters and gatherers and simple agriculturalists. They used words for concrete phenomena, which they perceive with their senses (e.g. names of specific plants or animals in their habitat), but did not have concepts denoting

abstract categories (e.g. for all plant or animal life) (Beaken, 2011: 185). As Bronislaw Malinowski noted in his analysis of the natives of the Trobriand Islands (2001: 393):

> *We have to realize that language originally, among primitive, non-civi-lized peoples was never used as a mere mirror of reflected thought. The manner in which I am using it now, in writing these words, the manner in which the author of a book, or a papyrus or a hewn inscription has to use it, is very far-fetched and derivative function of language. In this, language becomes a condensed piece of reflection, a record of fact or thought. In its primitive uses, language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behaviour. It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection.*

With concrete language, you must be in the context of the situation to understand what is being said (ibid.: 390).

The discovery of the written word (Babylonians), a simple alphabet (classical Greece) and an efficient printing press (Western Europe) paved the way for abstract thought (Goody, 1977: 51). In more complex agricultural societies, the written word had to be understood outside of the context of the situation, it needed to be understood in the context of the text. Everyone who acquired the skill of writing and capability for abstract reasoning could comprehend the text. Readers of a ruler's edict had to understand it in a similar fashion throughout the domain of his authority.

Basil Bernstein's distinction of restrictive and elaborate language codes is identical to our distinction of concrete and abstract speech. The restrictive code is context dependent, based on the common presupposition of speakers, on similar interests and identifications, on common expectations and shared local cultural identity. Because the speaker's intentions are taken for granted by others, the structure of speech is simplified and the vocabulary is limited. The content of what is being said is very likely to be specific, narrative and descriptive. On the other hand, the elaborate code is significantly different. Speech is planned, analytical and abstract because understanding it is not context- but text-related. The distinction of restricted and elaborate language codes depends on social class. Middle and higher social classes are more skilled in the elaborate code, while lower social classes are more proficient in the restricted code. Since they are less skilled in writing and abstract reasoning, they are disadvantaged at school (Goffman, 1964: 60–67). Another category of concrete language users in modern societies is children. In the first phase of language acquisition, children only use words for things they perceive with their senses. According to Jean Piaget, they acquire abstract reasoning capability in the formal operational phase, which roughly coincides with adolescence (Walkerdine, 1982: 129).

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How does our language capability correlate with our religious susceptibility? Rodney Stark believes the difference between the social classes lies not in the degree but in the style of religiosity. Middle and higher classes largely participate in religious rituals and voluntary church activities; their identification is primarily with the religious organisation. Lower social classes are more orthodox (a literal understanding of the Bible), report a greater number of personal religious experiences, are more pious (e.g. they pray every day), are more connected to their religious community (most of their friends belong to the same church), they are more likely to adhere to ethicalism (they behave according to their religious principles in everyday life) and are more often particularist (they believe that only members of their denomination will be saved) (Roberts, 1984: 288). Middle and higher social classes use religion more instrumentally, for conspicuous consumption to reveal their social status, while lower classes are more intrinsically religious.

In his studies of children, Piaget discovered that they are artificialists. They are convinced that a conscious being made everything that exists. Lions were created to go to the zoo, clouds exist so that it can rain, while pointed stones exist so that animals can scratch their backs with them (Keleman, 2006: 99–101). When a child is about 5 years old, they begin to realise that not all things were made by humans. When Piaget asked them who then made them, they often replied that it was god. However, since they were pre-abstract thinkers, god was in reality just another word for their parents (ibid.: 109). As concrete language users, children do not distinguish the domains of human life and thus quickly immerse themselves in the world of play. They often have imaginary friends and have little difficulty taking on the role of others. For them, god is just another imaginary friend from the world of adults.

Both members of the lower social classes and children are more inclined to concrete speech, while middle and higher classes and adults are to a greater extent abstract language users. What precisely is the nature of the connection between this aspect of language skill and religion? What is there in concrete language that makes us more susceptible to construct imaginary allies?

