

A (sort of) new task for the philosophy of religion: Cultural containment through religion for the (hopefully not) coming new Middle Ages

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With the US hellbent on becoming a rhyme with the Roman empire including its fall, Western societies are potentially on their way into new Middle Ages, i.e. a period of substantially lower political, economic and cultural integration. (A possible scenario would be a bursting of the AI bubble, quickly deteriorating economic conditions in the US leading to a civil war like state, China taking Taiwan as the start of a rapid de-globalization and finally in the wake of all of this the breakdown of liberal institutions at all scales; we can only hope that under such circumstances minorities like for instance trans people do not end up in camps.) If so, then now would be a good time to think about how religion could do what Islam and Christianity did for the Graeco-Roman culture; take up, transform, preserve and expand the core civilizational advances of antiquity. Currently, illiberal populists wield reactionary Catholic ideas as weapons in ‘culture wars’ to capture liberal democracies for personal gain. The forceful return of religion on the public stage is likely not reversible and does not have to be a bad thing *per se*, but this toxic mix of reactionary faith with grandiose male narcissism is fundamentally ill-suited to shepherd Western culture. Here, ‘cultural containment’ by more progressive forces is needed. So that is the titular (sort of) new task for the philosophy of religion: To answer the question of how we want religion to look like for the next Middle Ages.

The (hopefully not) coming new Middle Ages and cultural containment

With illiberal populists out to capture democratic states and liberal elites seemingly still placing personal gain (or more understandably their safety) over the greater good, one could get the impression that we are currently getting a ‘hands-on’ lecture on how empires fall. In the face of

ongoing economic inequality, accelerated cultural progress – facilitated also by new ways to share good as well as bad ideas – has led to a pronounced polarization of our societies. Conservative and especially also religious values are installed by illiberal populists against progressive efforts, to cloud the much more critical divide between authoritarianism and liberalism. This way, a toxic mix of reactionary faith with grandiose male narcissism is paving its way, with movements combining religious and nationalistic motives.[?] The real way forward for the faithful clearly is to resist this terror, already because of the great opportunity that this presents for the rehabilitation of institutional religion. Not missing ‘strength’, understood as ability to dominate others, but missing empathy and compassion is the core problem; this is a home game for religion.

The situation is indeed reminiscent of late antiquity also in this respect: When ancient Philosophy hit unrelenting skepticism and the ancient ideas of a good life still continued to revolve around outstanding individuals, Christianity offered a way towards new personal and communal flourishing. David Brooks’ perfectly captured what people tried to leave behind: ‘The pagan ethos has always appealed to grandiose male narcissists because it gives them permission to grab whatever they want.’[?] Christianity was meant to be the opposite of this.

Independently of how we want to judge it, it seems clear that with the secularization of our societies people lost not only trust in god, but – as individuals as well as societies – also in the beneficence of the world and our fellow citizens, which made the meaningful engagement with them an open task put on everyone of us individually. Despite important civilizational advances, secularization so far failed to produce a new, not only instrumental, but also ethical and aesthetical rationality; large gaps exist between technocratic optimization on the basis of materialist science and the full human experience. (Though what science really seems to teach us is to keep a certain humility of mind in face of the vastness of nature.) In the meantime, religion retreated on the front of rationality from proofs for god’s existence to arguments for the epistemic possibility of reasonable faith. But as long as secular rationality is not all-encompassing (and there is a decent chance that it will never be), those in need for answers will turn to some form of religion (or worse; ideology) to fill in the gaps – especially when things get Middle Age again.

And independently of how we want to judge this, at least for early religious movements it seems to hold, that at least some deep philosophical insights cumulate in lived religion. Religion is in this sense more powerful than on the one side philosophy and on the other side ideologies

as a force in our societies, so that those seeking to advance humanity are most likely better off pushing a progressive understanding of religion forward than fighting reactionary faith. A factor not be forgotten is that the ossification of institutional religion in the modern West was most likely to a good part driven also by more progressive minds leaving the game. The fact that reactionary faith is becoming so powerful in the West, is a sign of weakness, not of strength of institutionalized religion.

