



Religion and Science: What Can Anthropology Offer?

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ABSTRACT

This short tribute to Ján Podolák comments on the space between two extremes: pure science and blind belief. If religion is not susceptible to scientific proof because it is a belief in an invisible world inhabited by spirits who influence human existence on earth then science in its strictest sense is the opposite of religion because it is not based on any beliefs but solely on provable facts. However, the anthropology of science should be based on the pluralism of knowledge and the seeking of truth in different cultural settings around the world. Everything human, also science, is a social and cultural phenomenon. This means that rationality is not a preserve of the Western mind only and that without falling into the trap of postmodernist excessive relativism, we should admit that rationality is not only universal but also not hierarchized evolutionistically or qualitatively by giving preference to its Western brand. Science thus ceases to be the only realm of rational knowledge. Religion in its turn is a kind of non-scientific knowledge.

KEY WORDS: science, religion, pluralism of knowledge, rationalism, rationality

Ján Podolák seems to have moved throughout his long life between science and religion. Thus these two realms of human existence have been very close to his being. Religion was introduced to him during his childhood spent in Dolná Súča; it has been his concern today, at an advanced age, when he attends masses in Dúbravka. In between and parallel to it is

Podolák's quest for order and stricture of knowledge, truth as we would say. And still there is a period in his life that was marked by practicing religion as science. I mean, of course, Marxist historical materialism as a method and communism as a goal. I admire Podolák as a lover of life who always, or almost always, managed to keep to the golden middle path between science and religion.

My paper is based on the assumption that social anthropology is co-responsible for the simple observation that we owe to Ernest Gellner: humans are knowledge-seeking beings. Whereas many would understand this statement as a compliment to scientific knowledge (and Gellner would be among them), I would like to argue that there are different ways of knowledge, of seeking knowledge and of presenting knowledge. The rest of my paper will be devoted to the exposition of the varieties of knowledge, its seeking, its gaining and its presentation.

It has long been the currency that 'savages' living outside the orbit of Western and other civilizations have not been able to distinguish between seeming, occult and dreamy on the one hand and hard reality, testable empirically by human senses, instruments, experiments and so on, on the other (c.f. LÉVY-BRUHL 1966). Luckily, thanks to generations of anthropologists this belief was proved false. People around the world are capable of rational thinking and action. And people around the world as well are indulging in irrational thoughts, beliefs and acts. All of it is knowledge - perhaps different kinds of knowledge - because people know or believe that they know. And most often they also want to know, they want to fill the void of ignorance with knowledge, whether proved to be true or not. However, to gain knowledge might be difficult, especially if proofs are needed. For most assertions there are no ready-made proofs. Therefore people everywhere around the world are prone to proceed via shortcuts to knowledge, ready to believe those who present themselves plausibly as knowing more than others, even if they consciously lie. Sometimes even after the lie is discovered, people continue to believe it as if it were the truth. The reasons for it are connected with inertia, metaphysical belief in the person as such more than in that what he or she says, or with ethnic or other allegiances which connect the liar with the believer.

The space between strictly provable science on the one hand and blind belief on the other is a vast area of a mixture of gossip, guess, semi-truth, hearsay and hard facts, which however change with changing opinion, method, and emphasis. Religion can be defined with Ellis and ter Haar as those aspects of human existence which are the subjects of belief and not of scientific proof. It is belief in an invisible world and the possibility of communication with it, believed to be inhabited by spirits who are to influence human

existence on earth (ELLIS and ter HAAR 2004). Science in its strictest sense is the opposite of religion because it is not based on any beliefs but on provable facts; it is a method of gaining facts, and deciding what are the facts that lead to generalization and scientific truth. However, the anthropology of science, as an academic subdiscipline still barely existing, would be based on the pluralism of knowledge and the seeking of truth in different cultural settings around the world. By saying this I of course am aware of the fact that like everything human, also science is a social and cultural phenomenon. This also means that rationality is not a preserve of the Western mind only and that without falling into the trap of postmodernist excessive relativism, we can nevertheless admit that rationalism is not only universal but also not hierarchized evolutionistically or qualitatively by giving preference to its western brand. Science thus ceases to be the only realm of rational knowledge and its definition becomes 'more diffuse' (FRANKLIN 1996:503). As it is with oral traditions which became sources for historians, ethnomethodology brought forward superior knowledge in folk taxonomy of plants, fauna and the celestial world, folk cosmogony and cosmology included. Some of this research continues to inspire students of science and religion today. Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmeli* come to mind, paralleled in a way with Edward Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. There is a plethora of books and shorter texts produced since by generations of British, French, Belgian, German, American and also African or Indian anthropologists. They pushed forward our knowledge about religion and science first in so-called primitive societies, then within the orbit of world religions and finally in modern societies proud of scientific achievements and somewhat less sporting the religious guise.

