

Reconsidering Everything

From Folk Categories to Existential Theory of Mind

Thomas J. Coleman III and Ralph W. Hood Jr.

The debate about how to define religion, or if it constitutes something *sui generis*, has been raging for well over 100 years. As this has become an increasingly tiresome, and presumably unwinnable, debate for many senior scholars, those of us who are just beginning to navigate the interdisciplinary waters in the midst of these aging arguments may feel a bit lost. We might ask, does any semblance of meaning and purpose in an increasingly secular landscape require the label of ‘religion’ to fall—explicitly or implicitly—under one’s scope of study? More specifically, what is ‘religion’? Seeking assistance from some writers such as Durkheim would only lead us down one path (functionalism). Turning to scholars such as Edward Tylor or William James would lead down still another (substantive). All options, however, would sooner or later likely result in the following kind of statement: “This [insert favorite description here] is religion, and this [insert category, which will be ‘othered’] is not.” Indeed, the product of this methodology reliably produces such stipulated definitions that “artificially stabilize our object of study” (Taves 2013: 139). Thankfully, the theoretical contributions of cross-disciplinary scholar Ann Taves provide at least one option to avoid the limitations of past efforts to provide an essentialist definition of religion.

In her earlier work, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, Taves (1999) focuses upon William James and the curious turn that psychology of religion made away from James, who refused to limit it to natural scientific assumptions. In this book, Taves credits Anton T. Boisen (a student of George Albert Coe) with accounting for the rapid decline in psychologists’ interest in religion. Boisen gave two reasons: (1) the decline of an international and thus broadly based cross-cultural perspective and (2) the emergence of psychologists as narrowly based specialists no longer interested in either religious studies or philosophy (ibid.: 306). Had Taves chosen to continue to develop the themes in this volume along a more Jamesean fashion, her building-block approach would not have been possible and her limiting of an understanding of religion bounded by natural science assumptions would have been much different. It is unlikely James would find that trying to build up religion from more fundamental ‘building blocks’ would work well. Even in *The Principles of Psychology*, James ([1890] 1981: 1:265–273) noted that psychologists tended to mistake the object of thought as if it were built from more fundamental units. To use specific examples, neither “*the pack of cards is on the table*” (ibid.: 269; italics in original) nor “Columbus discovered America in 1492” (ibid.: 265) could be ‘built’ from smaller units such as ‘table’ or ‘card’ or ‘Columbus’ or ‘America.’ The thought is always total and not built from discrete units, and this would mean that the building blocks come after, not before. This is one possibility Taves chooses not to develop, putting a distance between herself and James in her subsequent work, perhaps to address a new generation of scholars who need not distance themselves from what they have not read or been taught.

Fortunately, and in great debt to Taves, the next generation of scholars and scientists has more options than the last and does not need to repeat the ‘sins of those who came before’. One can accept the possible ‘building blocks come after’ concerns of James mentioned above and later directives of Mircea Eliade (1959: 189; italics in original)—“he who has experienced the mysteries, is *he who knows*”—without concluding that there exists a primordial or even definable thing or set of things that should necessitate the label ‘religion’. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James ([1902] 1985: 33) reduced the debate over definitions of religion to nothing more than a “dispute about names.” Yet this stance entailed its own set of problems. For example, James not only presupposed the existence of what he wanted to study by taking it as a given, but also glossed over the individual processes and appraisals of value and meaning that may—or may not—have led up to what he was interested in (ibid.). The rush to answer questions about what ‘religion’ is neglects that there may be experience that is on a par with, or even greater than, ‘religious’ experience (Coleman, Silver, and Hood 2015). However, this particular question could never be proposed in the ecumenical and Protestant-biased framework of the psychology of religion in James’s day (Wulff 2001).

The infiltration and utilization of the folk category of ‘religion’ has enabled success yet thoroughly damaged (at least initially) not only religious studies (see Cotter and Robertson, forthcoming) but also the scientific fields that Taves’s framework endeavors to unite. Problems seem to arise most strikingly in the more scientific fields such as cognitive science, where naturalistic assumptions would not normally create such a conflict. For example, saying that ‘trees are natural’ or that we are ‘born tree climbers’ would not seem to grab headlines in the same way that popular books, scientific articles, and other media with various takes on the ‘religion is natural’ (e.g., Bloom 2007; McCauley 2011) and ‘born believers’ (e.g., Barrett 2011; Bering 2011) themes seem to do. One reason is that tangled up in the midst of our folk categorical assumptions are thoroughly normative abstractions that are value-laden and both culturally and chronologically contaminated. Researchers in the cognitive science of religion (CSR) often center religion on belief in the supernatural, and commonly define it as such (Taves 2015). Thus, many problems can arise when the supernatural becomes naturalized and when folk categories such as ‘religion’ and even ‘belief’, or what it means to have a belief, enter our scientific lexicon (Coleman, Hood, and Shook 2015). However, this is not a good reason to abandon the usefulness of folk categories in research, as the success of the cognitive sciences would attest. Rather, it is a reason to reconsider one’s methodology regarding their employment in scientific explanation. As Taves (2015: 194) suggests, this reconsideration would only entail that “we simply find various processes that have been and are combined to create complex cultural phenomena that sometimes get labeled or categorized in cultural terms, some of which are ‘religion-like.’”

