1 Talk about Faith in Context

Important moments in religions often come wrapped in epic stories: Moses coming down from the mountain with tablets in his hands, Mohammad returning to Mecca in 629 CE, Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. These stories are etched in the minds of religious believers because they represent ways of understanding how the supernatural interacts with humans. They become parts of sacred texts and doctrinal statements that define how people think about right beliefs and practices. They involve prophets and theologians and priests and religious leaders speaking the very word of God to people who listen and act on it.

At the same time, the day-to-day experiences of religious believers include both the mundane and the sacred. Prayers might be chanted in ancient languages but also muttered under the breath in moments of frustration. Talk about religious faith does, of course, happen within religious institutions, but it also occurs in the daily interaction of believers, whose conversations might include subtle references to sacred texts or prayers or hymns. Believers might look to one another for advice and support, making decisions about what they should or shouldn't do depending on what those in their own faith community say. Sacred texts and doctrine about right practice and belief can come and go in these conversations, as people work to live out the ideals of their faith in the messy contexts of real life.

The importance of interaction within religious communities was clearest to me as a university student when I was very involved in an Evangelical Christian campus ministry. The ministry was student-led, with a loose affiliation to a national association; as a student leader, I organised a variety of events throughout the week – prayer meetings, mentorship programmes, and large group meetings where we met for collective worship on Friday nights. One weekly meeting of an accountability group met late on Wednesday nights. This particular meeting was for men only, with a women's group meeting at another time in the week, and was organised around eleven questions all the members would memorise and which we would all answer in turn. The questions ranged in topics from health and fitness to personal devotion to sexual purity, that topic often taking the most time in the meeting. These meetings became very

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Stephen Pihlaja
Excerpt
More Information

important for the participants, where we laughed together and did practical theology and ethics, attempting to put into practice our faith and challenge one another.

An institution did not sanction the meetings – there was no instruction or Bible study. There was no explicit hierarchy or leadership; although there were some members who were more consistent attenders, or older, or more pious, the conversations were those of friends, taking bits of theology, scripture, practical advice, and experience to piece together our Christian lives in the challenging university context, with alcohol, sex, and drugs constantly tempting us away from a pure life. The meetings grounded us in a community that supported and encouraged in a way that prayer meetings or sermons or collective worship didn't. In the accountability group, the real questions of faith were hashed out in the back and forth of our discussions about what we were facing in our lives and how we might live in light of the commitments we had made.

Over the years, long after leaving Christianity as a faith system, I've often thought about the conversations that occurred in the accountability group and how important they had been for my own formation and how I thought about myself as a person of faith in the world. The dynamics of the group interaction included irreverent in-jokes and code words but also group prayer and scripture reading. Members of the group would appeal to what they had heard pastors say or things they had read in books, all while interacting with others who would agree with them or challenge them or offer slightly differing views on any number of topics, views which might evolve over weeks or semesters or years, as the group members grew or changed or experienced new things.

My men's accountability group at Knox College is not likely to come to mind when you think of *religious discourse* – it simply doesn't have the authority or publicity that the Pope's declaration about the immorality of the death penalty does, for example. The conversations in open-air food courts that follow Friday prayer in Malaysia are not seen as important as the prayers themselves. Real talk in real contexts challenges a foregrounding of institutional religious discourse. If we are going to understand how religion and theology are developing in the contemporary world, we need to look beyond what pastors and priests, theologians and imams, are teaching in formal contexts, and we need to engage seriously with informal religious discourse, what people who interact with one another every day are saying in contexts where faith is a developing, emerging part of a broader social world. This real world does, of course, include the rules of sacred texts about what is or is not acceptable, and the words and teachings of people with authority. However, everyday interaction also includes the bending of rules for specific situations or times when a faith practice needs to be adapted for a new context. The discourse processes by which people put their faith into action in the real world and how sacred texts,

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Stephen Pihlaja
Excerpt
More Information

teachings, and institutional discourses interact may very well be the real locus for religious development.

