

## Religion: Between Certainty and Meaning

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Religion has shaped human civilization for millennia, providing meaning, ethical guidance, communal identity, and hope in the face of suffering and mortality. Yet it has also been implicated in conflict, dogmatism, and the suppression of intellectual and cultural plurality. This paper examines religion as a stable historical and psychological structure that both responds to fundamental human needs and risks becoming a closed system of certainty. Drawing on philosophical, historical, and psychological perspectives, it explores the tension between faith and reason, religion's enduring appeal, its influence on politics, art, science, and society, and the consequences of absolutist belief. The paper concludes by proposing that while religion cannot simply be dismissed as delusion nor accepted as unquestionable truth, its positive potential depends upon resisting certainty in favor of openness, ambiguity, and continual self-reflection. Within this context, a Dynamic Dialectical Oscillation (D.O.) framework is proposed as one possible way of engaging meaning without collapsing into dogma.

**KEYWORDS:** Religion, Certainty, Meaning Philosophy of Religion, Critical Thinking, Dynamic Dialectical Oscillation (D.O.)

### 1. INTRODUCTION: WHY RELIGION PERSISTS

I think it is fair to say that the great religions that have endured over time: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism – have for a period spanning 3000 years engulfed humanity even unto the present day. While there were other kinds of worship and belief structures for clans and groups and the like evolving often into highly elaborate pagan cults - and wild from the very beginning of homo sapiens - one may surmise, some sort of reverence to supernatural forces seems implicit in the nature of humankind. Strands or elements of prehistory thus influence the subsequent turn to these five religions; religion being considered as a largely stable and identifiable node influencing swaths of people in the realm of ideas and beliefs as well as actions and behaviors.

I begin speculatively though probably justified by the material evidence defining religion, and the common substrate that informs them, no matter what the differences. I then argue that each religion has a narrative, one which in many respects is simply absurd and yet transfixes so many so strongly as to be diagnosed as the power of religion as some kind of mass delusion, since most narratives are probably at best, simply mythical.

I contrast this with the promises that religions offer, a reprieve from pain and suffering in this world and the next. Here religion offers order, repose and even transcendence in its more mystical formulation. However, even with such idealism, history teaches something very clear and obvious: religion has been and continues to be one of the strongest or greatest factors that cause war and divide between people and nations. This is augmented through art and culture, science and technology and within the psyche, even when religion after modernism appears subordinate to secular society in most nations, where the state and reason is paramount, yet just as when monarchy ultimately became absorbed into religion, so strands of it enter the secular, political domain, if inadvertently.

Two disclaimers: 1) This paper does not focus on the biological determinism that creates certain needs, desires and instinctual concerns that assume the form of some kind of religious worship and belief 2) I make no claim at truth; at best a partial truth at a given moment of time.

### **1) What religion provides**

The five enduring religions enumerated above concern belief in either a singular God defined as the Creator or as many gods that oversee creation. Stories abound as to how this God or gods communicated to humankind and a tradition, primarily text based secures its narrative account and often details elaborate rituals that aim to placate, beseech and praise such a God or gods.

While each such religion has evolved over time, both influenced and is influenced by the surrounding cultural, geographical, political, economic and social context, adherents are required to abide by its laws, customs and conventions. It tells people how to get married, have a family, moral codes and what to do when people meet their demise in death. In other words, such religions embody a way of life and as well as this, a set of beliefs or doctrines that determine control not only in the realm of action but thought and ideas.

Although the form of such religions differ, its material expression, the basic human drive to seek explanation beyond the natural, and to deal with human suffering, is the same: An explanation that emanates from a transcendent source and a set of codes and actions that connect believers to this God or gods, and in the process, each claims to be a beacon of truth and ethical coherence., while adherents are considered chosen emissaries of such powers. It is primarily narratives that create G/god-human communication, often including miracles, prophesy and authorities that guard and transmit what becomes embodied as a living tradition.

### **2) Problems of certainty**

One may ask whether such religious truths can be verified, whether they actually are true in the first place. While Judaism is the only claim of mass revelation (the Sinai experience and parting of the sea), while others emanate from the word of a single purported prophet and only a few witnesses, there is still no way one can verify any of these claims (did Moses not eat and drink of Sinai for 40 days and nights as claimed in the text?). Curiously, doubting the veracity of such a narrative is considered a mortal sin according to such religions, where such a person is cast aside and is said not to merit paradise after his or her passing.

What if one was courageous enough and asked if such narratives are actually sound and true? I suspect an honest, rational person, would say that such accounts cannot be proven and are unlikely to be true considering their absurd claims and that nothing of the sort has transpired in 1500 years, that is, miracles and the like, though one could maintain that certain prophecies have been fulfilled (for example the Israelites reclaiming their ancestral homeland thousands of years later with a mass return). Nevertheless, the acceptance of the whole tradition, with laws and details is probably not rational if one were to maintain the sacredness of every word and sage, as many such religions do, and that anything countering it is false and evil.

One might then conclude that belief in such religious narratives require faith and trust, not reason and those that keep it robust in a given age, jostle in acts of power-mongering to maintain its vision of the world and the future. Yet such alternative views of reality may amount to no more than being some kind of mass delusion. Delusion here seems an apt description, for it implies a view of reality that is warped, but internally coherent, and subsuming the facts within a system already defined, though not based on evidence, but rather simply a consistent framework imposed onto the world. Delusion also carries with it the connotation that those so deluded cannot see beyond such a framework and contorts every new bit of information to align with these belief structures, so that the believer is caught in a loop – deluded – and perceives the world colored by such a lens.

