NARRATIVE, POSTFORMAL COGNITION, 
AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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The study of narrative, and related advocacy of methods according importance to the place, function, and significance of story-telling in human behavior, increasingly shape our understanding of human behavior. They have contributed to a growing body of literature throwing into question the value of longstanding notions concerning the human subject, the nature of human action, as well as the purposes, and supposed truth value, psychological science contains, expresses, or might yet contribute to understanding human conduct. They have also affected our view of religious “belief”, practices, and contributions to human welfare.

In some measure, these critiques have been associated with a trend in psychological science to “explain away” the case made for religious truth. If religion, for example, be no more, or less, than a collection of practices that can be explained in terms of underlying mechanisms, illusions, hopes, obsessive compulsive, magical thinking, or other “abnormal”, even “pathological” behaviors, religion both as body of belief, and sets of practices, becomes “just” one more object of our fascination and study, and in so doing loses a measure of its majesty and supposed capacity to tell us something of ultimate value, whether about God, transcendent goods or realities, the “nature of things”, or about ourselves.

Pushed to their extreme in the domain of social construction, or for some constructionists simply going to the logical conclusion of constructionist assumptions, narrative accounts suggest that religions, and/or religious teachings, or accounts of the world, amount to things no more or less worthy of ultimate concern than any other stories or accounts. Religion no longer can belong, in this view, to those things some might have wanted it to be, such as a description of the “real”, because it has been unmasked being as “mundane” as any other set of human behaviors, and one more contribution to the constructionist assumption that there may be no “real” to be found “out there” or “in here”.

On this account there is quite simply, or profoundly, depending on how you take such accounts, no “there” there. Religious accounts are consensual accounts, which at some point we found convenient to privilege with “truth”
language, and to assign cultural importance. But since, on such a constructionist view, there exists no truth beyond what we can establish as consensus, and since consensual descriptions are as much, or more, concerned with what we prefer, as they are things we can establish as being “objective” in any way, religious terms, frames, beliefs, assertions, practices, are things we can, admittedly, “do” things with, but not something that stands over us, or to which we need have any particular loyalty, let alone to which we would want or need to submit ourselves.

Religious descriptions of the “real”, in this way of thinking and speaking, are no more true, than any other. What’s interesting about them is what they allow us to do. In this sense narrative is part of a move in psychological science that renews the highly pragmatic strains found in the early psychological work of William James and, later, Mead and Dewey. It moves us from concerns with what we might eventually learn about how things “are”, and predicting on the basis of how they “are” what they will likely turn out to be, to a concern with what languages, accounts, portrayals, stories, etc. allow us to “do”. We are no longer interested, once we take this turn, with what is “real”, or “true”, or “precise”, but with what we can do with the words we have to hand; what words, since we are not only authors of them but also consumers of them, appropriators of them, shaped as much by them as we are makers of them or guides to them, allow us, incline us, constrain us, open up or out, limit or close down; what words and discursive frames, contexts, and worlds, make it possible to do.

What would it be like to live in a world if we described it like that? Given that we have moved from a description of the world or of God or of human nature that reads like $x$ to one that now reads like $y$, what are the consequences we might imagine for living according to these words, images, scripts, and so on, and how might we study how such shifts and transitions occur, and where they take us, in the ways we play them out. From verification and prediction to meta-description and the pragmatics of doing, from a pretense to ontology to an immersion in context, from the epistemological subject to the dialogical self, religion has lost not only its allure, but also its glamour; it no longer glistens above the horizon but lights up features of it along with other kinds of stories, discourses, and perhaps most especially with art. Given such a turn, we are no longer gripped, persuaded, driven, committed, enamored, or inspired by religion, or are we? What is left of religious truth once the stories have been told, once we have taken a narrative turn? Can we dispense, on the basis of what the study of narrative contributes to a re-visioning of science and self,