In Defense of a Naturalistic Approach to Religion

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Abstract

By a naturalistic approach to religion I mean a social scientific one. I pit a naturalistic approach against a religionist one, by which I mean a phenomenological one. I argue that all of the conventional objections to a naturalistic approach by religionists rest on misconceptions of naturalism: that a naturalistic approach denies the believer's point of view, disregards the believer's description as well as explanation of religion, and is necessarily atheistic, eliminativist, and materialist. None of these assumptions, all of them self-serving, is correct. Naturalism starts with the believer's point of view and seeks to account for it. Naturalism translates that point of view into nonreligious terms and then explains it accordingly. Naturalism sidesteps the issue of the existence of God. Naturalism is reductive but not thereby eliminativist. And it allows for dualism as well as for materialism. The advantage of a naturalistic approach over a religionist one is its scope: it ties religion to the rest of human nature or the nature of society rather than severing religion from anything else. Finally, I consider Jason Blum's defense of a religionist approach by limiting the approach to description and limiting a naturalistic approach to explanation.

Keywords


By a naturalistic approach to religion I mean a social scientific one. I do not mean a philosophical one. I am not considering the existence of God. I am contrasting a naturalistic approach not to a supernatural one but to a religionist, or phenomenological, one. The exemplar of a naturalistic approach to religion will here be C.G. Jung. The exemplar of a religionist one will be Mircea Eliade.

My defense of a naturalistic approach is both negative and positive. Negatively, the approach is defended against mischaracterizations of it by religionists. Positively, the approach is defended as superior to a religionist
approach. I consider the defense of the phenomenology of religion by Jason Blum.¹

1  The Phenomenological Claim to Unique Access to the Description of Religion

Phenomenology as practiced in religious studies is not the same as phenomenology as practiced in philosophy. The standard objections to philosophical phenomenology do not bear directly on religious phenomenology, which ordinarily means something modest: an accurate description of religion from the standpoint of adherents themselves. Put simply, religious phenomenology seeks to present the proverbial insider’s point of view.

In phenomenology of religion the description, or interpretation, of religion is tied to the explanation of religion. Description is what religion means to adherents themselves. Explanation is why adherents are religious.

The first problem with the phenomenology of religion is that it fails to justify its deference to adherents for even the most reliable description of religion. Suppose members of a religion do not agree among themselves about the nature of their religion. After all, many religions are divided into branches, which exist because of disagreements on the religion. Suppose that members of even a united religion have never formally worked out their views. Suppose that their knowledge of their religion is either local or tacit. Suppose that they have limited knowledge of the history of their religion, including changes in their religion.

More important, outsiders, or trained experts, may know more about a religion than insiders do. Outsiders may know all that insiders know—plus. Outsiders may know more about the varieties of a religion and the history of a religion than insiders do. And they may know more about religion per se, for often they are comparativists, which ordinarily insiders are not.

Deferring to insiders on the grounds that it is their religion is like deferring to patients on the grounds that it is their disease. Would any doctor defer to a patient in making a diagnosis just because it is the patient rather than the doctor who harbors the illness? The patient is simply the subject of the disease but not thereby the expert on it. Ownership of a car does not confer expertise on the car. Adherence to a religion is no different.