

The Analysis of Personal Supernaturalism Using World View Theory

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Abstract

This paper proposes using universal categories of world view theory as an analytical model to answer the question, what do people believe about personal supernaturalism? The model presented here examines how people conceptualize the supernatural in a scheme with six methodological questions corresponding to six primary themes associated with world view universal categories, including: 1) Self, the Issue of Life Force; 2) Other, the Issue of Earthly Other; 3) Relationship, the Issue of Life Experience; 4) Classification, the Issue of Spiritual/Moral Capacity; 5) Causality, the Issue of Causal Means; and 6) Time & Space, the Issue of Destiny. Notions concerning aspects of world view hold fundamental meaning for assumptions and beliefs concerning the supernatural and offer specific data by which comparison between diverse belief systems may be accomplished. It is hoped the methodological questions posed in this paper will aid research in religious studies and, in particular, personal supernaturalism.

Keywords: world view, supernaturalism, religion, categories, research methodology

Introduction

The very nature of comparative religion begs the question of just how much can be accurately assessed between differing religious traditions and practices from various socio-cultural and geographical contexts. Notions concerning a religious paradigm entail a complex network of inferences which add depth of meaning and a web of cognitive relationships. Theories about the very structure of cognition raise intriguing questions for the limits of comparative religion. Cognition is primarily an activity of categorization, thus investigating salient categories, category membership, and relations between members is a research task of comparative religious thought. This paper proposes using universal categories of world view theory as an analytical model to analyze personal supernaturalism.

The definition proposed for supernaturalism is the human assumption of an otherworldly reality that exists outside the observable universe and humanly appears to transcend the laws of nature. There are two primary categories of supernaturalism: 1) personal, and 2) impersonal. Personal religious systems center on living supernatural *beings* relating to earthly living beings. Incorporeal beings in personal supernaturalism exhibit a moral nature. Impersonal religious systems center around impersonal supernatural *forces* determining the nature of events. In impersonal supernaturalism, supernatural forces are amoral in nature (Hiebert, Shaw & Tienou, 1999).

Presented here is a world view theory as a guide to a world view analysis of personal supernaturalism. The question to be answered is, what do people believe about personal supernaturalism? The intent is to provide a researcher with a theoretical framework to explore personal supernaturalism as a particular religious phenomena in the human experience.

World View Theory

World view is recognized as a culturally specific cognition arranging thoughts and ideas about the world which in turn produce culturally specific behavior (Kearney, 1996). These cognitions are thought to be a kind of cultural blueprint for social function (Nsamenang, 1992). Levin describes world view as representing “a past that is culturally present as tradition” (1974, p. 227). World view is an unconscious structural mechanism which organizes and defines the nature of reality, the interpretive process or technique of reality, and the behavioral mechanism to cope with this perception of reality. World view is that which the person understands to be naturally so, and beliefs are based upon these mostly unconscious assumptions.

The fundamental organizational pattern of all world views is comprised of seven universal categories: Self, Other, Relationship, Classification, Causality, Time, and Space (Kearney, 1984). Each universal category exists as an arrangement of ideas and behavior specific to each culture as a means of making sense of the life experience. While the seven universal categories are firmly rooted in each culture, the content of these categories remains variable across cultures. It is these content variances which distinguish one world view from another.

The seven universal categories of world view theory are a fundamental tool in sorting out world view understanding. World view theory from its inception has been concerned with exploring universal categories simply because a universal structure can be used as a basis of cross cultural comparison (Redfield, 1952). Thus investigating the content of universals becomes a necessity for the methodological practice of comparative religion.

The model presented here examines how people conceptualize the supernatural in a scheme with six primary themes corresponding to world view universal categories, these are:

1. Self: Issue of Life Force
2. Other: Issue of Earthly Other
3. Relationship: Issue of Life Experience
4. Classification: Issue of Spiritual/Moral Capacity
5. Causality: Issue of Causal Means
6. Time and Space: Issue of Destiny

Each category has a primary research question which is delineated in greater detail by the subsequent outline of the section.

Self: Issue of Life Force

The Self is both a physical and spiritual entity (Witte, 1990); and as such, it is the composite nature of the person consisting of multiple physical and non-physical components allowing Self to function as a distinct human person (Coloques, 1993). Physical and non-physical components are considered intrinsic to Self and universal dimensions of self concept (Lock, 1981). The interaction of Self with Other is the core of world view, and Self is distinguished from Other in three dimensions: we/they, human/non-human, and nature/divinity (Kearney, 1975). Within the religious framework, we want to know what people believe about supernatural involvement with the life force of individual existence.

Immaterial elements of Self provide significant understanding about the nature of relationship between man and supernatural beings. The personal supernaturalistic world view is founded upon notions concerning psychical components of Self such as soul, spirit, and breath. The non-physical Self elements are often empowered by supernatural beings and offer insight into man's reasoning on beginning, maintenance, and ultimate ending of life experience.

