“HOW DOES THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION STACK UP AS A BIG THEORY, À LA HUME?”

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1. Good Big Theories of Religion

David Hume wrote to a friend that as a young man his thinking about religion had begun “with an anxious Search after arguments, to confirm the common opinion.” Finding no arguments to support faith, he abandoned his, and then found it curious that “any human, two-legged creature could ever embrace such principles” (cited in Smith 1947: 7, 11, 41). Thus the Enlightenment project of explaining religion begins with the principle that religion requires explaining because it is an oddity, somehow unnatural. It is no coincidence that Hume creates what many consider the first complete naturalistic theory of religion (Preus 1987: xiv). Hume and a handful of other towering theorists continue to provide guideposts in the study of religions for many reasons, one of which is that the theories they propose are comprehensive and coherent. It is worth asking then if a recent big theory, the cognitive science of religion will prove to be equally fruitful, and to approach this question by asking if it is comprehensive and coherent.

By comprehensive and coherent I do not have in mind any formal theoretical principles from the philosophy of science. But in working with and teaching theories and methods in religious studies it has become clear that influential big theories do share certain formal or structural qualities. (Van Harvey suggests creating such a classificatory scheme in order to compare logical or formal features of theories in his marvelous book on Feuerbach [Harvey 1995: 234-36].) Others in the pantheon of good big theorists in the naturalistic paradigm include Durkheim

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and Freud. Their theories, too, could be placed easily and fruitfully into the schema I propose, and I have found this fruitful for purposes of comparison. For the sake of brevity I will mostly take Hume as an exemplar. Without making any claims about the ontological status of these categories, or to the categories' necessity and sufficiency, I have found it quite useful to compare the formal features of theories using seven basic categories or tasks that good big theories do. By comprehensive, I mean theories that handle each of these tasks well, and by coherent, I mean that the principles underlying or consequences resulting from each task do not come into conflict with each other. By way of illustration I sketch in features of Hume's theory. Comprehensive theories include at least the following seven characteristics:

1. A definition. When Hume asks what is the origin of religion in human nature, he equates religion with “[t]he belief of invisible, intelligent power” (Hume 1956: 21).

2. An epistemology. Hume is an empiricist, arguing that all “perceptions of the mind” can be classified either as ideas or impressions (that is, sensory experiences); and further, that ideas are copies of impressions (Hume 1977: 10-11). Given his definition of religion, his question about the origin of religion in human nature can thus be restated: What impression is it that gives rise to the idea of invisible intelligent power?

3. An anthropology (in the sense this word is used in theology: an account of human nature—what are people like, why do they act the way they do?). Hume, raised a Scottish Calvinist, thinks that all actions are initiated by our sentiments and passions rather than reason. We are driven by our passions, which are primarily self-love and pleasure (Hume 1983: 15). And yet, for Hume, leader of the Scottish Enlightenment, there is among our sentiments a small measure of pure benevolence. True, benevolence is useful to us (Hume 1983: 18). But he also gives examples of benevolence that please us but which cannot be useful to us personally. He concludes, “If usefulness, therefore, be a source of moral sentiment, and if this usefulness be not always considered with a reference to the self; it follows, that every thing, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and goodwill” (Hume 1983: 43).

4. A description of the circumstances or occasion that gives rise to religion. Any event with an unseen cause can give rise to the idea of intelligent power, but given Hume's anthropology we are “much