

# THE CASE FOR RELIGION

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## PREFACE TO PAPERBACK EDITION

Since this book was published in hardback edition, a number of books have appeared claiming that religion is a virus, that it is based on a delusion, that it poisons everything it touches, or that it is both irrational and immoral. These books have achieved a certain popularity, but intellectually the consensus is that there is very little to be said for them.

The reason for this is, quite simply, that their authors have not done the necessary research into the vast amount of scholarly material concerned with religion that has been built up over the last hundred years or so in sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and the serious and difficult scholarly study of individual religions. Reading them is rather like reading books purporting to be about science, which have got all their information from casual conversations with people who failed A-level physics. It is as though scholarship in these disciplines is simply not worth considering. Instead, the authors just spin arbitrary definitions of religion out of their own heads, use extremely selective examples from the literature, and show no evidence of having done first-hand research themselves. So instead of careful, considered, nuanced treatments, we have prejudice, bile, hatred, scorn, parody, and drivel. Is this what we have a right to expect of university professors, who are

supposed to increase understanding and careful assessment of views other than their own?

There is enough prejudice, hatred, and stereotypical thought in our world without academics adding to it, and apparently taking pride in doing so. One obvious example of this is when Professor Richard Dawkins characterises religious belief as ‘believing without question whatever your grown-ups tell you’ (*The God Delusion*, p. 174). This might be a good idea if the person in question is a five-year-old, but it is a ludicrous suggestion to say that the immensely rational, sophisticated, original, and questioning theology of Thomas Aquinas was all a case of believing whatever his parents had told him. In any case, getting people to believe things without question is not an especially religious activity. It is an activity of anti-intellectual arch-conservatives, whatever they happen to believe. Dawkins lives and works with colleagues who are members of one of the largest theology faculties in Britain, who spend their lives raising questions about received beliefs. But, he says, ‘I have yet to see any good reason to suppose that theology is a subject at all’.

Theology, as any first-year student could have told him, if he had bothered to ask, is the critical and rational consideration of the beliefs of various religious groups, both Christian and non-Christian. What it does is what Dawkins does in his book *The God Delusion* – it considers the meaning and plausibility of various belief-claims made in religions. The only thing is that Dawkins does it so badly that he is guilty of committing one of the worst sins possible for a university professor, of failing seriously to try to understand the meaning of assertions in a way that those who make them could accept as a fair account of what they think. Yet that is a first principle of anthropology and of theology alike. Only zoologists, it seems, need not bother to try to understand what religious beliefs mean to their adherents.

Theology is an academic discipline that does, among other things, consider arguments for and against the existence of God. It is pretty obviously not a science, in the modern sense. But Professor Dawkins

pretends that ‘the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis’. I am sure he really knows that a scientific hypothesis should be a publicly testable theory that accounts for complex phenomena in terms of simpler initial physical states and mathematically describable general laws governing their behaviour. I suspect he really knows that no believer regards God as such a hypothesis. God is not publicly testable, is not a simple physical state or a physical state at all, and does not act in accordance with general experimentally testable impersonal laws that can be framed in terms of mathematical equations. Dawkins concludes that there is no God. The more rational conclusion is that God, like history and morality, falls outside the properly naturalistic methodology of the sciences.

When he considers arguments for God, he makes the odd assumption that we live in a world where God is unknown and has to be inferred from observations. Again, his extremely brief acquaintance with philosophical theology has misled him. The classical ‘arguments’ assume that there is knowledge of a supreme spiritual reality, and attempt to spell out its nature, with the aid of the best available philosophies of their time, as a self-existent and supremely valuable cause of everything.

The ‘hypothesis’ is an enquiry into the true nature of a mind-like reality of supreme value, believed by many to be disclosed in various forms of human experience. This is an intellectual enquiry, but it is not natural science. Perhaps Dawkins thinks there are no real intellectual pursuits outside science. So much for literature, history, law, ethics, philosophy, and theology. So much for Plato, Aristotle, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and most philosophers in the academic canon, who regarded the existence of one supreme Consciousness as the most reasonable of all metaphysical hypotheses.

It is Dawkins’ exclusion of any form of non-scientific intellectual enquiry from the Academy that I find really worrying. He does not distinguish between a scientific explanation of the physically complex in terms of the physically simple (not that the basic quantum laws of the early universe are physically simple!) from a general interpretation of the whole complex range of human experiences in terms of

some integrating concept of ultimate reality. The former is (one sort of) scientific explanation. The latter is classically thought of as metaphysical.

