

Religious and Fictional Narratives: An Ontological Comparison with Reference to Max Weber's "Disenchantment of the World"

Jibu Mathew George

*Assistant Professor, Department of Indian and World Literatures
School of Literary Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University
Hyderabad 500 007, India
Email: jibugeorge@efluniversity.ac.in*

Abstract

This essay is premised on the idea that 'belief' is fundamentally based on the religious narratives which are offered to the believing subject. With reference to Max Weber's concept "Disenchantment of the World" (*Entzauberung der Welt*), it compares the ontological commitment of religious and fictional narratives. To a considerable extent, the efficacy of religious narratives owes itself to their ontological insistence. But contrary to received distinctions-the ontological insistence of religious narratives vs. the ontological self-consciousness of their fictional counterparts-the essay analyzes the dynamics of narratives *as* narratives, and argues that the boundaries between what it calls a "fabula-matrix" and an "onto-matrix" are porous, thus paving the way for a re-examination of religious truth claims and putative belief.

Key words: disenchantment, narrative, ontological commitment, fabulation, ontological self-consciousness, ontological insistence, fabula-matrix, onto-matrix

Introduction

In a lecture entitled "Science as a Vocation," delivered at Munich in 1917, Max Weber, German sociologist, political economist, and philosopher, outlined a process which Western civilization had been experiencing for several millennia, and had reached a highpoint with the scientific revolutions of modernity-"Disenchantment of the World" (*Entzauberung der Welt*). Weber borrowed the phrase from Friedrich Schiller, poet, playwright, philosopher, and historian, who, in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), used it to designate a shift from the holistic world view of

the ancient Greeks to the fragmentation characteristic of modernity. In Weber's work, however, this famous phrase refers, on the one hand, "to a development within the domain of religion from ritual and magic to ... paths to salvation completely devoid of magic [for example, Puritanism]." On the other hand, it denotes "a broad historical development in the West according to which knowledge of the universe is less and less understood by reference to supernatural forces and salvation doctrines, and more and more by reference to empirical observation and the experimental method of the natural sciences" (xxii-xxiii). Weber explains the process as "an ever more wide-ranging understanding of the world's occurrences and events by reference to empirical observation, mechanical principles, and physical laws rather than to the magical and supernatural powers of spirits, demons, and gods" (316). Disenchantment is a result of the rationalization and intellectualization which seeks to understand the workings of the universe in terms of forces which are internal to it. In other words, the disenchanted world is one of "natural causality" (319). Its causal powers, mechanisms, and meanings are to be searched for within itself, without the need for "mysterious incalculable forces" (322). The new world view (*Weltanschauung*) puts a premium on knowledge obtained through verification and proof as opposed to that based on the previous precondition of faith.

Writing nearly a century after Weber, Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, traces the source of disenchantment to the emergence an "exclusive humanism" (19). The "Great Disembedding" (146), as he calls the transition, describes a world view wherein this world suffices in itself. Its phenomena and endeavours need no recourse to anything transcendent for meaning—for what Taylor calls a sense of "fullness" (5). In yet another attempt to make sense of this development, Marcel Gauchet, in *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, locates the process temporally far from modernity, tracing its genesis to the rise of 'high' religions, particularly Judeo-Christianity, with certain characteristic disenchanting features. Gauchet narrates a movement away from 'primitive' religions, which presented an immutable cosmic order laid out for all time in what Mircea Eliade called *illud tempus* (that time). The only option left to humans was to live this order. In the world view of these religions, the divine and the human coexisted. But the high religions externalized the divine in a personal God-YHWH in the Judeo-Christian belief-system—who was amenable to human influence.

By enchantment, the antecedent antithesis of Weber's *Entzauberung* (literally, purge of magic, or removal of spell), I mean belief in supernatural beings. This essay is premised on the idea that this belief is fundamentally based on the religious narratives which are offered to the believing subject. I intend to address questions of enchantment and disenchantment with reference to the nature of narratives, and compare the ontological commitment of religious and fictional narratives. But contrary to received distinctions—ontological insistence vs. ontological self-consciousness—I analyze the narratives qua narratives, and argue that the boundaries between what I call a 'fabula-matrix' and an 'onto-matrix' are porous, thus paving the way for a re-examination of religious truth claims and putative belief.

