

General Systems Theory as a Framework to View Religion

Robert J. Gregory

*School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
Fax: 64 06 3505673, E-Mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz*

KEY WORDS Religion. Religious Behavior. General Systems Theory. Graphics

ABSTRACT The study of religion and religious behavior can be enhanced by use of social science theories and frameworks. One such theory is General Systems Theory, and a brief explanation of a graphic conceptual interpretation of GST is presented. The ideas are then applied to people and finally to religion.

INTRODUCTION

Some may note that there is no religion because religion is an abstraction. They would claim that it is better to face the details and what is real than to create abstract fiction. This is an obviously good and relevant warning to all. However, one thing that separates academic disciplines from other pursuits is the ability to generalize from details, to create theories from facts and findings.

For me, my work in anthropology and in psychology taught me to be a good observer and to study facts, details, and the specifics carefully, but also, I learned that a good theory is useful. Having a good theory enables an observer to see things that would be otherwise overlooked, or ignored. Not all theories, or disciplines or even institutions are good or valid, for many are more accidents of history than accurate portrayals or representations of the complex world we live in.

Humans are set off from other mammals by their ability to generalize, to build models, to use models to predict what might not otherwise be seen. Our unique big brains enable us to play with ideas and concepts, and as a result, we have increased in number, live longer, and invent and use technologies to make us comfortable. These skills or attributes may be our salvation or destruction. The answers are, of course, not all in yet.

Through university experience, I listened to theories - dozens and even hundreds of theories - Freud, Jung, Harry Stack Sullivan, Marx,

Existentialists, Merton's role theory, Lewin's field theory, and so on, ad infinitum. When I ran across general systems theory (GST) something clicked and that framework fit me. I took the ideas, made them my own, and have since used GST to understand, to explain, to predict, to "see" the world.

GST is adaptable to a mathematical base. It has a different language so that one does not get caught up in interminable quarrels between the established academic disciplines and their jargons. Further, GST is sufficiently abstract to avoid being overwhelmed by facts, specifics and details, that is, the mundane reality of daily life and the chaos and complexity inherent in the universe.

In 1968, I began drawing pictures, using GST as my theory, so that I could communicate with people of other cultures and backgrounds, and my audiences included poor blacks in the American south, lifers in maximum security prison, street kids, politicians, and even church groups. I use this approach in this paper.

GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY AS A FRAMEWORK TO VIEW RELIGION

General systems theory offers an abstract and even mathematical base for social theorists to engage with questions relating to people and their communities. GST, formulated in the 1930's and 1940's by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (Gray and Rizzo, 1973; von Bertalanffy, 1962), was subsequently polished up by operational researchers in World War II as a means and strategy to move men, materiel, and equipment to battlefields. GST spread into sociology and the study of social systems in the 1960's by Berrien (1968) Buckley (1967, 1968) and others. Along the way GST became enriched sufficiently so that it was more capable of handling open and social aspects. With this advance, the theory

could extend beyond just closed or mechanical systems. Satir (1972, 1983) explored the use of systems to analyze family interactions, for example. More recently, the ideas travelled into business via Beer (1979, 1981), biology via James Miller (1978) and of course to and through computer applications of all sorts. Wallenstein (1991; Amin, Arrighi, Frank, and Wallerstein, 1990) has used the ideas of GST to formulate a "world-system" made up of the political, economic, and social confluence of the various nation states.

GST presents an abstract way to think about people and their relationships, values, and social hierarchies. Rather than use words, I prefer to use simple drawings that begin with the special language of GST, then translate the resulting models into more familiar terms (Drawings 1 through 8).

Elements - anything you want to focus on, especially when there are several items, activities, events, or other entities

Exchanges - linkages between elements or between systems

Boundaries - permeable or impermeable markers between elements or systems

Permeable - not closed, open so that input and output are possible. The degree of openness may vary.

Impermeable - closed, so that input and output is blocked

Input - matter or energy that enters a system

Throughput - matter or energy that passes through a system, relatively unchanged

Output - matter or energy that departs from a system

Internal maintenance needs - input minus output is typically regarded as that matter or energy that is used for internal maintenance. However, internal maintenance may draw down reserves.

