

Genesis of God

THE EVOLUTION OF FAITH

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21A213

‘...In the beginning... God created man... in the image of God created He him’
[Genesis, *The Bible*]

‘...In the beginning man created God; in the image of man created he Him. And Man gave unto God a multitude of names, that he might be Lord over all the earth when it was suited to Man. And on the seven millionth day, Man rested and did lean heavily on his God and saw that it was good...’

[Jethro Tull, *Aqualung*]

"Men create gods after their own image"
[Aristotle]

Introduction

The goal of our study is to form a coherent theory of the origin of religion, and to trace its subsequent evolution to polytheism and monotheism. We begin by investigating the foundation of belief in the supernatural, leading to the first form of primal religion – belief in spirits and supernatural forces. We then trace the transition to the second stage – the appearance of gods and polytheism. Finally, we investigate the evolution of monotheism from polytheism. In ending, we test our theory by seeing whether the current worldwide decline of religion in modern society is consistent with our model.

TRANSITION

"Begin at the beginning. Proceed straight to the end, and then stop."
[Lewis Carol, *Alice in Wonderland*]

Like Alice, we shall begin at the beginning, starting our account of the evolution of religion with that of Man¹

Let us consider the primordial origins of religion. Our first task is to explain the very concept of the supernatural, pervasive in all known human cultures. From this concept, we shall then derive the concept of the divine. Since the idea of the supernatural is universal to human cultures, it is reasonable to look for a set of common sources.

¹ Animals seem to lack what most sociologists would characterize as religion – though a number of species seem to have social structure. This would seem to indicate that social structure, in of itself, is not sufficient for religion, though of course, this could also be attributed to a lack of sentience.

There are three possible sources for the supernatural: rational, psychological, and sociological. Primitive man, be it *Homo sapiens*, or *Homo erectus*, or even *Homo neanderthalensis* – was a complex, rational, and sentient being. His beliefs were equally complex and founded in rational thought – primitive Man was far from primitive. Thus, any theory we propose should be logical, rational, and consistent. Primitive religious beliefs are neither ‘ridiculous’ nor the outcome of ‘miscellaneous folly’, as has been charged – they are essentially consistent, and rational ways of satisfying psychological, intellectual, and sociological needs.

Man has a time sense. That is, he is psychologically pre-disposed to think of time in a *linear* fashion. He perceives himself, and the world, moving through a chain of linked causal events. Thus day precedes night, life precedes death, event A precedes event B. This linear thinking predisposes man to rationally attribute causes to events.

This tendency towards causality and explanation is reinforced by the emotional human desire for order and stability. Unexplained and unexpected² events are emotionally disturbing², challenging man’s sense of the world, and his place in it.

² An interesting example quoted by Geertz during his fieldwork in Java:

‘A large deformed toadstool sprouted from the ground in a remarkably short time in a local village. So peculiar was this event that people came from miles to around to marvel... (even though) in Javanese culture toadstools have no special significance. Its odd shape and rapid growth caused the interest... it challenged the local community’s sense of cosmological order, and raised disquieting apprehensions among the villagers that their customary ways of interpreting the world might be inaccurate. The Javanese villagers felt compelled to come up with some explanation. Several alternatives could have been advanced: The toadstool was fake. It had been transplanted from somewhere else. It was the result of unusually heavy rains. Rather than select an empirical explanation, however, the population opted for a religious one. The toadstool, they decided, had been fashioned by spirits... their explanation presumably afforded some measure of intellectual satisfaction’ Quoted in Hicks, *Ritual & Belief*

‘Men would never be superstitious, if they could govern all their circumstances by set rules, or is they were always favored by fortune. But being frequently driven into straits where rules are useless, and being fluctuated pitiably between hope and fear... they are, for the most part, very prone to credulity (and superstition)’

[Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*]

The gods toss all life into confusion: mix every thing with its reverse; that all of us, from our ignorance and uncertainty, may pay them the more worship and reverence.

