Subtraction Narratives

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Subtraction narratives of religion2 circle around the claim that religion
flourishes when
certain conditions (e.g. ignorance, powerlessness, and passivity) govern human
life and gives
way to a more secular, rational, and grown-up way of living as they are
overcome. The
narratives describe early human existence as the time in which these conditions
reign and
modernity as the period in which we push them away and arrive at maturity. My
aim in this
chapter is to explore and evaluate three subtraction narratives of religion -
those of Daniel
Dennett, John Dewey, and Maurice Gauchet - in both an expository and critical
manner. I
conclude the chapter by gathering some of each author’s most salient insights
into a series of
positive statements about religion.
It will be helpful to provide some historical context for the three considered
subtraction
narratives. Our first author, Daniel Dennett, builds upon David Hume’s
argument in the
Natural History of Religion (1779), which begins by pointing out that whatever
threatens
human happiness and stability generates anxiety and motivates us to alter
life’s circumstances.
We also have an overactive tendency to identify agency in the world,
particularly in
circumstances where we do not know a thing’s true cause. It was therefore
only natural, Hume
argues, for early humans to imagine supernatural agents operating behind
nature’s unruly and
threatening behavior and to seek ways to gain their favor, e.g. gifts, praise,
acts of devotion. On

Hume's reading, then, religion begins as a kind of understandably misguided practical
polytheism.
He goes on to explain how humans respond to polytheism's inevitable failure to improve
life by increasing the intensity of their activities of otherworldly assuagement. This process
eventually leads us to so exalt our preferred god that he becomes the head of the pantheon, and
later even the One True God. In this way, polytheism leads into monotheism. Monotheism, in
turn, compels us to believe that reality displays a single and intelligible order, and this belief

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2 Charles Taylor coined this term in his A Secular Age (2006).

helps us eventually see the contradictory, non-empirical, and morally reprehensible nature of
most religion. Only then can we face the facts of nature that stand clearly before our eyes, which
is precisely what Hume believes happens in modernity. Though differing in the particulars of his
argument, Dennett similarly conceptualizes religion as an illusory manifestation of biological life
that should, in the end, work itself out of our system.
Though employing many Humean arguments, John Dewey ultimately follows the path laid by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his philosophical novel, Émile (1762). Rousseau presents his
account of religion in a section entitled, "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar," in which he
narrates Émile's edifying encounter with a liberal-minded priest who argues that true religion
naturally appears when we are unencumbered by extraneous concepts and practices. The
principles of this natural religion are directly accessible to conscience and the historical
traditions arise as just so many deviations from and additions thereto. The modern task is thus to
throw off these unessential unessential accretions and let natural religion's light shine into
contemporary affairs.
Rousseau's line of thought found a strong following among those who cherished religion's power but shunned exclusivist doctrine, claims to infallibility, and strongly
supernatural beliefs. Later advocates even rejected the very concept of spiritual reality and
advanced naturalistic accounts of natural religion. Dewey's subtraction

narrative emerges
within this latter line of thought.
Marcel Gauchet's subtraction narrative appears within the trajectory set by Feurebach's
The Essence of Christianity (1841). This work proceeds as a major re-interpretation of Hegel's
philosophy of religion, which centers on the claim that spirit progressively unfolds its latent
potentialities throughout religion's history, reaching its consummation in Christianity and
perfected appearance in Enlightenment Europe. Feurebach literally inverts this narrative by
presenting God as the externalized projection of humanity's vague knowledge of its own
potentialities. Religion thus becomes the veiled process of human self-development. He agrees
with Hegel that Christianity constitutes religion's consummation, but only because it is the
moment in which our illusion that God is a transcendent agent disappears. For the notion that
God manifests himself perfectly in Christ, who dies for humanity and is resurrected in the spirit

of the Christian community, actually portends the otherworldly God's collapse into human
nature. This shift comes to fruition in Western secular society and its naturalistic worldview.
The great 19th century critics of religion - Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud - took up versions
of Feuerbach's account, while the founding figures of 20th century sociology of religion -
Durkheim and Weber - developed these further still. Gauchet draws upon and synthesizes what
he considers the best features of these accounts into an encompassing and interestingly counter-
intuitive narrative of religion's historical development and dissolution.
There are, of course, other subtraction narratives worthy of consideration, but the ones
mentioned above are, on my reading, the most interesting and paradigmatic within contemporary
discourse.

I. Daniel Dennett

Dennett details his subtraction narrative in Breaking the Spell (2006). To be fair, his main
point in this work is more that we should examine religion through a natural-scientific lens than

to argue for a specific theory of religion. Dennett acknowledges that subsequent inquiry will refine and perhaps entirely replace the initial account he offers, but contends that we cannot know one way or another until we use our best methods to test our strongest concepts. And, given the fact that "[f]or many people, probably a majority of the people on Earth, nothing matters more than religion" (p. 15), Dennett is rightfully very eager to find out what's really going on with religion.

Some caution that submitting religion to sustained natural-scientific inquiry will undermine the many benefits religion offers humanity by making religion even harder to believe than it already is. Dennett rejects this notion by pointing out that we do not know whether religion's benefits outweigh the harm it causes and that the only way to know is to pursue the kind of inquiry he recommends. Others worry that this line of inquiry will incite some kind of reactionary fervor. Dennett responds in kind, pointing out that if such inquiry engenders such destructive response then it is even more important to understand why and how such occurrences are curtailed. And, again, the only way to do this is by pursuing the kind of inquiry Dennett recommends. There is therefore no way we can, in good conscience, turn from the task of

natural-scientific inquiry and rest content with the myths, prejudices, and gut feelings that dominate much contemporary thinking about religion (among both believers and unbelievers alike).

Fortunately, a group of scientists and scholars have already begun this research program and Dennett works to synthesize their findings into an encompassing and empirically testable narrative about religion's evolving role in human affairs. He explains that the "purpose of trying to sketch a whole story now is to get something on the table that is both testable and worthy of testing" (p. 103-4). Of course, he has reasons for organizing the narrative as he does, chief among which is the conviction that religion constitutes an illusion of dubious merit whose

destructive influences must be understood, mitigated, and controlled as soon as possible. As he puts it, “complacency and ignorance could lead us to squander our opportunities to steer [religion] in what we take to be the benign directions” (p. 37).