Specialization of components - within a system, some of the elements and exchanges may group together to provide specialized services, such as decision-making, boundary maintenance, internal services, growth, and so on.

Directionality - systems may have purpose, teleology, goals, aims, objectives, and so on and if they do, then there is said to be directionality.

Scale or size - systems vary in size from uni-

versal down to nanometric

Levels - systems may have super-systems that aggregate systems together, or subsystems, i.e., component parts.

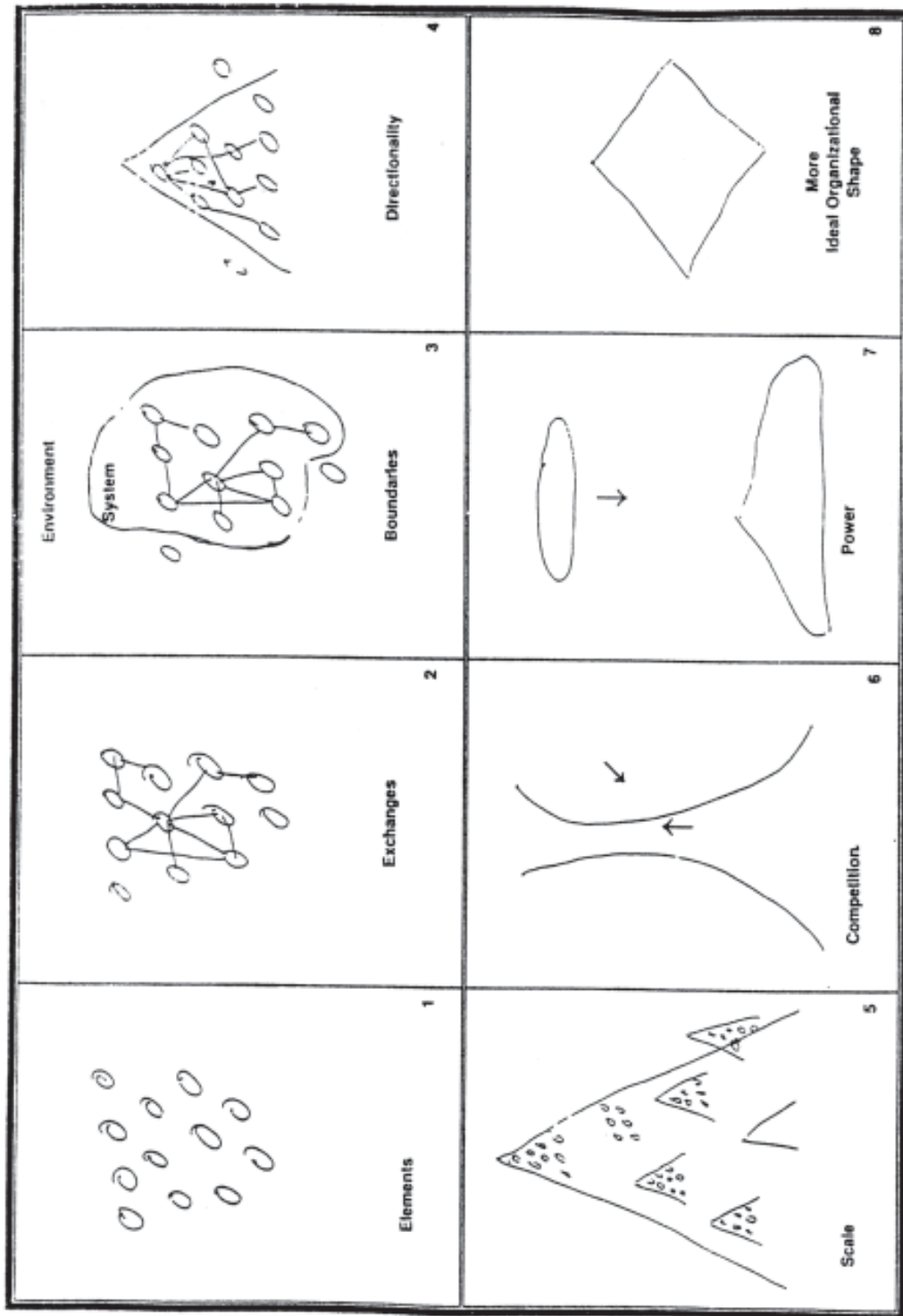
Environment - the context or background of a system is the environment