Religious and Fictional Narratives

Literature and religion, at least in their rudimentary forms, emerged in human history at points which were not temporally distant from each other. Literary and religious representations have historically, cognitively, and psychologically much in common, and, small wonder it has been tempting to look at religious narratives as analogous to fictional narratives. To clarify this analogy, we need to engage assumptions pertaining to the nature of fiction, and its precise relationship with the real world, or, what philosophers of literature call “ontological commitment.” Some philosophers believe that literature has no ontological commitment at all. Others maintain that it has a limited ontological commitment. My position is that the kind of commitment varies from genre to genre. The ontological commitment of documentary fiction (also called non-fiction novel) is different from that of fantasy fiction. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* has a different relation to reality from that of the Harry Potter series.¹ The model of literature which postulates that the world of a literary work is independent of the real world is called the “heterocosmic model,” one according to which “each work constitutes a unique, coherent, and autonomous world... [and] has reference only to the world that is established by that literary work” (Abrams 18). The only criterion applicable to a literary work is that its “possible world” should be “compossible” (176). Its ‘truth condition’ is not correspondence to the real world, but internal coherence. One way of understanding supernatural narratives of religions is to see them as writings without any ontological commitment-à la fantasy fiction. If these narratives are unontological by nature, entities in their worlds can be multiplied, and these entities can be represented as capable of virtually anything. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau put it in *Emile* (1762), “The real world has its limits, the imaginary world is infinite” (81). In other words, if we consider the worlds of religious narratives as analogous to fictional worlds, nothing prevents the world’s infinite expansion and infinite potency as it can happen with the latter. This, in fact, is true of all religious sub-systems-doctrinal, narrative, artistic, and so on. Entities can be freely multiplied, transformed, and empowered.

Most religions present relatively coherent narratives. The problem, and the vital concern, is their relation to reality. Can we say that only a coherence theory of truth (or, a pragmatic theory), not the correspondence theory, need apply to supernatural narratives as well? Religion, of course, draws a sharp contrast between its own narrative and fictional narratives as regards its ontology. As we know, religious narratives engage two realms-the realm of ‘real’ natural beings, and a realm of supernatural entities. If one can agnostically suspend the historically partisan positions of belief and disbelief, one may see that the relation between the two realms to be one of a singular ontological uncertainty. Unlike many other questions on which claims are sharply divided, here what is at stake is the very existence of the entity in question. In the context of two realms, the question is: Which created which? Did God

¹ The view that literature has no ontological commitment is based on the philosophy of the possible worlds, which is derived from Gottfried Leibniz’s idea that God has created “the best of all possible worlds.” See Ruth Ronen and Thomas Pavel for the concept of possible worlds as it pertains to literature.

create man, or man create God? Is culture a divine gift, or, are divinities cultural creations? Atheists can reverse the theistic ontology of gods, and vice versa. To them, what their counterparts consider supernatural is only a cultural construct. The realm of the supernatural becomes a matter of *reverse ontology*. Disenchantment is tantamount to reducing the two realms to one.

The imperative to mediate between the natural and the supernatural poses ontological problems for religious ideation. My contention is that supernatural ideation is subject to a split ontology, torn between two imperatives: i) to provide an account which is true to the real world; ii) to retain its alterity with regard to this world. The result of the split ontology is a series of logical contradictions and amusing paradoxes. The many contradictions which philosophical theology has found in the God-concept (for example, the problem of evil in the world as incompatible with the idea of a benevolent and omnipotent being)² are the inevitable consequences of this double bind-of rendering one realm in terms of the other, of rendering the divine in analogous human terms, or conversely, the human, divine. In any case, between the empirical world and its supernatural ‘theorization’ (or narrativization) is an ontological leap—a leap of imagination, of faith, and of conceptualization. A singular ontological uncertainty lies between the two, one which humanity has not been able to address since the dawn of supernatural ideation. As such, all faith is built upon an inevitable *ontological compromise*. Between reality and its symbolic theorization, there intervenes *fabulation*.

The Ontological Insistence of Religious Narratives

In order to survive and flourish, religion has to address the ontological dubiousness at the heart of supernatural ideation. It has to assert that God is not merely a name for natural processes, and thus counter its own redundancy. Even as it meets the spiritual, psychological, social, and other needs of devotees, it has to tackle the apparently fabulous character of its substructural ideational-narrative system upon which the superstructural edifice of belief is built. The fundamental imperative is to counter the proposition and possibility that the world process will go on even in the absence of the deity. A religious narrative has to deny alternative explanations for the world process, primarily naturalistic, but also those propounded by other religious systems. In fact, it has to fight two battles: one vis-à-vis other conceptualizations; the second, to ensure that its deity is not reducible to natural processes. It has to be God plus natural processes, or God contra natural processes, God who presides over and can intervene in human processes. The historical efficacy of several religions owes itself to their *ontological insistence*.³ The Book of Judges, Chapter 7 is tellingly instructive in this regard. Israelites go to battle with the Midianites under the leadership of

² See Richard M. Gale, “The Problem of Evil,” *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 457-467.

