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NARRATIVE IN SYSTEMS OF RELIGION



The Big Questions

Religion deals with the big questions of life.

Among these questions are: Why was I created? Why am I here? What happens to me after I die?

Each person at various times in their life (unless they die as a very young baby) will ask themselves these questions. They may, of course, ask themselves variations of these questions, such as: What is the purpose of life? But they will certainly ask themselves questions about the reason why they should exist on Earth. Indeed, in so far as we can tell, the capacity to reflect on these matters constitutes a major difference between humans and all other forms of life on Earth.

Human life is, then, a search for meaning.

In a more institutional sense, the world's religions are humankind's attempts in groups to try to answer these big questions. The religions have evolved at different times and in different places. But they all wrestle with these core issues. Each religion is a cumulative learning experience: a later generation can build upon what is contained in the sacred texts (oral or written) that have evolved over time, rather than having to start from the beginning.

Alternatively, a person may choose to start their own religion and seek followers for it.

All religions encourage people to live "better" lives. Each religion defines what it means by "better". Almost all aim at transformation of their followers of some sort. Religions want their followers to create a "better" world. This is the best way to glorify the god or gods of their faith.

This definition of "religion" therefore also includes systems of belief and ideologies. "Religion" is not a matter solely of having a god or gods. A system of belief can exist without recognition of the supernatural. A committed Marxist, for example, would also be able to provide "answers" to these questions.

The major exception to this broad definition of "religion" is nihilism. However, a nihilist would be able to provide a set of "answers" – even if they were based on arguing that life is

doomed to despair and nothingness and so transformation is pointless because life is pointless. But at least a nihilist is offering a set of answers to the big questions.

✓ Religion and Science

Science is the search for “laws”. A “law” means that an event can be “explained” because it can be reproduced, such as the splitting of the atom or that two plus two equals four irrespective of the land or language in which the calculation is done. Scientists tend to have a self-image of objective seekers after truth, who work across religious, language, political, national or ethnic lines in a collective fellowship – albeit with a high degree of competition – to find out how certain events occur.

Religion is different from science. In the European tradition since the Renaissance there have tensions because science was seen as challenging many of the basic ideas in religions (especially Judaism, Christianity and Islam), such as Earth not being the centre of the universe. There is now a truce, with practitioners less hostile to each because there is recognition that they are seeking different answers. Science is more concerned with “how” and religion with “why”. For example, even if scientists could explain how the universe was created, they would not automatically from that “law” be able to explain why it was created.

Meanwhile, the application of science may support events in Judeo/Christian/ Islamic religious history. For example, there is the story of David the shepherd boy who kills Goliath with a stone with a slingshot. Goliath was the tallest Philistine in the army and wore thick armour. But David killed him with a stone to forehead (1 Samuel 17: 49). How did a stone pierce a metal helmet? Science provided the answer only recently: a problem for very tall people is that they have peripheral vision problems: Goliath could hear David but not see him. Therefore, he may have lifted his visor to get a clearer vision and that provided the window of opportunity for David to strike at a part of his body that would normally have been well protected. Medical science has explained a biblical mystery.

✓ The Role of Narrative

Narrative is very important for each religion. It helps convey meaning to the followers and makes the religion’s answers more “accessible”. Religion is, after all, dealing with fundamental questions and so there is always a risk of the “answers” containing complexity and jargon that will confuse followers. Human stories are more interesting than an arid study of theology. Children learn about religions through role models and other stories – rather than theory.

Narrative is also important because it hinders the development of a new universal religion. The existing religions all have the ground marked out. There may be occasional splits and small sects might be created. But there can be no universal religion created with a common narrative to unify all humans. People, for better or worse, are too used to the existing ones.

✓ Why was I created?

All religions contain some “answers” on why the universe, Earth, human race and the individual were created. Most religions have narratives that have a god or set of gods being responsible for creation.

