Social Norms and Religious Belief

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I. What Is Religious Belief?

It may seem odd to bring up the topic of religious belief in connection with sociology in any way other than to examine examples of specific norms advocated by particular religious traditions. But that is exactly what I intend to do here. My title should be taken in the broadest possible sense. It means to raise the question of how, in general, religious beliefs impact our concepts of social norms of all types. And I will say right off that my answer to that question is that some religious belief or other invariably controls and regulates any and every theory of any and every social norm. In large part, this is because a religious belief can exercise its control while remaining an unconscious presupposition to theories every bit as much as when it is a conscious, fervent commitment. (And, yes, this means that every social theory assumes some such belief whether it advocates admit it or not!)

For this claim to make any sense at all, however, I must now say what counts as a religious belief. And since there isn't the time to do that job thoroughly, I'm going to have to quickly summarize my findings on this score and leave more detailed argument for the discussion to follow. Moreover, because there are such long standing, deeply entrenched misunderstandings concerning the nature of religious belief in Western thought, I'm going start by saying what religious belief is not.

Let's begin with a batch of the most common misunderstandings: religious beliefs are not all in a supreme being, do not all involve worship, and do not all include an ethical code. They do not all teach that there is life after death. These are items common to the Jewish/Christian/Muslim traditions, but are not at all common outside them. In fact, it is widely recognized that the truly enormous variation among religions beliefs is so great as to create despair over whether there are any common elements to them that can constitute a definition at all. Many scholars have rushed to embrace Wittgenstein's suggestion that common nouns are often applied by us to things that share nothing in common, so that the things they designate are not definable in terms of features they all share and only they share (his famous example was games).[1]

This conclusion strikes me as doubly hasty. First because I think there are common defining features to all games, and second because the common elements of religious belief have been sought in only one location while there is more than one place in which to search for them. To be sure, the most obvious place to look is at the natures of all the candidates for divinity advanced by various traditions. This is, of course, just the approach that has led to definitional despair. Clearly there are no common characteristics, **[p.2>]** e.g., among the natures of the Tao, Mana, God, and the Dharmakaya. But I contend that a second locus yields happier results. It is the status accorded to the various candidates rather than their natures; that is, we may look at the *relation* the divine is supposed to bear toward all that is not divine. Now every religion I know of regards the

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[1] Wilfred C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. NY: Harper & Row, 1978, pp. 146, 148-149.

divine as being *unconditional and nondependent* while all else depends on the divine. So while the nature attributed to the divine and other features of its relations to all else differ widely, the divine is always believed to be what is 'just there' while all else depends on it for existence. This is the essential core of what religion is about. In traditional religions, all their other beliefs are secondary teachings that depend on the idea of what it is that has this divine status. These secondary beliefs are prescriptions for how humans are to stand in proper relation to the divine.

This definition is not only is the only one I know capable of applying to every known religion, but also makes clear why there are religions that have no accompanying worship, or ethics, or doctrine of life after death. It shows, in fact, why a core belief may even fail to generate any prescriptions about how to stand in proper relation to the divine and still be religious so long as it is a belief in something or other *as* utterly nondependent.[2] But while this understanding of religious beliefs has the advantage of actually comporting with all their known varieties, it also has the disconcerting consequence that a lot more beliefs are religious than appears to be the case so long as the usual misunderstandings go uncorrected. For it entails that any belief in something as nondependent is a religious belief *no matter how that something is conceived*. Thus it is not just beliefs in God, or Brahman-Atman, or the Tao that are religious; so too is the materialist's belief in physical particles and laws, Plato's belief in the Forms, Aristotle's belief in form/matter substances, Russell's belief in logical laws and sets, and Pythagoras' belief in numbers. These, and a host of other beliefs are religious because they accord to some candidate the same status that characterizes the divine in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, or any other major religious tradition.

