
RELIGION

Religion has a curious relationship with truth. To tease it out, we will need to identify five forms of truth:

1. *Material truth* is direct, plain, literal description of reality. There is no interest here in exploring deeper implications, insights and echo-meanings. This is the truth which tells you about the route taken by the hot water pipe from the boiler to the bathroom, how to make flatbread, how to photograph otters, what Darwinism is, why a herd of cows' milk yield is higher if the cows are named as well as numbered, what a well-tempered scale is, what a Higgs boson probably is, why pregnant women don't topple over, whether you went to the pub last night. Accuracy is not essential: it does not *have* to be true to belong in the domain of material truth, but it *does* have to be the speaker's intention that the other person should understand it to be true. It can use metaphor that helps to get an unfamiliar idea across. The intention is to provide a truthful and uncluttered description. Here facts matter.¹

For religion, there is *material truth* in its historical account, and in at least some of religion's practical and ethical teaching.

2. *Narrative truth* (or poetic truth) we have met before, at the carnival. It is the truth present not just in storytelling but in myth, art and the whole of our culture. This is the truth of *Pride and Prejudice*. It is not materially true, in that it is fiction; on the other hand, it is true-to-life: it is as accurate an insight into human character as we have. Elizabeth Bennett's story can neither be dismissed as untrue nor accepted as true; it is in the middle ground. It may or may not report the material truth, but the narrative says something that cannot be said in any other way. It has a shadow-meaning that extends beyond

metaphor, and can *lead* to the discovery of material or implicit truths, as an explorer in search of the Holy Grail may discover and map real mountains and rivers.

Narrative truth makes sense of the roots of our word “belief”, which comes to our literal-minded age from a story-rich antiquity. It can be traced to the ancient Germanic root, *galaubjan* [to hold dear]; the Latin for “to believe” is *credere*, which comes from *cor dare*, to give [one’s] heart.²

Narrative truth may be a parable with a clear message, or a story for the story’s sake, or the meaning may be forever unknown: a question to be reflected on, perhaps the subject of a lifetime’s exploration. It is the domain of poetry, music, laughter; if you ask whether it is true, you are at the wrong party.³

And yet, our culture regularly lacks the mature judgment necessary to distinguish between material and narrative truth. A work of art makes the question of whether it is true or not absurd. It is a category error and should not be asked. You might as well ask whether Schubert’s String Quintet in C major Deutsch No. 956 likes broccoli.

Although religion inhabits all five forms of truth, *narrative truth* is at its core, most obviously in its allegory, parable and myth.

3. *Implicit truth* is the product of reflection, and is particular to the person reflecting. Different people may reach sharply different insights which may, however, all be true, despite contrasts in emphasis and meaning. They are different in that they are features in the landscape of the observers’ different cognitive homelands. The differences may be consistent with each other, or they may mature into deep contradictions:



“This is my territory”; “The ideal place for our honeymoon would be Scunthorpe”; “We’ve won”. All these are true or untrue depending on who is speaking, but all are in the category of implicit truth.

Religion’s *implicit truth* is the insight derived from deliberation; it is the guidance, comfort, inspiration and prudence derived by a person’s own participation in his or her religion.

4. *Performative truth* is the truth that is created by statements that do something: I challenge, I thee wed, I bet, I curse, thank you. The speaking makes the truth; a promise is brought into existence by being spoken: loyal cantons of contemned love make love come alive (for a variant—it does not quite qualify as a performative truth, but it is a good try—see “Making It Come True . . .” sidebar).⁴

Performative truths can also be created by symbolic events or even thoughts. Contracts are an example—they may be recorded, but the contract itself has no material expression: you cannot see it or say where it is, and if minds change profoundly enough it may simply cease to exist.

The *performative truth* of religion lies in its ritual, as in the performance of the Christian Eucharist and other practices of religion which affirm and bring into existence a reality of identity and belief as real as—and in many ways the same as—a contract.

MAKING IT COME TRUE . . .

By saying it often enough

So if it’s not focus that breeds success, how do you get a project as vast and ambitious as Eden off the ground? Simple: you just announce you’re going to do it. I discovered a technique that revolutionised my life. It’s called lying—or rather, the telling of future truths. It’s about putting yourself in the most public jeopardy possible and saying “I am going to do this”, so the shame of not doing it would be so great it energises every part of your being.

TIM SMIT, Executive Director and Co-Founder
of the Eden Project, Cornwall, 2009.⁵

5. *Self-denying truth* is paradox which contradicts itself: it is (materially) true until it is spoken: the speaking of a self-denying truth kills it. Examples: “I refuse to admit my addiction”, “The religious belief which unites us so securely is in fact a useful falsehood”, “The reason we have such a loving relationship is that you remind me of my mother”. It is a matter of acknowledging the limits of what we can say without destroying the truth in the process: you can kill an insight by analysing it, love by telling it:

Never seek to tell thy love
 Love that never told can be;
 For the gentle wind does move
 Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
 I told her all my heart,
 Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears—
 Ah, she doth depart.