Dennett drives this point home by comparing religion to the lancet fluke parasite that zombifies ants and forces them into strange acts of self-sacrifice. Though qualifying this image with a ‘what if?’, he clearly finds the idea of religion as a cultural parasite persuasive, pointing to examples of cult suicides and religious terrorism for support. He acknowledges that similar destructive tendencies can arise under the banner of other than religious notions, e.g. tribe, kind, nation, race, party, money, honor, to name a few. The only difference is that there are no prohibitions, whether implicit or explicit, against rigorously submitting such phenomena to natural science’s unforgiving gaze as there are with religion.

To change this state of affairs, we must get used to studying religion like any other cultural phenomenon, regardless of our ultimate convictions. For Dennett, this means learning to approach religion as a Darwinian phenomenon with both cultural and biological dimensions. No one would argue with presenting, say, language in this manner - particular languages develop through unique patterns of cultural evolution and language as such offers clear selective advantages for human beings, namely increased intelligence and organizational capacity - and the contemporary explosion of human language research evidences the effectiveness of this approach. Dennett argues that a similarly potent advance in our understanding of religion will arrive when we begin to investigate it in evolutionary terms.

He orients us to this approach by drawing analogy from a range of better understood phenomena. For example, might not religion have evolved like insatiable taste for sugar or alcohol, the unintended consequence of a trait evolved for entirely different purposes? In this example, religion’s destructive tendencies would function somewhat like diabetes or alcoholism.

Or, perhaps religion is more like a symbiant bacterial entity inhabiting our

bodies and the question is whether or to what degree any given religion's effects are beneficial, neutral, or destructive. We might also approach religion under the model of runaway sexual selection, in which arbitrary sexual preferences lead over time to, for example, the extravagance of male peacock tail feathers. Another model is that of a pearl, emerging indirectly as the result of a persistent irritation. Or, religion could be an evolutionary "good trick," like money, that societies universally discover but can be channeled in better or worse directions. Whatever it turns out to be, Dennett wants to make perfectly clear that, as yet, no one knows and that the only way to find out is to develop testable theories and put in the hard work of experimental evaluation. He works to achieve the first task so that the scientific community can start the second. It is to the particulars of Dennett's initial evolutionary account of religion that I now turn.

Dennett begins by describing animals and humans' hyperactive tendency to detect agency, exemplified when dogs bark at snow sliding off the roof and night-creaks spark thoughts of lurking murders. The evolutionary rationale for this trait is easy to discern; sometimes there actually are mountain lions on the roof or murderers creeping through the hallway. It is a clear example of evolution arriving at the principle of 'better safe than sorry'. Dennett argues that belief in invisible superhuman agents arises as an unintended consequence of this trait, and names the experience of losing a loved one as its activating occasion. After a loved one's death, a host of mundane occurrences bring the expectation of that person's presence vividly to mind. Such experiences can be a source of both great pain and comfort. One of the best ways to diminish the pain and heighten the comfort, Dennett suggests, is to interpret such mental episodes as encounters with this person's disembodied spirit. Our loved one has not, the thought goes, disappeared from reality, but only changed their form so that we must continue our relationship in a non-sensible manner.

The process takes on distinctly religious dimensions when the lost loved one

was a
parent. The parent-child relationship is one of the most important means for transmitting non-
genetic information and indelibly marks the child's psyche as such. Faced with a parent's death,
which in an earlier time happened much earlier in the process of individual development, we
search for ways to maintain access to their knowledge. This need encourages us to imagine our
parent's spirit as a special source of knowledge and devise means to convince them to give it to
us (p. 126). In this way, the earliest forms of human religion arise as practically oriented cults of
ancestor worship.
Dennett turns to B.F. Skinner's demonstration of pigeon's propensity to form
"superstitions" (1948) to understand how complex rituals grow up around such beliefs. Skinner
designed an experiment in which pigeons randomly receive food reinforcement and observes that
they soon develop an elaborate dance of sorts in their attempts to repeat the food triggering
conditions. Dennett humorously dramatizes their process of thought: "Now, let's see: the last
time I got the reward, I'd just spun around once and craned my neck. Let's try it again...Nope,
no reward. Perhaps I didn't spin enough...Nope. Perhaps I should bob once before spinning and
craning...YESSS! OK, now, what did I just do?..." (p. 118). The pigeons' false belief that their
actions cause the food to come underlies their superstitious dances and Dennett suggests that
early humans' false belief in super knowledgeable ancestor spirits similarly stimulates the
complex rituals that appear in all tribal religions.
The next question is why these tribal religions flourished as ubiquitously as they did in
early human society and Dennett points out three evolutionary rationale. First, tribal religion
likely aided decision making in a time when people had many important decisions to make and
very little information on which to rely. Second, tribal religions universally discovered the
placebo effect and relentlessly deployed it as a kind of collective health care. As Dennett
explains, displays of shamanic power increased participants' confidence that help was on the

way, which in turn revved up their immune systems, while habituation into communal ritual
systematized these effects. In fact, contemporary studies show that, even today, people seek out
shamanic healing for conditions that are particularly responsive to the placebo effect (p. 136).
And third, tribal religion provided powerful aid to human memory (p. 142). This is perhaps the

most important benefit, for without a mechanism to store cultural patterns, further cultural
evolution is not possible. In lieu of external symbolic storage like writing, the most effective
means for storing cultural patterns is perpetual collective re-enactment like we see in ritual.3
Religion moves beyond the ritual worship of tribal ancestors when special groups arise to
maintain, protect, and optimize the tribe's sacred traditions. These "stewards" are particularly
concerned with mitigating the corrosive effects of deviation and doubt, and work to consolidate
belief and practice and immunize them from critique. Put otherwise, they create an organized
orthodoxy and protect its reign by deploying obscurantism and epistemic taboo. This gives rise
to what Dennett calls "belief in belief," or the notion that allegiance to religious orthodoxy is
more important than personal conviction and understanding.
The stewards' immunizations lead religion towards increasingly abstract concepts of
spiritual reality, proceeding from super-powerful ancestor spirits, to a polytheistic pantheon, to
the supreme God, to the One True God, and eventually to the impersonal divine essence of the
great mystics and philosophers. On Dennett's reading, this last concept of the divine is not so far
from the kind of naturalism Dennett himself embraces:
Benedict Spinoza, in the seventeenth century, identified God and Nature, arguing that
scientific research was the truth path of theology. For this heresy he was persecuted.
There is a troubling (or to some, enticing) janus-faced quality to Spinoza's heretical
vision of Deus sive Natura (God, or Nature): in proposing his scientific simplification,
was he personifying Nature or depersonalizing God? Darwin's more generative vision

provides the structure in which we can see the intelligence of Mother Nature (or is it merely apparent intelligence?) as a non-miraculous and non-mysterious - and hence all the more wonderful - feature of this self creating thing (Dennett, 1995, pp. 185).