The suspicion that religion may amount to a form of collective illusion is hardly new. Sigmund Freud argued that religion functions as an illusion born of deep psychological needs, especially the desire for security and a protective father figure. Karl Marx famously described religion as the "opium of the people", not merely as deception, but as a consolation that eases suffering while simultaneously helping sustain existing social structures.

Although these diagnoses differ, both suggest that religion derives much of its power from psychological and social needs rather than objective verification. Yet neither position fully explains why religion has persisted across vastly different cultures and epochs, nor why its ethical and mystical dimensions continue to inspire genuine devotion.

### **3) Salvation? Transcending the world, order**

Religion in the form of these five dominant ones answers humankind's call for dealing with the fears of mortality, of abiding justice, of an ultimate answer or grand narrative. They offer visions of a redeemed world, explain the suffering of this world and replace them with ultimate justice, reward and unity with the ultimate being, to some extent in this life and in an alternative world-space after the soul is said to take the journey of death. This quiets man's fears and justifies the difficulties in this life.

Such visions soften life's hardships, control and lull people in a false sense of security, ceding their power to its belief structure, ritualistic traditions and powers of hierarchical authority. While life after death cannot be conclusively proven while yet not on the other side, religion offers an escape and a way to deal with the fact that the end of consciousness may in fact be just that. It is thus no surprise that these religions have endured, for modern nihilism and materialism has not diminished the power of these religions, even as they are generally separate from state (and for good reason, just look at Modern Islamist Iran) – they answer humankind's deep seated fears in the unknown, while also creating a structure binding the adherent to certain practices and disciplines in this life, hence assuming control of both the mind and body of large social networks and societies.

### **4) Historical consequences**

So, if we are to give a sobering assessment of what religion has caused in societies and the world at large, I think it is safe to correctly enumerate the following:

- i) Historically, religious antagonism, a fight for "truth" and nationhood solidified by such belief, has been one of the single most prevalent causes and reasons for wars historically down the ages, arguably inherited from prehistory. The simple logic that x is not part of my tribe y and therefore bad. X believes something different to us, y, and therefore we must eliminate x for the sake of tribe y and the gods and so on and so forth in nauseating circularity and repetitions of the same mistaken, childish logic. Religion is seldom the sole cause of conflict. Political ambition, territory, economics and ethnicity almost always intertwine with religious identity. Nevertheless, religion has frequently supplied the moral certainty through which violence becomes justified.
- ii) The influence of religion on art is iron clad: Christian Europe for almost 1600 years, the Islamic, Indian Hindu, Eastern Buddhist art is replete with religious iconography – in many instances art is the means to embody this in wood and stone and building and so on and while Judaism is not as influenced in this manner, the form of the Temple, the holy text and the Temple objects are a kind of artistic form that embodies belief and concept. Even as modernism and the Enlightenment overturned this paradigm and art is no longer in the service of either religion or the state as such, one might argue that such provenance is yet latent or that modern structures embody yet another kind of narrative or paradigm, a kind of religion perhaps.
- iii) Religion preys on fear: what will happen when I die? Who am I if I am just skin and bones? What is the point of life if I am a slave to the system? Why do I suffer so? It then embeds itself deep in the psyche with these answers – death, if one has been good in this life, leads to unification with God (gods); you are a soul and therefore not simply the body and the soul is immortal; religious practice is beyond the governance of a particular society – it is supposed as objective and ultimate and thus one may be a slave to G(gods) but never to this world and suffering is part of a test to earn the reward – if not in this life - then in the afterlife.
- iv) All these fears and answers are simplistic, unverified and do not push individuals to come to terms with themselves or these questions, but rather are conditioned within the religious system, precluding self, honest questioning, allowing for uncertainty and openness or complexity (ambiguity). And it is precisely the psychological short circuit that religion is particularly good at creating or conditioning extremists and fanatics, and hence in being instrumental in countless wars across time and space, even today in the post-modern culture that seems to abide.

- v) While scientific endeavor, modernist, liberal philosophies which appear to overturn the main religious traditions, this has not happened and often become weak exponents of scientism, rationalism and secular-materialism, either fueled by religious belief or even becoming an existential nihilistic philosophy. The trials of Galileo Galilei and the resistance to Charles Darwin illustrate moments where religious authority and scientific inquiry came into direct conflict. Yet history also records many religious individuals who contributed significantly to scientific development, suggesting that the relationship has never been one of simple opposition.

## **2. CONCLUSION – IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE?**

Finally, religions of this ilk can be defined as stable traditions (nodes) that interact with changing historical, political, and cultural fields. Durkheim argued that religion is fundamentally social before it is theological. It binds communities through shared rituals and symbols, creating cohesion and collective identity. This sociological perspective helps explain why religion has endured even where belief itself has weakened. Such a perspective does not deny that it carries a powerful unifying agent often replete with wisdom, ethical norms and good practice, but when touted as closed, certain and immutable this quickly becomes a harmful node that negatively impacts the field, as religion is prone to extremism, irrationality and hatred between differing cultural and individual ways of being and expression.

Is there something else that works better? Something to deal with human fear, need for belonging, explanation and meaning? If there were an answer it risks becoming doctrine, belief, certainty and another form that follows the same herd mentality and the division, segregation, difference between competing belief-structures and a cause to defend such an identity or even attack in its name. Nietzsche believed that the decline of religion would not simply liberate humanity but create a vacuum of meaning. Modernity therefore faces the challenge of replacing inherited certainties without descending into nihilism. This concern remains highly relevant, for the rejection of religion alone does not automatically generate healthier ways of living.

The answer is not a new order or new religion or new political formation and so on. It lies within and with the ability to take responsibility for oneself and a D.O. framework (dynamic dialectical oscillation) where uncertainty, ambiguity, movement and temporal harmony are at play. And yet, can people really forget their narratives, their desire for authority or to be led? I think not. So, the problem will persist.