

ORIGINS OF RELIGION

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INTRODUCTION

Religion was not named until there appeared a number of traditions overlapping in the same empires. In fourth century Rome there was a state Pantheon alongside the Mysteries, Christian groups, Mithraism, Judaism, and Philosophia. The Latin word, *religare*, meant to bind back. The first title to contain the word was Schleirmacher's *On Religion* in 1799. The word was taken up by linguists, anthropologists and archeologists in the West and imposed upon all strands found in human culture that looked something like "religion," becoming comparative religions and now religious studies in academia. To add insult to injury many were labeled as ideologies as in the terms Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc. We will attempt to identify the origins of what looks like religion and trace its emergence into the Axial Age, the time founders of today's great religious traditions lived.

A principle for the study of change in religion must be to examine what may have called changes into being. Religion means a binding together of relationships in society and among people and peoples. It is the social form of human spirituality. We can speak of deep history as a spiritual emergence, the story of our humanity, our kinship around the globe. In recent times we can speak of the spiritual growth of individuals, our spiritual practices and perspectives. Between human emergence and individual development is religion, our life together in communion with others.

I identify the religious experience as oneness, known variously by mystics, theistic or naturalistic. Interpretations vary widely concerning what appears to be a universal experience. Oneness becomes a powerful motivational force in what functionalists have identified as the adaptive role religion has played in human social survival. Religion has generated many adaptations: mimetic ritual, magic, myth, philosophy/theology and morality/ethics, developed from our location in evolution as social mammals. In the context of emergence, religion is the celebration of life and planet earth awakening.

Neuroscientists estimate upwards of 95 percent of our awareness and activity is generated non-consciously. Human consciousness, or what we pay attention to, or slower still, what we think about, has evolved to define our uniqueness as a species. Much of it we share with mammals, birds and even reptiles. If we see bits of a lion showing through grass and bushes of the savannah conscious attention seems very rapid. But reactions prepared in our unconscious connect even faster and we begin to run, climb, freeze, sneak away, fight, lightning fast. It is questionable what degree of consciousness, as we now know it, was even required for a complete survival and plenitude for hominid species until the very recent past. It is clear that the Axial Age involved a major breakthrough in the unfolding of our capacities for conscious attention. It provoked a dawning of what became discretely organized religion.

Most of our history and religious history was not lived in the same attentive frame that we associate with human consciousness today. There is a tendency to read back our present mentality, including an individual personhood and autonomy, a self narrative, into history. We of course share a generalized mammalian consciousness with the apes, wolves and elephants. We can find an occasional “aha” breakthrough such as the discovery and manufacture of a new stone tool-set perhaps a million years ago. But beyond persona, beyond social roles (Richard’s son, Baker, Cook or Cooper), beyond an egalitarian social body, a group mind, an enchantment, no. A free, responsible, selfhood is a recent breakthrough; a self, ‘inner space,’ is so recent that Axial Age spiritual teachers, their successors, and analytical psychologists are still helping us to unfold it, to be sane, happy, one.

We think in pictures and words. Language is an essential quality of any definition of what it is to be human today. Looking back there is a wide variance of opinion as to when and how physically/mentally language came to be. I believe early spoken language was literal and much hinges on when metaphor came to predominate, likely at least in part in the transition to the Mythological Age by about 12,000 years ago. Written language is very recent, used by accountants at first, with literature following, just prior to the Axial Age.

Speculation on the timing of changes in our place in life on earth, our emergence from among the social animals, often seems arbitrary. Here is my chronology. Our branch of the tree diverged among the primates 5 to 7 million years ago. Our story of religion begins perhaps a million years ago with the harnessing of fire. We can label this first time, for homo erectus, the Episodic, Archaic, or Time of Origin. The second age, also Paleolithic, beginning perhaps as early as 200,000 years ago for homo sapiens, we can call the Mimetic or Magic Age. Moving from the Mesolithic through the Neolithic period is the Mythic stage of human history, beginning about 12,000 years ago. The end of this time is often designated as the Bronze Age, about 5,000 years ago. The Axial Age began about 2,600 years ago. Even here chronologies vary, but now in hundreds rather than tens or hundreds of thousands of years. Suffice it to say the Axial Age is not even the day before yesterday in our story.