[Euripides, quoted by Hume]

By attributing a cause to an unexplained phenomenon, Man can exert a psychologically satisfying measure of control over it, and at the same time is comforted by imposing a satisfying order on experience. Events must no longer be passively suffered through; they can be explained, attributed, and hence transcended.

Without these (supernatural) Powers or an alternative to them, there would be no differentiation between experience of the self, and of the world, which acts upon it. Suffering, for example, could be merely lived or endured. With the imaging of the grounds of suffering in a particular Power, primitive man can grasp its nature intellectually in a way which satisfies them, and can thus to some extent transcend and dominate it in this act of knowledge... Animals or pre-religious men could only passively endure suffering or other limitations imposed by the conditions of their existence. Religious man can transcend and dominate them through his capacity for symbolism, and thus attain a degree of freedom relative to his environment...

[Bellah, *Beyond Belief*]

Religion also satisfies the need for emotional security. Human beings, as biological creatures, are equipped with an innate desire for self-preservation, which gives them an evolutionary advantage. Because of this instinct, however, Man is ill equipped to deal with his own mortality. Thus, fear of death is also an important psychological determinant of the basis of the super-natural, as pointed out by Malinowski amongst others.

Religion arises out of an individual crisis, Death – the final crisis of life... Religion saves man from surrender to death and destruction... thus the instinct of self-preservation is at the root of belief.

[Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion*]

Death also brings with it questions concerning the difference between the living and the dead. What causes sleep, trances, disease and death itself? What is the significance of dreams? How can those who are dead appear to us as living in dreams? Such questions naturally lead to the concept of a supernatural force, the spirit, which is independent of the material world.

Thus far, we have considered reasons that predispose an individual to believe in supernatural or spiritual powers. Religion, however, is *both* an individual and a social phenomenon.

Society reaffirms and reinforces the religious ideas that exist in the individual consciousness, and uses them to strengthen the social bond. Religious rituals are the primary ways in which the authority and solidarity of the social group is asserted; they also serve to initiate the young into the rules of social behavior.

Religion and its rites are a means by which the social group re-affirms itself periodically. Men feel themselves united... by a community of interest and tradition, assemble and become conscious of their unity.

[Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*]

Thus religious rites serve a *purpose* – they function not only to strengthen the bonds between individual believers and their god, but also to strengthen the bonds between such individuals and the social group to which they belong. Through religion, its rituals and beliefs, the group becomes conscious of itself as an entity.

This solidarity lends the social group cohesiveness, a sense of unity, which in turn gives the social organism a better chance of survival. And with the survival of the group, comes the

passing on and strengthening of its religious beliefs, explaining why religions are so ubiquitous.

STAGE I

We have derived then, the most primitive stage of religion. Primitive man attributes forces to events, providing him with a psychological measure of control over his destiny. These same forces help him explain the unexpected, provide him with a framework to appease his fear of death, and help him address the difference between dreams and reality, death and life. These are the *individual* purposes³ of religion.

Religion also serves a set of *social purposes*. Firstly, it serves to bind the individual firmly to the group, reinforcing the solidarity of society; secondly, it helps in the smooth functioning of society by providing the legitimization and authority for the social structure and moral order. At this primary stage though, the latter purpose is not yet fully evolved. As the society becomes increasingly structured, and the religion increasingly formalized – the importance of this second role begins to increase. For now, in our primitive prehistoric society, the primary *social* purpose of religion is to create cohesiveness within the group.

Man envisages forces in natural objects, animals, plants and forces of nature. But thus far, these spiritual forces are not gods. They are neither addressed nor propitiated, nor worshipped in the strictest sense of the word. The forms of religious life at this stage are primarily

³ For want of a better word...

concerned with maintaining social harmony, and gaining specific benefits through magic and ritual.

