

The Evolution of Religion

This author asks, “Is religion simply a result of our evolution as a species?”



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Most of what we believe to be true is based on some sort of evidence, and yet a very large number of humans rely on ‘a friend behind phenomena’, as Gilbert Murray put it (*Humanist Essays*), with no hard evidence that a friend in this context exists. This curious dependence on a mythical figurehead seems to be apparent everywhere in human communities, but how did it evolve?

Explorers have reported sacred rites, ordained by gods, practised in almost every corner of the settled world. Words like ‘pagan’ and ‘heathen’ were invented to describe alien kinds of worship. But how did all these different belief systems come to have a common theme? Clive Gamble has an answer. Speaking about hunter-fisher-gatherers, in *Timewalkers*, he writes:

Where long term survival information is coded into (such) oral traditions it is common to find it sanctified and linked to ritual performances.

If religion evolved along with *Homo sapiens*, it explains why it is so important to us, so common in substance, so varied in detail, and so

impossible to shed. And a hypothesis with the ability to *explain* has clout.

Facts support this paradigm. Walter Burkert (*Creation of the Sacred*) provides a wealth of evidence, documenting the way humans have memorised, chanted and ritualised religion as a means to an end – survival on earth. Information equates to survival, and ritual helps to instil a memory for generations to come, particularly *sacred* ritual (though it may be degraded into believing that the *rite* ensures the survival). A further step is to adopt certain behaviour in order to enhance survival of the individual throughout eternity.

Egyptian civilisation illustrates this. In ancient Egypt, eschatology was at a high level of sophistication not since improved upon, and long before that, the important dead were furnished with grave goods to support their continued existence. Unfortunately, material goods were not matched with information; a reliable map to the hereafter would have been useful.

Out of interest, I began to study evidence that religion was engendered and inspired by us, ie by *Homo* as against *Homo sapiens*, for ele-

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ments of religious behaviour may, I think, be deduced from stone tools, which can be dated back two million years.

Were tools sacred objects?

Chimpanzees use fortuitous tools littered about the landscape, but these tools; stones, tree branches and the like, show little sign of being purpose made. Religion demands a degree of foresight, hindsight and lasting commitment not apparent until stone shaping began and became a habit. Learned behaviour that carries down the generations seems to correlate with brain volume. Provisioned macaques given unwashed potatoes to supplement their diet, learned that they were nicer washed, so, following the example of a smart female monkey, the entire group washed their potatoes before eating them. However, the custom died out within a couple of generations, (Toshisada Nishida, 1987). Higher on the primate scale are gorillas, whose brains are larger relative to body weight. We have seen them in the wild on our TV screens in the series *Congo*, routinely washing their food free of mud. *Homo* made fire, no doubt washed edible greenery, and learned not only to make shaped stone tools designed for diverse purposes, but also to pass on the technique effectively.

The earliest kind of simple shaping of stone was done over a very long period. Was this because it did the job so well that nothing else could be envisaged? Or was it because the tools were considered sacred objects because they produced a livelihood? Were they regarded as clever? Magic? Having an element of control over the beings they served?

As tools became more sophisticated and were made from wood, bone, shell, and antler they can be associated with specific tribal groupings. Small differences came to represent the trademark of the group. The differences identified the group along

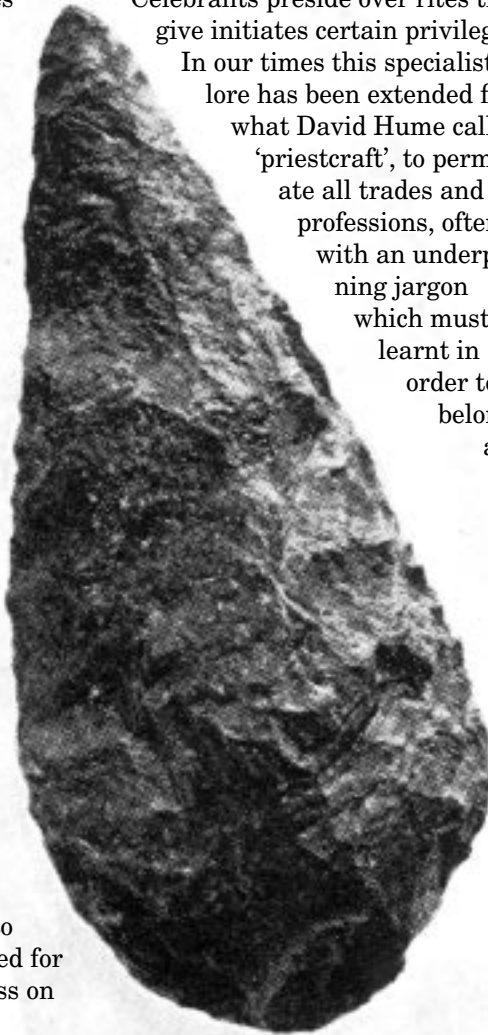
with body paint and hairstyle. These differences acted as a cohesive safety factor. Ritual and secrecy surrounded them and the secrets could be passed on within the group.

The language of secrecy

Secrecy is an element of religion.

Celebrants preside over rites that give initiates certain privileges.

In our times this specialist lore has been extended from what David Hume calls 'priestcraft', to permeate all trades and professions, often with an underpinning jargon which must be learnt in order to belong and



sometimes with a test period of initiation.