It is critical for us to capture an understanding of each of these ages of our emergence and to resonate with religion as manifest in each for they are in us still. We are our origin, our mimetic ritual, our grand mythic stories of society and nature, our axial perceptions. With some grasp of each we come to recognize their ebbing and flowing through our lives and religious perceptions and practice today!

TIME OF ORIGIN

The fact of a beginning for us is profoundly meaningful. We know we came down from the trees, became bipedal, lived among lions, hyenas, serpents, learned qualities of edible plants and scavenged for meat. Most important women lost the primate estrous cycle and we developed pair bonding with a lengthy childhood development and dependence. Our brains evolved to triple their former size opening vast possibilities given continued bio-cultural co-evolution. We had/have a basic mammalian episodic

consciousness. Our place of origin was Africa, the rift valley of East Africa, deep and dark Africa always present.

MAGIC/MIMETIC

7500 generations ago we were still hunting on the savannahs of East Africa. Mitochondrial Eve lived about 170,000 years ago, a direct line from our mothers. In another genetic bottleneck, Adam, traced from our fathers' Y chromosomes, lived about 60,000 years ago. Homo Sapiens had existed earlier, rather reduced to about 10,000 in population in the aftermath of the Toba volcano (c. 73,000 years ago) and return of the ice in northern latitudes. Some of us had begun to migrate out of Africa into the Levant before then but the cold pushed Neanderthal populations southward. Another route for the adventuresome, from the horn of Africa into what is now Yemen and onward towards India, proved open. We reached Australia also on rafts or small vessels by about 40,000 years ago.

Our world was quiet. Sustained quiet evokes a profound sense of mystery. There was no time perspective, nor space perspective, only present, breathing, living. We were "a dream dreaming us," a magic cocoon, enchanted oneness. Beyond the forest clearing was shadow. Beyond the open plain in the dark was sorcery with every breeze, of good or ill intent. We lived briefly. Death was an intimate companion. Shamans, who had left for another dimension, reentered for our reassurance or at least explanation. Our rituals were intense; they were not symbolic of reality, they created reality. Without them all was lost.

We had relatives out beyond, who could negotiate for our daughters, who could also kill us or be killed. We ate the heart of dead enemies to bolster our strength. We also ate our profound leaders, shamans who had given their wounded beings for our healing, who led our empowerment (rituals). In our tribe we were one, all coordinated all we did; if one of us broke our unity, caused chronic imbalance, dissipated the power, they did not return from the hunt. There was a total connection of hunter and hunted. As the animal weakened from our poisoned arrows, after the chase we circled it in ritual honor until it gave itself for us.

Women are continuous, one body from their mothers and through their daughters, one. Men must learn to be hunters. In caves our gifted ones mixed paint to create our animal powers. We generated considerable power enveloping the coming hunt. Boys took up their bows and spears to enter into men's ardor and terror, the power of our journey together. At Lascaux one of us (shaman) entered ithyphallic trance, entered the energy field of the bison, his staff the ecstatic bird of sublime oneness (power).

Opposite the language/motor centers of the brain is chant and music. The oldest musical instrument found is the flute, doubtless accompanied by drum sounds. It was an auditory origin, its rhythms eventually calling into being language. Song commands speech, provokes action. Ritual being brings in vital responses, urgent voices of command. There were no questions, only enactment: hunting, foraging, violence, grateful closure in celebration, then regeneration in the ever-present morning.

For good weather flowing for herbs and tubers, for a safe hunt, for reassurance in health and sickness, calming for the rattle of death, we gathered in silence and invocations. We fashioned sculptures of comfort and focus, a lion headed man, rotund “goddess” mothers. We wore ornaments of shell and ivory, fashioned tools for making tools with outlines of animal associates on the sides, we buried our dead with red ochre. The time of magic was closing as we became ready for Gobekli Tepe. There was a vast gathering of tribes. They came out of the shadows to congregate in circles around pillars, stones representing humans, with foxes, vultures, spiders, scorpions, boars charging, lions, numerous snakes. The enclosure was round, confined, safe for magic enactments. We were learning story.