Traditions transform themselves to survive by offering new opportunities for individual and social growth; but is it possible, maybe even for (at least certain) atheists or agnostics (like me), to chime in on progressive religion? Should they even be doing this? Surely not for instrumental purposes only, but is there a chance to formulate a progressive understanding of religion open enough and still true to the core of existing religious belief as well? Almost all religions fielded champions of an open-minded, often 'universalist' reading of their own faith, which is why formulating basic principles for a progressive understanding of religion in the 21st century is only a 'sort of new' task for the philosophy of religion. It is new in the sense that with this we do not look for a progressive reading of one's own religion, maybe in the light of the idea of an underlying universal divinity, but try to solve the meta problem of finding a minimum set of principles which can support a platform on which all of society – including 'non-religious' people – could agree to disagree on the further details. Such a religious understanding would be in no need of proofs for god or reasonable faith; the flourishing of people and communities would (have to?) make it self-evident.

Regressive cultural forces are rather not beaten by fighting them in culture wars until mutual self-destruction, but by 'cultural containment' until their proponents sabotage themselves or die out. Like with the political containment of Stalinist Russia by the US, successful cultural containment requires a more attractive narrative of and opportunities for lives well lived, which brings out the best in people, cumulating then also in economic and political power of their societies. Cultural containment is thus based on individual and social flourishing and requires to stand firm against cultural regression, and to further not only political, but also economic fairness.?

If cultural containment is not possible, our chances to avoid new Middle Ages would surely be worse. The 'postmodernism of the working class' calls for a chimera of 'red Cesar' and 'Christian prince'. If granted, it does not seem unlikely that truly horribly events could be unfolding, even globally. And in the wake, Religion, like wider culture, nation and family – at their core all resi-

lence factors –, could be found completely stripped of deep insights from century-long rational and inter-cultural discourse and opened-up empathy and compassion. Can we danger-proof religious thought for these hopefully not coming new Middle Ages?

The essence of religion?

Today, a majority of people in the West have either little religious connection, or have a very 'broad' concept of what religion means to them. Those who count themselves as religious will mostly not believe in a personal god or any oversimplified, supposedly traditional story about how divinity works in the world. Those who do not count themselves as religious will mostly still believe that life is somehow meaningful and that what counts in the end is neither only material comfort nor immediate personal gain. But this seems to be the core 'meta-message' across religious beliefs: That living in the world is meaningful and that accordingly there are more proper ways to live human lives than driven by (even if higher-level) animal instincts – a meta-message that is widely shared by 'non-religious' people, too.

If, for the moment, we do not want to take details of any specific religious revelation into account, one insight people seem to be rather willing to agree on might be this: That however the world came into being, it offers the possibility of meaning, which in turn requires it to be structured as to allow for meaning, thus being itself meaningful. We may not live in the best of all possible worlds, but we seem to be living in a world, 'strangely perfect' to realize practically infinitely many possibilities of meaning. (Not the best possible world, but the world of best possibilities?) In a broad understanding of the term, this is already a 'religious' belief. Many people who would usually count themselves as non-religious could rather easily turn to this understanding of religious belief, as having a very basic trust that a meaningful life, together in the world, is possible; this is then what makes existence divine.

People who count themselves as religious, but not in a fundamentalists sense, would need to take into account one additional central teaching, which is nevertheless widely shared among religious thinkers: That divinity is behind everything and makes itself present to us by meeting us where we are. A first reasonable corollary of this insight is to accept that beyond direct divine revelation, there is a second 'secular' revelation to uncover in how existence presents itself to us,

that can be decrypted by empirical investigation and reason. A second reasonable corollary of the above insight is to accept that even direct divine revelation was meant to meet us where we were, so that hundreds of years later, we have to carefully investigate which parts were necessary to meet our predecessors at where they were back then, and which parts make up the eternal message. With these two corollaries progressive religion becomes possible, informed by both revelation and reason, so that religious people become free to agree to the above minimum religious message of the meaningfulness of existence, though based on their specific faith they will actually believe a lot more to be true on top of it. We thus seem indeed to be able to formulate a minimum message, both secular and traditionally religious people could get behind: That existence is meaningful in the sense of offering the possibilities needed for meaningful lives.