These so-called metaphysical beliefs differ from traditional religions mainly by lacking (or having less elaborate) secondary teachings about how to stand in proper relation to the divine. Of course they also differ by occurring in philosophical or scientific theories rather than being embedded in traditions devoted to pre scribing how to stand in proper relation to the divine for purposes **[p.3>]** of ones present or ultimate welfare. But the very notion of divinity was imported into science and philosophy from religion. It existed in religions for an untold length of time prior to being picked up and employed in theories. So the fact that theories often skip the secondary beliefs cultic religions stress, does not diminish the clear sense in which they remain religious.[3]

To those who are seriously put off by this discovery I can only say that by finding the common characteristics of any type of things often results in a definition that is surprising. People outside botany are surprised to learn that lilies and onions are defined as in the same class, for example. And for centuries whales were classified as fish until it was shown that they have more in common with mammals—despite the fact that they

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[2] Bible writers use the term "idolatry" to refer to any practice that accords to anything a status that belongs only to God. Is. 48:11, for example, quotes God as saying, "I will not give my glory to another". But Is. also makes clear what that glory consists of. In 6:3 he quotes the Seraphim as saying: "The filling of the whole earth is your glory." Thus it is God's status as *creator* which it is idolatry to ascribe to anything else. It is God alone who exists independently while all else depends on God.

[3] It may be replied that I am here overlooking a key difference, namely, that such beliefs are rationally justified in theories but accepted on faith in religion. But I believe in can be demonstrated that any belief about what is utterly nondependent is incapable of theoretical justification. This is the main burden of my recent book, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.)

live in oceans as fish do. My contention, then, is that the only feature shared by all known religious beliefs, and which is a feature that is absolutely central for each of them, should be taken as defining what counts as a religious belief. It should not be rejected because it also occurs in science, or law, or philosophy, and so occur outside an avowedly religious – i.e., cultic - tradition. Where, and in what context such a belief occurs, is irrelevant to whether it is in fact a religious belief. So just as whales were once not recognized as mammals but now are, these beliefs now also need to be recognized as religious. It is in this expanded sense of 'religious belief' that the central claim of this paper is to be understood: it is impossible to theorize about social relationships and organizations without reference to norms for various kinds of values, and the theories of such norms are always controlled by a thinker's belief in whatever he or she regards as divine. Moreover this control is even true of theories which result in the misbegotten denial that there are any real values at all.

II. Are There (Real) Social Norms?

By "norm" I mean a rule for behavior that reflects the orderliness appropriate to a particular aspect of human life. Although they are sometimes called "laws", they do not regulate humans the way the laws of math or physics do. For whereas the latter laws cannot be broken even if we try, norms allow for disobedience. In other words, a norm differs from a law in that laws are exceptionless within the parameters in which they hold, while a norm can be violated while still in force. Moreover, a norm has to do with promoting some value such as: biological health, psychological sanity, logical consistency, cultural progress, linguistic clarity, economic wealth, aesthetic enjoyment, justitial fairness, and moral love. Norms, then, state what *ought* or *ought not* to be done if such values are to be realized. So although humans can disobey norms to some extent and do so without instantly self-destructing, their reality and binding force is often evinced most clearly when they are disobeyed. We may eat only junk food and be healthy for a while, we may reason inconsistently and avoid disaster on occasion, **[p.4>]** and we may act unjustly and get away with it at times. But continued violation of such norms will inexorably lead to the loss of their respective values.

By defending this view it should be clear, then, that I am taking the position that the 'oughts of life' are parts of what 'is'; this means that the 'is'-'ought' dichotomy as that has plagued ethics, for example, is a red herring. We never *experience* what 'is' apart from the values whose maximization is expressed in 'oughts' - though of course there are theories that *postulate* that the values we experience are all our own subjective projections onto some valueless 'is' (usually construed as purely sensory perceptions or purely physical objects) . But these theories suffer from such deep-seated faults as to be utterly implausible. To show in detail why this is so is obviously beyond the scope of this paper, but perhaps a few brief points can be made here.

