

Article Review

The pandemic and its influence on the relationship between science, religion, and theology

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The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced many social perceptions and has motivated a deep cultural shift in how people feel and project meaning into their threatened lives, relationships, and activities. This external factor has also influenced the perceptions of science and religious beliefs in broad population sectors, posing serious challenges and offering interesting opportunities as well. This new context provides an opportune chance to review and test how science and religion are related in particularly stressful situations.

It has long been speculated that the dramatic worldview shifts in the Renaissance were brought about by the plague which ravaged Europe some years before: it was the realization that the traditional knowledge was not useful, together with the tremendous isolation felt during the outbreaks, where sick individuals were abandoned by the Church and their own families alike, which triggered both anthropocentrism and Modern Science (Tuchman 1978). Belief shifts, in many ways, precede social ones, and it is important to explore the consequences of the Covid crisis in terms of the perceptions of science, the institutions, religious belief, the need for meaning and our relationship with the environment.

In our opinion, what is changing is not the way science and theology are produced or researched, but how public beliefs about these activities and their meaning are affected by this severe crisis. What is important is to assess how much science is reliable in its capacity to fix human problems; and to what extent religion still plays a role in such difficult circumstances: threats, uncertainty, and the isolation due to lockdown. Very likely, Covid-19 has elicited new perceptions or has corrected previous views on how much science can be relied upon, and how effective it is. A similar effect could be found – at least in a part of the population – concerning religion as a more or less effective coping strategy. Such a new context could help us to distribute the respective functions of both social systems better; to harmonise those different approaches more effectively; or to perceive them as complementary sources of meaning. However, other impressions could invite one to re-evaluate the reach and power of science, after the recent wave that nourished inflated expectations.

According to the former description, the research questions that need to be answered are:

- To what extent has the pandemic experience contributed to our better distinguishing, distributing and assigning the territories and functions of science and religion?
- Has science lost part of its authority due to the limitations exposed during the pandemic and its management?
- Has religious faith gained more appreciation in this uncertain context?
- How are the roles of science, religious and other beliefs changing, as sources of meaning and resources for coping with threat and loss?
- Has trust in institutions in general changed?
- Has the need for meaning intensified or transformed? In what ways?
- What are the perceived needs for change in our societal structures?
- Has this experience modified our perception of the environment and our relationship with it?

It is crucial to verify, within our model of cultural evolution and progress, how historical circumstances and unexpected contingencies determine the evolution of broadly held beliefs and values, in our case the social perceptions of science and religious beliefs, institutions, social structures and the environment. Beliefs are subjected to different evolutionary pressures, new adaptations, drifts and struggles, and the recent pandemic offers a unique case-study to test such influences and how beliefs evolve to adapt to the new conditions. These brief pages offer an outline of a highly desirable research program, including empirical surveys or field work, to test to what extent science, religion and theology have been affected by the current crisis.

1. A theoretical toolbox to study the shifts related to the pandemic

The study of shifts in both science and religion during and after the pandemic could benefit from a set of theories and studies that assist in framing such research and establishing current trends.

- The first and most important framework is provided by studies trying to model the different ways to understand the relationship between science and religion. After the famous typology proposed by Barbour more than fifty years ago, several other proposals have been advanced aimed to better describe and offer more nuances to the possible tensions and modes of collaboration between scientific views and religious beliefs, with their theological reflection. Probably the latest addition to the series is the recent book by Neil Messer, *Science in Theology* (2020), trying to discern different styles in relating scientific advances and their theological applications. In any case, those models can help to construct better scales and suggest questions to test to what extent the subjects surveyed

understand the science-religion connection and the possible implications of the chosen approach or understanding.

