

HOW DUNE (1965) GETS RELIGION EXACTLY RIGHT

Pratyush Rudra¹

ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the portrayal of religion in Frank Herbert's science fiction novel Dune (1965), with a particular focus on the Fremen society and their messianic beliefs. It employs a sociological and anthropological approach to analyse religion in Fremen society. The analysis utilises concepts such as costly signalling theory, credibility-enhancing displays (CREDs), and the relationship between religion and social cohesion, to shed light on religions' relationship to messianic complexes, and war, oppression, and resource-scarcity. Data for the analysis is drawn from the novel itself, focusing on the detailed descriptions of Fremen religious practices, rituals, and belief systems. Additionally, the essay incorporates relevant academic literature on religion, sociology, and anthropology to illuminate the theoretical underpinnings of the Fremen's religious behaviour. Ultimately, by comparing Herbert's portrayal to real-world religions and their ways of functioning, the essay seeks to demonstrate the profound sociological insights of the original novel.

1. INTRODUCTION

The release of *Dune* (2021), and *Dune: Part Two* (2024) has renewed a lot of interest in Frank Herbert's original book published in 1965. At its release, the book won the Nebula and Hugo awards for best science fiction novel. It went on to become one of the best-selling sci-fi novels of all time, along with being considered by some critics to be the best sci-fi book ever written. The book deals with various themes, ranging from politics of empires, colonialism, religion, gender and even ecology. The focus of this essay is to examine *Dune*'s portrayal of religion, and particularly messianic figures, rites, rituals, sacred beliefs, ideologies and practices and their effects on society and politics.

In *Dune*, Fremen society is characterised by a high degree of religiosity. Almost all Fremen believe in a prophecy that states that their desert society will receive a saviour- *Lisan Al-Gaib* (The Voice from the Outer World), who will lead their world to a green paradise. Paul 'Muad'dib' Atreides, claims the role of this messiah, and manages to unite the *Fremen* in a fight against the *Harkonnens*, a brutish, colonialist empire who subjugates the Fremen on their home planet. Herbert describes in incredible detail the religious rites, rituals and practices of the Fremen. He also uses the 'third-person omniscient' style of narration, by which we as readers, are able to understand the internal psychologies of his characters. Lastly, through the works of the Bene Gesserit planted belief systems that frame the experiences of the Fremen, we also have an empirical referent for the ideological system prevalent among the Fremen.

With these three empirical referents for Fremen religion, we can analyse the role of religion in Fremen society. Studies on the links between religious psychology, fundamentalism, social solidarity, community cooperation, and war- all have unique theoretical insights. When applied to Fremen society, we find that they illuminate many aspects of costly signalling theory, credibility enhancing displays (CRED), religion-oppression feedback loops and the philosophy of 'saviours'. The fact that Herbert wrote a story which describes quite accurately the insights from sociological, anthropological and philosophical studies of religion to come nearly three decades later, is nothing short of a gargantuan feat of sci-fi writing. This essay, though an analytical one, is thus also an appreciative one.

2. COSTLY SIGNALLING THEORY

Irons (2001) argues that religion is a 'hard-to-fake sign of commitment' which facilitates intra-group cooperation. The fact that religion increases group solidarity is an observation made by many anthropologists (Durkheim, 1912/2001; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). However, Irons goes a step further to show why religion is favoured universally as a strategy to promote cooperation. His argument is summarised as follows.

¹Department of Sociology, Hindu College, University of Delhi; Email: pratyushrudra.158.2022@hinducollege.ac.in

It is true that members of a group gain from intra-group cooperation in activities such as hunting, food-sharing, and warfare. However, when faced with the conditions of collective action, the incentive to falsely claim that one will cooperate, i.e. defect, is especially high because individuals can achieve their greatest gains by refraining from cooperation while others cooperate. Irons thus argues that the strongest social mechanism to limit such potential to ‘free-ride’ (Olson, 1965), is religion.

