

Travis Buechner

Purpose and Order

Travis Buechner is a Communications major with a minor in Religious Studies and a Digital Art Certificate. It was through a class about the nature of religion, taught by Professor David DiValerio, that he came up with the idea for this paper and the way he has since viewed religion. Although this paper is not as encompassing as was hoped, he feels it is still a good window into his views on how religion should be examined.

I'm going to with a story about a very strange and personal time in my life. About 9 months ago, I had a religious epiphany. It wasn't confined to any specific religion, but it revolved around the belief in a monotheistic god. I don't have time to go into detail but it happened very quickly, and it was a moment that is tough to put into words. Yogis might call it a moment of enlightenment, alcoholics might call it a moment of clarity, and hippies might call it a sober trip. And the latter is what it felt like. It was literally the moment where every thought I ever had and every action I ever did all clicked together. Every memory and train of thought racing through my mind kept adding up to the single conclusion. God is real, and he is present within everything I do. On top of determining this, all of my senses were going crazy, and my vision felt so wide that I couldn't drive a car for hours. It felt like I was kicked in the chest with light and it changed me.

After a lifetime of not believing in religion, I started praying on my knees twice a day. I had to explain to my friends why I no longer wanted to get drunk 5 nights a week. I made lists on how I could better myself. And the most interesting thing is I started acting on signs and feelings instead of logic. An example of this is a week after my experience, I felt inclined to tell a friend about it in detail. I saw signs that I should have this conversation. She later told me that she had been on depression medication but after the conversation I had with her she stopped needing it. Good things like this kept happening

Although it changed me so much, it never seemed logical to me, but it kept improving my life so for a while I continued to let the belief lead me. But despite the intensity of my initial experience, despite the feeling of ecstasy I got down my spine every time I prayed for the right thing, despite the surreal effects it was having on the people around me and despite how it was making me a better person, after a few months this belief eventually wore off. I let the logical side of my brain once again take over and I once again didn't believe in any sort of religion. This story may have seemed random and I don't expect you to care about my personal life, but to assist my argument, this story is something I will come back to throughout my presentation

In this presentation I will be explaining my own ideas on why religion exists. I theorize that religion is a survival tool to help human beings to find purpose and order in the complex and chaotic environment we inhabit. This theory is loosely based on the work presented by Emile Durkheim in his 1912 book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Through examining totem religions in Australia, Durkheim's observations also conclude that religion creates order for humans. I will also draw ideas from Victor E. Frankl's 1959 book *Man's Search for Meaning*. This book helps explain how religion brings purpose. Through examining and combining the

ideas in these sources, I will explain how religion allows people to find purpose and order and why this is helpful to mankind's survival.

To begin, I'll discuss why humans need purpose. *Man's Search for Meaning*, by psychologist Viktor E. Frankl, is a book about his personal experience of the year he spent in the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz, Kaufering, and Turkheim. Through the lens of a psychology, he explains how a human survives these horrible conditions. He concludes using the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how" (Frankl, 76). Frankl is suggesting that humans are more able to survive difficult situations when they have a reason to live.

This purpose can be anything, but what Frankl observed was that prisoners with strong spiritual convictions were better off. He states that they, "were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom... [This explains how] some prisoners of a less hardy make-up often seemed to survive camp life better than did those of a robust nature" (Frankl, 35). He is stating that a physically weaker individual can withstand a more brutal environment than a stronger individual if he has stronger spiritual convictions. This goes back to Frankl's conclusion that why you are doing something becomes more important than how you will do it. Religion often offers an answer to why when nothing else does. In this way, religion can be more useful to human survival than being physically fit.

The way I understand this is that the believer has a sense of freedom from results. In my personal experience, my purpose was to do things I felt God would approve of. I was doing things for him, instead of for the result. With this mentality, I no longer had fear of failure. I did what I thought was right and the result became secondary to the actual performing of the action. Just as in Frankl's philosophy, since I knew "why" I was doing something, the "how" became much less important.

It was this freedom that led me to do things like have the conversation with my friend. If I'm being honest with myself, I didn't talk to her because of a higher power leading me. Whether I want to admit it or not, I knew she was depressed, but since I didn't know if I could help her, I just avoided the situation. But once I wasn't concerned with the result, acting on the situation became much easier. This is how purpose through belief can give people a sense of freedom from results. The religious belief that I logically don't think is real, helped me to make a real change in my friends life.

Durkheim argues that this religious belief stems out of a sense of community, and it is this feeling of community that gives the individuals purpose. When speaking about totem religion in Australia, Durkheim states, "religious activity in Australia is almost entirely contained within the periods when... gatherings are held" (Durkheim, 220). These religious ceremonies are what he considers to be at the center of their religion. It is what gives participants a feeling he calls "effervescence" (Durkheim, 218). This is a feeling in which the ceremony brings people together into a sense of community so strong that the individual is lost. A human believing that he is part of a group makes him feel that he is a part of something bigger than his own existence. People can find purpose through belief in the group because the group represents a more permanent existence than an individual life. This makes doing things for the good of the group more rewarding than doing things for individual gain because it has more lasting effects.

