

Understanding Language Bias in Ancient Religions

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In this essay I suggest that ancient religions might be categorized into a spectrum between Seasonal and Apocalyptic depending on which role they serve socially. The language bias of ancient religions is dynamic and changes over time, moving toward or away from the extremes of the spectrum, catalyzed by historic events, by trends and fan-fiction.

A priest or priestess in an ancient religion is a person whose entire function in society is built upon stories. The priest blesses babies, say calming words to parents, pray for the sick, organizes charity for the poor, sacrifices animals, perform rituals, wed or witness marriages, advises rulers, incites war, spreads propaganda, betrays the innocent and the guilty, plots, violates and buries both people and secrets.

In our modern mindset, it can be difficult to understand the extreme power a priest or priestess might have over people in the ancient world. We know today, in modern religions, that some priests are raping children. They violate the physical and mental autonomy of people which they are supposed to protect. Yet, in the ancient world, we have few historical records of this happening, for the simple reason that there was no social protection for those children growing up or parents suspecting the situation, who wanted revenge against the priest. The priest can turn the crowd against any individual using rhetoric and fear, claiming divine intervention on their side. In the worst case, if everything else fails, then the priest can cast aside all pride and fell down on the knees, begging for mercy and forgiveness. And get it.

Did the child who was raped by a priest get mercy?

In order to really understand language bias in ancient religions, one must cast aside all pretension of defending these religions on a moral basis in a modern sense. Only fundamentalists today think that ancient religions were great in this perspective, because it is very hard to keep up the cognitive dissonance when confronted with evidence of the horror, pain and exploitation in the past. Yet, one can not blame these events on humanity as a whole, a modern scapegoat, because people at the time had no sense of humanity as a whole, nor a reflective nature of their doing and functioning in society except for a few cases. These few cases are the historic events that produce progressive change and from which the entire modern mindset is based on.

In our modern mindset, it is easy to construct a glorious past and elevate recorded history. The desire for legacy and tradition is a Capitalist move to capture and bottle the past as a commodity. However, few people today are willing to take responsibility for the abuse and failures of previous generations. People want to read the glorified stories and mythology through a lens of metaphorical truth. As if ancient people had developed answers to the mysteries of cosmos.

To people living in the ancient world, religion was not much about fun and excitement. They did not intellectualize their problems about finding joy in life by psychoanalysis of their sexual impotence. These people's idea of excitement was to die in glory on the battlefield to defend their village. If a man suffered from sexual impotence, the man blamed the woman. Internal failure was dealt with by directing the energy outwards in violent outbursts. Society was a ticking bomb, waiting for the fractures of the defense system developed by priests and priestesses to show, followed by explosion.

The function of ancient religions was to navigate a spiritual landscape which resembled an allegory of a modern battle minefield. There were violent people on all sides, suffering from traumatic experiences and untreated mental illnesses, so the only tool a society had at disposal to deal with this explosive energy, was to manipulate, deceive and hijack minds. Through stories.

If you ever wondered how people in the ancient world could dream up so magnificent stories, then you should be able to figure it out now. These stories were not divine revelations, as they often were claimed by descendants of the original authors. Stories were primarily used to navigate the complex social dynamics of the ancient world and leverage surplus energy into state power, whether the organization of power was local or spanning huge areas. You hear the stories who contributed to solidification of power, while the stories that failed were erased from history. Had you observed all the failure over time, you would probably not think that the surviving stories were of divine origin.

The oldest stories are told over and over, repeating similar symbolism. These stories are what I call Seasonal religion. They are closely connected with agriculture, war and sex. It can be difficult to the modern mind to understand how important agriculture was in the ancient world. The most popular gods and goddesses were often those who gave people bread and wine. The wine drink was often watered out, so people added substances to it to get intoxication and what they perceived as connection with the spiritual world. With other words, they were on mind-altering drugs and this affected the language they had about more interesting things to the modern mind: War and sex.