The irony is that Dawkins' own hyper-Darwinism is itself a metaphysical explanation, since it seeks to interpret all human experience (including, for example, art, music, and religion) in terms of the key mechanisms of mutation and natural selection. This is not a scientific explanation; it could not occur in any reputable journal of physics or biology, except as a *jeu d'esprit*.

Theism, the belief in one self-existent consciousness of supreme value that explains the universe by reference to its creation by such a reality, is a competing interpretation. Of course, if you try to make it a scientific explanation, it is bound to fail, since it precisely denies that natural science can provide an ultimate explanation. But many major philosophers throughout history have felt that it is a compelling interpretation of the complex reality we experience, which includes serious and considered claims to apprehend such a 'supernatural' reality.

Dawkins' allegedly knock-down argument that God is more improbable than the universe God is supposed to explain misses the point. For Dawkins assumes that the simple is more probable than the complex. Given the laws of this universe, that may be so, with reference to physical objects in this universe. But if one asks, in the absence of any laws or universes, whether it is more probable that a self-existent consciousness exists than that some set of laws of quantum physics exists, it is no longer intuitively obvious that the simpler is the more probable. There are, after all, infinitely more complex states than simple states in the logical space of all possible universes. But I think that probability is not the appropriate criterion to use here. One is looking more for something like 'interpretative adequacy'. The basic problem with Dawkins, for a philosopher, is that he just refuses to accept any such non-scientific form of enquiry, any interpretative metaphysical explanation. Yet Dawkins himself has one. He begins with naturalistic materialism, and that is where, unsurprisingly, he ends.

So sophisticated religious believers, while being duly appalled by the crudities of religion that Dawkins lambasts, will not feel that he has addressed the basic issues at all.

I conclude rather sadly that Dawkins' views about God are founded on lack of serious research, on hatred, bias, misrepresentation, and intolerance. It pains me to say this, since he is such a brilliant exponent of the scientific attitude in general. But not, I fear, with regard to religion.

To undertake any serious study of religion we need first to ask if it is possible to define what 'religion' is. If this proves difficult or even impossible, then it will be absurd to say that 'religion' is dangerous, or irrational, or anything at all, since we will not know what we are talking about. And that is the trouble. Dawkins and company simply define 'religion' as what they do not like, what causes all the trouble in the world, and what is responsible for the shameful depravity of human nature. This is an example of a well-known psychological mechanism called 'scape-goating'. Human life is brutish and violent. I cannot possibly be blamed for that, so it must be due to something else, something I do not associate myself with, a disease from which I am free. 'Religion' is that disease. Get rid of religion, and there will be no more hatred or greed, no more lust or desire to destroy your competitors, no more hypocrisy or depravity.

This is the old, repeated, vastly over-simplified formula we hear from Al-Qaeda, from Trotskyites, from utopian and fanatical political movements throughout the world. The formula does indeed lead to the black-and-white oppositional thinking that divides the world into good and bad, that sees the bad securely located in someone else, and that then seeks to eliminate that 'other', in order to live in a new and pure society – of people just like me.

It is slightly ironic that this dangerous view is promulgated precisely by atheists, who cannot recognise their own hatred and distortion of the facts because they have projected such things onto their chosen enemy – in this case, religion.

Any anthropological study of religion would expect religion, like politics, or morality, or science, to be the usual mixture of logical and



absurd, helpful and harmful, liberating and repressive, that characterises all human activities, from the local tennis club to the legislative committees of the great democracies. It would be hugely improbable to find a human activity that was all bad, all dangerous, and all irrational, in all its forms and everywhere.

So the first thing we might want to do is to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of what we might call ‘religions’, and acknowledge the difficulties of even getting an agreed definition of what is distinctive about a religious belief or activity. If anyone came up with a definition that all forms of religion are bound to be bad, we might well suspect that the definition has been chosen with a very specific agenda in mind, and that we are going to get a biased result.

Dawkins does not say that all religion is bad. But he does come up with the totally invalid argument that ‘the teachings of “moderate” religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism’ (306). The argument, put into logical form, might go like this: ‘Some religions are not extreme. But some religions are extreme. But they are all religions. Therefore non-extreme religions invite people to join extreme religions’.