1.1 Discourse

To begin a study of *religious discourse*, we need to define what we mean by both ‘discourse’ and ‘religion’, two terms that have historically been used to describe a variety of very different things. The Foucauldian (Foucault, 1971) concept of discourse as describing larger social systems of ordering knowledge and power is a useful starting point for thinking about how language is not just the words we use and how we order them but exists within certain societal structures that restrict how people communicate. In this sense, discourse comes to encompass more than just the language in use in a particular context, but the practices and beliefs underpinning that language usf. Understanding discourse as embedded in cultural practice helps analysts describe how meaning emerges in interaction because ways of speaking differ depending on cultural and contextual constraints. From a Foucauldian perspective, describing the ‘Discourse of Islam’ may well be a useful category to distinguish between how Islam could be ordered as a social system compared and contrasted with the ‘Discourse of Christianity’. The work of the analyst, from this perspective, is a kind of archaeology, to work through written and spoken language to make sense of the larger social structures.

Foucault’s description of discourse highlights that individuals do not speak or write in a void. There are, as Foucault (1971, p. 7) writes, ‘no beginnings’ and the speaker is merely standing in the path of the ‘nameless speaking voice’ and entering into something that already exists. The individual speaks within a larger system of language and thought, one that is constrained by social and linguistic systems. The Bakhtinian (1981) *heteroglossia* resonates in this understanding of discourse; *heteroglossia* describes how the individual speaks within the constraints of an ordered system of language, but with the creative potential – Foucault refers to the ‘slender gap’ (1971, p. 7) – to do something novel. Analysts, then, interested in making sense of what people say and write at any given time, need to understand not only the history of the thing that is being spoken about, whether it be a religious belief or a sport or a popular TV show, but how that thing has been spoken about in the past and the ways in which it is spoken about in the present.

Foucault further differentiates among different kinds of discourse, describing first-order and second-order discourses, a concept which is particularly useful in analysis of interaction around religion and belief. Foucault shows how first-order, or fundamental, discourses occupy a primary position, and subsequent second-order discourses ‘reiterate, expound, and comment’ (Foucault, 1971, pp. 12–13) on the fundamental discourse. The fundamental discourse can give rise to any number of new discourses and become 'blurred and disappear' (p. 13) in the commentary and retelling. Foucault gives the example of Homer's *Odyssey* from which other commentaries and retellings emerge (perhaps most famously, James Joyce's *Ulysses*). The texts which are subsequently based on the *Odyssey* are, to varying degrees, distinct from the original, and any individual reader's interaction with a retelling of the story will include varying degrees of knowledge of the original.

Considering the category of religion, the fundamental discourses of sacred texts can be seen in this same way, and the residue of the fundamental discourse can be seen in interaction, with speakers aware, again to varying degrees, of the presence of the fundamental discourse in their own talk. A Christian may have varying levels of biblical knowledge when, for example, speaking about their actions 'bearing fruit'. The extent to which this is a deliberate reference to John 15, where Jesus tells the parable of the vine and the branches, or Galatians 5:22–23 which describes the Fruits of the Spirit, might be hard to see in a discourse context, but Foucault's point is that the speaker need not be explicitly aware of the reference for the foundational discourse to be relevant. These discourses are baked into cultural knowledge. You don't need to be aware of where they come from exactly to use them effectively, in the same way that you don't need to know the origins of the idiom 'kick the bucket' to use it in conversation.

For analysts interested in describing the specifics of interaction, however, the Foucauldian use of discourse can become problematic because although it is helpful in understanding how institutions and foundational texts exert influence on interaction, Foucauldian discourse analysis is not an inductive process. Rather, Foucault starts with the assertion that there is a system to uncover and then works to uncover it through analysis. For researchers looking at the empirical effects of language on belief and how order emerges in interaction, the focus is the opposite. 'Discourse' might then, in a narrower description, be simply a way of describing language 'above the sentence' (Cameron, 2001), capturing the idea that language is not just individual words, but how they are used in particular texts in particular contexts. This definition focuses on language in use and builds on Saussure's (2011 [1916]) distinction between *langue* and *parole* – language as a system vs. language in use – by differentiating between the constitutional elements of the sentence and the use of those elements in complex social interaction. Of course, the individual lexico-grammatical elements of language can and should be of interest in how analysts understand concrete utterances (Bakhtin, 1986), but discourse describes the level beyond that, where language has meaning and accomplishes certain actions because of the context in which it is used. To understand, as a classic example goes (Austin, 1975), the consequences of someone saying the phrase 'I now pronounce you husband and wife', the analyst needs to know if the speaker is at a wedding ceremony or in a bar on a Friday night. The meaning exists beyond the words and how they are ordered.

