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# Commentary

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## The Work of Culture

*Some further thoughts on religion, psyche / mind and culture*

In his New Introductory Lectures, Freud qualifies the aphorism 'where *id* was, there *ego* shall be' with the comment, 'it is a work of culture'. This in turn is qualified, oddly, by 'not unlike draining the Zuiderzee...'. It may be an example of his fondness for hydraulic analogies, or may convey an image of the ego appearing as 'id-ish' water drains away. Whatever the case, this startling image of the work of culture stimulates reflection.

### Culture as an informational system

Culture can be viewed as a supra-individual informational system. Although humans make their culture, they are also made by it. The human mind and culture co-evolved, totally interdependent with the emergence of language and symbols, which enabled acquired information to become heritable.

Being embedded in the artefacts of culture, the informational system as a whole remains opaque. Recent concepts in species-formation emphasize the crucial role of environment in gene selection via the individual. Ecosystems and cultures are both supra-individual systems, dependent, of

course, on individuals. Ecosystems at their own organizational level proceed through 'successions' to the climax stage when there are no more successful species to replace the current occupants of the site. Is there some analogy in the way culture shapes the mind? Ecosystems in similar terrains and climates and of the same latitude, though quite independent, tend to 'converge', that is, despite having distinct components, they evolve similar characteristics. To what extent could this process occur *sui generis* as it were? Marshall Sahlins asks if culture can 'have its own momentum, swayed little by individual wishes? ... are individuals' cultures passive transmitters?' Leslie White suggests that 'for a student of human behaviour to discover a pattern within his [*sic*] own culture would be like a fish discovering water.'

A culture has, of course, many components. Some of these appear to be progressing through successions, for example, the evolution of the various extensions of the body - from hand tools and bowls to powertools and refrigerators. Are there actually 'out there', laws of technological development, an aspect of culture as an extra-organic process?

## Religion and cultural transmission

Whereas technology transfers with relative ease between cultures, other components do not, for example, language and religion. These have informational boundaries and have a conservative function.

Durkheim made the shrewd observation that we acquire our religion as we acquire our language, by being born into a particular society. Assuming that the brain and mind are two aspects of the one system, then it is not clear how this cultural information is embodied into the brain, but it undoubtedly is. It probably alters the 'hard-wiring' in some way, but this is not to say that it is computer-like, for the brain-mind is also self-organizing and structure maintaining.

Religious beliefs have the quality of being 'real, true and important'. Clearly for non-trivial information to be transmitted from one generation to the next it requires, first of all, that it is believed. Language has to be stable and conservative to serve communication. Both religions and languages have the shared cultural characteristic of being subjective - one's own personal belief, one's own speech, whilst at the same time being objective, in that they are 'out there' as religion and mother tongue transmitted from one generation to the next.

Paul MacLean describes an evolutionary model of the brain, the 'triune brain', which functions as a whole but evolved in a hierarchical fashion, with three subsystems: the Reptilian (the brain stem, and the oldest part), the Paleo-mammalian (cortex and limbic system), and the Neo-mammalian, which had its explosive growth late in phylogeny in primates and more particularly in hominids.

Of particular interest to an enquiry into the function of belief and the capacity for culture, is his account of a centre in eureka-type feelings. MacLean writes: 'ironically, it seems that the ancient limbic system has the capacity to generate strong affective feelings of conviction that we attach to our beliefs, regardless of whether they are true or false.' It appears that as proto-language, conceptual thought and symbolisation emerged, this centre could be involved in the process with the tendency to a simple emotionally based certainty. Information processing to significance and meaning would be presumably a more complex and integrated function involving the neo-cortex (MacLean's Neo-Mammalian brain).

