

Origins of Religions

The origins of religions have been a central focus of religious studies. The anthropology of religions has studied ancient (primitive) religions to understand the basic motivations for religious thought and action. Anthropologists like E.B. Tylor, and J.G. Frazer argued that studies in origins of religions provide a starting point to universal human motivations of religious phenomena, and the beginning of progressive religious evolutions culminating in western monotheisms. Phenomenologists including Mircea Eliade and Edmund Husserl looked to predominant patterns and principles of origin stories (myths) to explain how people thousands of years ago, and today, understand themselves and the world around them with the establishment of religious assumptions, categories, and meanings.

As part of a survey of religions in comparative methodology, starting with origins of religions is appropriate for several reasons. First, it engages the possible early human motivations for religion and how certain universal human experiences and circumstances lead to fundamental religious explanations. Second, it provides an appreciation that origin theories are connected to assumptions of progressive evolutions of religious thought creating distinct categories and hierarchies. Third, origin myths give foundational details for religious meanings including who we are, why we are here, and why the world is ordered the way it is. Studies of origins of religions have reoccurring subjects including death and dreams; states of consciousness; celestial objects; anthropomorphism and agent detection; and theisms.

Death and Dreams

Death might be the most universal religious motivation. When individuals and communities must face death, questions are asked, narratives are created, and solutions or compensations are developed. First, death requires explanations of what has changed from an animate person to inanimate corpse. The distinction between an alive and dead person has been the prime driver for conceptions and teachings about the soul. The things that cease when a person is dead are often equated with the soul (breath in the lungs, spark in the heart, light in the eyes, color in the skin). Religions begin to explain this change through narratives (myths). Second, communities must develop practices and traditions to deal properly with the corpse. Often funerary rituals are tied to the community's myths about the difference between life and death, what the soul is and where it goes; as well as

how they see the physical body and how it should be treated and disposed. Several researchers have argued that you can predict most of what religious groups believe by studying how they ritually engage and practically eliminate a dead body. In religions where the body is holy or pure, processes of mummification, preservation, encasement, entombment, and burial are common. In religions where the body is profane or impure, rituals of cremation and natural decomposition are utilized. For example, in Zoroastrianism the corpse is believed to pollute all natural elements including earth (no burying), water (no ocean disposal), and fire (no cremation). While it may temporarily pollute the air, element pollution is avoided by allowing for birds and insects to decompose and consume the body left on a nonporous stone slab. Death becomes a time for individuals and communities to contemplate mortality and the meaning of a temporary existence. Often religions will rehearse encounters with human death through hunting rituals and animal sacrifices. Overall, death myths and rituals are compensators for the one thing, unavailable to all humans, immortality.

Dreams are closely related to the questions of what is a physical, living person and what is not. Questions arise when people who have recently died appear in dreams. Explanations are created and evolve over what these sights in dreams are and how they are associated with their own corpse and the people still living in the mortal world. The difference between what is experienced in dream and what is experienced when awake is often foundational to demarcations between the physical and metaphysical, or temporal and spiritual. These demarcations are linked to how a society interprets the differences between immanent and transcendent, or human and divine.

States of Consciousness

Dream state, along with non-dream sleep and awake, is one of the three states of consciousness recognized by practically all early religious traditions. Investigating the differences among these states and the meaning of dream-state images have been very influential in the development of religious narratives and practices. Many early religions asserted that the images in dreams were spiritual in nature and transcendent from images in awake consciousness. Dream images, therefore, were given special status and religious authority. Those who could persuasively interpret dream-state images gained spiritual charisma and religious power within their communities.

Early religions focused on the lines of demarcations among the three common states of consciousness. Many believed that these “surface” consciousness states were based in a deeper, truer consciousness which is the part of the sentient self that supports, and even

controls, the surface consciousness states but operates under the surface requiring intentional exercises to bring it to the forefront of awareness. Evoking the true consciousness can provide extraordinary connections to the divine and reveal special spiritual insights. Some of the first exercises to bring into focus this fourth consciousness centered on the moment when one moves from one surface consciousness to another, most commonly between the awake state and the sleep state. Ardent intentional awareness was paid at the moments when sleep started and during the moment when one arises from sleep. Across religious traditions, the very early morning hours when one arises from sleep was seen as the ideal time for connections to and inspirations from this fourth state of consciousness because the body would be rested with the requisite energy for ardent, intentional awareness and yet the liminal consciousness of sleep lingered allowing for an open and distracted mind free from the distractions which would often seize the awake mind. This alert body, relaxed mind is often called visionary consciousness where one sees dream images while still awake. Ancient Hinduism developed the most explicit methodology for this in-between state, which is still practiced today as *nidra yoga*. Other practices attempt to train mindful awareness of being awake to dream consciousness allowing for the practitioner to have greater understanding and even control of dream consciousness. Today, this is often called lucid dreaming or dream yoga.

