

The Universal Grammar of Religion

Huston Smith

Noam Chomsky has described a universal grammar that is built into the human mind and structures every human language. What follows is my attempt to do the same with religion.

The Chandogya Upanishad provides a nice entry into the project.

“...as by knowing one lump of clay, all things made of clay are known, the difference being only in name and arising from speech, and the truth being that all are clay; as by knowing one nugget of gold, all things made of gold are known, the difference being only in name and arising from speech, and the truth being that all are gold – exactly so is that knowledge, by knowing which we know all.”

I have broken the “clay/gold” into 15 different pieces as follows:

1. Reality is Infinite. The Infinite is the one inescapable metaphysical idea, for if you stop with finitude you face a door with only one side, an absurdity.
2. The Infinite includes the finite or we would be left with infinite-plus-finite and the Infinite would not be what it claims to be. The natural image to token the Infinite’s inclusiveness is a circle. The Infinite is that out of which we cannot fall.
3. The contents of finitude are hierarchically ordered. Arthur Lovejoy titled his important study in the history of philosophy *The Great Chain of Being* and argued that its underlying idea was accepted by most educated people throughout the world until modernity mistakenly abandoned it in the late 18th century. *The Great Chain of Being* is the idea of a universe composed of an infinite number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existence through every possible grade, up to the boundless Infinite. The ascent may be a smooth continuum, but for practical purposes it helps to divide it into categories – steps on a ladder, so to speak. Aristotle’s categories of mineral, vegetable, animal, and

rational remain useful but stop too soon. *Homo sapiens* are only midway up the chain.

4. Causation is from the top down, from the Infinite down through the descending degrees of reality.
5. In descending to finitude, the singularity of the Infinite splays into multiplicity – the One becomes the many.

The parts of the many are virtues, for they retain in lesser degree the signature of the One's perfection. The foundational virtue is existence; to be more than figments of the imagination, virtues must exist. In scholastic dictum, *esse qua esse bonum est*, "being as being is good." It is good simply to exist. As for what the virtues other than existence are, India begins with Sat, Chit, Ananda (being, consciousness, and bliss). The West's ternary is the good, the true, and the beautiful, and these beginnings open out into creativity, compassion, and love until we arrive at Islam's Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God. Above these lies the hundredth name which – symbolically absent from the Islamic rosary – is unutterable.

6. Reversing the drift of downward causation, as we look upward from our position on the causal chain, we find that as the virtues ascend the causal ladder, their distinctions fade and they begin to merge.

This requires that the images of ladder and chain be replaced with a pyramid. Flannery O'Connor titled one of her short stories *Everything That Rises Must Converge* and this is so. God knows lovingly and loves knowingly, and so on until in the Infinite differences (which token separation) completely disappear in the divine "simplicity" or "singularity," a technical term that can be likened to a mathematical point that has no extension. To refer to that point, any virtue will serve as long as the word is capitalized, whereupon they become synonyms. God is the conventional English name for the Infinite, but Good, True, Real, Almighty, One, etc. are equally accurate.

7. When the virtues converge at the top of the pyramid, the religious worldview makes its most staggering claim. Absolute perfection reigns. In Hegel's dictum, despite the fact that the world is in about the worst shape imaginable, in the eye of the cyclone all is well. This brings us face to face with the problem of evil. Human beings are mixed bags, capable of great nobility and horrendous evil. Our primary mistake is to put ourselves ahead of others. We cannot get rid of that error, but we can and must work to restrain it.
8. The Great Chain of Being with its links of increasing worth needs to be extended by the Hermetic Principle, "As above, so below." Everything that is outside is also inside us – "the Kingdom of God is within you." We intersect, inhabit, all the echelons of the chain of being, as Sir Thomas Browne recorded in his *Religio Medici*, "Man is a multiple amphibian, disposed to live, not only like other creatures in diverse elements, but in divided and distinguishable worlds." When we look outward it is natural to visualize the good as up – angels invariably sing on high and gods live on mountain tops. But when we look inward the imagery flips and the best things lie deepest within us. The complete picture shows the ineffable, unutterable, *apophatic* Godhead at the top, descending through the personal, describable, *kataphatic* God, to angels, and from there on down to the physical universe. But as our eyes continue down to the lower half of the page, value inverts and the divisions increase in worth. Mind is more important than body, our multiple souls more important than our minds, and Spirit (which is identical in us all) is more important than souls. Animation proceeds upward on the lower half of the page, not downward as in the top half.
9. Human beings cannot fully know the Infinite. Intimations of it will seep into us occasionally, but more than this we cannot manage on our own. If we are to know it confidently, the Infinite must take the initiative and show itself to us in the way nature takes the initiative in instilling the universal grammar of languages in the human mind.
10. Intimations of the Infinite have to be interpreted, hence the science of exegesis (the critical interpretation of the religious experiences and texts to discover their intended meaning).

