



Pascal Boyer

The Fracture Of An Illusion

Science And The Dissolution Of Religion

Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht



Religion, Theologie und Naturwissenschaft/ Religion, Theology, and Natural Science

Herausgegeben von
Willem B. Drees, Antje Jackelén,
Gebhard Löhr und Ted Peters

Band 20

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Pascal Boyer

The Fracture Of An Illusion: Science And The Dissolution Of Religion

Frankfurt Templeton Lectures 2008

Edited by Michael G. Parker and
Thomas M. Schmidt

Afterword by Wolfgang Achtner and
Elisabeth Gräb-Schmidt

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-525-56940-5

Umschlagabbildung: „Zitat“, 1996, Acryl, Papier, Holz 100 x 100 cm © www.edeltraut-rath.de

© 2010 Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen / www.v-r.de
Alle Rechte vorbehalten. Das Werk und seine Teile sind urheberrechtlich geschützt.
Jede Verwertung in anderen als den gesetzlich zugelassenen Fällen bedarf der vorherigen schriftlichen Einwilligung des Verlages. Hinweis zu § 52a UrhG: Weder das Werk noch seine Teile dürfen ohne vorherige schriftliche Einwilligung des Verlages öffentlich zugänglich gemacht werden. Dies gilt auch bei einer entsprechenden Nutzung für Lehr- und Unterrichtszwecke. Printed in Germany.

Druck und Bindung: ☉ Hubert & Co, Göttingen

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier.

Acknowledgments – and a cautionary note

This is an extensively modified version of lectures presented at the universities of Frankfurt and Gießen in May 2008, as part of the Templeton Research Lectures on science and religion. I am very grateful to Dr. Wolfgang Achtner and Dr. Elisabeth Gräß-Schmidt for organizing these lectures, and to Dr. Thomas M. Schmidt for publishing them in this series.

Dr. Achtner, Dr. Gräß-Schmidt and I also engaged in extensive discussion of the material presented during the lectures – and the revisions are largely due to their input, as I greatly benefited from their intuitions and criticisms. I hope the text does reflect some of the pleasure of these friendly exchanges, although these scholars are of course not responsible for any of my outrageous claims.

Being lectures, these were delivered in the form of sermons – that is, in this case, with greater emphasis on argument than evidence. I provide only minimal description of the studies, experimental and anthropological, that lead to the particular claims made here. I chose to take as my starting point what we know from the scientific study of religious thought – not how we came to know it – and explore some implications for such questions as: Can there be a free civil society with religions? Does it make sense to talk about religious experience? Do religions make people better? I encourage readers who find some of these statements odd or implausible (and the study of religion is replete with surprises) to have a look at the studies mentioned in the notes.

Contents

1. Is there such a thing as religion?	9
The Kant-Darwin Axis	11
Religions without doctrines	13
No “religion” in most cultures	14
Who invented religion?	16
Religions as brands	20
Does the study of religion need “religion”?	22
An uncertain and unnecessary concept	23
2. What is natural in religions?	25
Natural religion as a theory	25
What is the phenomenon?	26
The cognitive picture – supernatural concepts	27
Why are supernatural concepts culturally stable?	30
The cognitive picture – non-physical agency	32
Natural religion is not (just) for the primitive Other	35
Probabilistic, experience-distant model	36
What makes religious notions culturally viable	37
3. Do religions make people better?	41
Humans are “prosocial”	43
Apparently, morality could not possibly evolve	44
Models of commitment	47
Could “religion” be a form of prosocial signaling?	50
So why are superhuman agents also moral enforcers?	54
Epilogue	55
4. Is there a religious experience?	57
Why bother with experience?	57
Who invented “religious experience”?	60
Monks and magnets	61
Rituals: a real (and most common) form of religious experience	63
Ritualized behavior and precaution systems	66
What about collective “rituals”?	67
Religion and experience redux	69
5. Are religions against reason and freedom?	73
A recapitulation of natural religious elements	73
Understanding religious cognition without “belief”	76

Religion is not the sleep of reason	77
The troubled consciousness of modern religions	78
Two escape routes – fundamentalism and “spirituality”	80
No need for “science and religion” or different “magisteria”	85
Two varieties of Enlightenment	89
Misleading policies: the specificity of “religion”	91
Political psychology and secularization	93
Epilogue – fracture of an illusion	95
Afterword	99
Bibliography	105

1. Is there such a thing as religion?

The point of this book is not to argue that religious ideas are creations of the mind. That point was conclusively argued more than two centuries ago by Kant and other *Aufklärung* scholars. We are all in debt to the Enlightenment – and conscious enough of that debt, that we need not restate what was so lucidly demonstrated at the time.