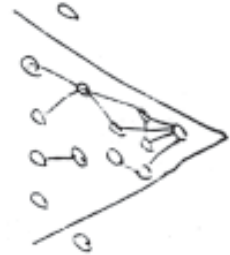
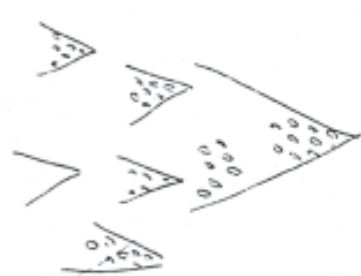
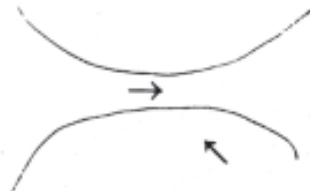
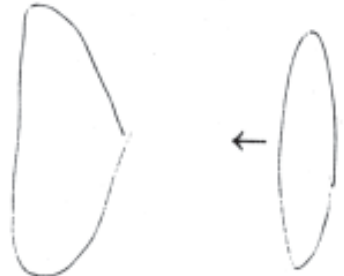
SYSTEMS APPLIED

Elements are of course, for the social scientist, people. Exchanges are represented best by communication, and boundaries are the groupings into which we form. Some of our groups are open (permeable) and some closed (impermeable) although not completely as in mechanical systems. Some individuals make, control, and maintain more communication links than others, giving them key or leadership roles. Some individuals avoid communication links, and thereby end up as isolates or hermits. The groupings we form may be small or large, and an almost endless, shifting, series of groups at different levels form and reform, build and collapse, and add to the networks of life. Some individuals become more able than others to master and maintain connections with large groupings, others are content with smaller local level groups. Most small groups are embedded within other larger groupings, and thus it becomes necessary to specify a figure from its ground, a particular social system which has sub-levels within and super-levels around and above in many conceptual maps of space and time. The human groupings we form are caught up in environments of diverse sorts, including the physical surroundings or the contexts of larger groupings (Drawings 9 through 16).

The information presented above represents one notion of general systems theory. Mathematicians and economists use the ideas represented by GST to count components, to count inputs and outputs, to count communication links or exchanges, and so on.

For me, I like to tie the notions into a series of models of social structure. Individualism (I) is represented by an element alone. The focus could be on the internal element, on the boundary, or on the relationship of the specific element to its environment or other elements. Small groups (II) are represented by the communication links



People  9	Communication  10	Environment In Groups  11	Values  12
Cities, Corporates  13	Upward Mobility  14	Power/People  15	Alternative Shapes  16

between a set of elements - noting that some elements are better connected than others. This level of consideration may deal with dominance and submission, as some elements are more powerful than others, of greater size than others, filled with more energy than others, or they may possess more linkages than others.

Small groups can be set on their side and then they illustrate that the better connected elements are in leadership positions (IIb). Larger groups (III) may be represented by several small groups embedded or related to each other so that overlaps and common membership is present, as well as by an accumulation of elements greater than that for small groups. Competition (IV) is represented by struggles to reach the leadership positions, and a reduction in "middle management." Upward and downward mobility, centrality and periphery, and of course dominance and submission are important to this level.

Divergent values may split groups, and politicians may seek to create conflict to seize power. When in power, politicians may seek to create consensus to maintain their hold or increase their popularity. The media represent the major mechanism by which this struggle takes place. Media management appears to have replaced people management, such is the strategic nature of the television, newspapers, radio, and others.