Any normative approach to go beyond this runs into the same problems as common approaches to universal religion: Whatever we would focus on would seem highly selective and many sub-forms of any given faith would not fit in. As Clooney finds for Hinduism, we also find for other religions that they are based on sets of individual and cultural practices, as well as rich linguistic and ritualistic heritage, but encompass orthodox traditions as well as counter-movements, with corresponding challenges and changes to orthodoxy over time.⁷ The truly unifying belief seemingly behind all religions, that divinity is behind everything, was taken up above. Mutual to some religions is the belief that divinity is perfect and wants life to flourish. Divine personhood, its bodily nature and possible desires are already points of disagreement, and even rather well outlined divinity shows complexity in simplicity, as trinity, divine couple, etc. While such beliefs can thus not be part of the minimum set (already before considering non-believers), another truly unifying belief concerns the accessibility of divinity as to meet us where we are, which was accordingly taken up above, too.

So now we consider Pascal's 'god-shaped hole in the heart of every person', the abyss which 'can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object' to be filled with our trust into the possibility of meaningful existence. But we can probably map the shape in a little bit more detail. There are more things – and probably more important ones – to religion than narrative metaphysics; first of all ethical and moral messages. The core message here seems to be, that for meaningful lives, we have to turn from destruction and dominance to care and kindness. And although historically some 'others' were practically always excluded from this care and kindness, relying both on revelation

and reason, progressive religion can certainly not do so anymore. (In this sense, the ancient pagans were indeed damned, because they could not get over their exclusion of 'the others'.) 'Pure' philosophy has so far failed to come up with a 'proof' that meaningful lives should strive for care and kindness. It seems to be factual existence that delivers this proof; not taking part in meaning means nothingness, but meaning gets relevance from truly shared agency, requiring that care and kindness – independent of any idea of a possible afterlife. The real lesson seems to be that there is a greater good which is only partly open to our current understanding; further inquiry is essential, but denying it before we can proof it seems self-defying.

Up to here we have looked at ideas for how a religion for the 21st century could answer humanities two eternal questions, namely what there is and what we should do: Whatever we find the world to be in detail, it allows lives to be meaningful, and to make them meaningful, we should act caring and kind. Most 'non-religious' people will be on board with this minimum platform, too. The resulting – in that sense religious – 'kind majority' will not fight if not forced to, but must firmly contain regressive forces, that either deny other people's meaningful lives, or worse, try to isolate them from kindness and caring.

There is of course even more to religion than metaphysics and ethics as *mythos* and *ethos*; besides rational thought there are deeper, emotional insights connected to religious experience. The 'oceanic' feeling of our 'sensus divinitatis' is for religious people a primary channel for the insight into the meaningfulness of the word and their lives, in a possible Christian formulation for instance a deep feeling of being loved by god and loving of others. As such it also poses an opportunity to channel irrational forces in helpful directions. I don't think that any of this is in conflict with the above.

In addition, there are more specific individual psychological needs religion takes care of: Unlike any ideological 'visions of strength' for people, nations or cultures, religions catch the fallen and give meaning and hope also to 'failed' lives. Faith then allows to still act from a position of strength through trust in the world and myself, but this is a strength not of dominance, but compassion. Again, I don't think that this is in conflict with the above minimum platform message.

Furthermore, religion has rites and these are by no means superfluous. Proper faith has to find expression in time and space, in actually lived life. Rites involves sensual and social experiences in shared ritual spaces and can act as starting point for rewarding communal activities. A

core question also for progressive religion in the 21st century is what to make of the diversity of traditions. Even within religions we usually find a rich landscape of variations, then we have the diversity of several world religions, and for our purpose the diversity of traditionally religious and only in a meta-sense religious beliefs as outlined above. In the spirit of the above, 21st century religion would have to appreciate this diversity of traditions and rites. Each group would be free to believe in the truth of their way, while acknowledging that because divinity has always met us where we were, none of this can be forced on to the other, thereby showing the kindness and caring asked for by all.

