

Religion

**What It Has Been
and
What It Is**

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Table of Contents

Introduction	v
Chapter 1 The Human Predicament	1
Chapter 2 Earliest Religion	10
Space	13
Time	17
Personal Time	17
Seasonal Time	19
Historical Time	22
Power	23
Chapter 3 The Age of Empire	29
China	29
The Near East	35
Sumer	35
Egypt	35
Assyria and Babylonia	37
The Jews	39
The Persian Empire	41
The Hellenistic Empire	44
South Asia	46
Rome	51
Chapter 4 The Contrarians	56
China	56
South Asia	60
The Near East and Europe	64
Jesus	64
Muhammed	71
Culture Circles	75

Chapter 5 Growth, Adaptation, and Scholasticism	77
South Asia	77
China	84
Buddhism	84
Daoism	89
Confucianism	92
Europe	98
The Near East	111
Islam	111
The Jews	117
Chapter 6 The Modern World Begins	123
China	123
South Asia	125
The Near East	128
The Safid Dynasty	128
The Ottomans	129
Europe	130
Chapter 7 Modern and Contemporary Religion	143
China	143
South Asia	146
The Near East	149
Europe	153
The United States of America	165
Index	179

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to provide, in brief compass, an overview of the development of human religion to show what it, in fact, has been and is. Because the discussion is meant to be brief, the whole history is offered in very broad strokes. There will be many who will wish that this or that omitted movement had been mentioned. Some will certainly take issue with the central thesis. So be it. The point is not to provide final answers but to offer a general view that every reader can then proceed to elaborate upon and modify by further study.

In other words, this is a primer—a “first book.” It grows out of the sense that in order to study some particular religious tradition, one ought to have a vision of the whole first. It is never enough to study one tradition, for, in reality, any tradition chosen has a long prehistory and operates in a context of historical interaction. There is no tradition that I know of that has developed entirely by itself.

Some like to think that “all religions teach the same thing.” Well, perhaps in some very vague and general sense that might be true, but what is more interesting is to explore how traditions and individuals within those traditions differ and why those differences are important. As is suggested in chapter one, religion may very well be a response to certain aspects of the human condition and in so far as religions seek to answer those conditions they may be similar. On the other hand, every religion interprets the questions in its own way and it is that particularity that distinguishes one tradition from another. This book begins with human similarities but also explores, in some detail, the differences.

My first impulse in writing this book was to begin by offering a definition of what religion is. Certainly that seemed to be the most reasonable course. On second consideration, however, offering a definition seemed less and less useful. The reason is that religion

has taken so many forms that to include them all in one definition is like defining a human as a “featherless biped.” The definition may be more or less accurate, but essentially tells nothing very interesting about human beings. Today, I suppose, one could define a human being by offering a complex genetic formula, but again, though it might distinguish human genetic makeup from that of other animals, it would not really offer for most readers much of a clue as to what human beings really are.

Human words are frustrating. Centuries ago Confucius urged his pupils to get their words straight because language confusion can cause all kinds of trouble. Good advice, except that it is easier said than done. A glance at the dictionary reveals that nearly every word has several distinct meanings. Moreover, words change their meanings over the years. For instance, the word “atom” linguistically means something that is unbreakable, for that is how people originally thought of atoms. They were the hard, unbreakable building blocks of existence. We still use the word atom, but it certainly no longer means what its derivation implies.

Sometimes, words arise to address a particular problem and then are applied to very different situations. The word *religion* is a case in point. Most languages until fairly recently had no word for religion. When 17th and 18th century European intellectuals, tired of the wars between Protestants and Roman Catholics, tried to found government on a secular basis, they began distinguishing between religion, a word that previously had had a somewhat different meaning, and secular government. Religion, according to their view, was an assertion of belief in a particular god whereas government can operate without any particular theological assumptions.

