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The student of history of religion must wonder why this is such a universal tendency. Any phenomenon that appears everywhere on earth, during every period of history, and in every known religious complex, must have some underlying explanations that are fairly common or general.

The purpose of this study is to try to survey some of the current and past explanations put forward for objectification of religion, and to evaluate the credibility of these views in the estimation of this author.

Methodology

The first question that must be raised is whether generalized themes of the sort envisaged in this paper are really valid, or whether we are simply imposing an artificial framework onto the field of comparative religion. Parrinder complains that,

"A good deal of tinkering has been done at the theory of religion, without coming to grips with the facts of religious experience."

This complaint is no doubt appropriate, especially when one considers the very great number of blunders that

³ Geoffrey Parrinder, Monship in the World's Religions, (Association Press, New York, NY, 1961) p. 16

Objectification Of Religion

Universal Themes

Introduction

Objectification of religion is one of the most interesting tendencies demonstrated by religious man. It is also one of the most universal features of religion. As Morbeck observes,

"Great religions have indeed arisen as ethical or philosophical principles for the guidance of man, but once they have become the province of multitudes...they have met a common fate of objectification; that is, of being cast into concrete form so that they may be actively appreciated by the eyes, ears, or other senses organs rather than remaining only abstract ideas and beliefs."¹

And again,

"Objectification in varying degree and form appears in all known religious complexes of primitive peoples and it has been outstanding in the religions of civilized societies."²

¹ Edward Morbeck, Religion in Primitive Society, (Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, NY, 1961) p. 71 Although this book does, as its title suggests, focus on oral cultures' religions, it also contains extensive sections on other religions as well.

² Edward Morbeck, Religion in Primitive Society, p. 71

unbridled speculation has produced.⁴ He also explains another problem,

(the religious) "...state is externalized in rites which we can observe, but their meaning depends finally on an awareness of God and that men are dependent on him and must be resigned to his will. At this point the theologian takes over from the anthropologist."⁵

Authorities today seem to increasingly agree that a deeper understanding is required of the cultures, economies, languages, and histories of each religious group before trying to compare them, and reach generalized conclusions, if, indeed, we can even then reach such conclusions.

On the other hand, we must agree with Norbeck when he observes that,

"...very few comparative studies of primitive religion of any sizable compass have been attempted in America during the past two decades, and none has been attempted in England, where a common view seems to be that we must understand every detail of the social and cultural context of each religion from the native viewpoint before any kind of comparison is attempted... something which seems hardly attainable..."

⁴ Parrinder documents some of these errors, including the famous error made by Darwin in *Teirra del Fuego* in 1883. He asserted that the natives there were at a pre-religious state, and this was widely believed for decades, but later proved false. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Worship in the World's Religions*, p. 20

⁵ Parrinder, Geoffrey. *Worship in the World's Religions*, p. 19. Of course, the present author is a theologian. In addition, Parrinder himself does not shrink back from discerning patterns that run across all religions.

⁶ Norbeck, Edward. *Religion in Primitive Society*, p. 267, 268

Norbeck's point is that if we insist on taking every religious system as a separate entity even to the extent that it cannot be compared to others (because the social context is different) we wind up in a shoeless ocean of unintelligible detail. Unless it is possible to draw some general conclusions, there would seem to be no basis for a study of comparative religion at all! Carodny and Carmody agree with this when they say,

"...we believe that the empiricism that misses such unity (between religious concepts) and mystery is at least an unwitting reductionism-- an insistence that humanity is no more than as it behaves. Usually, that insistence indigates an impoverished imagination..."

Certainly, if care is taken to qualify any conclusions reached, and to ascertain that they are truly representative, it is legitimate to seek for more or less universal themes underlying universal practices.

This is especially true when we see some practices that are far too widespread and similar to be coincidental. Whether we look into the nature of man, or into the nature of man's environment, (or both), there must be some connecting factors that explain these patterns of similarity.

As stated earlier, one pattern that is extremely similar throughout the world and throughout history, is objectification of religion. Since the subject of

⁷ Carodny Denise L. and Carmody, John T., *Mya-Ta The Centax* Second Edition, (Wadsworth Publishing Co. Belmont CA. 1964) p.

objectification of religion is too broad to treat completely in a paper such as this, we will be majoring on the aspect of objectification known as Sacred Space.⁸ It is hoped that the notion of sacred space will shed light on the process of objectification as a whole.