No, the point here is to carry on where these scholars left off – this time with the use of a better science – and show that the very existence of some thing called “religion” is largely an illusion. What I mean by “illusion” is actually very simple, but also rather counter-intuitive and therefore difficult to present in a succinct yet persuasive manner. Most people who live in modern societies think that there is such a thing as “religion”, meaning a kind of existential and cognitive “package” that includes views about supernatural agency (gods), notions of morality, particular rituals and sometimes particular experiences, as well as membership in a particular community of believers. In all this, each element makes sense in relation to the others. Indeed, this is the way most major “religions” – Islam and Hinduism for instance – are presented to us and the way their institutional personnel, most scholars and most believers think about them. By considering, studying or adhering to a “religion” one is supposed to approach, study or adhere to that particular package: an integrated set of moral, metaphysical, social and experiential claims.

All that is largely an illusion. The package does not really exist as such. Notions of supernatural agents, of morality, of ethnic identity, of ritual requirements and other experience, all appear in human minds independently. They are sustained by faculties or mechanisms in the human mind that are quite independent of each other, and none of which evolved because it could sustain religious notions or behaviors. What would seem to be integrated wholes, the Shinto system or the Islamic world-view, are in fact collections of such fragments.

So why do religions, and by extension religion, appear to be such integrated wholes, such systems? That is largely a matter of stipulation. That the package is a package is not a fact but the wish expressed, or rather the slogan put forth with great animus by the members of many religious institutions – the priests, the ritual officers, the office-holders in religious institutions. There is no reason to take this postulate at face-value. Indeed, there is every reason to think that the notions of a religion (the Hindu religion, the Islamic religion) and of religion in general, are the main obstacles to the study of why and how people come to have what we generally call “religious” notions and norms, that

is, why and how they find plausible the existence of non-physical agents, why they feel compelled to perform particular rituals, why they have particular moral norms, why they see themselves as members of particular communities. These phenomena cannot be understood unless we first accept that they do not stem from the same domain, they do not actually belong together, except in what amounts to the marketing ploys, as it were, of particular religious institutions.

The notion of “religion” as a package seems so plausible that even people who intensely dislike what they see as the supernatural fantasies, odd rituals or extravagant moral exigencies imposed by religious institutions, still assume that there is such a thing as religion – which they see as a nefarious set of thoughts and institutions, the influence of which has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished. Framing the conflict as a struggle of reason or lucidity against the obscurity, indeed obscurantism, of a single enemy, “religion”, simply perpetuates the illusion that there is a domain of religion – a single fortress for the militant rationalist to assault. That it is an illusion may explain why the best efforts in this epic struggle are often in vain.

Incidentally, the view presented here implies that there is no such thing as a conflict (or even debate) “between science and religion” – at least not in the way that confrontation is generally described. This is partly because natural science does not really *compete* with the statements of religious institutions about the natural world – scientific knowledge quite simply makes them entirely redundant.

It is also because “religion” in the religion-science debates is quite simply an imaginary object, a chimerical combination of widespread metaphysical beliefs, culturally acceptable moral norms, and the doctrines of religious institutions – but that amorphous mixture does not really exist, either as a set of mental phenomena in anyone’s heads or as a social or cultural phenomenon.

Whether “religion” is a mere illusion or not is not an academic matter, given the social and political implications. One could hardly write about the topic and ignore the presence of many people bent on inflicting serious harm or death on others for what seems to be an extreme form of religious adherence. Is religion to blame? Framing the question in such terms ensures that we will reach no understanding of the phenomenon. Once we leave aside the “religion” label, there are many useful things we can learn about such violent extremism from the behavioral and biological sciences.

In a less dramatic form, a variety of political debates in some countries (the USA and countries in the Middle-East in particular) seems to focus on the putative role, if any, of “religion” in the public sphere or on the connections between “religion”, civil society and the state. I will argue that such debates may become much less murky, and perhaps even rationally tractable, if we dispense with the notion that “religion” is one of the partners in the debate. There is no such thing. Belief in the existence of a social object that is “religion” is equivalent to belief in this or that form of supernatural agency. It