

The Two Faces of Religion
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Religion is a basic institution that shapes a civilization. Our ancestors, like ourselves, had many questions about phenomena that they did not understand. We see this in children, as young as three, who ask "why?"

The basic definitions of religion always mention belief, belief there are gods or a god (divine source) that govern human society. These deities require sacrifices and prayers if they are to intervene on a person's or a society's behalf. This belief provides comfort, explains catastrophes, and mandates behaviors that please the deity. Most religions forbid murder, a specific personal crime, different from killing animals for food or sacrifice, killing in warfare, or executing for crimes by a leader or a community.

Beliefs can affect behavior; for example, the belief that bad actions are punished in an afterlife can promote what the culture believes to be good behavior. Human beings have long known that bad behavior is not always punished in this world.

Beliefs can seemingly explain why a volcano erupts (angry god or gods) and that a sacrifice (usually a virgin girl or child) can tame the anger of a god. Since eruptions always end, this belief is considered true.

Religion plays an important role in creating community solidarity, providing rituals, feasts, and such activities as marriages and funerals. There is no human society that we can think of that does not have religion as one of its most important institutions.

Although there is no single religion for all human societies, all religions (particularly today) have attributes in common. They all have professional leaders (priests, rabbis, mullahs, ministers) whose role is to lead the followers in rituals, promote values, and preside over major community events.

All of today's religions have played a role in architecture, creating styles of edifices for congregational worship and activity. Some of the world's most beautiful buildings were designed for these functions, but also serve as models of man's highest artistic values.

All of today's religions have been beneficial when they provide charity, kindness, protection of the poor and handicapped, and comfort to the bereaved.

Even in antiquity, religious belief tamed people's instincts to kill strangers. All early religions have tales about hospitality to a stranger who might possibly be a god in disguise.

However, religions also have a dark underbelly. Polytheistic religions practiced tolerance to other multi-god faiths, practices that were reciprocated. Monotheism, however, had one unfortunate byproduct: antipathy toward other beliefs.

There was an interesting intermediate stage in the creation of monotheism: henotheism, in which the monotheists recognized other faiths but forbade them to their own believers. In ancient Judaism, for example, the followers were admonished that they must not adopt the practices of their neighboring idol worshippers, but it was not long before the ancient practice of genocide of polytheists began. This was short lived, fortunately.

The ancient Greeks and Romans took this practice of genocide to other purposes: long-standing enemies or commercial rivalry. They both committed genocide against the Phoenicians.

History provides examples of the best and worst influences of religion on human development. At best, religion offered stories that honored women (the Hebrew bible stories of Ruth and Naomi and women judges); reverence for motherhood (the Virgin Mary in Christianity and the Prophet Mohammad's first wife and daughter in Islam).

At worst religion invented the "inquisition," legalized torture of suspects of incorrect piety. Both Christianity and Islam followed this unfortunate direction. Also at worst, religions practiced horrors against any deviant spinoffs: Protestantism, Sunni-Shiites, and even Buddhist cults.

The worst underbelly of religion is the failure to evolve as human knowledge has.

Many religions are trapped in some earlier age, like bees trapped in amber. Many today persist in belief that women are the property of men and owe them total obedience, which conflicts with modern cultural evolution.

The worst inheritance from religious history is "belief," the acceptance of an idea with no process of reason or verification. The "belief" that a COVID vaccination transforms one into a Zombie or that it implants computer chips testifies to the persistence of religion's worst underbelly. Belief is not an alternative to truth.

682 words

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