

The History of Religious Thought

Religious thought of some kind goes back as far as we are able to document the activities of *Homo sapiens*. It has however, undergone striking changes in form and continues to do so.

In the West, polytheism (the belief in many gods) has, to a large extent, given way to monotheism (the belief that there is only one god).

Before about 200 AD, much of Europe was pagan; paganism is the term used by early Christians to describe any religion that was not their own. However, these days, it is more commonly associated with polytheistic religions that are no longer widely practised.

So why were people religious and why do they continue to be so? This is more of a question for psychologists than it is for philosophers but I will, nonetheless, suggest a few possible answers.

1. Explanation: In the Stone Age, the Sun dominated the day and the Moon, planets and stars the night. The distinction between planet and star was made long before any substantial difference in kind was understood (the word planet comes from the Greek word *planētēs* (wanderer) which, in turn, is a shortened form of *asteres planetai* which means wandering star). As our brains evolved and we developed intellectually (the two would appear to be interdependent), we began to wonder and ask questions about our existence as well as develop the practical sides of our lives, such as the provision of food, living quarters and warmth. Such intellectual development was interdependent with our recognition of the seasons, patterns in the weather, changes in the heavens and so on; we wondered at such things but also observed patterns that would help in the practical sides of our existence. This involved explanation and prediction. Where it seemed impossible for us to explain certain phenomena, a god (or gods) was postulated to explain them. The phenomena were then taken to be evidence for that god's existence but at least there was an explanation. The explanation theory suggests that as science has advanced and explained so many of the things that were once attributed to gods, religion has been driven back and has had to look to more and more unreasonable forms of assertion in order to maintain itself. One such example is that we do not know God's plan and therefore speculation about His nature and the reasons for what we count as miraculous should be left alone. That we know that God has a master-plan is explanation enough to salve psychological disquiet. And it is certainly true that, in ancient times, many religious ideas were answerable to a desire to explain and predict.
2. Spiritualism: although the explanation theory seems plausible, it does not, perhaps, do all of the work in terms of understanding why people are religious. There are, after all, plenty of scientists who are religious – who, for example, take the view that science will progressively explain, in better and better ways, how the universe works. Yet they are mindful of the fact that there is stuff in existence at all. Does this stuff (however we choose to explain how it works) exist forever? – Is it infinite? Even if it is, surely there is a reason why it is there. In a sense, this kind of thinking is expressive of a form of spiritualism. It gives one a sense of place in the universe. There are other forms of spiritualism too. Take this quotation from a letter Tolstoy wrote to his aunt:

“For me, religion comes from life, not life from religion. You scoff at my nature and nightingales. But in my religion, nature is the intermediary.” (Troyat, H. Tolstoy (trans: Amphoux, N). WH.Allen. London. 1968. p.186)

Personally, although I am not religious, I am sympathetic to the idea that a sense of nature – a sensitivity to it – nourishes a spiritualism (might even be interdependent with it).

Of course, spiritual reasons for religious belief as outlined above present significant problems in terms of its rationalisation. It is similar in kind to the idea that *"the irreplaceability of human beings in our affections and attachments, without reason or merit, has offended rationalists and moralists since the dawn of thought."* (Gaita, R. *The Philosopher's Dog*. Routledge. London. 2003. p.76). Now, an evolutionary theorist might scoff at this and say that such attachments are answerable to our evolved psychology. Yet there is nothing rational about the emptiness that embraces us when we have lost a loved one; neither is there anything rational about someone saying, in the wake of this loss, that their life is devoid of meaning. Evolution might explain why we have a psychology that encourages us to form attachments but it does nothing by way of accounting for the kind of meaning loss that is sometimes internal to grief and the kind of radical individuation of a person that occurs in love. Largely, although not entirely, scientists and philosophers have ignored this kind of spiritualism on the grounds that it is irrational and, as such, not their business. Some such as Wittgenstein, Rhees, Winch and Gaita have attempted to place mysticism and spiritualism within human forms of life without trying to explain it.

Some Quotations:

God, he says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them? (Epicurus *De Ira Dei* (On The Anger of God)).

Socrates: Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious or is it pious because it is loved by the gods? (Plato. *Euthyphro* 10-11)

God is or is not. But towards which side will we lean? Reason cannot decide anything. There is infinite chaos separating us. At the far end of this infinite distance a game is being played and the coin will come down heads or tails. How will you wager?...Let us weigh up the gain and the loss by calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win, you win everything; if you lose you lose nothing. (Pascal, *B. Pensees*).

No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish. (Hume, *D. Of Miracles*. Part 2)