The research question of the Self category must answer: What is the nature of authority over life force by supernatural beings? Three areas of investigation address how and degrees to which supernatural beings influence the issue of life force (see Table 1).

| <i>Self: Issue of Life Force</i> |
|---|
| What is the nature of authority over life force by supernatural beings? |
| Give life giving energy to man? |
| Sustain life giving energy in man? |
| Terminate life giving energy of man? |

Table 1: World View Methodological Questions for Self Category.

First is the question of whether any supernatural being supplies life giving energy to man. If so, does this same being sustain life energy throughout man's life or does another supernatural entity support life? And thirdly, man has various ways of explaining death in supernaturalistic terms so a logical research inquiry would probe the nature of authority by the supernatural in terminating life giving energy of man.

Other: Issue of Earthly Other

Supernatural beings engage man by earthly means in addition to interacting with man on a personal level as in the case of life force issues. In the universal category of Other, the research inquiry is: What is the nature of exchange between Self and earthly Other supernatural beings influence? Three areas should receive consideration with the initial topic viewing the degree to which supernatural beings contribute what is needed for physical needs beyond man's ability (see Table 2). The first area is meant to address the ecological function of religion. Supernatural beings often, in some way, have control/authority over nature so that man's chances for survival are helped and natural resources can be exploited for man's benefit.

A second area of investigation probes in what way supernatural beings are engaged for social rules governing order. The social function of religion is a key component to greater understanding of the efficacy of an organized system of faith which in turn allows for comparison to other religious world views. Beliefs about the supernatural tend to validate the "why" of social behavior, give moral imperative to the way of life in a society, and guide the value system. Further, the issue of earthly Other includes addressing the socio-cultural function of religion. Beliefs about the supernatural tend to lend definition to notions about "us vs. them" to guard a culture from outside threats and changes. It may be that outsiders are either broadly or narrowly defined and defined as a severe threat & untrustworthy or beneficial & welcomed. Whatever the delineation, discovering rules governing outsiders which are infused with some type of supernatural involvement are a research task.

| <i>Other: Issue of Earthly Other</i> | |
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| What is the nature of exchange between Self and earthly Other supernatural beings influence? | |
| | Provide for physical needs beyond man's ability? |
| | Provide for social rules governing order? |
| | Provide for rules governing outsiders? |

Table 2: World View Methodological Questions for Other Category.

Relationship: Issue of Life Experience

The distinction between Self and Other is the basis for Relationship as a universal category in world view theory. How Self relates to Other is the prime function of the Relationship universal. A research query for comparative religious studies is the ways in which man encounters supernatural beings in the life experience. Just what is the nature of supernatural involvement in man's individual initiative and response? One area of supernatural influence is the individual features of Self (see Table 3).

Underlying notions concerning significant physical and non-physical elements of Self across religions consistently show various types of supernatural involvement. Supernatural beings influence individual features of Self, and it is these relationships that need examination. Discovering key psychical elements such as soul, spirit, desire, emotion, etc., where the element is located in a person, who gives the element to the person, and the meaning associated with the element all contribute to increase understanding of the relationship between supernatural Other and man.

| <i>Relationship: Issue of Life Experience</i> |
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| What is the nature of supernatural involvement in man's individual initiative and response? |
| Influence of individual features of Self? |
| Influence of the spiritual essence of man? |
| Influencing man in the nature of supernatural beings? |

Table 3: World View Methodological Questions for Relationship Category.

It is a task to examine what influential characteristics the supernatural exhibits on the spiritual essence of man. All religions include beliefs about the basic spiritual parts of a person. The spiritual components of Self give insight into notions concerning how one should conduct themselves in this life and perhaps the next. A third matter relating to life experience is the nature of supernatural beings and how inherent qualities of the supernatural promote participation of these beings in man's life. Probing the nature and function of the divine and spirit world allows these religious beliefs to be discussed in a comparative manner.

Classification: Issue of Moral Capacity

The first classification an individual formulates is believed to be grasping a distinction between Self and Other. In essence, world view theory tries to relate the classification of things and the principles governing these things to the content of other world view dimensions. In the case of the relationship between Self and Other, comparative religion seeks to examine the issue of moral capacity in man from the intersection of the metaphysical world with humanity. Hence the research question posed by Classification is: What is the nature of supernatural authority over moral department? To fully answer this question, the researcher seeks a tripartite understanding (see Table 4).

The basic idea that supernatural beings are unseen forces of good and evil is rather common but just how much and in what way is a source of variability in religious thought. Alas, how much good and evil in man comes from supernatural beings is a principal research query. A natural succeeding area is investigating the degree to which supernatural beings provide the capacity for a person to act good or bad. This line of questioning has the potential for explaining how man ended up with the propensity for moral/immoral inclinations.