Magic, however, is not the worship of gods. Magic involves a belief in *impersonal* power, as opposed to religion, which invokes personalized supernatural beings – gods. Magic, in many ways, is akin to science – ‘the bastard sister of science’ as Frazer rather colorfully puts it. Like science, magic is a rational attempt to influence forces, natural or supernatural, to achieve a desired outcome. Like science, it is based on a rational system of observation, classification, and logic. The difference between magic and science, is that magic can associate phenomena where the link is subjective and often symbolic, while science only associates phenomena where the link is *necessarily* causal. An example is the ancient belief that the gaze of stone curlew, a bird with vivid golden eyes, would cure jaundice. This is an example of the subjective association characteristic of magic – but it is *not* irrational. Given the information that primitive man has at his disposal such inferences are quite logical.

In this pre-historic stage, religious organization as a separate social institution is yet to evolve. The only form of specialized religious function exists in the form of the shaman or medicine man, a practitioner of magic, one who can manipulate forces for the good of the tribe and the individual – helping fulfill the basic social and individual purposes of religion.

Direct anthropological evidence for our prehistoric system of belief is difficult to find. The only examples available to us are based on archaeological evidence, and to some extent, on

studies of the Australian aborigines. The beliefs of even the most ancient of human societies have evolved to the next stage, that of gods and polytheism.

TRANSITION

Over time, the spirits and forces that inhabit the mythical world of primitive Man become increasingly anthropomorphised. Having conceived of spirits that inhabit various objects, animals and natural forces, it is natural for man to conceive their life to be like man's own, and thus he imagines them to be possessed by intelligence and a conscious will. This is the first transition from spirit to god.

The school of life quickly teaches primitive man that these spirits are not negligible in power or scope. Their whim affects him; they can be greatly helpful, or terribly harmful. In essence, they have influence over his destiny. This then, is the second transition from spirit to god – a god is a living being with intelligence and a will. More so, he has dominion over man's fate. He possesses power that far transcends human experience, and can use this to help or harm. He is hence worthy of respect, worship and propitiation. Thus are gods born.

...As these spirits are at the same time powerful, (perceived as) far seeing, and in some cases benevolent and others hostile, it was not long before they came to be seen as Providences, continually intervening in the course of things and mingling with the life of the family or the tribe. As a result, man...felt himself under the protection of deity, and as he was incapable of ruling (the natural world) himself, he profited from this continual dependence...
[Durkheim, On Guyau]

As the religion becomes increasingly complex, the gods are each assigned their niche, taking their place in a complex cosmological order. They are assigned increasingly human desires,

wants, consorts and agendas. At the end of this process, we have a pantheon of gods, each sharing dominion over the world.

Man can take steps to gain the favor and protection of these formidable deities. Since the gods are now anthropomorphic, Man uses the same methods he does to appease higher-ranking members of human society, offering praise, sacrifices, offerings, and other signs of submission, worship and propitiation to gain divine favor.

As non-personalized spirits evolve to personalized gods, shamans develop into priests, who take on the role of helping fulfill the individual and social purposes of religion. They expound the structure of the cosmos, and Man's place in it, presenting a rational and intellectually satisfying system of beliefs for their people. They conduct and expound rites and sacrifices that both satisfy individual psychological needs, and bind society together.

The distinctive feature of a polytheistic pantheon is its accompaniment by the cult of priests, worship, and sacrifice, all of which are now present. Religion has thus evolved to polytheism.

STAGE II

We have derived the pantheon of gods. This stage deals primarily with the recognizable polytheistic religious systems of Africa, the Pacific, the ancient religions of Egypt and Greece, the Middle East, India and China. In this system, the spirits and forces are...

...much more clearly characterized. The mythical beings are more objectified, conceived as actively and willfully controlling the natural and human world, and as beings with whom men must deal in a definite and purposive way; in a word they have become gods. Relations between the gods... and hierarchies of control are established...

