

will be exceedingly difficult to understand the meaning of the statement that, "religious beliefs have no functional equivalent."

Spiro goes on to say that "neither the truth of the beliefs nor the etiology of the conviction by which they are held is relevant to the question of their rationality."¹⁸ The criteria of their rationality are dependent on the degree to which religious beliefs satisfy our intellectual, motivational, and perceptual needs. Obviously, the quality of conviction alone will not suffice as a criterion for rationality.

Notice, once again, that Spiro's explanation of the function and rationality of religious beliefs does not reduce the data we are attempting to understand. On the contrary, the theory is offered as a way of solving certain problems that have not been adequately solved by previous theories. The virtue of Spiro's approach is that it attempts to resolve three stubborn problems; the problem of the rationality of religious beliefs, the problem of the truth of religious beliefs and an explanation of the persistence of religious beliefs. It should be satisfying to us all if such a theory succeeds on both logical and empirical grounds. It would advance our knowledge about religion, open new problems for analysis which would in turn provide greater explanatory power and methodological procedures for solving the new problems. In brief, it would provide the "science of religion" with a process for growth in knowledge about religion instead of the stagnant and dogmatic accusation that such an explanation is "reductionistic."

Unfortunately, not even the most sophisticated functionalist theories present us with well-formed arguments for explaining religion. Spiro's "revised" explanation does not commit a logical fallacy. Furthermore, the explanation is not to be taken as a strict causal explanation in the sense that religion is to be explained by its antecedent conditions. Religion is explained by its effect on some consequent condition, which in turn is a necessary condition for the maintenance of a society. Spiro's claim that there are no functional equivalents to religious belief systems also seems to evade the trivial conclusion that "somehow" the requirements of a social system are being satisfied. Nevertheless, serious weaknesses remain, and I believe they are weaknesses of the kind which will not allow us to use the theory as an explanation of religion.

There are at least two basic problems with the example we have used. The first problem has been discussed at some length, and we need not repeat it again. It involves the problem of stating that a religious belief system is a necessary condition for satisfying a functional

requirement or set of requirements of a social or personal system. The difficulty here is justifying such an explanation empirically without becoming engaged in circular arguments. What we would have to show is that all the relations between perceptual, motivational, and intellectual needs of a person and their relation to the structure of a society are sustained only if a specific system of religious beliefs is present. No one has succeeded in showing that this is the case. I do not know how it could be shown to be the case without circular argument. The usual option is to argue for functional equivalents or a set of social units taken jointly as a class of sufficient conditions. I have argued that this option does not solve the invalidity of functionalist explanations and the trivial conclusions it ends up with.

There is a second problem with the statement that "religious beliefs have no functional equivalents; being less satisfying, alternative beliefs are rejected as less convincing." At first, such statements may appear to assert the existence of a necessary condition. They are, however, usually qualified in such a way that they become ambiguous as necessary conditions for a functionalist explanation. Just how, for example, are we to interpret the statement that "there are no functional equivalents for religious belief systems because alternative beliefs are less satisfying?" Such qualifications surely do not entail, "only the present belief system satisfies...." What has been introduced is the notion of a range or degree of satisfaction. Some beliefs have a greater power of satisfying certain requirements than others. The difficulties now become compounded. For, to sustain the statement that other beliefs are less satisfying than a religious belief system present in a society, we will have to specify the range or degree of satisfaction as well as a means for measuring the range. If we fail to provide such a scale and the means for calibrating the scale, our statement will remain vague -- not false but simply incapable of being tested or confirmed.

We might also ask whether the statement that "alternative belief systems are less satisfying" means that religious beliefs function as providing maximum satisfaction of a requirement. Once again, we would need some scale which would permit us to measure and test such a maximum. Moreover, the statement "alternative belief systems are less satisfying" does not entail "only this belief system provides maximum satisfaction." It may imply that the religious belief system is more satisfying than alternative belief systems; but, again, this does not entail that the present religious belief system is a necessary condition for satisfying the social requirements.