³ Obviously, this is not to discount the violent proselytization enterprises which gained ‘believers.’

Gideon. Gideon and his men camp at the spring of Harod before the ambush begins. Then,

The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, ‘My own strength has saved me.’ Now announce to the army, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained. But the Lord said to Gideon, “There are still too many men... .” (Judges 7: 2-4)

God orders a strange selection process, and promises to deliver the Midianites into the hands of the Israelites with just three hundred men. He delivers on His promise, and Gideon defeats the Midianites. Here God is telling Gideon that things will not happen in the natural course of events, and insists on proving that the situation solely depends on Him. He insists that they not take too many people to battle, lest they say the victory was achieved by strength of numbers. The ontological insistence of the scriptural narratives flows from the fact that they present a world of *absolute fulfilment* (But not so the real world!). Abraham is promised a son, and by the same day the next year the promise is fulfilled.

Judaism emphatically asserts the reality of the true God as opposed to the unreality of presumptive god-aspirants. Interestingly, unlike many of its Middle-Eastern contemporaries, it has no theogony. Throughout the Old Testament YHWH constantly battles putative deities, who He insists are mere stone or wood or metal. This is not, as commonly seen, merely a battle between monotheism and polytheism, between god and god. It is indeed a case of *competitive theism* as well. Of course, faith, feeble and fumbling if left to itself, receives an impetus from competitive theism. But the distinction that YHWH makes is not between god and god, but between God and no-God. He insists that His other is unreal. Here is a god who is real, but His Chosen People hardly believe in Him, but oscillate between gods, and that is why He is wrathful most of the time, and insists on fidelity like a jealous husband-lover. God is angry not only because His Chosen People worship his competitors, but because they got their ontology wrong. They, unlike Himself, do not make a distinction between the real and the unreal, and hence unstable in their devotion to the ‘true’ God.

In contradistinction to the ontological insistence of Abrahamic faiths, the pagan (as Christianity designated its European rivals) ontology was negotiable. Strictly speaking, the existence or non-existence of gods, its own or those of other religions, did not matter. As opposed to the Jew and the Christian, whose dependence on his ‘real’ God was near-complete, the pagans hardly expected to see a god. Ken Dowden points out: “Anthropomorphism, even to the most hardened idolater, is always to an extent metaphorical and no-one would be more surprised than a devout pagan to see a god in the flesh—even the heroes of Greek epic were somewhat taken aback” (215). On account of their almost self-confessed ontological fragility, pagan narratives were vulnerable to revealing the constructed character of their constructs. Therefore, it became easy for proselytizing Christianity to debunk paganism as mere fabulation. Christian apologists effectively used euhemerism to explain pagan gods

away. For instance, Clement of Alexandria triumphantly proclaimed to the pagans in *Cohortatio ad Gentes*: “Those to whom you bow were once men like yourselves” (qtd. in Seznec 12). The Franciscan friar Roger Bacon in the 13th century argued that ancient gods such as Minerva, Prometheus, Atlas, Apollo, and Mercury were all deified humans. As Jean Seznec observes, “Thus Euhemerism became a favorite weapon of the Christian polemicists, a weapon they made use of at every turn” (13).⁴ According to Kwasi Wiredu, African gods are open to review, and are made fun of, if they prove ineffective. K. A. Busia remarks that “The [Akan] gods are treated with respect if they deliver the goods, and with contempt if they fail... . Attitudes to the [gods] depend upon their success, and vary from healthy respect to sneering contempt” (205). Wiredu adds: “A worse fate can overtake an under-achieving ‘god’; he can be killed. The total withholding of respect from such ‘gods,’ still more, the directing of scornful attention, can drain them of all vitality” (33). All these indicate consciousness of a make-shift, make-believe utilitarian symbolic system.