- The second framework to be applied is the growing body of studies on ‘cultural evolution’, a label embracing several research programs. The inspiration is biological evolution, which sets the standard; however, many scholars are demonstrating specific patterns in cultural change, drift, and adaptation to shifting contexts and conditions (Boyd & Richerson 2005; Mesoudi et al. 2006; Laland 2017). The current multi-faceted crisis, with all its impact, poses many challenges and opportunities for cultural forms that were accustomed to a relatively stable context, and now need to adapt to changing times and stressful circumstances. Theories of cultural evolution could offer clues on how we can understand such changes and to what extent they follow patterns previously described, or whether they tread a different evolutionary path.
- A third component in our toolbox corresponds to theories trying to describe cultural dynamics, formation of broad consensus, collective visions or the tension between semantic contents and social structure in social systems theory (Castoriadis 1987; Andersen 2011). Various strands can be followed in order to dig deeper into the cultural universe and the processes that assist in generating those patterns of shared ideas and values. Cultures are living entities and they are formed through their own mechanisms, which need to be followed to capture successfully how ideas about science and religion assume a dominant or a marginal weight, and how they interact with other social dimensions, configuring relatively stable compacts that influence all aspects of personal and social life.
- The fourth element to inspire our research is the recent developments in ‘belief studies’, a program aimed at better understanding of how beliefs are formed, nourished, stabilized, and eventually decline and may even get lost or be replaced by other beliefs. In our opinion, this program provides interesting tools to improve analysis of how beliefs about science and religion are formed and interact. A cognitive perspective is needed here to assess more effectively to what extent such beliefs result from which experiences or inputs and how they get elaborated, so nourishing a steady process that needs to be better followed and described. (Seitz & Angel 2014)
- The fifth contribution comes from studies of media and information, with their impact, and how news contributes to building cultural frameworks and structuring individual minds. It is apparent that the pandemic period has been a very intensive and sometimes saturating time of news consumption, and many have relied on this information to formulate their

own views and expectations, with different outcomes. Along the same lines, it has been made clear that the emotional reaction to the content and presentation of such news has been a key component in the population's response to the evolving situation. A deeper analysis of such effects would be very useful (Valkenburg et. al. 2016)

- The sixth and last strand to explore is the psychological, and specially the study of psychopathologies and struggles that a population constrained to lockdowns and subjected to messages of fear and other stressors – loneliness, lack of freedom, guilt, great financial uncertainty – could be affected and the ways they could perceive science and religion in the time of stress (Guo et al. 2020).

The main questions that should guide the research into the effects of the pandemic on science, religion, and theology are:

1. To what extent views on science and religious beliefs are context-sensitive and on which factors do they most depend?
2. Did the special circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the lockdowns many people endured, influence their understanding of science and religion?
3. Do science and religion work as coping strategies? Do they provide meaning in a way specific to dealing with stressing situations? Do they exclude each other or rather collaborate in that important function?
4. Do sociodemographic variables influence our approach to science, religion and their interaction?
5. Is religious coping effective in those conditions? To which psychological problems is their contribution most related: anxieties, depressions...?

In a nutshell, that research is needed to explore to what extent science and religious beliefs are deeply influenced by contextual features, and are not mere cognitive issues that reflect mental structures and patterned ways to deal with reality. This research could provide solid evidence to test how cognitive schemas interact with cultural models, and how both are played out in a broad field of big changes and historical shocks.

2. Have the roles of religion and theology changed with the pandemic?

The perception of religion is highly dependent on the social context and on personal circumstances. Particular moments can endow religious experience with a special intensity that would be unthinkable at more routine times. We know that our environment has an effect that is often decisive in how we experience transcendence. The hustle and bustle of the city is markedly different from living in a village or in the open country. The desert has an even more unique impact, and the history of religions offers many examples where supernatural revelation is linked to wild and lonely places. The experience is

not the same in calm and relaxed times as it is in troubled periods. These variations are included in the set of factors that affect religious experience, which goes far beyond the presence of some mental structures that favour the perception of supernatural agents – as cognitive psychologists suggest – or the convenience of some traits that encourage prosocial behaviours, as in turn claimed by evolutionists.

On the other hand, the religious phenomenon – always elusive and hard to objectify – has been observed in terms of its functions or its usefulness for people and societies. The functionalist approach has always been, at least since the great sociologist Emile Durkheim, a source of good information about religion, an access to that experience able to explain, if not what it is, at least what it does or what religious beliefs and practices provide for individuals and societies. Certainly, the sociology of religion has developed several proposals and theories that today enrich a dense and plural repertoire. Furthermore, in our times, the discussions about religion revolve around its functions and utility. To some extent, the traditional question of the credibility of a religious faith, such as the Christian one, is expressed more indirectly and practically in terms of the utility or benefits that it brings to individuals and groups. If a set of beliefs fails this test – whether or not they contribute something practical, whether or not they address and fix pressing problems – then religion becomes useless and irrelevant. The culture that surrounds us is eminently pragmatic; accordingly, if religion does not render any positive service (or if it results in more negative than positive impacts) then it should not hold a place in our societies.