In fact, he considers naturalism the logical conclusion of religion's abstracting evolution under the steward's influence:

When we looked through Darwin's eyes at the actual processes of design of which we and all the wonders of nature are the products to date, we found that Paley was right to see these effects as the result of a lot of design work, but we found a non-miraculous account of it: a massively parallel, and hence prodigiously wasteful, process of mindless,

3 Contemporary research shows that such collective strategies mitigate individual unreliability. In fact, this insight played a key role in developing computer technology (p. 46). Mnemonic aids (rhyme, rhythm, melody, norms of production), high benefits to participation (divine and social favor), and costs for non-participation (divine and social disfavor) maintained active and universal involvement in ritual, which in turn allowed for the slow growth of culture on which all subsequent developments depend.

algorithmic design-trying, in which, however, the minimal increments of design have been thriftily husbanded, copied and re-used over billions of years...That vision of the creative process still apparently left a role for God as Lawgiver, but this gave way in turn to the Newtonian role of Lawfinder, which also evaporated,...leaving behind no Intelligent Agency in the process at all. What is left is what the process, shuffling through eternity, mindlessly finds (when it finds anything): a timeless Platonic possibility of order. That is, indeed, a thing of beauty, as mathematicians are forever exclaiming, but it is not itself something intelligent, but wonder of wonders, something intelligible (Dennett, 1995, p. 184-185).

Whether or not the generality of humanity can or will follow this course is an entirely different question, though. Dennett acknowledges that religion is very

attractive for many
believers and not likely to go away any time soon. No amount of scientific data will turn the
masses from their religion. But, Dennett notes, there is a growing number for whom the
traditional religions are no longer convincing and he encourages his secular brethren to learn
how to add momentum to this group's maturation and expansion while simultaneously curbing
the destructive tendencies of the masses' religion.
Regardless, we can only achieve these ends by accepting religion as a central feature of
human society and submitting it to the same kind of rigorous scrutiny and control as economics,
medicine, and politics. Doing so helps curb the tendency to believe in belief, which, in turn,
frees increasing numbers from religion's clutch. It also allows us to develop smarter policies and
educational endeavors to combat religion's destructive tendencies. Thus, on Dennett's reading,
the best way to tip the scales against religion is to make it the object of intense scientific scrutiny
and thoughtful public discourse.
Dennett's account is noteworthy for its lack of embarrassed exasperation in approaching
the subject of religion. In fact, part of what he tries to do is undermine the taboo that stops the
best mind's from venturing into religion's choppy waters. He also does not mindlessly demonize
religion and religious believers, but rather calmly examines the subject from a natural-scientific
lens and formulates an explanatory theory amenable to future experimental evaluation and
critique. He encourages patience to those who make hasty claims to knowledge on either side
and cautions them against using flimsy theories for major policy decisions. In all these regards,
he show admirable intellectual restraint.

There are many insights to be gleaned from Dennett's general strategy and account.
Foremost among these is the claim that the natural-scientific framework can provide great insight
into the phenomenon of religion. He is fully justified in striving to understand religion as a result
of Darwinian evolution and exploring the psycho-perceptual factors involved in the formation of

religious beliefs. His critique of religious leaders use of allegiance, obscurantism, and taboo to block to path of inquiry is also well placed and his exhortation that we dedicate great intellectual effort to learning to curb religion's destructive tendencies is undeniably wise counsel.

Furthermore, his assessment of tribal religion's memory enhancing function, an insight that we will explore further when examining Robert Bellah's persuasive account of religion's evolution, is accurate and insightful. No doubt, the main features of his account will be altered, refined, and completely reconsidered with time, but this should not take away from the value of his initial endeavors.

That said, it is obvious that Dennett's narrative turns on the notion that the natural-scientific framework should provide a total explanation of reality. This can be seen in his suggestion that we only introduce non-natural-scientific concepts when our best natural-scientific concepts fail. Admittedly, he makes this claim within a line of inquiry explicitly dedicated to examining religion through a natural-scientific lens. But he wants to restrict the sense in which we can speak of publicly meaningful knowledge about reality to those concepts developed within the natural-scientific framework. This is the main point I want to question, and to do so I will draw analogy from Karl Popper's critique of what he "scientific determinism" in The Open Universe (1982).

According to Popper's use of the term, scientific determinism considers reality to be such that a sufficiently developed scientific theory could predict everything that happens. Proponents of this view tend to cite the success, scope, and fruitfulness of scientific theories that present certain features of reality as so determined as justification for their worldview. Popper argues that it is fine to consider determinism as an ideal for natural-scientific inquiry and reject prior restrictions about the range of phenomena such theories can treat. He likewise notes that belief in scientific determinism has historically added impetus to natural-scientific inquiry by spurring researchers to push deterministic theories in areas that were previously

forbidden. That said, he

rejects scientific determinism as a worldview because it creates an unhealthy anxiety about the
relation between mind and world and obscures many of the most fruitful new developments in
non-deterministic scientific practice.
In the same way, Dennett's attempt to see as much of religion as he can through the
natural-scientific lens is a valid and important intellectual endeavor and we should not attempt to
limit beforehand the insights it can yield. But adopting this research program as a worldview
tends to create unnecessary anxiety about the relationship between spiritual and material reality
that fans the flame of animosity between religious believers and the more secularly minded.
There is nothing necessarily anti-scientific about accepting the existence of spiritual reality and
there are even ways to approach this reality through a scientific strategy of inquiry. We will be
able to say more on this point after examining John Dewey's particular version of the subtraction
narrative.
Dennett's account of how the stewards' immunization of religion inaugurates a path of
progressive abstraction that yields both "belief in belief" and naturalistically inclined essence
religion is another of his narrative's weak spots. Certainly, dedicated religious stewards did
codify and conceptualize their religions, which generated more robust and intellectually complex
versions thereof. Likewise, religious leaders have often deployed obscurantism and epistemic
taboo to secure allegiance to their particular religious brand. But extrapolating from these facts
to the above claim is unwarranted, more the result of speculation on the idea of religion as a
memetic phenomenon than of well-founded investigation of religion's actual course.

