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**The main origins of religion are both intellectual and emotional, and in a somewhat interactive way.**

to create a sense of the I, i.e. the self. Other mammals have various levels of awareness, but not that of the self. They are born, live

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## ***ORIGINS OF RELIGION***

### ***Daltún Ó Ceallaigh***

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The intellectual primarily derives from the felt needs to explain a genesis of the universe and to underpin the observance of morality. The emotional derives from anxiety at the prospect of nihilism as the consequence of death.

The human is a unique type of mammal in the manner in which its brain developed so as

and die, but are not conceptually aware of these processes. While we are aware of being aware, they unselfconsciously exist. As a consequence, while they learn what to do and what not to, they have no real sense of time. They live in a perpetual present.

Along with self-consciousness, the human has certain innate abilities for dealing with the

world, its cerebral limbs, so to speak. One of these is to think abstractly in terms of cause and effect. Other mammals have an instinctual sense of cause and effect to an extent. They apprehend that specific actions or situations will produce particular outcomes. Thus they try to survive. But their cerebral makeup does not include the notions of 'why and how'.

### **Distinctiveness of Humans**

The human of course puts its cerebral equipment to the same basic uses as other mammals in order to secure its own survival, but it can do so through much more sophisticated ways and means. Furthermore, it extends the use of this power in all sorts of directions up to the point of building civilizations. We can contemplate what was and imagine what can be. It is this multifaceted cerebral capacity and its full potency, along with resulting advanced achievements, which have led humans to be a hegemonic species on the planet.



What is especially of note about the human is not only its powerful techniques of self-preservation and aggrandisement, but the pervasiveness of its curiosity about cause and effect regarding every aspect of life - present, past and future. Questions are asked and have to be answered. Initially these included mysteries such as 'why storms occur' or, more urgently, for example, 'why earthquakes take place'. And it was not just puzzlement which intensified concern here but fear and some hope of its alleviation.

Today, there is the science to adequately explain these events and sometimes contain them. But, early on, in the absence of such knowledge, the gap was filled with assumptions of a supernatural and an anthropomorphic character along with propitiation. If a human was seen to produce certain outcomes in ordinary affairs, then it was assumed that superhumans were responsible for producing extraordinary or strange happenings.

### **The Supernatural**

There could also be an instinctual impulse towards assuming invisible supernatural forces, this extending from an original, natural wariness in everyday life about hidden

agency. For example, a rustling in the undergrowth might be exaggerated as due not just to the wind, but perhaps a preying sabre-tooth tiger. So there was a predisposition, deriving from defensive caution, towards imaginative interpretation. And one then has to allow for this taking on transmogrified forms in society.

Thus, all in all, belief developed in various spirits and gods. Today that is generally no longer the situation for the kind of elemental occurrences referred to, although some humans still believe in occasional miracles.

This idea of the superhuman which led to appeasement and invocation of the gods and demigods, entailed belief resting on faith rather than reason. Today, there are still offerings of a symbolic kind and prayers for relief of suffering or attainment of objectives. But there are generally no longer sanguinary sacrifices; and theurgic manifestations are usually not alleged. However, there remain belief systems covering supreme divinities, cosmic creation and an assuaging immortality.

### **Causation and Existence**

Religion may therefore be perceived as principally originating and enduring from the search for initial causation and the need to allay existential insecurity, the latter also expressed as transcendental hopefulness. Humans mostly either cannot conceive of existence ceasing or are loathe to accept it. There is a deep-seated yearning for permanence, a sense of time inclining towards a passion for timelessness. Once there is personal Being, how can one have instead non-Being? Consciousness protests against its total negation and a return to the nonexistence which preceded birth. To a certain extent, this resistance is also a residual manifestation of the survival instinct; one looks to survive death. But this is not just a self-centred phenomenon; the living also cannot easily reconcile to the idea that a loved one is no more, as is evidenced by the intensity of grief.

Yet it is not alone the certainty of death that discommodes us, but also the contingency of life. Accident, disease or violence can cut short existence in a very premature and unpredictable way and these

phenomena thus particularly disturb us and seem to call for at least posthumous compensation. Likewise with social deprivation in the case of the poor.

Apart from all this, there is further the hope on occasion that religious practices might change the conditions of existence to an extent, whether by way of a rain dance or going to Lourdes for a cure.

Of the causational and existential roots of religion, the latter is much more powerful than the first, because whatever about the speculated primordial source of Being, the prospect of its ultimate evaporation is by far the most impactful. It can cause dread. As for the predilection for causation, ironically it results on occasion in acceptance of what is called the 'causeless cause' (god); in other words rationality ironically leads some eventually and distortionally to an irrational conclusion.

Religion is of course also put forward as necessary for morality insofar as it lays down what ought to be done or not done by divine command and stipulates the rewards or penalties for obeying or transgressing.

