

Mimetic Roots

1. Religion is uniquely characteristic of the human species. It is found in no other species, but it is found in every human culture, possibly extending back even beyond *homo sapiens* to *homo erectus* and its Neanderthaler descendants.
2. The word “religion” comes from the Latin “re-ligio” to rebind. Religion consists in beliefs and rituals that bind us to one another by connecting us to what we hold sacred, that is, to what which constitutes the ultimate ground and horizon of our lives’ meaning and purpose. What we hold sacred is what orients, indeed defines, our very identity.
3. What is it about the human species that accounts for this unique trait? Many candidates have been proposed over the years. In this lecture I wish to focus on the religious anthropologist and philosopher René Girard who has provocatively argued that the roots of religion lie in another distinctively human characteristic: imitation. (1) Humans are incredibly imitative. Far more than other apes or mammals. We may talk about “aping” others; we may dismiss someone by saying “Monkey see, monkey do” but we are far more obsessed with mirroring others than the most imitative chimpanzee. It’s not merely an instinct with us, it’s the human way of being in the world.
4. Imitation also lies at the root of human communication. By imitating others we learn to do as they do. And by modeling behavior we can teach others to do as *we* do. (1) But imitation takes attention; it takes the teacher getting their student’s attention, holding it and directing it.
5. It is this capacity to hold another’s attention that enabled parents to teach their young how to make the first stone tools, how to use them to crack open the marrow in the bones left by predators, even how to become predators themselves by using sharpened rocks as weapons. Stone axes and flint blades were the first technologies emerging 2.5 million years ago, by our pre-human, hominid ancestors.
6. It took two million years however for the next significant technological achievement to occur, the domestication of fire by *homo erectus*. Once equipped with fire and flint technologies, hominid resiliency and adaptability to new environments was so enhanced that (1) *homo erectus* could venture forth beyond its home habitat on the African savannah and spread across the globe.

7. Now even more important than the warmth and light that fire provides in climates colder and darker than *homo erectus* was biologically adapted to, fire enables cooking.
8. Cooking effectively pre-digests food by breaking down cellulose into mush and tough and sinewy raw meat into tender morsels from which more calories, and protein can be assimilated by our intestinal tract. Cooking thus not only expanded what humans could eat but also increased exponentially the efficiency of human digestion. Primates spend nine and a half hours a day just gathering and eating raw food. (1) Cooking freed *homo erectus* up for lots of other activities, such as attending to each other, playing with each other, (2) even wondering about things. Indeed it is only *after* the invention of cooking that hominids could eat enough calories to sustain the evolution of their brain to three times the size of the largest ape.
9. Back to imitation though: We humans do not only imitate behavior, we also imitate feelings. “Mirror” neurons in our brains are stimulated by behavior in others to feel in ourselves what we see others around us feeling. Thus for humans, feelings are contagious. It takes a deliberate effort not to smile back at someone smiling at us, whether we know them or not. (1) Or, as any television sitcom knows, it’s hard not to laugh when we hear others laughing; (2) or to feel sad when we see others sad. (3) Finally, consider the popularity of spectator sports: when we watch a game we become swept up in the excitement of the crowd, itself excited by vicariously feeling the perceived feelings of the players on the field or the court. When my team wins, I feel exhilarated, like I have won the game myself. When my team loses, I feel dejected, like I have lost.
10. Before a child ever learns language, a mother can communicate with her child by directing their baby’s attention with her hands and voice and, most intimately, through her eyes. (1) Face to face, eyes locked on each other, this is the original relation, and remains the most intimate mode of emotional communication for humans. (2) Lovers seem to be always doing it. And after death seeing God face to face, the “Beatific Vision” is what life in heaven consists in for the Christians.
11. Now imitation means that our feelings and actions, or thoughts and even our desires, are not ourselves alone. We are not the autonomous agents modernity defines as our “true” selves. (1) Nor is our interior subjectivity as private as modern “authenticity” would

demand. (2) As in the title Bruno Latour's seminal work on the networked virtual self, we have never been modern. What independence modern individuals believe they have achieved has always been a function of networked webs of interdependence. Human beings are social animals.

12. To begin at the beginning, babies emerge into consciousness at birth with no differentiation between inner and outer, self and other. (1) As we mature we discover more than project who we are, often enough, even *how* we are, from how we are treated and recognized by others, (2) first of all, by our original caregiver, traditionally our mother, but soon enough by others in our family and beyond.
13. Objects in our environment also evoke feelings that engage our attention, that draw us into their reality. Religious symbolism draws upon a number of primal features of our ancestral hunter-gatherer environment upon which bands depended for their well being and very existence.
14. Just as humans relate with one another to bond and form a network of alliances, so through religious symbols and rituals ancient humans also bonded and formed a network of alliances with the world that surrounds them.
15. Today we might see such behavior as anthropomorphic projections, but they are more understandably seen as alterity relations. Rather than the third-person orientation of the detached scientific observer, (1) or the first person orientation of artistic expression, in religion humans adopt (2) a second person relational connection to the things that matter in their lives. The logic of alterity is the logic of mimetics and mutual recognition—action that is both expressive of the actor, but in a way that is also responsive to the other. Our feelings are evoked not only by others, but by an array of things around us, that also “speak” to us.
16. To modern humans, then, what are impersonal forces of nature, resources whose only value lies in how we might use them. (1) for our earliest ancestors these were potential allies to be addressed through ritual to enlist them in our efforts to survive and thrive.
17. Earth and Sky,
18. Mountains and Streams,
19. Fire and Water,
20. Sun and Moon,