A final component in the issue of moral capacity is whether supernatural beings award consequences for good and evil actions. Supernatural beings whether it be a divine creator, ancestral spirits, demons, etc., are attributed power to award an individual with prosperity and blessing when they act correctly and/or make a person suffer bad consequences (illness, calamity) for acting wrongly (Pandian, 1991). Comparative studies along these lines allow the fundamental nature of the supernatural to be contrasted amongst religious world views.

| <i>Classification: Issue of Moral Capacity</i> |
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| What is the nature of supernatural authority over moral department? |
| Supernatural beings are unseen forces of good/evil? |
| Supernatural beings energize the person with the ability to do right/wrong? |
| Supernatural beings award consequences for good/evil actions? |

Table 4: World View Methodological Questions for Classification Category.

Causality: Issue of Causal Means

Causal questions permeate religious paradigms with supernatural beings as one of the sources of power for causing both good and bad on earth (Malefijt, 1989). The research question which needs to be explored in relation to the issue of causal means is: What is the nature of supernatural authority over the casual forces in a person's life experience? Notions behind what causes things to happen invariably include the activities of the supernatural.

Religious thought is inclined to interpret a bad or evil happening as either some kind of judgment for behaving wrongly or an attack by an evil spirit on a person. Good or positive events are associated with blessing for behaving morally upright. Those causal explanations assigning blame to supernatural beings should receive critical attention (see Table 5). Unpredictable, life-changing events are typically defined as those things that man endures but cannot control. For this reason, illness, drought, famine, death, accidents, and capricious events in general are explained through religious ideas with the suppositions that these are guided by supernatural beings.

The researcher seeks to know what supernatural beings are responsible for unpredictable happenings. A seminal interrogative is, what supernatural beings influence or control human behavior? With the capacity for morality/immorality comes the reality of a changeable nature of Self. Comparing and contrasting religious explanations for this volatile characteristic provides fundamental distinctions about the nature of a moral universe.

| <i>Causality: Issue of Causal Means</i> |
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| What is the nature of supernatural authority over the causal forces in a person's life experience? |
| Causal explanations assign blame to supernatural beings? |
| Unpredictability of life attributed to supernatural beings? |
| Changeable nature of Self attributed to supernatural beings? |

Table 5: World View Methodological Questions for Causality Category.

Time and Space: Issue of Destiny

Common in world views is the assumption each person is put into a culture/community not by chance but by either divine design or some other supernatural will. The issue of destiny is of prime importance to world view understanding of religion. Destiny or fate may be attributed to supernatural beings making the decisions. The suggested research question asks: What is the nature of supernatural authority over life experience? An initial focus addresses whether supernatural beings set one's station in life.

A second inquiry should be made into how much earthly future is set by the supernatural. A common belief is that a person may diligently strive to gain wealth but it comes because some supernatural being is honoring that person for their effort. Supernatural intervention allows the fortune of a person, thus the premise that earthly life is supernaturally directed. A final element is recognizing to what extent supernatural beings are responsible for the result of mortality. A prevalent conviction is the belief supernatural beings (creator god, ancestor, and spirits) direct what happens to a person in death. Exploring the existence beyond death, which

may include heaven/hell, becoming an ancestor, or an afterlife as a servant or master, should receive research effort.

| <i>Time & Space: Issue of Destiny</i> |
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| What is the nature of supernatural authority over life experience? |
| Station in life set by supernatural beings? |
| Earthly future set by supernaturally beings? |
| Existence beyond death set by supernatural beings? |

Table 6: World View Methodological Questions for Time/Space Category.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is the universality of religion coupled with man's basic inquisitive nature in which the field of comparative religion has its most primal roots. People seem to thirst for explanations revolving around the spiritual essence of humanity and the universe. Whatever the origin, the human need for moral order inevitably leads to socio-religious requirements for individual behavior. It would seem an instinctive directive for man to seek stability and continuity of conduct through a world view vested with supernatural authority. Besides guiding social order, religion also provides causal theory to make sense out of the inconsistent and unpredictable nature of life experience outside the control of Self and society. Religion does so by accounting for the forces of good and evil and explaining the ultimate authority over life and death.

Religious assumptions are a complex web entangled in the universal categories of world view by including notions of moral nature, spiritual autonomy, supernatural power, and causal forces of behavior. World view is what people believe is naturally so. Thus, understanding significant beliefs about personal supernaturalism becomes imperative to a fuller understanding of religion and culture. Notions concerning aspects of world view hold basic meaning for assumptions and beliefs concerning the supernatural and offer specific data by which comparison between diverse belief systems may be accomplished. It is hoped the methodological questions posed in this paper will aid research into what people believe to be naturally so in their religious life experience.

The applied theory presented here produces ethnographic data which may be described and compared with other such data in different ethnographic contexts. Comparative research in personal supernaturalism would extend scholarship in religious studies to capitalize on the awareness and understandings necessary for the global world in the twenty-first century. Field researchers are able to investigate both the ontological and epistemological elements of personal supernaturalism from a world view perspective. The implications for religious understanding then is available for general beliefs as well as specific assumptions about supernatural beings and their relationship with an individual.

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