This 'certainty'-centre may have been advantageous in promoting prompt and decisive action, and it may also have evolved for its conservative qualities in carrying proto-cultural beliefs and ensuring informational boundaries. Religious beliefs and mother-tongue are acquired differently from the acquisition of empirical knowledge. The structuralists have indicated the innate grammar in languages. Do religions have the equivalent in rituals, the sacred, deities and worship - their reinforcers? (Religious experience seems to be in a different category altogether, and these notes in no way refer to this phenomenon, except, perhaps, in relation to the culturally determined symbols and language through which the experience is expressed.)

All life shares genetic informational systems. Highly evolved animals learn from individual experiences. Early human beings perhaps became learners to the degree that experience would over-ride genetic wisdom; this, then, could lead to each becoming so much an

individual that the coherent transmission of information could fail, producing chaos. There was a biological necessity to evolve a cultural transmission of tried, true and functional information, that is, with some of the persistence of the genetic, but also with some of the mutability of learned 'neurological' information.

What was 'selected for' was the process called Neotony - that is, the birth of the infant of the species in a very immature state. This necessitates longer infantile dependence, more parental care, more emotional bonding, a greater plasticity, and a longer learning period for enculturation than required for other species. The development of the neotony process was related to the development of erect posture, bipedal locomotion and the narrowing of pelvic outlets. A large brained infant was then born in an almost foetal state.

Groupings among the early hominids were small. Nevertheless, bands and later tribes extended beyond kin. The so-called 'hardcore' altruism of the socio-biologist is well explained by kin-selection. 'Soft-core' altruism, that extending beyond kin to tribal brotherhood is better explained by culture. Proto-culture imitated and extended genetically based adaptation in carrying shared ethical, altruistic beliefs. Religious prescripts and taboos are much concerned with the regulation of biologically relevant actions of individuals at all stages of the life-cycle, affecting the individual's chance of survival and his/her reproductive success. In tribal groups, what was 'culturally' true allowed an adaptive response to the ecological conditions and included concern for the carrying capacity of the natural environment. The religion-culture gave the unity needed for

concerted action.

John Bowker gives a functional description of religion: 'Social and systemic contexts for information in which particular resources for life construction are made available and kept in being from one generation to another.' He indicates that these resources tend to replace innate behaviours directed to species-specific environments. However, in his aptly titled 'Licensed Insanities', he also elaborates the shadow side of the informational systems which need boundaries: brotherhood and otherhood, true believers and infidels or heretics, and the bloody conflicts in their name. What could be interpreted as a vestigial tribalism, possibly 'belief-centre'-based, may be associated with fanaticism. Social uncertainties may promote compensatory fundamentalist certainties.

### **Cultural change**

When life was very hard indeed, as it was for early human beings, they were tightly bonded in a culture which changed little over thousands of years. It paid to be conservative as there were few resources and little lee-way for risky change. After 'civilisation' emerged about 10,000 years ago, the danger of change diminished, so much so that an advantage in change began to prevail.

Once a person or society gains an advantage through change, pressure is put on others to change as well. More recently, a competitive circle seems to have set in, with the 'rise of capitalism' and rapid cultural change. Consciously or unconsciously, Luther perceived the mood of the moment, emphasising personal salvation. More recently still, as 'social hope' is eroded with a waning

of confidence in collective solutions, there is the trend to faith in materialistic individualism, the market economy and the power of money (Jeremy Seabrook's 'privatisation of social hope'). This is at a time when the need becomes more obvious for a conscious, intelligent and concerted management of the earth, when it seems vital that this awareness gets into the culture so as to shape values, beliefs, actions and technologies. Changes in belief may well be post hoc, the reinforcers of behaviours which have emerged under social pressure or painful necessity.

Lynn White, in his controversial 1967 article, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', claimed that 'the victory of Christianity over paganism was the psychic revolution in the history of our culture.' He asserts that 'especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' and he then states that 'Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.' Be that as it may, one can only agree that the advent of Christianity brought marked cultural change.