When individuals can convey their commitment in a cooperative pursuit, intragroup cooperation is more likely to emerge. Therefore, whenever the gains for defection outweigh the costs of cooperation, the only credible commitment signals are those that are “costly-to-fake” (Zahavi and Zahavi, 1999). If commitment signals are not costly-to-fake, they can easily be imitated by free-riders who do not intend to invest in the cooperative pursuit. (Sosis & Bressler, 2003) while testing this theory, concluded that religious ‘communes’ who demanded costly sacrifices from its members (such as fasting, abstinence, celibacy) were more likely to survive longer than secular communes. For obvious reasons, the cause-and-effect relationship of this theory is propounded in scarce resource situations as the need for intra-group cooperation is severely increased.

In Dune, the Fremen live on a desert-world known as *Arrakis*. Water is an extremely scarce resource, so much so that even crying is considered a waste. However, in the second act of the book, we find that the Fremen have massive pools of water in their *sietches* (village type communities). However, since this water is considered sacred, no one is allowed to drink from it, or use it for any other means. Thus, there is the utmost incentive for a Fremen individual to drink from the communal sacred pool. However, they do not do so, as abstinence from the pool is not merely a costly ritual sacrifice to signal commitment, it is also sacralised in the belief system of the Fremen. The Fremen religious belief is that by saving water, they are taking steps towards building a green paradise.

Many such religious rituals supported by beliefs and ideologies are expressed throughout the book, all of which contribute to the extremely strong intra-group solidarity of the Fremen, particularly when it comes to their belief in the *Mahdi*, or the saviour.

“Whereas the semantic content of the secular ritual is exhausted by the psychological, physiological, or social information transmitted in the ritual, this is not so in religious rituals. Religious rituals always include, in addition to messages of social import, implicit or explicit reference to some idea, doctrine, or supernatural entity.” (Rappaport, 1971, p. 29)

Thus, by directing rituals’ referents toward the unfalsifiable, religions attach themselves to ultimate beliefs that are unverifiable and hence potentially eternally true. In Dune, we see the effect of such cognitive conditioning, in the confirmation bias of Stilgar, a Fremen leader, who interprets Paul’s initial denial of being the messiah as a sign of messianic humility (“as was foretold”).

3. HARSH CONDITIONS AND SCARCITY’S EFFECT ON RELIGIOSITY

In the movie Dune: Part Two (2024), a notable departure from the books is made. The movie shows the planet Arrakis being divided into two camps. The northern camp, where the colonialist Harkonnens harvest spice and few Fremen live; and the southern camp, where desert conditions are so harsh that “nothing can survive down there without faith.” Naturally, no outworlders live in the south, whereas a vast majority of Fremen live down there. The movie also describes the southern tribes as being more fundamentalist, i.e. they are far more willing to believe in the prophecies of the Mahdi/ Lisan Al-Gaib. Despite needing more troops to revolt against the Harkonnens, this is something Paul is cautious about at first, as he wishes to avoid sparking a flame that in his premonitions sets off a holy war. Nevertheless, even for the Fremen people, the book seems to implicitly suggest that resource scarcity has a direct correlation with religiosity. The movie merely explicitly states this belief to be true for the southern tribes more than the northern ones.

Sibley & Bulbulia (2012) found in their study of religion that natural disasters such as earthquakes are more likely to increase religiosity. This is consistent with other findings as well (Travino & Pargament, 2007) that imply that people are more likely to rely on prayer in the aftermath of terrorism. Put simply, in societies where religion is already prevalent, under harsh psychological conditions, whether they be

brought about by resource scarcity, terrorism, suffering, natural disasters, or a combination of the, people are more likely to rely on religion (Atran, 2004). Dune depicts this relationship impeccably.

Together with the harsh conditions of Arrakis' southern hemisphere, and the oppression of the Fremen people as whole by the Harkonnens, Fremen tribes face existential threats almost daily. One might be inclined to think that continuous decline in living conditions may lead to people losing religion, given that they might feel that their 'god does not care for them'. However, Fremen religion is different in this regard. The Fremen do not worship any 'god' as such who looks out for them. Rather they sacralise certain symbols of community solidarity as mentioned earlier, along with messianic prophecies. Thus, their religious belief can be said to presuppose a state of oppression and scarcity for all their mythology, practice and prophecies. As such, Fremen religiosity becomes extremely far-reaching and powerful.

