

Hulsean Sermon

Is the world shaped by systems or stories?

The Reverend John Hulse's bequest to the University of Cambridge promoting "the truth and excellence of revealed religion" points to the attacks this idea received in the 18th century. The Age of Reason was growing uncomfortable with revealed religious stories, which it increasingly cast as ignorant superstition. Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant and Spinoza led the charge for a religion more conducive to the times, a natural, or rationalist religion.

Religious stories seemed increasingly untenable since they imply particularity and contingency. In these stories, God acts at certain times and in certain places, according to his will, in miracles, epiphanies and revelations. But the Enlightenment favoured universality and consistency, and its religious thinkers responded with an understanding of divine action that sat more comfortably with the emerging natural sciences. Many leaned towards panentheism, a god who uniformly pervades the natural world. But the ultimate destination of natural religion was deism, a god who initiates the systems of the world, but then leaves us to our own devices.

So Hulse was flying the flag for stories amidst the rise of modern systems. In the centuries that followed, the tension has remained, but more and more systems-thinking became the default. Karl Marx argued that the class system and the systems of production shaped the history of the world. Adam Smith saw the market as the system that enabled God's invisible hand. Durkheim and Weber led the way in thinking of societies themselves as systems. My own university, the London School of Economics, has been profoundly influenced by all these systemic understandings of the world; our Fabian founders believed that causal systems could explain all things, and once understood, could be reconfigured to engineer societies that produce better outcomes.

Of course, the distinction between stories and systems is not so clear cut. The philosopher Mary Midgley has shown how even the systems of scientific knowledge arise out of some kind of story about what is real and meaningful. The systems of modernity are themselves rooted in what Midgley memorably describes as "the myths we live by", stories of human progress and betterment, of machines and mastery.

Recent years have seen a renewed recognition of Christianity's central role in these stories that underpin modernity. Historian Tom Holland has argued, not unlike Nietzsche, that the modern systems of human rights, democracy and free markets all owe more to the Christian story than Westerners now acknowledge. In St Peter's sermon to the Gentiles in the Book of Acts, the story of God's relationship with the

children of Abraham becomes a universal story of human dignity and redemption, on which the moderns will build their universalist systems.

Through the modern era these underlying stories became increasingly suppressed and obscured such that today the model of the mechanised system persistently dominates our imaginations. It has been reinforced by the rise of the computer system and the emergence of an Artificial Intelligence that reduces intellect itself to the ability to put enormous amounts of data into some kind of useful systemic order. We live in a world which political scientist Olivier Roy describes as increasingly codified, devoid of the rituals, mystery and unspoken understandings that previously constituted culture.

Nonetheless, stories have not died, and we might even claim that we live in times when stories are resurgent because our systems are becoming unstable. Many of the systems we have relied upon are in a state of disruption and crisis, and people are looking again to stories to fill the void and make sense of their predicament.

The system of the free market has not brought the universal enrichment it promised, and it has required a free movement of capital and labour that people have found destabilising to their cultures and communities. The systems of equality and human rights are viewed with suspicion by those who feel unseen or undermined in new codes of identity politics. The international system that has sought to impose peaceful order on the world since the Second World War has lost credibility among those who believe it is skewed to Western interests as well as those in Western countries who believe it is now at odds with the desire to put their nation first.

In this crisis of systems, the stories people turn to are often nationalist and nativist. They are stories that populist leaders harness to their advantage, stories with good guys and bad guys, insiders and outsiders. Frequently these stories draw on the narratives that have always been fundamental in most cultures – the spiritual, metaphysical and scriptural – fusing them into religious nationalisms like Vladimir Putin’s “Holy Russia” ideology or the Christian underpinnings of the American MAGA movement. We live in times when all religions are politicised into populist forms from India to Myanmar, and all faith communities face the challenge of resisting these nationalist distortions.

But the stories that replace (or shall we say complement) our systems need not necessarily be sectarian and self-interested. Stories that shape the lives of communities and individuals can constructively challenge us, as well as reassure us; they can open us up to difference as well as reinforce our collective belonging.

That was certainly true of the gospel story that Peter and the other disciples were telling. It radically challenged the social hierarchies of the Roman Empire, increasing the status of women and giving a dignity to the enslaved that would sow the seeds of

Christian abolitionism. It instilled in the individual a humbling attention to moral failure and an obligation to love our neighbours, even the neighbour who becomes an enemy.