MYTHIC TIMES

Once your tribe has interacted with ten others , the world becomes many where once it was one. Where was the center? It was no longer around our campfire. There was a certain fearful exhilaration in the great gathering, an ongoing anticipation of the next. That will be; what has been? Where have we journeyed? (Enter metaphor.) The imagination leapt into song. There is a story of our tribe and a big story of how earth must have been peopled. We entered time.

And there was a longing for origin, our dissolving magical oneness. We carried into story a pervasive loss. In the beginning the egg opened and there came forth our mother and father and they had together children. . . . One child killed another and he had to move far away. There was a great jealousy between two and they parted There was a great serpent in the waters. It held the secret of all things. Our founder and protector, our strongest hunter, took his axe and split open uroboros. Out came all good things, and all that deceives, hurts and kills. But our people (tribe) shall endure forever.

We are now at one remove. Our rituals once created our world. Now they sing the story of that world and of society as evolved from our ever-present origin. Oneness is stretched into time. As tribes came together, as trading and violence fractured the old enchantment, the great cohesive center was our story.

Catalhuyuk, an important Neolithic trading town, contained chapels to the goddess as well as the hunt. As elsewhere, families now placed skulls in walls and under thresholds. The ancestors were present, spoke in the old voices of practical wisdom. Flutes were now made from leg bones, breathing a connection, the sound of the ancestors. Hearing the commands of the past continued well into the prophetic period several millennia later.

The change from hunter-gatherer to farmer came about incrementally over a few thousand years until we grew in population and could no longer return. Early on if a plant was doing poorly, we moved it to where we knew others were doing well; it was an act of devotion. If a wheat or barley plant kept its grain we planted its seed more than those which scatter theirs to the wind. When game became more scarce, we knew the herd and placed the more docile ones in an enclosure to keep our growing village supplied. The animal whisperers and faithful domesticated dogs helped. And lo, we became more domesticated too. There were of course exceptions; some were restless and

took up banditry. Others became herders and often banditry as well. Broken tribes merged. Towns had to build walls. Chiefs emerged to protect and to preside at the ritual grounds. They appointed warriors to guard the gates, silos and fields. Warriors in turn appointed kings and the chiefs became priests. It had become a new world.

In the beginning was mother earth. In her was life, womb to tomb. Her polar partner was sky. Above the mountains, father sky could embrace the great principles of universe, cause, effect, interdependence. From sky came solar heroes to bring towards earth – society, kingship for the rule of law, the coordination of all elements. Polar partner of sun was moon, for society must have its poetry, its humane compassion. Beautiful daughter of earth, she rode in on the crescent moon carrying her child, savior of the world. At the right hand of sky, sun, at the right hand of earth, moon, there spun the great cosmic counter clockwise rotation around an axis, the tree of life, roots in earth, branches in sky, serpents embracing its trunk, earth to sky, sky to earth, in seven centers along the human spine. Source of all projections of gods and goddesses, embodied from vital gut to head, to the right (solar) hand and to the left (lunar) hand, centered at the heart, we move in the Archetype of the Spirit. As we garland the tree with flowers at the village center we find [mitochondrial] Eve to the right and [Y chromosome] Adam to our left. The routines of daily living are always clockwise, from the east southward, then westward in the evening, to north for inspiration. We circle the temple sanctuary clockwise until we enter the spiritual path, reversing direction, bringing in all projections to the center silence of origin.

As populations grew so did the size of temples and the extent of cities, empires. At appointed times in Babylonia the chief priest with his king ascended the ziggurat to consult the great winged solar disk. In China each spring the emperor would go into seclusion, emerging at the Altar of Heaven to lead the rites of harmony for earth (square) and heaven (circle). In the great Buddhist temple of Borobudur we see the same unity. To tell the story of society in nature, holding together its unity, there must be a center, a model of human-cosmic oneness. These great forms, together with the magic/mythic drama of music and ritual, and a profusion of written “interpretations,” remain in our midst today, a pervasive reminder of deep visceral powers of mind.

