Will humankind always be religious? Will ancient views of God and the cosmos disintegrate as more and more people employ the scientific method for understanding the world? Or is there something within the human breast that can never let go of beliefs in supernatural reality? The following three essays—by William Sims Bainbridge, Albert Ellis, and Ronald O. Clarke—paint a fascinating picture of the psychological foundations of religious belief, a picture as disturbing as it is illuminating.

Is Belief in the Supernatural Inevitable?

William Sims Bainbridge

In a pair of books, *The Future of Religion* and *A Theory of Religion,* Rodney Stark and I have tried to demonstrate that religion is the inevitable human response to the conditions of life. Hemmed by drastic limitations to our desires and faced with the ultimate loss of everything we hold dear, humans have no choice but to postulate beings and forces that exist beyond the natural world and to seek their aid. *A Theory of Religion* deduces the necessity of religion from a few, simple propositions about humans and the world we inhabit, while *The Future of Religion* offers empirical data to support our theoretical analysis. We are not so naive or conceited, however, as to imagine that our arguments and data will convince those who dislike our conclusions.

Social science has given religion a very low priority for more than half a century. Not since Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) or the several short books on religion by Sigmund Freud has there been a general theory of religion—a systematic attempt to explain it and to understand the human qualities that give it birth—not until our pair of books. Scientists tend to be irreligious, and the career of a university scholar rewards skepticism today far more than faith. Indeed, it can appear rather perverse for two contemporary social scientists to propose the inevitability of belief in the supernatural, all the more so when both of them personally admit they lack this belief.

Yet scientists are trained to pay attention to the evidence and to ask penetrating questions. And in the social sciences it is quite common for the facts to lead in directions uncomfortable for the researchers. So, rather than press my views upon you, let me invite you to ask a set of three simple questions. In return, I will offer you evidence and explanations that Stark and I have gathered. If you find them insufficient as answers, then you will be left to struggle with three very serious questions:

1. Why have humans traditionally possessed religion?
2. What is the condition of religion in America today?
3. How viable are the alternatives to religion?

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Why have humans traditionally possessed religion?

Many answers have been offered, from Durkheim's claim that religion expressed social solidarity to the calumny of Marx that religion was a tool of oppression by the ruling class. Yet the answer that I seem to find most often coming from intellectuals is that religion is a primitive way of understanding the world, a veil of primitive myths woven when our species was immature, ignorant, and superstitious.

While Marx might hope for an end to class oppression, and Durkheim might wonder how solidarity might be expressed in a wholly secular world, neither of their theories predicts the inevitable end of religion. Class struggle, or the consensual solidarity that is its opposite, might continue forever, perpetuating into all eternity the conditions that Marx and Durkheim believed gave rise to religion. But the view that religion is primarily a primitive way of thinking clearly points the way to its extinction, when science banishes the spooks of ignorance from the popular mind—as many scientists and scholars smugly believe it already has from their own.

What else could faith be? One possibility is that faith is the sister of hope, and that both are children of desire. The human mind did not evolve in order to create a race of philosophers and scientists. Rather, in the long course of biological evolution, greater mental capacity proved valuable in meeting life's practical tasks. Ages before *Homo* became *sapiens,* our ancestors

"Whether science ends in complete wisdom or financial bankruptcy, an era of stability in scientific knowledge would be one in which new religions could exploit the scientific world-view rather than be challenged by it."

sought rewards and tried to avoid punishments. Pleasure and pain were mechanisms that guided the organism toward survival and reproduction. As increased brain size and a high level of sociability produced the phenomenon we call "intelligence," these animal instincts were served in far more refined ways. Philosophers and scientists exist today because they serve very particular functions in the contemporary division of labor. But their mental habits are quite atypical, and the dominant function of the mind remains the hunt for material or social gain.

