

Musings on the nature of Religion

by Andreas Lloyd

SCENE 1

A university library. Dusty light falls through grand old windows between tall shelves. Musty books neatly ordered and alphabetized. Hushed quiet between the empty reading tables with their green glass lamps. Shielded from the world, frost sparkles on the windows, yet in here it is mildly warm and timeless. It could be early morning or late afternoon.

A young student enters. With proper dignified respect for the halls of learning, the student slowly and quietly glides along the shelves, letting her fingers slide along the leather backs of the old volumes. Her eyes wander quietly over the titles which only hint at their amassed ideas and knowledge. Eventually she finds the book that she is looking for, and settles down at a reading table to read and take careful notes.

An old librarian enters. With all the tacit routine, authority and old wonder slowly fossilized from years of being part of such an ancient and glorious institution, the librarian slowly makes his way down along the shelves, towards the centre of the labyrinth, his desk – his seat of power. Along the way he lets his fingers touch the backs of the books, absentmindedly assuring himself of their presence. Eventually he reaches his desk, sits down by an already open book and continues reading without any further delay.

Time passes. The only sounds heard are those of notes being taken and pages being turned.

After a while, the writing of notes begin to grow in intensity. The scribbling quickly becomes furious as if the student is underlining something repeatedly, hurriedly reading and adding question marks as soon as the text is registered in her mind. Finally she drops her pen and looks up. It is still early (or late). There is nobody else in the library apart from the old librarian. She slowly rises from her chair and carefully quiet, she walks to the librarian's desk.

Student: Excuse me. Can I ask you a question?

Librarian: [finishes reading the sentence. Makes sure that he is not leaving any central elements of the text unaccounted for, and levels his gaze unto that of the student. He doesn't say anything. It is obviously self-evident that the purpose of his being here is to answer questions.]

Student: ... I'm studying for this course, "Anthropology of Religion", and I am having serious trouble with it. I mean, since I began at university, we've been told that anthropology is all about *amazement*. A sort of "professional wonder" that arises when you encounter cultural variation. I mean, when you meet people of a distinctively different culture and you go, "oh wow – that is really weird." Like when I was in Brazil, and everybody just had a completely different way of meeting each other and being late. I was really amazed that anything like buses and trains could work when everybody seemed to be late all the time...

Librarian: Did you have a question?

Student: [has decided that she has to go through with all of what is on her mind in order to put the question right]

... As an anthropologist, you should always have that sort of *drive* towards understanding, to seek meaning in exactly those cultural elements that have amazed you. But lately, I've been wondering about some of the basic elements of humanity. About religion. I read an article about how the current conflicts with terror and intervention wars are not so much a "Clash of Civilizations" between Christianity and Islam, but rather a clash between secularity and religion. And it seems that to a fairly great extent, this is what separates the West from the Rest. I mean with the constant conflict in the Middle East between our oil interests and their national and religious interests. And the whole thing with the Danish cartoons of Mohammed. And all the problems with integrating third world immigrants into the first world. It all seems to be part of the same conflict. But the thing is, I don't understand religion at all. It seems so arcane and unnecessary. Like some remnant of times gone by. I know I should respect it, I guess. It's still their choice to believe whatever they want to. But it's difficult to respect something I don't understand...

Librarian: [having patiently listened to all of this, eases up and looks a lot more human. The thirst for knowledge is something that he can relate to. He looks around to make sure that there isn't anybody else in need of help.]

Librarian: Fair enough. Let's just sit down, and try to figure out what the actual problem is.

He gets up and they walk to a nearby table. On the way, the librarian makes sure to pick up a few books. They sit down. The student looks expectantly at the librarian.

Librarian: So, what have you been reading?

Student: Well, I've been reading various definitions of religion. Did you know that one of the first anthropologists, Sir. Edward Tylor, defined religion as "belief in spiritual beings"?

Librarian: Yes. I suppose that you end up with that sort of answers if you like your definitions to be snappy.

Student: Heh. That's true. Especially since I've just been reading Clifford Geertz' definition of religion.

Librarian: And what is his definition, then?

Student: [reads aloud from the book] “A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seems uniquely realistic.”

Librarian: And what do you think that means?