Finally, there is institutionalized religion, but in the context of the above we have to make a distinction between a tradition and its institutions over time; the later will almost always have fallen behind the envisioned high standards of the former. And maybe additionally between the institutions and the actual communities. Ideally, institutions have codified certain helpful ideas of truth, good and beauty and organized resources for the greater good, so that communities were able to flourish based on kindness and care. (Some of the thinking involved is not easily accessible to us anymore; when expecting most reward not in earthly life, but in – after all eternal – afterlife, building cathedrals made a lot more sense. As did the celibate when it was meant to protect church jobs from rentiers. And rejecting the scientific method made at least some sense when it was understood as to not propagate higher, but actually lower standards of truth, because for it to progress, not every logically possible hypothesis had to be excluded by careful scholastic work.) As with the diversity of traditions and rites, our minimum platform will not have much to say about specific institutions and communities, as long as they are willing to try to contribute to the greater good also beyond their own parameters. (Though we are allowed to wonder if future religion can make sustainability and economic fairness its cathedrals?)

A last point has to be discussed here; the problem of evil. If traditions believe in perfect divinity, the question comes up why we find evil in the world. Common answers refer to evil as the unpreventable consequence of free will, or as understandable in the light of eternal afterlife. The first 'solution' is readily accessible from our basic platform, which itself suggests that evil could be an unpreventable consequence of allowing for not one fixed meaning, but practically infinite possibilities – the world pays dearly for how wonderful it can be –, but also the second solution is in no direct conflict with the minimum consensus. (We could even formulate a very broad understanding

of 'hell', as being in the state of not contributing meaningfully to the whole, with not leaving behind any meaningful contribution as being indeed eternally damned.)

Progressive religion for the 21st century

So how would a suitable idea of religion look like? Which parts of existing traditions should we emphasize? What aspects of conserved history should we keep by any means and can innovations be suggested? In essence; what would be important for religion as vehicle of the envisioned value transport and how can this be effectively implemented? The following (and most likely more) questions can be discussed here:

1. Should we emphasize divine revelation and dogma? The advantage would be that core messages are explicitly formulated and not questioned easily. Especially in hard times, people will not be too willing to engage in sophisticated philosophical discourse. The disadvantage would of course be that dogma can prevent critical engagement, though this can probably be alleviated by framing core messages carefully. The most helpful 'innovation' would most likely be to emphasize that divinity meets us where we are with the implication of historical relativity and the important role of the second, 'secular' revelation from reason; specific dogmatic statements then have their time and historical background, which can then be taken into account when evaluating them at later times. Somewhat irritatingly, complex dogmatic constructions can be an advantage here, as there is a decent chance that they spark traditions of careful intellectual inquiry.

2. Should we emphasize the importance of religious institutions? Institutionalized religion can be a great force for good, but judging from history, smashed hopes and great disappointment were a regular outcome as soon as religious institutions became 'powerful' and with this the target of much more basic desires. Additionally, we also want to support the important role that religion can play for the oppressed, which might be excluded from institutional access. Overall it's probably best to emphasize first of all the personal nature of religion, but give strong motivation for the formation of stable communal structures. In any case, we need to think hard about how to improve structures to prevent abuse and encourage diversity.

3. Should we emphasize the role that religion can play in our political and economic lives? This is a hard one. In principle, theocracy offers great opportunities to implement values where

they practically matter most. Historically, this rarely turned out to work for long. A better way is maybe to emphasize again the personal obligation to act kind and caring and make clear that this includes political and economic activity. Not giving religious institutions control over states or economies seems mandatory then; we should thus emphasize the different sphere religious and secular institutions are working in. Most importantly, we should make clear that religious individuals have the duty to protect religion from being weaponized.

