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Narrative, Postmodernity and the Problem of 'Religious Illiteracy'

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Abstract

It is popular nowadays to claim not only that narrative is the most effective way to communicate religious knowledge but also that narrative provides the framework within which religious lifestyles and practices are meaningful. However, many today lack familiarity with the narratives of traditional religions. In other words, they suffer from 'religious illiteracy'. This article considers the problem of how religion can become meaningful to such people. The view that religion can be divested of its outdated cultural accoutrements and presented in a form that resonates with postmodern secular culture is considered and found to be problematic. If acquiring a religion is like acquiring a culture, or a language, it seems unlikely that a deeper appreciation of a religious tradition will be facilitated by divesting it of its traditional cultural expressions. Moreover, the view that religious lifestyles should be emphasised rather than religious belief seems to be more a symptom of the problem of 'religious illiteracy' than a solution to it. The article concludes that both of these responses fail to provide a solution to the problem and that an alternative strategy is urgently required.

Keywords

Narrative, postmodernity, religious belief, apologetics, religious education

It is popular today to hold that reducing every important religious claim to a proposition that is either literally true or literally false often misses out something of vital significance to religious language. However, that the only meaningful sense in which a claim can be true or false is in its expressing a truth-evaluable proposition was a core assumption of much modern thought. Postmodern religious thinkers, in contrast to modern ones, are united in their antipathy

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towards this assumption.[1] And this has led them to explore other ways in which religious ideas might be expressed, communicated and understood. Many, such as John Milbank and John Thornhill, argue that narratives—or, in other words, stories—are the most appropriate medium through which to express religious understanding, with Milbank claiming that 'narrating' is

> a more basic category than either explanation or understanding: unlike either of these it does not assume punctiliar facts or discrete meanings. Neither is it concerned with universal laws, nor universal truths of the spirit. Yet it is not arbitrary in the sense that one can repeat a text in just any fashion, although one can indeed do so in any number of fashions.[2]

Indeed, narratives form a large part of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. And it has been suggested that the stories contained in these sacred texts possess universal appeal because they resonate with our common human experience.[3] It could be argued, moreover, that the preponderance of narratives within these texts was overlooked by those moderns who read them while searching exclusively for information expressible in the form of statements corresponding to mooted facts. Reading the sacred texts with the expectation of finding such information may have contributed to the loss of confidence in them that many experienced during the last century. For example, when the Bible was taken to claim, literally, that God created the world in seven days, then modern readers tended to assume that they had found a straightforwardly false claim in the sacred text rather than a true one. And the quite different sort of understanding that the narrative form might convey was regarded by many modern thinkers as of little value in contrast to the true statements and, supposedly, objective knowledge available by means of the methods of the natural sciences.

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche seems to have anticipated this feature of postmodernism when he declared: 'The falseness of a judgement is not for us necessarily an objection to a judgement; in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating . . .'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), I.4.

[2] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 267.

[3] With respect to the narratives contained in the Christian Scriptures, John Thornhill claims that 'the biblical story which reaches its climax in the life, death, and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth discloses a truth about human existence which is universal. In the light of the biblical story, we can find the ultimate significance of our own stories. And conversely, the story of each of us can shed light on the ongoing story of the Christian people as a whole, the church'. John Thornhill, *Modernity: Christianity's Estranged Child Reconstructed* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 193. And one easily can regard the central narratives of the other Abrahamic faiths as functioning in exactly the same way.

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The re-evaluation of religious texts in terms of narratives only progressed when the view that scientific knowledge was fundamentally different in kind from knowledge obtained in the humanities was challenged. For example, Jean-François Lyotard, while holding that knowledge within the humanities is not fundamentally different in kind from knowledge within the natural sciences, proceeds to argue that a comparison of scientific knowledge with the kind of knowledge that is expressed in narratives, or stories, reveals that 'both are composed of sets of statements; the statements are "moves" made by the players within the framework of generally applicable rules; these rules are specific to each particular kind of knowledge, and the "moves" judged to be "good" in one cannot be of the same type as those judged "good" in another, unless it happens that way by chance'.[4]

So, although scientific claims and narrative are on a par insofar as they are both species of discourse, nevertheless, according to Lyotard, the criteria appropriate for judging a 'move' within science differ substantially from those relevant to evaluating a 'move' within a narrative. Moreover, he claims that

