

Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. x-290 \$30.00 US

During his address at the 1992 North American Association for the Study of Religion meetings in San Francisco, Jonathan Z. Smith made in passing what turned out to be a relatively controversial statement. He frankly asserted that no one in the field was presently working on new theories of religion and suggested that the closest any group came to developing such modern theories were contemporary feminist scholars. In spite of the mild dispute which his statement inspired among the audience, Smith's distinction between those works which engage in theoretical analysis of aspects of religion and those which are theories about religion is a useful one. Due to this general absence of new theoretical works of the latter type, *Faces in the Clouds* makes an important addition to the literature and joins what is now a slowly but steadily growing part of the field—Hans Penner's *Impasse and Resolution* (Peter Lang, 1989), Tom Lawson's and Robert McCauley's *Rethinking Religion* (Cambridge, 1990) and Benson Saler's *Conceptualizing Religion*. (Brill, 1993) all come to mind. Furthermore, Guthrie, a professor of anthropology at Fordham University, joins a rather distinguished line of anthropologists who have made religion their theoretical object. That Guthrie is himself not trained specifically as a scholar of religion also seems to confirm Smith's judgment: sadly, modern students of religion are intent on interpreting *not* explaining.

Where Guthrie's book differs from those mentioned above—especially the Lawson and McCauley volume—is that he is revisiting and revising a rather well-known explanatory theory. In one form or another, writers from the ancient Greeks to Hume and Feuerbach have been attracted to what Hume termed the “universal tendency” of humans to personify the natural world. According to Hume, we always find “human faces in the moon [and] armies in the clouds.” But simply asserting that religion is the result of some anthropomorphic tendency hardly explains *why* we commonly attribute intentions to what may in reality actually be inert or neutral aspects of our environment. It is in attempting to answer this prior question that Guthrie makes his contribution. “Uncertain of what we face,” he writes, “we bet on the most important possibility because if we are wrong we lose little and if we are right we gain much. Religion, asserting that the world is significantly human-like, brings this strategy to its highest pitch” (38). This ‘tendency,’ then, is, according to Guthrie, more a survival strategy than simply a proclivity.

Where Guthrie does fundamentally agree with Hume is in his belief that the origins of human religiosity are to be found in this aspect of human nature *not* in religion's social uses. And, if Guthrie is correct, the origins of religion in this personalizing projection is in no way unique to devotees: it is a strategy basic to being human—even cats, he informs us, think of rustling leaves as potential prey. And dogs chase cars as if they are somehow intruding or making a territorial challenge. If such wagers are correct, the payoff is large. In the case of religion and the belief that the spirits have wills, it means either eternal bliss of some sort or a relatively lower level of anxiety here on earth. Both options have their appeal.

When it comes to religion, the difference in the wager, according to Guthrie, is that the stakes are at their highest. It is not simply a question of whether or not, as Wayne Proudfoot illustrated, the object ahead is a log or a bear. As important as it might be to prepare oneself for a possible confrontation by assuming the bear over the log, the wager made in the case of religion—that the gods are intentional and rational, that a beneficent will directs the cosmos, that there is order and sense to existence—concerns issues of the utmost importance. In the cases of religious myth, ritual, and behavior (where we find the widespread use of oneself as a model for

the workings of the cosmos—essentially what anthropomorphism is), people are attempting to “account for the crucial components of the world” (201). This is worked out in his last chapter, “Religion as Anthropomorphism”; but to reinforce how this one instance is simply part of a much more pervasive human strategy, Guthrie moves slowly toward this conclusion, through excursions into the presence of such personifications in the arts, advertising, as well as in philosophy and science.

In the case of these latter two human endeavors, Guthrie again reminds one of Hume who argued that, “[n]ay, philosophers cannot entirely exempt themselves from this natural frailty.” Guthrie reminds us that Freudians attribute personal characteristics to the ego and some evolutionists conceive of natural selection as having a direction or intention. Indeed this last example has been one of the great criticisms of some early evolutionary thought—the supposed teleology of natural selection. In spite of the efforts of scientists to rid their discourse of such thought, it yet persists—inevitably but, according to Guthrie, not happily. He maintains that modern science ought to work diligently to rid itself of “at least egregious anthropomorphism,” an undertaking which he believes “improves our understanding of the world” (176). Although anthropomorphism is inextricably tied to religious discourse, Guthrie believes that it can—to a significant degree—be self-critically eliminated from much scientific discourse. With such a position Guthrie clearly understands religion and science to be concerned with two very different ends, and by arguing this he simultaneously places himself outside the camps of social-constructionist theorists who would not even frame the question in terms of more accurate or better scientific correspondence to what might be ‘out there.’

This new application of Pascal's wager to the anthropomorphic strategy comes with nearly seventy pages of notes and an intriguing selection of figures and reproductions, such as the early sketch of an African village which, when viewed on its side, convinced Salvador Dali that he had discovered an early Picasso. Guthrie's introductory survey of other theorists (nineteenth century and contemporary) is most helpful and his case is argued thoroughly, if not excessively. Of even more interest are the ways in which this anthropomorphic tendency is hardly, for example, gender- or class-neutral. It is not concerned with only projecting some essential *anthropos*. Especially in the case of orthodox Judaism and Christianity, their projections are clearly aligned with the engendered distributions of power in social and family life and do not simply project some abstract, ahistorical quality, which is precisely the way ‘society’ functioned for Durkheim. Although such concerns do not occupy the forefront of Guthrie's analysis, he does make suggestions as to the ways in which anthropomorphism is not simply a translucent activity, such as when he points out how, in the advertisements for alcohol he cites, “glasses/women often adjust their posture to bottles/men/.” That this is intimately related to social conventions and conveys important data about who controls what, and who is controlled, does not go unnoticed by the attentive reader.

It is not altogether clear if the merit of Guthrie's book is that it is arguing a new thesis or rather that it creatively synthesizes a number of formerly divergent—possibly even competing—theories. No matter which of these two conclusions one chooses, given the general mood of the modern field (as if field's have *moods*) simply to interpret what are widely considered to be self-evidently *religious* phenomena, Guthrie's book is a welcomed contribution. In a way, it responds to Eliade's often heard call for a renewal of bold theories. With his naturalistic assumptions in mind, however, Guthrie's work may not necessarily be what Eliade had envisioned. Hopefully, this offering of an explanatory theory—to indulge in yet more anthropomorphism—will *spawn* some much needed debate.

Russell T. McCutcheon

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