### **God of the Gaps**

Secular humanism affirms scientific knowledge and discerns no requirement for religious explanations beyond that. The conception of supreme deities it views as grandiose projectionism, while inserting a supernatural first cause before the 'big bang' is assessed as a god of the gaps theory, expounded in the current absence of scientific certainty as to what preceded that episode, while scientific hypotheses are not lacking; although these require further research (e.g. cyclical and multiverse theories). What also arises in connection with them is the vista of a temporal and spatial infinitude of nature, which is easy to state, but difficult for the human to get its head around. The causational predisposition of the human intellect tends to tilt towards a metaphysical dualism (the spiritual along with the material) rather than a naturalistic monism (multilayered materialism).

As for morality, natural instincts of social solidarity and collaborative effort as well as the rationality of the 'golden rule' (do unto others as you would they should do unto you) are the bases for proper human behaviour. The fact is that there can be no civilization without morality and reason points to this

without need for commandments from a divine. To be fully realised, morality requires an ethical system, which entails addressing the fact of desire, but a balanced system defines control, not demands repression, as latterly is so much the case with religion.

### **Meaning and Purpose**

Religious people further say that meaning in life requires a purposeful, god-led universe. However, the search for meaning or purpose, as distinct from just endeavouring to survive, also derives from the particularly human tendency to ask 'why and how' about existence and is another offshoot of an advanced cerebral endowment. (Meaning or purpose is not a problem for other mammals.) But it is not to be found 'out there'; it is generated by humans and can only be satisfied by them. In other words, we create our own meaning in whatever we decide to do in life. It is not given to us but chosen by us, individually or collectively. The cosmos and our universe within it are processes which, in some instances, give rise to intelligent, self-conscious creatures; that does not render such processes as themselves having purpose or meaning.

### **Undervaluing Existence**

The disadvantage in refusing to accept ultimate nonexistence is that this leads to the undervaluing of the only existence there is and as prevails in the instance of all mammals. In other words, the fixation with an afterlife means that some humans obsess about the nothing instead of realising the something. They yearn for redemption instead of seeking fulfilment. Their life is an apology for existence which is characterised by repentance rather than joy. One has a feeling of sin in place of a sense of happiness.

Yet, it is not irrational to want to live longer and in sound mind than normally obtains. This is especially so as life expectancy usually now falls far short of intellectual potentiality. 'Life is too brief', it is often understandably said. However, science is constantly expanding life-expectancy. It is known that humans can now live up to about 120 years, but this is far from typical. Nonetheless, it is not scientifically inconceivable that eventually this could be made typical, and more. That would go a long way towards reconciling humans to mortality.

Indeed, the 'gilgamesh scenario' holds that physical immortality is ultimately possible scientifically! This considers what might happen in medical advances and cyborg perspectives, among other things. Although, there would still always be the contingency of death by accident, disease or violence. But a gilgamesh prospect is hardly imminent. Besides, does anybody really wish to be immortal as distinct from being offered greater longevity? What in fact a Gilgamesh situation would be more likely to bring about is sovereignty over death whereby one would only go when one wants to and not before.

### **Delusion and Reality**

However mortality is confronted, there is no point in dealing with it through the delusion of religion. The promise of what is infeasible is simply not rational. At the end of the day, the human is one of many mammals - a very special one, given its brain power, but a mammal nonetheless, and cannot thus expect to be different in having a span of vital experience beyond the physical. The aim should thus be not to mope about dying but to exult in living.

That of course is easy to say, but the high level of human knowledge, while hugely advantageous in life, nonetheless has its price. Sometimes one feels that it would be better to be unknowing about the finality of death rather than fully conscious of it. Can bliss only be attained in ignorance? However, we are where we are and the only intelligent response to that, which leaves us to fully appreciate existence, is to proceed philosophically towards acceptance of the inevitable return to prenatal nonexistence. The Taoist says "disperse emotion with reason." In place of persistent anxiety about the end, one should seek serenity in the now.

That is the path to harmony in the light of fate.

### **Truth and Immortality**

Or, put another way, the essential point is to conclude what one thinks to be the truth. When truth is not what we would like it to be, there is the temptation to avoid it through fantasy. Fantasy is a standard human device to cope with frustration or dissatisfaction. However, one is either committed to truth above all or one is not. That is the basic choice that has to be made. And when one has resolved what truth is, one has to reconcile to it. Religion, however, does not really strive towards truth in that it opts for imagination rather than investigation.

As for immortality, we can trust that, whether in the remembrance of just loved ones or occasionally of nations and, in some cases, of humanity, there is a kind of endurance after death. To be not forgotten is the true immortality. And it is obvious that humans fix upon that as much as anything else. No-one is oblivious to their legacy and their memory. Much achievement and creation, such as in the arts and literature, derives from that.

Finally, Humanists are often accused of diminishing the significance of humanity, but their critics might be said to be inflating it. The Humanist sees the situation as coming to terms with the reality of our humble occurrence in the cosmos. The religious prefers the sublime notion of a cosmic uniqueness and the dream of eternity.

**Post Script** *This article does not imply any reference to classical Daoism or the original Confucianism, nor to Theravada Buddhism, because none of these is considered to be a religion as such, for reasons which are for consideration another day.*

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