Student: .. well, Geertz is a central figure in hermeneutic anthropology which focuses on the interpretation of symbols. Therefore, religion, in Geertz' view, is a system of symbols carrying cultural meaning. In this way, a religion is the sum of its public symbols. For instance, Christianity is not just the the Crucifix or the crucified Christ but also symbolic rituals such as the baptism and the wedding and allegorical myths such as Genesis and the life of Jesus. All of these symbols are given a religious meaning by the people believing in them. Geertz thinks that by examining and interpreting these symbols, we can get at the cultural values inherent within.

Librarian: You don't seem convinced by this.

Student: .. No! It seems so simplistic to think that cultural values would be lying in set symbols and rituals just waiting for an anthropologist to come by and harvest them. As if culture would be like some kind of honey to be tapped, once you have appeased the locals with a bit of smoke.

Librarian: [smiles]

Student: Besides, I'm just not convinced that all things culture can be reduced to symbols and signs to be interpreted. Faith seems to be such a intangible thing. How do you know that people actually use symbols the way that you interpret them? It just seems so random.

Librarian: So why do you mention Geertz?

Student: Oh, but it's so fascinatingly ambitious. To attempt to define such a basic element of human existence. In order to understand such a thing as religion, you first need to demarcate its boundaries. You can't talk about something if you haven't first stated what you mean by that word. Geertz gives us something which we may not agree with, but it is still a basis for discussion. And even through I disagree with his premise that all the cultural meaning of religion is placed in public symbols, I do agree that the basic purpose of religion is to create a coherent conception of a general order of existence. That is, as far as I've understood it, a coherent and meaningful way to perceive the general order of existence. That is the central, universal element of religion.

Librarian: Then why do religions vary so much in different cultures all over the world?

Student: In Geertz' view, religion is both a model *of* and a model *for* reality. Which is to say that a religion not only mirrors the worldview of its believers but also it shapes the reality that they perceive. According to Geertz, this is why the “moods and motivations” which a given religious system of symbols seeks to establish in people vary so much from one religion to another.

Librarian: So, cultural variation is expressed through “moods and motivations”. What are these exactly?

Student: Well, motivations are induced by the end goal, while moods are induced by their source. That is to say, religion affects and inspires in both ways. Either as an end-goal or as a cause. We can say that a protestant is motivated to be industrious through his religion, or that a shaman enters an ecstatic mood because of his religion. There is no single way to be religiously motivated or one single mood in which you feel reverent or worshipful. These all depend on your religion and your cultural mindset.

Librarian: And why the need for religion, then?

Student: Geertz develops the German sociologist Max Weber's notion of “the problem of meaning” - that there are some things in life that inherently or apparently absurd and meaningless, and that we are faced with the problem of meaning every time we have to face such a “vacuum of meaning”. It is in these situations that religion offers us a way out.

Librarian: Which kind of situations are these?

Student: Geertz says that there are at least three points at which uninterpretable chaos threatens our perception of the world: Bafflement, Suffering and Intractable ethical paradox. Though he is quick to add that there are also situations of such extreme fullness of meaning that they require religion to fully explain it.

Librarian: Such as?

Student: Such as a deep, enfolding sense of beauty or a perception of the vastness of the world and the scope of the power that must have gone into its creation... These are the sort of things that drive creationists and supporters of intelligent design, I guess.

Librarian: Interesting. But I think you need to elaborate on these three elements of the “problem of meaning” for me. How can “bafflement” threaten our perception of the world?

Student: This bafflement is caused by what we would call coincidence. Or maybe “bad luck” or just plain inexplicable. Something for the X-files! [snorts happily] This is the sort of thing which “just happens” - like earthquakes, volcanoes erupting, hurricanes or a tsunami. It's what the insurance business would call “force majeure” or “acts of God”. The sort of situation where you, lacking any guilty parties, allow yourself to explain sudden destruction and injury as caused by, well, supernatural beings – a greater force.

Librarian: Are you familiar with the British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard's work on witchcraft among the Azande in southern Sudan?

Student: Not really.

Librarian: Evans-Pritchard tells a story of about one of the granaries of the Azande tribe. The granary is really nothing more than a roof supported by four pillars supplying shade and keeping the grain out the way for interested rodents. Often, there are locals who sit underneath the roof to enjoy the shade. Then, one afternoon, while a few people are sitting in that shade, the granary collapses as the termite-infested pillars break and the roof crashes down on top of the people inside, killing them.

Student: Ouch.

Librarian: It was obvious that the termites had been eating their way through those pillars for years and that it was just at that moment that the integrity of the structure had been compromised enough to make it crash down. We would explain that accident as bad luck or coincidence. But the Azande said it was witchcraft.

Student: Really? Why?

