Cultural Uniqueness and Implicit Religion

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ABSTRACT
This article will argue that “uniqueness” can be understood as a form of Implicit Religion. This will be demonstrated through an analysis of the word and the use of fieldwork in two cultures in which “uniqueness” is a strong component of the nationalist discourse. In doing so, it will respond to serious and superficially persuasive criticisms of the idea that uniqueness relates to religion and, implicitly, of Implicit Religion as a concept. It will highlight the logically unsustainable philosophical presuppositions underlying Implicit Religion and the false rationalist and unsustainable philosophical presuppositions underlying the critique. It will conclude that the critique itself would be fruitful pasture for Implicit Religion analysis.

Keywords: Implicit religion, Finland, Uniqueness, Cultural Relativism, Culture, Nationalism

Introduction
This article will argue that the concept of Implicit Religion as developed by Bailey (1997) can be applied to the use of the word “unique” and that this word provides us with an insight into implicit religiosity, especially with regard to descriptions of certain “cultures” which are claimed, both empirically and also etically, to be “unique.”1 The article will begin by setting out why it is necessary to examine in depth the extent to which the use of the word “unique” betokens an implicitly religious discourse. It will continue by defining both “religion”—which we will understand in terms of Geertz-

1. I use the word “culture” here to mean the way of life of a people which is generally how it is employed amongst anthropologists (see Jenks 1993 for discussion of the various definitions). I appreciate that there is an on-going debate over the term. For a summary of the arguments, and a persuasive defence, see Fox and King (2002).
ian functionalism (Geertz 1966) and the succinct definition of the term offered by sociobiologist E.O. Wilson (1975)—and the word “unique.” Through so doing, it will aim to demonstrate the religious dimensions of employing the word unique. It will then examine the idea of uniqueness as it relates to certain cultures—and specifically Finnish culture—and it will demonstrate the extent to which the word is implicitly religious in this context. However, as this is a mainly philosophical discussion, the use of fieldwork will be very brief, simply to add to the point.2 In presenting this discussion of uniqueness, the article aims to reply to some particularly strong criticisms that have been levelled against so doing. To a certain extent, these criticisms can be understood as a powerful critique of the concept of Implicit Religion and this article accordingly aims to present a robust defence. In so doing, the main philosophical perspective underlying Implicit Religion will be highlighted and defended.

Defending Implicit Religion

There do appear to be some scholars who feel it is quite obvious that terming something “unique” brings us into the realms of Implicit Religion or—before this term was popularized—functionalist religion or comparable notions. Geertz (1966) notes that “religion” is distinguished by a belief that one’s worldview is “uniquely realistic.” Dale (1986) argues—in a volume entitled *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*—that the idea, popular amongst a school of Japanese social scientists and philosophers, that the Japanese are “unique” is a functionally religious concept which reflects “national self deification.” He reaches this conclusion by drawing upon a logical definition of “uniqueness” (which we will examine below) and, from there, demonstrating that the Japanese (of this school) respond to their culture as people might to God. Likewise, Andreski (1969) reaches a similar conclusion in defining the word “unique” and he does not feel the need to justify the “uniqueness as Implicit Religion” implied conclusion any further.

Implicit religion has not met with universal acceptance, especially by “conventionalists” who wish to keep to a traditional understanding of “religion” (see Donovan 2002 for a summary). But the criticisms responded

2. For the purposes of a mainly theoretical article there is simply insufficient room to go into the fieldwork in any greater depth than I will. Over the space of three years from 2005–2008, I interviewed 50 Finns on various issues including the “unique culture” idea. The fieldwork is only drawn-upon at all to refute what is actually a small part of a particular criticism, but nevertheless I felt it was salient enough to include. Full details of the fieldwork are included in Dutton (2009).

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Cultural Uniqueness and Implicit Religion

175
to here are even more fundamental. Like any criticism, even if it can be answered, the critique was useful in forcing one to defend one’s particular interpretation of the religion concept. However, the criticisms—to a great extent though covertly of the concept of Implicit Religion—are thought-provoking and deserve serious consideration by scholars who are themselves convinced, to varying degrees, by the concept. I will respond to these criticisms as part of my examination of “uniqueness,” but I would first like to define religion.

Defining religion implicitly

Geertz defines religion as follows:

Religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by forming conceptions of a general account of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (1966, 4)

Geertz’s definition parallels the analysis conducted by Berger and Luckmann (1981, 33). They argue that, “Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a … coherent world.” No definition will be perfect and Asad (1993, 37) highlights the importance of a power structure—a society—in validating a “mood”...
as “religious.” However, I would argue that this definition is superior to Bruce’s (2002) view that “religion” should be defined as a belief in gods, set in contrast to a secular world-view, because this is the view of the majority. First, the everyday recognition of a distinction between a religious way of thinking and a secular way of thinking has only really existed since the Enlightenment. Prior to that—and still in tribal societies—religion was simply the way that people understood the world. There was no “secular” alternative means of understanding it. So, Bruce’s distinction is a false distinction and many philosophers such as Benoist (2004) have argued that it is a distinction made by secularist ideologues whose own “secular” views heavily reflect a Judeo–Christian system of thought.