Land populations in mythic times assumed a flat earth island surrounded by waters with the great dome of sky above. At the highest point of atmosphere beneath the stars was heaven. Sun in its daily round “rose” in the east and “set” in the west, dropping into the sea. East is the traditional direction for birth, west for death. This dynamic was common sense for all except the mariners who knew earth was a sphere. They knew latitude and longitude and magnetic north. They knew trigonometry, navigating by stars and planets. They knew the roaring forties and the ports of many peoples. A Turkish admiral, Piri Re’is, in 1513 drew a map of the world from old sources showing in accurate detail the coastline of Antarctica which has been buried by ice for the past 8,000 years, known only to us in sonar readings by the U.S. Navy. The history of maritime trade rests mainly beneath the seas, but hints of Polynesian, Indonesian, Phoenician, Venetian, Viking sailing can be found scattered around the globe. Cyrus Gordon, who translated Canaanite writing in Brazil and an Indus form of archaic Sumerian Linear Script in Peru opined that

map making preceded writing by at least a thousand years. Every racial/cultural type in our human family is portrayed in pre-Columbian terracotta portraiture in Central America. The world's oldest sea-going boat building tradition is along the Chao Phraya River in Thailand.

The bronze age, so-called, likely began here in the Chao Phraya valley. Copper and tin are seldom found in close proximity. The mariners could bring them together from diverse places. Not only did armies gain strong swords but we gained the exquisite Shang dynasty bronze vessels for sacrifices and many examples of high art preserved in the dust of empires. It is tragic we no longer have the library of Alexandria (it took three burnings by Romans, Christians and Moslems to finish it), nor the remains of Carthage (massacred and flattened by the Romans). Such actions are late in our story, relapses into an earlier mentality, either-or, absolute commands, triumph or die. We remember the story in Joshua where Yahweh caused the sun to stand still so they could finish killing their enemies. There was a group consciousness. The king was god and through him empires rose and crashed overnight when the god's voice failed them. Near the end of their mythic reign, the Delphic Oracle proclaimed, as its voice faltered, "Know thyself!"

Isolated in Central America, a pure magic/mythic culture, centered at Tenochtitlan, a city of two million inhabitants, was ruled by the great god-king, Montezuma. Disobeying orders, the self-conscious, ego-filled leader, Hernan Cortez, burned his ships and set a course westward over land. Montezuma heard of his presence and sent sorcerers to bring him disaster and confusion. Failing in this he sent magicians and priests to intercept the Spaniards. They too were murdered. Not hearing any urgent imperatives in his mind, it hadn't occurred to the king to send his vast armies. Cortez marched in and kidnapped the king. Later spasmodic outbreaks killed half his men but with the king in Cortez' control the Aztec empire collapsed.

THE AXIAL AGE

The contrasts in human consciousness were nowhere else this dramatic. Across the world there was a transition of hundreds of years. But everywhere the profound mythic world broke apart into dark ages. It was a violent time of rapid transitions, leaders hearing mixed voices, mixed contrary imperatives in pervasive confusion, wobbly authority, lost-ness. Here and there an individual broke free of the collective. Akhenaton moved his capital but was ignored and his inscriptions broken up and used for filler in walls of the great mythic temples. Isaiah II's 'suffering servant' "poured out his soul unto death." Rising in the midst of this fracturing world was a new being, alone, a new terror, the individual. It came between the Iliad and the Odyssey (J. Jaynes). It came to torment King Saul, when it broke in upon him. When it came, you had to leave, seeking out a lonely place to discover what was happening. You no longer fit in the social herd, the routines, or membership of a seamless group. You became a stranger in your own landscape. Who am I? I see my self thinking! I am alone.

The old system was not working. In the chaos Priests continued the ancient rites and telling the ancient stories. In the cognitive dissonance considerable skepticism arose across the population over the myths. Splitting from the whole, more were thinking

analytically rather than living in a narrative. People had myths rather than being in myth. They could be demythologized, played with, reframed, in favor of alternative deductive or inductive descriptions of reality. There can be no absolute truth anymore. Only relative thought, clear enough to live by. But to dig deeply, to explore the riddles, to live further into the great sorting, this began in childhood play, in humor that exposed our follies, goading us forward! There is joy, fulfillment, in one's expanding capacities for dovetailing truth, ever searching further. Bio-cultural evolution had entered another avenue; the brain was reworking old circuits for new purposes, adaptations in the epigenetic rules. Our sentences now had recursive islands. We were nesting ideas. We were scenario builders and lonely for others on parallel journeys. The species had emerged in a brave new quest, to understand life itself, to explore this neighborhood of space, to gaze into the human mind itself.

