

## *Religion*

Religion: The institution primarily concerned with ultimate questions of life and death. By 'ultimate,' I mean 'beyond which', and 'higher than', none other.' Human beings have asked ultimate questions concerning existence throughout history, most likely from the time they began to think and use structured reason –for example, what makes the sun rise and makes life happen; what causes catastrophe: earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, drought; why does death happen; who or what made the world; what does it all mean and why does evil exist?

Religion differs, in the main, from philosophy in that religion presupposes a transcendent frame of reference; it assumes the existence of a God or Gods. For about 10,000 years up to three thousand years ago, most human beings in pre-scientific and pre-philosophic times attributed the cause of the unexplainable and the unknowable to extra-ordinary, super-natural forces. As civilization advanced, and humanity became more sedentary, rather than its earlier foraging and chase-kill-and-eat, religion evolved into a structured and doctrinal institution.

(\*Comment on the Fertile Crescent and the formation of nations)

Certain peoples, notably among them Hebrews, for some reason grasped the idea of monotheism: the belief in one God, author and originator of everything and considered the universal and all-encompassing good. Out of the Hebrew religion grew three of the world's monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in that order. Quite possibly, Hebrews were not the first to believe in one God, though possibly the first culture to do so. The honor of the first monotheist may belong to the Egyptian pharaoh Amenophis IV (or Akhnaton, circa 1350 BCE). Archeologists think Akhnaton may be the first clear monotheist of history; he worshiped Aton, the personification of the sun disk. We know him more as the husband of Nofretete whose sculpture is one of the best known and most beautiful objects of art found in the ancient world.

Polytheism (belief in many gods) pre-existed monotheism and later co-existed with it, and to some extent still does. I confess here to a terribly oversimplified generalization of an extremely long and complicated history, or spiritual journey. In truth, these changes and growths in human religious thought and practice took place in different ways and in different times throughout the civilized world.

Two thousand years ago, Christianity broke away from ethnic Judaism and the polytheism of the Roman Empire. With a different membership strategy than Judaism, Christianity attempted to speak to all peoples. However well or poorly it carried out this charge better fits another course than sociology. I mention this new 'religious kid' on the block because it constituted a major shift away from mainly national or ethnic religions. Much the same can be said of Islam, another monotheistic belief system which greatly influenced the spiritual thinking of the western world. In any event, today and for centuries Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and Christianity, and a host of other religious belief systems continue to speak to questions regarding the universe, life, death, and ethics.

An important question: To what extent does religion adequately respond to questions concerning the meaning of existence? Unfortunately, I have no clear answer for you. While it is true all religions worthy of the name religion have given (and continue to give) meaningful responses to the great questions, we cannot say any one of them corners the market on divine truth. When the Roman Empire formally adopted Christianity as its state religion, it radically transformed, if not ended, the principal spiritual thrust of the early Christian movement. In short order, Christianity became institutionalized and hierarchized, taking on a structure not dissimilar from that of the Roman Empire. Its rituals, formalities, offices, and government rather paralleled the laws, customs, offices, and pomp of the empire itself. Consequently, Christianity, like most religious systems, has the stamp of purely human interests, as well as the misconceptions, inconsistencies and errors this implies. (\*Expand)

A second question: Does institutional religion conflict with individual belief? Well yes, but too, not inevitably and not at all times badly. We can say institutional religions, when they systematize their beliefs into teachings (as they all do), frequently pay less attention to the freedom of individuals to think their own thoughts on matters of faith and, therefore, pay less attention to men and women's own innate freedom to believe consistent with those thoughts. So, yes, I think a difference between what various institutional systems say we should believe and what our private faith leads us to believe does exist. With that in mind, I want to suggest that individual faith, in matters of God and world and life and death, is no less important than institutional teachings on these same matters. Indeed, without the right of individuals to believe what and how they want

to believe, despite what religious institutions have to say about this, reduces every religion to legions of like-minded folk unfree to think for themselves. A balance between institutional traditions and the innate free right of individuals to think and decide for themselves proves critical for the continuing growth and development both of personal rights and freedoms and of institutional religious traditions, keeping in mind that religions do not change themselves. They change from human forces at work both within and without their systems.

Thus, for example, questions concerning how religions respond to death do not have one, single answer or one single response. Religions themselves provide different answers, based upon their cultural and spiritual traditions; and individual men and women come to believe what they believe based upon their own experiences and spiritual journeys. Let me draw for you another distinction between religion and faith. Think of religion, itself based upon the assumption of the existence of a God or Gods, as a reification (or a formalizing of faith) —that is, think of it as a structure making religion into a thing, an institution, a system, even into a business, albeit an important business. Faith, on the other hand, better describes individual experience as it informs us about the meaning of life and death, etc., also based on the assumption of the existence of a God or Gods —except, here, an assumption residing in the human heart rather than in the heart of doctrinal teachings. Which is better? Neither, because the two are necessary. And both, from time to time, can be good and meaningful, as well dysfunctional and horrid.