Then that word *religion*, suited for one context, became applied much more broadly, to cultures that did not make a distinction between religion and government at all. Thus, it was Western scholars who invented such names as “Hinduism,” “Daoism.” “Animism,” etc. Buddhism came to be called a religion even though Buddhism does not teach a belief in a god. To a large extent the history of religions has been, at root, the reading of Western experience into other cultures that think about what we call religion very differently.

So, there is a strong sense in which we ought to abandon the word religion entirely and think about the matter in a very differ-

ent way. For good or ill, however, words, once invented, take on a life of their own and cannot simply be abandoned. Perhaps we can redefine religion but we cannot simply abandon the word. Therefore, the words “religion” and “religious” are used throughout this text without particular attempt to define them. In fact, however, the book itself is an extended attempt at redefinition. My hope is that by the end of the book a new understanding, if not a new definition, will emerge.

The other impulse that I felt immediately when starting the work was to explain what basic theory lies behind it. That is to say, as an author I felt the need to explain “where I am coming from.” Such a question is, in a way, very important. It is noteworthy that answers given are often frequently hidden in the assumptions made. Theologians tend to give theological answers. Psychologists, on the other hand, usually provide psychological interpretations. The same is true for sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and historians. Sociologists give sociological reasons; historians, historical ones.

Since most modern academic disciplines bracket out “the god question” and generally do not consider very seriously any sort of divine revelation or intervention, most academic study of religion ultimately reduces religion to something based upon ignorance, deception, or illusion. Theologians, of course, take “spiritual truth” more seriously, but generally want to promote their own spiritual truth as opposed to that of others.

Perhaps the best way to begin, then, is with a healthy dose of skepticism, not just about ancient gods but about our own presuppositions. The essential starting point of this investigation is that contemporary life, like all human life, is based upon imagination. For instance, the United States of America is only real as long as human beings imagine it to be so. There is no “line written in rock” separating this country from Canada or Mexico. People imagine a line there and so it becomes “real.” The worth of a dollar is a matter of human imagination too. In fact, the whole economic system operates according to human imagination. If, for instance, people stopped imagining that they “need” many of the things they buy, companies that thrive on certain kinds of human imagination would go out of business. Indeed, if a religion like Buddhism were really taken

seriously and practiced widely, our whole economy would virtually grind to a halt.

The same is true of academic disciplines. Each one, even mathematics, is based upon certain unproved, and probably unprovable, assumptions. They seem to work and so we use them, but they only work within our sphere of imagination. It may be that in some other sense, they do not work at all. Ptolemy's astronomy "worked"; medieval astronomers could predict many celestial events. But actually, according to modern astronomy, Ptolemy was quite wrong, because he did not even know the earth orbited around the sun.

There was a time when it appeared that just a little more scientific investigation would solve all problems and we would understand the world completely. Now it appears that most of the universe is made of forces called "dark matter" and "dark energy" which we do not and seemingly cannot see or understand. There are also black holes and other amazing phenomena in outer space and the riddle of indeterminacy in the microscopic world. Moreover, there are a growing number of quite metaphysical hypotheses such as string theory that, if proved true, would radically reshape our understanding of everything. Every era thinks that it has come close to solving all the problems only to discover that the next era not only adds more knowledge but adds it into a different paradigm.

The truth of the matter is that science never took seriously the philosophical observations of a man like David Hume, who claimed to prove that we can never get beyond our own sensations and that those sensations come from a "world" we can never know. Immanuel Kant took much the same point of view, but argued that science works because it deals not with "things in themselves" but with a world of space and time already constructed by our minds; behind that mental world lies the mysterious other that is beyond our comprehension. It is true that for a time Kant believed that he could come to a knowledge of God's existence from what he called the categorical imperative, but eventually he gave up the argument as inconclusive.

Scientists chose instead to listen to the Scottish common sense philosophers, Dugald Stuart (1753–1826) et al., and the pragmatists who said that science can do great things—if it works, use it.

And it has worked for science—up to a point. But the old nagging questions still lurk in the background. Is space-time “real” or a product of our own minds? Can one even think of time in a world with no observer? Can there be a “then” without a “now?” A “there” without a “here?” So what about those billions of years that are said to have existed before life began? Do they have “extension” at all?

