

What will happen to religion after the pandemic?

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Abstract: Traditional religions play a decreasing role in Western societies. In addition, the pandemic has forced us to re-evaluate some of our behaviours and decisions. The pandemic could transform the way we understand religious faith, define the function it plays in society and describe it as a useful, efficient support system to address the current problems we are facing.

The perception of religion is highly dependent on the social context and personal circumstances. Particular moments can endow religious experience with a special intensity that would be unthinkable at other times. We know that our environment has an effect that is often decisive in how we experience transcendence. The hustle and bustle of the city is markedly different from living in a village or in the open country. The desert has an even more unique impact, and the history of religions offers many examples where supernatural revelation is linked to wild and lonely places. The experience is not the same in calm and relaxed times as it is in troubled periods. These variations are included in the set of factors that affect religious experience, which goes far beyond the presence of some mental structures that favour the perception of supernatural agents – as cognitive psychologists suggest – or the convenience of some traits that encourage prosocial behaviours, as evolutionists claim.

On the other hand, the religious phenomenon – always elusive and hard to objectify – has been observed from its functions or its usefulness for people and societies. The functionalist approach has always been, at least since the great sociologist Emile Durkheim, a source of good information about religion, an access to that experience able to explain, if not what it is, at least what it does or what religious beliefs and practices provide for individuals and societies. Certainly, the sociology of religion has developed several proposals and theories that today enrich a dense and plural repertoire. Furthermore, in our times, the question of religion arises – legitimately – around its functions and utility. To some extent, the traditional question of the credibility of a religious faith, such as the Christian one, is expressed more indirectly and practically in terms of utility or benefits that serve individuals and groups. If a set of beliefs fails that test – whether or not they contribute something practical, whether or not they address and fix pressing problems, then it becomes irrelevant. The culture that surrounds us is eminently pragmatic; accordingly, if religion does not render any positive service (or if it results in more negative than positive impacts) then it should not hold a place in our societies.

Religion has traditionally been associated, among others, with three main functions: providing meaning (1); to offer resources to deal with hard times and difficulties (2), and to establish moral standards together with the motivation to

comply with them (3). However, the wide spread of a secular mindset understands religion as a set of beliefs and practices that have become mostly redundant, of little or no use in advanced societies. Is religion still useful or can we replace the functions it provided by new, more efficient means?

The Covid-19 pandemic has reactivated this debate: it is not clear to what extent religion, at least its most evolved and universal expressions, still makes sense and can be of help in these difficult times. We know that historical and personal crises have had repercussions on spirituality and faith. According to some, Renaissance humanism arose out of the multidimensional crisis brought on by the Black Death plague, which had a profound impact not only on public health, but also restructured social dynamics, challenged the economy, and transformed existing perceptions of science and religion¹. During the worst moments of the epidemic, the sick were left to their fate even by their own families, which led to a marked individualism in the survivors. At the same time, it became clear that both the churches and the medicine of those times were completely powerless against infection. Trust in both institutions was broken in such a way that medieval theocentrism eventually disappeared, and a new science based on experimentation began to be built. Will the Covid pandemic also change the role of religion? To answer this question, we need to examine the proposed functions and their performance in current conditions.

The first function of religion is to provide meaning, especially in difficult times. The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann used to attribute to religion the function of determining the indeterminate; or managing unmanageable risks². Where other social systems exhaust their resources due to excess complexity and uncertainty, religion comes to the rescue. As a general rule, when uncertainty and risk increase, the role of religion becomes more necessary and more difficult to replace by secular means. Luhmann continued to mature his social theory of religion to later point out its role in helping to overcome or defuse the paradoxes that inevitably arise from the functioning of social systems. It is a more abstract level, but probably the pandemic we are experiencing also highlights some of these paradoxes – such as abundance and precariousness, security and uncertainty – and may once again they render more necessary the function of religion.