Stories have a complexity and capaciousness that systems resist. They don't seek to theorise or categorise human experience; they meet us in our circumstance, drawing us back to what is familiar and important, while at the same time helping us interpret what is new and uncertain. Stories are adaptive and can shift in emphasis. The articulation of the Christian story that Peter gives in Acts 10 is different to the accounts he gives to the people of Jerusalem in Acts 2, to the Temple crowd in Acts 3 and to the Council in Acts 4. This is not inconsistency or simple pragmatism. It reflects the meeting of narrative and experience as the site in which meaning is generated. As we inhabit and retell a story, we find the connections that bind us to one another and to a truth beyond ourselves. As such, stories are the opposite of ideologies that impose their meaning upon us regardless of context and circumstance.

So I would argue that a shift back to stories from systems is rich with potential for the renewal and flourishing of self and society. But this is not the dominant perception among Western commentators. For thirty years or more we have been talking about a clash of civilisations, which seems to amount to the fear that the world's diverse cultures are grounded in fundamentally incompatible stories. Systems, we continue to maintain, can iron out our differences, while stories run amok will tear us apart.

I can honestly say that my experience of leading interfaith engagement for over a decade in my university and around the world leads me to the opposite conclusion. Stories – whether religious, cultural or patriotic (or a mix of all three) – will drive divisions only if they become ossified ideologies and we fail to keep them vital by retelling them and relistening to them. For one thing, the Abrahamic faiths are not incompatible but overlapping stories. The same characters appear, the same themes emerge. Other faith traditions too have fascinating points of connection and comparison. Stories can be woven together, not necessarily in a syncretistic manner that diminishes their truth claims, but in a way that expands and enriches the imagination of those who share them.

The weaving together of our stories will be our means of resisting the clash of civilisations. It is how we will create a pluralism that is peaceful yet robust. That's a pluralism that can't be imposed through alignment to a contrived set of national values or subordination of religion to secular citizenship. It's built continuously through encounter and dialogue, through finding the points where our stories connect and finding the common causes behind which we can galvanize them.

That kind of interfaith pluralism is not as uncommon as we may imagine, even in places that would seem most divided along religious fault lines. Today the Israel-

Palestine conflict seems more intractable than ever, and extreme religious positions on both sides appear unyielding and closed to other narratives. People continue to maintain (in the face of diminishing evidence) that the only hope for peace is to replace religious stories with the systems of law and rights that allegedly transcend them. Yet my colleague Jeremy Ginges, a professor of behavioural science, found in his research that religion is not as divisive in this conflict as we may think. Through experiments asking religious Israelis and religious Muslim Palestinians how they believed the other would act in ethical scenarios, they found, to their surprise, that they both viewed one another's God as encouraging benevolence to the other.

This is borne out in my experience too, where theological dialogues between religious stakeholders have often been far more fruitful than discussing secular themes of statehood and law. I recall one conversation in a West Bank settlement in which a religious Jew said, "We believe God has called us to live in this land, but we have found other believers here too whom God must be calling us to live alongside."

The Holy Land, and its spiritual ground zero Jerusalem, is a land rich in stories, for the three Abrahamic faiths as well as Bahais and Druze and others. Their stories cannot be suppressed or contained in a system. They can only be woven together through the difficult and patient work of dialogue and community building.

These sacred stories inspired William Blake in the writing of his 1788 tract *All Religions Are One*. To Blake, they are one, not as they conform to some universal system of values or beliefs, but one in their pluriform response to the innate poetic and spiritual impulse that makes us all human. Even more than John Hulse, William Blake loathed the natural religion and deism that collude with the illusion of a mechanised world and suppress our spiritual (and political) freedoms.

And these sacred stories that weave together a holy city become for Blake a metaphor in his famous hymn for a people who resist the industrial machines of modernity, to build a society that is committed to the good, the true and the beautiful. Jerusalem may often be co-opted by those with a more jingoistic sense of national identity. But to me it expresses the desire of a story-rich people to be united in ideals and values that transcend any system.

A national story evolves as stories are retold and reshaped in dialogue with one another. And if that can happen on the West Bank of the Jordan River, it can happen in this green and pleasant land where we have been working for some time to overcome the violence of the past by weaving together the stories of four nations into a United Kingdom. Systems are not all bad, and there are some that we must work to uphold and strengthen as we defend the rule of law and universal dignity.

But amidst the dramatic growth of technological systems and the depersonalised, transactional society they promote, we need more than ever to know our story, what matters to us and what truths we believe to have been revealed. Confidence in our story need not lead to dogmatism or sectarianism. Like St Peter's retelling of the gospel story, it can drive and motivate us while still generating new connections and new understandings. Then we do the work of listening to the stories of others, and weaving them together to build the more peaceful world that points us to the Heavenly City.

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