

Religious Identity: Morality, Social Structure, and Dualism

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Abstract

Religion and the adoption of religious beliefs is often seen as a distinct part of an individual and of society by extension, separate and detached from all other aspects of life. In the globalized world consisting of many cultures, it is commonly believed that religious and spiritual practices are a very private and compartmentalized aspect of one's life. In multicultural environments, especially in professional, industrial, and academic settings, religion is typically not acknowledged, and ends up fading into the background of modern social life. This is a natural outcome in the era of globalization and the ambiguous cultural boundaries associated with it, however, this fact should not be misleading to the integral role that religion plays in identity. Identity in Anthropology is viewed as a complex concept, that can take on both personal and collective dimensions. Many aspects of identity are not inherently existent/primordial but are culturally characterized and constructed and fluctuate in different socio-cultural conditions in time and space (Golubovic, 2011). Religion is still a prominent part of the lives of a large percentage of the human population, predicted by many experts to continue to prosper despite globalization phenomena (Billig, 1998). Therefore, there is a need for recognition and study of religion as a fundamental part of individual and collective identity, strongly associated with cultural and ethnic identities as well.

Keywords: Identity; Religion; Morality; Dualism; Social Structure; Social Culture.

1. Introduction

The importance and relevance of religious identity can be reflected in the close links with cultural and national identity. It is also important to understand how national and religious identities differ. Religious identity is interlinked with national identity, but the two have a very different nature. According to Billig (1998), religious identities are affected by nationalist perceptions, as nations imagine themselves in terms of religion, although most conflicts are not of religious content. As a response, there have been forms of religious nationalism that apply national rules in religious identity, adapting it to the modern world of nation-states – although this does not always run smoothly. This is due to the different nature of religious identity, which is much older and has a much richer history than national identity. As national identity is accompanied by a much shorter history, Billig predicts that nation states are likely to be abandoned for another form of political structure in the future, while the perseverance of religious identities in time suggests that they will likely persist in the future as well. Billig supports that national identity is not functional due to the amount of violence associated with it and suggests religious identity as a future form of borderless political organization. Although there is evidence in support of opposite outcomes, expert predictions of the permanence of religion in the future point towards its relevance and highlight the importance of the knowledge of the interpersonal and intrapersonal effects of religion on human beings.

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2. Morality, Social Structure and Dualism

An anthropological viewpoint is of great significance as it offers a holistic approach to the study of religion. Humans have always sought religion to answer existential inquiries and to fulfil the inherent need for the attribution of meaning to one's life. Also, religion has contributed in satisfying the inherent human need to explain why certain things happen, such as why the lives of certain people are filled with happiness and abundance, and why others are plagued by injustice and scarcity (Daswani, 2018). The impacts of religion on humanity can be divided into two categories; intrapersonal, which are the impacts on the self, and interpersonal, which are societal impacts associated with self and the other. Through time, religious faith shapes the moral compass of individuals and is recognized as one of the most universal and powerful motivators of morality and moral choices (Rakimzhanova & Rakymzhanov, 2019). Consecutively, religion also acts as a key force behind social behavior, forging rigid social classification systems that can act as a catalyst to the sense of community of a society. Early anthropologists such as Durkheim and Malinowski recognized the social function of religion in creating social cohesion and social solidarity through shared rituals and beliefs. Durkheim established the important link between morality and religion, describing religion as a reflection of societal norms, and a set of practices that reflected the transcendent and divine connection in people's lives. He defined religions as 'imagined worlds' that have the power to shape reality through ritual, setting the basis for human social life (Daswani, 2018). Devotees share morals and laws based on their religion, resulting in social conformity and ultimately, control. Religion is a fundamental part of culture, and due to the deeply integrated nature of culture, anthropological studies provide insight into all facets of society. To understand the anthropological workings of religion, an understanding of symbols is also important. Culture is highly symbolic and is transmitted through meaningful symbols, that are common for all members of a culture, but can take on a unique meaning for each member. Similarly, symbols are fundamental to religion and are rigid in a societal level but flexible on how they are individually integrated and understood (Corrigan et al., 2016). The vast capital of religious ethical and moral beliefs can be understood through the scope of symbols and can be recognized for its ambiguity of interpretation for meaning, among individuals, and among groups of individuals belonging in the same religion (Rakimzhanova & Rakymzhanov, 2019).

The anthropological study of the influence of religion on core beliefs and worldviews is especially important nowadays, due to the connection of self-perceptions and social behaviors to mental health – given the power of religion to shape perceptions and worldviews among believers (Koenig & Larson, 2001). This paper will provide an investigation on the impacts of religion on unity and separation, focusing on common beliefs of the Abrahamic faiths that have contributed to the existence of both peace and conflict through shaping perceptions, morality and forging social structures. This dual nature of religion equally contributing to coexistence and conflict is often referred to as the concept of duality, or religious dualism (Stoyanov, 2015). For a better understanding of morality, social structure and dualism, an in-depth examination of the example of the Christian God acting both as unconditionally loving and as a punisher is provided.