Second, although Bruce’s definition is useful to distinguish a pre-modern view from a modern one, this is of limited use. Geertz’s definition allows us to understand why some secular ideologies are so powerful in people’s lives, which Bruce’s does not (if, as he suggests, only his definition is accurate), and it might be seen to imply that ideologies such as Marxism are somehow simply rational, leaving us puzzled as to the fervour and violence they involve. For Geertz, this is explained as they perform the same function in people’s lives as conventional religion. Geertz’s definition can be applied across all cultures and eras and is, therefore, of greater use.

“Religion” refers to the aspects of culture which are, at a given point, regarded by a group as essential and beyond question. Wilson (1975, 560) notes that belief in gods and abhorrence of incest tend to be the firmest, followed, third, by “ideology.” We would expect aspects of this primal “religion” to be partially preserved in any “secular” replacement. But to avoid turning abhorrence of incest into religion our distinction could be slightly more specific. Boyer (2001) makes the point that religion refers to a series of phenomena in human thought made possible by evolutionary hard-wiring towards group membership. One of the consequences of this hard-wiring is perceiving agency in the world. This perception of the “hidden hand” unites everything from ancestor cults to a historicist perspective such as Marxism or Herderian nationalism. This, combined with a firm belief that the perception of agency is accurate, is how we might distinguish “religion,” while always being aware that religion is a by-product of a series of adaptations rather than something easy to grasp. I think this definition has the advantage of not rendering religion too broad a category.

4. “Historicism” is the view that history involves an organic succession of developments. Popper (1957) criticizes it as promoting a determinist view of history whereby historical developments are somehow inevitable.

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but, nevertheless, I think that Wilson’s and Geertz’s broader definitions still help us to understand why some superficially non-religious phenomena evoke such fervour and, as such, this definition of “religion” still aids understanding. Accordingly, in this analysis, I will make use of both forms of definition. As I will discuss in more detail below with regard to essentialism, I think that words can be used with slightly different definitions in different circumstances where this aids analysis.

Third, Bruce’s definition is highly essentialist as it asserts it is the definition. In terming his view “essentialist” let us be very clear what we mean. On the one hand, essentialists—following the Platonic view—insist that every concept is an imperfect reflection of the ideal of that concept (which, according to Plato, can be found in the world of forms accessible through the intellect). These forms are unchanging and it is the task of science to describe the true nature of things and thus focus on the definitions of terms. Dennett (1995, 95) observes that scientists should “of course” define their terms, but “only up to a point.” He provides a modern version of the so-called nominalist critique. Nominalists are more interested in understanding how something behaves in different circumstances and they make use of a concept if it is helpful. There will always be different ways of defining a set term, and different definitions will be useful in different circumstances. But to insist, in an essentialist fashion, that terms must be perfectly and in one way defined limits our freedom of intellectual pursuit. The question should be whether the use of the term is logical and useful in the circumstances in which it is used. Bruce assumes that an entity—in this case religion—has set, unchanging properties and something should be classed as a religion if it conforms to this ideal form. But this is culturally contingent and his “form” reflects the Judaeo-Christian origins of the word religion. Bruce’s kind of definition—though useful in certain circumstances—is not as useful as a more broadly applicable functionalist definition. Fitzgerald (1997) argues that a complete absence of essentialism means that “religion” can cease to be a distinct category. Geertz obviates this by making clear that “religion” is that which is, amongst other dimensions, so central to identity that it is “uniquely realistic.” Geertz is cautiously essentialist. His kind of definition may be broad but it is useful inasmuch

5. Andreski’s definition of uniqueness (see the section “Defining Uniqueness” below) is essentialist in that it distinguishes uniqueness from ‘difference’ but it is also logical. Platonic essentialism, by contrast, tends to assert that a concept is composed of certain factors and these are eternal assumptions. No logical argument can dislodge them. They are founding principles of the cosmos.
as understanding can be gained from looking at superficially non-religious phenomena in religious terms. Boyer’s (2001) definition, which includes the “uniquely realistic” dimension of Geertz’s, also obviates Fitzgerald’s criticism. There are different conceptions of “religion” which are useful for different circumstances. Relying only on Bruce’s is useful in certain narrow situations. When we go beyond these, conceptions of religion as “implicit” are of more use.

Defining uniqueness

In looking at cultural uniqueness, we will examine it both in terms of logical evaluation and in descriptive terms; that is to say how the word is used. In linguistic terms, anything preceded by “the” is “unique” in the sense that it is a distinct category. As Bertrand Russell (1905) puts it:

Take as an instance “the father of Charles II was executed.” This asserts that there was an \( x \) who was the father of Charles II and was executed. Now \( the \), when it is strictly used, involves uniqueness; we do, it is true, speak of “\( the \) son of So-and-so” even when So-and-so has several sons, but it would be more correct to say “\( a \) son of So-and-so.” Thus for our purposes we take \( the \) as involving uniqueness.