Sacred space refers to the universal tendency of religious man to identify space that is sacred, and to carefully delimit that space from profane space. This space, once marked off, usually also plays a key role in the ongoing worship and religious practice of the faithful in that system.

This tendency is expressed in a tremendous variety of ways in different religious systems, but is always recognisable as the same basic practice, even when the type, size, or purpose of the space differs.

It would seem that the notion of sacred space, which is a key component in objectification of all religions, is a good departure point for a study of this type. It is universal, it is crucial to the process of objectification, and there is no obvious external reason for it. In other words, the reasons for identifying and reverencing sacred space must exist within man himself, unless there are elements in man's environment that determine sacred space, but which are not immediately apparent.

⁸ Without, however, ignoring other areas entirely.

Unresponsiveness to the Abstract

It is sometimes suggested by scholars that the reason objectification is universal is to be found in the inability of most people to respond to abstract truths without a way to relate those truths to their senses. This seems to be Norbeck's view when he says,

"Many, and perhaps most, human beings respond poorly to words or ideas alone..."⁹
 Davies says,

"...it is as though abstract ideas need to be set within a symbol before men can be impelled to act upon them. When any attempt is made to turn symbols into bare statements of truth, this vital trigger of the emotions can easily be lost."¹⁰

Norbeck points out that ritual and the designation of sacred space enable the simple layman to "participate" in a way that is meaningful to him.¹¹

The remarkable thing about these observations is that some of the greatest religions began with very little

⁹ Edward Norbeck, Religion in Primitive Society, p. 72. Norbeck also adds, "It is doubtful that any body of philosophical or ethical principles could survive unless it involved...unity among its members brought about by joint acts, in short, a church-like organization and ritual of some kind in which adherents participate." p. 71

¹⁰ Douglas Davies, "Myths and Symbols", in Sardman's Handbook to World Religions, (Grand Rapids, MI: William Borden Publishing Company, 1962,) p. 36.

¹¹ Edward Norbeck, Religion in Primitive Society, "Whether himself a performer of the ritual or an onlooker, the individual may participate by seeing and hearing and through the vicarious experiences evoked." p. 73

objectification, but seem to have invariably developed it later.¹² If people have so much trouble relating to abstraction, why did these religious systems ever take root in the first place?

Sometimes objectification has even been against the teachings of the founder of a religion, but nevertheless present in later practice. Morbeck points out that sometimes the great religions themselves have had strict rules against certain forms of objectification, "but the concrete has usually had a luxuriant growth along other avenues." For example, Muslims were not allowed to venerate pictures of Muhammad, but they quickly learned to venerate a piece of paper with his name written on it.¹³

Thus, even when the founder of a religious system has decreed rules to prevent common forms of objectification, worshippers have found ways around those rules.

Christianity contains examples of this as well.

Christ's declaration that people should worship God

"...neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem...but in Spirit and truth..." was largely ignored in favor of older

¹² Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, and Confucianism are examples of religious traditions that began with few or no external forms.

¹³ Edward Morbeck, *Religion in Primitive Society*, p. 72 The paper is often placed on an altar and petitions are addressed in that direction. Of course, Islam has no problem with sacred space, or with sacred time.

idea of "sanctuary" and "the house of God" (that is to say, sacred space).¹⁴

Wallace explains this tendency in religious man this way,

"An organism overwhelmed by information overload is incapable of discriminating response; ritual, by reducing the information content of experience below the often bewildering level of complexity and disorder with which reality confronts him, permits adaptive response."¹⁵

All of these authors agree that the common man is not capable of handling pure abstraction well. Instead, they see religious man bypassing the "understanding" stage, and going directly (through vehicles of objectification) to a simpler relationship with the sacred.

¹⁴ John 4:21-24. All quotations from *The New American Standard Bible*, (Lockman Foundation, 1963) It is also noticeable from a historical point of view as Morbeck points out, "Early Christianity involved no objectification by means of paintings and statuary..." Yet this was changed radically before long. Edward Morbeck, *Religion in Primitive Society*, p. 72

¹⁵ Anthony F. C. Wallis, "Rituals: Sacred and Profane--An Anthropological Approach", from *Religion: An Anthropological View*, (Random House, Inc. 1966) reprinted in *Ways of Being Religious: Readings for a New Approach to Religion*, Allen, Jay T., Lloyd, Charles L. Jr., Strong, Frederick J. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 157.

