

Language Bias in The Modern Concept of God

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In this paper I argue that in the modern concept of God, language bias plays a more important role than in ancient times when anthropomorphizing was more significant. This also puts secularism of modern society in a different light, where increasing monopolization of religious doctrine made it easier to find non-religious ways to express personal creativity. Thus, secularism might be viewed as satisfying a demand created internally by failing adaptivity of a religious elite that pushed too high demands on the concept of God in attempt to out-compete all alternative belief systems.

Anthropomorphizing is when the human brain recognizes patterns in nature attributed to personality traits when the underlying mechanism is irrelevant. This bias has been suggested by scientists as a way to explain the initial development of religious beliefs. However, over time religious beliefs overall have undergone gradual refinements toward logical aesthetics, meaning that anthropomorphizing is increasingly frowned upon by religious believers and only accepted in narrow situations defined by cultural norms. One particular development is that where religion used to be a cultural self-identity, it changed to seeking ontological superiority, not just within one ontological category, but above other ontological categories by mixing them up with language bias.

To make a religion can be compared to stewing a soup. The ingredients used in a soup depends on the taste and flavors preferred and easily found in the environment. The soup analogy goes deep because religious beliefs, in particular for the concept of God, mixes up ontological categories. In order to unite the ontological categories, one utilized language bias, that are usually patterns of higher dualities that can be transferred across domains. This solves two design problems, one that no single ontological category is given the highest priority, such as material-like existence versus abstract concepts, and second that emotions can reinforce beliefs from multiple perspectives.

In ancient times, a religion did not have to be the best possible to out-compete all other religions. Using the soup analogy, it did not have to be the best soup ever made, it was sufficient that the soup was good enough for people to replicate the receipt. However, as religion became more centralized and formalized over time, the reliance on folklore to progress and evolve beliefs vanished and the belief systems were increasingly decided on by a small elite. In order to keep control of this power, the elite had to put more and more effort into purifying the doctrine toward logical aesthetics, out-competing all alternative belief systems. This took away people's ability to represent folklore as genuine religious beliefs, adding a secular dimension to storytelling, associated with lowly superstition and later used to label the same established religious beliefs by critics. It also made it easier for people to seek other non-religious ways to express personal creativity, such as through art, literature, philosophy and music.

The most common way of narrating the development of secularism is as a progression where people got more economic stability and relied on more scientific knowledge. However, an important question to ask here is: What would be the alternative? As established religious beliefs were increasingly formalized and refined, it is became more and more difficult for people to come up with new belief systems that could successfully gather new followers. A naive view is that people sought secular ideas merely to revolt against the establishment, but one can also view increasing secularism as a way to avoid religious persecution, since it was difficult for authorities to persecute people without a religious basis of heresy.

Only later when people became more expressive of their secular worldviews, the authorities could label people these as heretics and persecute them. However, there are very few intellectual works which on their own could be justified as a ground for such persecution. This was a fight that most authorities early on realized they were going to lose. Up until recent times, it was common for strict religious societies to censor all kinds of intellectual works, since going after the individuals producing these works was not feasible politically or economically.

Think about the height of classical music. In this period, many symphonies were written in honor of God. This meant that new symphonies with religious motivation had to be compared against these immortal works of human geniuses. Now, in order to avoid the ever suspicious eyes of authority, looking out for competitors to the established religious dogma, it makes game theoretical sense to spin off new works as secular purposed, in order to avoid possible persecution. As long the composer was not openly expressing themselves as secular, there was little reason for authority to persecute them for producing some secular work of art. So, in succeeding to establish and support existing doctrines with music of highest quality, it simultaneously undermined future generations from generating new music within the established religious framework.

Contrary to popular beliefs, the early progress in science was not driven mostly by people skeptical toward the established religious beliefs, but precisely by people who sought to reinforce existing religious beliefs through the scientific method as a tool. For example, Kepler and Newton was deeply religious, but their works did have the intended consequences. The established religious beliefs were too indoctrinated to change. Again and again, people sought ways to unite the scientific worldview with religion, until this very process was recognized as heretic and in response people simply started to spin off secular purposes. Now, science became a way to merely increase material wealth and economic prosperity, a label that followed science ever since: Materialism.