Probably more than any other creature, humans are aware of time. Within limitations, we can know and interpret the past, but we can never influence it. The future, however, can be influenced for our benefit, on the basis of knowledge derived from the past. Thus, humans seek what they have learned to perceive as rewards and avoid what they have learned to perceive as costs. The ultimate definition of reward must be in terms of our animal desires for survival, nourishment, activity, social interaction, and the like. But, with our complex brains and the socially created tool of language, we discover many instrumental rewards, leading ultimately to satisfaction of instinctual drives by very roundabout routes.

Daily, humans face some of the same problems, again and again. Situations recur, requiring investments of particular kinds to obtain rewards. In solving our problems we imagine possible means of achieving the desired reward, and we select the one with the greatest likelihood of success in the light of available information. Then we pursue action along the chosen line until the reward has been achieved or our solution to the problem has proved unsatisfactory. In solving problems, then, the human mind must seek explanations. *Explanations* are statements about how and why rewards may be obtained and costs are incurred.

But the search for explanations that provide desired rewards is often fruitless. Some desired rewards are limited in supply, including some that simply do not exist. It is tragic that humans can conceive of a dead child coming back to life yet have no natural means to accomplish this. The list of our unsatisfiable desires is very long, but at the head of the list is eternal life itself.

Most rewards sought by humans are destroyed when they are used. This is obvious in the case of food. But the principle also holds for many far less material rewards. Our species must do all the work of love-making afresh each time, unable to hold its erotic pleasures long, before losing them. Even honor and respect must be continually replenished through significant efforts to keep them alive.

In pursuit of desired rewards, humans will exchange rewards with other humans. This can profit both parties of the exchange, because they need not value equally the things they trade. Because many rewards are consumed when used, we are drawn into continuing relationships with particular other humans who can keep providing them to us. If the exchanges continue to provide rewards, we come to value the exchange partner highly, and to trust him. Among the rewards most highly desired are good explanations concerning how to obtain other rewards. We are apt to develop some trust in the explanations we receive from the people who have given us the most valuable rewards, including explanations, in the past.

Some explanations are very hard to evaluate, particularly when a reward is highly desired and difficult to obtain. In the absence of a desired reward, explanations often will be accepted that posit its attainment in the distant future or in some other nonverifiable context. Stark and I call these explanations "compensators." When the value of the reward promised is very great, we refer to "general compensators."

A compensator is like an I.O.U. or any other kind of promise that, if certain things are done—certain investments are made—a reward will return. Of course, people prefer to get a reward immediately, and they will not often turn to mere compensators when the reward is available to them. But when the reward is highly desired and practically unobtainable, humans will accept general compensators instead.

A *religion* is a system of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions. *Supernatural* refers to forces beyond or outside nature that can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces. The reason religion is so successful as a purveyor of general compensators is that it is, in principle, impossible to examine the supernatural and prove whether or not it really can deliver the desired rewards. Politics also demands considerable faith of its adherents, but in relatively short order a political program must deliver the goods or be discredited. Religion, in contrast, can require a person to await delivery in the afterlife or in some higher plane of consciousness unattainable by the unfaithful.

This, in a nutshell, is the Stark-Bainbridge theory of religion. The fact that we took the better part of a thousand pages to communicate it in our two books suggests that the above is a very sketchy outline, requiring much greater specificity to be precise enough for scientific test. But the central ideas should be clear enough.

Religion is not the residue of the crudest human thoughts, but a reaching out for the most sublime, the natural extension of our intelligence beyond the limitations set by our environment and our physical natures. Born in the tragedy of the human condition, religion is the rational response of a courageous species never willing to accept defeat. What we cannot have here and now we work collectively to achieve in the future. If the combined effort to help each other and to benefit from each other that we call "civilization" cannot succeed this side of death, then it must continue beyond.

Note that this theory does not merely say that an individual will postulate the supernatural as wish-fulfillment for unrealized desires. Ours is a social theory that derives religion from social interaction between exchange-partners, and it is an historical theory that requires long periods of time for major religious changes. In social history there are many forces that may modify religion, and the kind of religion we know today is not the only variety that has existed or could exist. But whatever

varies in human life, the terrible limitations of the human condition will continue, and these are the roots of religion.

What is the condition of religion in America today?