These intimations progress through four steps of ascending importance: literal, ethical, allegorical, and anagogic, the text's capacity to inspire us. What does the text explicitly assert, what does it tell us we should and should not do, what allegorical meaning does it suggest, and how does it inspire us?

11. All these factors were taken for granted until the rise of 20th century fundamentalism and the literalism it fixes on. It has generated so much confusion that it justifies an excursus to indicate its mistake.

Science has shown us that there are three domains of size – the micro-world of quantum mechanics where distance is measured in picometers; the macro-world that we inhabit where distance is measured in millimeters, meters and kilometers; and the mega-world of the astronomers and relativity theory where distance is measured in light years. Neither of the worlds that flank ours can be consistently and accurately described in ordinary language – try to do so and you run into the contradictions that plague cartographers when they try to portray our three-dimensional planet on the two-dimensional pages of a geography book. Scientists can, however, describe the micro- and mega-worlds consistently in their technical language, which is mathematics.

The Infinite is at least as different from our human world as are the micro- and mega-worlds because it includes them. It follows that if we stick to the Bible's literal assertions we find ourselves in a tangle of contradictions analogous to those that quantum scientists encounter when they try to draw verbal pictures of their subjects. We can almost hear the despair in Robert Oppenheimer's voice when he tells us, "If we ask whether the electron's position changes with time, we must say 'No'; if we ask whether the position of the electron remains the same, we must say, 'No'; if we ask whether the electron is at rest, we must say, 'No'; if we ask whether it is in motion, we must say, 'No'." We too are driven to the brink of despair if we stay with the contradictions that the Bible's actual words confront us with if they are taken literally.

Religion's technical language is symbolism, the science of the relations between the multiple levels of reality. More fully, it is myth, metaphor, parable, figures of speech, and story. Plato calls stories that deflect our attention upward "likely tales," thus indicating that it is the non-literal denotations of their words that is important. By extension, the technical language is also sacred art. Prosaic language is useful as a medium of exchange, which like money ordinarily serves us well, but in times of crisis we look for bread – in this context, the bread of life. The bread of life transports us to a higher plane of reality.

12. There are two distinct and complementing ways of knowing: the rational and the intuitive.

The life and career of Blaise Pascal throw the two into exceptionally sharp relief. When he exclaimed in what was to become his famous aphorism, "The heart has reasons the mind know not of," the "mind" he was thinking of was his scientific mind through which he achieved fame for his theory of probability in mathematics and his work on hydrodynamics in physics, and "heart" was his word for the organ through which burst the epiphany that turned his concern from science to religion: "FIRE. God of Abraham... Isaac... Jacob. Not the philosophers and the learned... Tears of Joy... My God... let me not be separated from thee for ever." But that he never intended to dismiss philosophy and learning in total is amply evidenced by his eighteen closely reasoned *Letters Provinciales* in which he examined the fundamental problems of human existence, and the fact that he titles the entries in his notebook *Pensees* (thoughts), in which he spells out his conviction that the true function of reason is to attain the truth or supreme good.

All the religions of the world spell this out carefully. In the West, intellect (*intellectus, gnosis, sapientia*) is not reason (*ratio*); in Sanskrit, *buddhi* is not *manas*, in Islam *ma'rifah*, situated in the heart, is not *aql*, situated in the brain. In Hinduism, the knowledge that effects union with God is not discursive; it has the immediacy of direct vision, or sight. In Greece, *theoria* referred to the kind of knowledge that one derived from watching the great Greek dramas. Our word "theater" that derives from it is closer to its

meaning than our word “theory” which has degenerated from *theoia* in much the same way “belief” has degenerated from something more than knowledge (conviction and the determination to act on it) to something less than knowledge.

13. Walnuts have shells that house kernels, and religions likewise have outsides and insides; outer, exoteric forms that house inner, esoteric cores.

People differ in the way they relate to the two. The difference comes down to how adept they are with abstractions. Esoterics are comfortable with abstractions while exoterics need for ideas to be concrete and representational to be clear.

