

Christian Language And Its Mutations: Essays In Sociological Understanding

Current Anthropology Volume 53, Number 4, August 2012

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A Hyperreal God and Modern Belief Toward an Anthropological Theory of Mind

by T. M. Luhrmann

This article argues that there is an epistemological style associated with much American evangelical Christianity that is strikingly different from that found in never-secular Christianities. This epistemological style is characterized by a playful, self-consciously paradoxical framing of belief-claims in which God's reality is both clearly affirmed and qualified. One can describe this style as using an "epistemological double register" in which God is described as very real—and as doubted, in some way. The representation of God generated by this complex style is a magically real or hyper-real God, both more real than everyday reality and in some way fictive. The article goes on to argue that these epistemological features can be understood as generated by and generative of particular theories of mind. The article argues for the development of an anthropological theory of mind in which at least four dimensions are important: boundedness, interiority, sensorium, and epistemic stance.

In a famous series of papers, the anthropologist Robin Horton contrasted African traditional thought with Western science. His first goal was to rescue African religious thought from the charge of irrational confusion and incoherence that generations of interpreters, some of them anthropologists, had laid at its door. They are brilliant, audacious papers, laying out side by side with *ex nihilo grandeur* what Horton took to be the basic principles of African traditional thought and Western secular scientific philosophy. He pointed out that neither the African accounts of gods, ancestors, and spirits nor the Western scientific accounts of atoms and electrons are commonsense models of the world.

"Take the exasperated, wondering puzzlement of Lévy-Bruhl over his 'primitive mentality'. How could primitives believe that a visible, tangible object was at once its solid self and the manifestation of an immaterial being? How could a man literally see a spirit in a stone? ... Yet these questions of Lévy-Bruhl's have a very familiar ring in the context of western philosophy. Indeed, if we substitute atoms and molecules for gods and spirits, these turn out to be the very questions ... posed by modern scientific theory in the minds of Berkeley, Locke, Quine and a whole host of European philosophers from Newton's time onwards. (Horton 1967:52)

Both African gods and Western atoms, he argued, are explanatory theory, and they function to articulate unity beneath apparent diversity, simplicity beneath apparent complexity, and order and regularity beneath disorder and anomaly. An-

thropologists, he argued, had not noticed how the gods worked as theory for Africans because they had no more understanding of basic chemistry than a cat.

Horton was not saying that traditional African religious thought was a kind of science. He was saying that it was a theory and that the correct question to ask about such seemingly strange ideas as water spirits was not whether they were sensible in the abstract but how and why they were used. As theories, he argued, they come into play when common sense fails us and they work—as above—to unify, order, and structure our chaotic world. Of course, the religious thinking of traditional Africa and the theoretical thinking of the modern West, including science, were different, but their difference, he argued, could best be captured by what he called the "open" and "closed" predicaments, a simplification of Karl Popper's account of the social conditions necessary for the emergence of science. "What I take to be the key difference is a very simple one. It is that in traditional culture there is no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical tenets; whereas in scientifically oriented cultures, such an awareness is highly developed" (Horton 1967:155).

And he sketched out the consequences that followed from such awareness of alternative explanations and such tolerance for ditching a less adequate explanation for one more compelling: a nonmagical attitude toward words, the abstract systematization of ideas, reflective thinking, a clarification or streamlining of explanatory motives.

The contrast left to one side the nature of Western religion. If Horton had considered it, he probably would have identified liberal Protestantism—perhaps Unitarianism—as the natural outcome of faith in a scientific society. He would have

1. He develops the contrast in his collected essays (Horton 1993).

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