Religion today has some influence on public affairs, but the church has little power over other institutions or over many individuals. One might deduce from this that religion is on the decline, because our image of previous centuries is one in which religion had great coercive power, and such a decline is commonly called "secularization." However, this picture of a near-theocratic past is a myth. Stark has recently shown that, by some measures, such as the rate of church membership, religion has steadily gained over American history.

The process of secularization is quite real, but Stark and I think it has been misunderstood. In every age of history when there was a free market of religion, the dominant religious organizations were under social pressure to moderate their beliefs and practices to fit those of secular elites. Often, this means that the elite religious denominations are in decline, and thus there is the appearance that religion in general is on the wane. But simultaneously, other organizations in the same religious tradition will be growing, fundamentalist denominations and the schismatic groups we call "sects."

As the churches of the elite accommodate to secular culture, their grip on the supernatural weakens. Like liberal churches today, they may have little to promise members and little to demand of them. The ticket to heaven becomes cheap, but the route map is lost. Existing conservative denominations and new sects will expand to fill the gap. Originally finding their social base in disadvantaged groups, they can grow into the mainstream of the society and eventually possess many elite members. At this point they become vulnerable to the same forces that weakened the earlier elite denominations, and more conservative rivals will arise to take their places. Secularization is a self-limiting process, a cycle of religious expansion, liberalization, decline, and fresh expansion.

This model fits the current situation in America. The liberal churches are declining, but this is not destroying religion in general. The conservative churches are growing, but this does not mean future religion will be extremely conservative. The historical record indicates that the American cycle of religious decline and replenishment is well-balanced. These points deserve detailed, scientific study. But simple data on membership in some of the main denominations, given here in Table 1, sketch the big picture.

The data are taken from a pair of massive surveys of denominational membership, published by the Glenmary Research Center, dating from 1971 and 1980. The Catholics appear to be holding their own, and within their tradition liberal and conservative tendencies probably balance out. Protestant denominations differ greatly in their acceptance of secular standards versus assertion of supernatural absolutes. Despite its huge financial and cultural capital, the Episcopal church is losing members, as are other liberal denominations. The Unitarian-Universalists, who never believed Christ was divine and now doubt that even God is, are quickly declining.

Moderate Protestant denominations are holding their own, while the conservative groups are expanding rapidly. This table is not designed to illustrate the liberalization of many successful denominations, which in the long run offsets conservative gains; but at least one of the moderate groups, the Missouri Synod Lutherans, might have been considered conservative a few years ago. At the bottom of the table we see evidence of the success of Mormonism, a group that is not a mere fundamentalist Protestant sect but a whole new religious tradition.

Table 1
Estimated Membership of Some Major Denominations in America

Denomination	1971	1980	Change
Catholics	44,863,492	47,502,152	+ 6%
Liberal Protestants			
Episcopal	3,032,197	2,823,399	- 7%
United Church of Christ	2,271,432	2,096,014	- 8%
United Presbyterian Church	3,546,941	2,974,186	-16%
Unitarian-Universalists	194,733	156,286	-20%
Moderate Protestants			
American (Northern) Baptist	1,693,423	1,922,467	+14%
American Lutheran	2,490,537	2,361,845	- 5%
Disciples of Christ	1,158,855	1,212,977	+ 5%
Lutheran Church in America	3,010,150	2,911,817	- 3%
Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod	2,772,996	2,622,847	- 5%
Presbyterian Church in the U.S.	1,147,499	1,038,649	- 9%
United Methodist	11,511,709	11,552,111	0%
Conservative Protestants			
Church of God (Anderson)	389,989	535,647	+37%
Church of God (Cleveland)	369,989	474,315	+28%
Church of the Nazarene	869,831	885,749	+ 2%
Churches of Christ	994,926	1,600,177	+61%
Seventh-Day Adventists	536,082	668,611	+25%
Southern Baptist	14,488,635	16,281,692	+12%
Mormons			
Latter-Day Saints	2,133,072	2,684,744	+26%

Sources: Churches and Church Membership in the United States–1971, by Douglas W. Johnson, Paul R. Picard, and Bernard Quinn (Washington, D.C.: Glenmary Research Center, 1974); *Churches and Church Membership in the United States*–1980, by Bernard Quinn, Herman Anderson, Martin Bradley, Paul Goetting, and Peggy Shriver (Atlanta, Ga.: Glenmary Research Center, 1982).

