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Rodney Stark: For the Glory of God

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Introduction

Dimensions of the Supernatural

Uncommon things must be said in common words.

—*Coventry Patmore*

Just as many religions teach that human culture was a gift from the Gods, many social scientists propose that religion is so basic to culture that without it “humanity could not have emerged from its pre- or proto-human condition.”¹ Even if one doubts that humans were actually taught by various Gods how to build fires or grow maize, and takes a more limited view of the role of religion in the evolution of culture, it is obvious that ideas about the supernatural have profoundly influenced life in “advanced” as well as in less “sophisticated” societies, and that *monotheism* may well have been the single most significant innovation in history.

How, when, or even where belief in One God first occurred will probably never be known, but the dramatic results can be seen in virtually every aspect of the cultures and histories of the great monotheisms. Had the Jews been polytheists, they would today be only another barely remembered people, less important but just as extinct as the Babylonians. Had Christians presented Jesus to the Greco-Roman world as “another” God, their faith would long since have gone the way of Mithraism. And surely Islam would never have made it out of the desert had Muhammad not removed Allah from the context of Arab paganism and proclaimed him as the only God. Having embraced monotheism and the inherent duty to missionize, these three faiths changed the world.

This is not to suggest that the three great monotheisms are essentially the same, or that they have had a similar impact on history. As will be

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seen, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam differ in many important ways that have produced rather different historical consequences. For one thing, Jews have seldom had the power to directly determine events. As for the two powerful monotheisms, consider that Christianity was able to stimulate the rise of science while Islam could not. On the other hand, Islam produced no witch-hunts. However, even these differences illustrate the larger truth: that religion has played a leading role in directing the course of history.

Unfortunately, in today's intellectual environment, that simple and obvious statement is widely regarded as both unfortunate and false. Proponents of this revisionist claim overcome its inherent contradiction by assigning many of the most unfortunate aspects of history to religious causes, while flatly denying even the most obvious and overwhelming evidence that religion was the basis for any of the "good" things that have come to pass. For example, it is argued that Christianity played no significant role in sustaining the abolitionist cause but was a major factor in justifying slavery.

Of course, most of those who sustain and repeat such historical falsifications do not mean to mislead—they, too, have been misled. Were that not so, it would have been futile to write this book. But I cling to the belief that many readers respect the authority of evidence and will honor my search for what really happened and why.

The overall purpose of this book is to show how ideas about God have shaped the history and culture of the West, and therefore of the world—including both "good" and "bad" consequences. My method is to closely examine four major historical episodes, each of which was sustained by people who believed they were acting for the glory of God. I use the word "episode" to emphasize that this is *not* a "history of ideas." In every instance, the ideas are treated as a component of human action, of human organizations, or of social movements.

The first episode is, eventually, the Protestant Reformation. I inserted the word "eventually" here to alert readers that the reforming impulse is an aspect of all religious organizations, and that the Reformations of the sixteenth century had their beginnings as far back as, perhaps, the second century. As is explained in Chapter 1, theological disputes, especially those assuming the existence of One True God, inevitably result in religious sects and reformations. The chapter examines this process in pre-Christian times, in Judaism, in the early Church, and in Islam. Then I trace many centuries of failed efforts to reform the Catholic Church and

show how that frequently resulted in the appearance of popular, “heretical” movements. Finally arriving in the sixteenth century, I formulate and test a new explanation as to why Protestantism succeeded in some places and not others. An additional purpose of the chapter is to provide an outline of European religious history that will place the remaining three chapters within a coherent context.

The second episode is the rise of science. Chapter 2 shows that there was no “scientific revolution” that finally burst through the superstitious barriers of faith, but that the flowering of science that took place in the sixteenth century was the normal, gradual, and direct outgrowth of Scholasticism and the medieval universities. Indeed, theological assumptions unique to Christianity explain why science was born only in Christian Europe. Contrary to the received wisdom, religion and science not only were compatible; they were inseparable. Hence the last portion of the chapter demonstrates that the battle over evolution is not a conflict between religion and science but between True Believers on both sides.