Importantly, the understanding of discourse as language above the sentence is conceptual and does not see it as something that can be counted and quantified. The analyst needs further empirical categories, like an academic lecture or a conversation, or, perhaps more generically, a discourse event to segment-specific instances of discourse in the world. This kind of discourse, however, cannot be used to describe a 'Discourse of Muslims' in the way that we might in a Foucauldian sense because the analyst might immediately ask, which Muslims and where and in what context? Is it the discourse of Muslims shopping for fruit in Indonesia, or Muslims attending an *Iftar* meal during Ramadan in Detroit? The specific context will be much more important in making sense of what is being said and whether being Muslim is even particularly relevant to the analysis.

I introduce both conceptions of discourse not to force a choice between how the term is understood, but to recognise that the challenge for discourse analysts is balancing the empirical analysis of individual elements of interaction, be they pauses, or overlaps, or laughter, in any exchange, with attempts to understand these observations and analyses in the light of larger cultural and societal structures. The close analysis of interaction, as conversation analysts like Sacks, Jefferson, and Schegloff have shown, the regularities of conversation result in patterns that can be observed with surprising regularity in day-to-day interaction (see Schegloff, 1972; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Sacks, 1992). These regularities and learned ways of speaking have consequences for meaning making and identity construction, as foundational sociolinguistic work by Labov (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972) has also shown. Any pattern, belief, or regularity observed in social interaction exists in a feedback loop where individual utterances reflect, as Bakhtin (1986, p. 60) writes, 'the specific conditions and goals of each' area of human activity, and then feedback into genres of interaction with varying degrees of stability.

To describe the tension of stability and dynamism, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) use Complex Systems Theory, which has as a key principle the concept of emergence of phenomena on different scales over time. This means that outcomes in discourse are not the result of central planning but emerge from the interaction of components within a system. These factors might include central planning or institutional pressures from powerful people and organisations, but these factors are not necessarily determinative. Complex systems are open systems – the outcomes change as the components in the system change. The outcomes are also scalable. Phenomena that emerge in individual interactions can also emerge as consistent discourse practices on larger scales, the way a neologism might be taken up by more and more speakers over time and eventually enter the standard lexicon.

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Stephen Pihlaja
Excerpt
More Information

The interaction of different components in a system and interconnection among scales of discourse can then account for patterns and regularities in interaction in a variety of contexts, but particularly for faith and religion. As a complex system, religious discourse can be regular and predictable, but also dynamic and open for change, with a range of possibilities in between. The regular call to prayer in a Muslim community, the impromptu prayer of a Bible study group, and an encounter between a Muslim street preacher and a drunk person on a city street – each of these examples of religious discourse will feature varying levels of predictability and dynamism. Each exists within what we might say is a genre of interaction, but with incredible heterogeneity in the material conditions of that interaction, how each person might sound, the words that an individual might use, how long a prayer may last. There is always a range of possibilities for how any particular instance of prayer, for example, might occur and the extent to which it follows or doesn't follow a particular pattern will depend on a number of factors.

In a practical sense, the Discourse Dynamics Approach (Cameron, 2015) isolates five levels at which discourse, and particularly spoken interaction, might be analysed. Level 0 is the precondition of any interaction, the starting point of a conversation or a lecture or a prayer group meeting. This includes all the factors – social, cultural, personal, and so on – that exist before an interaction takes place. Once an interaction begins, a timescale of milliseconds (Level 1) could be analysed to follow the micro aspects of interaction that can affect how a conversation develops. This might include changes in intonation, a change in facial expression, or the start of an interruption, all of which can be observed on close analysis. The next scale, Level 2, includes the minute-by-minute engagement of speakers. These interactions can be seen as units in themselves, Level 3, single discourse events. Finally, Level 4 is where the patterns and regularities in individual interactions accumulate to become the preconditions for new interactions. Importantly, the Discourse Dynamics Approach insists on an empirical basis for identifying patterns and regularities and argues, if not for a consideration of all levels of discourse equally, the necessity of keeping them in mind when considering how and why certain interactions follow the course they do, and the need to do so without relying on deductive, common-sense understandings.

Still, the extent to which cultural and social systems are at work in the production of discourse may be difficult to empirically observe. Relevance theorists (e.g. Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Clark, 2013) have shown a complex interaction between communicative and cognitive contexts, with implicit practices – situated, cultural, personal – leading to different outcomes. Beyond the empirical evidence which can be captured in a systematic study of interaction, the stuff of context requires some 'native' knowledge, knowledge that is often hidden as common sense for speakers. The focus placed on patterns in interaction by Conversation Analysts, for example, reveals how everyday life creates and maintains norms and values in society and is regularly enacted by speakers living in the same broader cultural context. Work can be done, of course, to make this knowledge explicit: in Linguistic Ethnography, for example, the context of interaction can be understood through longitudinal observation and even just talking to people about what they are doing, making explicit how insider and outsider perspectives might offer insight into social life (Rampton et al., 2004; Creese, 2008). Speakers can also explicitly be asked in systematic ways about meanings they intended in any particular utterance, as in Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982).

