

Preface

Why? It is such a simple question. Children ask why from a very early age as they begin to learn basic concepts about their surroundings. They also ask what, how, where and who in their constant quest for discovery. These same questions mankind has pondered since our earliest ancestors roamed the planet. Humans have the ability to reason, which scientists believe separates us from other animals. It is this ability that has led our species from cave dwelling hunter-gatherers to the internet age and space exploration. We, like our children, are in search of answers. Children find their answers from parents and peers, as most of their questions can be answered based on simplicity. As we mature we realize some answers are not available to us. Sometimes they have yet to be uncovered, or may, in fact, be unattainable at the time. Scientists, theologians, explorers, and the like seek these truths in their own unique ways. So many questions remain unanswered in so many different arenas.

One underlying question however has mystified our species since the aforementioned cave dwellers; why are we here, who put us here and what happens next? These questions coalesced with human thought resulting in the formation of religious beliefs. Just as our brains cannot fathom infinity, we likewise are unable to comprehend creation without a creator. We are born, thus have parental origins. How can the world we live in not have similar origins? It must have a creator or creators in our minds. Early man certainly would have pondered these same questions. Humanity could not have simply appeared out of thin air.

Early man tied creation to primitive deities and paid homage in an effort to improve their hunting success, fertility fortunes or their agricultural yields. As we evolved into more complex societal webs, religious worship subsequently evolved into more dynamic forms. A single religious belief that once permeated a clan was now the belief of an entire region. Settlements became cities, and territorial commonality became nations. A tribal elder who may have once led a sacrificial ritual to appease the god of the hunt was now a pharaoh, a caesar or an emperor governing a nation of believers worshipping the same god or gods. Religion slowly, yet methodically morphed from worship for the sole benefit of life on earth to happiness and success in whatever afterlife you believed to exist.

Mankind has suffered greatly as a result of religious affinity. Nearly all of our conflicts seem to be tied to differences in beliefs, often times religion is found at the core. Politics, warfare, money, persecution and other prejudices revolve around this dynamic. This brings us full circle to questions associated with our initial query. Why are we here? Who put us here? What is our purpose? Where are we headed in life and in the afterlife if there is one? What else do we not know about the unknown?

This book is written attempting not to answer these long-sought puzzles, but to more clearly define the questions themselves. Mankind has become so confused in our quest that we have lost the sheer

simplicity our infant brains asked in childhood. Perhaps by reflecting on our past and posing simple comparisons on our differences we can find some collective answers.

Origins

“Rivers, ponds, lakes and streams...they all have different names, but they all contain water. Just as religions do....they all contain truths“

Muhammad Ali

To the best of our knowledge it all began approximately 13.5 billion years ago. Theories suggest it originated as an infinitely hot and dense point of matter that in an instant exploded out with a bang. A rapid expansion followed at a speed incomprehensible to the human mind. After approximately one million years, star formation began taking place in interstellar nurseries. Soon galaxies formed and the young universe began to take shape. The stars and galaxies that were created in those early years were our sun's ancestors. The universe continued to expand outward over the billions of years that followed and star formation continued. Nearly 9 billion years after the Big Bang, in one of the spiral arms of a spiral galaxy we know today as the Milky Way, our solar system formed. Planet Earth was created at this time as a rocky molten mass that eventually coalesced into a spherical world that settled into an orbit around the sun. Earth has been an inhospitable place for life forms for much of its history, and only in the last 500 million years has life flourished.

Fast forward the terrestrial clock to 2 million years ago and our story begins in Africa. Bipedal primates had evolved from their ape relatives a few million years earlier and inhabited portions of the continent. These hominids lived a nomadic existence as hunter-gatherers and thrived for hundreds of thousands of years in Africa. Eventually, growing populations or climate change forced some of these people to leave Africa for better hunting and foraging lands. *Homo erectus* was the first to migrate into other parts of the world about 1 million years ago. In the meantime other types of hominids developed and would follow *Homo erectus'* migration, *Homo sapiens* turn came about 70,000 years ago. Life would have been extremely difficult for these primitive humans. Infant mortality was staggeringly high, and for those who would survive childhood, disease, hunger and predation from wild animals were constant reminders of the frailties of life. Hunting and foraging were the jobs of each and every one in a group or clan. They likely had little time for anything else. Still, like modern humans, these early people would have certainly needed an escape. Mourning the death of a loved one would be a time for remorse. Conversely, childbirth, a new animal kill or victory in battle would have been cause for celebration, a release from the monotony of daily life. Celebration, or put more simply “play,” was where it all started. As Robert Bellah points out in his book *Religion in Human Evolution*, play begins in children who are

practicing for adulthood.¹ Playful interactions amongst early humans eventually led to rituals in these early times.²