Chapter 3 shows that the commitment of Christian theologians to reason, which sustained the rise of science, also resulted in tragedy when applied to the question, “Why does non-Church magic work?” Thus Chapter 3 examines how the answer to this question caused generations of clearheaded, decent Europeans (including some celebrated for their contributions to the rise of science) to engage in witch-hunting. Having dispatched eight popular explanations of why the witch-hunts took place, I propose a new theory to explain the variations in where and when witch-hunts occurred.

As it happened, some of the very same people who were active in witch-hunting played leading roles in declaring that slavery was an abomination in the eyes of God. It was that conclusion, and only that conclusion, that enabled the West to abolish slavery. In fact, slavery was abolished in much of the non-Western world only because of Western pressure and interference—and slavery continues in some non-Christian areas. Chapter 4 shows why Christians reached this profoundly important conclusion and Muslims did not. The chapter also illustrates that it was vital to the subsequent success of the abolition movements that they were able to utilize the resources of the churches.

Although each of these four episodes was of long duration, each is closely associated with the sixteenth century. It was in 1517 that Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. In 1543 Copernicus published *De revolutionibus orbium coeles-*

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tium. It was during the latter half of the sixteenth century that the witch-hunts reached their height, and it was in 1510 that King Ferdinand initiated the Atlantic slave trade when he authorized the importation of African slaves to mine gold in the Spanish New World. Consequently, the chapters usefully expand upon one another, and many people make repeated appearances.

Finally, in a brief postscript, I sum up my efforts to create a sociology of Gods, showing that images of Gods, rather than ritual behavior, are the fundamental aspect of religion.

The remainder of this introduction will be devoted to defining and illustrating some key concepts that are basic to the subsequent chapters.

GODLY AND GODLESS RELIGIONS

Religion consists of *explanations of existence* based on *supernatural assumptions* and including statements about the *nature* of the *supernatural* and about *ultimate meaning*.

Ultimate meaning concerns the fundamental point and *purpose of being*. Does life have meaning? Why are we here? What can we hope? Why do we suffer? Does justice exist? Is death the end?

Supernatural refers to *forces or entities* (conscious or not) that are *beyond or outside nature* and which can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces. **Gods** are a particular form of the supernatural consisting of *conscious supernatural beings*.

Notice that the definition of religion leaves room for “Godless” religions, such as the elite forms of Confucianism and Taoism wherein the supernatural is conceived of as a *supernatural essence*—an underlying mystical force or principle governing life, but one that is *impersonal, remote, lacking consciousness, and definitely not a being*. As explained in the *Lao-tzu*, the Tao is a cosmic essence, the eternal Way of the universe that produces harmony and balance. Although the Tao is said to be wise beyond human understanding and “the mother of the universe,” it is also said to be “always nonexistent,” yet “always existent,” “unnameable” and “the name that can be named.” Both “soundless and formless,” it is “always without desires.” Finally, the sage is advised to make no effort to understand the Tao, which is how such an understanding will be achieved. Little wonder that the Tao inspires meditation and mysticism, but not worship.

Religions based on essences are not found only in the East. Many Western intellectuals, including some theologians and even bishops, propose an image of “God” as impersonal and unconscious as the Tao. Supernatural essences may be ideal objects for meditation and mystical contemplation by intellectuals, but Godless religions fail to appeal to the general public, and therefore the popular forms of Confucianism and Taoism include a substantial pantheon of Gods. This split has existed for millennia. The Chinese philosopher Xun-zi (*ca.* 215 B.C.E.)* taught that the truly educated know that although religious rituals can be beautiful and inspiring, they are but products of the human imagination: “They are done merely for ornament.” However, “the common people regard them as [involving the] supernatural.”²