First, there is a spurious plausibility for the claim that values are purely subjective which rests on the fact that people disagree about them. We disagree over aesthetic beauty, economic worth, justice, and so—the argument goes—those values must be the result of our own projections. But this seems little more than fatuous. We also disagree over colors, for example. At times my wife and I can look at the same dress from the same

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angle in the same light and still disagree as to whether it is more blue than green. We can't both be right; the dress can't really be more green than blue and more blue than green at the same time, and there seems to be no way to decide which it really is. Granted our disagreement may reflect subjective differences in our perceptual abilities; but does it show that things really have no color at all? Does it show that colors are entirely our own projections? Surely riot. Why, then, should it lead to such a conclusion for values?

One possible reason why disagreement seems to count against real values and norms but not against real colors may be that values are surreptitiously being thought of as depending on something like Platonic forms. That is, they are being thought of as generated by perfect examples of what it is to be beautiful or just, examples everything must *copy* if they are to be have the value in question. On this assumption, the argument amounts to saying that if there really are such objective examples we should all see them alike—or at least more alike than we do. But why suppose values depend on perfect examples? All we need to explain them are the norms we find in our experience. In other words, I'm saying that the values consist in the ways things conform to the norms where norms are thought of as *rules* not as perfect examples. And the truth is that there is wide agreement on value norms even if there is often disagreement in the ways our judgments apply them to specific cases.[4] People do see the rules of, say, **[p.5>]** supply/demand and diminishing returns as economic norms, even if they don't agree on the fair price for this car. Taken this way, I contend, the value disagreements over price are no more able to show that economic value is *en toto* our own projection than disagreements over colors can show colors are. The same holds for norms of other values such as justice (give each person his/her due, be even-handed), and morality (do to others as you'd have them do to you, love your neighbor as yourself).

The significance of this point for sociology is that it is utterly impossible to give any account of interpersonal relations or of the distinctive character of social organizations apart from such norms. To call an organization a business *means* that its functioning aims at promoting economic value. To understand an organization as a hospital is to understand it to be aimed at increasing biological or psychological health. A government *is* an institution created to enact and enforce laws to ensure justice. Even to call a certain act a crime is already to make covert use of justitial and moral norms, just as it makes use of economic norms to call a certain income level "poverty." In short, there is no such thing as a pure description of sociological facts that deletes every reference to norm and value. Any description that really stripped away every such reference would leave human relations and organizations utterly incomprehensible. The upshot is that if norms are taken as rules we discover rather than as perfect exemplars we postulate, most of the reasons for resorting to the subjectivist theory of values are obviated.

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[4] There is, I admit, less agreement over aesthetic norms. But there is no reason to suppose this is any more serious than the fact that 400 years ago virtually no physical laws were known. The formulation of norms, like that of laws, is a historical process. Three hundred years ago no one could have stated an economic norm, and far fewer logical rules were known than are known today. The fact that we cannot state norms for certain types of value does not show there are none; indeed, we make an inchoate intuitive appeal to norms for these values by every judgment we make about them—even when we can't state precisely what the norms are.

But at the same time it is important to notice that by rejecting subjectivism, I am not defending traditional objectivism. This is not a theory that claims values are just there "in" the objects. Rather, it holds that values and their normative order are distinct sides of the created universe, and that although norms exist apart from humans the values they order are only potentialities apart from humans. For a thing to actually have a value, we must subjectively value it. At the same time, for us to be able to value it in a certain way the thing must be objectively ordered by the norms of that kind of value; indeed, the sense in which a thing objectively possesses the potentiality to be valued *consists* in the ways it functions - that is, in its potential and/or actual properties - under the governance of the value norms.

