

CITATION

Swidler, Leonard J. "Religion: whence, why, whoops, whither" *Journal of Faculty of Theology of Bozok University*. 4,4 (2013/4), pp. 49-55.

## Religion: whence—why— whoops!—whither

Leonard J. Swidler

Prof. Dr., Temple University

### Özet

Makalede, dinin nasıl ortaya çıktığı, niçin var olduğu ve geleceği tartışılmıştır. Bunu yaparken de dinin tarih sahnesindeki gelişimi açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Dine dair kapsayıcı bir tanım yapılmış ve bu tanım üzerine felsefi düşünceler ifade edilmiştir. Sonuç kısmında, dinlerin varlık amacının insanları daha kamil insanlar yapmak olduğu gösterilmiştir. "Kimsenin birşey hakkında herşeyi bilemeyeceği" olgusundan hareketle daha kamil bir birey olabilmek için devamlı surette bir diyalogun ve öğrenmenin içerisinde olunması gerektiği vurgulanmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Din, kamil insan, diyalog

however, but also animals with the ability to think abstractly (Latin, *ab*, "from," *tractus*, "pull," as in "tractor"—e.g., we *pull from* viewing many different concrete dogs one "abstract," general idea "dog," which applies to all dogs). This ability to think abstractly also gives us the ability to choose among the several concrete possibilities we perceive at any moment—that is, it give us *freedom*, and with it, of course corresponding *responsibility*.

The ability to think abstractly likewise gives us the capacity to *notice* that we are thinking. As we gather more and more experiences and increasingly think about them, we simultaneously become increasingly *self-aware*, conscious of ourselves, and still a further level, of ourselves thinking. We then begin to ask ourselves an endless stream of questions. That is where religion comes from—asking ourselves all these questions that almost literally jump out of our everyday experiences.

I have been very abstract so far—and I will become so again in a bit, but let me pause here and offer you a true concrete story which will help to

I would like to reflect with you, the reader, very, very briefly—to get you also to reflect, and then to respond back, if not to me, then, perhaps, to each other, and, most of all, to yourself—about where religion comes from, why it exists, where it is going, and in the midst—*whoops!*—how come it changed?

### The whence of religion

We humans are very special kinds of *animals* (Latin, *anima*, "living," from which we get terms like "animation," etc.). We are not only highly developed living bodies with the five senses, etc.,

### KAYNAKÇA

Swidler, Leonard J. "Religion: whence, why, whoops, whither", *Bozok Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*. 4,4 (2013/4), ss. 49-55.

ground what I have been trying to say so far. This story raises a fundamental human problem, one that my then three-year old daughter Carmel very starkly posed as a question—the very kind of question that gave rise to religion. She was then speaking only German, having been born and raised in Germany till then. We were out for a walk after a very warm rain, and the sidewalk was covered with earthworms (*Regenwürme*, in German), which for her were definitely *schrecklich*, “icky,” “evil.” After walking—very carefully!—for a while, she very seriously, quietly asked: *Vati, ist Gott gut* (“Daddy, is God good?”) I responded, *Ja*. Then after a little more silent walking, she asked, *Hat Gott alles gemacht?* (“Did God make everything?”) I, now becoming somewhat wary, answered slowly, *Ja*. Then she sprang the trap: *Wer dann hat die Regenwürme gemacht?* (“Who then made the earthworms?”)—the problem of the source of evil! (From then on, I thought of this kind of query as “A Carmel Question.”)

Our human ability to think abstractly, and, even quite young, our being able to think about our thinking, that is, our ability to think about our (or God’s!) making choices—in other words, our ability to pose “Carmel questions”!—naturally, inevitably led us humans long ago to ask ourselves questions like: Where did we come from? What is the purpose of our life (does it have a purpose!)? If life has purpose, how do we reach it, that is, what is good, and what is not good, or bad? We humans slowly came up

with various answers. We developed explanations for ourselves, telling ourselves that “X” is the purpose of human life, and “A” is how we have to act if we want to reach “X.” These and related follow-up kinds of “Carmel Questions” naturally, inevitably led to the founding of what we call Religion.

