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Proceedings

Religion, Information and Ritual: Understanding Difference in a Sacred Context [†]

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Abstract: Religion is a fundamental part of the lived experience of the majority of humanity. This paper reports on the conceptualization of religion through an understanding of its relationship with information. The focus is on practice and ritual rather than belief. Information is here understood in terms of Bateson’s definition of “the difference that makes a difference”. The paper explores information in a ritual context in a variety of settings, as well as touching on work done regarding other uses of information by religious communities, such as church websites and learning environments.

Keywords: information; difference; ritual; religion

1. Introduction: Religion, Ritual and Lived Experience

Religion is a complex mixture of belief and practice, situated in a particular set of institutions and traditions. In each of these aspects of religion, information can be observed—in the rich symbolic language and behaviour of a Roman Catholic Mass or a Hindu festival, but equally in the simple and plain practices of a Quaker meeting. Religion is somewhat marginalised in mainstream Western culture, but it is central to the lived experiences of a huge proportion of the world’s population.

This paper forms part of an ongoing investigation to examine the ways in which theories of information can be used to understand the nature of religious practice, but also to widen the use of information theory through exposing it to phenomena with which it has not often been associated. In this regard it resembles the work of West Churchman [1] who in the 1970s sought to widen systems thinking by incorporating ideas from religion (along with morality, aesthetics and politics).

It has been argued by a number of scholars that religion is principally experienced through practice rather than belief—that for many people, the lived phenomena of religious acts is much more important than the belief structures espoused by those performing these acts. (This can be found, for example, in the work of the theologian Karen Armstrong [2], but it relates closely to sociological ideas of performativity, and Goffman’s presentation of self in everyday life [3]). The focus of this work is therefore not on belief structures but on action. More specifically, the focus will be on corporate acts of worship, the role that information plays in these acts, and the conceptualisation of these acts through an information lens.

An important aspect of focusing on lived phenomena is that it emphasises the richness of most religious practice, which cannot simply be reduced to words but are deeply embedded in physical surroundings, cultural backgrounds, political entailments, and emotional experiences. Armstrong refers to this process as a ‘mystery’ [2] (p. 60), drawing on the ancient Greek term, and observes that beliefs cannot be separated from practices. Bateson comments about reductive approaches to symbology relating to ritual acts, especially the Eucharist, that arose during the Reformation that “this way of interpretation banished from the Church that part of the mind that makes metaphor, poetry, and religion—the part of the mind that most belonged in Church—but you cannot keep it out” [4] (p. 29).

2. Towards a Model for Information, Religion and Ritual

I will discuss in this paper a framework for understanding information based on an actualised form of Bateson's celebrated definition of information as "the difference that makes a difference" [5] (p. 453) and use it to analyse a number of examples of religious ritual from different settings. My questions throughout are around the meanings and symbology involved in these ritual occasions, but also the way in which difference can be explored and exhibited—difference between interpretations, experiences and theologies, as well as more concrete and practical differences; and the way in which all these differences are weaved into an informational framework in the ritual practice.

3. Information in Other Religious Contexts

I will also briefly discuss the way in which this framework can be used as a form of action research, by discussing its application in two practical church contexts where I have used it over the past year, and where it has had positive impact.

The first of these areas is in the analysis of local church websites. These can range from large and sophisticated, created by professionals with huge experience; through well-crafted sites based on dedicated templates and platforms and built by experienced (albeit amateur) developers; to terse static sites with only basic information. My interest however is largely here in the information that is conveyed on such sites—the underlying messages and forms of communication involved, and thus the information conveyed through the differences that make a difference.

The second area concerns learning in a faith context. It is common to most religious traditions that learning is an important aspect, whether it is carried out in a communal and ritualised manner, or in a more individualised and rational manner. Especially where more formal learning is concerned, a particular question in this regard is the use of online and blended learning techniques—how is it possible for religious groups to educate their members, at various stages of their development and in various roles within those groups, in ways that combine the effectiveness of online tools. How can these tools make a difference? In what ways does this form of learning resemble or differ from learning processes in a secular society?

Donald Schön argued, almost fifty years ago, that "The loss of the stable state means that our society and all of its institutions are in continuing processes of transformation. We cannot expect new stable states that will endure even for our own lifetimes. We must learn to understand, guide, influence, and manage these transformations. We must make the capacity for undertaking them integral to ourselves and to our institutions" [6] (p. 30). Looking at such transformations in a religious context, and transformations within religious institutions, is crucial to the world today.

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