Charles I was the only father of Charles II, rendering him “unique” in the sense of being his father. But all Russell is really emphasizing is that if we precede a category with “the” then it is not an example from that category but a category in itself. Accordingly, in the evaluative sense, any concept is “unique,” because it is different from every other concept. Insistence on maintaining these concepts as “different” may reflect an essentialist, religious viewpoint (see below), but is not really saying anything to assert that a concept (such as Finnish culture) is unique, when this is true of all cultures and all concepts.

In normal parlance unique is used to mean the only one of its kind; without parallel. To be unique, something is so different from anything else that it cannot be compared. Andreski (1969, 49) provides a cogent summary of the implications of uniqueness:

The only kind of admissible explanation of a unique event consists of showing either that it comes under a known general rule, or that it can be resolved into elements which all come under a known general rule … Elements of irreducible uniqueness can be apprehended but neither explained nor described—for even description involves analysis of a phenomenon into elements that are sufficiently recurrent to fit the meanings of words.

For something to be unique there must be no element of re-currency with
The “unique” cannot even be put into words. It is by definition inef-fable. It cannot fit into any system of categories. It might be compared to Douglas’ (1966, 206) concept of the “taboo” or “sacred,” which is defined in a similar way to that which is “between” categories and thus beyond them. This is especially true of “sacred” characters: Jesus is “god and man,” while his mother is a “virgin and mother.” Following this, Finland is both “East” and “West” and thus violates a fundamental, if simplistic and changing, division in popular thought, rendering it “unique.” However, this is itself problematic because this violation surely creates a category of “taboo” items which are structurally similar inasmuch as they do not fit into a subjec-tively significant category system. Also, these items may well “make sense” if they are apprehended by means of a different system of categories, and any item could be regarded as in some way between categories. So some-thing is not unique just because it is “between” even the most supposedly significant categories.

For Lipset (1996, 26) cultures are accepted as unique because they are “outliers,” at the extremes of a spectrum. Again, any culture could be found at the extreme of some spectrum or other. This is a spurious explanation. It does not explain why Finland is widely accepted as “unique” but Bel-gium is not. It might be argued that Belgians may well feel that they are unique—because Belgium is a unique federation of French and Dutch culture—but simply say less about it than the Finns, because the world is not especially interested in this particular combination. But this still leaves us asking the same questions. Belgium has as great an entitlement to call itself a unique culture as Finland does, and the outside world, drawing upon Russell’s definition of uniqueness, has as much reason to accept this. However, Belgium does not stress its uniqueness and nor does the outside world. Equally, it could be argued that the English language is unique be-cause it uniquely combines Germanic and French influences. We are still left asking why this is, and a comparison between two countries which do stress their uniqueness (and have this accepted to some extent) may lead us to the answer.

We might even go so far as to argue that—for many people—the only thing that can really be “unique” is the God of the monotheistic tradition because such a theology denies any other god’s existence. This may still apply even if God is understood in the broadest possible sense: that which

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6. There is a cliché that Finnish culture is “between East and West.” See Browning (1999) for discussion.

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cannot be described; experiencing the *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans* (Otto 1977, 1) or a sense of “depth” at the heart of life (Robinson 1963, 22). Otto’s description is generally understood as reflecting this ineffable idea: “religious experience” involves experiencing that which is awe-inspiring, is enticing yet frightening. It is not without reason, then, that Dale (1986, 26), in debunking the uniqueness of Japanese culture, argues in a descriptive analysis that: “Clearly the word is a talismanic password: like the mason’s handshake it signals to others that one is accorded the secret knowledge accorded to the initiated insider.” To term a culture “unique”—when every culture can be, in some way, paralleled with others—therefore reflects, for the cultural insider, an emotional reaction to the qualities of their society (whether its power or some other quality), analogous, perhaps, to the *effervescence* observed by Durkheim (1995, 158) in tribal ritual; a merging of the self into the collective. In descriptive terms, “uniqueness” is not brought about because something defies categories, because everything does to some extent. It is a response to a sense of something greater as in religious experience.

In making the comparison to religious experience it is important to emphasise that there are different kinds of religious experience. They may be seen to range from the kind of awesome confrontation described by Otto to what we might term “mystical” experiences, which are of more contemplative and subtle kind. Nevertheless, they have in common what we might call a non-rational or emotional reaction to some perceived greater power. In the case of religious experience this may be God or some other religious figure, though it should be stressed that there is a subjective dimension to religious experience and something that might provoke a sense of mystery in one person might not in another.7 I am arguing, following Durkheim, that societies can provoke similar reactions—in some cases awesome, and in others perhaps more comparable to mystical experience. However, whichever kind it is, it relates to an emotional rather than analytical response (see Rambo 1993 for a discussion of different kinds of religious experience).

This is my finding with regard to Finland, with regard to how I have found the word employed about “Finnishness.”8 All of those interviewees

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7. However, various scholars such as Boyer (2001) and Mithen (1996) have argued that certain phenomena evoke a similar religious response in every culture because of hardwiring to react to such phenomena in a set way.