#### The What of Religion

Let me pause here and offer you my working definition of Religion. I say a “working definition” because, although many scholars have given many differing descriptions of Religion, they often did so from a specific perspective—anthropological, sociological, psychological, theological, historical.... I want to offer a definition that is general enough to include all the ones just mentioned without going into the deeper detail they often focus on.

Religion is an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly based on a notion and experience of the Transcendent; it normally contains the four “C’s”: Creed, Code, Cult, Community-structure.<sup>01</sup>

**Creed** (Latin, *credere*, “to believe”) refers to the cognitive, understanding aspect of a religion; it is everything that goes into the “explanation” of the *ultimate* meaning of life.

**Code** of behavior, or ethics, includes all the rules and customs of action that somehow follow from one aspect or another of the Creed, of the “explanation.”

**Cult** means all the ritual activities that “cultivate,” foster, the relationship

01. Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute*, (Minneapolis: 1990), Fortress Press, p. XIV.

of the believer to one aspect or other of the Transcendent, either directly, as in prayer, or indirectly, as in, what you eat, or don't eat, because the "Transcendent" is said to have told you to do so—in other words, all the "externals" of religion.

**Community-structure** refers to the relationships among the believers; this can vary widely, from a very egalitarian relationship, as among Quakers who have no clergy, through a "republican," "representative" structure, as Presbyterians have, to a monarchical one, as Catholics have with a pope.

**Transcendent**, as the roots of the word indicate (Latin, *trans*, across, beyond; *scendere*, "to go," as in "ascend," "descend"), means "that which goes beyond" the everyday, ordinary, surface experience of reality. It can mean spirits, gods, a Personal God, an Impersonal God, Emptiness, etc.

Especially in modern times there have developed "explanations of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly" which are *not* based on a notion of the transcendent, e.g., Marxism, Atheistic Humanism—"What you see is what you get; that's all there is!" Although in every respect these "explanations..." function as religions traditionally have worked in human life, because the idea of the Transcendent, however it is understood, plays such a central role in religion, but not in these "explanations...", for the sake of accuracy it is best to give them a separate name; the name often used is: *Ideology*. Hence, much, though not

all, of the following discussion will, *mutatis mutandis* (Latin, "adjusting what needs to be adjusted"), also apply to "Ideology" even when the term is not used.

### The Why of Religion

The question that must be addressed first, of course, is that of the first C: What is the *ultimate* meaning, purpose of life? If we reflect about this question even a little, we will notice that in the end all the religions (and ideologies) of the world tell us that "happiness" is fulfilling whatever they understand that *ultimate* purpose of life to be. Or, to put it in other words, the purpose of religion is to help humans to be correct, authentic, fully developed, good human beings. (It is interesting to note that at least Western religions speak of that "good" human being as a "saint," as a "holy" person—and the term "holy" comes from the Greek *holos*, to be "whole." To non-Western readers, I put the question: What is the *linguistic* background of your non-Western goal of religion—*nirvana*, *paradise*, *moksha*....?)

But of course there are many descriptions of what it is to be a good, authentic, holy human being, and therein lies one of the sources of the *differing* religions. To make matters even more complicated, just what a good, authentic, holy human

being is like has been variously described not only *among* the different religions, but often also even *within* each of the religions. Still, becoming (whatever is described as) a model, true human being is what *all* the religions

say fulfills their “explanation of the *ultimate* meaning of life.” Hence, it then becomes essential to reflect on what religions say we must do, and not do, in order to become that model human being who will fulfill the *ultimate* meaning of life.

Therefore to answer the “Why?” of Religion we must address not only that first C, but also the second C of Religion, the Code of Behavior, the ethics, that flow from the first C. The second C answers the question, Why should I do this, and not do that? What is good? and, What is bad?—if I want to attain the purpose of life, the first C. Again, there are many differences not only among the religions about what is good and what is bad, but there are also differences *within* religions about that. However, what is really interesting to note, are not so much the differences, though they are, of course, important, but how much agreement there is on the fundamental ethical principles! When a friend and colleague of mine, Hans Küng, and I both began to investigate this matter in 1990, it became clear that there is *in fact* a broad agreement on the fundamental ethical principles across all the religions and ethical systems of the past and present, which is why we then launched the *Movement for a Global Ethic*.<sup>01</sup>

As stated above, every religion will also have as major parts of themselves the huge range of cultic elements—the third C—as well as the multiple forms of community-structure—the fourth C.