We would be engaging in the next several millennia for sufficient emergence of the individual autobiographical self, to make it more stable as an evolutionary advantage (a process ongoing today). In his epochally intriguing study, *Self Comes to Mind*, Antonio Damasio begins with: "Awakening meant having my temporarily absent mind returned, but with me in it, both property (the mind) and proprietor (me) accounted for." The Axial Age brought in what Robert Bellah called "second order thinking" or thinking about thinking. Karen Armstrong called it "a most lucid thinking." We were beginning to know ourselves.

An Axial key was the translation of human ethics into teachings and into written scriptures. For now we had gained new capacities for self-criticism and self-reform. It was a violent and chaotic time. Our human suffering had reached such pervasive reality the world cried out – in the name of our humanity (and all the gods) – for applying to our corporate living our best selves! On every continent we found the Golden Rule advocated by our founders of religious traditions in all its possible iterations. In all branches of human culture we found our new-found egos grossly inflated. We engaged in their exposure and calming. Ego was/is the virtual center of consciousness but it is not a thing and it cannot reach beyond its limited role to comprehend or control the self. And surely not our best selves. Such ego aggrandizement spells disaster for our integrity of person and disruption of appropriate and compassionate relationships. We have limits and we are mortal. Deal with it while there is yet time! There was now a core of what it means to be human and in the practice of religion.

The Axial founder in the West was Zarathustra (c. 600 B.C.). He reformed the old Iranian religion into a dualistic form of monotheism. Some of his Gathas survived as his Zoroastrian religion somewhat regressed. He was murdered by a priest but influenced rising Jewish awareness after the Babylonian exile and eventual consolidation by the rabbis in the first century A.D. His influence continued via Western monotheism in Christianity and Islam. Jesus (4 B.C. to 30 A.D.) too was martyred but Muhammad (571-632 A.D.) lived to an old age. Striking was the anticipation by Jeremiah (c. 645 B.C.) that the covenant now must be found in the individual heart.

Socrates engaged others in a dialogic process of questioning, ever receding from unexamined assumptions into deeper possibilities with no real final resolutions. For some the process was opening and revelatory; for others it resulted in resentment. He was martyred by his polis for corrupting the minds of youth. Fearfulness trumped adventure. William C. Smith labeled a parallel tradition in the West, Philosophia, beginning with the pre and post Socratics, Epicurus, Lucretius, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. This religion has been in the background for the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and subsequent emergence of scientific world views.

In India, Mahavira (540-468 B.C.), founder of Jain religion, gave us the startling principle of ahimsa, not killing living beings. He did not engage in metaphysical speculations, only extreme ascetic yogic practices, a drastic alternative practice awakening our connection in earth's biosphere.

The Buddha (c. 534), a wanderer, after his enlightenment beneath the Bodhi Tree, began with the premise that life is suffering but it can be neutralized through ethical and meditative practice. The goal is a neutralization of aggression and ambition, a middle path leading to nirvana, a cessation of distinctions at the center. A new institution, the Sanga, provided a way for intensification of spiritual disciplines and compassion for all sentient beings.

The Axial Age in India produced a remarkable complex of humanist-naturalist schools of religion, all departing from the Vedic traditions on the one hand and the Upanishadic (later Vedantic) conception that behind the illusions of self and world phenomena, is a unity of Brahman-Atman, a kind of world soul. Alongside Jain and Buddhist impulses was the Carvaka materialist school, the six teachers (Gosala, Purana, Ajita, Pahudha, Sanjaya and Sanjaya), skeptic, sophist, even fatalistic. Later Samkaya and Yoga schools developed around the teachings of Kapila and Patanjali, their naturalism eventually revised by Vedantic editors. The early teachers preferred an exploration of the self with its emerging ego-conscious core to the alternative older mentality of magic/mythic absorption.