8. As discussed, Finland’s unique discourse is interesting because—as Dale (1986) argues regarding Japan—the idea that it is “unique” is also accepted by various

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who accepted that Finnish culture was unique began with an Andreskian
definition of the word. For example, Päivi asserted that, “We Finns are
unique,” and that by unique she meant, “we are completely different from
other cultures.” When I said to her that all cultures were “completely dif-
erent” from other cultures she responded that, “Yes, but we are more dif-
erent. We are totally different from the others. We are unique.” So assert-
ing uniqueness means others are not unique. They did not mean that they
are not “as unique,” but simply not unique. She added that “Swedes, Nor-
wegians … they are kind of the same but we are different. Of course we’re
unique, look at our language!” I observed that Estonian was very similar
to Finnish and asked how, then, Finnish culture was “unique,” to which
she responded: “Okay. But still. It just is. They have been part of the Soviet
Union and are like Latvia and other cultures. We are unique. We just are.”
Discussing this issue with other Finns led to very similar conversations.
By “unique” they meant without parallel, and when it was demonstrated
that this was inconsistent they continued to assert that they were “unique,”
and in some cases became rather agitated about it. Elsa and Kukka (both
pensioners) defined unique as being “different,” but it was not “different
from” anything. Finns were simply “different,” and “more different” than
any other culture that might be asserted to be “different.” Most interview-
ees used the issue of “language” to demonstrate this difference. Ahti (68)
claimed that “the Finnish genes” were somehow inherently “different”, as
did Johanna and Elsa.

All of those that accepted “uniqueness” stuck to it fervently, despite evi-
dence of it being inconsistent. However, not all Finns whom I interview-
ated accepted the idea that Finnish culture was “unique.” Those who were more
intellectually aware (usually graduates under 40) tended to challenge the
idea. They did not accept the idea, terming it a national myth. One inter-
viewee (male, 46, lecturer), just burst out laughing when I asked him about
it and said, “Ah! Finland has been so long invaded. We have to find self-
esteeom from something, even if it’s just a myth like that!”

9. Finnish is not an Indo-European language like the Nordic languages and Rus-
sian. It is part of a separate group known as Finno-Ugric which includes Esto-
nian, Hungarian, Sami (Lappish) and various Siberian languages. See Campbell

10. Benoist (2004) argues that “uniqueness” tends to be a response to defeat—an
ideology of resentment where the disempowered gain self-esteem by asserting
themselves as “unique.” It is noteworthy that Finnish “uniqueness” died down
after independence from Russia in 1917 (when the Greater Finland movement

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Romantic philosophies as religion

Before examining the criticisms of this conclusion, it is necessary to look at the philosophy (in my view, the unsustainable philosophy) which I will show to under-pin them. It would follow from an implicit definition that “nationalism” (and the perception that one’s culture is unique) is a form of Implicit Religion, as is Cultural Relativism, whose proponents tend to assert that other cultures are unique. I think these two conceptions can be examined together. For any reader unfamiliar with the term, Cultural Relativism is the principle that a person’s or group’s beliefs should be understood only in terms of their own culture. Accordingly, all cultures are understood to be equal—and incomparable. Sandall (2001) argues that it is a descendant of Romanticism.

Romanticism developed in the eighteenth century and gained particular strength during the Industrial Revolution. The movement treasured emotion and aesthetic experience—above rationality—as a source of knowledge and a guide to how to live life. Accordingly, proponents such as Rousseau argued for a return to a more primitive, natural state and tended to idolize tribes. Moreover, in tribal fashion, Rousseau posited very strong boundaries: you either accepted the general will or you were a dangerous outsider. Romantic nationalism ultimately grew out of this, as did Marxism which, like Romantic nationalism, was heavily influenced by Hegel. Romanticism (and thus its successor philosophies such as Marxism, Nationalism, Cultural Relativism and the other philosophies of the Continental School) do not (and cannot) prove their premises, that, for example, “All history … is the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels 1848, Ch. 1), or “The most natural state … is a single people with a single national character” (Herder 1785 in Popper 1966b, 52), or that all cultures are unique (Sandall 2001). They are asserted as founding principles. Popper (21) observes that in Romanticism there is “a new kind of dogmatism … it confronts us with a dictum. And we can take it or leave it.” It is an “age of dishonesty” which does little more than “bewitch” the reader. These philosophies, as I have said, are Hegelian. They have to involve an “other”—an antithesis—and in that respect also are highly tribal. Precisely because Romantic philosophies are based on such unquestioned and accepted assumptions they are, fol-

to invade Finnish-speaking areas was at its height and the country was empowered), and became popular again after 1944 when Finland was, to a certain extent, under Soviet influence and disempowered (see Kirby 2006). Reader (2003) makes a similar point about the dynamics of Japan’s promotion of its own uniqueness.

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following Wilson (1975), implicitly “religious” in character.