Soon as she was gone from me
 A traveller came by
 Silently, invisibly—
 Oh, was no deny.

*William Blake, Never Seek to Tell thy Love, 1793.*⁶

Self-denying truth is the opposite of performative truth. It is a statement which makes itself untrue. By unpacking a useful mystery you are making it no longer a mystery, and maybe no longer useful.⁷

Religion involves a *self-denying truth*, in that the commanding authority of a myth is impaired, or even destroyed, when it is described as a myth. The author of this book, as a critic, affirms the truth of this description of religion—but, as an observant, he denies it and, instead, enters into the performative truth which gives religion real presence.

All five forms of truths, then, are exuberantly present in religion, which, if confined in the narrow space inhabited by material truth, decays into fundamentalism. There are paradoxes and shadow-meanings in all of these, especially in narrative truth and self-denying truth, yet all five are

needed for the common purpose of making a future, which requires both brain and soul. Alfred North Whitehead, with the sureness of touch of a philosopher of science, captures it:

Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realised; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest.⁸

Religions are works of art—narrative truths affirmed by ritual; they variously assert the existence of many gods, one God, a mystical union of three gods in one, or their myth does not have a concept of God at all. The narrative truth and the ritual in which it is affirmed have essential functions for a community, for the individuals within it, and for its social capital. They embrace its culture, giving it identity and meaning.

Religion, like all other living things, dies if dissected; the dissector kills what he seeks to understand. It exists because it is performed, declared and loved. The view that dismisses religion on the grounds that it contains untrue statements is a solecism; a naïve failure to understand the significance of religion, the culture which it expresses, and the many natures of truth. If a common practice celebrates the identifying narrative or myth of the community, if it is expressed in one or more of the arts, especially music, if there is at least a degree of repetition and constancy in that expression, and if it requires some, or many, members of the community to participate, it is, for *Surviving the Future*, an expression of religion. At least to some degree. Binary definitions—*this is/is not religious*—have value only at the extremes, at which the identification of the religious is trivial in any case.

What is religion for?

Religion provides meeting places in which people can come together, building and sustaining the friendships of social capital; it is the hub through which needs are signalled and answered. That can be done in

other ways, too, of course: by playing cards, or being a regular at the pub, or being on a committee. But religion can do it in ways which those other meeting places cannot. It enables a lot of people to participate in a collective activity, doing the same thing at the same time, to the same music. Its ritual is, in itself, of no direct practical value, and this makes it especially potent and effective as a statement by participants that they are there as members of the community. It delivers tradition to us—a present from the past—where core values are represented in forms of exceptional beauty. And it brings shared presence; in religious observance, friends, neighbours, beloveds and families face the same way.

The critic will point out that religion can bring strife as well as concord; that there have been many abuses of power; that some expressions of religion misapprehend their own myths—by, for instance, naïvely supposing the Creation Story to be fact. Religion, like every other human enterprise, comes with no guarantee of being done well. It can be more drawn to guilt than to joy, to the personal than the collective, to righteous narcissism than to communal care. Religion can be intolerant, sanctimonious and cruel. But it is hard to think of any political or social order to which those regrettable properties do not apply from time to time. The secular world, too, with chilling good intentions, and at whatever cost in lives and capital in all its forms, sometimes tries to build a new and secular Jerusalem.

But look again at what religion *can* do. Religion is the community speaking. It is culture in the service of the community. It is a framework for integrating care into the community's life and culture; it takes charitable giving beyond the level of personal conscience and integrates it into the way the community sees itself and expresses itself.⁹

Religion uses allegory, opening up the potent space of questions unsettled, paradoxes unresolved, beauty undescribed. It occupies, with benign myth, the space in the mind which, if vacated, is wide open to takeover by ideology. Akin to carnival, it provides powerfully-cohesive rituals that give reality to membership of the community and locate it as particular to, and steward of, the place; that invite emotional daring; and that also alert the community to time—to the natural cycles of day and season, as well as to its existence as inheritor from previous generations and benefactor of future generations. The performance of the ritual itself is a skilled practice recruiting the deep intellectual power which is available only to

the subconscious mind. In all these ways, religion underpins the trust and permanence which make it possible to sustain reciprocity—the network of interconnected talent and service which makes the local economy real.