One of the many reasons for the historical success of Christianity is that it successfully established the ontological dispensability of its rivals. Again, this was easier to do because pagan belief was implicit. Paganism was non-creedal, non-doctrinal. Since it did not have to make its beliefs explicit, it should have no, or less, ontological anxiety. As Dowden says, “... paganism is largely not a matter of belief ... it speaks the language of actions, the language of ritual” (24). By contrast, Christianity, after Constantine’s peace, was obsessed with doctrinal questions. Though the religion apparently begins in the empty tomb, which symbolizes the absent divine, it wove a grand narrative round it to address the absence, and with it, all the ontological problems and pitfalls of faith. Saint Paul, facing apprehensions that the resurrection of Christ might be mere fabula, addresses the ontological anxiety of the faithful: “And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain” (Corinthians 15: 14). The statement encounters the ontology of the divine straight in the face, and quite directly addresses the question ‘What if this is all a fable?’ It not only answers emphatically in the negative but engages the alternative possibility. This tradition of ontological insistence has been so entrenched that Dante Alighieri, writing in the 13th century, temporally quite remote from the originary event of Christ’s resurrection, has to insist in *Divina Comedia* that what he has undertaken is not a metaphorical journey but a real one. The supernatural is not the realm of the symbolic; it is all real!

The Ontological Self-Consciousness of Fictional Narratives

‘Fictional truth,’ at least in the early phases of literary history, was considered innately dubious, and looked upon in condescension. The authors of early English novels had to name them ‘histories’ (for example, Henry Fielding’s *The History of*

⁴ Euhemerus, a Greek mythographer who lived in the fourth century BC, introduced a method of interpreting myths: mythical events as historical events and mythical personages as historical personages. Euhemerism, the historical-rationalizing method of interpreting myths, draws upon the name and practice of Euhemerus.

Tom Jones, A Foundling). Daniel Defoe's struggle for truth claims is evident in the length of his book's title: *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an uninhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates* [sic]. The assumption was that histories were somehow 'true' accounts, and fiction, as its etymology has it, concoctions. The English word 'fiction' is derived from the Latin infinitive *fingere* , which means to concoct or contrive. But today the distinction has collapsed. The postmodern philosophy of history seems to have found the enterprise of the nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke-to reconstruct history as it actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen war*)-not only impossible but also undesirable. The former emphasizes the idea of narrative, and claims that history is always written from the perspective of the present, and serves its ideological purposes. Hayden White in his *Metahistory* sets out to demonstrate that historical narratives are neither simple representations of a sequence of events nor the revelation of a design inherent in them. Instead, he analyzes historical narratives as shaped by the imposition on events of cultural patterns similar to narratological concepts, such as plot and character-type. History itself is a fictional construct. To write is to fictionalize.

Fictional narratives are ontologically self-conscious-in the sense they are conscious of their own constructed character. Historically, they have become increasingly self-conscious. If we look at the history of European literature, we can see that its evolution has been a matter of progressive disenchantment in Weber's sense. In *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye classifies "fictions" using the hero's power and stature as criteria. At the top of the scale is the myth, in which the hero is *a divine being*, superior in kind to both other men and to the environment. At its bottom are the "low mimetic" mode of comedy and realist fiction, where the hero is the reader's equal, and the "ironic" mode, where the hero is inferior to the reader. In between are the romance, in which the hero is superior in degree to other men and to his environment; and the high mimetic mode of epic and tragedy, where the hero is superior in degree to other men but not to his environment. Here, Frye makes a statement which is of great import to us: "European fiction, during the last fifteen centuries, has steadily moved its center of gravity down the list" (Frye, 1957: 34). The movement from myth, romance, and epic to realist and ironic fiction is indeed a sign of disenchantment. More importantly, this disenchantment in literary genres is also a story of increasing ontological self-consciousness. In an apparent exception to Frye's thesis, fantasy fiction is becoming popular, but this popularity is based on a subliminal deal between the text and the reader. The reader 'inhabits' the fictional world of fantasy fiction with full consciousness of its fictional character. Two centuries ago, Samuel Coleridge called the prototypical version of this phenomenon a "willing suspension of disbelief." Coleridge believed that if a writer could infuse a "human interest and a semblance of truth" into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgement concerning the implausibility of the narrative.

A Fabula-Matrix and an Onto-Matrix

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, the difference between religious and fictional narratives, as the former claims, is between a purely narrative unontological discourse and a discourse with strong ontological claims—a *fabula-matrix* and an *onto-matrix*. In appearance a religious narrative is similar to fantasy fiction,⁵ but claims its reality as uncompromisingly as documentary fiction does. It is also a contrast between what one has to look for: reference or meaning? Ontologically, the difference between Lord Voldemort and a deity is that the former, as envisaged by the system which posits him, operates in a realm analogous to our lives, and *does not* claim, as professed by the system which contains him, to ‘touch our lives.’ A deity, as professed by the system which contains him, *does*.