> narrative knowledge does not give priority to the question of its own legitimation and . . . it certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof. This is why its incomprehension of the problems of scientific discourse is accompanied by a certain tolerance: it approaches such discourse primarily as a variant in the family of narrative cultures. The opposite is not true. The scientist questions the validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation or proof. He classifies them as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children. At best, attempts are made to throw some rays of light into this obscurantism, to civilize, educate, develop.[5]

In other words, if our aim is to seek logical arguments or demonstrative proofs within narratives, we are approaching them in the wrong way. Hence, we should not be evaluating narratives either as forms of logical argument or in terms of their status as demonstrative proofs. Rather, their worth lies in the specific way in which they are employed.

How, then, are narratives employed in a manner that reveals their particular worth? According to Milbank:

[4] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 26.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 27

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> In a rhetorical perspective, narrative really does cease to be a mere appendage, because here the story of the development of a tradition—for example, in the case of Christianity, a story of preachings, journeyings, miracles, martyrdoms, vocations, marriages, icons painted and liturgies sung, as well as of intrigues, sins and warfare—really *is* the argument for the tradition (a perilous argument indeed, which may not prove persuasive at all), and not just the story of arguments concerning a certain X (for example the nature of human virtue) lying outside the story.[6]

But if there are no extrinsic arguments supporting such narratives, one might wonder why they should be taken seriously. And moreover, what might compel us to favour the narratives within one religion over that of another? In response to this question, some, such as Milbank, cite the attractiveness of the religious lifestyles of those who are inspired by the religious narrative in question.[7] Ultimately, Milbank claims, it is the appeal of a particular lifestyle that compels a person to prefer the narratives of that religious tradition to those of any other.[8]

The prioritising of religious lifestyles over religious truth-claims was a common thread uniting several late-twentieth century religious thinkers. Some argued, in addition, that narratives are essential for a religious lifestyle. Alasdair MacIntyre's claim that narrative is the condition of possibility for any meaningful action can be deployed in support of this conclusion. In a characteristic passage, MacIntyre asserts that

> man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth.... I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'... Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.[9]

[6] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, *op. cit*., p. 347.

[7] Cf. George Lindbeck: 'Pagan converts to the catholic mainstream did not, for the most part, first understand the faith and then decide to become Christians; rather, the process was reversed: they first decided and then they understood. More precisely, they were first attracted by the Christian community and form of life'. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 132.

[8] On how the appeal of a particular lifestyle might compel a person to adopt a particular religious tradition, see V. S. Harrison, 'Human holiness as religious *apologia*', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 46 (1999): 63–82.

[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1982), p. 216. Anthony Giddens seems to offer a parallel analysis when he claims that '[p]ersonal meaninglessness—the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer—becomes a fundamental psychic problem in late modernity. We should understand this phenomenon in terms of a repression of moral questions which day-to-day life poses, but which are denied answers. "Existential isolation" is not so much a separation of individ-

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Not only is the narrative approach consistent with the view that religious knowledge is intrinsically related to meaningful forms of life, but it is also, clearly, at one with the anti-foundationalism that characterises much postmodern religious thought. Anti-foundationalism holds that there is no ultimate, 'Archimedean point' upon which our knowledge may be grounded. Every premise supporting a conclusion is, ultimately, open to doubt, and hence none stands as an indubitable foundation upon which a belief system can be reliably constructed. In the specific context of religious thought, anti-foundationalism feeds the denial that a person's most basic religious beliefs and commitments are ultimately premised upon logical argumentation or demonstrative proofs, which coheres with Lyotard's view that narrative should not be assessed in such terms.

However, such anti-foundationalism is not taken by postmodernists to imply that religious beliefs and commitments are unreasonable, but rather that the reasonableness of subscribing to them can only be appraised from inside the form of life within which they are embedded. From this, it might be thought to follow, as George Lindbeck claims it does indeed follow, that

> basic religious and theological positions, like Kuhn's scientific paradigms, are invulnerable to definitive refutation (as well as confirmation) but can nevertheless be tested and argued about in various ways, and these tests and arguments in the long run make a difference. Reason places constraints on religious as well as on scientific options even though these constraints are too flexible and informal to be spelled out in either foundational theology or a general theory of science. In short, intelligibility comes from skill, not theory, and credibility comes from good performance, not adherence to independently formulated criteria.[10]

If a religious worldview is to acquire its credibility from exemplary instances of living the form of life within which that worldview is embedded, and if a full understanding of that worldview requires skill in living the form of life in question, and, further, if that form of life is transmitted through a deep acquaintance with the stories that shape its worldview, then narrative becomes key.