We can contrast this kind of philosophy—which Popper terms “false rationalist”—with that pursued by scholars such as Popper. Again, I use the term “false rationalist” cautiously. It is important not to insult—or be thought to insult—one’s intellectual opponents. “False rationalist” is inherently critical and is used to refer to ideologies which are overtly rational—such as Marxism—but which, upon closer inspection, are not rational because they necessitate, for example, believing propositions without evidence. I think this term is preferable to accusing an opponent of being pseudo-scientific, because the term is well-known and, partly because of this, emotive and insulting.

This distinction can be noted between the dominant Anglophone philosophical tradition of analytic philosophy and the Continental tradition. In basic summary, Analytic Philosophy attempts to solve set, discrete scientific (in the broad sense) problems. It is characterized by a respect for the natural sciences and an emphasis on formal logic and reaching clarity of argument through linguistic analysis. It was particularly dominant in British philosophy departments and in particular in Cambridge, though also in Scandinavia. It developed as a reaction against the previously dominant school of Idealism, which was effectively a form of metaphysics broadly in the tradition of Hegel. The Continental tradition has been more inclined towards changing the world, as in the Frankfurt School (see Horkheimer 1974), which sees all philosophical thought as merely a product of its historical or social context, and is strongly sceptical of the scientific method. This school—including such philosophies as the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and the post-modernism most associated with Jacques Derrida—is more dominant in mainland Europe and especially in France and Germany.

For analytic philosophers the key question is whether or not a statement is ordered and logical, regardless of who said it and the various influences upon them. These can, anyway, be overcome through critical thinking (see Rosen 1998, Preston 2006 and Popper 1966a–b). Romanticism, by contrast, is in line with the Continental School and the idea that philosophy should change the world, and can learn from tribal organization.

**Cultural relativism and post-modernism**

The second problem with Cultural Relativism is trenchantly highlighted by Sandall (2001, Chapter 1). Even ignoring its failure to prove its founding basis, Sandall demonstrates that different cultures lead to very different
results in terms of basic culturally-shared desires such as *individual* survival, and this has been widely documented (see Wilson 1975, 550). This is why, Sandall suggests, people come from Africa to Europe for heart operations and not the other way around. This is why the Western standard of living—in terms of shared desires such as to survive serious illness—is so much higher than is the case in much of Africa. We are making a distinction between a scientific culture (the culture of the anthropologist) and a non-scientific one.

For the cultural relativist, this is illegitimate. The argument, most famously advocated by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, runs that any anthropologist’s cultural analysis will be heavily influenced by their own culture, meaning that they are themselves a subject for analysis as much as the analyzed. Second, the nineteenth century view that the anthropologist is from a somehow more developed culture, studying a more primitive culture, is criticized as “racist” and “ethnocentric” as it suggests that there are measurable differences between the achievements of different cultures which are differently structured. Rather, all cultures are “unique,” equal and “equally valuable,” and should be examined within the terms of the culture itself; because to do otherwise implies the superiority of one culture over another. Tribal and non-tribal cultures are assessed as broadly as possible, to emphasize that all cultures are equal and function in a similar fashion (Sandall 2001, ix).

This world-view, if applied to Religious Studies or the Anthropology of Religion, would prevent us examining “implicit religion,” because “religion” could only be what, for example, the gentleman interviewed in a pub said it was. To suggest otherwise would be to suggest the anthropologist’s “culture” was somehow superior or qualitatively different (because its definitions and terms were somehow more worthy of employment) to the worldview of the man in the pub. I do not think the question should be about “superiority,” but rather whether the anthropologist’s view is more logical and so allows us to understand the world in greater depth.

Anthropologists wish to enter the mind of the other and understand it, but they can only do this through the limitations of their own language and their own concepts, whose usefulness is likely to have been seriously debated. If anthropologists cannot do this they are left with entirely separate worlds which cannot be mutually understood, but this again raises the fundamental issue at the heart of the critique of Cultural Relativism. The scientific world involves tangible, provable, consistent results and therefore furthers “understanding,” if we interpret this to mean getting closer to the truth.

For many cultural relativists—and post-modernists—science is just
another system of thought like any other. Bruce (2002, 230) points out that this is equally true with post-modernism. He argues that post-modernism has a set of doctrines, such as a refusal to regard scientific criteria as the sole standard for worthwhile knowledge, and a willingness to abandon attempts to find overarching theories. Bruce further points out the inconsistency of post-modernists in their use of logical argument to attempt to persuade us of their idea (231) when “Western” thought is the object of their critique. Implicitly they are hypocritically accepting rational methods, and so the very analytic philosophy with which they disagree. They might counter that this appeal to reason is a circular argument, but that is the point Bruce is making. They are using reason to highlight a fallacy—the circular argument—and therefore are inconsistent. As the biologist Richard Dawkins (2003, 15) put it, “Show me a cultural relativist at 30,000 feet and I’ll show you a hypocrite … If you are flying to an international conference of anthropologists … the reason you will probably get there, the reason you won’t plummet into the ploughed field—is that a lot of Western, scientifically trained engineers have got their sums right.”