A dynamic theory of secularization is not complete until it can encompass the emergence of wholly new religions. While rooted in Christianity, as Christianity was in Judaism, Mormonism possesses a considerable set of new teachings, complete with holy books, and a powerful religious community well adapted to success in the modern world. Stark and I believe that we have entered into one of those exciting periods of history when new religious traditions arise.

Without meaning any disparagement, we call novel religious groups that represent new religious traditions "cults." While sects arise within a religious tradition to replace declining denominations, cults expand to fill the gap when an entire tradition declines. For the past decade, Stark and I have searched for every possible way of testing our proposition that cults will thrive when conventional religion fails to serve people's needs.

Table 2
Church Members and Cults in 75 American Cities

Rates per 100,000 Population

Group of 25 Cities	Percent Church Members	*Fate* Letter Writers	Scientology Clears	Spirit Community	Christian Science	Transcendental Meditation
High	67.7%	0.69	1.34	0.72	0.77	344.3
Medium	53.8%	0.77	2.54	0.92	1.01	435.8
Low	38.5%	1.35	9.09	1.90	2.01	598.4

We have seen relatively high rates of acceptance of occult and pseudoscientific ideas among respondents to surveys who report no religious affiliation or who are members of the highly secularized liberal denominations. It appears that traditional religion inoculates believers against novel superstition. However, critics may always raise doubts about the way we phrased questions in our surveys or how we recruited our respondents. Therefore it is of great importance that we have been able to test our theory using data based not on responses to our questionnaires but on the actual religious behavior of vast numbers of American citizens.

The statistics on church membership published in 1971 and 1980 by the Glenmary Research Center, from which I drew the data in Table 1, made it possible to estimate overall church membership rates for American cities, with data on Jews coming from the annual Jewish Yearbook. These were official data from the denominations themselves, and some groups either did not have such information or refused to participate. However, the coverage was quite good, and we were able to develop unbiased methods for estimating the total number of people who formally belonged to congregations in each city outside New England. The trouble with New England is purely technical. The smallest geographic unit in the religion statistics, and the smallest for many government statistics, is the county. But in New England, unlike the rest of the nation, the county boundaries and the official boundaries for metropolitan areas do not coincide.

My complete analysis is based on 289 metropolitan areas outside New England, but for sake of simplicity I will report here on just the seventy-five metropolitan areas having populations of a half million or more in 1980. Conveniently, we can divide these seventy-five into three groups of twenty-five each, in terms of their rates of church membership. As Table 2 shows, on average 67.7 percent of the population of a city are members of religious groups in the group of twenty-five with the highest rates. The average church membership rate for the twenty-five cities in the middle is 53.8 percent, still a majority. But on average only 38.5 percent are church members in the lower twenty-five cities.

Where are the most religious cities? Are they in the Bible Belt? Among the top twenty-five are New Orleans, Birmingham, Greenville, Memphis, Charlotte, Louisville, and Richmond. So far, it looks like the South. But the cities with the highest rates of church membership also include Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Albany, Jersey City, Newark, and New York City. In all of these, more than 60 percent of residents belong to churches.

Cities with high rates can be found throughout the East, South, and Midwest. The cities with the lowest rates are mainly concentrated in the West. About 40 percent of the residents of Tampa are church members. The cities that fall between 40 and 35 percent are: Tucson, Phoenix, San Francisco, Portland, Denver, and Oxnard. Below 35 percent are: Riverside, Anaheim, Sacramento, San Diego, Honolulu, Seattle, and San Jose.

