

On Magic, Religion, Science and After-Science¹

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Abstract

According to Frazier, magic seems to predate religion, which is later challenged by science. Throughout the ages, man has been trying to better understand the world around him; the quest for the truth. To do this, he has resorted to magic (and superstition), religion and science. In this essay, we have reviewed the extent to which the three ways of “knowing” have helped man understand his world and his role in it. We have essayed to show that there might be need to invent another paradigm, beyond science, to lead us even closer to the truth. Even when science is not dogmatic and ritualistic, like religion, it might not lead us to the whole truth.

Key words: *truth, magic, science, religion, epistemology*

Introduction

The following essay will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is magic premised upon? What purpose does it serve?
2. What is religion¹? What purpose does it serve?
3. What is science? What is its purpose?
4. What is likely to come after science?

To help us tease out these questions and essay a convincing argument, we will review the following thinkers: Sir James Frazier, Yoval Noah Harari, Ayn Rand, Friedrich Nietzsche, Feyerabend, Thomas Aquinas, Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, John Mbiti, Nassim Taleb, Pierre Daniel-Huet, and Voltaire. The choice of these thinkers is based on their reflections in regard to humanity’s preoccupation with spirituality, religion, and epistemology.

We will then ask what epistemology will come after Science? Or is science the end of the search for the truth? And finally, can science be reconciled with religion?

Family, clan & religion

We begin our journey by examining the argument espoused by Harari on the evolution of ancient societies from individuals to religions. Inarguably, man as a single entity would be exposed to myriad survival challenges e.g. lack of food, security, lack of children to carry on his genes, attack from wild animals, etc. Pinker posits, in simple but rather bawdry manner, that our primitive brain (the limbic system) was mainly concerned with four Fs, to wit, Feeding, Fighting, Fleeing and F..². These can be termed as fundamental functions that feature prominently in

¹ The author is indebted to reviews of the essay by Prof. Macharia Munene and Prof. Karega-Munene.

² The last F is on sexual reproduction.

Maslow's hierarchy of man's needs. In order to effectively guarantee his survival and reproduction, our ancestor needed a family, nay a very big family.

Further, families expanded due to population pressure or infighting or sorcery, and the only way to unite them were blood lines, and thus clans were formed. A clan secured the survival interests of the bloodline, and sought ways and means of controlling other clans.

As clans expanded and diversified, there was need to create super clans for more control and power. But how would they be united, and yet the bloodlines were diverse? Harari proposes that man created a myth and persuaded diverse peoples to believe in it. This could be the origin of creation myths to provide a sense of history to the community. This move created huge numbers of people of various clans, and oftentimes countries and regions to believe a myth and share common rituals in observance of the same. This was the genesis of religions around the world as part of our social evolution.

Arguably, societies of today may be glued together by other ideas or constructs such as race, nationhood, democracy, green society, capitalism, globalization, and so on. Nonetheless, the role of religion cannot be gainsaid.

Frazier posits that magic may have played a significant role, prior to religion, since in some observed communities in New Zealand, there is no form of belief (with a supreme being and a set of rituals to worship him). What seems to help resolve issues of daily existence is magic, practiced by a person inducted in the art through bloodlines. In other words, a man seeks to understand his life and fate by consulting another person, presumed to have supernatural powers (magic). If the magic fails, then the person has no other recourse; conversely, when it works, the person is forever grateful to the magician.

Mbiti observes that African societies were very spiritual, meaning that they may have had magicians but they also had a set of beliefs, mainly animistic. In one realm, lower, the magician held sway, but for matters of greater import, like failed rains, the community resorted to the higher realm of spirituality³, where a supreme being was invoked.

Be it as it may, Rand argues that religions are created by creative people (like con artists), endowed with a slightly higher IQ level than an average person; they create a myth of origin, a myth about life and death, and over time, the myth becomes a sect, then a religion. Gullible humans, and they are many, follow the sects or cults blindly (or delude themselves that they understand the meaning of life and death). This is what Rand calls "insanity". If she's right, then the world of today is replete with insane people. History does, indeed, show that the major religions of today, are mere successful sects. They were lucky to survive, as others perished in the sands of time. Taleb, would say, they were positive Black Swans.

Swans were believed, over millennia, to be white until a black one unexpectedly showed up and overturned that thinking. So, the unexpected event, whether positive (like a sudden rise in book

³ Frazier conflates spirituality with religion, although the two are different concepts.

sales) or negative (like the September 11 attack in the US or the DUSIT attack in Nairobi in 2018) is called a Black Swan. In this thinking, modern religions can be considered as phenomena that succeeded unexpectedly, positive black swans.

But then, in this genesis of religion, some thinkers like Voltaire, argued that “if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.”⁴ But why so? Recall Harari's thesis that the creation of a myth has a more visceral and fundamental function of uniting big chunks of people, over and above the bloodlines. Bigger groups can reap more benefits, political, military, economic or otherwise. Therefore, the existence of God or a supreme being seems inevitable in the mind control enterprise.

