

More Reasons to Read About Religion

Tyler Cowen urges us – especially the secular “us” – to read more about religion:

So many religious facts have a very long half-life for their relevance. Say you learn about how the four Gospels differ — that’s still relevant for understanding Christian divisions or Christian theology today. Reading about the Reformation? The chance of that still being relevant is much higher than if you were reading about purely secular divisions in internal German or Swiss politics in those same centuries.

Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, or Muslims? Facts from many centuries ago still might matter. And the odds are that people a few centuries from now still ought to read about the origins of Mormonism.

In few other areas do past facts stand such a high chance of remaining relevant for so long.

As an empirical matter, “rationalists” tend not to read so much about religion, but that is precisely the unreasonable thing to do.

I heartily agree, and have several points to add.

1. Studying religion teaches us a tremendous amount about human psychology: our eagerness to embrace doctrines that outsiders consider nonsense, our pretentious overconfidence and hyperbole, our willingness to oppress and even murder over objectively trivial issues.
2. Studying religion also teaches us a tremendous amount about human sociology: our propensity to split into doctrinally-obsessed clergy and angry-sloganizing laymen, our desire to socialize and especially intermarry with co-religionists, our eagerness to dehumanize outgroups.
3. Once you learn this lessons, most secular ideologies start to seem like thinly-veiled religions as well. And I’m not just talking about Marxism. Mainstream liberalism and conservatism fit the same psychological and sociological bill. And yes, so does

libertarianism, despite its overrepresentation of bona fide rationalists and individualists. It may be a cliché, but politics *is* the religion of modernity.

4. While you're at it, read (or re-read) Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer*. Great stuff, especially for those of us who believe in something.