This view also differs from traditional objectivism in another way. I already pointed out that by postulating perfect exemplars for (or in) objects of value, and by claiming these are known by unbiased rational inquiry, objectivism was open to the charge that everyone's understanding and application of them should be much more alike than they are. My further reason for denying this part of traditional objectivism is the main claim of this paper: people's theories about every **[p.6>]** aspect of their experience vary relative to their divinity beliefs. (This is true not just of the value aspects but also of such 'hard' sciences as math and physics as well.) All humans do have an intuitive recognition of such values as logical consistency, economic worth, aesthetic beauty, justice, morality, etc. They find these values in their experience and there is wide agreement on the norms for them. But the theories they develop to deepen their understanding of those values, generate contrary interpretations of them. The intuitive recognition of a value is not obliterated by theorizing; it remains as the experiential basis that prompts the theory and is what the theory is about. But the subsequent interpretation of the intuitive recognition of a value is not matter of pure unbiased rational inspection. The intuition of a value and its norms is influenced by theories such that the value is conceived differently *depending on how the theory understands that value to relate to the other aspects of experience*. This relation implies a general theory of reality. And it the different views of the nature of reality that are the source of the numerous 'isms' in value theory, just as it is the source of 'isms' in the natural sciences and philosophy. Moreover, any view of the general nature of reality contains or presupposes some divinity belief or other as that was defined earlier.

III. How Does Religious Belief Control Theories?

In order to illustrate how theories interpret values differently depending on the religious belief they presuppose, I'm going to use the issue of *the nature and source of authority* in society. By what authority does one person (or group of them) tell another what to do? Where does such authority originate? This is, of course, an issue raised in connection with the value of justice. More specifically, I will raise it in connection with the idea that people have what I will call justitial *rights*.

One influential answer to our question is the objectivism of Aristotle who held that the nature of authority is rationality. Reason in humans, he thought, is based on the same principles (rational forms) that order all reality and make it what it is. Moreover, these same principles also generate real values; they are not only the basis for our being able to

distinguish right from wrong, just from unjust, but are what make things really right or wrong, just or unjust. So he contends that those who have the greater measure of reason and virtue should rule those who have less. See the progression of presuppositions here? The most basic (religious) belief is that the rational forms are divine.[5] Humans are defined as rational animals. He then argues that human rationality can only be come into its own in a rationally ordered society or State; therefore humans are also social beings for whom the State must be ruled by those with the most reason and virtue. But since the very exercise of human reason depends on being a member of the State, justice is defined as whatever preserves the State! The idea of justitial rights, therefore, is that they are whatever the State **[p.7>]** sees fit to confer on its citizens for its own benefit.

Compare that with the answer of Hobbes. Hobbes' most basic belief is that physical matter is that on which all things depend. Humans too are therefore basically physical, which for Hobbes includes their biotic and sensory drives. Among the most powerful of these drives is fear, and it is out of fear of the competition of "all against all" that humans form the State. This State is nothing more than a contract a group of people form to give up their mutual competition by creating a ruling power they all agree to recognize. Justice as a real value and norms of right and wrong have nothing to do with it; Hobbes thinks there really are no such values or norms. In fact, he holds that the very ideas of these values are created by the contract to form the State. Once that is formed, right and wrong, just and unjust, are *whatever the ruler says they are so long as he can enforce it*. The ruler can literally do no wrong on Hobbes' view. The ruler is not even party to the agreement that created the State and named him ruler, so he owes his subjects nothing. This is not the view that whatever the ruler says goes, even if he's wrong. According to Hobbes nothing is really wrong; "wrong" means only that the ruler will punish you. Might *is* right. They are identical. So Hobbes' positivism with respect to values presupposes his materialism, and his denial there are any real justitial rights at all follows from his positivism. Rights and justice are denied altogether. There is only physical force.

This same progression of presuppositions can be demonstrated again and again. The two theories briefly mentioned above interpreted justice in ways that identified it with rationality and emotion respectively. Other theories have interpreted the nature and source of authority to be economic (Marx), or to lie in the general will (Rousseau). In every case these theories take some facet or faculty of humans and proclaim it to be the proper ruling function of social life on the ground that it corresponds to the basic nature of reality. And in each case the idea of basic nature of reality depends on what is supposed to be nondependent and divine. So there are distinct steps to my claim: every theory of justice presupposes some view of society and human nature, while views of society and human nature presuppose a general view of the nature of reality. And these, in turn, depend on what the thinker believes to be divine.