My point is that although we believe we know many things, behind and through everything is the great mystery. The usual tacit assumption is that such mystery is really matter, for everything is matter. But that is just an assumption, particularly when it is no longer at all clear what matter really is. This is not to say that I will argue with George Berkeley, the famous 18th-century Enlightenment philosopher, that the mystery is God. All I wish to maintain is that those who study religion should keep an open mind and not assume that they know what Reality really is.

Surely there is plenty of evidence to give us pause. One thinks of the multitude of ghost stories, peculiar dreams that foreshadow actual events, extrasensory perception, prophetic visions, etc. Of course, those who are essentially materialists will simply pooh-pooh all these matters and argue that each one can be explained perfectly well. And if one begins by assuming such things could never happen, then, of course, one can find reasons why they did not. The answer is already hidden in the assumptions. There is, however, an amazing amount of evidence that these events that do not fit into the academic-scientific world-view do sometimes occur.

I am certainly not about to argue that all such claims are authentic or that the nay-sayers are always wrong, but if there is one ghost story that proves to be accurate and unassailable or just one predictive dream that cannot be explained on other grounds, then, it seems that the whole set of assumptions that modern science operates with is suspect and must be investigated. One real ghost upsets our basic view of what the self is, of what reality is.

It is not the intention of this book to argue for or against various paranormal phenomena but only to allow for such possibilities. It may, in fact, be the case that such paranormal claims are all false and that the world is “just matter.” When studying such questions, however, it does little good simply to impose pre-con-

ceived notions. Before the mystery of existence, humans must keep an open mind.

The argument of the book will follow along historical lines. After a short chapter reviewing some of the human needs religion seeks to fulfill, we will study briefly prehistoric religions and then turn to their historical development in four major culture circles: China, South Asia (generally, what today we call India), the Near East, and Europe. Here were to be found the great empires of antiquity and it was in those imperial areas that tribal religion was transformed into something more universal.

We will then look at some contrarians who moved religion in a new direction and subsequently review the religious and scholastic developments of each tradition that they founded. The last chapters will be devoted to the transformation of religion in the modern world and the questions that contemporary circumstances raise about the continuation of religion.

Only the briefest description will be given of the contributions of the many people mentioned in the text. The point is just to provide an outline, not a full discussion of any one person, event, or position. What I try to provide is an overview that can be read in one sitting, a vision, as it were, of the whole. My aim, as I said at the beginning, is to provide a “first book,” not an encyclopedia. My hope is that will be useful for anyone seriously interested in the study of human religion and its significance in the past and in the present.

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The Human Predicament

In order to study religion and understand the role religion has played in human life, we must begin by locating the situation or situations that religion addresses. Why is it that virtually every culture ever studied or lived in has had, as far as we can discover, some dimension that we would label religious? Why is it that, in the face of scientific skepticism and secularism, religion still seems not only to survive but in some areas to gain in strength?

Perhaps it is best to begin by looking at the nature of human existence and how humans differ from other animal species. Like most species, humans are social by nature. There never was a time such as that imagined by John Locke when humans lived outside communities, alone in the wilderness. Not only does procreation demand a sexual relation with at least one other person; the length of time needed by humans to reach adulthood implies a considerable period of parental care. Unlike many other sorts of animals, the human infant does not become self-sufficient for several years.

Moreover, whether one is a hunter and food gatherer or an agriculturalist or lives in an industrialized society, one needs others to survive. It would be difficult if not impossible to prosper entirely on one's own. There may be an occasional hermit who lives alone on some mountain, but all of those fleers from civilization were brought up in society, speak their society's language, and, in fact, usually return to it occasionally for certain provisions and social interaction. Humans are, by necessity if not by innate desire, social creatures.

The problem, however, is that unlike most other species, humans have no "way of society" innately built into them. Ants, it would seem, do not have to worry about how to build an anthill or how to interact with other ants. Bees do not have to decide