At this point we have a minimal *mythos* to build on, giving importance also to reason, a universal ethics of kindness and caring, and a large diversity of historical traditions and rites, for which we want to emphasize the importance of personal religion in communal activity, acting in our societies through the good that is done by these individuals and communities. Disagreement between traditions must then be seen as being first of all not about (unquestionable) truth or good, but 'beauty' in the sense of having different ideas about ways to live and paths of growth. Followers would still have full faith in their tradition and thus believe in the tradition's specific ideas of truth, good and beauty, but would know that none of this can be forced onto others while staying true to their own ethical commitments. These would not be reformed traditions, but traditions honouring a minimum consensus. (The above is clearly inspired by a Western – and not committed – experience of religion, but this text is meant as no more than a discussion starter; others should chime in now.)

The majority of believers in the West will actually already have an understanding of their religion somewhat like this, with a rather skeptical view of the proposed metaphysics of their religion in combination with a general openness to scientific inquiry, a strong commitment to universal ethical principles, and tolerance – as well as interest – towards other systems of thought and belief. The point of cultural containment would be to make a renewed and strong commitment to this.

Christianity got to its central place in Western culture through an extreme cultural bottleneck after the fall of Rome in late antiquity (think about for instance reading skills of the general public). Modern Rome is so to say split up over a handful of US cities; let's not hope that they fall soon. But if so, the new middle Ages might make progressive Religion centrally important to Western culture, only that they could do this also to a culturally regressive, fundamentalist tradition. Working to secure a good starting point for progressive religion could thus indeed be essential to ensure that religion could again provide inclusive hope in dark times. What else could make individuals

in medieval circumstances wish for themselves not only to be powerful like kings or rich like oligarchs, but also wise like sages or at least just not that greedy and unkind as the other guy?

The (sort of) new task for the philosophy of religion

Besides our basic platform of a meaningful (minimum) metaphysics, a universal ethics, and a diversity of rites for a personal religion in communal activity, we could think about formulating additional messages from secular revelation as 'modern commandments'. Here amongst others the following ideas could be discussed:

1. We often find variations of the 'golden rule' to play an important part in religion. Do we want to emphasize compassion beyond a 'first-order' understanding of the rule? Shall we move from some version of 'love others like you love yourself' to 'love others as they like to be loved', with mutuality implying no overreach in turn? This could maybe diminish the danger of abuse being justified as forcing people for their own greater good. For most though, the requested change of perspective will already be implied in the first version, inwardly adding 'if you would be in the position of the other'.

2. Would we want to emphasize core scientific insights as some form of revelation? (Could Indian philosophy and religion be an inspiration here?) A better way is probably to emphasize the 'scientific method', for instance coded as the necessity of (self-)critical, experimental investigation to pin down the nature of 'divine creation'. We also may want to emphasize the importance of education in general; and here it could be a good preparation for times of very low literacy to emphasize that religious messaging is not dependent on any specific language, hopefully easing the access to education (unlike in the last Middle Ages) right from the start. Some of the most controversial topics in current religious thought concern topics like sex, abortion, contraception, marriage, and gender because of the central role that life and therefore also everything connected to its genesis plays in religion. These are unfortunately also the easiest to instrumentalize in culture wars, as people often have very strong feelings and partly irrational views on these topics. The connected arguments depend crucially on our still limited biological knowledge; progressive religion should accept this complexity, i.e. should not simply fall back to dogma here; most importantly people should strongly push back against attempts to weaponize these topics. In the end,

kindness and caring are not compatible with forcing dogma on people.

3. We also often find some notion of questioning the idea that great material wealth is helpful for one's well-being. Do we want to emphasize some idea of 'enough' as the goal of material (as opposed to intellectual and social) growth? Such ideas are inherently linked to economic fairness and respecting limits of growth (like planetary boundaries), and could thus contribute to solving societal problems. Do we maybe even want to 'condemn' the rich to give in times of crisis? Should greed be a proper sin again? It should certainly be made clear that caring includes the material needs of others, too.