We cannot tell what forms the religion of future communities will take. Small communities, with cultures shaped by a closeness to nature, which is held in respect and awe, could be close to pagan spiritualism—like the *lelira* of the Inuit and the shamanic religions whose rituals sustain the practices which in turn sustain their local ecologies. On the other hand, cultures which are settled, more domestic than wild, and with a religion to match, may find themselves in the Christian tradition. If they do, they will inherit a proven, full-mouthed, full-blooded liturgy of great depth and brilliance, the existence of which—if they have formerly experienced only the winsome banalities from the time of the late market economy—they might not suspect. And they will also inherit the architectural expression of that liturgy—the churches—spectacular assertions that community is a mere prelude to the great fugue of overlapping mysteries, parables, affections and accomplishments that give us Gaia.¹⁰

Surviving the Future brings whatever values and insights it can to the task of holding community together in the absence of a robust market economy. Religion (Latin: *ligare* to bind + *re* intensely) is the binding-together of people with stories, music, dance, emotion, death, spirit—all really about the celebratory making of community, and real enough to give your heart to.¹¹

Unfortunately, the religions of the world will not, in general, be in good shape for these creative responsibilities. There are four reasons for this:

The first is that religions have been shattered and depleted by the disintegration of social structure and the loss of social capital which have followed the advance of the market economy. Religion has been separated from its cultural context and become something that people come together to *do*, like rally-driving—a personal journey for you, because that is the sort of thing you like. At the same time, the advance of science and the literal-minded, disenchanting thinking that is widely taken to be the only sort of thinking there is has made it harder to recognise and accept the poetic discourse of religion. Challenged by science, its leaders and ministers quickly surrendered to the idea that scientific, material truth is the

only kind of truth there is. Argued on science's own terms, the religions that have been exposed to the debate in any serious way have been routed.

Secondly, and for similar reasons, a large part of (at least) the divided and confused Western Christian church, as it developed in the late twentieth century, has gone to great lengths to present the most plain-speaking of interpretations, abandoning the unchanging text needed if people are to have any chance of holding it in the memory. It has scrapped its liturgies and strained, instead, at spontaneity, and at presenting the simple message of personal salvation in literal terms to be accepted as material truth or rejected as false. When it is presented in those terms, many reasonable people have no choice but to refuse to accept a proposition which they reject as simply nonsense. In this way, the church has thrown out the whole set of implicit functions, narrative and allegorical truths which are integral to the artistic and cultural meaning of the community, and which are the essence of religion. Christian religion in the market economy has found itself drawn into the idolatry of reducing complex meaning and the reflective Imitation of Christ to an iconic Imitation of Marketing, falling for a technique which it can only do with breathless and piteous amateurism, in place of what it used to do with assured and numinous skill.

Thirdly, although at present there is a yearning for an expression of other, non-materialistic, non-scientific, spiritual values, the established churches almost completely fail to benefit from this. They are not on that wavelength and, for much of the spiritual movement in the world of strongly-developed green awareness, the affirmation of a Christian faith stands at the opposite extreme from what they need. It seems cold and absurd, full of confident reassurance about an afterlife which is not only grossly incredible but an offence to people whose concern is focused on how much longer there is going to be a planet for this life. Established religion, especially the Christian church, seems to be the embodiment of urban, and human-centred, alienation from nature, while green values look for ways to establish some real contact with—and come to the defence of—the rural. The childishness of happy-camper services is disempowering; in contrast, the green movement's central purpose is empowerment—to develop its intelligence and resources, to empower its members to act, having observed for themselves the extent of the ecological betrayal that has taken place at the command of centralised urban civilisation and its centralised religion since the invention of the plough.¹²

The fourth handicap which religions have to bear—as they find themselves with their new society-building and life-saving responsibilities—is the mixing up of religions which has taken place over the same period (see “Multiculturalism” on page 45). There is no doubt that they have something to learn from each other, gaining insights through their faiths which may not be accessible in any other way. Every religion has something to teach; they are each best in some way: the Lean Economy, which will inherit pluralism, will have to derive advantages from them.

Nonetheless, pluralism is a self-denying truth. It contradicts itself with multiple claims to authority. If it is spoken too loud, the contradiction is fatal. It has introduced a sense of branding into the matter which, in itself, trivialises religious encounter: it effectively forces people to make an instrumental choice with the conscious mind between the seductive appeals of competing retailers in the salvation market, rather than undergoing a bit-by-bit discovery of meaning and affection at the level of the subconscious, starting in childhood when the foundations for this facility are laid.

Pluralism also means that society itself dare not favour one story over another, so collective expression of any one religion becomes an offence to the rest: many turns into none. Society is thus largely excluded from the benign shared vocabulary of ceremony, celebration, solidarity, spirit and belief provided by religion; the culture, scrubbed clean of allegory, is filled with secular kitsch.

But the act of transcending this pluralism is something in which art can help. When different traditions develop their artistic differences to the fullest extent, they may find common ground on which there is a chance that they can meet. You cannot argue with a song.¹³

None of this is rational from the point of view of the market economy, whose instinct for worship is directed to its technology, but the idea that a society can be held together without *either* an energy-rich market *or* a culture-rich religion—that is seriously irrational. A coherent social order in the future will need a religion; a religion will need a rich cultural inheritance: it will give culture a real job to do, something to participate in, and not simply to be watched: something to give your heart to, to give you the moral strength you need to keep going because there is no big Something in the sky who is going to do it for you.