

## Rethinking 'God'

### The Concept of 'God' as a Category in Comparative Religion

Our argument consists of the following six steps:

1. Comparative religion should not remain isolated from other sciences;
2. To enable interdisciplinary dialogue with other fields of study, scholars in comparative religion should make use of precise scientific concepts;
3. 'God' is not a scientific but an emic concept used intuitively;
4. Behind our intuitions about the concept of 'god' there are implicit Judeo-Christian assumptions;
5. Substituting 'superhuman agent' for 'god' is no solution.
6. Some possible solutions:
  - A) We might use the concept of 'god' only as a loose heuristic or interpretative term and drop it from theoretical language;
  - B) We might also restrict the concept of 'god' only to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and conceptualize other traditions preferring their own emic terms;
  - C) 'God' is made to refer to a very broad category of all kinds of entities somehow violating people's expectations of how entities ordinarily behave, and conceived of as superior to humans.

#### *1. Comparative religion should not remain isolated from other sciences*

There seems to be a dilemma concerning our academic identity: either we have a clear-cut identity based on 'theological' presuppositions concerning the *sui generis* nature (see McCutcheon 1997) of the object of our study; or we may aspire to a more scientifically rigorous approach. In that case, we cannot as clearly identify the object of our study, and therefore the independent scientific identity of our discipline becomes suspect (see Lawson and McCauley 1993b; Wiebe 1999).

Thus, comparative religion has all too often been understood in the scientific community as an odd humanistic enterprise somewhere between theology and real science. This we consider an unhappy

state of affairs. We think that comparative religion should be practised in dialogue with other fields of social science, and that religious phenomena offer a very significant field where various psychological, sociological and cognitive theories may be tested — even if there is no such ‘thing’ or entity as religion as a clearly demarcated object.

*2. To enable interdisciplinary dialogue with other fields of study, scholars in comparative religion should make use of precise scientific concepts*

If we take comparative religion to be a humanistic and social scientific discipline (as we think it should be taken), we have to accept that in describing and explaining religion we must make use of precise scientific concepts. As comparative approach implies concepts that are universally applicable, we should not remain satisfied with mere emic concepts, be they our own emic religious concepts or emic concepts of another culture. Although scientific concepts can, in the last analysis, be shown to rest on folk categories and assumptions without ultimate foundation (Saariluoma 1997: 11–12; see also Millikan and Clark 1996), they, nevertheless, are precise and effective in the context in which they are primarily used. Thus, if we use emic folk categories as starting point, we should at least be able somehow to transform them into analytic, etic categories (Saler 1993: 1).

*3. ‘God’ is not a scientific but an emic concept used intuitively*

Although almost all other central concepts by which scholars in comparative religion operate have by now received careful analyses, the use of the concept of ‘god’ is still guided by nothing but the scholars’ subjective intuitions. Such concepts as ‘tabu’, ‘sacred’, ‘totemism’, etc. have all been lifted from religious contexts and have already been quite carefully problematized and thus made into etic categories for comparative use. Only ‘god’ is still used without any well formed criteria for its operationalisation. This may, perhaps, be because problematizing ‘god’ is considered to belong to philosophy of religion, not to comparative religion which is an empirical science. However, problematizing ‘god’ does not necessarily mean doing normative ontology, but only conceptual clarification. This is what we are calling for.

*4. Behind our intuitions about the concept of ‘god’ there are implicit Judeo-Christian assumptions*

If we do not have any clear idea of what exactly constitutes the category of ‘gods’, we are implicitly guided by the Judeo-Christian and

Islamic traditions<sup>1</sup>. This is largely because our discipline originated in Europe, and various nineteenth-century European debates on religion are still shaping our field. Thus, we may think we are using neutral concepts when we speak of 'African gods', 'American Indian' gods, etc., because we think there is a category of 'gods' in which the Christian God is only one member. We imagine that we can simply forget the Christian connotations of 'god' when we deal with Indian gods, ancient Finnish gods, etc.; and yet the whole *category* of 'gods' is built on Christian presuppositions. Thus, the attributes of the Christian God are silently smuggled into other traditions by naming various kinds of mythological beings as 'gods' (see, e.g. Haavio 1959; Davidson 1986; Sjoestedt 1994.)

