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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Wondrous Healing: Shamanism, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion by James McClenon

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committed francophone Catholics played a crucial role in narrowly defeating Quebec sovereigntists in the 1995 referendum. But Jacques Parizeau, the then-premier, hardly could have publicly blamed, for example, elderly Pentecostal Catholic ladies for the defeat, as much as he did the 'money and ethnic votes.'

In the end, some methodological choices impact on the book's relevance for sociologists of religion, if not for historians and theology students. Why reduce references to civic/civil religion to Quebec cases? Evidence of the Charter of Rights working in Canada as a functional equivalent of religion has been presented for some time. Why not have considered the dynamics brought on by cults, sects, or religious movements in the rethinking? Granted, the 'church' variable is held constant (4). But how have religious and public authorities dealt with new and intense public controversies involving 'historical' churches?

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Wondrous Healing: Shamanism, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion, by JAMES McCLENON. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002. 216 pp., \$ 40.00 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

Wondrous Healing continues a cycle of publication that began with McClenon's *Wondrous Events* and provides an extended exposition of his "ritual healing theory" of religion. It is an important and worthwhile, original and potentially definitive, contribution to the theory of religion, not simply a theory about religion. The thesis will be controversial both among some sociologists of religion and among some religious people, but

I am convinced that, as much as one can talk about theories of phenomena as complex as religion, McClenon has presented the most coherent scientific explanation yet available.

"The ritual healing theory . . . is grounded in evolutionary neurophysiology" (13). It begins with research on hypnotizability, provides contemporary evidence that hypnotizability is genetically based but socially mediated, and argues that the human capacity for religion springs from the success of primitive healers in relation to this genetic capacity. Quite simply, the hypnotizable survived at a higher rate, thanks to ritual healing (shamanism), than the non-hypnotizable, and religion was born. The critical mediating stage in evolution for this to happen was language. Wittgenstein *revivendus*: religion is a language game. Thus there was a co-evolution of hypnotizability, language, and religion: "Language and cultural development were inseparable from physical evolution" (33). Because hypnotizability is not simply a biological capacity, however, but socially mediated, religion is not simply a one-on-one practitioner-client relationship. Re-enter Durkheim: not the Durkheim of Parsonian functionalism, however, but the Durkheim of "collective effervescence" — the collective becomes inherently, if not essentially, connected to the healing process. In the life of the primitive community, collective effervescence sets the stage for the maximization of the hypnotic reservoir of the client/believer and the hypnotic skills of the practitioner. Religion is inherently social because ritual interaction enables the maximization of genetic potential: "experiences shape belief . . . biological, psychological, and sociological factors operate simultaneously" (14, 18).

Without denying the existence of gods, this is obviously a secular theory of religion. It is also a virtually unparalleled scientific theory because it is testable. How does McClenon come to this point? Across twenty years of research in psi-related phenomena, McClenon observed two things: "very different cultures often use similar spiritual healing practices" and "certain types of people benefit from these practices to a greater degree than others" (4). Interrelating these two sets of

data lead toward the theory: cross-cultural similarities among spiritual/religious healing practices and similarities among types of persons "healed." In terms of psi-phenomena theories, specifically, the evidence, here and elsewhere, points away from so-called culture-source theories to experience-source theories: that is, there is something in the experience that explains the phenomenon, rather than something in the culture, though this is not at all to say that culture does not mediate having the experience. Such a view is similarly consistent with sociological situationism, inasmuch as the Thomas theorem would hold that an experience defined as real is real in its effects.

A particularly important piece of evidence for holding McClenon's theory together is ancient medical textbooks. Referring particularly to ancient Egyptian and Greek texts — but works that also have Chinese and Indian analogues — McClenon argues that all ancient societies developed medical systems based on religious ritual. The first medical texts were basically sorcerers' handbooks. Here is, then, the key to McClenon's claim to offer a theory that can be subjected to scientific test: "The existence of language, caring attitudes, and ritual altered states of consciousness among early humans would have selected for genes associated with hypnotizability. The existence of ancient texts connecting religious rituals with medical practice also suggests that humans used ritual healing for a sufficient time for it to have affected the frequency of related genotypes" (45). A relatively straightforward extrapolation (provided in greater detail in an Appendix to the text) shows that even a somewhat modest genotype selection for hypnotizability along these lines would have a significant impact across generations. Put in today's terms: religious people are survivors. While we certainly cannot go back and test this theory millennia ago, it can be subject to contemporary tests according to the following hypothesis: "spiritual healing outcomes and the frequency of unusual ritual experiences will be correlated with hypnotizability (measured by standardized tests) and cognitive openness (measured by questionnaires)" (62).

Thus the uniqueness of McClenon's theory: it can be falsified. As such, in my view, it constitutes the only *scientific* theory of religion, q.e.d. It behooves its detractors to provide *evidence* that contradicts it. Evidence in the contemporary case cannot absolutely disprove its account of the past, but in the absence of evidence to the contrary in the contemporary case, it behooves any detractor to provide an alternative theory that is equally susceptible to empirical test — viz., meets the falsifiability criterion.

McClenon's work is based on far more than casual observation. It is a combination of extensive literature review across a variety of disciplines, wide travels, and the accumulation of *thousands* of first-person narratives of psi/religious experiences. These confirm the perception of a "beyond" of some sort for many people across cultures and across such standard demographic characteristics as race, sex, educational level, and social class. From students of human behavior they demand an account — a theory. Sociology of religion, though it may be close to producing a definitive theory *about* religion, continues to lack a worthwhile theory *of* religion, perhaps because it has failed to take honest account of religious (or anomalous) experiences that human beings recount. It is time for that to change. As McClenon observes in his conclusion: "If sociologists of religion wish to understand why people believe as they do, they must be willing to listen to people's stories" (155). Many of those stories will tell of things that heretofore have not fit into a scientific calculus, hence have been dismissed. The ritual healing theory provides a comprehensive account that allows religious experience to be included in, rather than explained away. May his tribe increase.

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