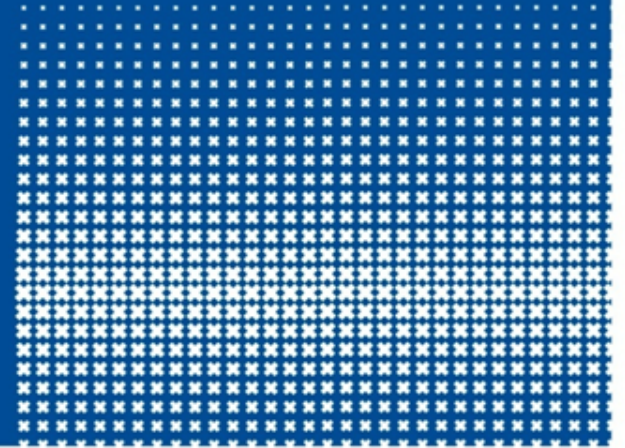




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# **Re-reflecting religion**

Blessing rituals (?) in the Pentateuch and in Judaism

## Lawson and McCauley: *Rethinking Religion* (1990, p. 125)

### ■ Prayers are not rituals in a technical sense:

“... the basic action structure of all religious rituals involves an object of ritual action. Religious rituals always do something to some thing or somebody. Religious rituals have an instrumental dimension [...] This is precisely the reason why concerns arise about rituals’ efficacy.

Participants perform rituals in order to bring about changes in the religious world. [...] It is worth noting that it follows on this view, that prayers are religious actions but not religious rituals.”

## Key ideas on the previous slide:

- Basic action structure:
  - “... do something to some thing or somebody”
  - “... have an instrumental dimension”
- Ritual efficacy, bring about changes in the world
- Prayers as religious actions (not rituals)

# Prayers (and blessings) not rituals??

- You are free to choose the definitions of your own concepts,

*but:*

## Prayers (and blessings) not rituals??

- Prayers and blessings are integral parts of religious action systems, usually a.k.a. rituals.
  - including emotional arousals, etc.
  - incl. ritual efficacy, bringing about changes in the “world”.
- Where should we deal with prayers and blessings, if not within a theory of rituals?
- Why not include prayers and blessings into such a theory, if we can? → Rethinking “*Rethinking Religion*”

# Overview: a cognitive approach to rituals and blessings

(in the Bible and Judaism)

- Representation in the mind/brain (“competence”)
  - of the action, of participants, of consequences
- Performance
- Parsing (observation)
- Learning (ontogeny)
- Evolution: historical scale and phylogenetic scale

# Mental representation of ontology: and epistemological modalities

	ENTITIES	ACTIONS / EVENTS	STATE-OF- AFFAIRS
Real / universal for <i>Homo sap.</i>	Barack Obama, this chair	walking, speaking	The crop is good. It rains.
Culturally postulated	Zeus, electron	Reincarnation, short-circuiting	*
Fictive	Snow White	Time-traveling	Harry Potter is at Hogwarts
Hypothetical	Higgs boson	Big Bang	The universe is expanding
Counterfactual	The current king of France	Travelling faster than light	If I were a rich man...

## \* **Culturally postulated state-of-affairs**

(which may turn out not so much culturally postulated)

### ■ State of being married

- (Film about wedding among Berbers in Morocco?)

### ■ Being halakhically Jewish / baptized Christian...

- (Why is a Jew afraid of being baptized?)

### ■ State of being blessed and cursed

- (Why one cares about blessings and curses by other cultures?)



## \* **Culturally postulated state-of-affairs**

(which may turn out not so much culturally postulated)

### ■ National narratives, mythologies

- (Counter-narratives: e.g., the Talmud on Jesus.)

### ■ Having a religious duty. Being *yotze yedei chovato*.

- (The tolerant secular society accepts one's religious obligations, e.g. accepting that Saturday begins on Friday at 4 pm.)

## Mental representation of entities

- Five (or more) ontological categories:
  - Human, animal, plant, artifact, natural object, etc.
- Ontological expectations for each category:
  - Folk-physics, folk-biology, folk-psychology, etc.
- Counterintuitive entities:
  - Violating ontological expectations.
- Ontological agents: will/volition/goal-directed

# Mental representation of actions

- Roles → filled by entities
  - Agent: wilful initiator of the action.
  - Patient: passively undergoing the action.
  - Instrument: contributing to result of action without will.
  - Etc.
- Result → a state-of-affairs
- Etc.

# Mental representation of state-of-affaires

- A combination of specific entities, actions/events, locations, time, etc.

# Mental representation of rituals = actions with a twist

## ■ Roles

→ *a culturally postulated counterintuitive agent involved*

- Agent: wilful initiator of the action.
- Patient: passively undergoing the action.
- Instrument: contributing to result of action without will. Etc.