How did this information get into the system? Constantine founded the new Christian city named after himself, gave Rome the new state religion, and set up and presided over the ecumenical Church Council of Nicea, but also retained his position of Pontifex Maximus to the pagans. By the time of Justinian paganism was illegal, and he was determined to establish orthodoxy by force if necessary, but hampered in this by Theodora's expressed Monophysitism. In the fourth century, St Gregory of Nyssa gave an amusing account of information getting into the system: 'the city is full of artisans and

slaves who are all of them profound theologians and preach in ships and in the streets. If you desire a man to change a piece of money for you he informs you wherein the Son differs from the Father; if you ask the price of a loaf of bread, you are told by way of a reply that the Son is inferior to the Father; and if you enquire whether the bath is ready, the answer is that the Son was made of nothing...'. Pagan cults thrived on variety, but for Christianity the problem of orthodoxy versus heresy was present from the beginning. Recent archeological finds (scrolls, manuscripts and fragments), and the uncovering of Paleo-Christian art have opened another window on to the times. The writings of radical biblical critics and quasi-agnostic theologians throw new and fascinating light on the dynamics of the new faith and the early church, as they entered our culture and into our minds. The numerous forgeries, fictions, alleged gospels and apocrypha also give some indication of the genesis of myth and legend.

If intellectual and cultural life is a very highly integrated organic system, then it is difficult to reach a position from which to view it. Does it or its components have systemic 'successions' as posited by evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century? Does religion process through animism, shamanism, polytheistic paganism, to theistic religion with huge hierarchical organisations?

One of the many functions of a religion is to give an account of the way the world works. Faith allows irrefutable answers to some unanswerable questions. The biological sciences give some piecemeal answers, but in refutable form, to some aspects of the human being's place in nature.

There has been a succession of views in Western culture concerning the human being's place in nature, following the closure of the schools of Athens by Justin. First, following Genesis: human beings as a special creation, separate from the rest, in the image of God, with dominion over creatures. Medieval maps were centred on Jerusalem, in a geocentric universe. As White says, these are anthropocentric views, and well embedded. With the post-Darwinian world view, in a strange way, the anthropocentricity continued; this informed the Piltdown forgery and search for the 'missing link'. It was assumed that either by special mutations or providential evolutionary steps, early human beings appeared complete with large cranial capacity, large brain and intelligence, which allowed them to cross a 'Rubicon', to attain the development of their culture, and their language, ancillary to, and extensions of their innately evolved sapient minds.

### **A new informational paradigm?**

In contemporary times, there is no Rubicon, no missing link. The human species supports many different cultures. What slowly evolved, what was slowly selected for was the capacity for culture which brings about the biologically unique situation for its members, of a network, grid or mesh of information between them and the natural environment. Now if the multiple symptoms of ecological problems indicate a mismatch between mind and environment, then necessity will cause a new stage to emerge. How will religion inform the new ecological awareness? It is difficult to find suitable sacred texts in the Christian tradition, more so than, for instance, in

the Buddhist, Hindu or Taoist traditions.

There is, however, more pagan inheritance in Christianity than is usually admitted. The December 25 winter solstice was the birthday of Sol Invictus before being selected as Christ's birthday. Directly below the altar in St Peter's Basilica in Rome, is a necropolis, according to tradition the burial place of St Peter. On display is a mosaic of Cristos-Helios in his chariot with huge solar rays. Ephesus, famed for the Temple of Artemis and house of the cult of Cybele (chastity and motherhood) has, as well, the house of the virgin Mary; it was there that the dogma of the virgin birth was promulgated in 431.

However, the fight with paganism is long over. Nature could be again made sacred. This is evident in the work of several noted Christian theologians who are emphasising the inter-relatedness of all Creation. In 1978, pope John Paul II declared St Francis, 13th century author of the canticle to Brother Sun, Patron of the Ecological Movement ... appropriately, in the exquisite courtyard of tiny San Domini-ano. If there is some process of selection in religious values (Bowker's 'well-winnowed', viable and quasi-stable heritages), then, if there is time, one may expect Christian theology to develop a further stage which would provide ecological movements with a spiritual dimension emerging out of the Western tradition. It is interesting that Aboriginal and Amerindian traditions are being used as sources in this way. Such developments might ameliorate the mismatch between our mind-culture and the natural ecological environment.

