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WHAT IS RELIGION?

Today, we find ourselves living during the most Religious era in all of human history. If this statement is true, it is also how we can predict the end of the human story. Let me explain.

First of all, what *is* religion? I've always found it useful to define anything through duality to better understand its nuance, so let's examine two "religions". First, there is religion, *the structure* that enables human beings to come together to have *community, tradition, ritual, purpose, meaning, and morality*; It is innocent and meant to provide human beings with essential needs they can not do without.

Second, there is "Religion", which represents all the negative connotations that have become associated with religion as a structure, and all its consequences. Today, when we hear someone mention religion, even the religious think about these things. What are they? *Groupthink, narrow-mindedness, arrogance, antagonism, and proselytization*; It is what happens when individuals seek to *concretize* their religious structure. By this, I mean that they want to establish and secure their religion by setting down laws and codes of conduct, by doling out punishments when they are broken, by signaling their moral superiority, by proving the benefits of their religion, and by converting others as well.

But why do they do all this, why do they concretize? Simply stated, it is caused by a deep insecurity that paradoxically emerges when an individual first finds security through their spiritual practice. *Note that a spiritual

practice can be many, many things, but most people are exposed to one that is concretized (“Religion”) before ever learning about *the first stage of enlightenment*. We will return to examine what that is in a bit. But for now, we can say that religion as a structure provides an individual with security from the existential crisis that looms just underneath the surface of their waking consciousness- It gives them answers to questions they are afraid of, such as: *Why do I exist? What does it all mean? What is my purpose?* and so on. Therefore, it only makes sense that a person would seek to concretize the answers to protect the fragile trust they have in these answers.

Imagine being a teenager and becoming aware of reality for the first time, being thrown into confusion and chaos. You are filled with fear until you find refuge in a religion, and suddenly you are soothed because you are *told* what the answers are. In fact, the authority figure and their community are so confident and certain of these “truths” that you feel secure again, just like a child playing in the grass. This is the power of “**groupthink**”. Now imagine that the priest, rabbi, imam, monk, or guru says something that makes you *doubt* the initial answers they provided you with? Some logical flaw has popped up. Oh no, the insecurity creeps up again, so you do some more reading of the religious text, and you ask your community and your authority figure for more explanations. They either reassure you with a clever solution or tell you that with enough faith and prayer, you will one day understand. So now, you either study and keep building the “big picture” of reality or distract yourself in your day-to-day life. You begin to follow the rules: *Faith, prayer, penance, and tribute*. Beyond this, you stop asking yourself any more questions. Everything is smooth and you feel pretty good. This is **narrow-mindedness** taking over.

Now imagine moving to another city, or going to a new school, or participating in a new community either at work, online, or at some extra-

curricular activity. You meet some people who have different ideas about the answers you have integrated into your heart and soul. They begin to contradict what you believe, they even start to state how you will suffer consequences for believing in your answers. Somehow, they have you doubting your beliefs: What they say has some logic behind it and you don't know whether their logic or yours is the correct one, despite the fact they contradict each other. Oh-oh, now the foundations of your entire reality start to shake again, and you feel the existential crisis creeping up in the distance. So you double down on your studies and begin trying to convince them that they are wrong and that you are right. You then convince yourself that you are not afraid of their beliefs, but that you are good and want to save them. This is **arrogance, antagonism, and proselytization**. Congratulations, your religion has made you "Religious".

That which was meant to give you some answers and a spiritual way of life has turned you into a representation of "Religion", the one thought of as an institution of groupthink, narrow-mindedness, arrogance, antagonism, and proselytization. But these things are not an institution or a spiritual way of life. They are human behaviours and they exist within you, the individual. You do this because you are insecure and fearful of losing that which gives you security. Therefore, you seek to concretize your religion- You want to make sure the people around you believe what you believe, feel what you feel, and do what you do. The motivation is innocent enough, but you have let fear overcome you and wish to control others. They do the same in return and by the time enough individuals in all religious camps have succumbed to fear, they all find themselves without peace, love, and joy. The very things they preach. Further still, they turn to war, hatred, and bitterness. The fear-inspired **hope** is that maybe security will return when "the other" is gone, dead, or converted. But for some reason, arguing with them, ignoring them, casting them away, and killing them doesn't work.

Even converting them doesn't work. It makes the fear worse; Now that you have 'saved' a few, they reflect a great many more who are still living in ignorance and sin. They are a threat. Now everything is worse, it makes it all worse.

