

“Make It So!” The Persistence of Religion

A (somewhat) humorous talk give at Queen’s School of Religion, March 2012.

On the first day of classes in our department’s world religions course, I tell the students that religions are mass cultural habits. From this perspective, religions look a lot like sports. They are practices that are culturally diverse, change over time, subject to globalization, riddled with corruption, and create acute passions and rivalries that are transmitted from parent to child in the form of ritualized habits. Religions, like the Maple Leafs, demand an irrational faith that is much hyped, lucrative for some, and always disappointing for the fans.

Religions, like hockey and football or the operas of Wagner, are also patriarchal, heteronormative, and violent. But they are also massive in their appeal, spectacular, colourful, brilliant and powerful. Their players are charismatic icons who wield a mystical power over their devotees. Their stories are the stuff of legend and they are immortalized in halls of fame, our modern day Valhallas.

But to those who are not claimed by the power of sport, or the Ring of the Nibelung, it is deeply mystifying as to why these cultural artifacts fascinate so many people across the world. As the Queen’s School of Religion launches, I hope it will develop new partnerships with cultural studies, drama, music and sport, so that we can better understand religions as these kinds of mass cultural habits.

But tonight’s question is why does religion persist? From my perspective, this question is something of a tautology. Religions are mass cultural habits, and it is in the very nature

of habits to persist. That is what they do. Religions, to the annoyance of Richard Dawkins, function like selfish genes and exist largely to replicate themselves. They do this through ritual, storytelling and above all educational institutions like the former Queen's Theological College. Religions find willing hosts to transmit their habits far and wide, even tempting respectable Presbyterian ministers to the godforsaken shores of upper Canada. From this perspective, the question of why religion in singular persists is ultimately banal.

The real question is why do some religions persist but not others. When asked in this pluralistic light—religions not religion—we see an very interesting empirical phenomenon. Some religions, notably, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, are spectacularly successful at acquiring billions of fans across the world. Others, like Judaism, face constant threats to their existence. Some, like Zoroastrianism, are tiny but resilient. But historically speaking most religions are failures. Who remembers Mithraism, asks Pascal Boyer? Most religions shine brilliantly for a while and then fizzle out. The key research question for religious studies here is why it is that some religions stick and others do not. What makes some religions successful and not others? Can we isolate what it is about the successful religions that makes them so widely adopted? What makes some religions go viral?

While I think this is a certainly an important question that someone should answer, I believe this opens up an even more interesting question which is what I want to raise for our general discussion.

That is, Who's asking why religion persists? Who wants to know? Who cares about this question? And from this follows the second important question. What is it about this religion

thing that they find so intriguing that they want to know why it persists?

To answer these questions I will draw on what I know most about, namely religion in China.

Travel in time with me, if you will, to the late Tang dynasty, around the turn of the ninth century of the common era. By this time Buddhism had spread far and wide within China and had even claimed the emperor as a devotee. Many intellectuals were deeply repulsed by this development, chief among them a scholar known as Han Yu who devoted much effort to stopping the virus of Buddhism infecting the Imperial court. His argument was that true piety was founded on filiality: respecting the traditions and teachings of one's parents. To be properly pious is to follow in the footsteps of one's family, one's community, one's tradition.

It is a sentiment that many moderns share about their religion. I am a Jew, one might say, because it is my identity, my culture, my tradition—my mass cultural habit, if you were paying attention in my course. Religions like Buddhism and Christianity with disruptive social teachings threaten this sense of filiality and social order. They demand detachment from one's karma, one's caste, one's family and they replace this given order with a new identity. In the ritual of baptism, Christians die to their own life and are born again with a new Christian name, a new family of god-parents and are welcomed into the utopian fantasy world of the kingdom of god on earth. It's explosive and liberating stuff. Jesus says deny yourself and follow me. Give up your biological parents, hate your mother, hate your father—only call God daddy, Abba. St Paul says be adopted into the family of Christ. Your genes, your culture, your race, who your parents are, what your culture is—all of these key markers of identity matter not one iota in the Kingdom of God. Even your gender is

irrelevant. We are all equal male and female, neutered by God's razor sharp castrating gaze. No wonder Isaiah and the prophets fell to their knees in fear and trembling.

The Buddha likewise says renounce your caste, your social position, your cosmically ordained fate. Be liberated from the chains of karma that bind you to the illusions of the sensual world. Be free from self-inflicted suffering. Realize that your ego, your self, your identity, your culture has no substantive reality to it and you will be happy.