It is at precisely this point that I think the religious belief in a transcendent Creator shows itself to be so beneficial to value theory. For if the only divine reality transcends the

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[5] Aristotle even calls rational form(s) "divine"—and for the same reason I gave earlier: "Therefore about that which can exist independently and is changeless there is a science... And if there is such a thing in the world, here surely must be the divine, and this must be the first and most dominant principle." (*Meta.* 1064a34).

universe, then nothing in the universe is that to which all its other aspects are to be reduced in order to explain them. The various values are therefore not to be explained as really identical with (or generated by) rationality, power, emotion, or will, any more than they are to be dismissed as our own subjective dreams. If God is the law giver to creation, then the laws and norms we find here are the order God built into the world not our own subjective inventions. More specifically with respect to justice: if the source of social authority is the norms built into creation by God, then no person, institution, or human function is that source. Here, then, is the key to halting the endless stream of theories founded on divinizing a particular aspect of humans or the world. Here is the way out of **[p.8>]** skewing the interpretation of values because of an overestimation of the role and explanatory power of whatever is divinized. Instead of narrowing our understanding of a value by concentrating on the particular side of it that is supposed to be divine, we can take a view that maintains a wide-angle lens. Eliminating any aspect of creation as divine allows us to develop a theory that interpret all aspects of creation—values included—as equally real and mutually irreducible.

Am I suggesting a theocracy then? Far from it. Rather, following what I find strongly suggested in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, I'm saying that we must see humans as *bearers* of authority rather than the creators of it. Furthermore, we must recognize that there is no one supreme authority or kind of authority in human society. Instead, creation has been structured by God so that there are different kinds of author*ities*. Scripture expressly mentions parents in a family, owners in a business, governing officials in a State, and authorities in a synagogue or church. To these we could add: the conductor of an orchestra, doctors in a hospital, teachers in a school, etc. And finally, I suggest that each sort of authority is limited: not only limited *to* the organization in which it arises, but also by the particular kind of value it exists to promote. So, e.g., parents set their children's bedtime, not teachers; teachers grade students' work, not judges; judges apply the laws of public justice, not parents, and so on.

IV. Can Pragmatism Replace Religious Commitment?

The typical American philosophical reaction to talk about the connection of religious commitments to values and norms—rights in particular—is to say we don't have to worry about such issues as: what is divine? what is the nature of reality? what is the basic nature of humans? What is the nature of society? We needn't be concerned at all as to which views of such matters are true or false, real or fictional. After all, we can have whatever we want (or need) on purely pragmatic grounds and bag all the stuff about religious commitment and abstruse theories. This mental aberration used to be confined to these shores with a few admirers in Britain. But in recent years the plague seems to have spread to the continent and even shows signs of becoming the common ground for a rapprochement of the analytic and continental thinkers who, about 20 years ago used to accuse one another of not really doing philosophy. So let us consider whether pragmatism really offers us an alternative that can allow us all the fruits of religious commitment and hard theoretical work to discover truth, without any commitment and without all the labor of planting, watering, and weeding the concepts to be garnered.

First it must be noted that as an epistemology, pragmatism is the claim that: A sentence S is true iff S works better for me. That is, it helps me live my life. But any belief that S works better for me will *have* to reflect some notion of the nature of the 'me' it works for. And in so far as others are like me, whatever I conclude for myself will apply to them also. So unless I'm prepared to say that I am radically different from others (so that one or the other **[p.9>]** of us isn't really human), what I conclude about my own nature applies to all humans. In order to decide what will work, how can we avoid deciding whether we are more essentially biological animals seeking to prolong life? or rational animals seeking to pursue a rational goal in accordance with virtue? or emotional beings whose fault is that we think too much and who really can do no other than seek pleasure and avoid pain? or that we are essentially no more than the "ensemble of our social relations?" No matter how the blanks are filled in here they reflect beliefs that are not accepted merely on pragmatic grounds are the basis for what we take to "work for us". And these convictions reflect, as we have seen, beliefs about what is the essential nature of all reality—each candidate for which is defended on the ground that it has identified that which has *unconditional existence*. Simply saying, "Let's be pragmatic" won't make any of this go away.

