

K 5. RELIGION

Most members of the human race profess some religion. For some it is a very important part of their belief system and of their lives, for some it is only a nominal adherence to something labeled religious, while for most people religion is something in between those two.

We find this as far back in history as we have any knowledge of humans. They seem always to have had some ideas that there was more to the universe than our five senses could reveal, and a feeling that this was somehow important to their lives. Modern science revealed that our senses respond to only a small fraction of radiation wave lengths, but what humans seemed to “intuit” was that there was something quite different from all that (though somehow related to it) that came to be called spiritual.

Over the years, various religions developed different ways of trying to relate to what they called the spiritual realm. We can now only speculate on the origins of religions. It might be that some started as people tried to explain how someone could be a living breathing person one moment and the next moment a dead body that could not respond to others. What they had known as a person had somehow left the body. Or some religions may have started as people tried to explain the alternation of favorable and terrifying and destructive aspects of nature. In addition, some individuals claimed to have had strange emotional experiences which convinced them of the reality of some spiritual truths & of how humans should live therefore. This attracted others who followed their teachings.

However the different religions may have started, almost all of them had some common elements, especially about how to treat each other.

But all religions also often failed to distinguish clearly between what they could claim were their spiritual insights and what were common customs of the time and place where they developed.

This and the belief of each that they alone had the spiritual truth and no other religions did, plus the fact that historically many religions became associated almost exclusively with different competitive political structures often led historically to wars between peoples of different religions. This has continued into the modern period where some Muslim extremists and some other religious extremists are convinced that some modern political powers are irreligious and about to destroy them or prevent their truth from ruling everyone. So religious people kill each other by thinking they alone have the truth and ignoring the more important parts of their religions that would enable all peoples to live together harmoniously.

In relatively recent history (the last couple of thousand years), most humans ceased to think of multiple spiritual powers and began to think that there was but one that they called God. God is often thought of as the creator

of the entire physical universe, perhaps because it seems more difficult for the human mind to think that this entire extremely complex yet enormous universe could come into existence “automatically”. It is easier to think of some purposeful super-being creating a world for humans, in which empathy, friendship, love and cooperation enhance human life and their opposites degrade it, than conceiving that this could have happened by pure chance.

We cannot really provide fully satisfactory rational answers to three big questions: whence, whither and why.

How did all this extremely complex universe come into being? If we say that God created it, even a child asks where did God come from, what God is going to do with it, & why did he or she or it create it in the first place. Any religion can formulate hypothetical answers, but no one knows whether any of them are really right. Science thinks it has an answer in the “big bang” theory, but no one can answer what created the concentrated chunk of matter that exploded, or why it exploded, or what will happen to it eventually,

To be sure, the charge that religion’s attempts to answer these three questions just create an anthropomorphic concept of God is correct. But the human mind tends to think in human terms. We can also think in mechanical terms, but not of huge mechanical systems that created themselves. We can hardly help but think that the God that made humans on this earth must be a loving God , so we attribute this human quality to God. But it is hard not to think that God must be something that has non-human qualities beyond human comprehension.

In any event, it is rationally impossible to prove the correctness of any denial that human’s historic intuition that there is a spiritual realm that exists in some relation to our lives. Humans have made many terrible mistakes in their thinking--that is easily provable. It would be the biggest most important mistake ever made, and made by most humans that ever existed, if most of us were wrong that there is a spiritual realm. In any event few can be convinced of that.

Without trying to verify any religion’s specific doctrines, what might I say that might have a wide positive response across religions? They all have good advice as to how to enhance the quality of life by human empathy, friendship, love and cooperation. And perhaps there would be fairly general response to the feeling of all religious persons that there is something within us, at least if we are raised by those who treat us lovingly, that subsequently responds to such treatment favorably. It is a though we had in us a sort of compass whose needle points to a spiritual magnetic pole in this universe. We can ignore the way of life to which it beckons us (a life responsive to empathy, friendship, love and cooperation) though ignoring that is a mistake, because we can all verify by experience that life is better the more we can follow the direction it points.