Studies by sociologist Crystal Park shed more light in this regard³. Her approach is more empirical, pointing out that religion becomes a more necessary source of meaning when the habitual means are overwhelmed by circumstances or by personal or social crises that generate too much tension or become more threatening. It is quite clear that religious faith is still a powerful source of meaning, but it certainly not the only one. Religious faith coexists with other systems to project meaning, or systems of beliefs and values, such as, for example, the family

¹ Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.

² Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977.

³ Crystal L. Park, “Making sense of the meaning literature: an integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events.” *Psychological Bulletin* 136.2, 2010: 257.

dimension, professional fulfilment, the great ideals that motivate us, the best friendships, or the most exalting experiences that we live and feel. The question is not so much what is the best or safest source of meaning, since it is not necessary to conceive them in competition, or in a ‘zero sum’ scheme, but to what extent religious faith still keeps some space and functionality when the meaning of life is built in a plural way and often somewhat fragmented, or divided according to moments or vital situations. The question is *to what extent religious faith keeps a space and functionality of its own in the current context*, which probably implies a reorganization of the systems of meaning.

The second relevant function of religion for this stressful time is coping; this is closely related to the first. For several decades, the ability of religion to deal with difficult situations has been studied from various perspectives. Religious coping becomes even more valuable in times of threat and anguish, of crisis (on a personal or social level) and, intuitively, in illness or the proximity of death. There is a wealth of scientific literature that firmly establishes the scope and effectiveness of religious coping, now becoming a broad research program, drawing primarily from the pioneering work by Kenneth Pargament and his team⁴.

The living conditions in these months bestow a special value to coping resources, which are urgently needed when facing the disease in the first person or in a loved one – an experience too common for many in these troubled times. There is anecdotal evidence that, for many, prayer has been more frequent and intense during lockdown. We also find examples like the article by Tanya Luhrmann in *The New York Times*, under the title “When God is your therapist”⁵, pointing out the fundamental role that many churches play in caring for those suffering psychological disorders. Even the leading magazine *The Economist* pointed out a few months ago to the important role that churches and other social entities can play in coping with the symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder associated with Covid-19 and its treatment⁶. The truth is that coping strategies are not exclusive and that such a psychological demand in situations of great stress becomes now more needed. Indeed, many studies show that depression, anxiety and other pathologies caused by the prolonged pandemic and lockdown have grown considerably in many countries, rendering coping strategies more urgent⁷. Again, religion is by no means the only coping strategy available; family and social networks provide irreplaceable support. The contemplation of nature, sports, art or reading can also provide valuable relief. Religious beliefs and practices can add

⁴ Kenneth I. Pargament, *The psychology of religion and coping: theory, research, practice*, New York: Guilford Press, 1997.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/opinion/sunday/luhrmann-when-god-is-your-therapist.html>

⁶ <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/08/29/worldwide-covid-19-is-causing-a-new-form-of-collective-traum>

⁷ LixiaGuo, MingzhouYu, WenyingJiang, HaiyanWang, The psychological and mental impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on medical staff and general public – A systematic review and meta-analysis, *Psychiatry Research* 291 (2020) 113190; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113190>

value and combine with a broad spectrum of coping resources to enforce and transcend them.

The third function we recognise in religion is also traditional: religious beliefs and practices help nurture a more responsible attitude towards others at times when such an attitude is particularly required, but not everyone seems to be convinced about such social duties. Also, in this case, a great deal of research has tried to understand to what extent religion is related to prosocial behaviour⁸. A relative consensus points only to some religions, the so-called ‘Post-Axial’ ones (among which Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Buddhism are included). These religions emphasize moral duties towards others alongside religious or spiritual devotion. In other words, the link between religion and social duty cannot be assumed in all cases but is observed under some conditions that include several major world religions. Empirical and experimental studies have noticed a preference towards one’s own group or members of the same religion when engaging in helping attitudes, rendering it somewhat partial and focused. In any case, it is expected that religious people behave in a more responsible and respectful way towards others, especially in times of health emergency in which the population is invited to take extreme precautions so as not to infect others. It can be expected that those who are more sensitive to others, motivated by more demanding religious beliefs in this field, will assume behaviours that are more convenient for them and for the population as a whole. In other words, it would be foreseeable that a more religious population – in the sense of a prosocial religion – could better follow the official rules aimed at limiting infections.