II. John Dewey

John Dewey elaborates his subtraction narrative in two of his later works, The Quest for
Certainty (1929) and A Common Faith (1934). His argument centers on the idea that traditional
religion arose as a misdirection of the religious attitude into

supernaturalism.4 He describes the
religious attitude is a sense of “awe and reverence” both at “the dignity
of human nature” and a
“just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts” (1934 p. 25) that
changes our attitude

4 Dewey notes that the concept of “supernatural” does not properly arrive
until there is a dualistic conception of

nature as a self-contained physical realm. Still, I use the term to describe
his position because it concerns the
attempt to read invisible superhuman agents into reality.

towards ourselves, society, and the world from one of isolation and fear to one
of trusting
cooperation towards the improvement of life. It nourishes confidence in the
possibility of
channeling reality’s great forces towards the realization of our noblest
individual and collective
ambitions and helps us guard this faith even through periods of great
difficulty and despair.
Belief in the supernatural arises when early humans’ powerlessness and
ignorance lead them to
read invisible superhuman agents into reality and direct their life-improving
energies towards
gaining these agents‘ favor.
Abandoning supernaturalism and all its derivations should liberate the
religious attitude
and let us channel its potent forces into various avenues of social benefit.
This is not as easy as it
sounds, though, because much of the Western philosophical tradition and many
contemporary
accounts of natural science remain entrenched within supernaturalism legacy,
which Dewey
describes as the quest to improve life by aligning ourselves with reality’s
eternal forms. It is this
quest for certainty that tie Greek, medieval, and modern thought to
supernaturalism.
We begin to see how to overcome the quest for certainty, though, by grasping
the real
reasons for natural science’s success. Instead of improving our lives by
rising to a pristine vision
of eternal reality, natural science works by experimentally altering our
environing conditions
with certain purposes in mind until we practically master the phenomena in
question. Put
otherwise, natural science maps certain of reality’s features by reflecting
upon the observed

consequences of purposeful action. Doing so enables natural science to generate countless
insights into the means for translating our aims and ambitions into reality and overcomes the
ignorance and powerlessness we have for thousands of years felt when considering our place in
the world. In this way, natural science undermines the reasons that long motivated
supernaturalism and facilitates a more authentic development of the religious attitude, but not by
offering an alternate account of reality's eternal forms, as many imagine.
Dewey's line of thought becomes more comprehensible when we take note of his account
of unsophisticated inquiry. Humans, he argues, have a basic impulse to reorganize their relation
to the world when their aims and desires are unsatisfied. This involves either changing the world
or our aims and desires, or both. Sometimes the required change is readily made, e.g. squashing
a pesky mosquito, while others, it requires more extensive deliberation, e.g. figuring out how to

stop workers from dying of malaria. Discovering the solution to deliberative problems brings a
certain feeling of satisfaction. Such feelings have little value, though, if their satisfying insights
are not translated into action.
Supernatural notions arise when we try to solve deliberative problems by cultivating
satisfying feelings without substantive action. I say "substantive," because supernaturalism
seems to open a sphere of action in which we can work to improve our lives by winning spiritual
beings' favor. But these actions abandon responsibility for their outcomes and thus fail to yield
the kind of reliable, growing, and practically oriented knowledge that inquiry naturally seeks. In
fact, supernatural religion's inevitable failure to improve life launches a spiraling endeavor to
correct religious practice and belief that constitutes the engine of supernaturalism's evolution.
Supernaturalism's complex history thus arises as the result of our escalating attempts to respond
to its falsity and inadequacy.
This process begins with the proliferation of ritual in tribal religious societies and
continues as myths arise as means of narrative amplification and refinement.

The plurality of these early religious communities eventually falls before the great archaic traditions, e.g. those of Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and the Hebrews (1934 p.59). Though all archaic religions tend in increasingly conceptual directions only the Greeks, according to Dewey, broke through into true abstractive thought. They claimed to discern spiritual reality's eternal features as underlying and informing all things and imagined happiness and social security to stem from a perfect intellectual grasp thereof. In pursuing this aim, they discovered a space of rational connections that could be explored without apparent reference to experience. Euclidian geometry impressively seized upon the new possibilities of inquiry enabled thereby and the philosophers interpreted his achievement as a partial disclosure of a "realm of fixed Being which, when grasped by thought, formed a complete system of immutable and necessary truth" (1929 p. 13).

Medieval philosophers and theologians took up and developed this approach to reality and Enlightenment thinkers used it to interpret natural science as the total account of nature's eternal structure.

Because natural science explicitly discards reality's spiritual features in favor of a pristinely mathematical approach to physical reality's regularities and realizes an unprecedented degree of certainty and practical knowledge in doing so, many modern thinkers felt compelled to embrace a naturalistic vision of reality. Others rejected this course and sought different ways to interpret natural science, pointing out that it arose within a tradition of inquiry that source and aim of human knowledge and practice. In this way, the quest for certainty animates the conflict between science and religion that dominates the deliberations of modern thought and society.

A first tendency in seeking solution to this problem is to transform spiritual and material reality's apparent incompatibility into a virtue through the doctrine of dualism. But this approach encounters great difficulties when it tries to explain the two realities' intimate

interaction within human life, and subsequent lines of modern thought attempt to sidestep the
problem in various ways. For example, Spinoza considers the natural-scientific and spiritual
frameworks as partial yet coherent views of reality's single and intelligible order. Kant
alternately presents these frameworks as mutually exclusive ways in which mind organizes an
ultimately unknowable reality, while post-Kantian idealists (e.g. Fichte, Hegel, Bradley) consider
the natural-scientific framework a moment within the internal development of a fundamentally
spiritual reality (1929 p. 52). In the opposite direction, philosophical Darwinians work to derive
the phenomena traditionally associated with spiritual reality from natural selection and positivists
question the very notion that purpose, value, and higher spiritual truths fall within the domain of
epistemologically meaningful discourse.

Dewey sympathizes with certain features of each approach: we should strive for a unified
view of reality (Spinoza) that incorporates the diverse phases of human thought (post-Kantian
idealists) and accounts for their often strong conceptual differences (Kant); for this reason, we
cannot consider every phenomenon suitable for treatment within the natural-scientific framework
(positivists), but should seek out the modes of thought and inquiry appropriate to each range of
phenomena (dualism); that said, it is foolish to decide before hand at what point the natural-
scientific framework will stop yielding insight (philosophical Darwinians). These appreciations
noted, Dewey argues that each remains burdened by the belief that knowledge should improve
life by grasping reality's eternal forms. All would be far more effective if freed from this
antiquated commitment and reframed in terms of the lessons of natural science, chief among

which is the recognition that successful inquiry comes from systematically reflecting upon the
results of purposeful action.