Power and people (V) can be represented by a star and an audience - only one way messages are sent by power to the people. All these models, for that is all they are, can be found around us. They occur in our "alone" time, our pairing up, our dominance and submission behaviour, our discussion groups, our membership in various corporate bodies, and in stalling or watching television or taking part in lectures at the university or preaching in a church.

APPLYING GST TO RELIGION

Using the above framework to look at religion and religious behaviour may work to reveal information that might not otherwise be noted. For me, Individualism (I) is self-focused, that is a narcissistic situation in which internal states are considered, or on the boundary, that is, the individual as surrounded by an environment - a person in relationship with the universe,

in a third scenario, the individual in potential relationship with other individuals. Religion might be seen as an individual contemplating internal states of self, individual in relationship to a near infinite universe, or individual in potential relationship with other individuals. As self, the individual may struggle with cognitive beliefs, what feels right, or internal states of harmony. In relationships, the individual may deal with conversion of self or others, accepting or denying beliefs promulgated by others and so on.

The small group (II) situation finds a face to face grouping of people, such as family, peer group, discussion group, or bible study grouping in which the relaxed, accepting, and mutually influencing nature of the group enables each component, each individual, to freely express, explore, and exchange feelings and knowledge. Dominance and submission may be accepted, fought about, or at rest so that each party is regarded as similar to others.

The larger group (III) situation finds more numbers, so that an individual may not know all other members on a face to face basis. An example is a church congregation, a neighbourhood gathering, a formal working organization, or even a town where people are engaged in everyday activities. In such a size group, religion may become affirmed, but some of the free expression and exchanges are less than free. Making and playing social roles would extend to religious expression and exchanges about beliefs. Some guarded statements, presence of boundaries based on belief, practice, or belonging to particular groups would demonstrate in - and out-groups, conflict, occasional threat and recoil, and differentiation. Inclusion, exclusion, dominance and submission, engagement or withdrawal is common among the issues of larger groups. Hierarchies are also common as are struggles for power (Strenski, 1998).

The competitive group (IV) situation finds strenuous efforts to achieve leadership positions, to convert others to a particular belief, missions and goal oriented activity, striving, and demonstrations of power. Losers and winners are created, such that some few win, most get caught somewhere in the middle, and a few lose, although in some cases a great many may lose. Getting to the top, figuring out the "right"

belief, finding and keeping followers or disciples, and attacks on out-groups or non-believers would be characteristic of this situation.

The star and the masses (V) situation would note the preacher in the pulpit, or the preacher over television, promulgating certain beliefs or ideals, while listeners and non-listeners sat back, hearing or awaiting the proper word. This is similar to the lecturer and the audience or the pilot in the sky carrying the atomic bomb and the people down below, waiting and wondering, knowing that it matters not which side the pilot flies for. Authoritarian and uni-directional messages are sent, whether they reach their target or not may be questionable. But the power is reserved for an elite, while the masses have little or none.

Through the series of ever larger groupings, fluidity and flexibility are lost as institutionalization increases. This crystallization occurs so that forms and styles become rigidified into rules, regulations, laws, procedures, and so on.

THE CASE OF CULTS

Cults occur and attract individuals away from larger groupings that have become institutionalized, as well as attract individuals who have no belonging to larger groups. The cults are typically begun by one or more dissatisfied individuals who join with others in a face to face positive grouping, and yet, can quickly or slowly grow to become social movements, and then become rigid and inflexible as well. Conflicts occur when a cult threatens an already institutionalized form. A special educator, William Rhodes, noted the threat posed to order in classrooms by children labelled emotionally disturbed, and also noted the reaction to the child by the teacher and other students. He called this a threat recoil cycle, and claimed that the system perceived a threat, organized and then acted against the threat. Such a cycle can operate swiftly to devalue, destabilize or destroy a cult or other perceived threat.