Librarian: The Azande were well aware that the termites had been there for years and years and that there was some natural risk that the granary would collapse at some point. But why would it suddenly collapse just when these exact people were resting there? Why those people at that moment?

Student: As you said, it was just bad luck.

Librarian: Ah, you see, this is where our scientific explanation reaches its limit. We can explain *how* these people died, but not *why*. The best we can do is to offer references to semi-superstitious assertions such as luck or destiny. The Azande, on the other hand, know that it is the work of a witch.

Student: A witch?! How should a witch have caused the roof to collapse?

Librarian: Oh, according to the Azande, witches aren't really aware that they're witches. Instead, witches are born with some sort of witchcraft substance inside of them that is affecting the world around them.

Student: What kind of substance is that?

Librarian: Evans-Pritchard says that he's never seen it personally but that it has been described to him as "an oval blackish swelling or bag in which various objects are sometimes found." Supposedly it was attached to the edge of the liver, and once removed, the witch powers were gone as well. It is not so much the actual form or appearance of this substance that is relevant. It is rather the mere existence and presence of such an object and the meaning it represents.

Student: So it's just a sort of scapegoat thing, really. Like the medieval witch hunts in Europe.

Librarian: In a way, yes. That is the universal element of religion being played out here. To use your terms it is both a model for and model of society. Religion offers an explanation and a concrete and meaningful way out of an apparently absurd situation.

Student: This much I understand. I mean, we call this sort of thing coincidence and leave it at that, though – I suppose there are times when it isn't that easy...

Librarian: So what about suffering, then?

Student: Well, according to Geertz, almost all religions seek to make it perfectly clear that life hurts from time to time. He says that the problem of suffering is not so much a question of how to avoid suffering, but rather how to make it bearable. You make suffering bearable by giving it meaning.

Librarian: Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul;
Which long for death, but it cometh not; and dig for it more than for hid treasures;
Which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find the grave?
Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, and whom God hath hedged in?

Student: What is that?

Librarian: The book of Job, chapter 3, verses 20 through 23. Are you familiar with the story of Job?

Student: Can't say that I am.

Librarian: The story is one of the most discussed parts of the bible, as it seeks to answer the questions given in these verses: Why all this suffering? Why are we to live, when only in such bitterness and misery?

See, Job was a rich, pious man with a huge family, lots of land and a good health to top it all. God enjoyed his worship very much and pointed Job out to the devil to show how wonderful his worshippers were. The devil responded that it was easy to have good worshippers when they had all they needed and knew no suffering. He offered God a wager: If God allowed the devil to completely control the circumstances around Job, he was sure he could make Job abandon his faith. God agreed on the bet but on the condition that no harm came to Job personally.

And so the devil went to work. He killed off Job's family, ruined his business, spread cruel rumours about him. But Job refused to abandon his faith. So the devil asked God to alter the bet so that he could hurt Job personally, and God accepted on the condition that Job mustn't die.

And again the devil began torturing Job, huge boils grew all over his body, and being so poor he had no other place to live than in a rubbish heap where he punctured his boils with old pot shards and slowly lost his faith.

His friends tried reasoning with him. They told him not to abandon his faith, they tried the best they could – but in the end they could not stop him, and washed their hands clean of his misery.

So finally Job was alone, broken and furious with the God who had abandoned him. And he asked the questions in the verses, I cited for you. And God appears, angry at Job's hatred. He tells Job that no man can ever question his ways, that they wouldn't be able to understand. That they should be happy to exist in his creation.

And Job repents. And God accepts his apology and restores his health and good fortune.

Student: Wow, vengeful God and all. It reminds me a bit of an article I read on how alcoholics are treated with the Minnesota Model treatment. The essential part of the treatment is accepting the problem and that you need to rely on something greater than yourself. One of the life stories the article mentioned was about an alcoholic who breaks his leg while drunk. He then experiences a spiritual awakening in the hospital. I think the article quoted him as feeling a sensation of “a strange overall meaning of life.” From that moment he intuitively knows that he'll never drink alcohol again. Only later, through the Alcoholics Anonymous does he find a way explain this awakening, as most AA members find the solution to their drinking problem not through individual willpower, but through a power greater than ourselves. You know how the Serenity prayer goes:

God grant me serenity
to accept the things I cannot change
courage to change the things I can
and wisdom to know the difference.