Three unintended side-effects of language that make us susceptible to religious experience

From the co-evolutionary perspective, the first people used concrete language. As a result, they could only consciously cognise things perceived by their senses in everyday activities. Their thinking was unreflected, embedded in tradition, entailing heuristic reasoning. This taken-for-granted way of

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doing things was unquestioned. Yet, there were also many occasions that went beyond heuristic reasoning. Bronislaw Malinowski makes this distinction with respect to gardening on the Trobriand Islands (1955: 28- 29):

> *If the fences are broken down, if the seed is destroyed or has been dried or washed away, he will have recourse not to magic, but to hard work, guided by knowledge and reason. His experience has thought him also, in spite of all his forethought and beyond his efforts there are agencies and forces which one year bestow unwonted and unearned benefits and fertility, making everything run smoothly and well, rain and sun appear at the right moment, noxious insects remain in abeyance, the harvest yields a superb crop; and another year again the same agencies bring ill luck and bad chance, pursue him from beginning till end and thwart all his most strenuous efforts and his best-founded knowledge. To control these influences and these only he employs magic.*

It is this second domain of events that were beyond the traditional stock of knowledge held by the first people that interests us. We have already noted that the first people were materialists who only had concepts for things they could perceive with their senses. This implies they had no concepts for the backgrounds of reality (such as self and group, life and death, animal and human, nature and culture etc.). This also meant they had no clear understanding of the demarcation between themselves and others, and no conception of the afterlife. They saw animals and humans as being intimately connected. Above all, the worlds of cause and effect and intentional action overlapped. Regular natural events (such as the earth's movement of earth around the sun), contingent natural events (such as earthquakes) or man-caused natural events (like fire in the camp) were understood as inherently involving intentional agents. Many cause-and-effect natural relations (such as fire or water) could not be understood without such mysterious intentional agents. It is apparent from this that animism, the attribution of life to natural events, was an unintentional side-effect of concrete language, of the overlapping of nature (cause and effect) and culture (intentionality). There is no need to explain animism as an evolutionary adaptation that benefits our survival, as evolutionary psychologists do (Guitrie, 2002: 39–40).

Anthropomorphism, the fact that we find it hard to resist the temptation to attribute human social categories, intentions and morality to non-humans (Guitrie, 1980: 184), can also be explained by the concrete language of the first humans. As they had no clear-cut sense of self, they found it difficult to distinguish themselves from others (other members of the tribe or other living beings such as animals and plants) and from other (as animists, they also attributed life to natural events like fires and rivers). As the anthropologist

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Clifford Geertz noted, the conception of a person as a bounded, unique, integrated motivational and cognitive universe is very modern (Lodge, 2003: 89). This explains why people today can perceive the world as the objective reality, whereas for the first people it was more personal. The world was not 'it', but 'him' or 'her', an entity with which one could communicate.

As animists, the first people also understood speech as a material thing. After all, it had a sound and a breath to it. This meant that speech could be used as a tool, no different from a spear or an axe, to affect changes in events in their world. In a ritual, animistically resuscitated natural phenomena could be transformed anthropomorphically by using speech as a tool. This is how the first people could attribute authoritative power to speech, the power to change the course of natural (e.g. floods) and cultural (e.g. wars) events. The rituals of the first people were created by animistic and anthropomorphic thinking.

