Reconceiving Religion in Polarizing Debates

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The Changing Face of the Study of Religion

Rethinking religion is very much in the air these days. The impulse to do so arises out of many different places. Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, published in 2007, caused considerable discussion about religion’s role in secular societies—both how religion set off impulses of reform that led to secular outlooks and where it is located today. More recently, Robert Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution* takes us back to the very origins of religion in human life and traces it up to the so-called “axial age,” when the great religious traditions were emerging in the last five hundred years before the beginning of the Common Era.

Alongside these two works—the former by a philosopher and the latter by a sociologist—a great deal is going on in a wide range of disciplines. Cultural psychology (in its late-twentieth century form) has been exploring how culture shapes moral frameworks. Richard Shweder has been the leading figure in this regard. Cognitive psychology, which explores regions of the brain, has been probing the varieties of religious experiences and traditional understandings of the soul. It has even spawned its own branch of theology called “neurotheology.” The journal *Zygon* is a good source for following these developments.

Perhaps the most intriguing work is happening in evolutionary biology, where scientists are speculating about the origins of religion. David Sloan Wilson’s *Darwin’s Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* marked an important turning point. In it, Wilson presents the results of work on the evolution of genes that challenges the “selfish gene” theory put forward in the 1970s by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins posited that genes that endure through time are able to do so because human beings look to situations that favor those genes in order to ensure survival. Wilson, on the other hand, suggests that there are “cooperative genes” that ensure survival through cultivation of cooperation and mutual trust. This has stirred a great deal of interest in how religion is involved in the shaping of a moral community. From an empirical standpoint, sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell report in their *American Grace: How Religion Unites Us and Divides Us* that religious people are more likely to volunteer, join secular causes, and give more to charity.

What is remarkable in this work is its significant departure from the more negative approach to religion that marked Western thought since early in the nineteenth century. There are still efforts to reduce religion to impulses that modern society has since outgrown or a pathology that needs to be eradicated. One thinks here of the so-called “New Atheists,” such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris; they have gained a lot of publicity, but a significant number of scientists are skeptical of the claims they make for science. Rather, what one sees is a critical yet appreciative approach to the study of the origins and functioning of religion in human society. A good number of those studying religion in this way make mention that they are agnostics or atheists. Nonetheless, they recognize that religion can be used for good and for ill in human life. This more nuanced approach is yielding understandings of religion that theologians and ministers need to take more into account. This goes beyond the reductive approaches to religion that had been shaped by positivist thinking for nearly two centuries.

Addressing Polarization

A good deal of the research into religion by cultural psychologists, cognitive psychologists, and evolutionary biologists comes together in the work of Jonathan Haidt, who teaches at the University of Virginia. He calls himself a “moral psychologist.” Moral psychology, as he presents it, studies how people make decisions and how intuition and expressed values come together in moral frameworks. In his most recent book, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion, he presents his theory of how people come to decisions and why people find it difficult to understand points of view different from their own. He brings together a broad knowledge of the fields of research just mentioned (he also worked with Richard Schweder for two years and credits Shweder with having shaped fundamentally his own perspective) and quantitative research into populations’ ideas, values, and views. He notes that he was brought up in a Jewish family but is now an atheist—although an atheist appreciative of religion and religious people.

What has emerged from Haidt’s work is an intriguing theory that can contribute to our understanding of polarization in society and in the Church and help us think about how to bring contending viewpoints together. This theory proposes that there are five sets of values that underlie our decisions about morality. He has developed these out of his empirical research, largely using surveys on US populations (although he appears to have done some testing of his theory in India as well). What creates difference and division is how each of these sets of values are understood and how much weight is given to each of them in making decisions or developing a view point.

Out of his research, he identifies three viewpoints—liberals, conservatives, and libertarians—that coalesce around the interpretation and importance of these sets of values. He says that he began this work as a liberal but is now much more sympathetic to the values (and their opposites) that shape conservative thinking. These are the five sets of values and how liberals and conservatives view them (space does not allow for including the libertarians here):

*Care versus Harm.* Care was important for the growth of human society, beginning with maternal care and continuing in care for kin. Liberals tend to view care in universalist and abstract terms—we should care for people we do not even know. Conservatives tend to focus care on specific groups to which they are related.

*Fairness versus Cheating.* Liberals prize fairness as social justice and struggle against oppression for all peoples. Equality is important, understood as equality of outcomes. Conservatives view fairness through proportionality: what one puts into efforts should be reflected in what one receives in return. Equality here means equality of access. Outcomes are proportional to what one has put in as effort.

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Loyalty versus Betrayal. For liberals, universal loyalties are possible and desirable. Betrayal likewise can be felt for people and causes distant from us. For conservatives, loyalty is addressed to specific groups with whom we are in relation. These relations are sometimes shaped especially by self-interest.

Authority versus Subversion. Liberals are likely to be suspicious and critical of authority, and they are more likely to try to subvert it. Conservatives are more respectful of authority and see hierarchy as a way of binding society together and defining mutual responsibilities.

Sanctity versus Degradation. This deals with what a group holds as beyond question and what evokes disgust when it is violated. Liberals see things that threaten autonomy as degradations. Conservatives feel certain structures and institutions are necessary for sustaining a moral society and are beyond question.

These summary descriptions do not do justice to the nuances of Haidt’s presentation. But they give some general idea of what he is moving toward. He says that his research shows that these five sets of values are operative for both liberals and conservatives, albeit interpreted differently. And they carry different weight. For liberals, he says, the first two sets (care and fairness) are paramount. The final three (loyalty, authority, and sanctity) are considerably less important. For conservatives, care and fairness are important as well (although conservatives come out slightly lower on the care scale), but so are the other three. And they are all held as having equal weight.

This difference shapes the moral universe each group inhabits. For liberals, care for distant others, autonomy, and justice are of prime importance. The objective is a moral universe where each is able to have full autonomy. For conservatives, care and fairness are important, but there is a greater concern for the structures and institutions that define a moral society, or what Haidt calls the “moral exoskeleton” of society. Decisions are aimed at sustaining those structures. Liberals tend to have a more optimistic view of human beings: if each human being can be autonomous, society will be at its best. Conservatives are more cautious about human liberty and feel structures must be in place to guide it—and discipline it, if need be.

It does not take much effort to see how even this sketchy presentation of Haidt’s work plays out in the polarizations in society and in the Church. Liberals, he avers, work out of a more universalistic yet paradoxically narrow base. Conservatives bring a broader set of values into play yet can narrow the outcomes. Haidt gives theology—especially fundamental theology or discussions of theology and culture—a great deal to think about.