In short, linguists have developed a range of tools to observe what occurs ‘beyond the sentence’ in language in interaction. These methods require robust, reflexive processes, ones that pick apart which components of any given system are exerting influence at any given time to understand why people say the things they do and why they have the effect that they do on the world around them. The analyst must work their way up and down from the minutia of interaction in particular places in particular times to the larger structures that might be at play to make sense of what people say and use that information to understand its place in the social world.

1.2 Religion

Like discourse, religion, as a category, can also be difficult to define, particularly given its common use in everyday conversation – an academic might well do away with the category if it weren’t so prevalent. A classic definition sees religion as a ‘unified system of beliefs and practices’ (Durkheim, 2008 [1915]: 47). Hjarvard’s similar definition – ‘human actions, beliefs and symbols related to supernatural agencies’ (2008; translated by and quoted in Lövheim, 2011, p. 154) – adds the important element of symbols and their relationship to the supernatural, the ‘ineffable’ qualities of religion and religious experience (McNamara & Giordano, 2018), which have also been a focus of research into religious language. Religion often includes some belief that one can know and interact with something beyond this natural world, something transcendent, and that this interaction is reflected in religious practices and beliefs.

Implicit in Durkheim’s conception of religion (its inclusion of ‘belief’) is a bias towards confessional faiths, particularly Christianity, which would have been prevalent in the early twentieth century. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are all faiths that include some clear statement of belief or creed to which adherents affirm with intent. However, as Harrison (2006, p. 148) shows in a useful review of the topic, religion is never ‘one thing’, and essentialist approaches to the category are unlikely to capture the diversity of the ways people believe and act within religions or create useful boundaries between what should or shouldn’t be included. Instead, Harrison (2006) categorises

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Stephen Pihlaja
Excerpt
More Information

three approaches to religion: intellectual, focusing on belief; affective, focusing on emotions; and functional, focusing on practice. Each of these approaches foregrounds particular religions over others and has implicit strengths and weaknesses. A ‘beliefs plus practices’ model of religion, for example, describes Christianity and Islam well. However, they are less useful in describing Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism – any number of other religions where belief might be backgrounded or absent and practices are not clearly delineated from other community or cultural functions.

Understanding religion also need not necessarily foreground belief in the supernatural, and it might be more useful to focus on the empirical elements of religious practice to understand how a religion functions within a particular cultural context. Analysts might instead employ a community of practice model (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to describe how religious communities work, focusing on the things the people *do* in religious communities and the ways in which people learn how to do those things. Religious identity might also be seen as one part of a larger social identity and be described using social identity models (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Tajfel, 1983) which describe the various ways in which humans understand themselves in relation to those around them and in terms of in-groups and out-groups. Membership Categorisation Analysis (Sacks, 1992; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002), which describes how people talk about and potentially think about each other as members of different categories, may also be a fruitful way of understanding religious distinctions while taking an agnostic position on the existence or non-existence of the supernatural. Being a Christian or being a Muslim is then not necessarily a static identity, but one with different incumbent beliefs and practices that depend on the interactional context and how categories are being defined, something my own work has shown in relation to the categorisation of ‘Christians’ in online interaction (Pihlaja, 2014b).

Beliefs and practices about the supernatural are, of course, not limited to named religions with clear doctrinal statements and practices. For example, a ‘spiritual, not religious’ distinction has grown in prevalence since the 1960s (Ammerman, 2013), implying a suspicion of ordered, organised religious practice while still accepting the importance of recognising the role of spirituality in day-to-day life. To be spiritual but not religious suggests a differentiation between internal and external processes – the spiritual is internal and focused on belief, whereas the religious is external and focused on organised practice. The spiritual might be conceived of as personal, experiential, and free, whereas the religious is institutional, confessional, and organised. To be spiritual but not religious may also suggest rejecting membership in a larger structure of institutional beliefs and rules, and establishing an identity to free oneself from the prejudices of the organisational and institutional and to be ‘unchurched’ (Fuller, 2001).