There is an extensive body of evidence regarding common beliefs among the three Abrahamic religions that promote positive perceptions and worldviews, which are responsible for enforcing unity and peace among believers. The plethora of existing common elements among the three religions is not always evident, but upon careful study they are very prominent, and are responsible for informing a cluster of beliefs closely associated to harmony and coexistence (Yunus, 2016). Moral aptness and integrity comprise one of the central themes and purposes of the three Abrahamic faiths. The elements of the religious commands stand as a means for attaining moral propriety in human behavior within the family, the laws of the nation, and society in general (Ali, 2011). The prophets of each religion and scripture had a central role in communicating religious teachings with the goal of sustaining camaraderie and social order. As Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all monotheistic religions, devotees believe and devote to one God only, dedication and commitment is taught, leading to an increased sense of unity within each religion. Also, all three religions believe humans to be the highest creature on earth, possessing endless possibilities of expansion and endless mystery. In that way, with the help of God, good within each human being can be cultivated, helping to overcome tendencies for disruption, disorder, separation, and war. Obedience to God ultimately equals social obedience and seeking of peace. Furthermore, all three religions have the common element of hope towards the future, despite the difficulties that the past may have presented and those that are felt in the present. The term Paradise represents the ultimate prevalence of good over evil, along with unconditional happiness and harmony. Abrahamic religions also have a rigid focus on human communication. As God communicates with people through revelations from prophets, humans are taught to communicate with one another and support one another in writings of the Holy scriptures. Love is also highly emphasized, especially in Christianity. In the New Testament, God is presented as one and the same with love, therefore those who serve love, serve God. Respect is taught to devotees not only towards God and scripture, but towards fellow human beings, which is more of a duty rather than a simple teaching (Yunus, 2016).

All three Abrahamic religions also give specific instructions to followers regarding the avoidance of acts that go against humanity. In all three religions, murder of innocent people is considered unacceptable. Devotion to the truth is another key principle that is common, enforcing honesty in people's lives and work, forbidding to take what justly belongs to another person. Dignity is also a concept that is of key importance in Abrahamic religions. People are to respect their own as well as other people's dignity, often by helping those who are not able to ensure their own dignity, such as the poor. In all three religions, the mindset of the 'golden rule' of treating others in a way one wants to be treated is central. Modesty, moderation, and honesty in work are central principles of Abrahamic religions, along with the submission to the will of God. Such teachings create a moral compass in the mindset of the faithful, that shape their attitudes and stances throughout life (Yunus, 2016).

Although the concept of religion arose in societies out of attempts to transcend disorder and anarchy, there have been many cases where religion leads back to chaos and separation. The initial messages of unity and peace have been distorted to fit into political goals in the world of nation-states, creating an anthropological 'border' instead, separating groups of people from one another and creating hostility among believers of a different religion. It is evident in many historical examples that religion can be a primary cause for conflict, prejudice, and racism, that is associated with negative behaviors of religious individuals (Bushong, 2018). One such example are the events of the Crusades of Christian Europe in the medieval period. Also, the three Abrahamic faiths were challenged in the events after the first and second World Wars, as well as the Cold War which gave rise to rifts, confrontations, distrust, and uncertainty among them (Ali, 2011). In some instances, even the same teachings that had the initial aim of unity can lead to chaos and disorder. For example, teachings of devotion and obedience to God, can project to obedience and devotion to destructive political or religious leaders whose actions and orders serve their own agendas. The transmission of religious ideas through time and space, and the subjectivity of symbolic interpretations can distort many beliefs from their initial intention. The love of God can turn into fanaticism and disregard for other human lives. Moreover, the vertical components of love in religion coupled with the idealization of paradise can lessen the importance of earthly manifestations, giving way for destructive behaviors that are promised to be redeemed in the afterlife (Ali, 2011). This second outcome of religious beliefs ends up functioning as an anthropological border instead, creating division among people of different religious faiths.

On the surface, the two functions of religious beliefs discussed seem very contradictory and confounding. Upon closer examination, the two clusters of beliefs serve very specific functions. In fact, religious studies have revealed multiple times the simultaneous existence of contradictory concepts and narratives within a religion. This known coexistence of opposite ideas in religion, is referred to by experts as religious dualism or duality. An understanding of religious dualism is at the core of decoding the conflicts among Abrahamic religions (Stoyanov, 2015). A key example of religious dualism that can provide a better understanding of this concept are the opposing depictions of the Christian God that exist throughout Christianity. Christian narratives are filled with two contrasting forms of God, who is either depicted as an all-loving God, or as a punisher of human sins.