As we shall now see, however, any such account of the importance of narrative as a way of acquiring religious knowledge, and as underwriting religious lifestyles and practices, would appear to lead to a

uals from others as a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying existence . . . .'. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Era* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 9. Although Giddens is concerned with moral knowledge, his remarks would also seem applicable to religious knowledge.

[10] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, op. cit.*, pp. 130f.

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rather gloomy assessment of the situation in which traditional forms of faith are placed today.

The Problem of 'Religious Illiteracy'

Religious people can no longer simply assume, as their ancestors may have done, that the narratives of their particular faith-tradition inform the wider cultural and social practices, never mind the core values, of the society within which they live. Moreover, for those growing up within western culture today, socialization into a religious tradition, through familiarity with the narratives of that tradition, has ceased to be a matter of course, as it had been for many in the past. Thus, traditional religions have come to lack obvious points of contact with the dominant secular culture. One consequence of this is that a large fraction of the western population now find traditional faiths quite alien. Like the character in Philip Larkin's well-known poem, 'Church Going', many people, although perhaps interested to some extent in religion, have come to lack the culturally-imbued skills necessary for a meaningful engagement with any of the faiths.[11] There is much evidence in popular culture to suggest that many today do indeed experience traditional religion to be nothing short of incomprehensible, and that those who do, nevertheless, enquire into it further are rewarded only with extreme cultural dissonance.

In the not-too-distant-past, on the other hand, virtually everyone who had been brought up within western culture became familiar with the narratives of at least one religious tradition—which, far more often than not, was, of course, Christianity. Although many, clearly, did not subscribe to the beliefs of the religious tradition that was dominant within their culture, in many cases it nevertheless continued to inform their cultural understanding and values. In short, people by and large shared a set of religious symbols, images and values, which occupied a core role within the general culture, even if many chose not to belong to any faith-community. It would seem that this situation has now changed to such an extent that many people today seem incapable of understanding the languages, symbols and imagery of religion, are unfamiliar with sacred literature, and do not share the values endorsed by any of the Abrahamic faiths.

In Christian terms, an increasing number of people are thus 'unchurched'. Among other things, they are ignorant of the differences between the various Christian denominations; a consideration that has, in many parts of the West, given rise to the need for a new approach to attracting new members on the part of institutionalised

[11] See Philip Larkin, 'Church Going', in Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Marvell Press, 1988), pp. 97f.

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religions. Consider, for example, Alister McGrath's depiction of one of the new style of non-denominational churches currently flourishing in the United States. McGrath provides a detailed description of the Willow Creek Community Church—a massive ecclesial complex in Illinois, whose average Sunday attendance is 20,000. McGrath opines that the appeal of this church would seem to be, in large part, due to its founders' recognition that, because many North Americans were unchurched, a new approach was now required if the Christian ministry were to deliver their message effectively. For many people simply

> had no experience of clerical robes, hard pews, collection plates and the old-fashioned hymns. They did not know the language of the Christian tradition, and the Bible was a closed book to them. Why, its leaders wondered, did newcomers to the faith have to fight their way through a jungle of obsolete Christian cultural trappings to find out about Jesus? For an unchurched person the first experience of a traditional church worship service was likely to be the last. Old-fashioned music, dusty old hymnals, uncomfortable pews and a pompous liturgy were in stark contrast to the everyday life experienced by modern Americans.[12]

In short, the founders of Willow Creek had begun to worry that many found traditional Christianity unappealing primarily because of, what they regarded as, its unessential and antiquated cultural accoutrements. Moreover, these accoutrements were totally alien to the target audience. So, in an effort to make their church 'seeker sensitive', they chose to abandon all such features. Clearly, this constitutes one way of responding to, what many regard as, a growing 'religious illiteracy' on the part of the general public. And it is a response that seems to be in continuity with some of the modern forms of religion that had been promoted earlier in the twentieth century.[13] However, it remains a highly contested 'solution' to the problem of how to make religion accessible to those who lack inculturation, or socialization, into a religious tradition.