Librarian: The suffering of the alcoholic shapes the understanding of others. Every time a person, such as this alcoholic, finds faith, all of the believers around him are confirmed in their belief. The story of his treatment and spiritual rebirth is yet another story which confirms their shared perception of the world: To the believers, he embraced God, and was saved. To rationalists like us, he found a framework of meaning that could explain his suffering and support his recovery.

Student: This fits with Geertz' model for, and model of the world, too: The suffering of the alcoholic needs to be systematized and explained to fill any arising “vacuum of meaning” that

might compromise the social stability of the society.

Librarian: It reminds me of an analogy that Claude Lévi-Strauss made between the rituals of Kwakiutl-Indian shaman and the psychoanalytical therapy of Sigmund Freud. In both cases, the dangerous absurdity of madness or illness is given meaning. In this way, the shaman plays an important social role in explaining this illness to the concerned society around them and maintain social stability.

Student: Yeah, I think Foucault talks about some of that stuff, too. It's very interesting how we create norms around meaning and decide when something is credible. How much testing and experimentation and reasoning we need before something becomes an acceptable explanation. It has a lot to do with authority. Power. When a doctor tells us that we're ill, we trust him because he has been right before, or his education qualifies him as being an expert and then likely to be right – or at least knowledgeable about these matters. I guess it is that the Kwakiutl have the same relationship with the shaman – whether he is usually right, or just gives us the impression that he is usually right. We accept these answers because we trust these authorities. Well, often we have to trust them. If we couldn't, we'd have to be sceptical all the time.

Librarian: I suppose that is too much to ask of most people. [Looks up, a few people have begun milling about the library and are sending curious glances at their discussion] But let me hear about the last bit, something about a paradox..?

Student: Intractable ethical paradox, yes. Also known as the “problem of evil.” It relates to the cruel things that man do unto his own kind. How to explain social inequality, war, violence, hatred and the like in such a way that it will give some kind of meaning.

Librarian: And we need this meaning. It is as basic a need as the need for food or shelter. But most of all, it is a sort of mental shelter. Giving hope, giving strength.

Student: I guess so... But that is actually the bit that I have the most trouble getting to terms with. When people do things unto people, God is never really involved. With the coincidences and acts of God, there are no culprit. The same goes for diseases and depression and alcoholism and suffering, there is often no easy guilty party. With evil – physical, mental evil – there is always an aggressor. An active part dominating and destroying. How can you explain this through religion?

Librarian: So I again considered all the oppression that continually occurs on earth.
This is what I saw:
The oppressed were in tears, but no one was comforting them;
no one delivers them from the power of their oppressors.
So I considered those who are dead and gone
more fortunate than those who are still alive.
But better than both is the one who has not been born
and has not seen the evil things that are done on earth.

Student: Another bible quotation?

Librarian: Yes, from Ecclesiastes. Chapter 4, verses 1 to 3. Another bit of the Old Testament asking us not to question God's ways, but accept and learn from them. Again, the scope of religion is not to explain in complete and meaningful detail why these things happen, why Holocaust and wars and suicide bombings take place. As the only answers we can expect require faith, a leap in to the unknown. Instead, we're offered a way to deal with these situations. How we can create a life around it.

Student: But that's just the problem! When people of various religions fight each other exactly

because of these things – isn't it because they find it meaningful? Because they find it necessary?

Librarian: Maybe that is why it is a paradox in the first place.

Student: You're not helping! My whole question was: how can I respect people who can use this kind of reason to go to war or fly a plane into a building? How can anybody be so taken with belief to do such things? Religion scares me because it makes no sense and it is proud of that fact!

Librarian: Really, you're facing your very own intractable ethical paradox and you don't like how others have dealt with it. We all have our beliefs of how the world is ordered and reality is shaped. And religion is nowhere near the worst way to get to grips with it. Throughout the 20th century, religion has only been a minor factor in the atrocities committed. Far worse things have been committed in the name of ideas such as racial purity, communism, democracy, the free market or the national state. It seems that religion is most often only a political motivator for the desperate.

Student: Sure, I may be facing a paradox, and one that only can be solved through some sort of belief. And I guess that considering your – slightly normative – examples, I did overreact. Religion is not so much to blame as the very human tendency to justify our actions through a higher goal or meaning. But unlike these conservative religions who merely accept that status quo and its horrible consequences – I won't! I want to change the world for the better! And that's why I can't respect it: religion refuses to let man improve! Religion sees us as no more than rocks thrown by a greater power – as if we are unable to change our momentum or direction! It is this kind of medieval thinking that is holding us back! Ever since the enlightenment, we have been proving that it doesn't have to be so!