Religion is not unparalleled for insisting on a sense of belonging. The association of language with secret ritual is interesting. The medieval church held a large section of the population in thrall for a thousand years by using a language only a small number could understand. Icons were developed as simple encapsulation of a belief, sacred to some, unholy images to others. Icon has become a secular word, used to sanctify all sorts of profane things like Coca-Cola. Did language develop

in the same way as jargon does, as a mark of prestige, of being an initiate of a certain society?

Religious similarities

Given that the details of religion are very different, why are there so many similarities across continents and nations? The religious answer is that irrespective of how misguided and far from the "the truth" some may be, all religions come from the same source – God. Another answer is that they are human inventions, different, yet familiar. Early religion was based on supposed evidence that certain behaviour would produce meals. For an airline, proving it is airworthy is a modern equivalent as regards the vital element of survival. A massive amount of technical information is essential for its safety record. Even the most devout would not expect an airline to run on prayer. Prayer takes over when there is no available pertinent information. Prayer runs on hope, not mechanical know-how. Survival is a matter of expediency. All sentient beings strive to survive, whether the wish is a conscious one or not. Therefore religion, which is primarily about survival, has a common theme.

Exploitation of differences

When we examine the social evolution of hunter-fisher-gatherers, we see how one group could identify themselves from another and how this became the basis for competition and/or cooperation. Signs and symbols became ritualised and distinction between groups, important for identification, resulted in a plethora of varied accoutrements clinging to religion. In a modern global situation, these separating factors, which could be dismissed as irrelevant, instead, too often, have led to bloodshed. Everyone knows why that is, but we all seem powerless to prevent it, possibly because these differences have been sanctified eons ago. Of course, it is clear that groups fight each other for reasons other than religious differences, such as having enough to eat or wanting more territory. But not only is the sanctification

of differences divisive, the whole process is singularly exposed to exploitation. The way to grab power is to espouse a cause, and what could be more empowering than a ready-made platform with a figurehead guaranteed not to interfere, and a set of identifying criteria that makes members think they are morally superior? A quote attributed to Yasser Arafat is appropriate at this juncture. He is reported to have said, "It's all about which of us has the better imaginary friend!"

Why are we so powerless to prevent struggle on such a basis? Is it because the criteria for belonging were laid down by this impossible-to-prove founder who has decreed that everyone outside the group is in the wrong? Are we then destined to suffer these inflammatory separations until the sun cools or an asteroid hits us? Perhaps a more likely scenario is that we desecrate the Earth to such an extent that it can no longer support life as we know it.

Saving graces, but are they saving enough?

Our history warns us but also heartens us. Humanity is capable of introspection and of re-thinking its philosophies. Tools *did* change and this is well documented in Australia. There was a "renaissance" in the Holocene period (last ten thousand years) when stone tools underwent a sea change (Lourandos, 1983) to become smaller, more varied and more efficient after thousands of years of apparent stasis. Tool sophistication was accompanied by alliances between tribes and exchanges during "ceremonial events", an example of putting ritual to peaceable (and profitable) account.

The Greeks in the time of Plato and Aristotle founded another mind-bending change. But perhaps more pertinent to our time is the great leap in thinking that took place in the period known as the Enlightenment. During hundreds of years previously, enormous effort went into Christianising Greek philosophy to

fit the prevailing myth of an Earth-centred universe. Building on the findings of Copernicus and Galileo and many others responsible for significant scientific achievements, Enlightenment philosophers set about demonstrating the irrationalities of a circular cosmological argument for the existence of God, although some of them subscribed to a god-designed world. The deist argument, based on the bountiful beauty and essential goodness of the earth rings a little hollow today when we know so much more about the dog-eat-dog side of Nature.

The acquisition of flexible language capable of expressing abstract ideas has caused an exponential change in the history of *Homo*. Robin Dunbar floats the idea that language may have taken over from primate grooming as a societal adhesive. Language is the nuts and bolts of our information/communication network, a safety valve if wisely used.

Somewhere along the line it became necessary to account for the world and its contents, to have a figure or figures to praise or blame. There had to be a way of understanding the universe and finding a *raison d'être*. We are not really any nearer the truth now, in spite of (probably) knowing how the universe began. Knowing how does not give us knowing why or what was the *first cause*, or even if there was one.

Conclusion

So what I set out to consider (not prove) was that religion evolved along with us. Keeping an open mind, it is just possible that a controlling figurehead decided that this was the way he/she/it *wanted* to instil religion. No doubt such a belief has been a comfort to countless millions. All religions claim to be a social recipe designed to create good relations *within* the group. The other side of the coin is the inherent tendency to produce fanatics, and, like everything else, it has gone global. In *Holy War*, a detailed account of how Middle East turmoil today harks back to attitudes at the time of the

Crusades, Karen Armstrong sees the only solution is to bring Muslims, Jews and Christians into equal partnership. Armstrong is an ex-nun – now Middle East journalist. Her unbiased synthesis throws light on the historical origins of the present appalling situation. However, any solution is fraught with difficulty, in that each faith itself is split into 'tribal' entities unable or unwilling to agree on the way forward.

Loyalty within the group is necessary for social animals, but can be misplaced, with outsiders branded as anathema to be misrepresented and demonised. Propaganda, practised unspoken by wily primates (monkeys and apes), has now reached its zenith in human-primate society. With us, religion, mainstream and otherwise, is deeply into that form of persuasion. If man-made religion began as a survival strategy, it now harbours inherent dangers not only for the world's ecosystems but also for the peace and security of the human race.

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