There was nothing sacred about these rituals. They were modelled on every-day, heuristically guided activities in the paramount reality. S. A. Tokarev offers an illustration of such a ritual. Aborigines from Alice Springs in Australia had a ritual to stimulate the propagation of the larvae of an edible caterpillar. The insect which it becomes is a totem of the group. Naked and fasting, all male members of the tribe would meet in the main camp. They would go to an appointed spot away from the camp where they would lie down and sleep. When they awoke, they would climb a nearby hill just like their mythical ancestors had supposedly done in the distant past. They would carry statuettes with them that in some mysterious way were connected to the totem animal. Then, they would enter a cave in which there was a large lump of quartz. This lump represented an adult insect. They would there touch the quartz lump with statuettes, chanting a song that stimulated the insect to lay eggs. The leader of the ritual would touch the participants' bellies, telling them: "You have eaten a lot". They would repeat the ritual on a riverbank where their mythical ancestors once apparently roasted and ate the larvae. Similar rituals would then be repeated throughout the day. The Aborigines would then return to the main camp where they would enter a hut that represented the cocoon of the insect. Their leaving of the hut represented the birth of the insect. The ritual would end and its participants would believe that in the next season the larvae would be more abundant (1974: 33–35). To conclude: the first ingredient in the recipe for religion is concrete language, which bestows life on the non-living and enables one to communicate with it.

The second ingredient for religion is superstition. It may be defined as motivation for an imaginary influence on future events in highly contingent situations. In contemporary societies, gamblers or sportsmen often develop superstitious habits. A baseball player, for example, follows the

same stereotypical movements before hitting the ball, some only eat certain meals, still others do not shave or always wear the same tee-shirt etc. before the game, all in the hope of improving their performance (Sydky, 2015: 93). An example of superstition among native people is an Indian from the Crow tribe (Wax, 1969: 52): "When I hear a song and I have luck immediately afterwards, this song becomes sacred to me".

Because good luck is fortuitous and because the Indian was motivated to make it predictable, he developed a superstitious habit, whereby an arbitrary connection between a particular song and his good luck was constructed. There was nothing 'sacred' in his behaviour. To conclude: some people are motivated to reduce the contingency of life with superstitious behaviour.

However, the recipe is still missing the key ingredient of religious experience. Most people would probably agree that a baseball player, who behaves superstitiously when he animistically and anthropomorphically makes imaginary connections between his behaviour and his batting success, is not having a religious experience. He has simply fallen into the trap of imaginary heuristics, like the Aborigines from Alice Springs we have described (Tokarev, 1974: 33–35). In both cases, people perform the prescribed activities in accordance with an imaginary heuristic to exert a make-belief influence on a contingent event. The activity is superstitious, but still modelled on the every-day, paramount reality way of doing things.

To ensure a complete recipe for religion, one must have a personal mystical experience of the supernatural. William James defines it as ineffable (it defies expression), noetic (it is an insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect), transient (it cannot be sustained for a long time) and passive (one has the feeling of being held by a superior power) (1985: 380–381). A mystical state can thus be defined as superstitious motivation, transformed into a living force with the aid of animism and integrated into the social world with the aid of anthropomorphism, with which we ascribe exceptional significance that supposedly transcends the paramount reality. Because a mystical state is an enclave inside the paramount reality, it is brief and passive; because it defies the logic of the paramount reality, it is ineffable and noetic. To the non-superstitious person, someone who is not seeking an imaginary connection with the supernatural, such an experience will simply be interpreted as nonsensical, yet the same experience will hold mystical significance for the initiated person seeking an insight into the depths of truth beyond all human knowledge.

How does one go the extra step from being a superstitious baseball player or gambler to a saint or a prophet? To achieve this, one must have a transcendent experience in either the form of perceptions of the outside world (hallucinations, usually visions of supernatural agents) or

internal bodily moods (sensations incongruent with everyday experience, e.g. standing in awe of supernatural agents). Transcendent experiences enable us to attribute extraordinary significance to hallucinatory perceptions, ascribing sensations to them that one cannot interpret in the context of the paramount reality. Since nothing exists in the paramount reality that cannot potentially be perceived and explained, one has no other choice but to interpret his experience as other-worldly, or to use the words of William James as ineffable and noetic (1985: 380–381). How can people come to believe that they have disassociated themselves from the paramount reality and achieved a higher state of consciousness in which they experience a vastly superior, religious reality? All known human societies use similar techniques to achieve such mental states: dreams, mental illnesses, extreme bodily states and intoxicants.