Second, it needs to be emphasized that pragmatism as a movement has produced exactly NOTHING in the way of innovative proposals in science or philosophy. The new theories, the new discoveries, the new interpretations in every field are all products of conviction about the nature of humans and the world about us. At best pragmatism tries to offer a way to end the difficult debates that arise between the theories' contrary views of what each takes to be progress. But pragmatism itself did not come up with - for example - the doctrine of political/legal rights, it did not contribute any advance toward enumerating them further, and it is helpless to show us how to resolve conflicts between them. The most it has ever done is say: "Why worry about whether there really are rights or what they are? Let's just keep the idea because it seems to work." But, of course, there's no more agreement on exactly what works than there is on the basis for rights. And the only way to decide what will really work *in the long run* is to settle the issue of the nature of society, humans, and reality.

Third, it is a fact about the human belief-formation process, that people cannot base their most important beliefs simply on the ground that they seem (for now) to produce some desirable effect. Thus to try to base any thing of real importance on solely pragmatic grounds (other than temporarily) is to sound the death-knell of that belief. This is because people don't think they know something unless they see it to be true. And even when they accept something as less than knowledge, they require some evidence for its truth as the basis of their acceptance. Moreover, people naturally believe in the law of non-contradiction even if they've never consciously articulated it. They know that if something's not true then it's false, and that it can't be both at once or neither. So if they cease to believe that "all men are created equal" is *true*, they will come to the inevitable (and correct) conclusion that it is therefore false. To say "Let's accept it as though it were true" not only won't help, *it will destroy that belief*.

This brings us to a key point pragmatism frequently sweeps under the table: people commonly experience certain beliefs—like the principle of non-contradiction—to be self-evidently true. They **[p.10>]** do not submit everything to the test of practical usefulness

before accepting it - any more than do pragmatists themselves (how could anyone formulate a test for the law of non-contradiction that would not already assume it?). This is another reason why the people normally act on pragmatic grounds only when prevented from getting anything more definite to go on - when they can't seem to discover what the truth is but are forced to act anyway. This limited use seems to me quite harmless and often the best way to proceed in such cases. Pragmatism is thus at best a stop—gap measure; it's a seat-of-the-pants temporary ploy to help us deal with a difficulty *when we don't really know the truth*. And there can be further epistemic value in employing a pragmatic test for a belief where the test is taken as an indicator of truth. But it can never constitute a substitute for truth. But if pragmatism is taken as the whole account of why people believe what they do, then that is exactly what follows: it is a substitute for truth. This means that there really is no truth at all in the sense of belief that corresponds to reality—as pragmatists such as Dewey and Rorty have admitted. Dewey recommended that the word "truth" be dropped altogether because nothing is either true or false in the sense of asserting what is in fact the case. And Rorty has claimed that we hold all our beliefs because we think it will make us happier to do so.

This sort of radical relativism seems to be the epistemic epidemic of our time. That it is a sickness is clear from the fact that both of these statements of the pragmatic theory purport to assert what is the case! That is, they both assert something to be true in exactly the sense in which they deny anything can be true In the face of such self-refuting incoherence why ever should we be induced to set aside our experiences of self—evident truth? Why should we for a moment consider giving up the truth of law of non-contradiction, the axiom of equals, that 1+1=2, that people all have the right to be treated with justice, or that God exists?

In the final analysis, therefore, pragmatism fails its own test. It just doesn't work.

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