Frazier demonstrates that in the social evolution from magic to religion, man feels like the latter explains life in much fuller way than the former. There's need to believe in a super powerful anthropomorphic being that controls and regulates our lives down here on earth. But magic has its charm, and religions invariably incorporate magic in their teachings and rituals. It is common to ascribe magical powers to prophets or divine people. Likewise, some religions can hardly resist ancient customs and myths of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their leaders, albeit symbolically. Ancient societies ate their kings or better still they ate their valiant enemies, just to rejuvenate their own powers. The heart of a brave warrior was coveted during warfare, and once vanquished the victor demanded to tear out the heart of the warrior and eat it while it was still pulsating.

God or no God?

Therefore, instead of evolution, *strictu sensu*, religions seem to embody magic and the belief in a supreme being who is the First cause or first mover of all things, including the universe. Thomas Aquinas argues, though in a rather circular manner, this supreme being is God, and He exists. In other words, the “5 proofs for the existence of God” presuppose that there must be a being that started it all, and the principle of regression stops at this being. He is the causer of all causes, but he has no cause himself. Interestingly, Stephen Hawkings, once observed that probably God is the cause of the Big Bang that began time and the universe. Or did the Big Bang just trigger itself?

Things seem to hold well with religions, and atheism, not believing that there is such a thing as God, was left to a small seemingly rebellious group. Harari notes that if someone had slept in year 500 AD and woke up in 1500 AD, that is after 1000 years, he would not have noticed any difference in the lives of the people. almost nothing changed for a millennium. But religions were well and healthy, save for sporadic bloodletting between or within religions.

Societies make leaps, not crawls

Harari presents a couple of revolutions that made our ancestors make jumps, not crawls. It seems like we never change gradually but we make bold leaps. The Agrarian revolution (12,000 years ago), the Renaissance (600 years ago), the Industrial revolution (200 years ago), and currently

⁴ https://books.google.co.ke/books/about/God_Human_Beings.html?id=OMclM7Qz6o0C&redir_esc=y

the Digital revolution. In sum, the hunter-gatherers saw the benefit of tilling large swathes of land as a more reliable source of food. They became sedentary and more sophisticated politically as compared to those communities that continued a pastoral tradition. John Lonsdale talks about the *Jembe* (farmers) versus the *Mkuki* (pastoralists) dialectic. The renaissance, or rebirth, was like a spring of human progress, as history, arts and antique values from the Greco-Roman civilization were reintroduced and revalorized. The decadence, nonchalance, and barrenness of the Middle Ages ceded way to creativity, flamboyance and shrillness of people eager to expand their intellectual horizons to the fullest.

The 18th century became to be known as the Enlightenment period, where a lot of the values embedded in religion and body politic tumbled and wavered. For instance, the church was under fire to explain its role, and that of God, in affairs of men. Some thinkers dismissed the existence of God, and even proclaimed that "God is dead" *Gott ist tot* (Nietzsche). They argued that man is fully responsible for his life, without a god pulling strings like a marionette. In the body politic, the monarchy in most places was simply dismantled, and a new constitutional order, with republican values, put in its stead. People wanted to elect their representatives, and not to be ruled by dynasties or families claiming legitimacy from a deity.

The industrial revolution spurred growth with spectacular inventions, like the locomotive engine, automobile, airplane, etc. It also gave us two world wars (1914-1919, and 1939-1945).

The digital revolution has already interconnected the entire globe, creating new opportunities, inequalities and contestations. The Internet and the ubiquity of mobile telephony attest to this new reality. In the wake of covid-19 epidemic, most learning institutions reverted to online teaching via various applications such as Zoom, Microsoft teams, Skype, etc.

As man jumps from one revolution to the next, magic and religion suffer blows, albeit in different proportions. Magic, both sympathetic and contagiousⁱⁱ, is abandoned to charlatans, quacks, and persons of dubious distinction. Religion on the other hand is down but not out. Yet. Thinkers, in the mould of Nietzsche, like Dawkins decry the infantilism of believing in a god. Man, not God, is the Centre of the universe. To circumvent this dilemma, some religious scholars present some form of religious existentialism by arguing that man is responsible for his acts but there is a God who will judge him later, and make him account. Gabriel Marcel, the French Christian existentialist comes to mind. On the other hand, religion sneaks back magic by the back door by claiming that some rituals are imbued with certain sacred values; it also creates objects and consecrates them. But this syncretism of religion and magic is threatened by a new way of searching for the truth: science. What are the "real facts" about our existence? Can science perform better than magic and religion in leading us to "what is true" (truth)?

Did magic lead us to the truth? Does religion lead us to the truth? It seems to me that the two only partially avail the truth to us. Can science replace them, and deliver the truth to us?

The first epistemological challenge is about how we come know, i.e. knowing. In the magic paradigm, our ancestors thought they knew the truth but then that paradigm waxed and waned, and was replaced (partly) by religion. Within the paradigm of religion, believers think that they

know the truth. Today, scientists would like to make us believe that theirs is the paradigm that will lead us to the truth. But is that the case? Could this be yet another paradigm that will need replacing?

Science as a religion?