Ritualistic behavior is a key component for the development of religion. The late anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserted that rituals create imaginary worlds.³ Thus, imagination was vital in early religious thought. How do we define religion though? Is it easily explained? Is it possible to define religion? Like the emotion of love, it seems difficult to pinpoint a clear explanation. Merriam-Webster defines it in the following ways:

1. The service or worship of God or the supernatural; commitment or devotion to a religious faith or observance
2. A personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs and practices
3. A cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith

Another interesting and more complex definition comes from Bellah where he paraphrases Geertz:

Religion is a system of symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence.⁴

Geertz notably omits a reference to supernatural beings or gods. It seems he is arguing that religion has evolved by humans for humans to explain our existence in time and space. The late Emile Durkheim, who was a French sociologist added:

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community⁵

The varying definitions above certainly have commonality, but are clearly open to one's own interpretations. What we can comfortably conclude, however, is religious beliefs evolved from early stages as a relatively simple dynamic into the variety of beliefs we find in today's world.

¹ Bellah, Robert. *Religion in Human Evolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. Print. Pg. 91

² Ibid

³ Bellah, preface xvi

⁴ Bellah, preface xiv

⁵ Bellah, 1

Canadian neuroscientist and psychologist Merlin Donald believes religion has evolved over time in three stages: *Mimetic*, *mythic* and *theoretic*.⁶ Mimetic belief systems may have begun as far back as 2 million years ago with *Homo erectus*. These early hominids would have mimicked one another in dance and ritual, and despite very limited oral communication skills, were able to convey beliefs and traditions to their peers. Music has long been able to speak to the soul of man and would have been a key ingredient in these early rituals. Music was a fundamental ingredient in the development of not only religion, but societies as a whole.⁷ Bellah points to a tribe in central Brazil, *The Kalapalo*, as an example of its importance. To these people, virtually untouched from the outside world, music is the language of the gods.⁸ For them, the “powerful beings” speak music, people have their spoken languages, animals have distinctive calls, and inanimate things make noises.⁹ No doubt, they are not historically alone in their devotion to the musical arts. Music, dance and ritual remained central in early beliefs for millennia. Not until the development of spoken language in the last 250,000 years did the mythical aspect of religious development transform early religion.¹⁰

Myths began as an integral part of religious stories accompanying the earlier ingrained rituals. Donald defines myth in the following way:

Mythical thought, in our terms, might be regarded as a unified, collectively held system of explanatory and regulatory metaphors. The mind has expanded its reach beyond the episodic perception of events, beyond the mimetic reconstruction episodes, to a comprehensive modeling of the entire human universe. Causal explanation, prediction, control.....myth constitutes an attempt at all three; every aspect of life is permeated by myth.¹¹

Referring back to Merriam-Webster for the definition of myth we find:

1. A usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief or natural phenomenon
2. A person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence

Stories passed down through generations and eventually led to theoretical analysis by scholars of the day. As *Homo sapiens* evolved from hunter-gatherer groups into a more complex, urban existence, it is

⁶ Bellah, xviii

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Bellah, 139

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Bellah, 134-135

likely theologians reorganized earlier rituals and beliefs to correspond to localized knowledge of the world. Armed with pragmatic beliefs and new ideas, religious ideology morphed from a primitive existence into an array of dogmas that would eventually circumnavigate the globe. No wonder it is nearly impossible to define religion or to quantify our belief systems!