Interestingly, scientists now express more caution as to their ability ever to be able to explain the creation of the universe. They can certainly research events close to the moment of creation. But they cannot get back to that point itself. There is also a feeling that the more they discover, the more complicated life seems. A few decades ago, it was assumed that all matter in the universe was composed of atoms. Later it was found that the atoms are composed of particles (neutrons, electrons etc). Now scientists are examining a sub-particle world, so that apparently “solid” matters (such a human being or an iron bar) now seem to be composed more of space than of substance. The more they learn, the more scientists discover that there is yet more to learn

Religious narratives do not have these problems. They are stories “explaining” creation via the activities of a god or set of gods.

✓ Why am I here?

All religions explain to their followers why they are on earth – and how they are to live. Again narrative is very important, if only because a code of conduct is more interesting when it is to be followed through a story rather than just as a book of rules.

First, many religions have “ideal” figures (such as Jesus) to set an example of how followers are to live. “When in doubt about whether or not to commit an action, ask: ‘What would Jesus do?’ ” Many Russians between 1924 and 1990 had Lenin as their communist model and children were brought up to see Lenin as their role model. Many married couples on their wedding day (or shortly thereafter) trooped past his embalmed body in the Lenin Mausoleum in Red Square, seeking in effect his blessing for their marriage.

Second, all religions have lesser mortals (but still significant people) whose (usually glorified) lives set examples, such as “saints” in the Catholic and Orthodox Christian religion, and “faithful” political party members in the old USSR and China.

Finally, lives of other people are less sanitized but also significant because they contain “lessons” for their followers (sometimes on what to avoid). 3,000 years before the 1974 Watergate scandal, David, King of the Jews, had his own “recording machines” living in his palace, noting the beauty and blemishes of his life. The detailed accounts by the palace scribes have come down to Jews, Christians and Moslems and they have provided much material for homilies, sermons, books and movies. David was a great leader of men and a great follower of women. Therefore, there have been many sermons preached on bravery in battle and the need to avoid womanising.

✓ **What happens to me when I die?**

No one knows what happens after death. Some people have had near death experiences (NDEs) in which they have died and later been revived. Many – but not all – have returned to life with accounts of “floating outside their bodies” and meeting people wearing long flowing gowns. Others can recall nothing.

There is no firm evidence for life after death – any more than it can be proved that there is no life after death. Christians and communists both have to take their respective destinies on faith.

Faith is a great comforter in a time of despair, such as when worrying about one’s own death or that of friends or relatives.

✓ **Religion and War**

If truth is the first casualty in war, then God is usually the first conscript.

All sides like to claim god or a group of gods as being on their side. In my view, religion is usually more a label than a cause. In other words, in a place like Northern Ireland poor, alienated, marginalised Catholics are opposing Protestants from a similarly deprived economic and social background. Meanwhile, there is less violence in the affluent middle class areas, where people are too busy getting on with their lives to re-fight old struggles. Similarly, despite the warning of some authors about the “West versus the Rest”, with the West being threatened by an aggressive Islam, I doubt that Islam is that united to attack the West. Where there are problems within Islamic societies (such as Indonesia, Egypt, Algeria and Turkey), then much of that again comes from poor, alienated young people who have no hope for the future and so are vulnerable to the extremist statements from mullahs who promise them a better life.

But I do admit that religion can create an element of superiority over other religions. Religious people distinguish themselves from others by their beliefs and assume that they have all the answers to the fundamental questions of life.

The problem gets worse when this feeling of superiority becomes a desire to force the “truth” on others (such as the Christian crusades in the Islamic world almost a thousand years ago) and to convert others forcibly. Such actions are now regretted by Christians. The history of this violence lingers in the collective Islamic memory.

✓ A universal narrative?

Can humankind begin afresh with a universal narrative? Is it possible to create a new religious narrative that will unite humankind with a set of truths that will appeal to all people and so reduce the risk of “religious warfare”?

The answer is not clear but on balance I suggest that a new universal narrative cannot be created. Here are three different scenarios to illustrate this claim.

1. “A new spiritual search is underway in Western countries.”

The Christian church is in decline in the Western world. For example, in the UK (the home of Methodism) there are now more Moslems than Methodists and the Methodist church in the US has been closing down a building at the rate of one a week for the past two decades.

