

Understanding Religion: How Religions of the World Came to Be

We live in a highly religious world with over a dozen major religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Taoism, and others. At the same time, there are hundreds if not more of minor indigenous religions and philosophical systems with fewer followers, but with even more complex systems of beliefs, traditions, and rituals. How did all religions, major and minor, come to be? While the timing and geography are more or less known, the underlying causes for the emergence of religions as socio-evolutionary phenomena are still the subject of many hot debates.

In this essay, I'll claim that the major religions of the world came to be at a certain historical period to protect man from himself, from self-destruction – the function that I see universally embedded in all religious systems and beliefs, and which is still more or less successfully fulfilled by the present day.

The Ontology of Religion

The emergence of most religions of the world dates back to around 2-4 thousand years, and it is geographically tied to certain cultures and nations. Why then? Why not earlier or later? And why not simultaneously everywhere, but distanced by hundreds and thousands of years? Was it something special, if not a divine intervention, in those cultures and societies that has led to the emergence of religious beliefs?

Most researchers agree that the most plausible driver for the emergence of the major religions was the level of our cultural development. In other words, the conditions were right, the levels of cultural, linguistic, and even economic development were favorable for the emergence of prophets who would develop and teach religious beliefs and norms.

The main function of religion was, according to mainstream research, to explain reality and give a sense of existence to people who, at their level of social-technological development, could not yet explain most natural and celestial phenomena around them.

The Alternative Ontology of Religion

I'd like to offer an alternative view. It is based on the works of the famous Austrian ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, who didn't study religions directly, but he did offer some brilliant insights into the nature of human behavior and psychology, in particular, our basic instincts.

In his famous work "On Aggression", published in 1963, he argues that, in nature, most predators have very strong instinctive prohibitions to cause harm to other representatives of their kind. He says that any species, armed with deadly weapons, such as claws or sharp teeth,

are born with instinctive taboos to use their weapons against their counterparts. This is clearly seen in the animals' behavior in the wild and controlled environments, such as zoos and national parks. Lorenz further argues that herbivorous species, on the contrary, don't have the same inborn instincts preventing them from killing or hurting their counterparts.

This leads us to a very interesting implication to our topic, as humans, as biological species, also don't have any deadly weapons given to them by nature. That's why we are also free from any instinctive prohibitions to cause harm to our fellow counterparts. This was not a big issue until we made an epochal leap in our technological development – invented deadly weapons capable of killing representatives of our kind in close combat and over large distances!

My key point is that the emergence of most of the world's religions coincides in time with our enhanced capability to cause harm and kill representatives of our kind. We have discovered how to turn a fire into a weapon, invented a sword and a knife, a crossbow, catapult – giving us the destructive powers we've never had before. They suddenly made us the deadliest species on the planet, but our biological and psychological nature was not ready for that drastic change of power balance! It simply didn't have time to work out genetically encoded mechanisms to regulate and limit our enhanced destructive capabilities.

Since the big part of any religion is made of prohibitions to do harm and avoid any wrongdoing in general (don't kill, don't steal, don't covet, etc.) – I believe those represent a natural and cultural response to our increased destructive capabilities. They compensate for the absence of inborn, genetically conditioned prohibitions and are meant to protect the representatives of a group of people from self-destruction, and ultimately, from extinction.

Does It Refute God?

One may argue that such a view totally disproves the existence of God. If the emergence of the world's religions was an all-natural (evolutionary) response to man's invention of deadly weapons – that does question divine intervention. However, I don't think it is that simple. We cannot be sure that it was a purely natural response, and even if it was, that God doesn't exist. After all, what makes us claim that he couldn't have intervened in our evolution at its critical stage?

Others may say that the mere existence of over a dozen different religions, each with its prophets and belief systems, points towards their humane origin, that they are the product of societal and philosophical progress. If there ever was a supernatural God, he would have deployed a single, universal religion to be followed by all people of the world.

However, I think we have reasons to refute that claim too, as such a highly intellectual entity as God, should have known better than us what kind of intervention would work better and why. For evolution to work and to bring progress to our society, it has to operate across multiple independent, conflicting, and competing approaches (i.e., religions). Variability and selection –

are the two mechanisms of evolution, which have to be valid for things like religion as well. A single, unified religion wouldn't simply be viable.

Of course, that variability of the world's religions comes with its downsides – we protect our fellow counterparts but convert or fight the “barbarian” others. Our history knows many examples of such wars: Crusades (11-13th century), Spanish Inquisition (Middle Ages and till 19th century), Bosnian War (1992-1995), and many others. That only points towards the profundity of our societies and the complexity of sustaining the balance between their peaceful coexistence and evolutionary progress.

Closing Thoughts

I'm not going to say that my alternative ontology and the view on the main function of the world's religions are the only correct ones, or that they are more plausible than any others. I believe that they will pump some fresh air into the old debate and open an extra dimension for further discussions.

The study of religion must be approached with extreme care, especially in the age of mind-blowing scientific discoveries in outer space and down here on Earth, each capable of undermining our belief in God and weakening the peace-making function of the system of ethical provisions and behavioral prohibitions that any religion represents.