To grasp this insight more clearly, consider how reality's features appear to us during
everyday inquiry. For example, the concept of a poisonous berry only makes sense in terms of

our efforts to find edible foods. We come to the concept of poisonous berries through a process of trial and error, but our methods and concepts soon improve; perhaps we learn to recognize poison in certain forms of color and taste. Our developing concept functions as a map for navigating the environment that lets us predict what eating certain berries will cause to happen.

In this way, we cannot separate our understanding of reality's features from the purposeful actions through which they are encountered and explored. Dewey argues that natural science functions in basically the same way, albeit directed towards a unique end; discerning the most general and orderly relations animating the physical world by experimentally exploring its conditions. The natural-scientific framework thus takes shape as a means for organizing our understanding of these relations into a coherent body of knowledge and functions as a map that lets us see what outcome a particular action will bring.5

There is no reason, Dewey argues, why we cannot apply this same insight to endeavors governed by ethical, aesthetic, or even religious purposes, as the principle is the same: certain of reality's features show up through purposeful action and are understood by experimentally exploring this action's result. The only difference is that these higher purposes involve subtler patterns than those seen in physical reality. For this reason, we should expect experimental physical inquiry to mature long before experimental ethical, aesthetic, or religious inquiry. This is no excuse for despair or inaction, though, as all forms of experimental inquiry develop and mature through active pursuit (1929 p. 217).

5 Dewey points to Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle as affirmations of this account of natural science. Within the Newtonian paradigm, mass, velocity, and location were considered inherent properties of nature's unchanging material substrate. Natural science investigated these qualities in order to discern their governing laws and gain certain predictive knowledge of and control over their behavior. This research program fell apart when Einstein showed mass to vary with velocity and Heisenberg, that velocity and location are

not simultaneously knowable. Some feared that these shift would leave us rudderless on the stormy sea of uncertainty, but the opposite, in fact, turned out to be the case: they ushered in a period of unparalleled scientific and technological advance. The reason for this, Dewey argues, is that they helped us approach natural science as a means for purposefully selecting among reality's excess through experimental action, which is what it always was at its best.

Dewey contends that our "beliefs about values are pretty much in the position in which beliefs about nature were before the scientific revolution" (1929 p. 204). This gives us an idea of the magnitude of change he imagines such broader applications of scientific strategy to portend.

Of course, making these changes requires that we abandon certain long held practices and beliefs, chief among which are those forms of supernaturalism that have long dominated human affairs, particularly those religious. For supernaturalism stifles the natural impulse to act experimentally and diverts energy into "irrelevant modes of practice, into rite and cult...[and the] discovery of omens" (1929 p. 203).

Acknowledging that his proposal seems to strip religion of its distinctive features, he alternately contends that it will liberate mankind's natural religious life into a more effective and fulfilling mode of operation. We see this, he suggests, when we recognize that the traditional religions do not have a monopoly on the religious attitude; it also nourishes scientific inquiry, social causes of various sorts, poetry, and philosophy, to name a few. The confusion of supernatural religion with the religious attitude is largely responsible for the general disrepute into which this essential aspect of life has fallen, and differentiating them lets us reverse this tendency and return religious aims to their rightful place at the center of life. In making this claim, Dewey does not ignore the historic religions' many contributions, but simply points out that, just as religion has undergone massive periods of transformation in the past, it is today going through just such a period and its future course will be affected by the concepts we have of

what religion can and should be.

I very much agree with Dewey's sense of the present hour and the need for a powerful re-conceptualization of religion's current and future possibilities. Likewise, I concur with his claim that scientific strategy must form a central part of this re-conceptualization. In arguing this, my point is not that we should abandon such pursuits as prayer, meditation, moral struggle, commitment to the improvement of religious institutions, etc. for some kind of abstract science of religion. Rather, the claim is that learning to employ scientific strategy in distinctly religious practices would yield tremendous benefits. Such inquiries will, of course, generate different concepts, methods, and standards of precision than those employed in the natural sciences, but this does not prohibit them from both functioning as "scientific" systems of knowledge.

Certainly, Dewey's account of scientific strategy needs to be updated by subsequent developments in the philosophy of science, but the basic point stands nonetheless. 6

To provide an initial approach to the concept of a scientific mode of religious inquiry, we can helpfully reference Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth (1994). This work narrates Gandhi's maturing understanding of certain spiritual truths through a continuous process of scriptural study (mainly the Bhagavad Gita, though also the Bible), experimental application of the insights gained therein to environing social problems, and reflection upon the outcomes of his action. Though his line of inquiry failed to achieve the depth of social change he envisioned, it did yield lasting and repeatable knowledge concerning the effectiveness of spiritually oriented, non-violent civil disobedience as a means of social transformation. In this way, Gandhi's method of inquiry offers a clear example of how an individual can carry out an experimental line of religious inquiry. That said, his efforts did not give rise to the growing and maturing community of inquirers that so essentially characterizes scientific inquiry.

The worldwide Baha'i community offers a noteworthy example of this next step. The Baha'i Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions and constitutes a body of more than five million registered adherents and many more actively participating in its work. It expressly aims to build a peaceful and unified world civilization characterized by both material and spiritual prosperity. Among the varied processes that inform its global efforts in this direction, Baha'is are currently developing an experimental approach to learning the dynamics of spiritual community building in neighborhood and village contexts around the world. Rooted in each local community's efforts, this learning process is systematized by regular meetings for reflection in which several such communities come together to consolidate their learnings and plan for upcoming months. Similar occasions for reflection and planning also proceed at regional, national, and international levels in order to discern broader patterns and direct guidance and support back to local communities. All participants, whether Baha'i or not, see themselves as active contributors to a collective learning process. Though this description

6 6 Peter Godfrey-Smith's Theory and Reality (2003), for example, offers a good account of philosophy of science's

evolution from logical empiricism through contemporary debates, and settles upon a beefed up version of Dewey's account of experimental method. It is from Godfrey-Smith that I draw the term "scientific strategy."

superficially treats a profound and quickly maturing process, it is meant only to give a glimpse into what a more scientific mode of collective religious inquiry might look like. For a more detailed articulation of these features of the Baha'i community, see (Lample, 2010).