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Stephen Pihlaja
Excerpt
More Information

However, for many people, even for members of confessional faiths for whom a beliefs and practices model might describe their use of religion, the definition creates a false dichotomy. Durkheim's description holds – the beliefs an individual has motivate and affect their practices, in both the religions in which they participate and the moral decisions they make. Ammerman's (2013) research showed this point precisely – seventy-five of ninety-five respondents included 'Identifying with or participating in a religious tradition' as a part of their understanding of being spiritual (p. 263). The belief, and the practices associated with it, connects the individual to a larger community of fellow adherents and a history of practice and belief, one that is not necessarily orthodox but like any other category provides a sense of shared identity. Like faith and practice, the interaction between the internal and the external experiences of a religion cannot be separated. Instead, the religious practices – and the discourse which emerges in those practices – are a natural outworking of an internal, spiritual experience. Discourse around religious belief and practice goes hand-in-hand with the experience of those beliefs and practices; in them, individuals come to claim their own unique religious identity.

Despite variation in individual religious experience, institutional religious categories are often controlled by organisations with their own explicit hierarchies (Yandell, 2002). What the organisational structures sanction and prohibit frames the way religion is seen in particular cultural contexts. These institutions also produce first-order and second-order discourses that govern both the doctrine of the religion and the individual faith of adherents. An inevitable connection exists between power structures and the possible religious identities that people can claim for themselves. That control may be explicit, as with the authority to allow or disallow membership in a group – one cannot be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints without taking part in rituals and practices which only the church can administer. Control can also be exerted more implicitly in, for example, decisions about who is chosen for leadership, with people of particular backgrounds being favoured and championed over others. Institutional religious structures are inevitably and unavoidably foundational to how religious categories are conceived of in particular cultural contexts.

What interaction should and shouldn't be included in analysis of religious practice and belief is difficult to delineate. Indeed, what counts as religious for any individual will differ depending on their experiences, and what beliefs are considered central and which are seen as more periphery may look like those of other non-religious communities of practice, with the engagement of the members of the religion, what they do together, and how they talk about their beliefs and practices affecting how one might be seen and see oneself within a particular context. The negotiation of membership, beliefs, and practices may be, in institutional contexts, top-down as in the Catholic liturgy or Islamic calls to prayer, which are the same across a wide variety of different local contexts. They will, however, also be negotiated in particular local contexts, with individuals exerting influence as central members in each community. Like discourse, there will be a tension between the universal, the unity of the named belief, and the individual, the person claiming the belief for themselves.

The categorical label of any particular belief, when it is taken up by an individual, can be a part of identity work, but the label has different functions for different people – ticking the ‘Muslim’ box in a questionnaire form for, say, your child’s primary school application may foreground certain practices and beliefs and signal those beliefs and practices to a particular audience. At the same time, the category is not a complete descriptor. Simply knowing that a child is a Muslim is unlikely to give the primary school information about what could be expected of any particular student and, indeed, the particular beliefs and practices that any individual Muslim keeps. Importantly, again as Ammerman’s (2013) work shows, individuals can do discursive work to hide and highlight different elements of their own faith, dependent on how they view themselves; in what context they are speaking about their belief; and the larger political and cultural pressures, either real or perceived.

For each person, religious categorisations, to the extent that they are useful, are elements of different identities, where class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, personal history, and any number of other factors come together to make any individual who they are. The intersectional nature of identity has been particularly important in showing how discrimination does not occur on a single-categorical axis (Crenshaw, 1989), and that conceptions of race and sex ‘become grounded in the experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon’ (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). For members of marginalised groups, the intersection of faith and ethnicity can be observed, for example, in the labelling of ‘black’ churches in the United States. This label shows the implicit bias towards the dominant power structures in that race must be marked for a minority congregation, but a similar Evangelical church with a largely white population would unlikely be described as a ‘white’ church. The cultural and sociopolitical contexts produce categories and limit individuals’ ability to claim their preferred identity and how they may be seen by others.

To that end, any analysis of religious discourse must also take into account other elements of identity, particularly when considering marginalised and oppressed communities. Discourse analysis can provide empirical descriptions of how categories are negotiated in interaction and how different elements in categorisation are worked out. As mentioned earlier, Membership Categorisation Analysis as conceived by Sacks (1992), but particularly its more recent applications (Eglin & Hester, 2003; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009), focuses on the situated nature of categorisation, looking at, for example, how a racial category like ‘Asian’ can be used in creative ways to meet