

The Popularity of Religion;

On Why People Choose to Identify with a Religion.

An essay by

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The fact that religions have, so far, withstood the constant progress of human enlightenment suggests something about the nature of religion itself. The sort of progress that is the advent of scientific understanding, technological improvement and secular humanitarian ethics. Yet, the reason is not what religious people might hope. It's not that the assertions of religions are true, because mostly they are not. The survival of religions, almost amusingly, is because of the evolution of religion. Indeed, the history of the world's religions shows that over time they have changed, adapting to better fit with the current social environment. Of course, this is only on the whole, even if it's a sloppy-fit, and there are some religious sects that hold on to more archaic versions. Religion, as a phenomenon, is opportunistic and exploitative. Religion always seeks to corner the market, to be the only game in town. But, philosophy can compete and even surpass religion. With a philosophy one can find that religion becomes entirely vacuous. In deed, the fact that religion is human-made can be seen when one examines the reasons why people choose to be religious. It would not be possible for any religion to take root, let alone thrive, if their soil, the human mind, were not fertile enough for religiosity.

Interestingly, the reasons you might think a person would join a church or identify with a religion are probably wrong. Or at least, they may be only a few of the many reasons. It's likely that you would say the reasons a person belongs to a church, or religion, are the ones a person would say to explain for him or her self. That is, you might just accept whatever reason a religious person gives for being a member of a religious congregation. I don't deny that there are the common reasons people think of, but I think those commonly cited reasons are only scratching the surface of the issue. I also think that those other possible, lesser-contemplated, reasons are more powerful and yet under-appreciated.

I think, from a sociological & psychological perspective, people deeply desire certain things, which religions offer. Religions survive by ingratiating the given cult authority into the minds of the believers. In addition to a community, religions generally also offer the succor of an afterlife, a sense of significance or purpose, and strong order and rules. While the "eternal paradise" concept may be appealing, it is also not realistic, nor based on evidence. The sense of purpose, i.e.: "god's plan", is really merely appealing to individual insecurities. People want the stability which comes from having absolutes. But absolutist morality is so inflexible that reality itself becomes unacceptable. And that is the off-putting flavor that religion offers.

The power of nature is undeniable. Even in ourselves, we, who are but one of millions of species of life on this planet. Our species evolved as a social animal. We have in our very nature a dependency on each other. This drives each of us toward being a part of a group. Religions, being formed and maintained by people, get this fact. It's all about the sense of belonging, the community, the shared culture and mutual support. Ultimately it can be described as the attraction of the in-group. Religions appeal to this inclination very well. They offer the sense of community membership that everyone wants, and they do it skilfully. But there is more to the popularity of religion than community alone.

Religions offer a world view, a way to understand the universe. Religious worldviews are certainly grotesquely flawed, but the fact is they're generally comprehensive views, nonetheless. Of course, when one chooses to believe in myths and superstitions, the unnatural (supernatural) worldview seems to make sense to the believer. It has the added advantage that the worldview is usually already-constructed, making it much easier for people to adopt. They need not think for themselves, which religions discourage anyway. Religious worldviews tend to be not just easy to adopt and grasp, but also uniform. I mean uniform, not in the sense that all the members of the group believe exactly the same things, but rather that the framework is the same. The minor differences are not what the worldview is made of, despite wide variation and at times violent disagreement.

While it's worth noting all of what religions offer, there are only three items that seem to be legitimate issues to address. I believe there are secular alternatives that address those three legitimate issues, the feeling of belonging to a community, the moral compass and the philosophical worldview. I'll save those for discussion later though. But first, I believe that what religions offer, positive attributes, can be categorized into two main groups; one which is vain and useless, and that which is a legitimate topic of concern.

The first category, of what religions offer, is absurd or at least unfounded. People can do, and ought to do, without those pretenses. They are only appealing for those of weak will or ignorance. However good it may feel to believe such selfish nonsense, the fact is that most of it, if not all, can be abandoned altogether or substituted with more reality-based certitudes. In the second category there

are some offerings which really speak to human need and the human condition. Yet, the religious construct which is foundational to those offerings are harmful in the long-run, or at least misguided. These issues can't so easily be done without, even when the particular religious model is toxic. To this point, we are fortunate, however, in that there are secular alternative options.

I think that there is another thing which can explain why religions are still so popular. Even in this era of instant widespread information and immense knowledge -- factual & objective knowledge -- on such a never-before-seen scale. This is early indoctrination in one's life of the god meme. The religions have intentionally devised that from the moment of birth a person should be taught to be a part of the religion. In a sense it is the confession on the part of the religious that the ideology they hold, the faith, would not have much of a chance of surviving if it were only allowed to be introduced to adults. It is a calculated exploitation of the natural, evolutionary beneficial trait of youth, to believe easily what the parents or other trusted adults say is so. It's a credulity that can keep a child from a danger because she was told that a 'boogie-man' will get her. But then, with constant reinforcement the religion becomes sacred unquestionable, yet only supposed, "truth".

Atheism only offers us the rejection of supernatural nonsense, a rejection of unsupported claims by the way. We throw off the indoctrination and rightfully so. But, there is something that is missing for so many people once that liberation from superstitious dogma has been achieved. There is even for an atheist something impressive or appealing to that, which for so long has been attached to religion, but which can be usefully decoupled from it. Those advantages and pleasures can be offered us, minus the superstitions, the authoritarian dogma and the factually false premises. I propose that we seek the alternative secular worldviews, grounded in objective facts and logic, and to promote them whenever we can. With time and hard, but very worthwhile work, we may be able to replace in large portions, if not entirely, religions. We may develop a better way. We may provide the sense of community and traditions. We may provide the moral compass, one that is concerned with human suffering instead of pleasing an authoritarian dictator. We may offer a worldview that promotes critical thinking and logic over blind obedience and beliefs lacking in evidence.

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