My main contention with Dewey's attempted reconstruction of religion concerns his attempt to limit religion to a naturalistic account of reality. Admittedly, he avoids the mistake of considering the natural-scientific framework equivalent to reality as such, presenting it instead as a particularly powerful means for navigating nature's excess. Still, he

refuses to show the same
flexibility when faced with some of the more immodest and problematic characterizations of
spiritual reality that arose in the late Medieval and early modern periods. On his reading, belief
in spiritual reality entails a dualistic metaphysics and derails all forms of experimental inquiry.
Would it not be more in keeping with his thoroughgoing realism and reconciling approach to
simply acknowledge the existence of a spiritual reality while challenging those conceptions
thereof that generate the kind of impractical fatalism and fragmented metaphysics of which he is
so rightfully suspicious? Even the most cursory study of the history of thought reveals a plethora
of concepts of spiritual reality that avoid the problems Dewey identifies, many that are even
amenable to the kind of experimental inquiry he envisions.7 In this way, it becomes clear that
Dewey's refusal to engage with spiritual reality with the same patience and flexibility he shows
nature stems from prejudice.
On another note, one wishes that he showed greater scholarly discipline and exhaustiveness in his arguments. His account of primitive human life, which forms the bedrock
of his narrative, is perplexingly scant and apparently results from intuitive assertion. Likewise,
his breezy narration of religion's history acknowledges the existence of little more than the tribal,
Greek, and Christian religions. Such casual disregard for the complexity of humanity's religious
heritage is expressive of the superficiality and presumption with which much contemporary
discourse treats religion. Fortunately, Dewey's philosophical insight exceeds his loose
scholarship and yields a singular vision of an experimental mode of religious inquiry and
practice that avoids the extremes of both theologism and naive naturalism.

7 We can even acknowledge that a certain strand of philosophy and theology become burdened by such problematic

conceptions, which in turn generated the overzealous naturalistic reaction from which Dewey struggles to recover.

Though Marcel Gauchet provides much less insight into religion's possible return to a
role of social centrality, he helps us develop a more attentive approach to

religion's historical
development and role in humanity's cultural evolution than either Dennett or Dewey.

III Marcel Gauchet

Gauchet's subtraction narrative, presented in The Disenchantment of the World (1997
[1986]), begins with the claim that tribal society exhibits religion's consummate form.
Subsequent transformations of religion are not developments, but rather steps towards religion's
ultimate dissolution. Christianity completes this devolution and leads to the formation of a non-
religious secular society, which is why he describes Christianity as the "religion for departing
from religion" (1997 p. 4). In calling modern society non-religious, Gauchet does not suggest
that individuals stop believing in spiritual reality or practicing religion. Rather, his point is that
the current social order reverses the tribal religious order. He therefore has no problem
envisioning the possibility of a non-religious society being dominating by a believing majority,
though he has a hard time imagining how humanity's overall levels of belief could not, in the
end, wane.
His view of religion stems from his broader reflections upon humanity's existential
situation. We are thrown into a pre-formed part of an established world with capacities and
opportunities that we had no say in choosing. At the same time, we are intelligent and
purposeful beings who cannot help but change ourselves and our world to better suit our liking.
We are beings of both passivity and activity, and our response to any given situation takes shape
as a blend of these two orientations. That said, the longer historical arch displays a clear
directional shift from passivity to activity. As Gauchet puts it, earlier societies showed a
complete "submission to an order received in toto, determined before and outside our will" while
modern society conceives the order of things as "originating in the will of individuals" (1997 p.
11). He equates this change with the transition from religious to secular society, and names it the
secret logic of human history.

Gachet thus presents religion as a “well-defined type of society based on the priority of
the principle of collective organization over the will of the individuals it brings together” (p. 27).

It is one in which the “forces of change are put completely in the service of preserving and
giving unwavering assent to what exists” (p. 29). Religious societies achieve this end by
locating their collective law in a mythic eternal order under which all irrevocably stand. There is
no need for a state or social hierarchy to preserve the sacred order because it unproblematically
reigns over every aspect of social reality, with established rituals maintaining and repairing our
engagement therewith.
Clearly, religious society brought with it certain benefits, else it would not have reigned
universally throughout the longest period of human history. As Gauchet explains, it combats
social domination by establishing unrelenting equality before the sacred order, limits social
conflict by placing social responsibility above individual concerns, and mitigates the struggle
with nature by working to establish a static harmony with environing conditions. With these
points in mind, Gauchet thus remarks, “Not without good reason has [religion] preoccupied our
forefathers and dominated practically all of history” (p. 6).
Religion was, nevertheless, ultimately unable to stem the tide of change, as the tribal
form of society gave way to the archaic state circa 3000 BCE. This is not to say that religion
threw in the towel as soon as such fundamental change began. To the contrary, the entirety of
religion’s subsequent history tells the story of its faltering attempts to re-establish humanity’s
unproblematic connection with a timeless sacred order. Religion’s history is thus not an
“evolutionary process by which vague or rudimentary religious ideas have become more precise,
profound, and systematic,” but rather “just so many stages of its abatement and
disintegration” (p. 9). Put more simply still, “[w]hen dealing with religion, what appears to be an
advance is actually a retreat” (p. 10).
Acknowledging his simplification of a complex process, Gauchet narrates the

history of
religions' decline in three stages. The period of archaic religion (e.g.
ancient Egypt and
Mesopotamia) constitutes the first stage in which the state emerges as a
mediating agent between
spiritual and social reality. The need for such mediation signals the
dissolution of tribal society's
unproblematic relation with spiritual reality. Divine kings arise as professed
conciliators of the
two realities and, through their great imperial ambition, present their gods as
best among all
others. Nevertheless, archaic gods actually exert less influence on society
than their tribal

predecessors, for instead of reigning unproblematically and with unquestioned
supremacy over a
particular tribal society, the gods of the divine kings must conquer the world
to prove their worth.
The Axial Age, spanning roughly the period from 800-200 BCE, constitutes the
second
stage in which the foundations of the major world religions are laid. Its
unique feature is the
eruption of prophetic figures from beyond and in critique of the established
archaic order to
claim the divine king's mediating role for themselves. Though aiming to
better align spiritual
and social reality, they actually push the spiritual further from humanity's
daily affairs. For if the
most prominent and powerful socio-religious orders are devoid of real
connection with spiritual
reality, as these figures tend to argue, then one cannot help but consider
spiritual reality as hidden
from all but a few souls.
Christianity, which is the fourth stage of religion's dissolution, arose as a
transformation
the Axial tradition of Judaism. According to Gauchet, all other Axial
traditions, except Greek
philosophy to a certain extent, take a more effectively conservative route than
Judaism by
adopting the concept of an impersonal One or void. Judaism alternately embraces
the idea of a
hidden personal God who presents himself through the subjectivity of a few
marginal prophetic
figures and Christianity takes this logic to its radical and revolutionary
conclusion in the concept
of a powerless God-man. In doing so, Christianity creates the conditions in
which humanity

moves out of religion's reign into a secular age. Let us examine this process more precisely.