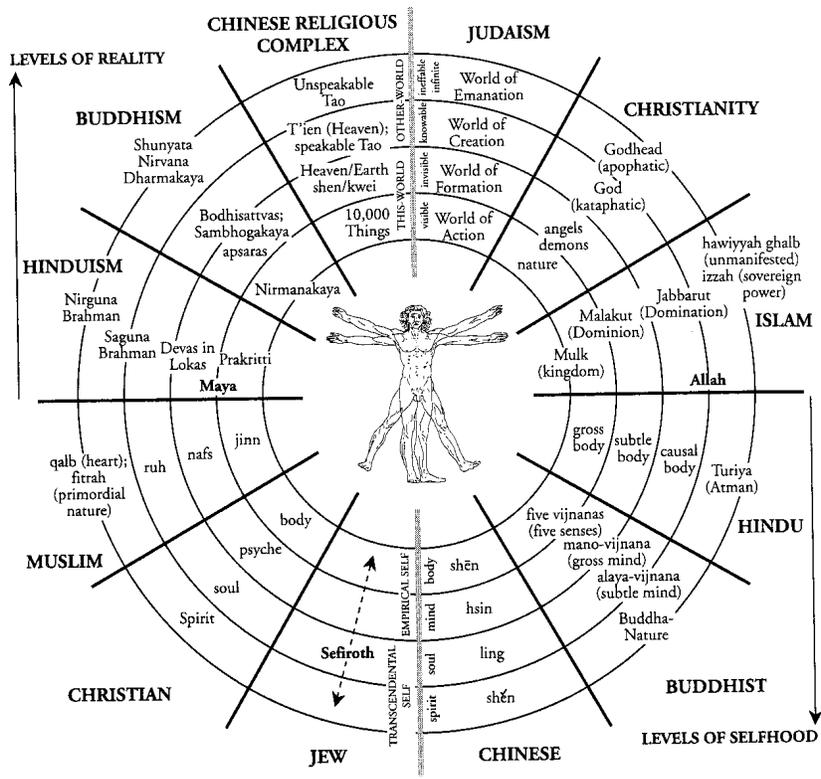
It follows that exoterics like (one might almost say need) to think of the Infinite in personal terms, whereas esoterics, while subscribing to the Infinite-clothed-in-human-attributes, are at the same time aware of the danger that this can easily turn into anthropomorphism – making God too human – so it needs to be supplemented by esoterism. We need for God to be both like and unlike us – like us so we can connect to him/her/it, and different from us because we cannot worship our own kind. Absolute imminence and absolute transcendence in absolute tension is what gives maximum tonus to our spiritual lives.

14. What we know is ringed about with darkness. It is a numinous darkness that lures, for we know that God sees it as light and at times we sense a kind of twilight zone around its edges. But to cognition the darkness remains – we are born in ignorance, we live in ignorance, and we die in ignorance. In relation to the Infinite we stand as less than a simple protein in a single cell on a human finger. Though living, that protein cannot know the cell in which it lives. How then can it conceive of the skin, the knuckle, or the finger’s articulating joints, the intricacies of the ligaments, nerves and muscles, the electro/biochemical processes of that finger of which it is a negligible part? And even if it could contain all that understanding, it could never conceive of the whole hand of which it is a part that can find expression in the fingering of a guitar, the fist clenched in anger, the delicate touch needed for surgical repair of a heart. It is only a simple protein, an amino acid building block.

So much less are we in this mass of the universe and beyond it, the Infinite. We are born in mystery, and we die in mystery.

Compressed into a single paragraph consisting of topic sentences, religion's Universal Grammar causes the religions it structures to affirm that existence is Infinite and includes the finite and its value-laden degrees, hierarchically ordered. As virtues ascend in the hierarchy, they meld into one another until their differences disappear in Singularity. Evil features in the finitude but not in the Absolute, and as the Absolute is all-powerful, in the end, absolute perfection reigns. Human beings intersect the degrees of reality, but in them they are inverted in the way the image on the surface of a glassy lake inverts the mountain it reflects. We cannot comprehend the fullness of Reality on our own, but its outlines are given to us in the Universal Grammar and the languages that stem from it. The key to unlocking the truths of religion is symbolism. Knowing is both rational and intuitive, both concrete and abstract. After we have done our best to understand the world, it remains mysterious.

In a single sentence: The world is perfect, and the human opportunity is to see that and conform to that fact.



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