[Bellah, *Beyond Belief*]

We have arrived at a formal polytheistic religious structure. There are many gods, all ruling different parts of the world, each with an appropriate place in the cosmological order. Firmly defined hierarchies amongst the divine are also defined, and to explain origins, a High God is usually present in the pantheon.

Polytheism is by its nature labile and mutable. Where there is a pantheon of gods, there is room for one more. Tribes, through contact, acculturation and conquest acquire and incorporate new gods into their own belief system.

As mentioned above, a priestly class evolves which is usually part of the social elite, in that they have the privilege of communicating the will of the gods. With the advent of priests, religion becomes increasingly organized. Thus, by this stage, the sociological role of religion is finally complete. Not only does it serve to tie society together, as it did before; it also serves to justify and protect the social structure and to provide the foundation for an ethical, moral and legal framework that keeps society functioning smoothly.

TRANSITION

The hierarchy of the pantheon in polytheism invariably includes a High God, who also serves to satisfy the innate human need for an origin. Belief in such a High God is prevalent in many cultures, and is still a feature of religious life in many indigenous African tribes. However, in most polytheistic structures the High God is not worshipped or invoked the way other, lower, deities are. He becomes so distant and exalted that he is gradually replaced by lesser, more approachable, deities.

He is strangely absent from (their) daily lives: he has no special cult, and is never depicted in effigy. The tribesmen say he is inexpressible and cannot be contaminated by the world of men. Some people say that he has 'gone away' ...
[Armstrong, *A History of God*]

Such is the fate of Brahma in Hinduism, for example. And that of El in Canaan, where the worship of Baal had relegated him to relatively minor importance. And it is with El, that we begin tracing the evolution of monotheism from Judaism – the first major monotheistic religion.

We can trace Abraham's god to El, the High God of Canaan. Abraham was in Canaan when God first appears to him and introduces himself as *El Shaddai* – El of the Mountain – El's traditional Canaanite title. In other places, he is referred to as *El Elyon*, or *El of Bethel*. His name can be found to this day in titles and names such as Isra-El and Ishma-El.

We notice, moreover, that a large part of the Old Testament is not rigidly monotheistic – consider for example, the following verses:

For the Lord your God is the God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great god, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward
[Deuteronomy 10:17, *The Bible*]

Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?
[Exodus 15:11]

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
[Exodus 20:3]

Psalm 82 seems to verge upon open polytheism:

The Lord takes his stand in the Council of El⁴
To deliver judgements among the gods....
“I once said, ‘You too are gods,
Sons of El Elyon, all of you’;
But all the same, you shall die like men,
as one man, gods, you shall fall.”

Thus, it seems reasonable that monotheism arose from the polytheistic pantheon in Canaan. The origins of that pantheon have already been discussed. One of the gods in the pantheon, in this case the High god El, gains ascendancy as the patron god of a tribe. Eventually El comes to be viewed as the ‘only ‘ god.

The Bible even relates, in the parable of Jacob, this transition coming about. Jacob decides that El is incredibly effective if He can protect him in Haran. He thus seals a bargain with El: In exchange for El’s continued protection, Jacob would make him *elohim* – the only god that counts.

As we discussed, polytheism is mutable, constantly adjusting to the influx of new gods and new beliefs by contact, acculturation, and conquest. Monotheism, however, is quite the

⁴ In the psalm, Yahweh makes a bid for the leadership of the Divine Assembly, which was central to Canaanite and Babylonian polytheistic myth. Direct translation from the Hebrew by John Bowker, *Religious Imagination & The Sense of God*, Oxford 1978, pg.73 – The King James version is essentially similar, but translates *El* as mighty or high.

antithesis. By its very nature, monotheism is rigid, believing in *one* truth, *one* god, *one* path to salvation. Thus monotheism, once evolved, is inherently stable in structure; self-correcting and intolerant of deviation. Thus, by virtue of this argument, we need only show *one single step from polytheism to monotheism*. Once created, the strain of monotheism is self-perpetuating. Once El transcends the pantheon and becomes the One God, there is no going back.