This explains how people feel an individual purpose through religious affiliation. It is this sense of purpose that then brings order to society. Durkheim agrees with this through his observations of totem religions in Australia. He states that religion is "beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... [that] unite into one single moral community called a church"

(Durkheim, 44). Sharing morals helps humans create order within society. Since humans want this order, they create sacred things to represent their unity. It is belief in the sacred that leads humans to, as Durkheim states, "submit to rules... that sometimes are contrary to our inclinations and to our most basic instincts" (Durkheim, 209). Through creating this desired sense of order in religion, humans have something to put before personal gain and bring order to society.

Even though I was alone during my experience, I did feel like I was part of something bigger than myself. Through understanding that I was a part of a whole, I could let go of personal gain and focus on the gain of everyone. It was this feeling that led me to come out of the experience with a sense of purpose. And that purpose came from the realization that the wellbeing of everyone is more important than the wellbeing of the individual.

To summarize this first piece, religion is a tool that helps people find purpose and order in life. Frankl explains that purpose is possibly the most important thing for people to overcome difficult situations and that a common way to find this purpose is through religion. Durkheim believes that religion gives humans this purpose by giving them a sense that they are part of a whole, part of a community. This lets the individuals use this sense of community to create order within their society. In putting these two theories together, it becomes possible to see how purpose and order perpetuate each other within religious groups. This is present within Durkheim's totem religions, but it is also present within major religions we have today.

Just like Durkheim's totem societies, Catholicism also centers on a ceremony. Catholics are ideally supposed to go to mass every Sunday, and within this mass, the most important part is the ceremony of communion. This is where believers are each given a host, which is considered to be a piece of the body of their savior, Jesus Christ. This is a physical representation of everybody in the ceremony becoming connected through his or her religious beliefs. Belief in this is meant to achieve the same feeling of effervescence Durkheim describes. Believers are able to use the group unity of religion to give their lives purpose and order.

This is also found within Buddhism. Buddhism is centered on the four noble truths. The four noble truths are the words of the Buddha explaining the chaos of the world to be due to karma. This belief brings order to society in a similar way as a totem culture's sacred because it gives people something to put before personal gain, which helps society and gives the individual purpose. Belief in this absolute is used in the same way as belief in the sacred because they are both tools to create a sense of order.

Both of these Religions have been around for thousands of years. My personal experience with belief lasted around two months before it faded away. In examining this, I realized how unsustainable my belief was without a community to perpetuate it. Belief in a higher power can come about without a religion and that can give the individual purpose, but belief alone does not inspire order. Without the order of an organization, the feeling of purpose can be very impermanent. This is why I argue that for individuals to find sustainable purpose and order, being a part of a group with a shared purpose is important. Religions have developed to be very good at sustaining this.

Being a part of a religious group can give individuals a shared sense of purpose, but it is not the only way. In our society, we have come up when many alternatives to get this group feeling of effervescence. We can get it through the jobs we have, the charities we are a part of, or the sports teams we root for. A good example is the NFL. The NFL is an institution that mirrors Durkheim's totem clans. Just as football fans have a team they root for, clans have a totem animal. Durkheim states "the totem is ordinarily not an individual, but a species or a variety." (Durkheim, 103) In the same way totem cultures center on a species instead of a single animal,

football fans usually care more about the team than the individual players. Also, just as religious activity in totem cultures center on ceremonies, football centers on games. This is a time where all the fans are brought together with the purpose of cheering on their team. Fans come together to create a similar feeling of communion that is present within religious ceremonies. Just like traditional religion, this example allows people to find purpose through feeling they are part of a group.

That example might seem abstract, but what about something a little closer to a traditional religion, yoga. Yoga was introduced to the west in the early 1900's and has been gaining popularity in our society ever since. There are many similarities between a yoga class and a mass at church. In both situations, participants are able to develop friendships through talking after the conclusion. In the same way participants sing during certain points in a Christian mass, participants chant during certain points in a yoga class. Both organizations promote healthy lifestyles and moral values. A yoga class even concludes with placing the hands together and bowing the head as if praying. These similarities show how a yoga organization can bring purpose to individuals through promoting values and feelings of community.

In conclusion, I theorize that religion is a survival tool for human beings to find purpose and order in the complex and chaotic environment we inhabit. As a species, we have a desire for belief because it leads to us making sense of the chaos of the world and uniting into groups to survive our habitat. Now, in our society, we have plenty of communities to do this, we are part of gyms and political parties, book clubs and beach volleyball teams. In belonging to all these different groups, we can find the similar feelings of purpose and order that we once needed religion for. So it may seem like religious groups are becoming less prevalent in our lives, but I make the argument that they are not becoming less prevalent, they are just changing shape.¹

¹ Works Cited

Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press, 1995.
Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search For Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962.