

**RELIGION IS AN ALMOST UNIVERSAL PHENOMENON. EXAMINE
CRITICALLY SOME OF THE SUGGESTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN MADE AS TO
HOW AND WHY RELIGIONS EXIST.**

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1 Introduction

The existence of religions is common both geographically across the earth and historically as far back as records go. Indeed, only the “modern” atheistic and materialistic worldview appears to diverge from this norm. In this essay I evaluate and seek to classify the explanations that have been proposed for explaining the origins of religion, drawing on the Bible, the course handbook, external sources and my own insights.

2 A Christian, God-centred view

The Bible suggests that the Christian faith stems from the creation of a mankind capable of a direct relationship with God, which was enjoyed uncorrupted in the Garden of Eden. This perfect relationship was spoilt by the Fall. Man still longed for a relationship with a God who “has also set eternity in the hearts of men” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), but the link was now distorted and fallible. Restoration of relationship has come through successive direct covenants between God and Noah, Abraham, and Moses, and supremely by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are called to follow him alone, as in his own words, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:16).

The Bible is not explicit in accounting for the growth of faiths other than Christianity (and Judaism) – which can be seen as a weakness of this approach - but a number of suggestions drawn from Biblical *doctrine* can be made that give a satisfactory explanation. Beyond the longing noted from Ecclesiastes, “General Revelation” as shown in Romans 1:20 is thought to give even those who have not been informed by the Bible evidence of God “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

This awareness, distorted by the Fall, made “other” religions feasible. For example, after the Fall, General Revelation might lead to worship of nature see Romans 1:21-23 “For although they knew God, they....exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” That they might plausibly become multiple faiths is understood in the wake of the Tower of Babel, when men ceased to be able freely to communicate in a common language. The influence of the evil unleashed by the Fall on other religion is shown in those of the Canaanites (child sacrifice etc., Psalm 106:38). Two other origins of other religion from a Biblical point of view are politics, as in the action of Jeroboam to set up altars with golden calves outside Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:26), and the work of Satan in post Christian faiths that deny Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, (1 John 4:1-2).

A particular Christian understanding is that “religions” in the sense of mere observance of dogma may actually be a revolt against God, as suggested by Barth (1975). He saw them as a form of self reliance that is man made, shaping God to man’s agenda. The “religious” in this sense are actually godless. Only “revelation”, which is from God, is actually inspired and stands opposite to religion in this sense. Jesus’ arguments with the Pharisee’s can easily be interpreted in this light – that they had constructed an artificial and burdensome religion that supported their own position, which was remote from God’s intention as revealed in the Scriptures (Matthew 23:2-7). Equally, modern Christianity can be criticised from this point of view, for unbiblical features such as exclusivity (cf. James 2:3) and denominational division (cf. John 17:23).

Barth's particular view begs the question why there have been diverse revelations, all claiming to be divine. The question arises, which one is the correct one – or as the Hindus argue, are they all alternative ways to God? His approach may also deny the possibility of learning about God from General Revelation which as noted is supported in the Bible.

3 Theories of the origin of religion based on the nature of humanity

A common explanation of religion is as an explanation of suffering and meaninglessness in this life. Humans revolt against the idea that life has no significance – death is final and suffering is due to chance. Religion in this context seeks to resolve this problem by providing a theory of meaninglessness and a methodology to overcome it. Notably, this occurs by positing extension of life beyond birth and death, with an element of justice, thus giving significance to an otherwise meaningless life.

A related argument is that religion stems from man's awareness of time (Brandon 1965), unlike animals, which allows planning but also gives a premonition of death, leading to insecurity. Man's reaction to the prospect of his own demise has taken the form of seeking security from death, or beyond death, by attachment to what is deemed eternal or unchanging. Psychologists have made suggestions in this "needs" field, but they tend to be contradictory, mutually exclusive and explicitly assume that there is no divine being. As noted by Spinks (1965), "For Freud religion was an obsessional neurosis...for Jung it was the absence of religion that was the chief cause of adult psychological disorders".

Whereas I have doubts about the time and psychological approaches, I consider the response to meaninglessness a reasonable explanation, and that the supreme resolution is in Christianity as set out in Cotterell (1990). The approach risks leaving God out of the equation

and being purely man-centred, however. One might also on this basis alone question why there are diverse accounts of significance, with the introduction of justice ranging from the Eastern concept of karma to the final judgement of the Monotheistic religions. Furthermore, modern existentialists would claim that the key is accepting life's meaninglessness and not "inventing" a religion to seek to overcome it.