Indeed, many deny that accommodating a religious tradition to the cultural expectations of people today offers a genuine solution to this problem. This is because the claim that a religion, such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam, has an essential form that can be clearly demarcated from its cultural expression in any particular era is one that came under increasing attack during the twentieth century.[14] It is now commonly argued that these religions have no essence, and that, at the deepest level, they are constituted solely by their varied

[12] Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 61f.

[13] For example, liberal forms of Protestant Christianity, Reform Judaism and Modernist Islam.

[14] See V. S. Harrison, 'The pragmatics of defining religion in a multi-cultural world', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59 (2006): 133–152.

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cultural expressions. It follows that in order to be religious, one must be inculturated into a particular faith-community's worldview and associated lifestyle, which will, of course, involve acquiring familiarity with the narratives expressing that tradition. However, as George Lindbeck has noted, it is precisely the difficulties facing those lacking such inculturation that can make the strategy of accommodation seem unavoidable because religions 'have become foreign texts that are much easier to translate into currently popular categories than to read in terms of their intrinsic sense'.[15] However, as Lindbeck proceeds to argue, the ease of translation into current cultural idioms is more apparent than real, and can disguise the fact that 'religions, like languages, can be understood only in their own terms, not by transposing them into an alien speech'.[16]

On Lindbeck's view, then, acquiring a religion is analogous to acquiring a culture or learning a language. It is a matter of 'interiorizing outlooks that others have created, and mastering skills that others have honed'.[17] However, as Lindbeck also notes, many today baulk at this process, because it would seem to be an affront to an individual's freedom of choice and self-expression. Indeed, many, such as Don Cupitt, promote a view of religion as a deeply individual affair. It is a personal quest in which people are encouraged 'to meet God first in the depths of their souls and then, perhaps, if they find something personally congenial, to become part of a tradition or join a church'.[18] If Lindbeck's account of religion is correct, however, acquiring a religion without the help of a religious tradition is, if not impossible, extremely difficult; just as mastering a language without participating in a community that speaks that language is an onerous task—and one at which many fail.[19]

Furthermore, in Lindbeck's view, 'it is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied, and differentiated can be our experience'.[20] Analogously, he holds that the deeper one's interiorization of a religious tradition, the more 'subtle, varied, and differentiated' will be the range of religious experiences accessible to one. The real problem of 'religious illiteracy', then, according

[15] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] As Lindbeck notes: '[T]o become religious—no less than to become culturally or linguistically competent—is to interiorise a set of skills by practice and training. One learns how to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated. The primary knowledge is not *about* the religion, not *that* the religion teaches such and such, but rather *how* to be religious in such and such ways.' *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

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to this view, is that without a certain degree of religious inculturation, a person will be unable to express, and, hence will be incapable of having, certain kinds of religious experience. And as beliefs and experiences are mutually reinforcing within any healthy worldview, it should be no surprise if religious beliefs that were not supported by appropriate religious experiences were found to be uncompelling. If this is an accurate account of the problem, then it would seem to follow that the strategy of accommodating religious beliefs and practices in order to meet current cultural expectations will fail to provide a long-term solution. Indeed, the only way to ameliorate the problem would be to provide people with the cultural skills necessary for a deep understanding of religion. However, as many have remarked, the transmission of these skills has, by the beginning of the third millennium, become progressively more attenuated. And this has, perhaps, been exacerbated by the steadily decreasing influence of religious thought upon western culture as a whole.[21]

This is a trend, moreover, that shows no signs of reversal. Indeed, Lindbeck, himself, is far from sanguine about the future prospects of traditional religion within western culture. For he regards this culture as having reached a stage in which 'socialization is ineffective, catechesis is impossible, and translation a tempting alternative . . .',[22] adding that the 'impossibility of effective catechesis in the present situation is partly the result of the implicit assumption that knowledge of a few tag ends of religious language is knowledge of the religion . . .'.[23]