Dreams are our hallucinations while we sleep, while we are unconscious and our memories are not under the control of the paramount reality. The enigmatic nature of dreams is sometimes used to achieve insight of mystical significance. For Joseph under Egyptian slavery, god spoke through dreams (Unknown authors, Genesis: 1925: 40). For another Joseph, this time under Roman occupation, the dream world as the language of gods was still so undisputed that he decided not to abandon his fiancée when an angel had informed him in his sleep that it was the Holy Ghost that had conceived the child Mary was expecting, not some neighbourhood acquaintance of his (Unknown Authors, Gospel of Mathew: 1925: 3).

Sometimes, mental illness is used to achieve a mystical state. Epilepsy is, for example, in some cultures even known as the 'sacred' disease. Dostoevsky's seizures started in childhood and became more frequent in his forties. Many of his attacks were preceded by mystical experiences in which the author became certain of god's existence (he was convinced that he had actually touched god) (Sacks, 2012: 155–156). According to Eliade, the only difference between a shaman and an epileptic is that the shaman can control when he goes into a trance (1974: 13–25).

Extreme body states can also cause hallucinations. To achieve a mystical state, various techniques are used: isolation, fasting, self-torture, meditation etc. When Jesus went into the desert where he stayed for 40 days by himself, he started seeing angels and the devil himself (Unknown authors, Gospel of Mark: 1925: 33). In the case of Buddha, self-torture went to the extreme. He lived in the wilderness, naked, fasting, lying on thorns, holding his breath until he had headaches, occasionally eating his own excrement etc., all simply to have a mystical experience (Schumann, 1989: 50–52).

Taking intoxicants is another common technique for escaping the paramount reality. Siberian shamans used mushrooms, South American shamans ayahuesco, Minoans on Crete preferred opium, while witches in the Middle

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Ages got high on mandrake (Rudgley, 1993: 27, 38, 96, 183). For Timothy Leary, the 'High Priest of LSD', the pursuit of religious experience without intoxicants was akin to studying astronomy without a telescope (ibid.: 105–106).

People are very suggestible beings. We quickly fall under the influence of our delusions in dreams, mental illnesses, extreme body states or under the influence of intoxicants. If we are also superstitious (highly motivated to exert an imaginary influence in contingent situations) and concrete language users (inclined to animistic and anthropomorphic thinking), we will in all likelihood attribute experiences which are by themselves quite meaningless with extraordinary significance. If we live where religion has a cultural background, we will tend to interpret such experience as mystical. We will become religious on the personal level.

Decline of religion on the personal level with the rise of abstract thought in monotheism

When Jewish scribes started to record their oral cultural tradition in the 6th century B.C.E., with the permission of their Babylonian rulers, they did so as an intellectual elite. They must have been familiar with the discovery of nature by Milesian philosophers at about the same time in classical Greece. From the interaction of Jewish elites, writing down the costumes and laws of their land, and the Greek discovery of nature emerged the idea of a nature that god had created, but then vacated and relinquished for man to manage. Neither the Earth, the sun nor the sky are divine. All natural phenomena, including man, are godless and hence insignificant to the creator. Such underestimation of the phenomenal world was unimaginable before the Jewish religion (Frankfort H. in H. A., 1967: 261–262, 264). This was a radical departure from the pagan animistic world of intentional agents being behind all natural events.

The second basic characteristic of Jewish religious thought stems from the nature of the written word. Most information that we as human beings have of our everyday life derives from visual perception. Once the visual depictions of pagan gods were replaced by the written word in the texts of Jewish scribes, people of the new faith gradually became religiously blind. Their new god not only ceased to intervene in nature (magic), but also became invisible and his new dwelling unknown.

