

Religion as Anthropomorphism: A New Theory that Invites Definitional and Epistemic Scrutiny

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This essay will focus briefly on (1) a definitional and (2) an epistemic analysis of Stewart Guthrie's cultural-anthropological theory of anthropomorphism in his book *Faces in the Clouds*. In Part I of the essay, I will examine specific definitional claims about religion that Guthrie advances in chapter 1 ('The Need for a Theory') and chapter 3 ('The Origin of Anthropomorphism'). In Part II, crucial statements in chapter 6 ('Anthropomorphism in Philosophy and Science') and chapter 7 ('Religion as Anthropomorphism') raise questions about Guthrie's epistemic assumptions that in philosophy and science the objects referred to as anthropomorphic have critically been known to be errors and have been wisely set aside in the margins of those enterprises, whereas the objects referred to as anthropomorphic in religion have always been at the centre of religion. Guthrie employs five theoretical criteria (of observability, simplicity, generality, fallibility, and probability) to explain why religion always anthropomorphizes. The essay concludes with a formal question about the epistemic status of Guthrie's observability and universality criteria.

Definitional Claims

After stating in the introduction of his *Faces in the Clouds* (1993, hereafter *FIC*, pp. 3–7) that religion should be understood as systematic anthropomorphism; that we anthropomorphize because guessing in Pascal-like fashion is a good bet; and that anthropomorphism is familiar, pervasive and powerful, Stewart Guthrie turns his attention, in the first chapter, to the definitional problem in religion as a way of drawing sharp attention to the need for a theory of religion. He claims that 'writers have speculated on the nature and origins of religion for well over two thousand years but have not produced so much as a widely accepted definition. Instead, there are nearly as many definitions as writers. Religion is difficult to define because definitions imply theories, and no good general theory of religion exists' (*FIC*, p. 8).

If no good general theory exists and that is precisely why religion is difficult to define, then two logical implications seem to follow.¹ Guthrie assumes, first, that all definitions imply theories and, second, that when there are no theories of religion, there will obviously be no definitions. But it is crucial to ask about the first claim in order to question the second. Do all definitions imply theories? The logician I. M. Copi argues otherwise in stating that only one of the five standard kinds of definitions—namely, a theoretical definition—is 'tantamount to proposing the acceptance of a theory, and, as the name implies, theories are notoriously debatable. Here one definition is replaced by another as our knowledge and theoretical understanding increase' (Copi 1968, p. 101). The other four, often referred to as stipulative, lexical, precisising, and persuasive definitions, do not linguistically and semantically imply theories. Only a theoretical definition of religion (the *definiendum*) would imply a theory of religion (the *definiens*).

Given the Copi clarification, Guthrie's argument that definitions imply theories would be strengthened if, and only if, he were willing to modify his original claim and state that only theoretical definitions of religion imply theories of religion. Such a modification would also help to explain why Guthrie would be entitled to ignore (as he does) a variety of stipulative, lexical, precisising, and persuasive definitions of

religion that have been employed in the discipline of religion (Penner and Yonan 1972, pp. 110–17).

If Guthrie were willing to grant linguistic and semantic status to theoretical definitions advanced by believers and non-believers alike, he would be in a better position to understand, explain, and criticize the theories of religion advanced by both, especially in relation to the problem of anthropomorphism. Believers and non-believers have formulated theories that provide internal interpretations and external explanations that, as Robert Segal rightly argues, account for religion in terms of meanings and causes (Segal 1992, pp. 77–8). Whether or not definitions are theoretical would depend on whether they were introduced, as Fred Suppe puts it, ‘in the initial formulation of a theory, theoretical terms are introduced definitionally; for example, in the initial formulation of thermodynamics entropy was introduced definitionally’ (Suppe 1977, p. 205).

In the light of our need to be clear about the status of theoretical definitions, one can ask Guthrie whether the theories he describes that have been developed by believers (such as Schleiermacher, Otto, Eliade, and Tillich) and non-believers (represented by Hume, Feuerbach, Freud, Malinowski, Durkheim, Tylor, Horton, Geertz, and Bellah) really constitute two quite different sets. If so, how can these two theoretical sets imply the same definitional claims that warrant Guthrie’s assertion that religion is nothing but anthropomorphism (*FIC*, pp. 8–38, 62–90)? Are the different theories advanced by believers compared to non-believers reducible to the common definition that religion always anthropomorphizes (*FIC*, pp. 177–204)?