Christianity, the second great monotheistic religion, evolved in a monotheistic environment, and thus no transitional mechanism need be explained. It builds upon Judaism, with the changes being doctrinal and reformist. Prophets such as Jesus, in our theory, can be viewed as social reformers. Religion, as we have stated before, helps define and maintain social order. Thus, it is an ideal vehicle for those desiring to execute social reform.

Finally, we turn to Islam, the last of the great monotheistic religions. Unlike Christianity, however, Islam evolved in the backdrop of polytheism, and thus provides a useful test of our theory. Indeed, one might even say that pre-Islamic Arab society was pre-polytheistic, suspended somewhere between pre-historic religion and polytheism.

There was a pagan pantheon of deities and the Arabs worshipped at their shrines, but they had not yet developed a mythology that explained the relevance of these gods and holy places to the life of the spirit...

[Armstrong, *A History Of God*]

Every other rock and stone had its attendant spirit and *djinn*. In addition to worshipping spirits found in animals, rocks, plants, and natural and astral phenomena; the ancient Arabs also

believed in several major gods and goddesses who held power over all things. A pantheon of 360 gods was worshipped in the *Kaaba*, the holiest shrine of the Arabs.

Judeo-Christian influences on Arab society, and a natural progression towards a formalized cosmological hierarchy associated with the progression from pre-historic to polytheistic religion, had reinforced the concept of a High God within this pantheon.

At Mecca, Allah was the Arab high god, the god of the *Kaaba*, and the special deity of the Quraish, Mohammed's tribe. The other major deities were Al-Lat, Al-Uzza, Manat and Hubal. The first three were thought to be the daughters⁵ of Allah, and were considered to be of great significance.

The cult of a deity termed simply 'the god' (*al-ilah*) was known throughout southern Syria and northern Arabia in the days before Islam – Mohammed's father was named 'Abd Allah' ("Servant of Allah") – and the deity was obviously of central importance in Mecca, where the building called the Ka'bah was indisputably his house.

Indeed... the Quraysh, the paramount tribe of Mecca, were being called on by Muhammad to repudiate the very existence of all the other gods save this one.

It seems equally certain that Allah was not merely a god in Mecca but was widely regarded as the "high god," the chief and head of the Arab pantheon, whether this was the result, as has been argued, of a natural progression toward henotheism or of the growing influence of Jews and Christians in the Arabian Peninsula...

[The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, pp. 76-77]

As a trader, Mohammed was repeatedly exposed to Judeo-Christian ideas. He was also related to a Christian convert. Like many other Arabs, he came to believe that Allah, the High God of the Arab pantheon, was none other than the Judeo-Christian god.

⁵ These same goddesses led to the possibly apocryphal event of the so-called Satanic Verses, another piece of supporting evidence of our transition from polytheism to monotheism. Under pressure from the Arabs to allow at least some of their previous pantheon, Mohammed accepted these three as subordinate to Allah, and verses were accordingly revealed. The next day he recanted, and God revealed the verses as satanically inspired.

At this time, Arabia was in crisis. The spiritual system was ever shifting and quite inconsistent; and Arabian society was greatly in need of social reform. The tribal social system was collapsing, and there was widespread social unease. Ideal conditions for effecting both spiritual and social reform. The result is familiar to us - again, we see the transcendence of a single deity from within a pantheon – a god becomes the God, and the vehicle of social change. In this case, the god is none other than Allah, the High God of the Arabian pantheon, whose, name, somewhat ironically means ‘The God’. Thus the interesting play of words in the traditional catechism of the Islamic faith: “Say! There is no god, but ‘The God’ ”

STAGE III

We have finally reached our goal, having traced the origins of monotheism and its ‘one’ God to the primordial psychological and sociological origins of religion.