Here Bellah paraphrases another Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz:

“In spite of its apparent actuality, the world of daily life is a culturally, symbolically constructed world, not the world as it actually is. As such it varies in terms of time and space, with much in common across the historical and cultural landscape, but with occasional sharp differences.”¹²

Furthermore, Schutz argues we exist in our current space and time and work and live in this practical existence; life is based on a fundamental anxiety of (although not consciously), a fear of death.¹³

There is no question human beings have an anxiety of death, a fear we share with most other animals. What differentiates us is a cognitive recognition of the significance of death and a hope for an afterlife. The fact is we do not want to believe it all ends in death. It petrifies us and diminishes our innate belief of human importance; we are supposed to be different. Bellah notes an article published by evolutionary anthropologist Terrence Deacon, along with Tyrone Cashman, that describes three ways in which human abilities differentiate themselves from other primates.¹⁴ The first is our ability to create narratives or stories. Our ape cousins have what is called episodic memory, which allows them to remember particular events and react accordingly when in a similar event.¹⁵ Human beings, however, have the capacity to interrelate multiple events, creating narrative. The second difference is human beliefs of a dualistic nature of the visible world and the non-visible world.¹⁶ Look no further than Pharaonic Egypt as an example. Egyptians believed the afterlife was an extension of humanity on earth. The pyramids and tombs they built were a portal to the afterlife, replete with all of their earthly needs, such as water, food and wealth. For the ancient Egyptians, the visible and non-visible worlds were intimately connected. Finally, Deacon and Cashman assert that humans seem to have a more advanced emotional capacity than other mammals.¹⁷ All three of these elements of human psyche played an integral part in the development of, and nurturing of religious beliefs over time.

As time passed, settlements grew, and soon formed alliances with other neighboring communities for stability and defense. Civilizations arose from these beginnings, and with them the citizenry commingled their varying ideals, including religious beliefs. Advances in technology, such as the advent of the wheel, cart, and plow allowed cultures such as those found in Egypt and Mesopotamia to flourish. Cities emerged by 3200 B.C.E., replete with temples and altars to worship and honor the

¹² Bellah, preface xv

¹³ Bellah, 2

¹⁴ Bellah, 101

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Bellah, 102

¹⁷ Bellah, 103

gods. Writing developed in the same period, and scholars began systematically documenting current events. Written communication became the single most influential event in the history of religion. It transformed verbal ideology into tangible evidence for potential followers to witness and comprehend....in other words, religious ideas became credible.

As societies developed and evolved, religion grew more complicated. A strong religious base was vital in maintaining order in the new urban societies of the day. Kings were given divine mandate to rule from ancient Mesopotamia to China, often times claiming divinity in the flesh. Religious decrees assisted rulers in maintaining civility in an unforgiving world. After all, civil upheaval was more likely to develop in a godless society; fear of heavenly wrath helped to keep the peace. Across the globe, parallel dynamics were gripping ancient societies, and religious devotion was at the center. We begin in the Fertile Crescent....

Judaism

“The Lord said to Abram (Abraham): Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you. “

Genesis 12, 1-3

Early in the 2nd Millennium B.C.E., according to Jewish teachings in the book of *Genesis* in the *Tanakh* (Christian Bible’s Old Testament), God appeared to a man named Abram to convince him to move his family away from the city/state of Ur. Ur located in the Fertile Crescent, was apparently in political decline, and it may have made sense for Abraham to comply with God’s decree. His destination would be the Levant, one of the key routes out of Africa for our pre-historic ancestors. This narrow region north of the Sinai Peninsula, described by University College London’s Institute of Archaeology as the “crossroads of western Asia, the eastern Mediterranean, and northeast Africa,” was the natural route of traveling parties spreading out to lands beyond Africa. A section of the Levant, now Israel and Palestine, borders the Syrian Desert to the east and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. This section became known in Biblical times as Canaan, the “Promised Land” by God to the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham. According to Jewish tradition, the descendants of Abraham lived in the Promised Land for many years before being enslaved in Egypt. After nearly four centuries of Egyptian servitude, the great prophet Moses, inspired by God and wielding divine powers, confronted the Egyptian Pharaoh demanding the release of the Israelites. After the Pharaoh refuted Moses ten times, Moses, with God’s power, unleashed ten different plagues on Egypt after which Pharaoh finally relented. As the story is told in Exodus, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, ushering them back to their homeland. As the tribe left Egypt, Pharaoh changed his mind and decided to chase them down in order to slaughter them. The Egyptian Army caught up with the fleeing Israelites at the Red Sea. Before the onslaught could begin, Moses, again with divine intervention, parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to safely cross. Then the waters returned to drown the Egyptians in pursuit. God’s chosen people were then free to continue their journey to the land God had promised them.