Sacred Space as a Vehicle for Hierophany

Stimulation

Mircea Eliade has developed some very stimulating theories regarding sacred space in his book, Patterns in Comparative Religion. First, he points out that man has always set apart areas as sacred.

"The enclosure, wall, or circle of stones surrounding a sacred place- these are among the most ancient of known forms of man-made sanctuary. They existed as early as the early Indus civilization (at Mohenjo-Daro, for instance) and the Aegean civilization."¹⁶

It is Eliade's observation that these sacred areas relate to some hierophany¹⁷ that occurred there once. This is a plausible claim which can be demonstrated in the case of many, but not all, holy places.

Eliade goes beyond this however, to assert the intriguing idea that,

"The hierophany therefore does not merely sanctify a given segment of undifferentiated profane space; it goes so far as to ensure that

¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion. (The World Publishing Co., Cleveland OH, 1958) p. 370

¹⁷ A "Hierophany" is a manifestation of, or an encounter with, the sacred. He also notes that many religious systems consider their sacred space(s) to be the center of the world. This is true for some, but relatively few sacred spaces. Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion. p. 371 ff.

sacredness will continue there. There, in that place, the hierophany repeats itself.¹⁸

Here we begin to sense the presence of something else. Not simply the inability of simple people to understand or hold dear abstract truths, but an attempt to stimulate an event that is not available elsewhere. In other words, the holy place is not there simply to explain (or objectify) abstract concepts, but to enable the worshiper to pray (or invoke) a spiritual event or blessing that is not available even one foot outside of the sacred space!

This seems to square with many western religious sacred space designations. The cathedral, church, mosque, etc. is not necessarily the scene of a historical hierophany, but it is more likely to provide one now. Therefore it would be a good idea, in the minds of many, to go down to the church to pray or worship, rather than to simply do so at home.

Thus with the notion of sacred space, we may have an attempt to regularize and perhaps to control hierophany.

Turner agrees that objectification through sacred space gives man control of sacred experience, and adds that the same is true of sacred times,

"Similarly periodic rituals re-enact and so renew the actions of the gods."¹⁹

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion. p. 366

¹⁹ Merold Turner, "Holy Places, Sacred Calendars", in Barthman's Handbook in World Religions, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982,) p. 26

Here then, sacred time designations also serve the same function. This idea is supplemented, according to Eliade, by the further notion of protection from the sacred.

"(the dividing structure between sacred and profane space)...also serves the purpose of preserving profane man from the danger to which he would expose himself by entering it without due care. The sacred is always dangerous to anyone who comes into contact with it unprepared, without having gone through the "gestures of approach" that every religious act demands.

Therefore there is both a positive and a negative element present in the practice of designating space as sacred. On the positive side, an increased likelihood of a divine response to the worshiper. On the negative side, a clear boundary between the safety of the profane, and the danger of the sacred. There is containment of the sacred here, along with limitation and control. To view it differently, sacred space not only enables us to approach the deity more easily, it also enables us to leave his presence afterward.

This could be considered a functional explanation for sacred space, as opposed to the didactic explanation favored, to some extent, by Morbeck and Davies. Here it seems that Eliade has the better (or fuller) explanation. The ideas of containment and control in turn lead to connections with other concepts often excluded from the idea of religion—namely, magic and fetishism.

²⁰ Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, p. 370

MAGICAL ELEMENTS IN OBJECTIFICATION

In 1940, Frazer made the statement,

"...This universal faith, this truly Catholic creed, is a belief in the efficacy of magic. While religious systems differ not only in different countries, but in the same country in different ages, the system of sympathetic magic remains everywhere and at all times substantially alike in its principles and practices."

Although most scholars would probably still agree with Frazer on this point, today many feel that he was wrong in his attempt to differentiate between magic and objectified religion.

In a book that is still useful, though written in 1921, Haddon brought to light many of the key elements found in magic and fetishism the world over. In it we find the following interesting observation:

"There arises in the region of human thought a powerful impulse to objectify, and even personify, the mysterious or 'supernatural' something felt; and in the region of will, a corresponding impulse to render it innocuous, or better still, propitious, by force of constraint, communion, or conciliation."