However, there is something about narratives *qua* narratives that undoes the above ontological distinction. Narratives draw into the vortex of their internal vital dynamics the distinction between the real and the unreal, and transmutes them into another binary—what is aesthetically efficacious and what is not. After all, it is *words* that create *worlds*, sacred or profane. The same words can be used in both. So can the same devices: symbolism, metaphor, personification, allegory, and so on. In the aesthetic melting pot, the assumed distinctions get lost. For example, religious narratives can become ontologically self-conscious like literary narratives. Consequent to the erasure of distinctions, it is difficult to distinguish where ontological commitment ends and aesthetic creation begins. The traditional view assumes a distinction between a *fabula-matrix* and an *onto-matrix*. But looking at particular narrative elements, it is not possible to ascertain to which of the two matrices they belong. The writer of the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100 BC) might have believed in supernatural beings (or, did he?), but do all the supernatural entities and processes depicted in the work imply an ontological insistence—in equal measure? Similarly, Dante could well be an agnostic literary craftsman merely modifying the Greek trope of *katabasis* (the hero’s descent into the underworld) for Christian consumption.

Religious narratives can be ontologically ambivalent because it is easy to cross over between the two matrices. One can fade into the other. Most narrative elements are located at boundaries between the *onto-matrix* and the *fabula-matrix*, where ontological commitment is no longer pressed upon. Even religious narratives are capable of constant shifts between the aesthetic and the ontological. And aesthetic appeal of narratives—aesthetic in the larger sense—can ensure their perpetuation independent of their ontology. In other words, religious narratives can easily be de-ontologized, or they can attain ontological self-consciousness. Religious ideation belongs to a realm of narration where the state of affairs described, or the plot narrated, is so vivid, internally so systematized, or rendered so desirable that their relation to reality is no longer the criterion of their validity, but paradoxically have had the greatest claims over reality. In sum, a supernatural text can potentially operate both in the narrative-mode and the ontological mode—which to choose is,

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, with his attempt at “demythologization” of scriptures, was keen to see religion rid of the fabulous element.

individualistically speaking, up to the reader/listener. The choice is key to determining whether the world was indeed enchanted or not.

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Bio Note

Jibu Mathew George is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Indian and World Literatures, School of Literary Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University (formerly Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages), Hyderabad, India. He holds MA degrees in English Literature, Philosophy and Religion, and Political Science, an MSc degree in Applied Psychology, a PhD on James Joyce, an Advanced Diploma in German, and a Junior Diploma in French. He has published on James Joyce, Indian writing in English, literary theory, philosophy of literature, history, time, and mythology, in national and international academic journals and critical anthologies. His book *Ulysses Quotidianus: James Joyce's Inverse Histories of the Everyday* came out in 2016. He has presented research papers and delivered lectures in several conferences, both in India and abroad. He was a Research Fellow at the Zürich James Joyce Foundation, Switzerland, in 2008. In the same year he also received a DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst-German Academic Exchange Service) Scholarship for studies at Technische Universität Dresden. University College Dublin granted him a scholarship to participate in the James Joyce Research Colloquium in April 2008. He was also awarded a travel grant by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) to attend the Conference on Folk Beliefs and Traditions of the Supernatural at Unst, Shetland, United Kingdom, in 2014. He is a member of the editorial board of the *English and Foreign Languages Journal* (EFLJ), the board of reviewers of *Glocal Colloquies: An International Journal of World Literatures and Cultures*, and the advisory board of *Epitome: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*. He was editorial consultant for the *Humanities Circle* issue on The Anthropocene and the Human Sciences [3.2 (2015)], reviewer, *Maulana Azad Journal of English Language and Literature*, and pre-publication reviewer for *Orient Blackswan*. He was the coordinating editor of a special issue of *EFLJ* entitled "Postcolonial Pedagogy" (January 2013). He served as the subject expert and script writer for e-learning programmes sponsored by the University Grants Commission in India. He also served as member of the curriculum committees of several universities and as resource person for refresher courses for university and college teachers. His areas of academic interest include modernism, twentieth-century European fiction in translation, twentieth-century American fiction, twentieth-century literary theory, continental philosophy, comparative religion, mythology and folklore, life span psychology, Holocaust studies, and historiography.