Christianity was a Jewish sect influenced by another strand of Greek thought, which also emerged in the 6th century B.C.E.: mysticism (Orphic, Pythagorean etc.). These mystics discovered the distinction between body (our material dimension) and soul (our divine and immortal dimension) of life. According to these new teachings, the soul must liberate itself from the

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shackles of the body, purifying itself (e.g. through moderation), saving a person from sin by catharsis (Vegetti, 1995: 271–275). This abstract distinction of body and mind was unimaginable to pagans. It introduced a new theme into religious experience: people who were aware of the transient nature of their personal existence, which motivated them to seek immortality. The fifth Jewish sect of Christians addresses this new preoccupation with a god who miraculously survives death by crucifixion and then promises eternal life to all who believe in his divine status.

This new sect also departs from Jewish religious tradition in another important way. The sect consisted of lower social strata from the Galilean periphery who were concrete language users. This is obvious from the texts they wrote, mere mythical stories of the supposed life of Jesus, without religious doctrine. It thus comes as no surprise that their version of monotheism relapsed to the pagan worship of visual idols (depictions of Jesus, Virgin Mary, angels or saints in Christian places of worship). Christianity was a chiliastic, protest religion of the lower strata of Jewish society, of people with nothing to lose in this world, but everything to gain in the kingdom of god to come in the near future. Christianity's appeal to the lower strata of society, and its lack of appeal to the Saducees and Pharisees, can be explained with the social theory of Rodney Stark. Since people prefer actual rewards to hypothetical substitutes for them, powerful individuals will prefer rewards (the riches of this world) while the powerless will have to reconcile themselves with religious compensators (the promise of eternal life after death) (Stark, in: Young, 1996: 7).

However, the chiliastic fervour of worshippers was lost after decades passed and neither the end of the world nor the kingdom of god had occurred. The reason for this is simple: a mystical disposition cannot be maintained for a longer period of time. As noted, mystical experience is, among other things, transient and passive. It cannot be sustained for long and one cannot influence the course of events within it (James, 1985: 380–381). When a prophecy does not come to fruition, a person is quickly sucked back into the paramount reality. With time, the mystical fervour withers away. The worshipper may simply forget the prophecy or it will be downgraded within the cultural tradition of the collective. Christianity became the law and costumes of the Roman Empire under Constantine. It evolved from an ephemeral cult of the poor and powerless into a state religion of the rich and powerful. As a Jewish religious sect, Christianity lost magic intervention, as a state religion of the Romans, it lost its mystical dimension. It gained the world to lose its supernatural aura.

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Phases of religious experience in the co-evolutionary development of language

Four basic phases in religious experience can be distinguished in the history of humankind. Proto-religion is the first phase, characterising the first people who were concrete language users. Their imaginary rituals were motivated by superstition, imaginary causation was sparked by animism, and communication between people and imaginary powers was made possible by anthropomorphism. The rituals were instrumental, modelled on behaviour in the paramount reality. The mentioned ritual of Aborigines from Alice Springs in Australia (Tokarev, 1974: 30–31) is an example of such ritual behaviour.

In pagan religions, concrete language is complemented with visual language (body painting and ornamentation, paintings and sculptures, temples etc.). In this way, gods as physical entities are created. Authoritative speech enables communication with these newly created, embodied supernatural forces. Since communication with gods becomes conscious, specialists emerge (shamans, sorcerers etc.) to carry out the performance. They must be in a special state of mind, achieved by techniques that supposedly empower one to transcend the paramount reality. As mentioned, these techniques rely on dreams, mental illnesses, extreme body states and intoxicants.

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In monotheism, abstract thought enables people to consciously distinguish three background domains of human habitat: nature, culture and supernatural. The world of miracles is gradually delegated to special religious reservations, thereby becoming obsolete and isolated from the everyday life of people. This is what Max Weber termed the disenchantment of the world. Gods become passive and invisible; they vacate their temple premises, which are being 'squatted' by priests in the service of political elites.