The stories of Seasonal religion have no beginning nor end and span the entire social fabric of the history of humanity. Influences, from one religion to another, happened all the time. When Christians read that Jesus had 12 disciples in the New Testament, one can trace this number back to e.g. ancient Egyptian religions, or Sumerian religions for that matter. To even think that this number has a literal historical meaning, is to underestimate the role of how stories functioned in the ancient world. People used stories as tools to manipulate and deceive others, in order to gain social benefits themselves. This was the primary mechanism since the start of history. This is why Seasonal religion manages to stay remarkably the same despite swapping its face over time.

Seasonal religion is driven by the desire to unite people in religious rituals. This requires setting the priests or priestesses apart from the normal person in the crowd. They do this by decorating and symbolizing the clothes, hats and tools used in the rituals. Through stories, the priests and priestesses communicate the meaning of the ritual. This way, they can claim that their tradition goes far back in time. The more people believe in the stories, the more they trust other people believing in the same stories. The point is not that the stories convey truth, but that they give a sense of communal fellowship among the believers.

When a person flows down the river of religious ecstasy in the religious crowd, fired up by chants and songs, orchestrated by the priests or priestesses, there are evolutionary traits and biases that contribute to the person perceiving “their” stories, the story of the people that makes the people, as divine truth. A social experiment confirms the power of being told by people next to you what is the shortest line among three lines. People can be deceived into thinking something obviously true right in front of them is false and vice versa. We are a suffering species due to the evolutionary instincts of the brain that hijacks cognitive processes to synchronize with beliefs of the surrounding crowd. This is something that people in the advertisement industry know and exploit on a daily basis.

A human is a social animal which is driven by instincts beyond the conscious control of the body. Knowing about these instincts do not always help and this is how large social hierarchies can form to create power outmatching any single individual. These hierarchies are enforced and solidified in power by rituals, which primarily builds on the same foundation of Seasonal religion. Every spring, summer, autumn and winter, people gather to reinforce their group identity.

One can imagine a Seasonal religion as a pattern of harmonic cycles that vibrates in a specific frequency. People who do not vibrate their social status and function in the correct frequency are labeled and handled. There can be multiple such patterns at the same time, overlapping and controlling people using different frequencies and phase shifts. When one Seasonal religion stabilizes into an equilibrium, it causes boundaries of phase shifts with other Seasonal religions nearby. While the same pattern is repeated on both sides of a boundary, the disharmony between a multitude of the same pattern can cause conflicts.

It is in the boundary between equilibriums of Seasonal religion that new ancient religions evolve. The boundary is a place where Seasonal religion tries to avoid conflict with other established Seasonal religions. Thus, it can also be a place where events can happen without the oversight of the priests or priestesses. The outsiders, the outcasts, the pirates, the deplorables, are the startups seeking to overthrow the harmony and balance that captures and controls the populace. This is a part of history which the establishment wants to sweep away, even when it is part of their own past. Seasonal religion often takes up patterns that have survived for millennia and denies its previous approach as a boundary religion. This is how Jesus gets 12 disciples, in tradition with the ancient stories. Why? Simply because the number 12 reflects the months of the year and refers to the harmony of seasonal rituals. Beyond this surface of symbolism, there is a problematic past, a trauma, of being processed socially as an outsider. This usually starts with an Apocalyptic religion.

An Apocalyptic religion is an enigma, by definition. It must be a puzzle for two reasons: One is that the establishment wants to bury its own past as outsider cult and instead solidify their legacy in a universal language claiming control and ownership of all social relevance. Therefore, people can not know the truth about the past. It must be destroyed. Second is that new followers to the Apocalyptic religion are drawn in by curiosity. The puzzle is what attracts people and turn them into loyal servants.

The enigma is a two-sided sword that cuts both ways. It is hard to imagine how a such process is possible without appealing to evolutionary traits. The complex behavior of human beings are results of millions of years where groups of people died out from possible weakness we are not able to easily comprehend consciously. The enigma is both a hidden reality in the human DNA, a quest for science, but also a social relation to the people captured in its net. A face, divine, yet inherently mysterious and spiritually powerful.

