Re-rethinking religion
Blessing rituals (?) in the Pentateuch and in Judaism
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”

Tamás Biró: Re-rethinking Religion: Blessing rituals (?) in the Pentateuch and in Judaism
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENTITIES</th>
<th>ACTIONS / EVENTS</th>
<th>STATE-OF-AFFAIRS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Real / universal for <em>Homo sap.</em></td>
<td>Barack Obama, this chair</td>
<td>walking, speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally postulated</td>
<td>Zeus, electron</td>
<td>Reincarnation, short-circuiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fictive</td>
<td>Snow White</td>
<td>Time-traveling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypothetical</td>
<td>Higgs boson</td>
<td>Big Bang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterfactual</td>
<td>The current king of France</td>
<td>Travelling faster than light</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
* Culturally postulated state-of-affairs

  (which may turn 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 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.

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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.

Tamás Biró: Re-rethinking Religion: Blessing rituals (?) in the Pentateuch and in Judaism
Mental representation of blessings: 

*God blesses Abraham*

- **Roles:**  
  - 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:**
  - 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???”**

Tamás Biró: *Re-rethinking Religion: Blessing rituals (?) in the Pentateuch and in Judaism*
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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