Human mind and culture are two aspects of the one system. Neither came first. Culture shapes mind-brain; brain-mind shapes culture over time. As culture varies so will behaviour, although in the short term the reverse is not true, culture being the more stable end of the cybernism.

There is vastly more information in genetic, neurological (unconscious) and culture systems than we are aware of, select or even suspect. Just as a person may wake to find an intractable problem solved courtesy of the unconscious, information entering awareness covertly from these systems may be regarded as providential, satanic or currently, as paranormal.

Leslie White speculates on the 'locus' of culture: that 'the things and events of culture have their existence in space and time... within the human organism (concepts, beliefs, emotions), within processes of social interactions among human beings and within material objects such as axes, factories, railroads, pottery bowls... lying outside human organisms, but within the patterns of social interaction among them.' One wishes that there was a bio-cultural description of information, which elaborates White's 'within' in a comprehensive way. The terminology of information theory does not yet suit description of life processes.

### What then is the work of culture?

To what extent can culture acquire a life of its own? Once established, cultural expressions such as churches, banks, universities, parliaments and schools of art are not only cultural artefacts with a normative function, but in addition are information processing systems at a higher level than the

individual central nervous system. Cultures can graft, hybridize and show convergence at a level well above the individual. Is this what Freud means by 'a work of culture'?

At this supra-individual level, the work ahead should be a saltatory mutation towards a concern for all planetary systems with relevant actions. The information is in, the symptoms on display. Natural systems tend to be homeostatic loops, whereas economic systems, commercial imperatives, are straight-line affairs, cutting across the loops. The cultural change would include a spiritual-religious component underwriting this planetary concern (from Narcissus to Gaia).

To return to speculation about the ontogenetic, the ego and Freud's work of culture... were it possible to rear a human being of normal genetic constitution under circumstances of deprivation of all cultural tradition (quite impossible - but as a thought experiment), a pre-cultural, pre-human ancestor would not emerge, but a poor chaotic mental cripple. Talcott Parsons suggested that action is generally oriented to the attainment of goals and to conformity within norms. Happily this is not always the case; many lead quiet lives dissenting from the cultural norms. Some creative individuals can, as artists, communicate their sense of the absurd; others, as religious folk, transcend the cultural norms in a quite different way.

In 'Social Construction of Reality', Berger and Luckmann note that in primary socialisation, the individual's first world is constructed... the world of childhood is massively and indubitably real. Probably this could not be otherwise at this stage in development of consciousness. Only later can the

individual afford the luxury of at least a modicum of doubt. And probably this necessity of proto-realism in the apprehension of the world pertains phylogenetically as well as ontogenetically.' They describe the ontogenetic level of culture: '...it is at once evident that primary socialisation is usually the most important one for an individual, and that the basic structure of all secondary socialisation has to resemble that of the primary socialisation.' If this is not so, the consequence could be severe alienation in its various forms. This brings us back to Freud's reference to 'a work of culture'. In Berger's terms, the socially constructed reality (culture) is internalised in a primary socialisation. In Freud's terms, the culture is internalised and incorporated into the dynamic of the ego and super-ego.

**Endnote**

In 382, Bishop Ambrose persuaded Gratian to remove the Altar of Victory from the Roman Senate. This led to a great debate in which Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, Prefect of the City, pleaded with the Emperor for its return. A very moving speech expresses one of the last cries of the pagans. The following is a fragment:

Grant, I implore you, that what we inherited in our childhood we may in old age leave to our children. The love of tradition is a powerful thing.

*Alan Jennings  
South Australia*



## Rhymes from a Recent Reincarnation

### Om Sweet Om

In the trees by the river an old guru sat  
 Chanting "Om, Aum, Aum."  
 And I asked him, "Sir, is it true I am that -  
 Just Om, Aum, Aum?"