## ■ Result: real / culturally postulated

→ *ritual efficacy, temporary or super-permanent change.*

## ■ *Etc.*

# Blessings (and prayers)

- Thank you to Risto for discussions about prayers.

# Mental representation of blessings

- Roles:
  - Agent = speaker
  - Recipient = hearer
  - Patient/topic = text, utterance
  
- Results: real or culturally postulated, temporary or super-permanent change in state-of-affairs.

# Mental representation of blessings: *God blesses Abraham*

- Roles: *(I believe, that's the original, basic structure)*
  - Agent = CP-CI-A
  - Recipient = human (Abraham)
  - Patient/topic = “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” (Gen 12,2)
- Result: culturally postulatedly super-permanent wealth.



# Mental representation of blessings: *God blesses the humanity*

## ■ Roles:

- Agent = CP-CI-A
- Recipient = **many** humans (all humans/humanity)
- Patient/topic = “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen 1:28)

## ■ Result: culturally postulatedly super-permanent.

# Mental representation of blessings:

## *Priests bless Israel's sons*

- Roles: *(I believe, that's where re-analysis began)*
  - Agent = **human**, although...  
enabled and instructed by CP-CI-A (Lev 8; Num 6,23)
  - Recipient = human
  - Patient/topic = “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”  
(Num 6,24-26)
- Result: temporary? Therefore repeated.

# Mental representation of blessings: *Father blesses child(ren)*

## ■ Roles:

- Agent = human, **without** enabling fact/ritual
- Recipient = human
- Patient/topic = “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” (Num 6,24-26)

## ■ Result: temporary? Therefore repeated.

## ■ Where is CP-CI-A???

# Mental representation of blessings: *Isaac and Jacob bless their son(s)*

- Roles:
  - Agent = human
  - Recipient = human
  - Patient/topic = Gen 27; Gen 48:15-16; Gen 49?
- Result: culturally postulatedly super-permanent.  
(Cf. problems in the case of Isaac blessing Jacob.)
- Where is CP-CI-A? Why is it super-permanent?

# Mental representation of blessings:

## *David blesses God*

### ■ Roles:

- Agent = David
- Recipient = CP-CI-A
- Patient/topic = “Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, for ever and ever.” (1Chron 29,10)

### ■ Result: temporary? super-permanent?

# Mental representation of blessings:

**Berakhot: over food, sights, news; Amidah, etc.**

## ■ Roles:

- Agent = Jew
- Recipient = CP-CI-A
- Patient/topic = “Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, the King of the universe, who...”

## ■ Result: CP, temporary, and therefore repeated.

# What is needed for a CSR model of blessings?

- The mental representation of speaking action.
- The mental representation of a CP-CI-A.
- The mental representation of results.
  
- Good news: *We have all of them for free from general cognitive science and CSR.*

## Next steps

- 1) From mental representation to performance.
- 2) From performance to mental representation.
- 3) From observation to learning.
- 4) From learning to historical change.
- 5) From learning/historical change to phylogenetics



## Next steps

- 1) From mental representation to performance.
- 2) From performance to mental representation.
  - Semantics ↔ syntax: how do roles map to positions?
  - Create a linear structure, a series of actions
  - Action grammars (e.g., Frits Staal; Ray Jackendoff)
  - Schemes (e.g., Victor Turner's separation / liminality / reintegration)

## Next steps

### 3) From observation to learning:

- Principles and Parameters:  
what is universal (innate or general cognitive capacity),  
and what is culture-specific?
- Learning the culturally postulated modality (vs. universal)
- Observations → calibrate the culture-specific parameters.

(Learning: central to CS, ignored by CSR. But don't worry: Having related religious phenomena to everyday ones, CSR can rely on results in CS regarding the learning of everyday phenomena.)

## Next steps

- 4) From learning to historical change.
  - E.g., iterative learning: imperfect learning leads to a (slightly) different mental model in the next generation.
- 5) From learning/historical change to phylogenetics
  - E.g., evolution of the universal principles, in order to optimize learning, performance, etc.

# Gradual historical development of the concept of *blessing/prayer* in Judaism

- CP-CI-A blesses the human:  
positive consequences for the patient.
- Human blesses human (involving CP-CI-A?) :  
positive consequences for the patient.
- Human blesses CP-CI-A:  
positive consequences for the agent?

Gradual “re-analysis”: due to “imperfect learning”?

## Summary: Rethinking “Rethinking religion”

- Mental representation of ontology (entities, actions, state-of-affairs), including CP ones.
- The mental representation of blessings.
- From mental representation to performance (production), and back (interpretation).
- From interpretation to learning.
- From learning to historical change (to evolution).



*Thank you for your attention!*

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