01. For instance see the websites: [www.globaletic.org](http://www.globaletic.org) and [www.weltethos.org](http://www.weltethos.org).

Once more, there will be wide variations both in cultic and communal structural *among* and *within* the religions.

#### The “Whoops!” of Religion

I decided to use “*Whoops!*” as the heading of this section where I want to reflect on “change” in religion—because people don’t usually expect change in religions! Religions change? No, not possible, you say! But we find in archeological diggings that the earliest humans thought of Ultimate Reality as plural—*polytheism*—and even more shocking to many today, as female—*goddesses*! Further, many early religions included human sacrifice, which no religious person would accept today, nor, indeed, its later replacement in the history of religions, animal sacrifice.

We must face the reality that our religions, that is, “how we humans understand the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly” have in fact changed immensely over the millennia. One helpful way to try to understand how these changes have occurred is the concept of “paradigm shift.” A *paradigm* is simply the *mental model* each of us has in our heads (which we largely learned from our elders) into which we fit all new information as we attain it. For example, until the new explanation of Copernicus in the sixteenth century, almost everybody believed that the sun revolved around the earth (“geocentrism,” Greek, *geos*, “earth”), and all the new observations about the movement of the planets and stars gathered over the millennia was fitted into that

paradigm. However, increasingly the flood of new information gathered about the movements of the stars and planets made the old “geocentric” paradigm less and less plausible, until finally Copernicus proposed that really the earth revolved around the sun! (“heliocentrism,” Greek, *helios*, “sun”). After furious initial resistance (especially by Christian theologians!), eventually everyone accepted the new paradigm of heliocentrism—a major paradigm shift!

These paradigm shifts are not restricted to the physical sciences, but in fact occur in all areas of human thought, including ethics and religion. For example, in the area of “what is good and what is bad in human relations,” that is, in religion and ethics, we have the example of human slavery. During 98.5% of the 100,000 years of *homo sapiens sapiens* on the earth—that is, up to just one hundred and fifty years ago—humans of all different religions thought possessing slaves was morally acceptable. However, in 2013, no serious person of any world religion—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism....—would claim that slavery was morally acceptable! This is a huge moral paradigm shift! How can such change in religions happen!?

If we look at history, we see that paradigms, in whatever field, are challenged as new evidence comes in that is increasingly difficult to fit into the prevailing paradigm. As the difficulties mount slowly (could be over many decades, or even centuries), a

“tipping point” is finally reached when more and more key people in the field become aware of the challenge to the old paradigm, and then the change to a new paradigm begins to occur rapidly, indeed, even increasingly rapidly. For example, just a few decades after the rise of “Abolitionism”—the movement to “abolish” slavery—in the late eighteenth century, there developed in mid-nineteenth century the first wave of “Feminism”—the movement for the equality of women with men, followed in the mid-1960s by the second wave of Feminism at the same time as the worldwide peace and civil rights movements. Feminism in the early twenty-first century clearly has begun to reach its “tipping point”—as evidenced by the multiple women leaders in politics, business, universities, etc., across the world—and soon the subordination of women in general will be as unacceptable morally as slavery is morally unacceptable today.

Change in human life was for a very long, long time very, very slow. Our best scientific evidence to date suggests that we—*homo sapiens sapiens*—first appeared in central Africa about 100,000 years ago, and slowly spread out from there over the following millennia. For perhaps the first 90,000 years humans lived by hunting and gathering, developing agriculture only about 10,000 B.C.E. at the earliest—very slow change, indeed! It took another seven millennia for writing to be invented (around 2,000 B.C.E.—in Sumeria, present-day Iraq). But that invention greatly accelerated

change! Within less than—not seven thousand years, but—a mere one thousand years, there was created the foundational Sacred Scriptures of two of the most ancient religions: Hinduism and Israelitism (the basis of: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Then in just a few hundred years (between 800 and 200 B.C.E.) there emerged the “Axial Age,” which more or less simultaneously radically changed the consciousness of the four ancient civilizations: China, India, Near East, and Greece.