While Lindbeck's focus is upon Christianity, it would seem that his analysis describes the situation of each of the Abrahamic monotheisms in the modern West. Amongst many of those who adhere to one of these faiths, as well as amongst many who do not, there is evidence of a marked lack of religious education. It is plausible to regard this as symptomatic of the marginalization that the intellectual study of religion has suffered within modern western culture. Within academia, there would seem to be several reasons for this state of affairs. I shall mention two. First, the study of religion has become increasingly the preserve of those interested in cultural studies, specifically cultural anthropology. Many theology departments have turned into religious studies departments in a laudable effort to broaden the study of religion beyond Christianity. But many of these departments now focus upon ritual and other phenomenological expressions of religion, rather than upon religious *ideas*. Indeed, many are seemingly hostile to the study of ideas. Thus, the study of religions as intellectual systems has become increasingly less

[21] See, for example, *ibid*., p. 124.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 133.
[23] *Ibid*.

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important within academia. Second, in the twentieth century, academia became increasingly driven by pragmatic interests. Funding was diverted from the human into the natural sciences and other disciplines that appeared to have immediate pragmatic value. Thus, the humanities became under-funded, and hence marginalized. The study of religious intellectual systems suffered enormously from this, as did generations of students who have become progressively deprived of any but the most superficial cultural education.

In the case of Christianity, however, the fault does not lie exclusively with the system of education favoured in the modern West. To a large extent, Christian theologians have been complicit in the process that has led to their marginalization within Western European and North American intellectual life. Throughout the twentieth century, many of them promoted a view of theology as a strictly academic discipline—one independent from the interests of Christian churches. Consequently, theology became increasingly irrelevant to Christians, who found it to have little, if anything, to contribute to their spiritual lives and hence to their religious inculturation.[24]

As noted above, the problem of growing 'religious illiteracy' in the West not only afflicts the Christian community, but would also seem to be a significant issue within Jewish and Muslim communities. The Muslim thinker, Sayyid Qutb, for example, claimed that the modern era constitutes a second *jāhilīya* (age of ignorance). In other words, he regarded the ignorance of many of his contemporaries as comparable to that of those living in the time prior to Muhammad: the first *jāhilīya*.[25] If we turn to Judaism, we find that Jacob Neusner has drawn attention to, what he regards as, the intellectual decline of the Jewish community within the United States, noting

> the as yet unappreciated factor of sheer ignorance, the profound pathos of Jews' illiteracy in all books but the books of the street and marketplaces of the day. The second generation beyond immigration to the USA received in the streets and the public press its education in Jewish existence. The third generation in a more benign age turned to the same sources and came away with nothing negative, but little positive. And by the fourth generation, the Jews in North America had attained complete illiteracy.[26]

And in Neusner's view, one immediate consequence of this situation is that most Jews have become incapable of valuing anything

[24] Hans Urs von Balthasar was a lone voice in the mid-twentieth century warning theologians of the consequences of the changed conception of theology. For a study of his analysis of the situation, see Victoria S. Harrison, *The Apologetic Value of Human Holiness* (Dordrecht: Kluwes, 2000).

[25] See Robert D. Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), p. 88.

[26] Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in Modern Times: An Introduction and Reader* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 235f.

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in the religious domain that does not lead to immediate enjoyment. Thus, they have been rendered incapable of valuing the depths and complexities of their religious tradition. Moreover, he argues that this has become equally the case regarding the adherents of other religious traditions in the West. Almost all, he avers, have been rendered virtually incapable of seeking, or understanding, anything beyond their immediate experience. The core of the problem in each case, or so he argues, is a profound illiteracy with regard to the history and literature of their respective traditions.[27]

We thus see that prominent scholars from each of the major monotheisms practised in the West have reached a remarkably similar conclusion about the main problem now facing their respective faiths: 'religious illiteracy'. And in agreeing that the social changes and political upheavals that characterised the twentieth-century West have contributed to this ostensible defect, they are also united in identifying its main cause as the decline of an overtly religious culture in the West, hastened by the disappearance of any serious religious education. Given that western European secular culture is now ubiquitous to a degree unimaginable even at the beginning of the twentieth century, and given that this culture is still in the ascendancy, it seems reasonable to assume that the problem that 'religious illiteracy' poses to the traditional faiths will become progressively more intractable as time proceeds.