Why do most people prefer a Godly religion? Because Gods are the only plausible sources of many things people desire intensely. It must be recognized that these desires are not limited to tangibles. Very often it is rewards of the spirit that people seek from the Gods: meaning, dignity, hope, and inspiration. Even so, the most basic aspect of religious activity consists of exchange relations between humans and Gods; people ask of the Gods and make offerings to them. Indeed, it is believed that Gods, unlike unconscious essences, set the terms for such exchanges and communicate them to humans. Thus while Godless religions rest upon the results of human meditation and speculation—upon wisdom—Godly religions rest upon *revelations*, on *communications believed to come from the Gods*. Consequently, the intellectual advocates of Godless religion devote themselves to seeking enlightenment through meditation, while the intellectuals in Godly religions devote their efforts to understanding the full implications of revelations: *theology* consists of *explanations that justify and specify the terms of exchange with Gods, based on reasoning about revelations*. That is, theologians attempt to expand understanding of divine concerns and desires, and to extend the range of instances to which they apply, by tracing the logical implications of revelations. Indeed, the authority of the Mishnah rests on the Jewish belief that revela-

* Because this book meanders over more than two thousand years of history, it seemed appropriate to ease the burden on readers by providing the dates for every significant person mentioned in the text who lived and did his or her primary work before 1930. Dates will be placed at the first substantial reference to the person, not at the first mention if it is only incidental. As in this instance, it is now conventional to use B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) rather than B.C. All years not identified as B.C.E. belong to the era that was once designated as A.D.

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Chinese Gods. The elite forms of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism are “Godless,” but the popular forms of these religions are bursting with Gods. Here are just a few of them, their statues lining the walls of the Temple Loong Wah. © Underwood & Underwood/CORBIS.

tions are granted to scholars through their close study of the Torah. A classic example of the theological process is the evolution of elaborate Christian doctrines concerning Mary despite how little is actually said about her in the New Testament. Many similar results of theological inquiry play important roles in the subsequent chapters.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Not only does religion consist of a certain kind of beliefs about the meaning of life and about the nature of the supernatural; *all* other aspects of religion *are derivative* of these beliefs, especially those about the supernatural: the forms and motives of rites, rituals, prayers, sacrifices, and even mystical experiences are determined by the nature of the *object* to which they are directed. Thus religious *practice* includes *all activities performed for religious motives* or purposes; only when we know what religion *is*, can we distinguish actions and feelings that are religious rather than otherwise. A High Mass and a Nazi Party rally both qualify as rites, and both can inspire deep emotions in participants. Only by noting which is grounded in supernatural assumptions and which is not, can we effectively distinguish them. In similar fashion, William James (1842–1910) rejected the idea of “religious sentiments” or “religious emotions” as having a distinct psychology. Rather, what can be identified as “religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth” are nothing more (or less) than natural emotions “directed to a religious object”—objects being religious because they involve “the divine.”³ Hence my references to religious rites, for example, mean rites that are performed for religious motives or purposes. Applying the adjectival form of “religion” as a modifier makes it possible to incorporate all aspects of religion and of the religious life without the use of more complex definitions.

Although I define religion as a set of beliefs, religions exist outside of sacred texts only as *social or collective phenomena*. Purely idiosyncratic faiths are found only, and then very rarely, among the mad, or (perhaps) singular prophets—even ascetic hermits pursue a collective faith. One reason religions are social is that it is a difficult task to create a plausible and satisfying religious culture, and therefore any given religion (even those attributed to a single founder) is usually the product of many contributors. For this same reason, religions are most effectively sustained by dedicated specialists. The second reason religions are social is that the universal problem of religion is *confidence*—the need to convince people that its teachings are true and that its practices are effective. Since the ultimate proofs of religious claims typically lie beyond direct examination, it is through the testimony of others that people gain confidence in a religion. Organized religious groups maximize the opportunity for people to reassure one another that their religion is true. Among followers

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of Godly religions, in addition to asserting their personal certainty about otherworldly rewards, people often enumerate miracles—how they recovered from cancer, how they overcame alcoholism or drug abuse, how they became reliable and faithful spouses, how they survived a catastrophic accident, or how their prayers for a dying child were answered. Thus do people demonstrate that a religion “works,” that its promises come true.

