

Chapter 18

The Origin of Religion, A Speculative Story

Any discussion of the origin of religion is a speculation, a piece of poetic fiction. My aim here is not to explore with scientific carefulness the probable historical facts, but to further explore the nature of religion through contemplative imagination.

In my speculation, the origin of religion precedes language and art. Indeed, it is the very first dawning of the consciousness of being consciousness. The origin of religion precedes the evolution of the human brain to its current size. The origin of religion took place on the same day as that great dawning that makes our species qualitatively different from other forms of mammalian life.

Here is my piece of fiction about that grand day. A small tribe of hominids perhaps 500,000 years ago were walking across the African Savannah, when a deeply valued member of their group suddenly died. Everything that gave enduring unity to their group seemed to unravel. They gathered around the dead body. One of the women began moving in a sort of rhythmic way, a sort of dance, a sort of (dare we say) ritual. One or two others copied her. This very simple ritual implanted itself in the memory of this group. It came to be repeated when others died. Doing this ritual called to consciousness the experience of loss of a valued member. What was new here was not death itself, but the ritualizing of the deep experience of death. The ritual was new. This ritual was the existence of a mental form that stood for something, that allowed a certain distance from that something and from the feelings that went with that something. It allowed a reflection upon that something. It was the dawn of a new form of mental entity – the symbol.

Before that dawning this species of animal life had gotten by, like all smart apes, dogs, cats, zebras, and elephants get by, with images, not symbols. Images are multi-sensory mental reruns of previous experiences. The image-mode of intelligence is very powerful, but it is not capable of reflection upon the experience of experience itself. Image-intelligence is intensely practical for survival, food, affection, sex, danger avoidance, and so on. But a ritual is something different than an imaginal rerun of multi-sensory experience. That first ritual had no practical use whatsoever. It allowed reflection upon experience. It allowed consciousness to be conscious of being conscious. It allowed or began to allow the awareness that each of us is going to die, that each of us has been born, that each of us was or could be conscious about birth and death. As this sort of reflection evolved, it enabled the raising of questions. Perhaps the word “why” was the first human word. Then again, perhaps “why?” is too sophisticated a word to be first. Perhaps that first word was just “WAAAEÉÉÉÉ” as a sort of curious pointer to the overwhelming MYSTERY OF IT ALL .

The initial rituals of this new awareness became more useful as these new mental forms (and their attending consciousness) expanded from simple rituals to art forms and then to language. With the dawn of art, the simple rituals could be elaborated with icons. With the dawn of language the simple rituals could be elaborated with stories or myths. I imagine this development took hundreds of generations. It survived because it came to be an advantage for survival, a tool useful for group bonding or for an aid to teamwork. It may also have survived because it made existing more fun, experiences more interesting, living more conscious. As pointed out in Part One, consciousness has an inward propensity to be more conscious. Also, it may have survived because such consciousness was a sexual draw or a help in child rearing.

This is my story about the origin of religion. Don't take it too literally. The meaning of my story is that the practice of religion is basic to human culture. Religion

is the foundation beneath language and art. Religion is the foundation of human culture as a whole. Culture is the foundation beneath politics and economics. Religion is thus the rock upon which the human form of society rests. A sick religion spawns a sick society. A healthy religion spawns a healthy society. This understanding is needed to counter the crass notion that economics is the prime driver of human affairs. Economics is a driver in the historical process of humanity, but it alone does not explain the origin, development, and historical transitions of our species. Economics does not explain the wild adventures taken by our species into the often costly deepening of our consciousness of consciousness.

Being religious and being human is one and the same adventure. Humans have intensely explored being human and being religious for at least a hundred thousand years. There have been many huge turning points in our religious and social history. We are currently engaged in another huge turning point in our awareness of consciousness and in the religious forms that nurture this expanded consciousness. We are beginning to see the elemental nature of religion and to build our new societies accordingly. We are beginning to know that an open, honest, affirming relation to the MYSTERY-OF-IT-ALL is the solid ground on which new cultures, polities, and economies can be built. We are beginning to know that our ever-busy languaging and art-form-producing minds can separate us from our true and glorious lives. To heal from our falling into horrific forms of depravity and despair and to maintain ourselves in our deepest actuality and glory, our cultures need solid roots in illuminating rituals, icons, and stories. When healthy, these humanly invented but deeply rooted symbolic forms can enable our consciousness to be conscious of our consciousness and thereby conscious of the GROUND of BEING that posits us as conscious beings.