The remainder of our appreciation for Taves’s work in this brief response aims at highlighting how her theorization can guide ‘generic’ scientific theories such as Jesse Bering’s (2002) concept of an ‘existential theory of mind’ (EToM). While EToM is ontologically ambiguous with respect to belief in supernatural agents, it is nonetheless argued to be a driving force in the generation of religious beliefs as a necessary but not sufficient condition. Therefore, one’s EToM system parses the kind of ‘religious–non-religious’ appraisals that Taves’s framework was designed to reconsider.

Taves Applied: Existential Theory of Mind

One view of our natural scientific world is that it is void of meaning—mere matter in motion. In this case, the only ‘meaning’ would be the role of one mechanism causing change in yet another. While this type of meaning is easily accounted for by the sciences, it is the teleo-functional,

goal-directed account of meaning that might appear troublesome. Indeed, accounting for meaning in the natural world is an issue that philosophers and scientists have struggled with since the birth of naturalism. Thankfully, this type of meaning can be explained in ways that are decidedly natural and involve no supernatural appeal. Regardless of the existence or non-existence of supernatural teleological forces, meaning is central to humans. However, the question ‘why did this happen to me?’ likely arises in the day-to-day life of theists, atheists, and everyone in between. Take, for example, Bering’s (2002: 4) thought experiment regarding a teenager who reports that his car accident may have occurred to teach him that life is fragile: “For the meaningful case, an implicit question is the following: ‘What, or who, set out to intentionally teach the teenager about his or her mortality?’ To the religious individual, the answer might be God, but note that the statement could just as easily have been made by a nonreligious individual without explicitly representing a specific supernatural agent.”

On a scientific causal level of analysis, we know that events such as this do not happen to teach individuals life lessons. Rather, there is an attributional process at work that occurs at the level of the individual, who is in turn embedded in a culture (Taves 2009, 2015). The above example is one used to support the existential theory of mind, which is defined, “in a *purposefully* general sense, as a biologically based, generic explanatory system that allows individuals to perceive meaning in certain life events” (Bering 2002: 4; emphasis added). It has been suggested that EToM is an evolutionary adaptation stemming from the theory of mind system that allows one to “attribute meaning to certain classes of autobiographical experiences” (ibid.). This kind of theorization appears ripe for Taves’s building-block approach to ‘special things’ and for complex cultural concepts in general, as this definition of EToM is ‘generic’ and can be applied to any individual—religious or non-religious (ibid.). Thus, in following this model to its logical conclusion, one is left with a potentially unlimited number of complex cultural concepts that can only be categorized as religious or non-religious (or perhaps even as ‘other’) from one of two viewpoints: that of the individual deeming meaning behind an event, or that of the researcher deeming meaning as such.

Importantly, Bering (2002: 3) notes that the utilization of one’s EToM may characterize “philosophical-religious theorizing.” Thus, the distinction between a religious system as opposed to a merely philosophical one is rampant, although undervalued, in this conceptualization of EToM. If the idea of God can stem from the EToM as “a descriptor of natural inferential processes” (ibid.: 6), then so too can the idea of philosophical reasoning in general, as Bering minimally suggests. Unfortunately, this is a critical distinction that is not explored further in Bering’s article. Importantly, however, the researcher need not privilege religion over philosophy, or philosophy over religion. In this case, it seems that only Taves’s building-block approach could avoid the researcher taking *all* such instances of an individual finding philosophical meaning in certain cases of autobiographical experiences over and above meaningless causal mechanistic explanations for religious reasoning (e.g., the car accident occurred so I could learn that life is fragile vs. it occurred because some aspect of my physiology failed to function in an appropriate manner so as to avoid the impending car accident). In the case of EToM, ‘the philosophical’ is really a placeholder for ‘the secular’. A building-block approach to this scenario would ask, who is deeming what to be ‘religious’, ‘philosophical’, or ‘special’, and for what purpose? Interestingly, these types of questions are already implicit in EToM as Bering (ibid.: 5) notes regarding the teenager’s car accident: we should be interested in “what he perceives to be the ultimate meaning of the accident (how the individual makes sense of the occurrence of the event itself).”