The best explanation we have found yet is the simple fact that rates of geographic mobility are especially high in these same cities. While about 75 percent of people in the twenty-five cities with high church member rates were born in the state where they now reside, only 50 percent of people in the twenty-five cities of low church membership were. While 42 percent of people in the highest twenty-five cities changed homes in the past five years, 55 percent of those in low cities did so. When people move, they lose membership in their old congregation, and it often takes a complex process of developing friendships with several members of a particular church in the new town to establish membership again. This is more difficult in the mobile West, and thus rates of church membership are much lower.

But people do not lose the need for hope, comfort, and the feeling that life has meaning, merely because they travel west. Large pools of potential converts to some kind of religion are found near the shores of the Pacific, and even the strangest cults can have some success dipping into them. Table 2 reports information on five different cults or aspects of the occult milieu about which I was able to develop good data. For each I have calculated rates per 100,000 population.

Fate magazine is the central publication of the American occult, established in 1948 and giving its readers a monthly dose of astrology, ancient mysteries, religious cults, pseudoscience, and advertisements for a dizzying array of cultic businesses. Among the standard features are three columns of letters from readers, two of which report readers' mystic experiences and contacts with the dead. I tabulated the addresses of all such letters published in the 120 issues from 1975 through 1984, calculating rates for each metropolitan area.

Cults rise and fall, but perhaps the most consistently influential and fascinating novel religion for the past thirty-five years has been Scientology, the creation of science-fiction author L. Ron Hubbard. Believers who have attained a high level of spiritual enlightenment are called "clears." David Aden of Scientology of Boston was kind enough to obtain for me a tabulation of Scientology clears in all postal zip areas in 1985, which I was then able to assign to the right metropolitan areas for the calculation of rates.

Since the early 1970s, a New Age cult in San Rafael, California, has published *Spiritual Community Guide,* a traveler's directory of groups and businesses somehow connected with the occult or New Age counterculture. The largest number of listings is found in the 1974 edition, partly because the group began charging an advertising fee after that issue. Again, it was a straightforward task to calculate rates of listings for all metropolitan areas.

Christian Science is one of the most solidly established cults in America, more than a century old and well known

throughout the world. Despite having its headquarters in Boston, Christian Science has always been most popular in newly developing areas, like the far West. In journal articles about the 1920s and about Canadian cults, I have been able to analyze actual membership statistics for Christian Science, but new American data are not available. However, the church publishes a monthly guide to the professional practitioners of its healing methods, so I could tabulate rates of Christian Science healers for each city from its December 1984 issue.

More than a million Americans have tried Transcendental Meditation, the spiritual technique of guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The "TM" organization provided me with a huge computer printout listing the number of people initiated into this mild cult in each of 3200 urban areas from 1970 to 1977, which I was able to combine into the appropriate metropolitan areas. Only the TM rates look really big, but it should be realized that statistics for the other cults do not report membership totals. Those who write letters to *Fate* magazine are a small minority of its total readers. Scientology clears and Christian Science practitioners are leaders in their respective churches, while each *Spiritual Community Guide* listing represents a number of individual cult members or occult customers.

Thus new religions do arise where old ones decline. To be sure, the cults of America have not filled the gap, and western cities continue to have low rates of religious participation—but these are low rates only when compared to the rest of the country, not historically low rates. The example of the Mormons shows that an occasional new religion can rise to great strength, even in the industrial age. We have to predict that other novel religions, suited especially well to society in the third millennium of Christianity, will arise to fill any gap left by any decline of this ancient tradition.

How viable are the alternatives to religion?

Speaking in terms of major social institutions, the chief alternatives to religion are science and politics. Each of these has its own social causes and consequences, of course, and here we speak only of their aspects that challenge religion and might substitute for it. The modern world cannot do without these two, but do they offer viable alternatives to supernaturally based compensators?