MAGIC

While all religions offer answers to questions of ultimate meaning (even if only to say that life is without meaning), magic does not. As Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) noted, magic is concerned not with the meaning of the universe but with “technical and utilitarian ends,” and hence “it does not waste its time in speculation.”⁴ Or, as John Middleton put it, “Magical beliefs and practices are particularly significant in being mainly instrumental, with little expressive content.”⁵ Thus magic is excluded by the definition of religion since it does not concern itself with ultimate meaning and typically does not offer explanations even of its own mechanisms, let alone of more profound matters. In addition, magic is essentially Godless.

Magic refers to all efforts to *manipulate or compel* supernatural forces *without reference to a God or Gods* or to *matters of ultimate meaning*. Put another way, magic is *limited to impersonal conceptions of the supernatural*, what the celebrated Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) described as a “mystic, impersonal power.” He went on to describe the nearly “universal idea found wherever magic flourishes” that there exists “a supernatural, impersonal force.”⁶

Summing up more than a century of anthropological studies of magic, Middleton pointed out:

[T]he realm of magic is that in which human beings believe that they may directly affect nature and each other, for good or for ill, by their own efforts (even though the precise mechanism may not be understood by them), as distinct from appealing to divine powers by sacrifice or prayer.⁷

Of course, Middleton did not mean to place in the magical realm just any or even most human efforts to affect nature or one another. He assumed

his readers understood that, just as rain dances differ from irrigation projects, only efforts involving a resort to supernatural means constitute magic. What is important is that these efforts are not directed toward a God, albeit they are efforts to manipulate supernatural forces.

Because the distinction between religion and magic is of such major importance in this book, especially in Chapters 2 and 3, it will be helpful to expand on these matters. When a Catholic wears a Saint Christopher's medal to ensure a safe journey, that is *not* magic because the power of the medal is attributed to the patron saint whose powers, in turn, are granted by a God. The medal is intrinsic to an exchange with a God. But when devotees of the New Age place "mystic" crystals under their pillows to cure a cold, this *is* magic because no appeal has been made to a God. The same applies to astrology. The conclusion that tomorrow is not an auspicious day for travel, for example, is not a message from a God but a calculation concerning the location of heavenly bodies relative to one's birth date. Magic deals in impersonal supernatural forces, often in the belief that such forces are *inherent properties* of particular objects such as planets or crystals, or of words, especially written or spoken formulas and incantations. Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) distinguished religion and magic in this way, proposing that the former involves "personal relations with the supernatural," while the latter deals with "mechanistic manipulation of the impersonal."⁸

Admittedly, the most sophisticated form of magic, known as *sorcery*, may sometimes involve supernatural creatures having some degree of consciousness. That is, sometimes sorcerers do attempt to compel certain primitive spiritual entities such as imps and demons to perform certain services. Even so, it still remains possible to "distinguish between magic and religion on the basis of the criterion of compulsion."⁹ As Benedict put it, "*Magic* is mechanical procedure, the compulsion of the supernatural."¹⁰ Compulsion assumes supernatural beings of extremely limited capacity—it is quite inconceivable even to compel the small Gods of polytheistic systems, let alone omnipotent beings. Hence compulsion of spiritual entities remains within the realm of magic, but exchanges with the Gods shift the activity into the realm of religion. Max Weber (1864–1920) made this same point when he noted that "those beings that are worshipped and entreated religiously may be termed 'gods,' in contrast to the 'demons,' which are magically coerced and charmed."¹¹