Altered states of consciousness have also been approximated through adjustments of physical states. Early theories were that physical changes in the body can have influence on the mind bringing practitioners to alternate states conducive to spiritual experiences. Most commonly this was practiced through fasting of both food and water, as the fast slows and weakens the body, the mind becomes open and focused. Other common practices alter oxygen in the religious environment. Changing elevation, lighting fires, and burning incense, all change environmental oxygen altering consciousness. Extreme temperatures and humidity play similar roles. Also, from ancient times herbs and chemicals, from stimulants, to sedatives, to hallucinogens, have been used to achieve altered states of consciousness. In religious situations these substances are referred to as entheogens. When placed in strict ritual structures, these substances are seen, inside traditions, as effective, even essential, practices. In general, while methods and practices may differ, all religions engage in some kind of orthodox discourse and rituals when it comes to altered states of consciousness for religious reasons.

Celestial Objects: Sun, Moon, Planets, and Stars

Most studies of early religions concur that the sun was the first transcendent object of worship. Some believed the sun was the transcendent itself, holding all cosmic power and controlling all earthly phenomena. Others believed the sun to be an icon or incarnation of the transcendent, but not God in and of itself. However, early religions looked to the sky, especially the patterns and movements of the night sky in the development of religious narratives. The unpolluted night sky represented the otherness, majesty, and order central to religious moods and motivations. Religious myths would explain the patterns and movements of celestial bodies making them religiously significant and relevant.

Anthropomorphism and Agent Detection

The characteristics of early religions that have the greatest influence on modern religious beliefs and practices are arguably anthropomorphism and agent detection. There is a powerful human motivation to project anthropomorphic form and attributes on to object both animate and inanimate. Faces are seen on trees, rocks, and pastries. Human characteristics are projected onto animals, weather, and possessions. Also, humans are inclined to prefer order over chaos and so human volition is projected onto natural occurrences. Anthropologists have called this agent detection. When objects move, unanticipated occurrences arise, or unusual sounds occur, humans are more likely to account this to human action than to other explanations. These tendencies influenced the early conceptions of the divine. Human form and characteristics were used to explain and categorize the otherness and awe of a transcendent God. Many religious traditions started to split the characteristics of the divine between its otherness (transcendence) and relevance (anthropomorphism). Taoism explained the Tao as both the way (Tao) of ultimate reality, which was esoteric and ineffable, and the way (Tao) of the universe, which was known within human cognition and categories. Buddhism, as well, taught of multiple bodies of the Buddha, including the transcendent body, which was beyond form and time, and the transformation body which, almost always, took human shape. Overtime it was the deities that are more anthropomorphic which successfully perpetuated in early religions. These “human-like” Gods were seen as more relevant, immanent, and efficacious. Even today, human beings have tendencies to relate to and bond with animate and inanimate things that have a face and that motivation seems to have a continuous influence on how humans understand the divine.

Theisms

Human tendencies toward order, and explanations of agent detection led to animistic systems of religious understanding. Early religions explained natural and supernatural phenomena with beliefs in a spiritual dimension that parallels and underpins human experience. Animistic spirits were the distinguishing variable of the animate and inanimate but were also infused in inanimate phenomena with intensity and characteristics distinct from the spirits in living things. Spirits explain actions and changes in the world. Many early animistic beliefs were based on force rather than form. Human preferences for anthropomorphic explanations led to theistic evolutions, beginning with animistic monism, where formless spirits are infused in all phenomena. Monism frequently evolved into systems of pantheism where animistic spirits gained more form and distinctions were made between creator and created. Animism often changed into systems of polytheism. Originally, polytheistic systems represented independent, interacting divine figures as seen in Greek and Roman Mythology. Overtime, intendent polytheistic deities were ordered into hierarchies, eventually leading to the emergence of supreme deities and assertions of monotheism. Tylor and Frazer claimed that these changes in theism were historically linear and progressive where the more plausible and correct theistic beliefs perpetuated and grew in a Darwinian survival of the fittest among theologies. More recent studies of religious origins have found the landscape to be much more nuanced and complicated with versions of all theisms mentioned above rising and falling in devotion and influence through a religious history that could be much less single-direction linear than previously assumed.

Sources

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