Feyerabend takes a swipe at science by claiming that most scientists have turned science into a religion, replete with the same dogmatism and obscurantism commonly associated with faiths. The scientific method has become the canon, nay the dogma or orthodoxy, and any other knowledge obtained from other methods is adjudged subjective and contextual or relative. This is reflected in the contempt for social sciences, and praise for pure sciences.ⁱⁱⁱ

Will science lead us to the truth? First, let's try and understand what truth is. When do we attain to the maxim *Adaequatio intellectus et rei*^{iv}, the equivalence of the mind with the thing (reality)? And how do you know that it's what it is? Illusions of perception (optical and cognitive) as well as those of interpretation can easily distort reality or the truth. So how do we eschew the biases, and yet we are human beings, who learn via the senses? Scientific method of acquiring knowledge seems to minimize, but not extirpate bias. For instance, Pierre Daniel-Huet empirically demonstrated that the same data can be interpreted in many ways. Similarly, people of different persuasions interpret the same event differently. Democrats will no doubt differ with Republicans, even when presented with the same facts. So, how do we get to knowing or closer to knowing?

Taleb proposes negative empiricism, skeptical process of discovering and claiming that we have knowledge. He recalls to mind the foundational works of Hume, Algarab, and Sextus Empiricus. The works are also not very dissimilar from Descartes' *dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum* (I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am.). By doubting knowledge presented to us from research, in light of the biases outlined above, we could refocus our attention on the process through which that knowledge is acquired, in lieu of knowledge itself. This, *inter alia*, could cure us of looking for evidence to confirm what we believe is the truth, the *confirmation bias*. Further experiments from different angles and perspectives present a more reliable method of getting to the truth or knowledge. This is not to say that truth is relative. Truth is what it is, irrespective of where we stand on earth.

So where does this leave us? Magic, religion and science all deliver some form of truth that soon crumbles in face of unexpected events or life conundrums. The same data from empirical research has many interpretations, depending on the intellectual prism adopted. Since none of them can present the truth, can we combine the three to help us move on with life, irrespective of where the truth is?

Syncretism and alternative methods to science

In Africa, it's no contradiction or cognitive dissonance to find a person inhabited by the three spirits of magic, religion and science. Confronted with a disease that science cannot cure, people resort to prayer, and if prayers do not deliver quickly a witch doctor can be consulted, albeit surreptitiously. In some road accidents in Kenya, the injured are found wearing a crucifix or

rosary around the neck and an amulet or a charm around the waist to ward off malevolent spirits. Is this pragmatism? Maybe.⁵

If knowledge premised on magic, religion and science is not definitive. Can we imagine another way of knowing that is yet to be discovered, at least to repair the gaps in the scientific method? Can the digital revolution provide novel ways of knowing that do not follow the scientific method? In other words, can we have true knowledge without science? Is science blinding us from discovering another method of knowing the truth, just like magic and religion are accused of?

We now turn to the question whether science is compatible with religion. For religion, some claim, knowledge comes to us through faith in a deity or some supernatural force. Conversely, science derives its knowledge mainly from empirical surveys. Belief versus empirical evidence. Philosopher Baruch Spinoza would say faith (in God) versus reason (Mind). The former leads to transcendental reality, while the latter refers to understanding the laws of nature (physics). He Bahauallah, putative leader of the Baha'i religion, notes that religion should espouse an "unfettered search for truth" by embracing science. Likewise, Fethullah Gulen, leader of the Hizmet movement, has in his writings and pronouncements, openly advocated for a pragmatic approach in life that combines the fruits of science and the benefits of belief in God. The Buddhists see no contradiction since science deals with material aspects of life, while religion deals with our interconnectedness with the universe in a never-ending life drama. Life is a book without beginning or end. Pope Francis, head of the Catholic church is also a great supporter of science. Therefore, it seems that religion and science need not draw daggers at each other, since they address different concerns of our lives. However, in regard to truth, they both leave us with doubts as to whether they bring us closer or alienate us. Their peaceful co-existence or co-habitation does not help us much in the quest for what is true. In fact, as Feyerabend warned, science can also become a religion, replete with dogmas with do's and don'ts. It can claim it's the only way to the truth, and consider other methods of knowing as "heretic".

Can we have another paradigm of knowing without the scientific method? What will succeed science? A blend of all three: magic, religion and science? Or an entirely new way of "knowing"? I wonder.

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ⁱ We will not discuss spirituality, which is more individual than collective. Different persons could have different values that lead them to inner peace and imbue them with a sense of purpose in life. In other words, they could have different spiritualities.

ⁱⁱ Frazer terms magic as sympathetic when an object is made in the likeness of the victim, e.g. an effigy. Any harm inflicted on the object makes the victim suffer at the same time. For instance, if the effigy is burned the victim's body is also engulfed in flames. Contagious magic, on the other hand, is when an object, e.g. a hair, a nail, piece of clothing, etc., is taken from the victim and used to make him suffer. Manipulations of the object by the magician directly affect the victim. Frazier argues that magic is just a convoluted interpretation of how the associative mind works in humans.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Kenya, for instance, science teachers earn more than teachers in the humanities. In 2018, the Minister for Education recommended the reduction of humanities in favor of mathematics and science in the school curriculum.

^{iv} The correspondence between mind and reality.