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Religion and Its Nature

Shiv Talwar¹

Prophets, sages, and seers of religion use critical spiritual thinking and sound reasoning in their contemplative searches. As a result, their personal narratives and terminologies are rigorous and precise. Simple communication of the ineffable for people who are uninitiated to these processes poses a special problem.

As a result of identifying and relating to these findings metaphysically, our prophets, sages, seers, and spiritual scientists felt one with all beings and their hearts were filled with the bliss of unconditional and nondual love for all. Out of unconditional and unbounded love and compassion, they wanted to share their bliss with everyone with whom they came into contact. But how do you share an experience of an insight about the infinitely subtle that does not lend itself to any finite concepts? How do you talk about the ineffable? How do you communicate the incommunicable? But communicate you must!

The sages and seers reflected the love and compassion that resulted from their painstaking and disciplined quest for the Absolute truth working on their personal psychology. They were passionate and keen to share their bliss and joy with the masses. If bliss is from the experience of a material object, it can easily be shared with loved ones. If joy results from doing painstaking research and coming up with a deep spiritual insight or a scientific theory, like the general theory of relativity, how do you share that? There is no replacement for the passion to know physics to the core and to embark on one's own journey of research into the deepest layers of the existence of matter, or one's own spiritual quest for the infinitely subtle.

This perhaps is the backdrop that leads to a social construct known today as religion. Religion provides a physical and mental space meant to explore the transformative story of existence in an attempt to help others benefit from the transformation. Various religions exist today, each with a body of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding using the narratives of faith, doctrine, laws, rituals, ceremonies, and code of conduct thought to be transformative. As anthropologist Pascal Boyer has expressed it, "Most modern, organized religions present themselves as a package that integrates all these disparate elements (ritual, morality, metaphysics, social identity) into one consistent doctrine and practice."²

A spiritual scientist could systematically communicate directly only with those few who came into intimate contact with them. The close associates, to some extent, understood the need for the long and disciplined journey undertaken by their mentor, but they did not really travel the hard road themselves. In their keenness to help their mentor in spreading the message, they appealed to faith for acceptance of the word of the master teacher. They got around the problem of communicating the ineffable with an appeal to faith in culture-specific metaphors and divine images used to express the mystery. They committed their

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² Pascal Boyer, "Religion: Bound to Believe?", *Nature* 455 (October 23, 2008): 1038–39, <https://doi.org/10.1038/4551038a>

teaching in writing in the form of articles of faith and commandments to be followed. They were perhaps blissfully unaware that, in so doing, they were debasing the very truth they were trying to reveal. Thus, the discoveries of the spiritual scientists which transformed them personally took the form of codified scripture.

In time, the culture-specific local images and metaphors used to refer to the Absolute asserted realities of their own, hiding the very reality which they were supposed to reveal. A painstaking, disciplined, and transformative search using critical spiritual intelligence was replaced by mere acceptance on faith, concretizing the subtle that the spiritual scientists meant to establish.

Religion was originally meant to be exploratory in nature and to provide an avenue for human beings to understand themselves existentially, through the teachings of holistic text and wisdom. However, it became increasingly prescriptive as it took the form of belief in rigid articles of faith to be accepted on authority as religion was institutionalized.

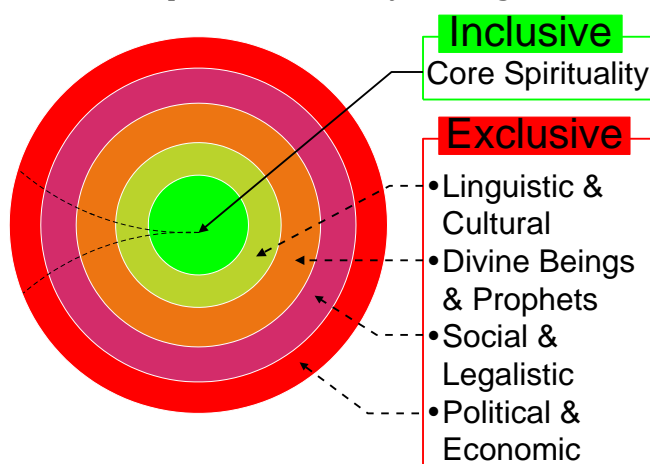


Figure 1: Anatomy of Religious Faith

Figure 1 shows the anatomy of religious faith. The innermost circle represents core spirituality centred on the metaphysical Absolute which is totally unifying and inclusive. Around the universal spiritual core grew circles of successively gross, exclusive, and potentially divisive layers representing local culture and language, divinity and prophets, social and legal norms and political and economic aspirations of communities of religion.

With institutionalization, whether formal or informal, loyalties combined with the political, economic, and social aspirations of faith communities began debasing the Absolute even further, and in the end their culture-specific imagery completely eclipsed the Absolute. Thus, the Absolute was replaced by cultural and divine imagery and metaphors prevalent in the days of the specific prophets. Over time, culture changed and the metaphors lost meaning. In the crowd of relative community perspectives, the lonely Absolute was totally lost. Thus begins the negative and divisive use of the metaphysical truth, as shown graphically in Figure 1.