Some post-modern writers—most notably Derrida—appear to obviate this accusation by abandoning any formal reasoning at all. Indeed, taking a clear position is abandoned in favour of a dream-like style. Thus, their works employ appeal to verbosity and linguistic tricks in particular. Barry Smith described Derrida’s writings, in a letter to *The Times* (Smith 6 May 1992) thus:

M. Derrida’s writings seem to consist in no small part of elaborate jokes and puns. He seems to have come close to making a career of translating into the academic sphere tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists … His writing … stretches the normal forms of academic scholarship beyond recognition … his works employ a written style which defies comprehension.

And it cannot be countered that this is an “appeal to authority,” because that implies an objective, accepted standard. Dawkins (2003, 51) notes that we cannot subject post-modernism to logical analysis, because post-modernists admit they are “playing games.” And isn’t the whole idea of games that they are fun and should not be taken too seriously?

If we follow Derrida, we abandon any search for the truth or understanding the world. It is epistemologically pessimistic and comparable to some forms of Gnosticism (and I cannot be accused of “appeal to insult” for so describing-it). I appreciate that as post-modernism has gradually fallen out of favour, it could be regarded as an academic insult, but I would counter that many post-modernists would continue to define themselves as
such and so I think it is reasonable to use the term. Benoist (2004) argues that Post-Modernists and Cultural Relativists are in the anti-scientific tradition. Following Popper, they are “false rationalists.” Popper draws a distinction between epistemological pessimism and epistemological optimism. The former includes Plato’s view that knowledge can be attained by an elect in this category. The latter is scientific, except that Popper observes that the optimist view can lead to a belief that humans have an in-built, God-given understanding of the world and that anybody that questions this is consequently wicked. It can lead to utopianism and fanaticism. Popper (1963, 363) terms this “false rationalism” because of its belief in the power of humans to make sense of the world, mixed with a refusal to critique their own view—something which he argues is not a sign of a rational, critical attitude. It seems to follow that to pursue “implicit religiosity” involves being part of the Analytical tradition of thought.

Having looked at this philosophical background, we are now equipped to examine the criticisms of the notion that “uniqueness” is a matter of implicit religiosity. Many of these criticisms are underpinned by philosophical assumptions fundamentally different from those of Implicit Religion scholars.

“Philosophical but not anthropological”

So, let me respond to the central criticisms of understanding uniqueness in religious terms. Is it not pushing the definition to its—indeed logical—but still quite extreme conclusion to understand uniqueness in terms of religion? As anthropologists should we not start from the emic usage of the term, rather than defining a term for ourselves and then applying this definition to the culture at hand? Is not Andreski’s definition logical but nevertheless extreme, and accordingly is the whole debate philosophical but not anthropological? I think this critique makes a false distinction, reflecting the Cultural Relativist perspective which we have already shown to be logically unsustainable.

First, we have already demonstrated that it is reasonable to define religion in terms of aspects of culture which seem “true” and which one asserts as “true” in spite of what reason might indicate. If a person maintains that “Finnish culture is unique” and they define “unique” in Andreski’s terms (which almost all Finns whom I interviewed that accepted cultural uniqueness, did) then they are asserting a proposition to be true despite the fact that it is demonstrably illogical. As such, they are reflecting precisely the definition of religion propounded by Wilson (1975)—they are refusing to let go of an illogical belief, so highlighting its
importance to their worldview; its emotional power so strong that they do not think questioningly about it; its functionally religious nature. Second, if they are using “unique,” colloquially, to mean “very different,” this is no matter. They are using a word which has religious connotations and “unique” (and synonyms such as “strange”) tend to be used without comparison, meaning that Finland is simply inherently “different,” rendering this kind of “unique” indistinct from Andreski’s “unique.” Finland is not “different from,” but just “different” and so “other.” But, most importantly, most critics would accept that the term is being used illogically.

It is important to be clear what we mean by the word illogical, as it has the potential to become a kind of academic insult. In essence, something that is illogical is contradictory, and accordingly does not make sense. Believing two mutually exclusive and opposite things to be true at the same time is thus illogical. It is following in the example of Lewis Carroll’s Queen of Hearts who believes things which are “impossible”—they cannot be reconciled with each other. Likewise, the way in which many Finns use the word unique about their country cannot be reconciled with realities which they would also accept—such as that the Finnish language is closely related to Estonian for example. As we discussed, this inconsistency, this belief in the impossible, is central to many religious concepts, and the religious (in the conventional sense of the word) are found to be fervently attached to these concepts. If somebody insists on using the word in an illogical way, then this again leads us into the world of functionalist religion. The word is so important to their worldview that they cannot relinquish it, even in the face of a demonstration that it is being illogically and inconsistently employed and thus involves accepting a contradictory state of affairs. The word is central to identity; it is part of a Wilsonian (1975) religious discourse—“religious” in the broadest sense of the word. Moreover, it reflects what Boyer (2001, 287) calls the “magic of society.” He argues that we have difficulty explaining “stable or complex actions of social interaction,” so we are left saying that societies cannot be explained—they take on a “magical character” and tend to be anthropomorphized, introducing a kind of agency. If we examine cultural uniqueness in terms of how it is employed, it is effectively a part of either Nationalism or Cultural Relativism. Both ideologies are in the Romantic tradition, involving a “hidden hand” in the form of the inevitable force of history, and thus uniqueness can be seen to reach into a religious discourse in Boyer’s narrower sense whereby some implicit agency must be involved.11