Religion has traditionally been associated with, among others, three main functions: (1) providing meaning; (2) offering resources to deal with hard times and difficulties, and (3) establishing moral standards together with the motivation to comply with them. However, the secular mindset now widespread understands religion as a set of beliefs and practices that have become mostly redundant, of little or no use in advanced societies. Is religion still useful or can we replace the functions it provided by new, more efficient means?

The Covid-19 pandemic has reactivated this debate: it is not clear to what extent religion, at least its most evolved and universal expressions, still makes sense and can be of help in these difficult times. We know that historical and personal crises have had repercussions on spirituality and faith. Will the Covid pandemic also change the role of religion? To answer this question, we need to examine its proposed functions and their performance in our current conditions.

The first function of religion is to provide meaning, especially in difficult times. The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann used to attribute to religion

the function of determining the indeterminate, or managing unmanageable risks (Luhmann 1977). Where other social systems exhaust their resources due to excessive complexity and uncertainty, religion comes to the rescue. As a general rule, when uncertainty and risk increase, the role of religion becomes more necessary and more difficult to replace by secular means. Luhmann continued to mature his social theory of religion, and later pointed out its role in helping to overcome or defuse the paradoxes that inevitably arise from the functioning of social systems. Probably the pandemic we are experiencing highlights some of these paradoxes – such as abundance and precariousness, security and uncertainty – and may once again increase the need for this function of religion.

Studies by sociologist Crystal Park shed more light in this regard (Park 2010). Her approach is more empirical than Luhmann's, pointing out that religion becomes a more necessary source of meaning when the habitual means are overwhelmed by difficult circumstances or by personal or social crises that generate too much tension or become more threatening. It is quite clear that religious faith is still a powerful source of meaning, but it certainly is not the only one. Religious faith can act as a value system which coexists with other value systems that arise from different social sources. Fulfilling relationships, the care of others within or outside the family, the quest for new experiences, a motivating career or financial success are all core values that get ranked and related in every value system. Religion contributes to this ranking, together with other social systems. These values include many different categories, including but not limited to moral values. For instance, it is arguable that physical beauty, fitness or novelty are emphasized by the media, that professional success, wealth and its displays are emphasized by capitalism and that honesty or compassion are emphasized by moral systems such as the ones provided by religion. Value systems are not in competition but work together in a somewhat fragmented manner, morphing in different moments or vital situations. The question is *to what extent religious faith keeps a space and functionality of its own in the current context*.

The second relevant function of religion for this stressful time is coping; this is closely related to meaning. For several decades, the ability of religion to deal with difficult situations has been studied from multiple perspectives. Religious coping becomes even more valuable in times of threat and anguish, of crisis (on a personal or social level) and, intuitively, in illness or the proximity of death. There is a wealth of scientific literature that firmly establishes the scope and effectiveness of religious coping; this is now becoming a broad research program, drawing primarily from the pioneering work by Kenneth Pargament and his team (Pargament 2007).

Living conditions in these months have bestowed a special value upon coping resources, which are urgently needed when facing the disease in the first

person or in a loved one – an experience, unfortunately, too common for many in these troubled times. There is anecdotal evidence that, for many, prayer has been more frequent and intense during lockdown. We can also find previous examples like the article by Tanya Luhrmann in *The New York Times*, under the title “When God is your therapist” (Luhrmann 2013), pointing out the fundamental role that many churches play in caring for those suffering from psychological disorders. Even the leading secular magazine *The Economist* pointed, a few months ago, to the important role that churches and other social entities can play in coping with the symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder associated with Covid-19 and its treatment¹. The truth is that coping strategies are not exclusive and that such a psychological resource becomes more needed in situations of great stress. Indeed, many studies show that depression, anxiety and other pathologies caused by the prolonged pandemic and lockdown have grown considerably in many countries, rendering coping strategies more urgent (Guo et al. 2020). Again, religion is by no means the only coping strategy available; family and social networks provide irreplaceable support. The contemplation of nature, sports, art or reading can also provide valuable relief. Religious beliefs and practices can add value and combine with a broad spectrum of coping resources to enforce and transcend them.