Recently we have seen the relativisation of science and rationalism on the one hand, and a new advance of religion in both economically advanced and less developed countries on the other. The new wave of interest in witchcraft, cognitive processes in different societies, independent churches and the role of the occult as a counterpoint and corollary of science builds on the now classical anthropological works on taboo, ecstasy, ritual, shamanism, and spirit possession. Also 'the savage mind' as Lévi-Strauss called his powerful exposition of ability to understand and interpret nature among the alleged primitives or savages comes to mind here.

The human world needs both science and religion, whether in the past, present or in the future. Only dimensions and shares differ. What is certain now is that the unidirectional path from the prevalence of religion to the prevalence of science is the wishful thinking of manipulators, whether power holders or overambitious scholars. Rather we have times with less religion, even godlessness alternating with the over-emphasis on the occult, supernatural, and religious. And this oscillation does not necessarily touch upon all people

but some people more and some less, depending on their position within the social hierarchy or distance from the centre of happenings. With advancing globalization many features become instantly universal even though they usually have a technical locus of origin. Having said this I hasten to assure the reader that I do not subscribe to relativism of the ‘anything goes’ type. With Gellner I believe that religion is a very powerful cognitive force only as far as it fills in the void left by science. Again, science may conquer many voids left by religion but science also retreats from various regions by virtue of coping unsatisfactorily with new challenges, phenomena emerging in society and also from the mysterious encounter of modern humanity with the natural environment. Here I mean, for example, the current war of opinions, indeed stern beliefs, about global warming against inadequate scientific argumentation. Behind this, as it was so often in history, the balance between science and religion is a function of politics. Those who hold power, especially in large and mighty countries, manipulate their subjects/citizens in favour of science or religion according to their whims. Gellner had no respect for religious modernists who ‘interpret’ old beliefs so that they are politically correct as against scientific cognition. As Lessnoff wrote of Gellner and Weber, both these pillars of 20th century thought were fascinated by the historical role of religion, and dismissive of its manifestation in modern culture (LESSNOFF 2002:155).

In contrast, “[N]either science nor reason can perform the function of a religion, nor can they validate values. Science is, in this sense, value-free”, if you like, non-moral. It is thus futile to replace religion with science – because there is a crucial gap between fact and value, especially in modern rationality. For example, for Hegel and Marx reason was the schemer of history instead of God. According to Gellner’s interpreter Lessnoff, what Marx, following Hegel, wanted was a utopian project. Marx, donning the cap of a scientist, wanted to “re-enchant the disenchanted world of scientific reason” by science or by reason – contained in history. “Descartes’ project of overthrowing the tyranny of ‘custom’ or culture, so as to base belief on reason alone, was according to Gellner, an error” because humans “are cultural creatures who cannot avoid seeing the world through some set of cultural ‘spectacles’” – one of them certainly being religion. A special case, however, is to Gellner the culture of modernity which is unique – “uniquely valuable, modern culture, the ‘magnificent fruit’ of a heroic failure” (LESSNOFF 2002:138, c.f. Gellner in *Reason and Culture*) – the result is of course modern science, technology, and wealth.

To put to doubt the postmodern attack on science is one thing, to accept that many if not most people while using the benefits of science nevertheless believe in witchcraft, practice spirit possession, taboo various things and actions, and revere leaders who repeatedly fail them is another. Here, as well, Gellner’s views are interesting. Gellner

recognizes the historical role of religions as precursors of modernity—that what he calls ‘generic Protestantism’ or ‘High Islam’ have been the progenitors of the modern world. But otherwise he is not impressed by the role of religion in the modern world. According to Gellner religion has hardly any ‘legitimate cognitive role’. His analyst Lessnoff however rightly remarks that religion performs even today “important functions for both individual and society” (LESSNOFF 2002:155-156) that no rationalist alternative can perform. Its cognitive function was discredited but it is supreme in “furnishing of norms and values for society, and of consolation for individual”. But that, perhaps paradoxically, is religion’s primary cognitive function.

The post-religious world which concerns many of us who do not believe in God has its serious pitfalls. We are not necessarily less moral, but we cannot live only on the scientific truth. Lessnoff, summarizing Gellner’s views stresses that what attracts believers to religions is not at all their truth but their ability to provide comfort face to face with human mortality. I quote: “[T]he denial of human finitude is certainly among religion’s greatest attractions... science can offer nothing here – for this reason religious faith will presumably continue to be embraced by those for whom consolation is more important than truth” (LESSNOFF 2002:156). And most of us, without much doubt, are more interested in consolation than truth. Gellner, along with Weber, advises to face the truth at all costs, accept it – and still be happy in the modernity as the modern liberal society offers more than ever before. The problem, however, is that not many are so strong to face the disenchanted truth. Especially those of us who suffer in poverty, illness, wars, domestic violence, legally incurred injustice, and many other wrongs which they cannot understand and accept, will continue to seek consolation and strength to live in belief, practice of religions or quasi-religions. Anthropology, by revealing causes and mechanisms of almost infinite variety of human experience with cognition, understanding and misunderstanding, with mystery and belief without proof or disproof, is an important tool for making our shrinking world bearable and worthwhile to enjoy even if it sometimes looks as if we are doomed.

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