Judaism emerges as a rebellion against the Pharaoh's rule that begins to invert the logic of divine kingship. Instead of reigning over a great empire, the Jews' God liberates them from a great worldly power. He is beyond established socio-religious systems and deploys worldly rulers as pawns in his Israelite-centered schemes. While this concept of God consolidates the Israelites and allows them to establish a fledgling nation, they constantly face the question of why, if they were God's favored people, they remain so weak and others so strong.

The Hebrew Prophets arose in response to this problem. They explain that God purifies his people through trial and command the Israelites to bring their thoughts and actions into greater alignment with his law. Messianism deepens this response by announcing a future in which a special figure would arise and bring the rest of humanity under God's law. It was within the twofold context of these prophets of trial and messianism that the unique figure of Christ vaults onto the scene.

Gauchet describes Christ as the inverted Messiah because he completes the Jewish reversal of divine kingship. Like the divine kings, he claims to reconcile heaven and earth and demonstrates a grand imperial ambition. Unlike them, he makes his claim from a position of no worldly influence and deploys a kind of mystical imperialism that professes to leave the political order unchanged. He seeks instead to bring humanity into a community of cultivated detachment from worldly affairs and orientation towards the transcendent God. In doing so, he fulfills the Jewish expectation of a universal messiah and, through the example of his sacrifice, radicalizes their notion of purifying trial. Yet, the actual affect of his life and teachings is to push the divine even further from human affairs. For if God's power appears in a spiritual beyond and leaves the political order more or less unchanged, then we are faced, for the first time, with the possibility of envisioning a non-religious social order in the here below.

Paul consolidates these distancing innovations by establishing a socio-religious order that cultivates otherworldly orientation. But neither he nor those who came after him fully clarified the Christian community's relation to the worldly order. Christians were to live in this world while spiritually inhabiting another. Did that mean that they were to submit entirely to political orders? Or, were they to gain some measure of influence over these orders and bring them closer to Christian ideals? Gauchet argues that this tension cannot be solved within Christian thought, as it stems from the paradox contained within Christ's twofold nature and reconciling function.

Christ is "the perfect union of two natures which, just as profoundly, remain completely distinct" (p. 127). The same union will be realized in the world, but only on the occasion of his second coming. For the time being, Christians inhabit the precarious position of believing in a virtual reconciliation between God and world while living in a world in which this reconciliation remains unrealized.

In time, the Catholic Church sets itself up as a mediating power that helps humanity become aware of this virtual reconciliation and prepare for its eventual realization, but, according to Gauchet, takes on an impossible task in doing so. One cannot hope to maintain a hierarchical socio-religious order whose ultimate purpose is to help people realize the futility of all socio-religious orders. Or, as Gauchet puts it, "[e]cclesial mediation was...built on something that cast doubt on the very possibility of mediation" (p. 137). The Roman empire's collapse draws the Church irremediably into worldly affairs by presenting it with the alluring possibility of creating a "City-World, where the executive mechanisms and the wheels of authority would be subordinate to eternal aims, under the leadership of a single shepherd, who himself was closest to God" (p. 153). From a certain perspective, this shift makes the church appear indistinguishable from other imperial powers, and the Christian kings of Europe were quick to point this difficulty out. The Church, they argue, is an institution operating in this world and,

according to Christian
teaching, must submit to king's rightful political authority. The Protestant Reformation builds
upon this line of thought, claiming even more that God establishes this world with an
autonomous structure and gives control over its affairs to human beings. Religion's concern is
not with political affairs, per say, but rather the spiritual life of all those who must participate
therein. Though this idea first takes shape within the context of European monarchies, its
egalitarian basis eventually appears in the form of secular democracy. Regardless, once we began down this path, Gauchet argues that humanity leaves a religious form of society behind for good. Certainly, countless individuals maintain a strong
faith and religious practice, but we no longer live in a society that presumes to be structured by a
hierarchical and institutionally embodied sacred order. Instead, we consider ourselves
responsible for choosing society's future, and this even when we seek to walk the most
conservative paths. This perspective clarifies one of Gauchet's most counter-intuitive remarks:
"If we were to imagine an imminent miracle freeing the Polish people from Soviet
oppression, we could also imagine that Catholicism, due to its role in safeguarding
national identity, playing a spiritually dominant part within the framework of a free
government...We would nevertheless still be dealing with an atheistic society, made up of
and governed by a believing majority" (p. 4).

While Gauchet has much more to say on the path and nature of modernity's unique formation,
the above account suffices for present purposes.8

8 No doubt, I have not given sufficient attention to features of his argument, notably those metaphysical, that others

would consider essential. In this light, it is important to remember that my aim is to consider and evaluate the
dominant narratives that influence our thinking about religion. Metaphysics certainly plays a part in orienting these
narratives and structuring our notions of religion, but so do many other concepts and forces. My presentation of
Gauchet's subtraction narrative reflects this attempt to maintain a balanced approach to the issues at hand.

Gauchet's is a very helpful account of religion's radically different form and function in previous epochs. While this point may seem banal, he makes it in a way that emphasizes the inapplicability of many notions of religion developed during the modern epoch. He is particularly critical of attempts to reconstruct the world's religions as cultural variations upon a core religious experience or sentiment. Instead, he begins from the premise that contemporary existence departs in many fundamental ways from previous epochs, explaining that such departures are nothing new in human history by exploring three other moments of radical novelty.

These considerations do not lead Gauchet into relativism, though. Rather, he presents religion as a unified phenomenon that evolves in a coherent fashion under various forces. He grounds this claim in the idea that human nature contains a limited and ordered set of possibilities that show something of themselves in every situation. Given religion's great historical and contemporary diversity, it is all too easy to either overlook religion's fundamental unity or present a tactless conception thereof, both of which Gauchet laudably avoids. That said, his is not the only way to develop such an idea and we will explore other noteworthy efforts in due course.