All post-axial religions share the three described functions, which allows conjecturing a possible interreligious convergence, a trend that would allow to overcome some of the pressing problems associated with exclusivism and religious fanaticism, which probably constitute the main current arguments against religion. Exclusivism constitutes a logical barrier to religious belief (“If one religion is true, then the others cannot be. Therefore, all religions are false”). Religious fanaticism would be the most disastrous consequence of exclusivism with a negative impact by which many judge religions as a whole.

However, it seems increasingly clear that the main religions can meet and share their deepest proposals, or recognize each other not so much as competition, but as proposals that collaborate at various levels to contribute positively to societies. Religions, according to this principle, provide meaning, a strategy for coping with pain, and also values to guide personal decisions for the common good. These benefits suggest a potential convergence towards common objectives, or the assumption of priorities in difficult moments that force to relativize other components and objectives in each religious form: now, the first duty is to face the pandemic, and all the humanity and all religions are involved in that struggle.

⁸ For systematic reviews of the available literature: Preston, Jesse Lee, Ryan S. Ritter, and J. Ivan Hernandez (2010), Principles of Religious Prosociality: A Review and Reformulation, *Social and Personality, Psychology Compass* 4/8: 574–590; Galen, Luke. W. (2012). Does religious belief promote prosociality? A critical examination. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138, 876–906.

Although religion is much more than these three functions, and the functionalist analysis is clearly partial, evaluating them offers the first step in assessing what religion brings us from a social point of view, and clarifying whether it makes sense in a context that some sociologists describe as ‘postsecular’⁹. If religion contributes positively to the performance of these functions, then its practical role in societies should be recognized.

We need to go beyond a simplistic view that identifies religion with a vague spiritual feeling, close to the aesthetic and devoid of any practical effect. If faith and religious experience do not have a practical impact on people’s lives, then they do not make much sense. If, on the contrary, religious faith is useful to us or continues to serve convenient functions, it will persist playing a role in our societies. Now it seems quite clear that the role of religion in advanced societies evolves over time and according to changing circumstances. The pandemic has introduced levels of risk and uncertainty, in addition to an increase in mental disorders, which renders the religious dimension more necessary, and more urgent its functions. The current situation invites us to overcome more reductive schemes in the treatment of religion, and also to go beyond the secularization models that were conceived from a concurrence pattern between religious agencies and political, educational or other entities. Rather, the idea of post-secularization implies reaching a satisfactory level of constructive integration and collaboration between these social systems, each with its own functions and services. As a consequence, the perception arising from the current state of health emergency invites religious faith to better integrate into the social fabric and with other social systems that try to face the current crisis, such as the health system, the scientific system, and the systems dealing with information and political management. Furthermore, this integration invites religions to abandon exclusive forms and to assume a format of convergence and collaboration for the common good. This is a point that Pope Francis and his recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti* insist on, a point that the pandemic has further evidenced.

The experience of the pandemic may have transformed our understanding of our role in the world. In a social context marked by fatigue and generalized chronic stress, a society that values the economy and productivity above everything else, the pandemic has thrown us face to face with our vulnerability and that of our loved ones and, more importantly, with the many incongruities between our values and the way we spend our lives. Many have felt intense and intimately the need for meaning beyond the consumerist materialism in which our societies have been operating in an unconscious and increasingly unsustainable way for decades. Trust in institutions has been seriously eroded and continues to deteriorate, as has our economic system. When something is destroyed it is necessary to replace it with something that better fulfils the missing functions. The pandemic is transforming our societies, our economy and our science. If we take advantage of the opportunities that come beyond the tragedies that plague us now, we can build a world that is more sustainable and fair, a more humane economy and a more humble, prudent and transparent science. Religion can contribute to this task by

⁹ Gregor McLennan, “The Postsecular Turn.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 27.4, 2010: 3-20

providing meaning and support in difficult times, as well as fostering cooperation from an inclusive framework.