Yet, this statement, so similar to several made by Morbeck and Eliade, is not referring to formalized religion, but to fetishism! Indeed, in this case, the localization of

²¹ Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough, (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1940) p. 56.

²² Alfred C. Haddon, Magic and Fetishism, (Constable & Company Ltd. Leicester Square, W.C. 1921) p. 92

the deity is in terms of an object rather than a temple or shrine. Yet, we are still dealing with sacred space.

To those reluctant to understand a fetish or a spirit trap as sacred space, we pose the question, "Why should we draw a dividing line between an object twenty inches across, and a shrine 200 inches across?" Is not the difference here one of amount rather than one of substance?

In another passage, Haddon defines a fetish.

"A fetish is credited with mysterious powers owing to its being the habitation, temporary or permanent, of a spiritual being."²³

There is a great similarity between the way oral cultures view a fetish, and the way many literate peoples view a temple or a shrine. What meaningful distinction can, or should be made between the sacred space recognized in fetishism, and that recognized in objectified religion? The "house of god" motif so well known in western religion seems almost identical to these notions of sacred space. Further still, Eliade points out that,

"...the rocks, springs, caves and woods venerated from the earliest historic times are still, in different forms, held as sacred by Christian communities today."

²³ Alfred C. Haddon, Magic and Fetishism, p. 77 He also says, "Animism sees all things animated by spirits; fetishism sees a spirit incorporated in an individual object." p. 77 "The material objects which form the tutelary deities of Bushun of the natives of the Gold Coast are not symbols of gods which usually reside elsewhere; each is the actual receptacle or ordinary abiding-place of an indwelling god." p. 78 He explains that these containers are prayed to, sacrificed to, and venerated like any other deity.

²⁴ Eliade, Mircea. Patterns in Comparative Religion.

It is likely that some western thinkers are reluctant to admit the presence of an outlook for so long considered "primitive" in the heart of western culture. In a book containing much useful insight, although largely considered outdated in its basic interpretation today, Frazer says,

"...an Age of Religion has thus everywhere, as I venture to ~~submit~~, been preceded by an Age of Magic..."²⁵

However, Frazer seems to be speaking more from cultural bias than from provable evidence. Parinder denounces Frazer's view:

"Sir James Frazer called magic a primitive science and said that it came at the early stages, before religion. There is no evidence for the latter assumption. Religious and magical beliefs are intertwined at most stages of culture, and indeed a case be made out for banning the word magic and including it all, however crude, under the heading of religion)

²⁵ Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough. (New York, NY.: Macmillan Company, 1940) p. 56

for these strange practices all depend upon spiritual conceptions and largely work by faith.²⁶

It may be argued at this point that the theology of some religions have no explicit understanding that the deity(s) indwell a holy place. However, there is still ample similarity with so-called more primitive magical outlooks, because even fetishism sometimes views the object as "merely the vehicle or means by which the spirit communicates with his worshippers."²⁷

26 Geoffrey Parrinder, *Worship in the World's Religions*, p. 27 I would have to side with Parrinder here against Frazer. The argument referred to runs thus, "But if in the most backward state of human society now known to us we find magic thus conspicuously present and religion conspicuously absent, may we not reasonably conjecture that the civilized races of the world have also at some period of their history passed through a similar intellectual phase, that they attempted to force the great powers of nature to do their pleasure before they thought of courting their favor by offerings and prayer--in short that, just as on the material side of human culture there has everywhere been an Age of Stone, so on the intellectual side there has everywhere been an Age of Magic?" Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1940) p. 55

This argument, cited here in full because it is typical of the attitude of many scholars, is based on conjecture and misinformation. There is never an absence of religion in "primitive" societies, nor is there an absence of magic in the so-called "civilized races of the world", as I hope this paper shows.

27 Alfred C. Maddon, *Magic and Fetishism*, p. 79 This description fits most priestly mystical practices in well developed objectified religion. Maddon further states, "...the conception of the fetish as the vehicle of communication between spirit and worshiper raises fetishism to a higher plane in religious evolution..." p. 80 And again, "...(fetishism) includes conceptions which persist into higher forms of religion, such as the worship of the symbol of an unseen power." p. 92 Here we see an example of language that is somewhat outdated, although the content of the statement is true.