4. Central to how we as individuals, but also our societies and as a result also the larger world develops, are 'ways of life', often envisioned as narratives of what 'good' lives are. In the religious context, besides lists of virtues, one extremely powerful topos in such narratives is the acceptance of vulnerability, when for instance a failed, but repentant soul is raised again by divinity. Do we want to emphasize vulnerability as virtue? Putting a wall up against any unchecked 'hero-culture' of strength as domination, which is prone to close itself against the suffering of the weak, seems centrally important anyhow. (And Hollywood's penchant for underdogs can hardly be overrated as a cultural force.) Furthermore, accepting vulnerability would help with making personal bonds and thus promote more sustainable strength in cooperation (in the end it was our ethical ability to form societies that led to 'planetary dominance'). Do we want to emphasize further traits or behavior as virtues? Or rather striving for balance? We could think for instance about taking perspective and accepting setbacks, or maybe even humor in the face of hardship. We most likely also want to emphasize very diverse narratives of good lives, not making for instance only religious or intellectual efforts a primary goal, and not speaking low of more everyday joy; love of animals or sports (can) make people better, too.

The above would elaborate on the deliberations of the last two sections, with which we had in essence pushed religion to a meta level, speaking of meaningful lives based on compassion on mutual terms. This is suitable for times in which cultural containment is still possible. Now we have to get real; containment will break down during the descent into new Middle Ages. There is a general dilemma of a changing landscape for our religious teachings; some might have unintended or even contradictory consequences when interpreted under completely different circumstances. We should therefore carefully check, if our platform still works especially in a much more scarce

and brutal world, where abundance is just a distant wish and where stereotypically 'male virtues' might get much more courtesy. (Not a few also male people will be unpleasantly surprised what 'more masculine energy' can mean.) Even things that seem totally innocent to us now, might fall prey to a severely distorted rationality. The call to respect reason besides direct divine revelation might for instance lead to the claim (as it indeed did in the past), that nature teaches us about the supremacy of certain races (usually not someone else's), genders or ruthless and/or entitled individuals. Indeed, looking back in history, we probably want to build in mechanisms that allow to break the 'iron chain of old white men' at least when things are getting better again. One central message should surely be, that if in doubt, being kind and caring should trump all other considerations. And do we want to build in ideological 'target breaking points'? (Christianity's call for universal love and its 'brittle' form of divine revelation, motivating intellectual inquiry also on the meta-level, seems to be a very good bet then. Was the relative brittle setup of Christianity maybe in the end an advantage over more effective Islam in modern times?) Do we want to reserve priesthood for 'special' (vulnerable) people, to protect them through having special roles? Do we want to emphasize asceticism for priesthood to make it less attractive to unsuited individuals?

Outlook

Going through all these thoughts we see how hard it will be to danger-proof religion for the new Middle Ages, first of all because human thought is so easily corrupted by desires, nevertheless keeping its ingenuity to build successful narratives – only then of regressive nature. In the light of this, we must concede that many existing religious traditions already have quite effective core messages, and that it was more often up to specific people than core messages to cause great harm. It may then be a reasonable approach for the wider society to just not condemn liberal religious traditions, for instance on the grounds of (anyhow then overreaching) science, to not push believers to regressive ideas; none of even the liberal traditions is perfect, but they are at least something that could stand up against much darker intentions. Not letting cultural containment fail in the first run seems to be our by far best bet anyhow. Civilizational advances cannot be taken for granted, are fragile and need to be protected. Fortunately, people are more educated than ever and at least half of 'modern Rome' is still more committed to liberal democracy, economic fairness

and cultural diversity than people in most other places (just think of the ones like Sanders, Warren or AOC in politics, the economic reasoning behind The Giving Pledge or the greatly increased visibility and acceptance of trans artists). The situation is thus very different to the falling Roman empire and especially also Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia; there is clearly no need to go fully medieval, yet. Religious or not: Let's carry on in good faith.

References

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