Epistemic Scrutiny

In chapters 6 and 7 of *Faces in the Clouds*, several important warrants need to be scrutinized in order to ask what philosophical justifications are foundationally required to support Guthrie’s epistemic assumption that in philosophy and science the objects referred to as anthropomorphic have been recognized to be unalloyed errors and have been wisely set aside in the margins of those enterprises, whereas the objects referred to as anthropomorphic in religion have always been at the centre of religion (*FIC*, pp. 152–204). The epistemic difference that Guthrie assumes here is developed into a theoretical and definitional claim: religion is anthropomorphism because it persists in perceiving the non-human world in terms of human-like models (*FIC*, pp. 200–4).

Guthrie states the epistemic matter directly in terms of two standard explanations of anthropomorphism: familiarity and comfort (*FIC*, pp. 73–90). Although ‘our conceptions both of the human and of the non-human world are constantly subject to revision’, nevertheless ‘anthropomorphism offers the greatest intellectual coherence possible’, and ‘the search for comprehension that underlies it comprises the same processes—of economizing, generalizing, ordering, and system-building—as does the rest of thought’ (*FIC*, pp. 88–90). Anthropomorphism, like other model-like categories of the mind, results not so much from a desire to find those that, given some context, matter most.² In Guthrie’s words, ‘scanning the world with human-like models, we frequently suppose we find what we are looking for where in fact it does not exist’ (*FIC*, p. 90).

It is precisely these Kant-like epistemic antinomies between the known anthropomorphic models of the mind and the never-fully-known empirical objects that ‘people in many fields—literary critics, journalists, philosophers, scientists, and others—call attention to. As anthropomorphism is chased from one realm it springs up in another.

Unmasking instances of anthropomorphism is like stamping patches of a bigger fire because anthropomorphism stems from an effort broader than itself' (*FIC*, p. 92).

As pervasive for Guthrie as anthropomorphism is, it culminates in religion. If all domains of culture share a common (more than family-resemblance) feature of ostensible communication with human-like beings through some form of symbolic action, 'religion always anthropomorphizes in more generalized, systematized, and integrated ways' (*FIC*, p. 200). 'Religion not only anthropomorphizes (as everyone admits) but is anthropomorphism' (*FIC*, p. 200).

Guthrie's definitional claim is embedded in his theory which 'should correspond to observation, should be simple, and should be general' (*FIC*, p. 201). These theoretical criteria of (1) observability, (2) simplicity, and (3) generality justify his definitional claim that religion is what religion does: religion is anthropomorphism because anthropomorphizing is the only thing all religions share. If anthropomorphizing rests on a persistent and knowable mistake, then (4) error should be added to Guthrie's theoretical criteria. A Pascal-like bet should also be added as (5) a probability criterion to Guthrie's other four because it provides an explanatory and argumentative strategy for claiming that 'If we are mistaken about anthropomorphism, we lose little, while if we are right, we gain much' (*FIC*, p. 6).

Are there areas of religion that are non-anthropomorphic? If so, criteria (1) and (3) would be open to serious criticism. If not, Guthrie wins his formal bet in claiming that religion is nothing but anthropomorphism. He advances a good guess that anthropomorphism is always familiar, pervasive, powerful, spontaneous, and even compellingly evident because it generates models of the nonhuman world in humanlike terms. In any case *Faces in the Clouds* is so rich and comprehensive in detail and argument that it will surely inspire considerable debate in several disciplines for many years to come.

Notes

1 While I agree with Guthrie that defining religion has been a challenging and longstanding problem and that no one definition of religion has been widely accepted, I disagree with his definitional assumption that religion is unique in not having a single definition that meets the various tests of uniform agreement. See *Religion Defined and Explained* on describing and classifying specific definitions and theories of religion (Clarke and Byrne 1993). For example, is it the case that all philosophers agree on a single definition of philosophy? *The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis* presents contemporary disagreement and very little widespread consensus (Cohen and Dascal 1989). Similarly, anthropology has had its own problems of definition. In a very interesting article on 'Waddling In', Clifford Geertz argues that one of the advantages of contemporary anthropology as a scholarly enterprise is that no one in the discipline knows exactly what it is (Geertz 1985, p. 623). If one looks closely at these and other related disciplines, one finds as much definitional diversity as in religion. Moreover, definitional diversity does not seem to be the problem, especially when Guthrie claims that religion is difficult to define because all definitions imply theories. Copi and other philosophers of language argue that only theoretical definitions imply theories. See the arguments for a variety of definitions, including theoretical definitions, in *Definitions and Definability* (Fetzer, Shatz, and Schlesinger 1991).

2 I am using the term 'epistemic' in the widely influential way Alvin I. Goldman uses it in his book *Epistemology and Cognition*, where he states that 'the multidisciplinary conception of epistemology is the suitable way of integrating knowledge in many disciplines' that have widely shared interests (Goldman 1986, pp. 8–9, 181–4, 378–80).

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