In China Confucius (551-479 B.C.) preempted ancient Odes and music in forming an Axial philosophy around individual discernment. Distraught with the old inertias of exploitation and inter-kingdom violence he sought to set an alternative public administration. He traveled widely but no king would trust his ideas. But his students, sent to him by noble families who could not understand their sons, did prevail one by one. The Analects engage life issues with students around the careful cultivation of our lives to the goal of shengren, unique, autonomous, appropriately interdependent. Later Mencius (371-289 B.C.) systematized Confucian thought around a confident estimation of human nature balanced by the somewhat chastened view of Hsun tzu.

Lao tzu (Sixth century B.C.) wrote the Tao te Ching in polar tension with the Confucian impulse. On the one hand a social tao, on the other nature's tao, the great valley of balances in the world in which we are to find ourselves. Chuang tzu (Fourth century

B.C.) followed with a profound critique of the magic/mythic past sharpening the contrast of social—nature perspective often with charming humor.

At any day's dawning we know we could die by dusk. Will that be our end? Perhaps Neanderthals wondered about this when they dusted their dead with red ocher. In the early Neolithic, skulls were placed under thresholds. How long would their voices be heard? In places the cyclic round of time was thought to bring us new lives, based in merits or demerits of the past. In Egypt there was an underworld for more life presided over by Osiris. In Christianity there was hope for a life in heaven just beneath the dome of stars.. There was fearful anticipation for the unsaved beneath the earth in torture by fire. The Christ was said to have ascended bodily into heaven, and later his mother as well. We should pay attention now just in case. A majority of our founders gave us no opinion on the matter. We just can't know.

In the minds of young children we still find something very ancient blooming quite naturally in their perception – agency. Children's theory of mind sees intention in parents, people generally, trees, rocks and animals. Justin Barrett calls it "a hyperactive agent detection device." Parents and others can build houses and pave streets. But who can build the great design of the world they are placed in? What created trees and people, streams and mountains, the ocean, the sky? Paul Bloom explains children are natural creationists, natural animists. Agency in people and things is perceived like a car which must have a driver to move. A supernatural being made the world. I (separate from my body) drive me/my body. This becomes the default manner of perceiving the world for adults unless they have learned to question their earliest assumptions. The skepticism, questioning, analyzing of the realities, carried on by many Axial founders were diluted or lost in a sea of panpsychic and supernatural proclivities.

The great temples continued with ritual observances and sacrifices. New temples were constructed, many with the stones of the old reused. New icons found places of honor, the old now absorbed, reinterpreted. Chanting voices, flute, sitar, koto sounds accentuated the magic silence, drums, cymbals, great bells punctuated the drama of story, priests anointed our foreheads with oil paste. Temples were/are our great pilgrimage connection from the present clear back to ever-present origin. Religion absorbed the new perspectives of teachers, prophets and sages. Their Axial breakthroughs were remembered, diluted, cherished in profound painting, sculpture, reworked mythology. A new religious authority of the founders moved into the temple precincts and was accessed in temple cloisters, libraries and schools.

An invention among the Hebrews was the synagogue, the local congregation in which members could enter into a covenant one with another, to educate the young, to attend to the elders, to help one another. Here we approached the equalitarian circle, face to face. There are elements of this in the Buddhist Sanga or the Hindu ashram. Most of the world continued with the larger temples, given and endowed by patrons, managed by priests and/or by trustees from the people. Universal in religious precincts were the rites of birth, coming of age, marriage and death. When hierarchical there was initiation into the mysteries, invoking gods or enactments performed behind screens, fleetingly seen but

sustained in sound, chanted by priests for lay audiences facing the elevated altar. These priests had initiations of their own, ordination.

We now have history, itself born in the Axial Age. History is our ‘myth.’ We now may draw time-space at 13.7 billion years. With our bio-cultural emergence the story of our precarious conscious presence continues to be balanced in the scales of natural selection. We have traveled outward to the moon and probed Mars. We have captured glimpses inward of the Higgs boson particles and the vast spaces between. We remain limited and mortal beings nested in this minor planet. We still seek reassurance, comfort, adventure, drama, meaning, purpose for our time here together.

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