

The Essence of Religion



Religions understand well that ordinary people find it hard to accept an abstract notion of God. So they elevate the supposed messengers of the divine to a godlike rank and press people to venerate them. Buddhism deifies the Buddha; Islam, Muhammad; Protestantism, Jesus; Catholicism, not only Jesus but also his mother Mary; Hinduism, Krishna and others.

Faith naturally fixes more firmly on a figure who seems to have once existed than on a purely imaginary deity who has never shown himself in history. Even if such figures are fictional, leading believers to think they were historical people strengthens confidence in their existence and hardens the believers' faith.

In practice, the "god" claimed by ruling classes is the very figure who functions as **their** proxy. Directly declaring themselves divine would never be accepted, so they put forward an Absolute as a front, claiming merely to transmit his words. They set prophets, saviors, popes, or pastors in front of the people and demand blind obedience to the god they have created (which in reality is obedience to themselves), calling for sacrifices on "God's" behalf—while legitimizing the diversion of offerings and outputs into their own hands. Under cover of "announcing the

founder's words," clergy and their allied elites effectively act in God's stead, extracting people's wealth and time and enjoying honor and prosperity in this life.

"Organized religion seeks to turn us inward and to bind us within a world of severe constraints. It always divides the world into battling gangs—judging and separating the followers of the 'true religion' from those of the 'false.' ... But such **signs** can never be part of the experience of God that comes as life, love, being, and consciousness." 1)

Each religion insists that its founders—Jesus, Muhammad, and so on—really existed. The higher the probability of a real person behind the belief, the more credible and accessible it becomes to ordinary people. Thus, compared with an abstract God, devotion more readily attaches to a concrete intermediary (or one claimed to be such).

Such practice violates not only the Buddha's teaching—he recognized no separate deity and never presented himself as one—but even Yahweh's command not to make or worship images. Despite injunctions against fashioning and bowing to images, religious authorities permit or encourage it, knowing that the simplest way to intensify belief is to give devotees something tangible to gaze upon and adore.

In Buddhism the Buddha designated no god and taught as a human teacher; later, however, clergy and laity deified him and multiplied a host of Buddhas (Amitabha, Śākyamuni, Medicine Buddha, Vairocana, etc.), creating a form of polytheistic devotion.

"Even in Islam, if you would enter paradise you must win favor not with God but

with Muhammad. The servant has become the master; in the end the prophet has become a god." 2)

"Religion is ultimately not a search for the meaning of God but a search for the meaning of humanity. It is not a journey toward an external deity but a journey toward the center of our humanity, where we overcome the fear born of our sense of separateness and enter the meanings of transcendence, union, timelessness, and at last eternity." 3)

Faith and Prayer

"If any of you lacks wisdom, ask of God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to you. But ask in faith, with no doubting; for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. Such a person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord—he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." (James 1:5–8) Likewise: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

Even if faith is "assurance" and "conviction," a purported object of faith that is non-objective and resists scientific scrutiny should be excluded from that category. If what we once took as divine anger in earthquakes or volcanoes has been explained scientifically, then our relationship with the "god of the winds" should end. To go on calling such events God's will, and to forgo proper measures, deserves censure.

Science advances because some people dare to question phenomena in order to seek accurate answers; it will go on advancing in the same way. Forcing one-way

belief often serves only to conceal weak contents. If a saying were truly the perfect word of God, it would hold as truth under all conditions.

Were the scriptures rational and scientific in their substance, there would be no need to coerce belief. It is their irrational and unscientific elements that tarnish their sanctity and lower their value; sensing this, clergy insist on unconditional faith. That the Bible or Qur'an sells widely and is broadly distributed does not prove its contents true. For knowledge to do its proper work it must be testable, truthful, and objective.

Definitions of angels, demons, and witches are unclear; no one has **seen** them. Virginal conception, resurrection from the dead, miracles performed by prophets or by Jesus—all are unverified, and there are no credible, reproducible instances since.

Even the existence of God or Jesus cannot be established objectively. Were the true God or Jesus to appear today, there would still be no objective way to **prove** identity; their claims would, in the end, be rejected. Those with vested interests—clergy and religious leaders—would deny such a possibility most strenuously, fearing the threat to their privilege.

Some claim that prayer heals. But we have never heard of a person who lost a limb regrowing it because of prayer. When people recover, it is not because prayer **caused** healing but because the illness was, by chance and treatment, curable; no one thus healed lives forever. In short, improvement is not the gift of divine favor but the by-product of a condition that could improve interacting with a will to recover and an effective therapy. To pray is to possess a strong will to live, and

those who keep that will naturally fare better than those who surrender.



"'God's standard,' in the end, only has meaning to the extent that humans apprehend it. What God truly wants turns out not to be what **he** wants but what **people** want; pleasing God turns out to mean pleasing people. ... The same holds in prayer. We speak **to** God, but in reality we are speaking to those who participate in the prayer. In this sense, prayer is a deeply political act." 4)

Our prayers must not be confined to petitions for our own fortune or that of those around us. True prayer recognizes *Nosome*, the source of life—the essence present equally within ourselves and all beings—and seeks mutual fellowship and coexistence. Such prayer rides on positive waves, exerting a wholesome influence on its subjects and on all beings. Conversely, if prayer seeks only private gain or nurtures hatred, it transmits a negative resonance both outward and back upon oneself and others. Strive, then, for positive, inclusive prayers and for enlarging love's centrifugal force; as it grows, a corresponding centripetal return will come to

you. The butterfly effect and the echo are constant in nature. And do not pray only in your heart—fashion a life that puts prayer into words and deeds.

Sources

1. **A New Vision of Eternal Life**, John Shelby Spong, Korean Christian Research Institute, 2011: 239
2. **The Laughing Jesus**, Timothy Freke & Peter Gandy, Three Rivers Press, 2005: 100
3. **A New Vision of Eternal Life**, John Shelby Spong, Korean Christian Research Institute, 2011: 231
4. **Everyday Violence, Violent Religion**, Lee Jong-Rok, Kumran Publishing, 2017: 202–203