Librarian: You wave those words about as if they agree with you. Holding us back from what? What are we to achieve?

Student: Our potential! Whatever we want!

Librarian: But in that case, you don't want to understand religion. You merely seek to find some way to tolerate it.

Student: But I want to understand it! By understanding it, we can pull the wool from our eyes, make people be enlightened! Seek their own answers through experimentation and science!

Librarian: But can you understand religion and at the same time understand faith?

Student: Why shouldn't I?

Librarian: The British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre asked himself that question. But he found that it was impossible.

Student: Why?

Librarian: To understand religion as cultural phenomena, you have to look upon it as a stabilizing social factor which works through systems of meaning and action so as to make order in the lives of the believers. But you can't make such an analysis explaining religion and be a religious believer at the same time.

Student: Why not?

Librarian: MacIntyre says that if you believe, you must accept the premises of your faith. You must accept the paradoxes – the absurdities – of the religion. You have to believe in it.

Evans-Pritchard, who himself was a devout catholic, argued that this was a great problem for anthropology. Since so many anthropologists are – what he called – “unattuned towards religion.”

Student: Why?

Librarian: Because you're not religious. You cannot understand both the “why” and the “how” of religion. You can either understand religion from a social scientific, systematic approach like Geertz' where all of the aspects of a religion makes scientific “sense.” Or you can seek to understand religion from a sort of personal, post-modernist approach where you can see how people use their religion and their faith in their daily lives – examining how religion makes sense to *them*. There you cannot attempt to get a better hold of religious ideas by likening them to other ideas that you already know or find more comprehensible or more precise. That would tie you to what you already know and what you already prefer and would thus prevent you from ever grasping it.

Student: But what about you? You're not religious, either. You've been telling me all of this and preaching about how I shouldn't attempt to understand religion in its entirety. What about you?

Librarian: I am religious, of a sorts. In that I accept that in order to live most happily, we must accept many harmless untruths – many of which are part of any religion. Yet at the same time, I am one of those constant sceptics you mused about earlier. I don't think that we'll ever know much for sure. This library is a temple to what we believe as scientific fact, yet most of it are theories, approximations, ideas, and interpretations. Nothing is set in stone. I find theories like Geertz' or Marx' or Freud's amusing as they cannot be disqualified. Those theories contain such great parts of the human condition – suffering and meaning, working and meaning, sex, death and meaning – that we can always use them for support. In that way, they become myths themselves. Our science is myths we have accepted as because they make sense to us now. And while I believe in them, I believe that something better will come along, too. I don't believe that any of our knowledge is final. Since it is always just human. Yet it is this slow turning of wheels – of paradigms, if you will – that I have dedicated myself to. Because learning is my passion, I continuously seek truth. Though I believe I will never find it in any distilled, pure and unalterable form.

...

It is through accepting and believing in paradoxes like this that I live a meaningful life.

Student: I don't get it.

Librarian: Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, "Why, why, why?"
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.

Student: Heh, that's actually kind of funny. I guess that really is the defining for the human condition, too. I don't claim to understand you – or all these religious people. But if all else fails, I can always tell myself that you're all crazy. Anyway. Thanks for the talk. I'm not sure that I got that much wiser, though. [she gets up and begin to gather her books]

Librarian: [gets up too. Albeit more slowly. For the remainder of their conversation, they're walking towards the exit of the library] Here, I'll walk you to the door. That poem is from a book by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. I think he meant that even if we never found any answers that could satisfy us, we could always laugh about it.

Student: Yeah. That's another thing that I can't let go. Isn't it strange that evolution would give us a sense of humour?

Librarian: [walks quietly next to the student and doesn't reply]

Student: When you think about it, it's weird to have a physiological response to absurdity. We laugh at nonsense. We like it. We find it funny.

Librarian: [smiles to himself, but still doesn't respond. He opens the library door and lets the student outside]

Student: [stops right outside the door, holding her notes tightly. She peers at the old man as the new train of thought accelerates in her mind. Her eyes widen a bit.] Don't you think it's odd that we appreciate absurdity like this? Why would we develop that way? How does it benefit us?

Librarian: I suppose if we couldn't laugh at things that don't make sense, we couldn't react to a lot of life.

Student: [looks at him for a long moment. Then turns away. The door closes behind her. And she's alone. Thinking.]

Student: ... I can't tell if that's funny or really scary.



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