"Then why do I feel such a limited I,  
 Still waiting for the pie in the sky when I die?"  
 But to all my enquiries he'd only reply,  
 "Aum, Aum, Aum."

"Well Swami," I said, "I can make you a star,  
 With your Om, Aum, Aum.  
 With me as your manager, you could go far,  
 Chanting Om, Aum, Aum.  
 Your mere presence, we'd say, is a gift from Beyond!  
 I can see the girls flocking, just like to James Bond,  
 And to sceptical questions you'll simply respond,  
 Aum, Aum, Aum."

He soon became famous, with me at his side,  
 Chanting Om, Aum, Aum.  
 He was rated five star in the Good Guru Guide  
 For his Om, Aum, Aum.  
 We were even approved in the pages of Choice:  
 They said we entirely deserved our Rolls Royce;  
 And when quizzed about tax we'd proclaim with one voice,  
 "I owe 'em, I owe 'em, I owe 'em."

Then one day with a wink, and a chuckle of mirth,  
 "Ha-om, Ha-om, Ha-om!"  
 My swami decided to check out from earth,  
 And go Home, a-home, a-home.  
 He looked so contented, my heart didn't ache,  
 I simply decided, his place I would take,  
 And if anyone asks, am I real or a fake,  
 I say "Om, Aum, Aum."

Now my punch line is this - my new life is such fun,  
 Singing Om, Aum, Aum.  
 That my feeling of limited I is undone,  
 With an Om, Aum, Aum.  
 In my Rolls I don't bother with pie in the sky.  
 "Can this be enlightenment, Swami?" I cry,  
 And I fancy I hear a faint laugh from on high,  
 Saying "Om, Aum, Aum."

*John Wren-Lewis*



(Author's note: The above is not actually my own composition. It was "channelled" through me while I was in a state of deep meditation, and was in fact one of a number of such "communications" from an entity claiming the name Gilbert Sullivan, who appears anxious to update for the contemporary scene verses he wrote in a previous incarnation when split between the personalities of two famous Englishmen. This particular verse contains a number of hidden spiritual references which may not be immediately obvious to the uninitiated reader: for example, the first line clearly refers to the Sat Guru tradition of Hindu mysticism (as contrasted with the Stood-up Guru and the Got-up-and-Went Guru traditions), the fourth line refers to the identity of the sacred sound Om or Aum with the Transendent Self or Brahman, the references to stars no doubt invoke the ancient occult belief that stars are actually astral consciousnesses, and line 14 refers to the bond between guru and disciple.)

## **A Modern New Age Minister**

I am the very model of a modern New Age minister,  
My versatile dexterity is positively sinister.  
I ride the lecture circuit in an ancient souped-up Jaguar  
And bring you revolutionary songs from Nicaragua.

I led several protest meetings when they sank the Rainbow Warrior,  
I put sackcloth on the Eiffel Tower to make the French feel sorrier.  
Of all endangered species I have recently been sent a list - They've named me for the Nobel  
Prize as Top Environmentalist.

I've written to the Pope to say he needs some female cardinals,  
I've dug up several ancient scrolls from Israel to the Dardenelles;  
In fact when I've discovered how to be a sound li-turgy-man  
I'll be the very model of a modern New Age Clergyman.

I've studied tribal customs and traditions aboriginal,  
I've written several papers proving sin is not original.  
I've found a mystic meaning in Shakespearean erotic song,  
And told Umberto Eco where he's got his semiotics wrong.

When I attend a seder they will ask me to officiate,  
I know Masonic secrets up to Third Degree Initiate.  
I've grasped Hindu cosmologies, both Shankara's and Patanjali's,  
I got my second kensho at a Zendo in Los Angeles.

In fact when I know how to tell a Gnostic from an Arian,  
When I know why Jehovah chose a smooth 'un, not a hairy 'un,  
Indeed when I've a clue about the Persons of the Trinity,  
I'll be the New Age model of a Doctor of Divinity.

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