The third function we recognise in religion is also traditional: religious beliefs and practices help nurture a more responsible attitude towards others at times when such an attitude is particularly required, but not everyone seems to be convinced about such social duties. Also, in this case, a great deal of research has tried to understand to what extent religion is related to prosocial behaviour (Preston et al. 2010; Galen 2012). A relative consensus points only to some religions, the so-called ‘Post-Axial’ ones (among which Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism are included). These religions emphasize moral duties towards others alongside religious or spiritual devotion. In other words, the link between religion and social duty cannot be assumed in all cases but is observed under some conditions that include most major world religions. Empirical and experimental studies have noticed a preference towards one’s own group, or members of the same religion, when engaging in helping attitudes, rendering the engagement somewhat partial and focused. In any case, it is expected that religious people behave in a more responsible and respectful way towards others, especially in times of a health emergency where the population is invited to take extreme precautions so as not to infect others. It can be expected that those who are more sensitive to others,

¹ <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/08/29/worldwide-covid-19-is-causing-a-new-form-of-collective-traum>

motivated by more demanding religious beliefs in this field, will assume behaviours that are more convenient for them and for the population as a whole. In other words, it would be foreseeable that a more religious population – in the case of a prosocial religion – would better follow the official rules aimed at limiting infections. This has been already remarked by some authors such as Francis Collins, who points out that religious leaders have a key responsibility in helping the public understand and accept the upcoming vaccinations (Bailey 2020).

All post-axial religions share the three functions just describe, which allows one to conjecture a possible interreligious convergence, a trend that would promote the overcoming of some of the pressing problems associated with religious exclusivism and fanaticism. These probably constitute the main current arguments against religion. Exclusivism constitutes a logical barrier to religious belief (“If one religion is true, then the others cannot be. Therefore, all religions are false”). Religious fanaticism would be the most disastrous consequence of exclusivism, with the negative impact by which many judge religions as a whole.

However, it seems increasingly clear that the main religions can meet and share their deepest contributions, or recognize each other not so much as competition, but as proposals that collaborate at various levels to contribute positively to societies. Religions, according to this principle, provide meaning, a strategy for coping with pain, and also values to guide personal decisions for the common good. These benefits suggest a potential convergence towards common objectives, or the assumption of priorities in difficult moments that force us to relativize other components and objectives in each religious form: now, the first duty is to face the pandemic. The whole of humanity and all religions participate in the same struggle.

Although religion is much more than the above three functions, and the functionalist analysis is clearly partial, evaluating them offers the first step in assessing what religion brings us from a social point of view, and clarifying whether it makes sense in a context that some sociologists describe as ‘post-secular’ (McLennan 2010). If religion contributes positively to the performance of these functions, then its practical role in societies should be recognized.

We need to go beyond a simplistic view that identifies religion with a vague spiritual feeling, close to the aesthetic and devoid of any practical effect. If faith and religious experience do not have a practical impact on people’s lives, then they have no role in our society. If, on the contrary, religious faith is useful to us or continues to serve convenient functions, it will persist in playing a role. Now it seems quite clear that the role of religion in advanced societies evolves over time and according to changing circumstances. The

pandemic has increased the levels of risk and uncertainty, with devastating effects on public health and the economies, which have been reflected in an increase in mental disorders. All these have made the religious dimension more necessary and urgent. The current situation invites us to overcome more reductive schemes in the treatment of religion, and also to go beyond the secularization models that were conceived from a concurrence pattern between religious agencies and political, educational or other entities. Rather, the idea of post-secularization implies reaching a satisfactory level of constructive integration and collaboration between these social systems, each with its own functions and services. As a consequence, the perception arising from the current health emergency invites religious faith to better integrate into the social fabric and with other social systems that try to face the current crisis, such as the health system, the scientific system, and the systems dealing with information and political management. Furthermore, this integration invites religions to abandon exclusive forms and to assume a format of convergence and collaboration for the common good. This is a point that Pope Francis and his recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti* insist on, and it is a point that the pandemic has further evidenced.

The experience of the pandemic may have transformed our understanding of our role in the world. In a social context marked by fatigue and generalized chronic stress, a society that values the economy and productivity above everything else, the pandemic has thrown us face to face with our vulnerability and that of our loved ones and, more importantly, with the many incongruities between our values and the way we spend our lives. Many have felt an intense and intimate need for meaning beyond the consumerist materialism in which our societies have been operating, in an unconscious and increasingly unsustainable way, for decades. Trust in institutions has been seriously eroded and continues to deteriorate – together with our economic system. When something is destroyed, it is necessary to replace it with something that fulfils the missing functions better. The pandemic is transforming our societies, our economy and our science. If we take advantage of the opportunities that come beyond the tragedies that plague us now, we can build a world that is more sustainable and fair, a more humane economy and a more humble, prudent and transparent science. Religion can contribute to this task by providing meaning, support and the spirit of cooperation in difficult times.

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