With messages like these, it is no wonder that Christianity and Buddhism appeal across cultures and disrupt existing patterns of social relations. This religious drive demands in its purest form that people cease reproducing and instead live in chastity as hermits, priests and monks. Only marry if you really have to, says Saint Paul. Renounce desire says the Buddha, and live in a monastery. When it comes to this type of counter-cultural, counter-heterosexual, counter-genetic religion, it's no wonder that the social, educated elites like Han Yu, or Richard Dawkins, or Schleiermacher's 'cultured despisers' cannot fathom religion's appeal. The privileged are the ones who ask the question of why religion exists, why it is so infectious, and why it is so powerful. If you are perfectly happy in your culturally rewarding, heterosexual, child-producing life, you will be horrified by disruptive convert religion. Han Yu thought it was deeply immoral to worship strange gods like the Buddha at the expense of one's family traditions and was perplexed by this new religion's popularity.

And so now we can begin to see more clearly what "religion" is. When people ask why religion persists, they ask this question from the perspective of the privileged nonbeliever living in a normative secular modernity. To those who ask this question, religion is an alien habit or a kind of pathology.

To ask why something persists is to already made the assumption that, like gonorrhea, it ought not to. No one asks why people stay healthy because health is normal. They only ask why people get sick. Only high-minded commentators who deplore the violence of hockey, religion or Wagnerian opera ask these types of questions.

This then gives us a second clue to understand religion. Religion is not an obvious material thing. It is something that is deemed by outsiders. To say that something is a religion is to make a classification from an external perspective. It is a label given to something by outsiders.

Until the late 19th century there was no direct equivalent for the English word religion in Chinese. The modern Chinese word used to translate religion, zongjiao, was invented in Japan in the 19th century and brought to China by Christian missionaries keen to explain what their religion thing was. In this case we can see clearly that “religion” was quite literally given by outsiders. They were the ones who first deemed certain kinds of cultural activities to be religious in a modern sense.

The reasons for this, and the consequences of this, have been profound. Firstly, the Chinese religious rituals for venerating the spirits of the deceased were not deemed to be religion by the first wave of Jesuit missionaries. They were deemed to be cultural habits associated with Confucianism and therefore did not conflict with true religion, i.e. Christianity. One consequence of this can be seen in a 2005 survey of religious belief in China. When asked to label themselves as religious, non-religious or anti-religious, only 8.7% of Chinese people said they defined themselves as religious. But when asked about their practices. 22% said they prayed to the god of fortune, 13% prayed to other spirits

and 29% found themselves comforted or empowered by religious activities.

This conflicting picture of religious life in modern China arises from the fact that because of the Christian invention of “religion” and the widespread acceptance of this label by China’s modernizers, most Chinese people do not accept that their religious practices actually constitute religion.

The second point that goes along with this is that that an the act of naming something as religion that always comes with a value judgment. To say that something is a religion is not dog or this is a cat. It is an act of taxonomy fraught with subjective value.

The history of religion in twentieth century China can be viewed as a political process of deeming or classifying certain activities as religion and other activities as culture (which more tolerated) or superstition (which is less tolerated) or evil cults (which are totally outlawed). What counts as religion is simply the result of an administrative act of deeming something to be religion. This deeming activity is the means by which religious activity is bureaucratically created, defined and controlled.

Why does religion exist? In the modern nation state religion ultimately exists because the state defines its existence, and enshrines its existence in constitutions and charters of rights and freedoms.

In this regard religion is rather like pornography. The interesting thing about pornography is what counts as pornography and what counts as art. Why do people in some cultures and some historical periods regard a certain kind of thing as pornographic and not another. The answer lies not in the image itself but how it is culturally produced and regarded. It is our cultural and political regard that deems

one thing as offensively pornographic and another thing as genuinely artistic. Likewise, it is our cultural and political regard that deems one thing as religion and another thing as culture. In recent years, for example, Christmas has been taken out of the religion box and put into the more neutral culture box. At the same time, veils have been taken out of the culture box and put in the explosive religion box.

Religion, like pornography, is not in and of itself intriguing. The more intriguing thing is the process whereby our culture makes religion or pornography come into existence as a distinct cultural category and assigns various activities and habits to these boxes.

As Captain Picard in the Star Trek Next Generation series says, "Make it so." This is why religion persists. Because we make it so.