Beyond humanity's needs per se, some argue that there is an inborn awareness of a higher existence beyond that of the worldly existence, as in the quote from Ecclesiastes. Most closely associated with Schleiermacher (1928) is the characterisation of this awareness of one of dependence on a higher power. Awareness of dependence makes one human, while being "lost" is losing that sense of dependence. Criticisms of this approach are again that there is no uniformity in religion that could accompany the universality of this awareness. Western materialism exalts the individual and denies that dependence is a good thing. A Christian would note that this approach posits only an impression of dependence and not its reality.

The idea of the numinous¹, that man senses that there is a God, or spiritual realm, is clearly linked to the point above. This could relate in turn to the psychology of mankind linked to experiences of natural forces man could not otherwise understand (volcanoes, tidal waves), also linked to General Revelation. In such cases there arises the concept of holiness, devoted to God or the spirits and therefore treated differently from normal objects or people. Again, this is man centred and does not allow for the necessary existence of God. It is not generally considered that the numinous could also relate to the actual existence of the spirit world.

There is a danger that focus on the numinous leads to subjectivity, as it requires a supernatural experience per se and cannot be taught. Charismatic Christianity may have elements of this – but on the other hand the sense of awe may be developed also in ritual, as in the Catholic and

¹ From the Latin word numen, which denoted a supernatural nonpersonalised being

High Church tradition. Furthermore, although scientific explanation of natural forces have weakened this basis of religion, they have not eliminated religion itself.

4 Theories of the origin of religion based on contingency

It can be argued that the great religions only developed the way they did from chance. Hence, without Jesus, Christianity is inconceivable, and similarly for Mohammed with Islam and Siddharta Guatama for Buddhism. This contingency element would help us to account for the number of faiths, which is a problem for most of the universal explanations given above.

Such a person of course would have to arise at an appropriate juncture. This may on the one hand be in respect of established religion, as for example when there was dissatisfaction with priestly Hinduism at the time of Buddha and with polytheism in Arabia in the case of Mohammed. Furthermore, social and economic change was also often behind the success of the movement, as in the case of the Protestant Reformation.

On the other hand, not all religions, such as Hinduism and African Traditional Religions, or even the Patriarchal origins of Judaism, have a clear starting point in time, so contingency does not explain all religions.

5 Theories of the evolution of religion

Some theories maintain that religions change over time in a similar way, with more developed forms superseding the more primitive. This can be seen as an application of Darwinianism, survival of the fittest. It is clear that religions change as they interact with culture. An illustration is the doctrine of war in the Bible that changes from the injunction to destruction

in the invasion of Canaan to material for the “Just War” theory in the New Testament.

Furthermore, the proportion of the world’s population that is monotheist is probably greater now than it was before Jesus was born, and probably greater than before Mohammed.

There remain problems of assessing where in the evolutionary hierarchy a particular faith may come. Arising recently is not an indicator, nor number of adherents, since 98% of individuals simply adopt the faith they are born into.

Conclusion

The textbook explanations of religion are mainly man centred, and hence take a certain atheistic or agnostic point of view. For example, an otherwise quite convincing view that religion meets the needs of mankind for significance, or is somehow inbuilt via a sense of dependence can easily have a hidden corollary that this is a delusion and such significance and dependence are not there, and even that religion is the product of a diseased mind (see Sharpe 1983, p61, p69).

One element that is omitted from most common explanations is the action of God himself – I contend that we need to interpret the atheistic explanations using the Bible. Such a background would help us to overcome the difficulty of contingency by seeing the advent of Jesus as part of God’s unfolding plan for mankind. God would also guide religion in a manner appropriate to the people concerned, and hence some of the commandments to the ancient Jews need interpretation in today’s context. Equally, we have seen that God as creator made man with an awareness of the spiritual realm and ability to communicate with him.

On the other hand, unless one is to accept the Hindu view that all religious paths lead to God, it is hard to accept that all religions are thus God inspired. But this is in any case not a Biblical view - as made clear in Isaiah for example, much of religion is idol worship, while the Bible also accounts for other religions. And here Barth's view gains relevance – that religion per se is often godless human based activity, and we need to sift for *convincing and consistent revelation* for evidence of divine inspiration, as I contend is found in the Bible.

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