As to the Judeo-Christian concept of 'god', we should, first of all, be careful to notice that there is no such entity as 'Christianity' (or 'Buddhism', etc.), only a rather heterogeneous tradition (see Boyer 1987; Pyysiäinen 1993: 15–17) and culture (see Sperber 1990; Sperber 1996) referred to by the words 'Christian(ity)' (see also Boyer 1992: 39–40, 48–49). This tradition may have partly very ancient roots, but its now prevalent official versions are mostly an outcome of the mingling of Greek philosophy and Judaic mythology.

The traditional Christian doctrine of 'god' took its definitive form in the Middle Ages, and is best represented by St. Thomas of Aquinas who follows the traditions of Philo, the Neoplatonists and Pseudo-Dionysius in thinking that we can only know that god exists, not his essence. Therefore his description mostly consists of negations saying what god is not. This gradual eliminaton of predicates finally leads us to distinguish God from all other beings. Yet Thomas emphasizes that denying predicates of God does not mean that he lacks them, but that he exceeds them. God also has such positive predicates as 'good' and 'wise', which, however, only describe him in so far as our intellect can know him, and thus represent him only imperfectly (Copleston 1985/2: 347–362.)

According to Aquinas (1962–63/1: Q III art. 1–8):

1) God does not have a body (*Deum non esse corpus*)

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<sup>1</sup> Benson Saler (1993) is willing to accept Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the most prototypical religions upon which our theorizing about the concept of 'religion' primarily rests. Timothy Fitzgerald (1997: 93), for his part, argues that the concept of 'religion' "picks out nothing distinctive and ... clarifies nothing", merely distorting the field, as it is so intimately tied to the idea that there is "one ultimate reality, God or the Transcendent, and a multiplicity of ways or paths and manifestations of this One."

- 2) God is not a composition of matter (*materiam*) and form (*forma*)
- 3) God is one with his essence (*essentia*) and nature (*natura*)
- 4) God is not only his essence but also his existence
- 5) God does not appear as a species in any genus (*Deus non est in genere sicut species*) or as a cause (*sicut principium*)
- 6) There can be no "accidents" (*accidens*) in god
- 7) God is totally one (*Deum omnino esse simplicem*)
- 8) God cannot be combined with anything

Such theological attributes of god have partly found their way into the Christian folk religion in which God is now understood as great, good, creator, even omnipotent and all-knowing, to be in the heavens, to love us, etc. (see also Barrett and Keil 1996).

### 5. *Substituting 'superhuman agent' for 'god' is no solution*

Expressions such as 'superhuman agent' (Lawson and McCauley 1993a), 'nonnatural entities' (Barrett and Keil 1996), and 'extrahuman entities' (Boyer 1993: 4) are often used to refer to superior beings "that humans religiously engage", or to "points at which humans relate to 'the other'", as William Paden puts it (Paden 1994: 121–122). (Paden, however, also says that the study of gods requires "phenomenological analysis that is not governed by Western, theistic premises.") These concepts are problematic, however.

It has been pointed out long ago, that the concepts of 'nature' and 'natural' are always culturally determined (e.g. Durkheim 1960; see also Pyysiäinen 1996a: 25–51). In the West, the concept of 'nature' has from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards been strongly shaped by the natural sciences. The idea of a lawfully governed natural universe, as opposed to supernatural, has been formed in a long dialogue between science and Christian theology (see Crombie 1959/2). Even in popular Western language, 'supernatural' usually covers everything that is not subject to empirical testing and scientific observation. It is usually agreed in particular that gods do not belong to the category of the empirical.

Now, our idea of 'supernature' is of course tied to our idea of what is natural, and as this depends on our own culture, 'supernature' is also not a universal notion. Plato, as Arthur Lovejoy once observed, is the real 'father of otherworldliness' in the Western tradition. He postulated the existence of a Completely Other supraworldly reality as the necessitating ground of the sensible world (Lovejoy 1964: 39–50), and St. Thomas then finally established the adjective *supernaturale* in theological vocabulary.