11. For further discussion of the religious dimensions of Cultural Relativism see

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Third, if we were to follow this critique we would clearly be engaging in Cultural Relativism. It is effectively saying that it is “not anthropological” to attempt to get behind what a tribe says and try to logically understand it. Indeed, it might be asked, “What is to be gained from it? Is it an exercise in getting people to use terms more accurately? This might be a valuable task but it is not very anthropological.” What is to be gained is to understand where a group is using a word illogically and from this understand the (functionally religious) ideas to which the group is attached. Since Bailey’s (1997) seminal work, many scholars have attempted to discern the “Implicit Religion” buried beneath everyday language usage (e.g. Grainger 2007, Lamb 2004). We cannot get behind what the tribe says—this is imperialist. We should accept the tribe’s categories at face value, which means that we can never examine such issues as “functionalist religion.” Unless the tribe defines a particular phenomenon as “religion” we cannot do so even if, according to a logical definition, what is happening is conspicuously “religion.” As we have seen, this is logically unsustainable. Fourthly, it is very interesting that some critics term Andreski’s definition “logical but extreme.” Surely, as scholars we should strive after logic and nothing else. In contemporary English, people are accused of being “extreme” if they fundamentally question the assumptions of the majority; if they “rock the boat” in a major way. To say they are “logical but extreme” implies that these presuppositions—and thus the tribe which presupposes them—are more important than critical thinking.

And the use of the word “tribal” is not without serious thought. Indeed, it is a word which Popper explicitly uses about the Continental School. Popper (1966a/b) draws a distinction between “civilization”—where knowledge is always critiqued—and the tribe (or religion) where it is not, and so where solidarity, and accepting orthodoxy, is more important than truth. This is the worldview of the false rationalist, the cultural relativist whose (in essence) violence (or non-rational reaction) against critics such as Derek Freeman, E. O. Wilson and Roger Sandall, who have challenged this view, has been well documented. Derek Freeman (1999, 1983) is generally acknowledged to have substantially falsified Margaret Mead’s (1928) study of Samoa through his own fieldwork conducted in a similar time period. Freeman was met with highly personal and other fallacious criticisms by defenders of the Mead orthodoxy such as the American Anthropological Association voting, in 1983, that his refutation of Mead was “unscientific,” as if truth can be decided by a vote (see Freeman 1996 for details). Indeed,


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it might be observed that such an action is akin to deciding academic truth in a court or through a Vatican Council. However, nobody has been able to successfully defend Mead against Freeman’s refutation (and thus defend Cultural Determinism). Caton (2005) has argued that Freeman’s critique proves he was a narcissist. This is irrelevant to the logic of his book, although it may imply that it takes somebody slightly mentally unstable to have sufficient disdain for the tribe to put reason above tribal acceptance, challenge the conventions of the tribe, and genuinely innovate.

In general, Sandall’s critique, *The Culture Cult*, has been well-received but its critics often employ *ad hominem* and other fallacious arguments. Wolfe (Sept. 2001) emotively argues that Sandall should not criticize anthropologists who are dead, because they cannot defend themselves. Should we then not criticize Plato, because he is dead? Wolfe associates Sandall with “right-wing ideologues” and engages in personal attacks regarding Sandall’s state of mind which have no relevance to the logic of his arguments. Wolfe uses Sandall’s discussion of Aborigines to suggest that he is “racist” but Sandall is critiquing a policy that has worsened their lives. I cannot see how this is “racist” and, anyway, suggesting that an intellectual opponent is “racist” is, I would argue, an appeal to insult and emotion. Some terms, such as (currently) “racist,” “fascist,” “fundamentalist,” “Holocaust denier” or “paedophile,” are so emotionally charged (and even associated with murder) that almost nobody would self-identify as being one. Using these terms (which are usually inconsistently defined) about an intellectual opponent or their arguments, is, even if inadvertently, an appeal to emotion (the “connotation fallacy”); an attempt to win an argument other than through reason. E.O. Wilson’s experience would be amusing if it were not so evident of failure of logical thinking. For criticizing Cultural Determinism and arguing that genes influence behaviour, E.O. Wilson had a bucket of ice water poured over his head at a 1978 Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (Segerstråle 2000, 23). This is a Hegelian system which puts acceptance of “religious” (in the Wilsonian sense of believed in fervently despite the evidence) presuppositions above logic.