Some would, no doubt, argue that the passing of religious culture and the demise of religious education constitutes a positive development, and, moreover, one to be encouraged. It is certainly undeniable that many today view religious education unfavourably. However, those who deem the decline of an overtly religious culture in the West to be progressive are likely to regard one possible result of this situation as extremely costly. For many who lack early familiarity with a religious tradition become religious later in life. And when they do, lacking any grounding in a tradition that manifests different intellectual expressions and that can facilitate a wide range of religious experiences, they are often attracted to religion in one of its fundamentalist, and sometimes one of its extremist, forms. Thus, a social policy that seeks to exclude religious education from the curriculum may, ironically, be contributing towards increased levels of religious fundamentalism.[28] Perhaps, then, the kind of education most appropriate within a multicultural world is, rather than religious indoctrination, a form that fosters the comprehensive understanding of different traditions.

[27] See *ibid*, pp. 236ff.

[28] Indeed, such an outcome would seem to be predicted in Charles Liebman, 'Extremism as a Religious Norm', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22 (1983): 75–86.

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A further related consequence of the dominance of western European secular culture is that, as Sherwin Wine, the founder of Humanist Judaism,[29] claims, religious identity is experienced by most westerners today only with considerable effort.[30] This brings to the fore another characteristic of current religiosity: namely, that assuming a religious identity—or being a religious person—has become a matter of choice, rather than hereditary. In a cultural shift that is surely not unconnected to the steadily increasing levels of 'religious illiteracy' in western society, religious communities have become communities of assent rather than descent. It would seem, moreover, that this change has been accompanied by similarly dramatic alterations within the belief systems of each religious tradition. This is because many people are now less inclined simply to accept all the beliefs that have, in the past, been part of, what is now, their tradition of choice, and are now more likely to evaluate critically each belief and to question the cogency of traditional religious concepts.

Given this new critical attitude to religious belief, and given the lack of religious inculturation experienced by many today, some have suggested that the only viable future for traditional religion lies in letting go of the modern fixation with the categories of belief and unbelief and emphasising instead religious lifestyles.

Religion Beyond Belief and Unbelief

Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that religion has become not so much a matter of belief but rather a way of being.[31] Nietzsche would seem to have anticipated this development when he claimed that, in view of the bankruptcy of Christian theology, 'only Christian *practice*, a life such as he *lived* who died on the cross, is Christian. Such a life is still possible today, for certain people even necessary: genuine, original Christianity will be possible at all times.'[32]

[29] Rabbi Wine founded Humanist Judaism in the 1960s. The movement was motivated by, what he perceived as, the urgent need to revise Jewish practices and beliefs in accordance with quintessentially modern values, such as gender equality and human dignity. Members of this movement do not believe in a supernatural deity, and they reject the traditional dual-Torah theory of revelation. Moreover, in contradistinction to the traditional view of Jewish identity, Wine argues that anyone who chooses to identify with the Jewish tradition can be a Jew, irrespective of that person's birth. See, for example, Sherwin Wine, *Judaism Beyond God* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1995).

[30] See *ibid*., pp. 87f. As Wine also observes, by the end of the twentieth century, religious identity had shifted its locus from the whole of life (as in pre-modernity) to specific religious holidays and activities.

[31] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Reflections of the Relation of Science and Religion' in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 127.

[32] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Antichrist' in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), paragraph 50.

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The mooted bankruptcy of the Abrahamic faiths as intellectual systems appears to have been conceded by influential thinkers within each tradition (some of whom having been recognised religious leaders within their communities). And many of these thinkers have, like Nietzsche, nevertheless asserted that religious lifestyles continue to be of value. Richard Holloway, for example, argues that traditional Christianity as an intellectual system cannot survive into the future because, given the ideas and values that many now accept, traditional beliefs are no longer tenable. In the face of this situation, he proposes that we go beyond both belief and unbelief, and embrace, instead, a 'way of action'. It is, he argues, 'more important to follow the way of Jesus than to believe or disbelieve the traditional Christian claims about him. Above all . . . the task of Christianity today is the challenge, not to go on interpreting the world in the ancient way, but to start disturbing it in a new way'.[33] Thus, the trend seems to favour orthopraxy—practice in accordance with faith—over orthodoxy.