Substituting 'superhuman' for 'supernatural' is no solution, unless we mean by it something that transcends what the particular people in question consider human, i.e. humanlike beings with certain counterintuitive properties (see Boyer 1994: 113–123). But, even that is not enough. If we ask "in what sense precisely gods are superhuman?", we also have to ask "in what sense do they differ from *other* superhuman things?" In realizing that there are different senses to the notion of 'superhuman', we may begin to sense some implicit assumptions behind the idea of a superhuman agent as a necessary element in religion (as suggested in Lawson and McCauley 1993a: 61, 82, 89, 112, 124, 165).

Computers, for example, can be said to be superhuman as they far exceed human capacities for calculation. Also many animals are superhuman in that they can perform all kinds of feats we humans can only dream of. Should we, then, categorize computers, tigers, elephants, etc. as peculiar kinds of gods? And if we do not allow this, we must ask ourselves "why not?" We believe that the reason lies in our implicit assumptions. If the superhumanly intelligent computer were also nonmaterial and eternal, perhaps we would not hesitate to call it a god.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the concept of a mere 'superhuman agent' is too vague as a necessary determinant of religion.

However, sometimes the word 'god' really is used in a broad sense, although then the user usually knows that he or she is merely using the Christian concept of 'God' as an analogy. Thus, if, say Bruce Springsteen, is considered superhuman because of his musical greatness, he is referred to as 'god'. Or, when Paul Churchland (1995: 246) writes that if Gödel is right then there must be arithmetic truths that are beyond our "armory of algorithmic procedures, truths that some superior being with an even larger armory might be able to prove where we could not", this no doubt sounds religious to some. The notion of a 'superior being' is clearly analogous to 'god' in a certain sense, and yet there is little reason to say on these grounds that

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<sup>2</sup> Of course many gods at least occasionally appear in animal form, and Justin Barrett and Frank Keil (1996) replaced 'God' by a supercomputer called 'Uncomp' to see how god concepts differ from other nonnatural entities, as they conducted psychological experiments about people's ways of conceptualizing God. (Also Uncomp was anthropomorphized but much less than God.) Should we then broaden the scope of the concept of 'god' to include everything somehow great but not human, or should we somehow differentiate it from some extrahuman beings such as animals and computers?

Churchland is 'religious' (see also McCauley 1996; cf. Pyysiäinen 1996b).

### 6. *Some possible solutions*

We have shown the category of 'gods' to be problematic in comparative religion. What should we then do with the concept of 'god'? We have no definite answer. Among the alternatives are the following:

- 1) We may, of course, use the concept only as a loose heuristic or interpretative term without any ambitions to generalize. We might conclude simply that there are no common features in different religious beliefs concerning various entities and that there exists only some kind of family resemblance in accordance with which we may loosely employ the concept of 'god'. Because of the centrality of the concept of 'god' in comparative religion, this solution would quite largely negate our thesis about the necessity of precise, scientific concepts in comparative religion.
- 2) We may also restrict the use of the concept of 'god' only to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In other traditions we should then likewise only use their various emic terms. This solution, however, implies that we also renounce all attempts to form general explanatory theories about these beliefs. This would multiply our explanatory attempts to an unhelpful degree as every case would require its own theory.
- 3) 'God' is made to refer to a broad category of all kinds of entities somehow violating people's expectations of how entities in everyday world ordinarily behave (and are perhaps somehow 'superior' to humans). We would then be talking about beings that involve what Pascal Boyer (1994: 113–123) has called 'counterintuitive claims'. In this case the category of 'gods' may become so large and so vague that it becomes necessary to employ some additional criteria, like 'sacredness' (cf. Anttonen 1996; Paden 1996 and Paden 1999: 165–180) in order to separate it from all kinds of lesser beings such as ghosts and spirits (see Pyysiäinen 1996b). This, however, would open up the question all over again. In other words, what separates gods from other kinds of superhuman beings? We consider this a rather pressing issue in comparative religion at the moment.

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