The Apocalyptic religion preaches an end to time. This metaphor must be understood in the context of Seasonal religion. Otherwise, it simply does not make sense. The hidden motivation of the enigma is to overthrow the establishment. However, in order to do so, it must represent itself in ways that people buy into and ensnares them until it is too late to change one's mind. For example, the end that Christianity has promised, was celebrated as actual historical events, multiple times, thanks to the people who used the Apocalyptic aspect of it. Every time, people forget this history and again project the end that comes. New religions form around this idea, that the world is coming to a cataclysmic and catastrophic climax, where everything, social status and ownership of property can be turned upside down. Yet, when the dust settles, the social benefits are again concentrated on a few individuals that establishes their religious upper hand, through stories, complete fabrications of deception, myths that weaken the average mind from rebelling.

Christianity contains both the Apocalyptic and Seasonal aspects of religion, because it started, like most religions, as an Apocalyptic movement driven by outsiders. Later, when the end of the world did not come, it took on aspects of Seasonal religion, which traditions go much further back in time. While sometimes not perceived as an ancient religion, it is a gateway for many to understand the past. The understanding of this dynamic in language bias can be difficult to comprehend, because of the contradictions that are inherent in the change of social perspective.

Today, when people confess their beliefs in Jesus' resurrection, it is ambiguous whether they emphasize it as a historical event or as a spiritual metaphor for their own religious conversion. The event is celebrated in the Easter, when it is believed that the historic event took place, yet it also happens to coincide with the agricultural rituals performed by basically every civilization, down to the very acts of sharing bread and wine. If you really believe that Jesus' body is transfigured into agricultural products and consumed by the communion, then your beliefs are shared by hundreds of similar traditions spanning thousands of years in the ancient world. It is a pattern copied by the priests and priestesses over and over, to the extreme of ridicule by skeptics, that people still believe that their religion is the only one that has this special meaning and all other religions are wrong.

So, what is the truth? Did Jesus really die during the Easter?

The whole point is to recognize that you can not figure it out. The past has been destroyed and consumed by priests and priestesses who change and alter the religious beliefs to their benefits. The truth no longer matters, because of the function of belief as a social controlling mechanism.

People make up their own explanations and use them, above trying to find a scientific and objective truth to share with others. Once people know that the past is forever sealed away, they can create their own stories and try to win the vulnerable over to their side. Thus, the cycle repeats.

It is more important to understand the context of all ancient religions and how they worked than paying full attention to Christianity, or your favorite, in particular. This way you can avoid the same mistakes that people have repeated in the past. Ancient religions have aspects of both Seasonal and Apocalyptic elements within it, that obscures, gives deeper meaning and attracts new followers. The aspects of a particular religion as it is practiced in a specific region at a specific time period, is distributed along a spectrum on which the language bias can change dynamically over time.

In one end of this spectrum, there is Seasonal religion. In the other end, there is Apocalyptic religion. Most religions contain both of these contradictory aspects and this allows the religious beliefs to change over time, while followers perceiving themselves of taking part of a longer tradition. The rituals of agriculture, spanning back millennia, are simultaneously devices for the priest or priestesses to excuse whatever they are about to say next. The historical context contradicts the arbitrary direction that is picked, clouding the judgement of the crowd. The spectrum triggers anxieties and cognitive dissonance among the believers, making them more psychological vulnerable and easier to manipulate. An army of grown ups can carry out genocides in the name of a deity which merely was encouraged by a short speech of a priest. What seems to the modern mind as deep and mysterious, perhaps metaphorical truths, is more often a result of survival bias, the stories that presents themselves as glorious pasts, while people suffered from wounds and hunger.

The priests or priestesses enjoy a safer and more predictable lifestyle than the average person in the ancient world. They suffer less from wounds, due to their self-proclaimed pacifism. They suffer less from hunger, due to the steady sacrifices of agricultural products. The best parts of the animals, the best parts of the harvests, are offered up to be cooked in front of the deity alter, consumed by the priests in the accompany of wine and in-toxic mind-altering drugs. What makes life meaningful, but in philosophical contemplation of existence, a luxury afforded by the rich and powerful?