Now, what is the most natural thing for humanity to do after suffering this horrible feedback loop? Well, to abandon religion of course. But here is the really dangerous part: Humans can never abandon their needs for **community, tradition, ritual, purpose, meaning, and morality**; So in effect, they will seek these things by creating their own religious structure. *This* is why we find ourselves in the most religious era in human history. Naturally, we will still come face-to-face with the same existential questions, resulting fear, and incompatibility with other belief systems. Only now we are much more fragmented and constantly faced with these things. The potential for many more "Religions" whose members have succumbed to fear is present and fomenting a landscape set for the end of humanity, both in spirit and in existence. How could it not be? The world is now deeply connected so that what happens on one side of the planet is known by the other side. We all impact everyone else on great scales, all the time, with increasing power and significance.

One way to overcome this is to become aware of **the first stage of enlightenment**. Often, when people *practice* their religion, they reach a spiritual maturity enabling them to feel enlightened; It is like a light being turned on in a dark room- There is a grand and sudden clarity and an understanding that often goes beyond words. We still try to express it though, and we use words like "peace", "love", and "joy". These sensations pass through our bodies and then we say: *I have felt God*. Almost always, we believe that we have attained enlightenment as if it were something of a "one-time" deal. We are convinced that there is nothing more to learn

because, although we must continue our spiritual practice to feel it again, we at least know its truth. This is where the Buddhist saying comes from, the one saying: *"If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him"*. Basically, it is meant to warn us against thinking that we are ever enlightened, because whatever feeling we experience in our spiritual lives, as true as it might be, such an experience is not *the* truth of God. Understandably, we want some kind of finality to the mystery of the human condition, so we tend to conflate our feelings/sensations with truth as if it were objective and absolute in this way, as if: *my spiritual practice is the one true path*. Many people get stuck in that belief, but really, it is just an effect of the first stage of enlightenment, and although your path is true, *it is not the only one*. Further still, it is not the only one *you* can take to achieve spiritual enlightenment.

A person can take many different paths, but this scares them because they do not want to lose the truth they believe they have found and secured for themselves. As a result, people often get fixated on the internal experience they had, seek to reproduce it, and try to involve others in it for the reasons described before; To avoid that, this is the crucial distinction necessary to overcome the first stage of enlightenment: **the religion/spiritual practice does not equate to the truth experienced within it**. That truth remains the same, unbounded by any religion, practice, or feeling- It is only attained *through* them. When one spiritually transcends, positive feelings and sensations come *as a result* of touching pure and simple **Being**. They are a response to let one know that they have touched God and so have *achieved* truth. One can not simply say that the truth *is* prayer, meditation, fasting, consuming substances, making love, or any of the other spiritual practices used to achieve truth therefore enlightenment.

One thing is of the realm of body (transcendence) and the other is in the realm of mind (truth), but neither is of the realm of spirit (being). This is the proverbial “trinity” that many religions speak of and try to clarify: **One must focus their awareness on the being of God, not one’s own mental understanding and physical practices used to achieve it.**

With *this* truth, we can better understand what religion *really* is; It is not the confusion and fear we feel. It is not the stories we tell about God and reality. It is not the various practices we use to become aware. Religion is the personal journey each individual takes through darkness, searching for the light. It is their path to remembering how to open their eyes to see the truth. It is their strengthening of the power to turn inwards to connect with eternity. It is their art form of simply being- perfectly suspended in communion with whatever word they choose: *God, universe, truth, nirvana, or Om*. It is their following realization that “communion with” is already a separation that does not exist. *It is their transcendence of transcendence.*

Understanding it this way, how can anyone ever be willing to force others to practice their own religion? How does it even make sense? Can I live your spiritual life for you? We certainly hope that others achieve peace, love, and joy, as we do, but one must always doubt whether this “hope” actually comes from fear. When people *hope*, it is because they are separate from being and do not (at that moment at least), understand that all is perfect. This leads us to the question: *If all is perfect, why do we need to transcend?*

Do we?

The answer is both yes *and* no, and in itself can not be understood or felt but rather embodied. There is no answer to the question of “which religion is the right one” because there is no question to begin with. We are all on

our own journeys, alone until we realize there is no such thing as loneliness. That is the unbearable part: We fear loneliness and so group together in our religions or form our own religions, *trying to live* instead of *being*. But fear does not exist either.

The end of the human story begins and ends with you, it always has.

But you do and do not exist...

James Sirois