But there is a new spiritual search underway in these countries. Alongside the decline in organized Christianity in Western countries, there is a new search for meaning. The Baby Boomers (people born between 1946 and 1966 – the largest single age cohort in Western history) are now in their middle age. For most of them, life has not turned out quite as well as they expected. In the 1960s, they were going to change the world – and instead the world has changed them. They may have wealth but they may also now be unemployed, separated (they are the most divorced generation in history) and alienated from their children. What went wrong? They are looking for answers to their spiritual problems. They cannot find the answers to the basic questions of life in the established religions. Therefore, they are not returning to churches (and not going into Judaism or Islam).

Perhaps a new religion can be created that will omit Jesus. It will be a New Age worship of God without the attention to Jesus and without all the intermediation of the church. This seems fanciful but it has been done once already. The Protestants have largely removed the Catholic attention to Mary from their approach to Christianity. Mary has largely disappeared from Protestantism. Perhaps the next step will be to remove Jesus?

A problem with this approach is the lack of narrative. Who, precisely, is to be worshipped? How is a person to “know” god? Who is god? Narrative in each religion solves that problem for its respective adherents. It will be difficult to find support for a “secular religion” because of the missing narrative. Baby Boomers in Western countries may be dissatisfied with their quest for a new religion. The World Health Organization has warned that depression will be the major health problem of the 21st Century. The failure of the quest for religious answers will add to this problem.

2. “A new faith is already underway”

Baha’is believes that their faith is the final unification of prior faiths. They now have the universal narrative. Baha’is believe that there is only one God; there is only one religion progressively revealed by God (with Baha’u’llah as the last messenger), and that all people are equal in the sight of God. Their religion contains a strong narrative, based partly on the 40 years of torture, imprisonment, exile and suffering of Baha’u’llah, with his death in 1892 in the Holy Land. The faith is now administered from the Universal House of Justice, Mount Carmel. Haifa, Israel. It is spread out around the world and has followers (albeit in a small number in total) based in more countries than any other faith except Christianity.

But Moslems do not accept the Baha’i claim. They see Baha’is as heretics from Islam (a view rejected by Baha’is) and they persecute them. The worst persecutions have been in the Middle East, with Iran currently the worst place for persecution. According to Islamic thinking, Moslems cannot become Baha’is and still remain Moslems.

Christians are not so violent towards Baha’is (partly because they feel less threatened by them). But they too reject Baha’i thinking. Jesus said: “No one comes to the Father except through me”. Christians (recalling the violence of the Crusades) tend to be more tolerant of inter-faith dialogue than Moslems but the bottom line is that they remain Christians.

Therefore, although the Baha’i faith will continue to grow (both through conversion and people being born into the faith), it will not – on current indications – become a new universal faith to rival the total numbers of either Christianity or Islam. It will not exceed their combined number.

3. “The older faiths are alive and well and people will not change”

The third scenario suggests that it is important not to look at this matter from the point of view of tired, jaded Western Christianity. Christianity is booming in the Third World. Seven of the world’s ten largest churches are in South Korea. Christian church growth is in Latin America, central and southern Africa and Asia. The next Pope (based on the numbers of followers) should come from Brazil and the next Archbishop of Canterbury should come from Nigeria or Uganda.

Similarly, Islam is also growing. It is thriving throughout northern and central Africa and Asia. London is its capital city – it is a “neutral” location for all the competing Islamic groups, which do not want to be based in the more established Islamic capitals. (It is ironic that the British hospitality, which made London the home for communist exiles in the 19th century, should now be the home for Islamic ones).

The religions are growing where the populations are growing. 90 per cent of all the babies born today are being born in the Third World. The Western world currently has the wealth – but not the babies. By 2050 only about five per cent of the world’s population will be “white”.

The booming faiths are booming partly because they are aggressive in their growth methods – either through evangelism or in encouraging members to have babies to be raised in the faith. They have no interest in creating a new universal narrative. They are still surging ahead. These people are not interested in submerging their faiths into a vague universal spirituality. The power of their narrative is too powerful.

To conclude, there seems to be little scope for creating a “universal narrative” to unify people. The existing religious narratives are too strong to permit the inclusion of a new one. The challenge is, then, to find a way of making the world safe for religious diversity. The religions cannot be united – but they need to find ways to live in peace with each other. If there cannot be unity, then there should be toleration of diversity.

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