Fifth, implicitly, as I am not a cultural relativist I am “not anthropological” (I am not an anthropologist) but rather “philosophical.” Philosophy

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12. It might be argued that this suppresses discussion of a particular social issue. I do not agree. Those wishing to discuss this issue would simply have to state precisely what they mean rather than use an emotive label, often with an inconsistent meaning.
is about rigorously logical thinking and the fact that one might seek to divorce anthropology from philosophy—and employ a philosophically unsustainable category system—speaks volumes and the consequences can be noted in terms of scholarship. This problem, of false rationalists in “Cultural Studies,” might be overcome if the separation between Philosophy and Social Sciences were broken down. We might then move beyond the “Sokal Hoax” where a parody (Sokal 1996), lampooning cultural relativist articles by being illogical and jargon-filled, can be submitted to an academic Cultural Studies journal and actually published (see Sokal and Bricmont 1998).

Sixth, let me respond to the following incredulous question: “I am wondering what it reflects when we define religious reaction... as a simple recognition of differences.” But this is not as bizarre as the phrasing makes it sound. If an anthropologist asserts that “mongoloid peoples have certain unique physiological features” they are powerfully asserting difference between concepts. This is essentialist because it implies a belief in unchanging ideas and it is thus religious by virtue of deifying a system of categories. One might counter that all I am achieving is “a more careful use of language.” But this is question-begging. A person's use of language can be analyzed in order to understand how they see the world. If they make strong statements—if they speak about something quotidian in an imprecise, illogical way—then this allows us to discern the things which they regard as unquestionably true. To use the word “unique” about something is often an imprecise, unthinking use of language, and accordingly it is a passageway to that which is religious (that which is unquestioningly assumed, a central dimension to all of the definitions of religion which we have examined, and the essence of Geertz’s) for the user.

Finally, it might be asked, “Can a group never be considered unique?” I am not saying that something can “never” be “considered” unique. I am saying that the use of the word is almost always an emotional issue. It can be considered unique in Russell’s sense. I am saying that, beyond this, the use of the word is almost always an emotional issue. If you really think something is unique (and other concepts are not), then this irrational view is, as we have defined it, religious. By saying an archaeological find is “unique” (because “there’s no other pot like this from this period”) you are connecting that find to a discourse of otherness. This either reflects deliberate exaggeration or a lack of logical thinking which indicates a momentary, perhaps loss of critical faculties, an unquestioning attitude towards reality and one’s own sense of certainty. This is congruous with how we have

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Cultural Uniqueness and Implicit Religion

defined religion, at least in Wilson’s sense.

Some tourism promoters might use the word “unique” about a culture, knowing it to be illogical and not believing what they are writing—but if this is so then this is presumably because the word makes the culture seem mysterious, awesome … attractive to the romantic-minded with money to spend. Also, I appreciate that, in asserting that “unique” leads to a religious discourse, the word might be used as a joke, and so cannot be seen as indicating a person’s religiosity if it is so employed. But this, of course, would raise questions about the implicitly religious dynamics of jokes and these have been discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Berger 1997).

Conclusion

This article has argued that the concept of Implicit Religion can be applied to the use of the word unique. It has done so in order to reply to some superficially persuasive criticisms of this very idea and, implicitly, of the notion of Implicit Religion itself. Having justified the concept of Implicit Religion, drawing upon Geertz and Wilson, it was argued that uniqueness, in effect, has a religious dimension to it, in line with common understandings of the divine, and it was argued that the assertion that a culture is unique would logically reflect a person having similar feelings towards a culture as they might towards “God.” This would be in line with accepted theories amongst advocates of Implicit Religion. It then demonstrated, drawing (alas for the purposes of a mainly theoretical article, briefly) on fieldwork with Finns (a culture in which “uniqueness” is an important discourse) that this appeared to be how those Finns that accepted this idea understood their culture as “unique,” and that, following this, uniqueness can be perceived as an important dimension to an implicitly religious nationalist discourse: we highlighted that Dale (1986) found something similar in his examination of the Japanese, amongst whom there is also a strong “uniqueness” school. Thereafter—in anticipation of the criticisms of this conclusion—we examined the philosophical dynamics of both nationalism and Cultural Relativism and found that in each case they are constructed, like religion, around assumptions which cannot be proven, tend to assert that these assumptions are the ultimate truth (as in the Hegelian dialectic), tend to cast an “other” against which they contrast themselves, and are, in some manifestations such as Post-Modernism, sceptical about science and logic. These are, it was argued, the philosophies of the Continental School, which can be contrasted with Analytical Philosophy. We also highlighted the intellectual difficulties with Cultural

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Relativism, and argued that those who accept Implicit Religion are effectively within the Analytical rather than Continental School.

Having done this, we turned to the criticisms which we found—in most cases—to be underpinned by the very same cultural relativist (and more broadly by Romantic and False Rationalist) assumptions, which we have already shown to be logically unsustainable. Implicit Religion has not been universally accepted but the critics highlighted tend to be those who wish to maintain the “conventional” definition of religion for various reasons. In this article, I have highlighted another kind of critic. This is the Cultural Relativist critic who sees the very attempt to employ a category system other than that of the subject as illegitimate and even as a sign of imperialism.

I hope I have demonstrated in this article that Implicit Religion can stand up to this critique and that, indeed, the critique appears to provide fruitful research territory for the further understanding of Implicit Religion.

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