Indeed, many religious thinkers would seem to be united in their emphasis of religious lifestyles and spirituality in preference to beliefs that are constituted by demonstrative propositions. Does this suggest that, as we enter the twenty-first century, religious *belief* has arrived at a dead-end? It is, surely, still open to religious thinkers today to seek more nuanced accounts of the relationship between religious beliefs, experience and truth. Thus, it may not necessarily be the case that the focus on experience and practice so prominent in religious self-understanding today is incompatible with commitment to religious beliefs. And consequently, there would seem to be a legitimate task ahead for philosophers of religion and theologians who seek to examine not only these beliefs but also their relation to the experience of religious believers.

Nevertheless, the trend in favour of orthopraxy resonates with the changing conception of religious thought and language that is evident within each of the monotheisms. The attention of many religious thinkers has clearly shifted away from the metaphysics of theism and towards the human dimensions of religious experience. This change of focus can be clearly seen in, for example, the work of Richard Rubenstein, who claims that

> [c]ontemporary theology reveals less about God than it does about the kind of men we are. It is largely an anthropological discipline. Today's theologian, be he Jewish or Christian, has more in common with the poet and creative artist than with the metaphysician and physical scientist. He communicates a very private subjectivity. Its relevance lies

[33] Richard Holloway, 'The Myths of Christianity', Lecture 6: The End of Religion, Gresham College, 15th March 2001.

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> in the possibility that he may enable other men to gain insight and clarify their religious lives in the face of common experience.[34]

This new appreciation of the importance of religious lifestyles has paved the way for a deeper appreciation of the significance of the narratives that provide their framework of meaning and that shape the experiential context within which they are practised. Increasingly, religions have come to be seen as worldviews or systems of meaning, whose 'truths' are most aptly expressed through narrative and hence cannot be isolated from their context within extremely complex traditions, or from within the forms of life they inspire.

Conclusion

We have considered two popular responses to the problem of how successfully to transmit a religious tradition to people who have grown up within postmodern secular culture. The first seeks to make religion accessible by divesting it of its traditional cultural expressions and presenting it in a way that is not culturally alienating to those at home in the secular culture ascendant in the West today. The second aims for the same goal by distinguishing between orthopraxy and orthodoxy and claiming that the former should be emphasised given that the categories of belief and unbelief have become culturally inappropriate.

However, despite the obvious appeal of both responses, the argument, considered above, that narrative provides the condition of possibility for meaningful participation in religious lifestyles, suggests that both solutions are inadequate to solve the problem posed by, what I have called, 'religious illiteracy'. One problem with the first response is that the narratives which express religious ideas would seem to be, at least partly, constitutive of a religion's cultural expression. According to this view, there is no such thing as religious truth that can be abstracted from its narrative expression and then deposited into another form deemed to be more culturally appropriate. And, as we have seen, a problem with the second response is that religious lifestyles will appear incomprehensible to those lacking familiarity with the narratives that frame them. Attempting to adopt a religious lifestyle without adequate knowledge of the narratives that shape it could, perhaps, be compared to trying to learn a language which no longer has a community of competent speakers. The aspirants would surely be, to borrow from Alasdair MacIntyre, 'unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words'.[35] Thus, attempting to

[34] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966), p. x.

[35] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

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address the problem of 'religious illiteracy' by emphasising religious lifestyles rather than religious belief would seem to be a symptom of the problem rather than a solution to it.

The seeming inadequacies of both the strategies considered might, however, explain the tendency exhibited by many today to convert from the more liberal religious groups into the, ostensibly, more robust varieties. It would seem that many prefer what appear to them to be more historically grounded and tradition-imbued forms of faith, and are thus more inclined to convert, for example, from Reform Judaism to Hasidism, or from evangelical Christianity to either Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism, or from cultural Islam to some form of revivalism.

Thus, despite the current trend towards orthopraxy combined with the popular belief that religious ideas are more aptly expressed through narrative than by propositional forms of language, and despite the emphasis upon religious anthropology that can be found in the work of many religious thinkers, forms of faith that can make a convincing appeal to 'orthodoxy' would still seem to stand at an advantage over those that seemingly cannot. What seems clear is that the attempt to make a religion accessible to those lacking religious inculturation by divesting it either of its native cultural expressions or of its traditional beliefs does not seem to be a viable alternative to providing people with the culturally imbued skills necessary for acquiring a deep understanding and appreciation of the religion. Finally, allow me to add that, in a multicultural world, it would surely seem desirable to encourage the development of the skills necessary to acquire an appreciation of a range of faith traditions, not just one.

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