Thus even in those theologies where there is not a concept of the deity(s) literally dwelling within the sacred space, there is still the idea that the space is a "vehicle of communication".²⁸ We find then that notions which have been common to pre-literate cultures the world over are very similar, if not identical to some of the forces present in the process of objectification of religion.

It is observations such as these that lead scholars like Morbeck to comment,

"Sacred objects of the great civilizations differ not at all in their general nature from those of primitive societies. Protective talismans, many uses of the cross, holy water, and the sacrament may all be objectively viewed as implying power which, although interpreted as bestowed or derived from a man-like deity, become the qualities of the acts or objects themselves."²⁹

28 Harold Turner, "Holy Places, Sacred Calendars", in *Kardman's Handbook to World Religions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982.) Turner is typical of many when he says, "Since divine power is more accessible at sanctuaries, these become places of pilgrimage." Here is the "vehicle" notion to be sure. However, he then feels it necessary to add, "The synagogues, churches and mosques of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, however, should be seen as meeting-places for the worshippers, not as sacred dwelling-places for God." p. 20 This distinction seems unwarranted. Why is it necessary to remove one's shoes before entering a mosque? Why are children not permitted to run in the "sanctuary"? Why may we smoke in the parking lot, but not in the sanctuary? What does the term Sanctuary mean?

Carmody and Carmody have a more accurate view when they say, "A mosque, a synagogue, and a church all show likeness of a Hindu or a Buddhist temple. All five enclose sacred space." Denise L. Carmody and John T. Carmody, *Mystic In The Center* Second Edition, p. 352

29 Edward Morbeck, *Religion in Primitive Society*, p. 82

One might wonder why, if these notions are so similar, is there a general correlation between chronology and the development of formalized structures such as those we are familiar with in the modern west? Where are the temples of the non-literate peoples today?

In answer to this question Parrinder says,

"Building in stone is unknown to most illiterate peoples, either through lack of soft stone in their territory or more commonly because the necessary techniques are absent. Hence there are no great temples, monuments of the past, such as we find everywhere among the literary religions."³²

Although there are temples to be found in pre-literate societies, they do not play the prominent role that they do in literate societies. Yet this may only be a reflection of a difference in technology, not a difference in the basic way of thinking about the divine.

Having broached the subject of temples, it is interesting to note here yet another clear connection between magic and objectification of religion. Many, and perhaps most of the great cathedrals, temples, mosques, pagodas, and other shrines the world over, are actually built around a part of a human body. Whether it is some hair, bones, breast milk, teeth or whole body of a saint, the shrine receives its identity and, we must suppose, some

³² Geoffrey Parrinder, Morship in the World's Religions, p. 78 He acknowledges that there are some temples among non-literate peoples, but points out that they are small, and often not built of lasting material.

Here Norbeck truly points out that objects and actions are invested with spiritual qualities in the major religions today in precisely the same way that the so-called primitive fetishist or magician does.

Perhaps this then is a workable framework within which to understand objectification of religion; not a further development of the major religions, but a return to a way of thinking and believing that is as old as man himself. ³⁰

Maddon states it bluntly, and agrees that,

"...it is difficult to point out where fetishism ends and nature-worship, ancestor-worship, totemism, polytheism, and idolatry begin, or to distinguish between a fetish, an idol, and a deity."³¹

Here are scholars reaching the same conclusion that has already been suggested-- that objectified religion and magic are very difficult to differentiate.

³⁰ This is the interpretation favored by Wallis for many objectified aspects of religion. For instance "...the simple ritual act of crossing oneself, in Catholic custom, by touching the fingers to the forehead and chest in four, must be understood as a statement of intent to secure divine power as a protection against danger, spiritual or physical. The "sign of the cross", the extremities of which are indicated by the points touched, invokes the whole story of Christ and its complex meanings; the accompanying litany-- "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen"--...constitutes both a prayer and a primitive magical conception of power inherent in naming; Thus, this simple act may be a statement ...of beliefs based both on ancient Christian mythology and even more ancient conceptions of magic." Anthony P. C. Wallis, "Rituals: Sacred and Profane-- An Anthropological Approach", in Way of Being: Religious Readings for A Man Approach to Religion, p. 156

³¹ Maddon, Alfred C. Magic and Fetishism, p. 94