Most of us know the aforementioned story from our earliest days of religious study, Sunday school, catechism, and the like. It is a terrific narrative that is much more involved than this brief summary, and many scholars now believe it to be a story, a tall tale of biblical proportions, no pun intended.¹⁸ . Some historians credit the first five books of the *Tanakh*, also known as the *Pentateuch* or

¹⁸ MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. London: Viking, 2010. Print. pgs. 51-53

Torah, as possibly having elements of truth embedded within its text, but believe as a whole it is more of a myth or a legend created by early Hebrew scholars. But why would they possibly make this up? What circumstances would prompt a group of individuals to create a story and lead people to believe it was actually factual? It all starts with the circumstances surrounding the people of Israel at the time the early books of the Old Testament were written. Abraham (if he actually existed) was believed to have lived sometime between the 17th-19th centuries B.C.E., and Moses apparently fled Egypt approximately 500 years later. The Pentateuch is believed to have been written 1000 years later, but no earlier than the 8th century B.C.E. and much of it may have been penned during the *Hellenistic Period*,^{19*} Thus modern scholars credit much of the early Old Testament texts as having been developed to satisfy the need for historical significance of the people of Israel.²⁰ Archaeologists and sociologists today credit the beginning of the history of Judaism to the biblical story that began with Judges.²¹ It is here we begin to look at the history and meaning of the Israelites.

The first recorded text of the existence of the Israelites was discovered by Victorian archaeologists in the 19th Century AD on a stone victory monument for the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah dated to the late 13th Century B.C.E.²² The hieroglyphs on the monument indicated the Israelites were a collection of scattered peoples in the countryside as opposed to an organized civilization. According to Diarmaid MacCulloch in *Christianity, The First Three Thousand Years*, multiple accounts of Israelites, or “Hebrews” were found in early texts referring to them as *Habiru*, a social grouping living on the fringe of society. The *Habiru* would have been viewed as lower class farmers of little to no value in the eyes of the urban citizenry of larger kingdoms and empires. These farmers in the hills of Canaan were loosely organized in a scattered band of clans, much like what is found in the mountains of Afghanistan today. And, much like these modern Islamic clans that join forces to fight against “infidels,” the hill peoples of Canaan aligned themselves in unity against foreign invaders of the day such as the Ammonites or the Philistines. According to scripture, there were twelve main clans or tribes in Israeli antiquity that were descended from the sons of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. In the latter centuries of the 2nd Millennium B.C.E. the entire Near East experienced an ancient dark age with Egyptian and Hittite Kingdoms in decline and the Assyrian Empire experiencing a series of setbacks. At the same time Israelite tribal leaders, or “judges” as they were referred to in the *Tanakh*, took advantage of the regional power vacuum resulting in the larger kingdoms’ problems and the tribes built a stronger alliance. Ultimately, one judge/chieftain named Saul, became leader of a band of central hill clans and was pronounced the first “king” of Israel. According to Robert N. Bellah in *Religion in Human Evolution*, Saul was only modestly more powerful than the judges who preceded him and did not have an army or a system of taxation.²³ Saul’s reign was short-lived and he was subsequently overthrown by an upstart named David. David, known in infamy for slaying the Philistine giant named Goliath with a slingshot, went on to solidify complete control of Israel, organizing an army and capturing Jerusalem, making it the capital. He

¹⁹ Bellah, 284

²⁰ Smith, Houston. *The World’s Religions*, New York: Harper Collins, 1991. Print. Pg. 272

²¹ MacCulloch, 52

²² MacCulloch, 53

²³ Bellah, 293

* term coined by 19th century A.D. scholars for Greek influence, post-Alexander, to differentiate its period from the Classical Greek period.