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DUALISTIC MONOTHEISM

Not only can religions be separated into the Godless and the Godly; there is enormous variation within the latter category: from religions that believe in flocks of tiny Gods who are everywhere, to religions that believe in One God who is everywhere. However, although monotheism means belief in only one God, in none of the great monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—is there only *one* supernatural *entity*. In each, God is surrounded by “a cloud of beings.”¹² As Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) pointed out:

Another fact to be noted respecting the evolution of monotheisms out of polytheisms . . . is that they do not become complete; or at least do not maintain their purity . . . [for example] the Hebrew religion, nominally monotheistic, retained a large infusion of polytheism. Archangels exercising powers in respect to their respective spheres, and capable even of rebellion, [a]re practically demi-gods . . . [Christian] trinitarian[ism] is partially polytheistic . . . Nay, even belief in a devil, conceived as an independent supernatural being, implies surviving polytheism.¹³

If we ignore his questionable evolutionary assumptions, Spencer surely was correct, and his mention of a devil acknowledges that there is a clear distinction among the various additional supernatural beings within the great monotheisms between those regarded as good and those who are evil. Therein lies the limiting principle of monotheism.

In practice, absolute monotheism is possible *only* when the supernatural is conceived of not as a *being* but as an *essence*, as an impersonal, remote, divine principle such as the Tao. If there is only one supernatural *being*, such a God would of necessity be *irrational* and *perverse*; one God of infinite scope must be responsible for *everything*, evil as well as good, and thus must be dangerously capricious, shifting intentions unpredictably and without reason. Within the confines of absolute monotheism, the only alternative to such a fearsome God is a divine essence that is responsible for *nothing*, being utterly remote from human concerns. But such nonbeings have little to offer most people and never supplant supernatural beings, except among small elites.

This necessarily limits monotheism since, in order for a divine being to be rational and benign, it is necessary for the religious system to postulate the existence of other, if far lesser, beings. That is, *evil* supernatural beings

such as Satan are essential to the most rational conception of divinity. Thus Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are *dualistic monotheisms*—each teaches that, in addition to a supreme divine being, *there also exists at least one evil, if less powerful, supernatural being*. As Jeffrey Burton Russell put it, “Dualism posits two opposite powers of good and evil, attributing evil to the will of a malign spirit.”¹⁴ The principle of dualism reflects the necessity either to conceive of a single divine essence that is above the question of good or evil by virtue of being remote from any exchanges with humans (the Tao), or to admit the existence of more than one supernatural being.

Because evil supernatural beings cannot be trusted and may do serious harm to humans, people will prefer conceptions of Gods wherein the good ones are far more powerful than the wicked ones. Hence entirely symmetrical dualism is rare and tends to be limited to good and evil essences, although some faiths have sustained conceptions of an evil being nearly as powerful as the good one—the Cathars being an example (Chapter 1). Usually, however, evil is not accorded full Godhood—Yahweh, Jehovah, and Allah merely tolerate lesser evil beings.

As was demonstrated in the first of these volumes,* and will be again throughout this book, monotheism has immense capacities to mobilize human action—capacities far beyond those found in polytheism or in Godless religions. However, precisely because the Gods of monotheism ask so much, some humans are always tempted to soften and weaken their conception of God until it fades into an undemanding, unconscious, essence. Thus, for example, when Protestant academics hailed Paul Tillich’s proposal that God is only a psychological construct, the “ground of our being,”¹⁵ they banished the possibility of miracles and otherworldly rewards and settled for an essence that is no more Godlike than the Tao. Like the Tao, figments of human psychology ask nothing and give nothing. Thus recent history shows that even within a monotheistic tradition, religious groups that succumb to the temptation to dispense with Gods as conscious beings soon find that their membership dwindles to a few intellectuals as most of their rank-and-file members shift to Godly faiths.¹⁶

If the most basic aspect of any religion is its conception of the supernatural, then the most basic aspect of social scientific studies of religion is a