It is an irony that science, which started out as a way to achieve divine enlightenment, became criticized for merely producing useful machines and collecting vast amounts of data about the world. One explanation is that by criticizing science this way, religious authorities can portray themselves as the sole legitimate source of religious knowledge. However, at first sight this might seem merely as an attack on secularism as an unfulfilling process. At second sight, this does not only puts secularism in a bad light, but also any attempt to generate sub-standard religious knowledge. The turnout of new religious ideas, which usually came from folklore, now stays outside the orbit of influence and the religion fails to keep reflecting how people view themselves over time.

To make this point even clearer, let me make a list of things that were previously accepted ways to generate new religious ideas, but which are no longer acceptable by religious authority:

- Anthropomorphizing (viewed as superstition)
- Folklore (viewed as secular storytelling)
- Music and art (best works already made)
- Science (religious motivations is seen as suspicious)

Of course, none of these activities cease to exist, they just get a more secular spin than before. The question is: What remaining tools do people have to renew religious ideas?

In the modern concept of God, there is only one domain of innovation: Language bias. Since religious doctrines have cornered themselves by mixing ontological categories in order to out-compete alternative belief systems, innovation happens at higher levels where people seek to find new language biases and often through cross-cultural references.

For example, if you ask a Christian today whether he or she believes there lives a man in the physical sky above them, they are likely to answer “No”. However, if you ask whether God is just an abstract concept aka “infinity”, they are also likely to answer “No”. The modern concept of God is neither purely a kind of extra-terrestrial being nor an abstract concept. It is neither and both at the same time, mixing up the two ontological categories.

The reason for this is that in ancient times, it was sufficient to believe in some powerful extra-terrestrial being or an abstract concept as a religious idea, while in modern times the concept of God must be so powerful that it not merely establishes authority on its own, but also authority over any alternative belief system. God can no longer be a pure being because the idea also needs to evoke emotions inspired by the abstract concept, and vice versa.

On one hand, the modern concept of God needs some amount of autonomy, hence an imaginative body, in order to act in relation to the individual human being. On the other hand, there is no room for any greater idea, e.g. some cardinal that God can not keep in his head, because this would demonstrate God’s inferiority, not relative to other gods, but to merely abstract concepts themselves.

A such requirement is impossible to fulfill and hence normal people just give up making their own contributions. God becomes a mysterious concept that is left over to “professionals” while, as you might have guessed by now, normal people focus on more secular expressions of work. The secular work feels more safe and avoids all complicated issues of balancing the incoherent ontological categories required to even remotely point toward a similar direction.

However, despite this development, people have not stopped trying. They still keep innovating religious ideas, but confined to more directions of language bias. Instead of coming up with original intellectual works that can compete with existing works, the existing works are reinterpreted and presented in new ways to give new perspectives. This development functions both as a critique and to give new directions, e.g. when an artist places a robot in Michelangelo’s “The Creation of Adam”. In the same way as before where the religious authority is already seen as established, a secular spin is used through irony, taking the new art as non-serious, while preserving some of the religious under-tones.

A typical sign of modern times is when a TV series, experimenting with new ideas, starts each episode with a disclaimer that all characters and religious views in the show are completely fictional. While religious ideas have never ceased to be popular tools in storytelling, they present themselves often as secular approaches in order to avoid controversial debate. Imagine how different it would be sit around a camp fire in ancient times and hear new stories which presented themselves as dead-serious new religious ideas and you were not able to easily tell the difference between established doctrine and fiction.

The reason for this tendency is that in modern times, doctrines of religious beliefs are monopolized and refined to out-compete alternative beliefs, making it hard for people to create new ideas as they face public backlash. It does not happen out of the good-heartedness of most people. If people could grasp this power today, then they would. Most people settle for a safer secular spin, but some people are always trying to overturn established religious beliefs by creating their own. However, the refinement of established religious doctrines makes it difficult for startup religions to succeed and must often use additional political means.