Religion, Interpretation, and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model from Kant to Durkheim to Davidson (Book Review)

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mon explanation) commit the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent. That is, in arguing that A (ritual) causes B (anxiety reduction), one may not simply demonstrate the presence of B in the society under study. Any number of things could account for B. Theories that avoid this difficulty by adding that A or its equivalent causes B also fail to explain A and tend toward triviality.

The resolution to these theoretical dead ends is, for Penner, structuralism. Penner’s chapters on the thought of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and on the relation of Saussure to the thought of Claude Lévi-Strauss, are the best introduction to structuralism I am aware of. As evidence for the success of structuralism, Penner quickly reviews the progress made by Lévi-Strauss on the intractable anthropological problems of kinship, totemism, and myth.

In his final chapter Penner shows how the rigorous adoption of structuralism as a method in the history of religions has borne fruit. Here he cites Louis Dumont’s Homo Hierarchicus (English trans., Chicago, 1980) and S. J. Tambiah’s account of Buddhism. These are certainly formidable players to have on one’s side. Penner’s own attempt at applying structuralism to a cycle of myths from the Shiva Purana (dates unknown) is less impressive and might easily have been left out. His structural grid is derived from categories external to the myth in question (he borrows some categories from Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the Oedipus myth). This grid serves to do little more than organize the complex terms of the myth cycle.

Of course, there are positive arguments for structuralism, as well as “the last theory left standing” argument. There is a growing sentiment in the academy that all the human sciences must fundamentally be grounded on the analysis of language. One wishes that Penner, with his facility with theory, had presented this positive argument. Once this argument is made, it becomes clear that structuralism may not be the only player left standing. Dan Sperber, for example (Rethinking Symbolism [English trans., New York, 1975]), as well as E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley (Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture [New York, 1990], a book published soon after Penner’s, but which Penner saw in manuscript) believe indeed that structuralism is an advance but that it is itself surpassed by “cognitive” approaches. These cognitive approaches take their bearings from linguistics, as does structuralism, but it is a linguistics along the lines of Noam Chomsky rather than Saussure or Roman Jakobson.

But it quickly becomes ludicrous to wish that an author do something more or something different. This should in no way take away from what Penner has in fact achieved. All scholars of religions and teachers of religious studies owe Penner a debt of gratitude for gathering into one place powerful critiques of some of the most popular approaches to the study of religion.


While many in the “analytic” tradition in philosophy of religion continue to pursue issues inherited from natural theology, a set of questions of interest primarily to proponents of the theistic theological traditions and their adversaries, a loose countertradition exists that draws on the analytic tradition in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language but brings that work to bear on broadly
methodological questions. Instead of the classical debates on God's existence and the logic of the divine properties, it tends to focus on relativism and rationality, explanation and understanding, and hermeneutical issues in the interpretation of religion. Terry Godlove belongs in this second group. He moves skillfully from Kant to Durkheim to Donald Davidson in attempting to show that, when "Kant's a priori, selbstgedachte categories became components of human conceptual frameworks, open to empirical investigation" (p. 63), Durkheim fathered, despite himself, the idea of religion as a conceptual scheme imposed somehow on a neutral experiential base, thereby generating the contemporary debate over relativism. Davidson's assault on conceptual schemes recaptures the genuinely Kantian insight that our first-person claims are transcendentally constrained by a world of space and time we share with others. Religions embody narratives that provide an interpretive base for individual and corporate self-understanding. As such they are highly theoretical and likely to generate controversy when confronted by competitors from other intellectual or cultural traditions.

Students of Kant may worry that Godlove's identification with Davidson is a bit too facile, while social scientists may suspect him of preempting any critical interpretation of religion. If E. Durkheim, C. Geertz, M. Eliade, and Robin Horton all employ the "framework model," perhaps it is just too vague to worry about. But the book has its principal impact on the debate between "pragmatists," here represented by Jeffrey Stout (p. 153), and those who maintain that religious "narratives depend for their meaningfulness and objectivity on a transcendental counterpart" (p. 150). Pragmatists, be they believers or nonbelievers, tend to think that if beliefs are true they need no further analysis, and if they are in doubt we should defer to the best available history, sociology, and anthropology. What work does Godlove's "transcendental counterpart" perform? The truth of "I have offended God by my vile acts" depends on no transcendental argument or metanarrative but on my having offended God by my vile acts. Why should explicating religion require invoking anything more than beliefs, practices, and institutions? If the "only interpretive limit on the possible scope of religious belief is the requirement that all religious belief systems have enough in common that all are identifiable religious" (p. 145), Godlove excludes nothing that satisfies Davidson's constraints on learnable languages. Stout may be persuaded that Kant is not the founder of relativism without finding any purpose to being Kantian.

Nonetheless, Godlove clarifies the argument between methodological pragmatists and those transcendentalists who fear that historical or social scientific accounts of religion risk reducing it to something it is not. Godlove's is a challenging and important contribution.

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"Myth without Pain" could be the title of this short book in German, which tries to explain at graduate level while keeping up some fun and excitement the major theories on myth and ritual together with anthropological data on which theories are based. The enterprise is desperate, but Gerhard Schlatter succeeds fairly well in presenting the main nineteenth- and twentieth-century trends in myth interpretations, although soon all excitement is gone, for many theories are