21. Wind and Rain,
22. Thunder and Lightning. (1) They even relate to their own life, as sacred breath.
23. Such primal religious symbolism remains central to all religions to this day. Consider for example how contemporary (1) Christian rituals enlist elemental fire and water; earth, sky and the air inbetween, drawing upon the feelings they evoke in us, to address them in return.
24. Fire brings light and warmth, and evokes feelings of hearth and home, as well as moral purification.
25. In Genesis, creation begins with God's voice booming over the deep bathed in darkness, "Let there be light!" (1) Similarly, at the start of the Easter Vigil, Catholics light and bless a sacred fire, from which they then light the Easter candle, light from light. (2) The deacon holding the lit candle aloft before the crowd chants "Christ our Light". So too an eternal flame burns before the tabernacle in which is housed the Eucharist: bread ritually transformed into the very Body of Christ.
26. Fire is central to the quintessential religious ritual: the sacrifice. Offerings of prey, herd animals and grain are sacrificed to the gods, smoke rising like incense, the cooked food furnishing the festive, communal feast that follows. (1) Christianity removed burnt offerings, but retained the language of sacrifice. The Mass is a "bloodless sacrifice", through which bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ to be offered to the Father. So too Christ is worshipped as the paschal Lamb of God whose blood washes away our sin.
27. Water evokes both life and death. A desert people, the Israelites forever pined for rain and were on the hunt for drinkable water, "living" water in streams and springs. Rituals call for God's grace to rain down, and well up to slake our parched spirit.
28. Christianity's initiation ritual involves being immersed in the waters of death to arise reborn in Christ's Risen life. So too water's ability to dissolve mud and salts, becomes a symbol of the mystic's own sought after dissolution into the divine. (1) All that remains not yet fully one with the divine is imagined to be washed away in the waters of rebirth, or burned off as in a refining fire.
29. So too earth evokes stability and fertility. We seek to be grounded. We gather and grow our food in broad fields of dark earth. In Genesis the first human being is referred to

simply as Adam, literally “the earthen one”. On Ash Wednesday Catholics have ash smudged on their foreheads to remind themselves that they are themselves from the earth and that to the earth they will one day return.

30. Our ancestors also gathered hardened earth, stones, piling them up to form cairns to mark burials or sacred encounters. (1) Larger rocks could be arranged into great stone altars upon which ritual sacrifices were burned. (2) Medieval Christian rituals for consecrating altars involved burning small piles of scented wood or pellets of resin that could fuel a flame and wafting clouds of incense. (3) Even today, altars in Catholic churches, whatever they are made of, still embed an altar stone containing the relic of some saint, ideally the church’s patron saint, for participants to not only venerate but emulate.
31. And finally there is air and sky. What other animal looks up into the night sky? Let alone searches for regularities and patterns among the stars to find guidance?
32. Air, whether felt as wind, or simply drawn in with every breath we take, evokes a host of connotations in religious traditions around our world. The words for “Spirit” itself, in Sanskrit, Hebrew and Greek, Latin and English, are all taken from their word for breath. And, again in Genesis, God brings Adam to life through breathing into his earthen body. (1) So too God spirit, breathes over the early Christians at Pentecost transforming those mourning over the death of Jesus and cowering in fear of the crowds, into bold prophets sent to proclaim the Gospel of their Risen Lord to the ends of the earth.
33. Religious ritual uses water and fire, earth and sky and the air inbetween to evoke the origin and end, the ground and horizon of our lives. As early as the rise of speech, these were personified into gods both beneficial and malevolent, to worship and combat.
34. Music too evokes emotions. Drum beats quicken the heart, evokes gesture and movement, to the rhythm of the beat, in coordination with others. (1) The earliest religious rituals often involved dance, percussion, song and shouts
35. evoking at times manic exhilaration,
36. at other times, more somber moods of reflection or mourning.
37. Through such sacred music accompanying sacred ritual with sacred objects in sacred spaces, religion binds us together, reminding and reconnecting us with what we hold sacred. In religious symbolism we adopt an alterity relation with the primal forces of nature and human nature. Religion both teaches and celebrates who we are, to whom and

with whom we belong. It gives us human beings a sense of meaning and purpose. As our technologies ever evolve so will our relationships to one another and to our world. And so too will religion ever evolve to address these new relationships and identities, as well as draw upon new resources to cope with new threats to meaning and value that come in their train.

Suggested Readings for Further Exploration:

Bellah, Robert, 2011, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Harvard

Girard, Rene, 1978, (English translation, 1987) *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford.

Plate, S. Brent 2014 *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses*, Bellknap.

Malfouris, Lambrus, 2013 *How Things Shape The Mind*, MIT Press.