Scholars see in the Axial Age a *major paradigm shift* of a truly immense magnitude. This shift can be seen mainly in three ways: 1. A person’s identity was no longer primarily as a member of a tribe, but as an *individual* person—e.g., the whole teaching of the Buddha was for *each* person to seek enlightenment; 2. Not external rites were key, but *internal* commitment—e.g., “I desire not burnt offerings, but that you walk justly before your God,” said the Israelite prophet Isaiah; 3. The rise of critical-thinking, that is, “thinking about thinking,” which gave rise to philosophy and scientific thinking in Greece and elsewhere.

Now change in human life accelerated greatly, as we can see in the rise and fall of innumerable countries, empires, civilizations in just, not millennia, but centuries. Paradigm shifts of great significance developed in different civilizations ever more rapidly and frequently. Then a cascade of advances in the physical sciences far beyond anything that had happened before started in Western Europe in the seventeenth century, which, when

coupled with the discovery by the West in the sixteenth century that the earth is a globe and subsequent Western colonialism, quickly drew the whole world into the whirl of increasing changes coming from advancing abstract thinking, scientific discoveries, and the ideas of “human rights,” “democracy,” and “human freedom.” What was written in Philadelphia in 1776, that “All men are created equal,” was unthinkable outside the then infant United States—but now the whole world claims, or clamors for, it!

Change is racing forward now in breathtaking speed! When my own father was born just slightly over a century ago (1897), there of course were no smart phones, no worldwide web, no e-mail, no computers, no television, no radio, no airplanes. Now we live in a global village where the only thing that does not change is change itself—except that change is changing ever faster!

So, does that mean that nothing old is worthwhile? No, such an idea would fly in the face of everything good that has been developed by humankind in the 100,000 years of our existence. One of the most important things we humans have begun to learn from our increasing understanding of the past is that not everything old is good (like slavery), and not everything new is good (like global warming). We now increasingly understand that “*Nobody knows everything about anything!*” Nobody knows all about chemistry (we constantly learn new things every day!), or about physics, or about sociology, or

psychology, or....anything! And, since religion tries to give us “an explanation of the *ultimate*, the *total*, meaning of life,” obviously, all the more so, nobody can know everything about religion, As we humans continue to learn more and more about the “*ultimate* meaning of life and how to live accordingly,” religion, we—and the religions guiding us—are going to change accordingly, as we humans have, for instance, in rejecting human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, slavery, subordination of women....

#### The Whither of Religion

What, then, do we do? We engage those who have had different experiences and have therefore different “explanations of the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly” from us, in dialogue, that is, we try to see through their eyes what they see on their side of the world that we cannot see from our side of the world—and vice versa. We try to learn from each other. Together we use our constantly developing critical-thinking abilities to unendingly learn ever more about reality, and the *ultimate* meaning of life.

Does this mean that humankind, which clearly is increasingly racing toward *One World*, toward a *Global Civilization*, will all come to embrace one religion for all humans!? No, that clearly is not what is happening, nor will it happen in the future. Reality is far too complex for there to be just one explanation of it As we continue to learn ever more about how complex the universe is, the less possible a single “explanation of the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly” becomes.

What is clearly happening is the growth of 1) the need for dialogue<sup>01</sup>, 2) the increasing awareness of what we humans *share* across our religions and cultures (Global Ethic)<sup>02</sup>, and 3) an *appreciation* for our many differences, which in the end will produce a Dialogical Civilization, which will not be one of uniformity, but simultaneously of unifying and differentiating ongoing dynamism—and at its heart will be, not a single religion, but Religions-In-Dialogue!

#### Bibliography

- Center for Global Ethics [www.globalethic.org](http://www.globalethic.org)  
Global Ethic Foundation, [www.weltethos.org](http://www.weltethos.org).  
Journal of Ecumenical Studies, [www.jesdialogue.org](http://www.jesdialogue.org)  
Swidler, Leonard, *After the Absolute*, Minneapolis: 1990, Fortress Press.

01. Journal of Ecumenical Studies can be considered as one of the important journals, which advocates dialogue. See more, [www.jesdialogue.org](http://www.jesdialogue.org)  
02. For more information see [www.globalethic.org](http://www.globalethic.org)