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Following Johann Huizinga and Robert Bellah, this paper articulates an ethological model that characterizes religion as fundamentally ludic, or behaviorally and cognitively rooted in the mammalian capacity for play. Play erects subjunctive or artificial cognitive boundaries that do not emerge from natural laws and serve no immediate survival function. For instance, tiger cubs at play do not bite as hard as they physically could – a shared, self-imposed boundary within a space of behavioral possibilities. Compare, then, playing animals' voluntary restraint of physical capacities with the acceptance by religious adherents of the sacred boundaries between, say, the interior of a temple and its unconsecrated exterior. Both play and religious ritual construct artificial boundaries between distinct settings or contexts. Within the context of play and religion, conventions for behavior are more constrained and less focused on explicit survival needs than in respective everyday environments.

This ludic characterization of religion has several advantages over operationalizations that centralize supernatural beliefs. First, it makes sense of the obvious continuum between formal religious activity and institutional forms that exhibit "religious" characteristics, such as sports events or the civil religions of nation-states. To various degrees, each of these pursuits features subjunctive barriers that separate the field of play from the external environment, delineate in-groups from out-groups, and impose demands for ritualized behavior according to conventional rules. The need to identify a "magic bullet" that uniquely distinguishes religion from other human phenomena is therefore (thankfully) obviated. Second, it emphasizes evolutionary continuity between humans and other animals in a way that reduces the danger of sui generis construals of human nature. Third, it provides a fertile base from which to launch psychological and cognitive investigations into religion. Finally, it sheds welcome light on the normative dimensions of religious beliefs and behaviors, since it focuses on the ways in which social and sacralized conventions impose socially prescribed limits on human behavior.

To illustrate these points, I will present findings from two studies. First study, my colleagues and I found that religious conservatives exhibit more holistic, less analytical cognitive styles than religious liberals. This association was more strongly mediated by attitudes toward ritual than by supernatural beliefs. We conclude that reflective thought may expose conventional norms as contingent or arbitrary, thereby undercutting their intuitive credibility. Liberals and nonbelievers, as analytical thinkers, may therefore be less motivated to uphold the normative (ludic) conventions of both religion and religion-like institutions. In the second study, a computational model indicates that conventional aspects of religious ritual may both serve signaling functions (stabilizing in-group cohesion) and catalyze self-regulation among individual group members. In our simulation, inscribed norms and conventions artificially reduce degrees of individual behavioral freedom, which stimulates effortful self-regulation. Geertz argued that humans come "primed" for sacralized norms to guide behavior. Religion – a complex of ritual behaviors and empirically unprovable propositions that emerge within the the biological capacity for play – is suited for grounding such norms, since conventions are not empirically verifiable facts, but contingently binding agreements.