

Research Project 2023

If Religion Were a Game

How Much Religion is
Good for Us?

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The ongoing work's title should not be misunderstood. If religion is a game, then it is not "just" a game or "only" a game. As a matter of fact, nothing is more serious than games. Nothing is more serious than a game. Games require devotion and absolute acceptance. In games, rules cannot be broken or spontaneously bended, whereas in the real world it is much more possible to do so. Games are genuine, honest, sincere, severe, sober, contemplative, and thoughtful. To say that religion is a game does not discredit religion, but, on the contrary, elevates it to the status of nobility. However, whenever we play, we also know that we are just playing.

The rationalist-Enlightenment premise that religion is an illusion, a false consciousness, or simply a sickness that can gradually be done away with, has gained much territory in the secular world. However, this "illusion" may have a future – though not in the shape fundamentalists may have hoped. In modern civilizations, religion is often present as an invisible force capable of guiding us morally and emotionally, and in this book, I want to liken this force to a game that is played unconsciously. Without being religious, we seem to have maintained something of a religious subconscious. The spirit of religion has survived in a secular age, and this spirit prevents us from entirely giving in, for example, to violence or self-destructive urges or to the liquid individualism that is rampant in modern civilizations.

My Colleague

I had expected this day to come for a while. On a sunny Friday afternoon, my colleague went ahead and tried to turn me into a better Christian. Partly ironically, partly out of defiance, but also, perhaps, because I wanted to be friendly, I agreed: "If you can convince me that Jesus is in fact the son of God, I will become the most fervent of Christians. After all, if this is indeed true, we all should be fervent Christians." To my surprise, my colleague's forehead did not crease with wrinkles. He did not search for efficient arguments that he could launch at me. Instead, he leant back in his chair, smiled, and said in a mild voice: "That's not how it works. You do not believe it because you find it plausible; you find it plausible because you believe it." Frankly, I had not expected this answer. "So why would I decide to believe in something if I don't find it plausible?" I asked. "It's simple. Because you like it."

Religion and Aesthetics

The leap of faith, as my colleague had described it on that day, seems to be enabled by "aesthetic" considerations. Believing or not believing is a matter of "liking," and once one "likes," the reasonable premises will fall into place quasi automatically and make the argument plausible. To many modern individuals, the idea of believing in something beyond any "plausibility" is not acceptable. However, the process of 'liking first, and acknowledging the sense second' is familiar in the realm of art. We do not try to make somebody like modern art by using reasonable and logical arguments. Whether they like it or not will not depend on ethical or scientific considerations, not even on those drawn from the "science of art," which is aesthetics. Aesthetic arguments about proportions, harmony, or laws of attractiveness are unlikely to make a skeptic admire a drip paint canvas by Jackson Pollock or Carl Andre's sculpture *Equivalent VIII*. Whether they like it or not might depend on largely ungraspable elements, which becomes most obvious when it comes to the question of whether a work is a "great" work of art or not. No rules or quantifiable knowledge can establish the work as "great;" but once the individual's aesthetic appreciation has reached a certain level, it becomes relatively "plausible" that this work is great art.



Art and Play

My colleague – though he may not agree with this assessment – appreciated religion in an aesthetic fashion. When we appreciate art, such as a drip paint by Jackson Pollock, and find that here – perhaps against all odds – things make somehow sense and are somehow “plausible,” we are also very much aware that the work has rhyme and reason only within the limits of art. We are aware that it is our aesthetic appreciation – and nothing else – that turns these undulating lines into art and enables us to speak of the “meaning” of the work. Without such a preliminary acceptance of art as an instance of meaningfulness, not only modern art but all art would appear as nonsense. Why paint the Mona Lisa? What’s the purpose? It only makes sense as art, which means that some preliminary conception of a “sense of art” is necessary in order to see the work’s point.

The whole problem can be rethought by using the model not of art but of games. Playing a game, football for instance, makes no sense at all. If an extraterrestrial who has no notion of play came to earth, they would find a football match or the playing of any game quite bizarre. However, once I have entered the game and accepted the rules, everything perfectly makes sense. The rules become absolute, and I must accept them unconditionally. This functions, of course, only on the condition that I have acquired, consciously or unconsciously, an understanding of the notion of play either beforehand or while I am playing. The game is a closed organism, and its meaning resides only “inside” the organism. “The activity of play has only internal purposes, not ones that transcend it,” says the specialist of play, phenomenologist Eugen Fink (2016: 20).