* *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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sociology of Gods. Yet this is the topic that has received the least attention. Instead, for several generations nearly everyone in the field accepted Durkheim's assertion that religion is not about the supernatural at all, but only about rites and rituals. As will be seen throughout the book, and at length in the postscript, Durkheim was wrong. The contrasts already drawn between supernatural *beings* and unconscious, impersonal, vaguely supernatural *essences* reveal that different conceptions of the supernatural have dramatically different effects on the human experience. Even within Godly religions, compare the social implications of belief in a pantheon of undependable and often immoral Gods with those of belief in a supreme being who imposes moral obligations on humans. As will be seen, the consequences of these and other such differences in how the supernatural is conceived are decisive.

CONCLUSION

Although much of this book is devoted to history, my aims are those not of a historian but of a social scientist—which is what I am. In recent years I have turned to assembling and analyzing historical materials to expand the applications of original sociological theories that, in turn, are meant to illuminate the history. This approach involves synthesizing the work of many historians, not to produce a history, but to construct “cases” suitable for analysis. Hence although I have taken pains to offer a clear overall picture of each of the four episodes, I have eliminated some interesting aspects because they were irrelevant to the analysis.

As is necessary for anyone writing a historical study of any substantial scope, I have relied mainly on “secondary” sources: I am indebted to hundreds of fine specialists who have educated me about the many special topics involved. A very rewarding by-product of that fact has been the opportunity to acquire and read a substantial library of books and essays by historians, many of them very gracefully written.

Having said these agreeable things about my debts to historians, I must also register some of my disappointments. Foremost, of course, are the many efforts to dismiss the role of religion in producing “good” things such as the rise of science or the end of slavery, and the corresponding efforts to blame religion for practically everything “bad.” Of course, I was prepared for this when I began. What I was not prepared for was how many of the historians I read to write these studies expressed militant

anti-Catholicism, and how few of their peers have taken exception to the litany of contemptuous, anti-Catholic comments, delivered without any trace of self-consciousness. Of course, no reputable, recent historians actually use such self-incriminating words as “papists,” or “Romanism.” Instead, they substitute intellectualized equivalents such as “enemies of reason,” “benighted scholastics,” “fanatical friars,” and adjectives such as “sinister,” “brutal,” “uncomprehending,” “cruel,” “repressed,” and “totalitarian.”

Far more pernicious, however, are the many silences and omissions that distort scholarly comprehension of important matters. Among the many glaring examples to be revealed is that vigorous efforts by sixteenth-century popes to halt slavery were effectively “lost” from the record until the past decade or so, as will be clear in Chapter 4.

But perhaps the most serious harm is done unintentionally by honorable scholars. Although most living historians are probably not prejudiced against Roman Catholics, or at least not more so than against members of any other faith, most hold false views that they do not know to have been the product of the anti-Catholicism of previous generations. For example, aside from a few specialists, most historians still seem to assume that the Spanish Inquisition burned large numbers of heretics, witches, Marrano Jews, and other deviants in public autos-da-fé, and that to have fallen into the hands of the inquisitors was an almost certain sentence of death. All false! As will be seen, especially in Chapter 3, Spanish inquisitors seldom had anyone burned, and the typical sentence they meted out was mild in the extreme: for those convicted of witchcraft, in Spain it was usually sufficient to say they were sorry.

I am not and have never been a Roman Catholic. When I note virtues that many historians have misrepresented or ignored in their writings about Catholicism, I deny acting as an apologist. Indeed, sincere Catholics will find much to be uncomfortable about when reading some of the chapters that follow, and I have written some unpleasant things about Protestants, Jews, Muslims, heretics, skeptics, and pagans too. It is, of course, easy to find fault. Sad to say, in today’s intellectual climate it takes much greater courage to praise. I hope that I measured up.

Finally, because this is a work of social science, not philosophy, I have taken pains neither to imply nor to deny the existence of God. This is a matter beyond the scope of science. Consequently, my personal religious views are of concern only to me.