His suggestion that the tensions within the Christian account of Christ's twofold nature and reconciling action animates later social conflicts is also quite helpful, particularly on the issue of science and religion. For once we see that the concept of Christ as the conjunction of opposing realities that somehow temporarily leaves them in disjunction provided resources for the Church and state's competing claims to hegemony, it becomes clear that the conflict between theologism and naturalism displays the same logic: both sides make hegemonic claims in favor of their preferred face of an excessive reality. Of course, this conflict involves much more than Christianity's internal theological tensions. But it is certainly part of the puzzle. Gauchet is also right to point out how a certain concept of Christ's manifestation of God

leads us towards the kind of secularism and naturalism that many of the day's best minds so confidently espouse. That said, his presumption that another conception thereof could not emerge and reorient humanity's social and spiritual affairs is unwarranted.

This brings me to the most fundamental problem with Gauchet's account; his presentation of religion as "a historical phenomenon, that is, one with a definite beginning and end, falling within a specified period followed by another" (p. 21). I accept the idea that we cannot, in contemporary society, be religious in precisely the same manner that we were during the tribal, archaic, Axial, or medieval epochs. There is today a level of plurality and choice that has made universally unproblematic and unreflective commitment to one or another faith a thing of the past. At the same time, this notion is perfectly compatible with the idea that humanity is currently in the midst of a transition to a new mode of being religious, one that will display a new role in society. If one takes the concept of spiritual reality seriously, as I do, then the latter interpretation appears the far more reasonable option.
Additionally, I find Gauchet's claim that his narration of religion's demise flows from history's "inexorable logic" (p. 105) problematic, to say the least. The fact that various coherent and persuasive versions of such rational historicist arguments exist and offer significantly different conclusion casts serious doubt on his grandiose claim that, necessarily, nothing fundamentally new can again enter human history through religion. I doubt that those living at the height of the Egyptian empire imagined that their archaic order would soon be rolled up and a new axial one rolled out its its stead by a group of slaves. Are we in the West, despite our inexorable logics, really so different?
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To summarize these three subtraction narratives, Dennett argues that religion constitutes a cultural symbiant of dubious merit that arises from the interplay of our overactive agent detection and response to the death of knowledge bestowing parents. It first takes form

through the
accumulation of superstitious rites and rituals and later through the immunizing efforts of
religious stewards. Such efforts eventually codify religious practice and abstract its beliefs to the
point where naturalistic-leaning essence religion comes on the scene. The Scientific Revolution
and Enlightenment lead increasing numbers beyond religion into scientific naturalism, but the
masses of humanity remain mired in religion. The contemporary task is thus to use natural
science to mitigate religion's destructive tendencies and help those at the later stages of religious
abstraction to move towards naturalism.

Dewey argues that supernatural religion arose as a perversion of the religious attitude by
our attempts to manage life's difficulties with feelings of satisfaction. Doing so appears to open
a field of action in which we can improve life by winning spiritual favor, but such actions
inevitably fail and impel us to develop increasingly extreme and complex forms of religion. The
breakthrough into Greek philosophy constituted an essential moment in this process, as it
transformed supernatural religion into the quest for certain knowledge of reality's eternal forms
that dominates the medieval and modern periods and generates the conflict between science and
religion. When properly understood, natural science falsifies these pursuits, and applying its
lessons to religion will liberate the religious attitude from supernaturalism and return religion to
the center of life as a scientific endeavor.
Gauchet presents religion as a historical phenomenon whose consummate form appears
in tribal society and progressively dissipates thereafter. Religious societies work by deploying
all the forces of human life towards maintaining an unchanging social order. This kind of society
dominates the longest period of human history but eventually falters, proceeding thereafter
through three stages of dissolution (archaic, axial, and Christian religion) on the way to secular
society. This devolution centers on the emergence of divine kings of infinite worldly ambition
and their slow inversion into the powerless God-man whose kingdom is not of

this world. The latter character, appearing in the person of Jesus Christ, opens the possibility of a non-hierarchical and secular here below that slowly forces itself upon us. Though many individuals maintain religious practice and belief, it is no longer possible for societies to be truly religious again, barring some kind of apocalyptic collapse and reversion.

Having taken the measure of these prominent subtraction narratives, it should be clear that this way of thinking about religion has certain strengths and weaknesses. On a positive note, subtraction narratives are attuned to the value of many novel features of modern Western society, particularly its scientific mode of inquiry, and the way these spring from and impel us to depart certain long established modes of religious practice and belief. They also help us recognize that humanity is in the the midst of a great period of transition. At the same time, their rejection of spiritual reality leads them to overlook many features of religion's past that are worthy of contemporary engagement and preservation and limit reflection on religion's future to possibilities currently visible within contemporary Western contexts.

As we will see in the next chapter, renewal narratives show an almost inverse set of strengths and weaknesses. Before pursuing this inquiry, though, I want to pause and gather some of the most salient insights highlighted above into a series of positive remarks about religion. I will pursue a similar course at each subsequent chapter's conclusion, thereby progressively building a broader and more balanced account of religion:

Religion is one of the most important and powerful forces within the contemporary world and should, for this reason, be the object of intense and widespread inquiry. The natural-scientific framework must play an important role in such inquiry, as religion is clearly affected by biological and cultural evolution. The natural-scientific approach is particularly useful in understanding the illusions and destructive tendencies that often spring up and take hold of many religious traditions. It also helps us measure certain of religion's benefits. As natural-scientific

investigations of religion will rapidly develop, it is important not to draw conclusions too hastily
from initial theories.
At the same time, we must learn to employ a scientific strategy within religion’s internal
functioning. Achieving this requires that religions shift their emphasis from developing abstract
theological systems and marshaling allegiance thereto to the work of enacting spiritual principles
and purposes in social reality through experimental action. Realizing this new mode of religious
inquiry should yield at least as powerful results as did the modern transformation of premodern
science. It will also lead away from the line of Greek and medieval thought that generates the
conflict between science and religion into a way of thinking where science and religion
constitute complementary systems of knowledge.
We also cannot underestimate the extent to which contemporary concepts remain blind to
religion’s radically different past. This is not to say that previous epochs must remain forever
unintelligible to us, as religion constitutes a unified and coherently developing phenomenon that
activates the depths of human existence in comprehensibly reliable ways. Rather, the point is
that we should strive to transcend contemporary habits, fashions, and assumptions in our

thinking about religion and proceed instead by developing our concepts through sustained
engagement with the longer arch of religion’s development.

— Subtraction Narratives (Used by permission of the curator)