The first illustration of God in Christian teachings is the well-known form of the All-Loving God. This depiction of God is very prominent, as Christianity is often referred to as the religion of love. According to several Christian teachings, God is omnibenevolent or all-loving and his love for human beings is unsurpassed, peaking with the self-sacrifice of Jesus for the salvation of humans. Humans are taught to love and give unconditionally, and that through their service in love, they are also serving God. Love for other humans and selflessness are recurring notions in such teachings. A key characteristic of the Loving God is his ability to forgive. God is illustrated as forgiving towards people for their wrongdoings when they have recognized them and are remorseful. An example of God's forgiveness is given in the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament, where a son who has carelessly spent his father's fortune asks for forgiveness and is welcomed back home with open arms. Another example in the Bible is Joseph, who forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery. The loving and forgiving narratives of God have many widely studied implications. In an intrapersonal level, people possess benevolent and selfless beliefs and behaviors (Shepperd et al., 2019). In an interpersonal level, such beliefs enforce positive feelings and cooperative behaviors among people and within societies. Cooperation was especially important in the first historical establishments of large-scale societies, where nations did not yet hold the power they have today (Billig, 1998). Therefore, the role of religion was definitive and ensured adaptive benefits through cooperation, combining increased group size with specialized functions within the group. The adaptive benefits provided by the Christian religion ensured the efficient functioning of the first large-scale societies (Schloss & Murray, 2011).

Aside from loving depictions, God is alternatively presented in Christian scripture and narratives as a powerful punisher of human sins, which manifest as behaviors non-consistent with Christian teachings. This version sees God acting as a judge,

classifying people's actions into good and bad, and passing judgement both in life and in the afterlife; but mostly after death, in the afterlife. A characteristic that makes this form of God exert so much power over people, is his omniscient or all-seeing nature. This characteristic of God means that a human being is not only judged in their social presence, through the impact of their actions in the society, but is also judged in their private thoughts and actions. An example of this version of God is the existence of Hell in biblical narratives, which is synonymous with a life of punishment for people straying away from the ways of Christianity. In the parable of sheep and goats, sheep represent good people who have lived a life of helping others that are directed to Heaven, while goats represent people who have lived a selfish life and are directed to Hell. Although not evident from a superficial knowledge of such beliefs, the existence of the punisher God also served very important functions in the early years of Christianity (Laurin et al., 2012). The combination of the condemnatory, omniscient and omnipotent (all-powerful) elements of God made for a very powerful sanctioning mechanism. In the newly established large-scale societies where social institutions and state-driven mechanisms of punishment did not yet hold much power, the influence of religion was of ultimate significance to exert social control and maintain prosocial behaviors within communities. The need for state-driven formal punishment was therefore reduced, in an age where the effective monitoring of norm violations was not possible (Laurin et al., 2012). Beliefs in God as a punisher could also prevent individuals from taking matters into their own hands and acting as agents of justice in daily life. Also, while a unified group life holds many benefits, the adaptive benefits of coexistence cannot easily be sustained with the constant existence of outside threats (Schloss & Murray, 2011). This is another purpose that the punitive side of God serves, which is the unification of societies in the face of outside threats. Separating a group from others increases its internal power and ensures its survival and expansion in all aspects of life (Billig, 1998).

Questions often posed by modern believers are often of the same basis. Can both forms of God exist at the same time? How can a loving God punish humans? The answer is that the two forms can and do in fact exist in modern religion and societies. Beliefs in the two forms of God allowed societies of the past to expand, while also increasing the power of Christianity, as the dominance of societies was allowed to increase within the religion. Although they served the very important functions of ingroup cooperation combined with the elimination of outside threats in early Christian societies, today, they appear as very conflicting spiritual beliefs. This is not to suggest that they do not still serve similar functions. However, as formal means of punishment are now well developed, the need for sanctioning through religion does not exist in the way it did in the past (Laurin et al., 2012; Schloss & Murray, 2011). Some theological explanations have been given throughout the years, to attempt to bridge the gap between the existence of the two contrasting forms of God. First is the divergent account, in which God punishes in a manner opposite of his love. Many Christians who believe in this input, do not accept or adopt elements of duality within the Christian religion such as Godly punishment and eternal life in Hell. Another explanation in the form of the unitary account has also been proposed, in which Godly punishment is an expression of God's love that seeks a person's ultimate good. Punishment is a form of divine guidance that shows a person the right path (Wessling, 2017).

Despite the explanations that have been proposed, the maintenance of the two conflicting forms of God no longer holds the importance and functions that used to be present in the past. This results in confounding spiritual beliefs among believers, that can often lead to internal conflict. Empirical research has shown the different personality traits of empathy and tolerance versus aggressiveness and intolerance that are associated with the adoption of beliefs in a loving versus punitive God nowadays (Shepperd et al., 2019). Such findings can be generalized to religious dualism found throughout the Abrahamic religions, which can create dissonance within individuals and cause religious groups to unite against each other, in the instances of conflict previously discussed (Ali, 2011).

3. Conclusion

To conclude, in the extensive study of religious phenomena, scholars have highlighted the massive power of religion to both unify and divide. As it has been illustrated in multiple historical examples and scientific studies, religion is one of the greatest motivating forces in human culture, forging cooperative partnerships among the same religious communities, as well as hostility towards people outside of the group (Schloss & Murray, 2011). Opposing concepts of religious dualism presented throughout the Abrahamic religions may have had important functions in the past but can lead to unnecessary religious conflict in modern times. To transcend current religious issues and to learn from past mistakes, there needs to be space for open conversations and mutual understanding. Emphasis on the similarities among the three Abrahamic faiths can be a catalyst towards conflict resolution among the three religions (Ali, 2011).

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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