The concept of God, or divine beings, arose when life-affirming forces of nature were conceptualized in human form to get around reasoned explanations. Masses of people could not conceive that perceptible existence could emerge from an imperceptible essence. So spiritual essence was replaced with a creator God. Masses can easily understand that an

omnipotent and omniscient anthropomorphic form called God created, sustains, and governs the universe. He gets mad if you are bad and is pleased if you are good.

Religious faith, as it stands now, has two faces: one unites and the other divides. Religion unifies people into communities and simultaneously divides communities from one another by building tight boundaries around them.

Religious faith is founded upon one unseen and ineffable reality underlying the entire universe. This reality is infinite. It is the one source of all diverse beings. It is indescribable. It is inconceivable. Itself beyond attribution, it is the source of all attributes. This is the unitive face. It represents core spirituality. Spirit, unlike material, is all-inclusive. It unequivocally declares the essential oneness of all created beings. It is the root of our ability to perceive equality. This face of religion is the nectar of love, life, and justice.

Now examine the divisive face.

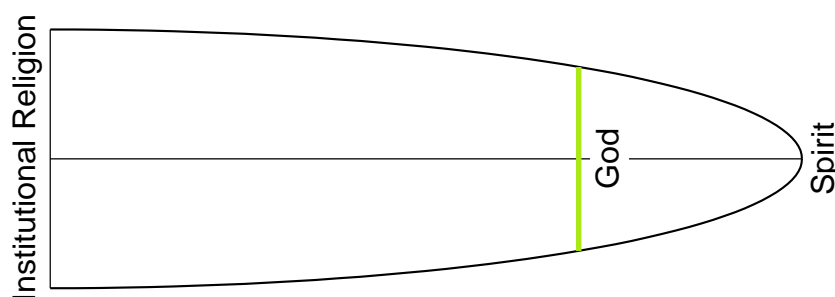


Figure 2: Spirit, Creator God, and Institutional Religion

Figure 2 shows the position of the creator God of religion vis-à-vis the spirit it is meant to represent. It has a degree of concreteness commensurate with the discernment capacity of the individual. The higher the degree of concreteness, the easier it is to discern but the greater its defilement of the infinitely subtle spirit and its capacity to fragment existence. On the other hand, the higher its subtlety, the greater its capacity to integrate diversity.

Figure 2 shows the concretization of the infinitely subtle spirit rendered by the wholly spiritual being, God. It is said that God cannot be idolized because it is wholly spiritual, made of spirit alone. Concretization imparts a definite form. People who worship God in a definite form are called idolaters or idol worshippers. That is what we all become.

Founded upon one infinite and unseen reality, religion goes on to confine it in finite forms, in words or otherwise. By describing the indescribable in particular ways, religion identifies the underlying reality with its respective form. The form becomes the God. Suddenly, somebody's God becomes less Godlike, somebody's prophet less prophetic, and somebody's community less righteous and deserving.

In its drive to distinguish communities and demarcate territories, the institution of religion implicitly and explicitly encourages divisive thinking. This face sets communities not only apart from but against one another and is insidious and downright poisonous.

Strong religious identities may be harmless within homogeneous communities, but they cause havoc between them.

Lightning-fast transportation and instant communication made possible by the developments of modern science and technology have shrunk the world into a global village.

Most of the inhabitants of the world live in close proximity to one another either in pluralistic democracies or in communities tending to become so. A spiritual ethos is essential for modern living if we are to address the collective human and environmental problems we face today.

Secularism requires a country's social structures and support systems and all levels of its government to be equidistant from and equally respectful of all religions and all people. Religious identities must be balanced against the responsibility of equal respect, heartfelt and not merely superficial. The question is: with the current faith-based mindsets, are we capable of such respect?

Democratic systems of social organization and governance are spiritual in nature. They recognize our underlying oneness which is foundational to our equal rights. Rights demand responsibility. What is needed for our responsibility? We have two choices: core spirituality that unites or double-edged religious faith that divides more than it unites. How can we transcend and discard the divisive face of faith and embrace the core spirituality that unites?

Inability to perceive equality threatens pluralistic societies and the global village paradigm. The best we can then hope for is an uneasy peace; and history is proof that an uneasy peace is easily broken.

We need to enrich and expand our identity. Let us not be so fearful about losing our religious identity that we isolate ourselves and shy away from building bridges to survive in pluralistic societies or the pluralistic global village that the world is fast becoming. We must wholeheartedly adopt the unitive face of religion. We must discard the divisive face of religion in our lives and adopt a narrative of oneness in educating our children. Otherwise, the sustainability of everything interreligious or pluralistic, including dialogues, marriages, and democracies, is threatened.

The education systems of the world must rise to confront the challenges of didactically communicating the ineffable. Now for the first time in human history, we are blessed with an educational infrastructure that can rise to this challenge. Continuing to skirt the problem of communicating the ineffable with faith-based approaches is not only a poor solution, but its perpetuation is irresponsible for our educational systems meant to teach the truth.