If you struggle with reading the horror of historical religious realism, then keep in mind that the priests and priestesses witnessed these events while alive, having few mental issues with it. Their religious beliefs consumed their minds as much their bellies consumed the flesh and blood of the deities. Corruption of the powerful is at the boundary between building the civilization, an intention of creating a better world, and to participate in perverse acts of sadism. The poor were intentionally being thrown out and cast down, penalized harshly, enslaved and tortured. All in the glory of deities.

When the events of history reaches tipping points and the established religion is overthrown, the priests and priestesses seek inwards to investigate what went wrong with their beliefs. Was it their brutal treatment of those below them in society that caused this painful situation? No, it was the deity's jealousy of people worshiping other deities. It must be the people's fault.

Like every dysfunctional family, deities are in constant battle among themselves. A female deity gives birth to new gods and goddesses who rebel against the throne. Asherah, the goddess wife of El, gives birth to Ba'al and Yahweh. One side claims that Yahweh came from the desert, from Egypt. Their worshippers should be treated as bandits and plunderers. The true religion is Ba'al, a god of festivities. Ba'al has access to the female bloodline and therefore divine right to rule. Notice how this reflects a Seasonal religion. The other side claims Yahweh was El all along, bypassing the need for a female bloodline and a new origin myth was created to explain it away. Instead of asserting the equal legacy in the shared land, the opponents' claims of coming from Egypt are weaponized and told as a story of liberation. The land becomes the promised land, given to the people by the highest deity. The true religion is the people who were given freedom by powerful miracles. Notice this reflects an Apocalyptic religion.

Whether it is about cutting foreskin off penises or sacrificing children, there is no step that is too far to show how loyal and obedient the worshiper is to their religion. It is the same everywhere in the ancient world. All are equally loyal and obedient, demonstrated by extreme acts against the body of the worshiper, its family and women, but also in the cruelty against opponents. Where the modern mindset would admire mercy and love to ones' enemies, an idea developed in a vast expanded empire, the tribal religions go to war when given the opportunity. Often, people even brag of genocides which never happened. It is a form of cruelty that is repulsive to people today, but at the time was socially acceptable and admired.

It is in the horror of historical reality that ancient religions must be understood on their own, not in the modern mindset. The ancient religions consumed human minds like the agricultural deity's metaphorical flesh and blood consumed by the priests or priestesses. Religious beliefs resulted in extreme suffering and exploitation which benefited a few people, an elevated class, which could afford contemplating existence and tuning their stories to be ever more invasive and awe-inspiring. As a priest or priestess, there was possibly never a dull moment, the fun of hiding secrets from the populace while balancing life on a knife edge. Each day, they ate like there was no tomorrow, because sometimes tomorrow did not come. When you became part of this elevated class, you had to go through hard initiation rituals to filter out those who would not stand the lifestyle of what might be considered today as criminal enterprise.

When priests or priestesses had time to spare, they indulged in literature and creative crafting of new religious narratives. A library could contain thousands of scrolls, which were frequently lost to history when a city was taken by the enemy. Scrolls were burned, sometimes by the enemy and sometimes by their own people to hide traces that could provoke anger among the populace. Some of the scrolls contained religious narratives which were not preached openly, but gained influence in the religious imagination centuries afterwards. What was perceived as the past was sometimes interpreted through scrolls which had nothing to do with historical reality but might have been produced as propaganda or a literary experiment. An obscure reference to a name in a sacred text could inspire whole new stories and complex mythology, even if the original reference was caused by a mistranslation or misinterpretation. Trends of literary style and fan-fiction influences religious beliefs as much as claimed historical events.

When we read the preserved texts of the ancient world, it is important to remember that we only get one side of the story. Contradictory to the modern mindset, some of the genocides described might be forms of bragging. There is no reason to idealize their opponents. People were equally worse.