Both advanced polytheism, and monotheism perceive duality in the cosmos – there is now a formal concept of the supernatural realm as completely separate, and superior to the empirical world. For the common man, this dualism is presented as the difference between this world and the world after death. The focus of religion, centered in the empirical world for pre-historic and polytheistic religion, tends to shift from this world to the next.

With this duality, the sociological purposes of religion become more and more important. God is increasingly seen as a moral force. The deity becomes ‘the prop of social order’, the

universally acknowledged redresser of social wrongs, and the rewarder of social virtue. Thus, the sociological purposes of religion become increasingly more important than the individual ones.

Islam, for example, is predominantly a social religion, with most of its tenets centered on creating social fraternity, and providing an ethical and legalistic framework ensuring the smooth functioning of society. These properties of such religions give the social organism a great evolutionary advantage, enabling the organism – and thereby the religion, to expand.

TRANSITION

We have constructed a complex theory of religion that traces the evolution of belief from primeval man to monotheism, the last of the major religious systems. In Stage I, we derived two sets of ‘purposes’ for religion, *individual* and *social*. Throughout the evolutionary path traced, religion has continued to serve these two essential purposes, fulfilling the needs of both individual and society.

The advent of science heralded a worldwide decline in religion and faith. Can our theory explain this phenomenon? Consider the individual purposes of religion. These include the desire to attribute causes to events, the psychological and emotional need for stability that drive the need to explain the unexpected, and the psychological fear of death.

Science addresses all these issues. It provides causes and explanations, presenting the world as orderly and predictable, satisfying the psychological needs of the individual. Just like religion, it presents Man with a view of the cosmological order and his place in it. Events and phenomena are assigned linear causality and are explained away, giving man the satisfying feeling of control over his environment. Thus, science usurps the major individual purposes of religion.

The lone individual purpose not yet captured by science is the mystery of life, or more importantly, that of death. And even here, science, in the form of biology is encroaching, beginning to explain life and death, and holding out the promise of immortality.

Self-confidence is substituting the direct action of man in particular events for the intervention of God. Yet, even today faith still has a last a last sanctuary in which it can take refuge, namely, the sphere of physical accidents... there, our current helplessness inclines many people to seek the hope they need beyond this world...
[Durkheim, *On Guyau*]

For the time being however, Death remains the last bastion of faith. The psychological fear of death, stemming from the inborn instinct for self-preservation is strong. The desire to be with loved ones who have gone is also an attractive force. This explains why, even today, men become increasingly religious as they age and begin to face their own mortality.

Science also destroys the dogmas of faith, by providing alternative explanations that are impossibly to deny. Geology and evolution have explained away most of the creation myths of religions; while history and psychology have attacked religion by casting doubt on its very origins.

Monotheistic faiths are especially susceptible, since, with their insistence on one absolute truth, they can not adapt to the destruction of their dogma. With its tenets undermined, monotheism tends to lead either towards disillusionment, or towards reactionary fanaticism.

The sociological purposes of religion have been similarly undermined. Religion's role in maintaining the cohesiveness of society has gradually been replaced by the sense of national identity. People no longer identify themselves as belonging to the same social group by their faith alone. Nationalism and the sense of cultural and communal identity has gradually replaced the sense of religious social identity. Globalism has dealt yet another crippling blow.

Religion's second role, as provider of the ethical, moral and legal systems that are essential in keeping society functioning has also been supplanted. Ethics has emerged as a social science independent of religion. People increasingly subscribe to a morality independent of faith – a morality which, though it may have at one point been derived by faith, no longer appeals or relies on faith to support it. The laws and tenets of religion that kept society from disintegrating have also become independent of faith. Legal systems in nearly all nations no longer derive authority from religion, but rather from the State itself.

Thus, in the collective elimination of the social and individual factors that form the very basis of faith, we find and account for its decline and fall.

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And, of course, the World Wide Web.