In the post-religion of contemporary modernity, superstitious people seek answers to their existential problems (contingency of one's future, fear of one's mortality, concerns over one's health etc.) in traditional New age movements (inspired by spiritualism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity etc.) or in modern New Age movements (inspired by a belief in science, e.g. in the hope it will soon become possible to download one's mind on the Internet, in computer worlds like Second Life, thus achieving immortality). The individual as the centre of self-worship in the new age substitutes the church as the collective embodiment of faith in monotheism.

Religious experience along the individual–collective continuum

Like any other human performance, people participating in religious rituals vary in the degree of personal involvement. One can for instance distinguish musicians on the stage, enthusiastic fans in the front rows and the more passive audience in the back rows of an alternative rock concert in a concert hall. In a similar fashion, one can also distinguish people who have a personal experience of the supernatural, religious fans and the more passive onlookers in the back benches of a religious ritual in a church. If the fans enthusiastically believe in the genuineness of the mystics, the passive onlookers go along mainly for more instrumental, social reasons.

According to Andrew M. Greeley, European states vary in the number of people who claim to have had a personal religious experience: from 31% in Italy to 10% in the east of Germany, with Slovenia somewhere in the middle (15%) (2004: 3). Rational choice theory as applied to religion by Rodney Stark and colleagues offers a possible explanation of these differences. If religious production is regulated by the state, religious participation decreases according to this theory; if it is market regulated, it increases (Stark, in: Young, 1996: 17–18). The lost interest in religion is the result of the state monopoly which weakens the mobilisation of religious believers (Finke, in: Young, 1996: 51). However, in the case of data on personal religious experience, they all come from societies with a state monopoly. A different explanation is thus needed. In our opinion, the large differences suggest that the respondents had different things in mind while answering the question. Religion is a phenomenon *longue durée*, which is why people invest different meanings in concepts that denote the supernatural. It must also be considered that respondents have different levels of language skills. As a result, it is not surprisingly that responses reflect both the ambiguity of the concepts themselves and the linguistic skill differences.

On the other side of the religious continuum one finds those participants in religious rituals who have never had a personal experience of the supernatural. They are in the majority. Harvey Whitehouse distinguishes imagistic and doctrinaire religious orientations. Imagistic religions have irregular rituals, with no central organisation, based on episodic memory etc.), while doctrinaire religions have leadership, written 'holy' texts, a centralised organisation, a system for verification of orthodoxy, and are based on semantic memory etc. (Laidlaw, 2004: 5–8). These two types of religion attract different types of believers: either the personal belief fans (in the 'front rows' of the faith) or those who identify with the social organisation of religious doctrine (those on the 'back benches').

Christianity in its formative period attracted imagistic believers (who were waiting for the end of the world as we know it and the start of

something completely different, the kingdom of god). It was later transformed into a church, which mostly attracts believers through doctrine (religion as cultural heritage in the service of existing authorities). In the modern Christian religion, a member of the lower social classes is more likely to be a concrete language user and have a stronger personal connection to religious belief (Roberts, 1984: 288) – a religious fan. On the other hand, a member of the middle or higher classes is more likely to be more doctrinaire in their religious attitude – passive onlookers. They will be more attached to the religious organisation, for example to voluntary social work in the organisation. They represent the majority of those who have not had a personal experience of god.

Conclusion

Religion is not a biological universal, an evolutionary adaptation benefitting survival. Those of us who are 'tone deaf' to the music of religion are not at a disadvantage when it comes to everyday survival. Yet, religion is a cultural universal. Not a single human society can be found in which some people do not practise some sort of religious rituals. This implies that religion is a side-effect of a cognitive characteristic which was an evolutionary adaption. Religion is a product of evolutionary adaptation to language. As language is a skill that gradually changes as our species culturally develops, different phases of religious experience can be identified on the bases of language skill development. The first humans were concrete language users, inclined to animistic and anthropomorphic thinking. Outside the narrow domain of the heuristic (re)productive tradition, they experienced life as contingent. This encouraged some of them in the direction of superstitious behaviour. Concrete language and superstition represent the humus of imaginary behaviour from which all religious experience has emerged.

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