Although I may disagree (and often do) with the so-called truths and beliefs around which people place their faith, faith in something appears to have lost little appeal. Institutions of religion tell different stories, with a number of them losing their ability to grasp the people's loyalty and respect. (\*Comment on: polytheism running rampant in contemporary society and in individual behavior: wealth, sexuality, power, youth, etc. —and the struggle of institutionalized religion to avoid the pitfalls of its own secularizing and anachronistic tendencies.) In order for private, spiritual faith and institutional religion mutually to benefit life and living, and death and dying, each must desecularize itself —individuals from their worldly polytheisms and destructive beliefs, and religions from internal politics and interreligious squabbles. One's private faith and one's religious affiliation must root themselves in ethics, learn from past mistakes, and possess the insight, courage, and willingness to change and grow, while never insisting on its own

correctness, and always remaining loyal to a spiritual mystery requiring us to admit our great questions essentially have no ‘provable’ answers.

The story of the human quest for answers stretches from the beginning of reason and civilization, through this present moment, and into the distant reach of endless tomorrows. Despite there being no verifiable answers to questions about God, death, and the purpose of the universe, organized religious systems, along with the individual faith experiences which accompany them, offer to humanity both comfort and time-stretching possibility by giving ultimate meaning to creatures who must die. If the self cannot save the self from death, if the self must search for ultimate meaning (and I believe it must or risk stagnation and emptiness), then it seems wise to transfer one’s safety to a belief in meaningful mystery whether we name that mystery God, Adonai, Allah, Vishnu, Buddha, the Tao, Great Father, Great Mother, or The Unknowable Mystery behind the Cosmos.

As for me, I believe one’s life must merge with mystery to become meaningful and fulfilling, and to avoid sinking into secular materialism, depression, and into nihilism. For religions to become ‘more believable’ they ought to consider meeting the human need to evolve reasonable, credible, and ethical faith systems that discourage competitive and contesting doctrines of certainty about God, life, death, and life after death. Perhaps the second principle of religion, after its first which believes in the existence of God, might be the decision never to attempt to ‘de-mysterize’ mystery, to take the mystery out of mystery. We should provoke faith without a desire for knowledge or certainty. Healthy agnosticism is always preferable to religious, dogmatic certainty. To confess that one does not know makes faith possible; but to insist that one does know makes faith unnecessary and impossible. Because we do not need to believe what we know. Certainty, like knowledge, has no mystery and has no need for faith. When certainty replaces mystery, the heart of religion ceases to beat; the Unknowable is no longer believed.

Now let me list some questions to which any religion might be expected to respond. The following responses are my own, but I think reasonable ones that one need not view as particularly Christian:

Who am I? Who are we? How did we come to be?

Response: We are creatures. We did not create ourselves. We are daughters and sons of the Cosmos, or of the hand that made it.

What is world? Who or what made the world?

Response: The world evolves but not as an accident. Faith declares that deity made the universe happen.

What of the relationship between and among human beings? We have here a question of ethics.

Response: Since women and men did not create themselves but result from deity, they are to that extent holy; consequently, they ought to be treated with care and love. (\*Comment on Namesté)

What of the relationship between human beings and the world? Here, too, we come upon a matter of ethics.)

Response: Custodial, Caretaking, Janitorial

What of the relationship between human beings and the world to God or, if you prefer, to the creative force of the universe?

First Response: Regarding the world, obedience, which we observe in natural law.

Second Response: regarding human beings, also obedience in relation to natural law. However, because freedom of choice defines human nature, men and women can do either good or evil. Free choice makes wrong-doing possible. Therefore, we might say God, by giving free choice to humanity, makes evil possible. Yet, we believe God does not do evil; rather wrong choices make wrong-doing possible. Indeed, we have sufficient Free Will to destroy the planet and to reject the existence of God.

What is the relationship of human beings, living things, the world, and the universe itself to Death (End-Time)? We know the answer to this question, however, it raises a further question steeped in speculation: What does 'death' mean and what does this meaning have to say about 'life-after-death'?

First Response: Everything, living and non-living, organic and inorganic, has a certain time for its existence, and its non-existence is inevitable, natural, and consistent with natural law. This defines organisms, artifacts, continents, planets, solar systems, galaxies, and the universe itself. What comes into being moves out of being. Everything that lives dies; every non-living thing, in time, ceases to exist.

Second Response: The question of life-after-death, of human life having afterlife, remains unanswerable. Religious faith may ‘believe’ in life-after-death but it does not ‘know’ of life-after-death. The answer to that question rests in the mystery of the universe, which itself rests in the mystery of God.

You might take note of a good amount of evidence for life after death on a species level, because species reproduce. Life continuously happens, again and again. However, concerning the existence of a soul and of an individual after-life, these we can neither prove nor disprove, only believe or not believe.

Who or what is God?

Response: The Unknowable Creator –with faith-names often used to provide some speculative understanding of mystery, names such as: Love, Sustainer, Ultimate Being, Uncreated, Omnipresent (Everywhere Present), Omnipotent (All Powerful), Omniscient (All Knowing), Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End of everything.

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Last, I hope you will forgive this all too sketchy and over-simplified lecture on religion. The questions religion raises, both as institutional practice and private faith, are so far-reaching, so central to mature human existence, and essentially with such long histories, that it seems wiser to say too little than too much.