In a sense, cults are similar to small business seeking a foothold in a world of corporate giants, or a local school lot rugby game dominated by televised and commercialized professional games. Cults are similar to citizen militias forming while massive armies rule, or local govern-

ment that is ruled and engulfed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank and United Nations and so on. Imagine too the situation of a local preacher trying to establish an independent congregation in the face of the unity displayed by the Catholics, the Anglicans, the Presbyterians, or other institutionalized major religions, when under threat.

CONCLUSION

When models are used to look at the features of a society, overlap between a variety of disciplinary or institutional views occurs. For example, work, politics, recreation, the economy, social behaviour, wealth, military, and intellectual capability all have common patterns in terms of social structure. There are a few at the top, a larger number of followers, a still larger group of the masses, and quite a few at the bottom or entirely left out. Another way of thinking about this is to use the concept of power, and a few have a great deal of power, some have aspirations to gain power and others protect the power, and the majority have little power, and unfortunately for them, some have virtually no power.

In terms of our focus on religion, a few are at the top of the religious hierarchies, the protectors of those hierarchies and aspirants to the top of the hierarchy are more numerous and seek to approach or bask in the power of those few at the elite position. The majority of people are apathetic - perhaps nominal members or non-members - it does not matter to them. Many, very often the vast majority or the masses, are left disempowered or without having any interest or participation in the matter at all. When and if religion is incorporated with the other academic disciplines and the institutions of society, then religion becomes the belief system. As such, religion overlays the wealth or economy, the verbal power or politics, the real physical power or the military, the social behaviour or social status games that people play (Berne, 1966) and the play or recreational forms of society. Cults become innovative ways to control people, thoughts, and beliefs, and they become new religions. Of course they come into conflict with the proverbial "powers that be" which rule the existing belief systems.

This way of looking cuts across the disciplines, the institutions, and calls into question those views. A new way to look (Wallerstein, 1991) would be useful when one realizes how arbitrary or accidental are the existing divisions. An ecological view (Burhenn, 1997) might offer an alternative, at least, a way to compare figures within larger grounds. A theory, even though a general and an abstract and mathematically based such as GST, offers a way of analyzing and seeing aspects of our world that are otherwise not visible. An abstract map or concept orients us to observe the details and chaos of the world in a disciplined way. Albeit such a map may be biased and inaccurate, the view offered is more useful to us than trying to deal item by item with all the bits and pieces of detail, or by withdrawal from critical analysis by using the available tools of social science (McCutcheon, 1997).

REFERENCES

- Amin, Samir, Giovanni Arrighi, Andre G. Frank, and Immanuel Wallerstein: *Transforming the Revolution: Social Movements and the World-System*, Monthly Review Press, New York (1990).
- Beer, S.: *The Heart of the Enterprise*, Wiley, London (1979).
- Beer, S.: *Brain of the Firm*, Wiley, Chichester (1981).
- Berne, Eric: *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, Grove Press, New York (1966).
- Berrien, Frederick K.: *General and Social Systems*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ (1968).
- Buckley, Walter F.: *Sociology and Modern Systems Theory*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. (1967).
- Buckley, Walter F.: *Modern Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist: A Sourcebook*, Aldine, Chicago (1968).
- Burhenn, Herbert: Ecological approaches to the study of religion, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 9: 111-126 (1997).
- Gray, William and Nicholas D. Rizzo (Eds.): *Unity through Diversity: A Festschrift for Ludwig von Bertalanffy*, Gordon and Breach Science Publications, New York (1973).
- McCutcheon, Russell T.: A Default of "Critical Intelligence? The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65: 443-468 (1997).
- Miller, James G.: *Living Systems*, McGraw Hill, New York (1978).
- Satir, Virginia M.: *Peoplemaking*, Science and Behavior Books, Palo Alto (1972).
- Satir, Virginia M.: *Conjoint Family Therapy*, Science and Behavior Books, Palo Alto, CA (1983).
- Strenski, Ivan: Religion, Power, and Final Foucault, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 66: 345-367 (1998).
- von Bertalanffy, Ludwig: General system theory - A critical review, *General Systems*, 7: 1-20 (1962).
- Wallerstein, Immanuel: *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*, Polity Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom (1991).