Here, the EToM is a theory in need of a ‘meta-theory’ to help structure research questions and interpretations of data. Taves’s building-block approach provides precisely that. Given that EToM is by necessity a theory of appraisal (‘what was the meaning of X?’), Taves’s most recent

work—stressing that appraisal of ‘salience’ and ‘significance’, combined with the ‘processes of imagination’, which constitute key resources that individuals draw on in generating the categories used to label experiences in general and special ‘religion-like’ experiences in particular (Taves 2015: 203)—could provide a bottom-up approach to EToM. From the top down, heeding Taves’s ‘religion is not a natural kind’ directive, combined with her focus on meaning-making processes in general, allows researchers to extend their study to non-religious, secular, atheist, and non-theistic individuals without artificially characterizing them as something they deem they are not—religious (Silver et al. 2014). Conjunctively, this also prevents the further scientific reification of a folk category—religion.

Finally, while Taves’s approach may appear complex when compared to some CSR theorizations, it allows for a more accurate and humble reflection of the position of the sciences in a very human world. While the EToM may be a useful scientific concept, it is also a complex cultural concept. If, as suggested by philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (1999: 29), “our ‘field of experience’ is molded, ‘overlaid,’ and ‘conspired against’ not just by language, but by numerous other patterns and institutions, many of them in mutual conflict,” then a framework providing for not only the deconstruction but also the reconstruction of these complex cultural concepts is required to navigate these dangerous waters. Taves provides this humanistic scientific framework. When generic scientific explanations (e.g., EToM) are ambiguous about whether or not meaning is religious or non-religious (as most are), Taves’s research should be taken as meta-theoretical grounds from which to parse these distinctions.

■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Carmen Guevara at the José Simeón Cañas Central American University for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

■ **THOMAS J. COLEMAN III** is a graduate student in the Research Psychology Masters program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and Director of the Ralph W. Hood Jr. Psychology of Religion Laboratory. He is an assistant editor for the Religious Studies Project and for the journal *Secularism and Nonreligion*. His interests span research in cultural psychology, the cognitive sciences, and the philosophy of science, focusing on theory of mind and folk psychology. Currently, he is co-editing (with John R. Shook and Ralph W. Hood Jr.) a special issue of the journal *Science, Religion and Culture* titled “Atheism, Secularity, and Science”; Thomas-J-Coleman@mocs.utc.edu.

RALPH W. HOOD JR. is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is a former editor of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and a former co-editor of the *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* and *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. He is a past president of Division 36 of the American Psychological Association and a recipient of its William James Award. He has published several hundred articles and book chapters on the psychology of religion and has authored, co-authored, or edited thirteen volumes, all dealing with the psychology of religion; Ralph-Hood@utc.edu.

■ REFERENCES

- Barrett, Justin L. 2011. "Cognitive Science of Religion: Looking Back, Looking Forward." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50 (2): 229–239.
- Bering, Jesse. 2002. "The Existential Theory of Mind." *Review of General Psychology* 6 (1): 3–24.
- Bering, Jesse. 2011. *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Bloom, Paul. 2007. "Religion Is Natural." *Developmental Science* 10 (1): 147–151.
- Coleman, Thomas J., III, Ralph W. Hood Jr., and John R. Shook. 2015. "An Introduction to Atheism, Secularity, and Science." *Science, Religion and Culture* 2 (3). Special issue. Forthcoming.
- Coleman, Thomas J., III, Christopher F. Silver, and Ralph W. Hood Jr. 2015. "... If the Universe Is Beautiful, We're Part of That Beauty": A 'Neither Religious nor Spiritual' Biography as Horizontal Transcendence." In *The Semantics and Psychology of Spirituality: A Cross-Cultural Analysis*, ed. Heinz Streib and Ralph W. Hood Jr. Dordrecht: Springer. Forthcoming.
- Cotter, Christopher, and David G. Robertson. Forthcoming. "Introduction: The 'World Religions' Paradigm in Contemporary Religious Studies." In *After 'World Religions': Reconstructing Religious Studies*, ed. David G. Robertson and Christopher Cotter. London: Routledge.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt.
- Feyerabend, Paul. 1999. *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*. Ed. Bert Terpstra. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- James, William. [1890] 1981. *The Principles of Psychology*. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- James, William. [1902] 1985. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McCauley, Robert N. 2011. *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Silver, Christopher F., Thomas J. Coleman III, Ralph W. Hood Jr., and Jenny M. Holcombe. 2014. "The Six Types of Nonbelief: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Type and Narrative." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 17 (10): 990–1001.
- Taves, Ann. 1999. *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Taves, Ann. 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Taves, Ann. 2013. "Building Blocks of Sacralities: A New Basis for Comparison across Cultures and Religions." Pp. 138–161 in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. New York: Guilford Press.
- Taves, Ann. 2015. "Reverse Engineering Complex Cultural Concepts: Identifying Building Blocks of 'Religion.'" *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 15 (1–2): 191–216.
- Wulff, David M. 2001. "The Psychology of Religion and the Problem of Apologetics." *Temenos* 37–38: 241–261.