Art, Play, and Religion

Both art and religion are rituals, and it is perfectly possible to engage in such a ritual. Even if we are aware that it is but a ritual, it can retain meaning and purpose as long as we agree that it is meaningful *as a ritual*. The ritual is a game, and whoever is in the ritual will find that it makes sense because they are in it. Even the spectators who are positioned outside the game can participate – indirectly – in the ritual and derive the ritual’s meaningfulness from the ritual while watching it. The rituals of art and religion can make sense as art and religion, and we are aware of this fact while playing them.

The essence of the play-art-religion connection is related to the curious combination of two conditions that would “normally” contradict each other: the combination of belief and skepticism. Such a contradictory aggregate is only acceptable in games, rituals, art, and religion; and the game is the most fundamental model capable of expressing this emotional and intellectual pattern. Play is based on – or provides – neither purely subjective nor purely objective certitudes. Instead, the subjective and the objective elements that we encounter in games both support and undermine each other in a paradoxical fashion, which creates the particular atmosphere of play. Games require

the unconditional acceptance of rules and the simultaneous awareness that what we are “only” playing games, which clearly suggests a merging of belief and skepticism.

The Future of an Illusion

According to Nietzsche, God is dead, but the dead God still exercises some power upon us. In this book I express this same thought by depicting societies and civilizations as games that are determined by a certain spirit, a spirit that is still derived from religion, and which modern, secular cultures perpetuate in their own ways. One does not need to believe in God to know that justice is better than injustice, courage better than cowardice, generosity better than egotism, and compassion better than violence. One just plays the cultural game in which the world of myths and religion still speaks to us from the past and regulates our morals and our ethical feelings. Religion exists, but in modern societies, it has become a played religion enacted like a game. Furthermore, “religion as a game” is precisely the event that takes place in the secular age that is often called “postmodern.” Like all games, the game of religion is not real but an illusion, and I hold that it must be played as an illusion in order to be a true religion. Religion’s destiny has always been to be played as an illusion. Religion is a game, and a game is only valuable as an illusion. We do not want games to be real for the simple reason that a “real” game would no longer be a game. In parallel, a religion that takes itself seriously and believes itself to be founded on real (perhaps even scientific) premises is no longer a religion. Logically, the secular age is therefore more religious than all preceding ages. Especially the “postmodern” age has given up many beliefs in absolute truths, rigid dichotomies, necessities, and destinies, and shifted towards some form of relativism: it has therefore become more religious. The provocative thesis of this book is that in the present cultural and intellectual environment, the illusion of religion can finally be lived as an illusion, that is, as a religion.

When irony and skepticism enter religion, religion becomes what it was always supposed to be: a game. Religions descend from cults, which means that they are spiritual games. The Oxford English Dictionary informs us that, traditionally, culture or cultivation tended to be understood by Christian authors as “worship.” In the modern age, religious imperatives about sexuality, the body, or eternity have been slowly dissolved. However, it does not mean that the spirit of religion simply melted into air. It has been preserved within cultures in the form of a spiritual game.

This seems to be the only way to adhere to religious principles without becoming neurotic or fundamentalist. By playing religion as a game, we discover the most genuine way in which religion can be experienced in a secular world and recuperate the most original spirit of religion that has been lost in more “real” phases of religion’s history. Accepting religion as an illusion requires a peculiar mixture of belief and skepticism, or of what Gianni Vattimo calls “half-belief,” which is one

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of the main topics of this book. In times of secularization, we can and should shelter an illusion of religion or religion as an illusion.

I examine parallels between play and religion from a philosophical, theological, and anthropological perspective using the philosophies of Vattimo, Derrida, Žižek, Heidegger, John Caputo, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I refer to Christianity and Islam, and also analyze arguments present in Buddhism, Daoism, and Sufism.

I find analogies between religion and culture because both descend from play-like cults. Turning religion into play means turning religion into culture. Whenever religion is “weakened” (Vattimo’s term) into culture, it becomes stronger because it rediscovers the original meaning of culture, which is based on the cult. Culture consists in the development of a specific cult or play that is performed in society.

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