4. FUNDAMENTALISM, WAR-REPRESSION AND CREDS

In Dune, it is basically a given that the southern fundamentalists will go to war by the millions if the Mahdi shows up to lead them. This too is supported by research which shows that religious fundamentalism is associated with greater support for hostile military intervention (Rothschild et al., 2009). At this point, a vicious cycle has the potential to emerge. The hardship of war motivates religious fervour, and religious fervour motivates war (Henrich et al., 2019). This feedback loop not only has the potential to influence how people behave, but also to influence the composition of religious belief, ideology and practice. As the Princess Irulan points out in her analysis of the Fremen uprising, 'repression only makes religion flourish (and) prophets only get stronger when they die'.

The film's portrayal of what Joseph Henrich (2009) terms "credibility-enhancing displays" (CREDS) merits discussion, particularly in its alignment with Henrich's theory concerning costly religious behaviours. In a pivotal scene towards the conclusion of the narrative, Princess Irulan and Emperor Shaddam deliberate over strategies to address the uprising of the Fremen. Irulan astutely notes that Prophets get stronger when they die. This assertion resonates with historical examples from Christian and Islamic traditions, underscoring the phenomenon wherein martyrdom amplifies the influence of religious figures, especially in politically hostile environments.

Henrich's theory posits that engaging in costly religious behaviours enhances the perceived credibility of one's religious ideals among observers. Such behaviours may encompass a spectrum of sacrifices, ranging from food taboos to vows of poverty or even physical feats like walking on hot coals. The willingness to endure such sacrifices for a belief system lends credence to its underlying supernatural tenets. Martyrdom epitomises the ultimate display of commitment, serving as a persuasive testament to the sincerity of one's convictions. Empirical evidence supports Henrich's theory, demonstrating that individuals exposed to high levels of religious creds during upbringing are more inclined to profess strong belief in the existence of a deity. Conversely, those with limited exposure to such displays are more likely to express scepticism regarding religious beliefs. Verbal expressions of faith and attempts to instil religious beliefs in offspring prove less effective in the absence of tangible displays of commitment.

"...a CREDS bias may well be working to make religious actions more powerful than words in persuading cultural learners to acquire supernatural agent beliefs." (Lanman & Buhrmester, 2017, p. 21)

Princess Irulan's assertion regarding the strengthening effect of martyrdom aligns with Henrich's framework. However, the protagonist, Paul, demonstrates an adept utilisation of creds, both consciously and inadvertently, to bolster the Fremen's faith in him without resorting to martyrdom. Paul's active involvement in the Fremen's cause, risking his life alongside them, earns him their respect and allegiance. Furthermore, his actions, particularly following the consumption of the Water of Life, strategically reinforce perceptions of his divine role. Notably, Paul's confrontation with the emperor's champion, Feyd-Rautha, serves as a deliberate utilisation of creds. Despite possessing prescient knowledge that the duel will not prove fatal, Paul's willingness to engage in such a perilous encounter enhances others' faith in his prophesied role. This strategic display of commitment, while not

constituting martyrdom per se, significantly reinforces belief in both the prophecy and Paul's divine mandate.

5. CONCLUSION

This essay explores the religious belief in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, among the Fremen. It argues that their harsh environment and oppression by the Harkonnens create a society primed for religious fervour. The Fremen's faith is not merely a belief in a deity, but a complex web of rituals, symbols, and a messianic prophecy that becomes a powerful tool for unification and resistance. The essay analyses this phenomenon through the lens of real-world sociological and anthropological studies, demonstrating how religion can foster cooperation and solidarity, especially when bolstered by costly displays of commitment. It also explores the causal relationships between religious fundamentalism and cycles of war-repression. Ultimately, the essay suggests that *Dune's* portrayal of religion is not just a backdrop for its epic story, but a profound exploration of the relationship of religion to society.

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