If religion is nothing but a primitive explanation of nature, then science has some chance of supplanting it. Yet as a scientist I am shocked at how little the typical citizen really understands about science. My university students are woefully ignorant not only of the facts of science, but also of its methodologies and—most important for the present discussion—of the general theories of nature advanced by science. With luck, a bright college student will have some idea that biological evolution involves natural selection, but typically they think of evolution as something that individual organisms accomplish, if they think of it all. They know the phrase "Einstein's Theory of Relativity," but few of them have any concept to go with it. While quantum theory is complex and counterintuitive, some of its basic ideas are both simple and fascinating. One would have thought that fifty years was quite enough time for them to make their way into the minds of most educated nonspecialists. But, no.

One concept, widely used throughout the sciences, does seem to have become popular and directly challenges religion: the concept of mechanical or impersonal causes. The fact that we are surrounded by machines that operate without constant supervision—the clocks that have been ticking away for centuries—reinforces this concept. However, humans are quite capable of being dualists, and if people have need of supernatural beliefs, they can easily coexist with mechanism.

Until it has completed its task and established a unified and empirically supported theory of nature, science will not be able to answer the big questions for which humans most strongly desire answers. Extrapolating from current perspectives in several of the sciences, I would have to guess that we will not find science's ultimate answers very pleasing. They are not likely to give the human individual a central role in the scheme of things, nor to offer him a solution to all his problems.

The rapid growth of science obscures the possibility that science will not be able to complete its task. As James Blish pointed out years ago, the crucial experiments may turn out to be too expensive to perform, a possibility nuclear physicists may have to face when the currently planned "supercollider" has completed its research program. Whether science ends in complete wisdom or financial bankruptcy, an era of stability in scientific knowledge would be one in which new religions could adapt to the world-view bequeathed by science, exploiting it in their rise to dominance rather than being challenged by it as old religions might be. Furthermore, the prestige of scientists, and of the secularism they promote, could end soon after they

had completed their main labors, simply because their profession was no longer needed.

One's analysis of politics, I need hardly mention, is conditioned by one's political ideology. Yet perhaps even the most diehard ideologue would have to admit in the privacy of his own thoughts that these are tough times for ideology. Developing nations still have the chance to discover afresh the fantastic ideologies that have exhausted the utopianism of industrial societies. And so long as an ideology is not put to the severe test that political power imposes upon it, it may serve as an alternative to religion. But the industrial nations have seen the more radical parties inflict vast pain on humanity when they had a chance, and the more moderate or liberal ideologies do not offer an alternative to religion.

Much has been made of the fact that secularism is far advanced in a number of European nations, although it takes some doing to convince an American that this is proof of the advancement of Europe over the apparently more religious United States. The fact is that Europe has been going through a transition stage in the relationship of religion to the state, one that has temporarily discredited the church with many citizens but has also prepared the way for a new era of revival and religious innovation, signs of which can already be seen. In the early stages of the development of democracy, state churches were controlled by traditional elites, and so in opposing the elites the new political movements of the Left often became antireligious. But, as the church has been progressively disestablished in Europe, it is free again to serve all the people, and the new range of denominations, sects, and cults offers forms of religion attractive to many previously unchurched groups.

While a purely political ideology cannot offer a solution to human mortality, it may claim to solve most other problems. Certainly, every modern political ideology pretends to know how justice can be achieved, and most promise social peace and progress as well. But only extremely radical movements can make promises that rival the general compensators of religion, and both wings of the political spectrum have been discredited in the miseries of our century. While there will always be fire-breathing revolutionaries, experience teaches reasonable people to fear political radicalism of any kind. And, while we can hope that good government will result from a healthy competition between moderate parties, salvation is not a credible outcome of the political process.

Unable to supplant religion, modern science and politics nonetheless have transformed the world in which religion exists. Religion is forced to adapt to them. This accelerates the secularization of the liberal denominations, whose clergy often attend the same universities as the scientists. And it places the entire ancient religious traditions, created as they were under radically different social and cultural conditions, under increasing pressure. These aspects of secularization, resulting from rapid developments in science and politics, are bad for existing denominations. But in the short run they stimulate the emergence of radical sects in the ancient traditions, and in the long run they stimulate the birth of cults, the most successful of which will be the major denominations of the distant future. The old order changes, giving place to the new, and religion fulfills itself in many ways. •