If it does not go like that, how does it go? We are never told. But the absurdity of the argument can easily be seen by using a different example: ‘Some games are not physically dangerous. But some games are dangerous. But they are all games. Therefore non-dangerous games invite people to play dangerous games’. It is obvious, however, that people play safe games because they do not want to play dangerous games, have no intention of playing them, and think it would be totally unwise to play them. So much for the alleged argument that moderate religions invite people to join extreme religions, which in fact has not even enough logical form to be called an argument.

Dawkins seeks to strengthen his case by constantly repeating his claim that Christianity ‘teaches children that unquestioned faith is a virtue’. That, of course, would make Christianity already an extreme religion, since a moderate religion would precisely not teach children,

once they got to the age of reason, any such thing. Perhaps Dawkins thinks there is no such thing as moderate religion. Well, to find out we would have to undertake some sort of sociological investigation. That has been done, of course, but Dawkins fails to refer to it, because it does not in fact support his case.

Perhaps, then, he is saying that at least there is more harmful religion than helpful religion. This is indeed an interesting question to investigate. It would still not show that all religions tend to extremism, but it might show that religion was on the whole a bad thing. There is quite a lot of sociological material on this topic, but again it is not consulted. Why not? Because it happens to show that religious belief has many good consequences for health and for human well-being. Does Dawkins ever refer to this research, or attempt to obtain a balanced review of all available research literature? He does not. I suspect he thinks that the social sciences, like theology, do not really exist. It's a point of view, but there is not much to recommend it.

The main trouble with this spate of books by the 'New Atheists' is that they seem to be totally unconcerned with any application of scientific method to the topic of religion. Scientific method would require that all the facts are examined carefully, that attention is paid to peer-reviewed articles by reputable sociologists, and that issues are not prejudged by choosing loaded definitions or concealing evidence that counts against your own viewpoint. Judged by these criteria, these books simply fail. They are intellectually disreputable. Of course they are fun to read. We all secretly like reading rude mockery of others. But is that what the academic study of religion is all about?

The philosopher Daniel Dennett, in his book *Breaking the Spell*, asks that the academic study of religion should break 'the taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many' (17). He seems blissfully unaware that the American Academy of Religion has been doing precisely that for many years. But Dennett defines a scientific study as having the presumption – shared, as it happens, with many members of the American

Academy of Religion – that religion is an entirely natural phenomenon (26), while he defines religions as ‘social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought’ (9). It follows that his investigation will regard religious belief as delusory from the start. That is perhaps not quite the dispassionate and open-minded attitude one might hope for.

It is illuminating to see that religions evolved, and that they have important pre-rational features that evolutionary theory might help to explain. Dennett proceeds to give a Darwinian account of the origins of religion. He tries to use the ‘Darwinian algorithm’ as an explanation of many features of religion. The algorithm states that if there is replication, mutation and competition, some entities will ‘evolve’, or change to dominate their environment. Some religious acts or beliefs may therefore be explained as features which preferentially enhanced the replication and survival of human groups in the far past. For instance, if a ritual enhances feelings of group solidarity and loyalty, that group may be better at exterminating its rivals. This seems a reasonable, if incomplete, explanation. But again there is a major problem – we have virtually no reliable information about the origins of religion, so this inevitably looks more like a bit of speculative philosophy than hard science. Thus we are told that early humans took their religious beliefs literally, which there is no possible way of knowing. And we are told that the earliest form of religious belief was animism – the natural if child-like delusion that everything in the world has intentions and feelings. This developed into theism, basically because one all-powerful God can give a better pay-off than many conflicting spirits. Well, maybe so. But is this science? Can it ever be verified or falsified? It seems more like a story that might appeal to us, given certain general beliefs about the universe, a general philosophical outlook. In fact it sounds more like Dennett saying, ‘If I had been a cave-man thousands of years ago, I would have been pretty stupid and ignorant. I would probably have thought there were spirits in trees and gods making thunder and lightning. Therefore that is what actually happened, because they were just as ignorant as I would have been’. Interesting, but hardly science!

The real problem here is the blurring of the boundaries between testable science, speculative philosophy, and social psychology (which often looks for closely observed patterns of coherence rather than law-like predictions).

Dennett concludes by asking for properly-conducted scientific investigation of the efficacy of prayer, and of the relation between religious belief and moral conduct. And he concludes by saying that ‘my central policy recommendation is that we gently, firmly educate the people of the world’, and have more critical, open education about religion in schools. These do seem commendable goals.

But while it is entirely right to expose religion to informed critical enquiry, it is also important not to assume the falsity of religious beliefs, but to provide an empathetic account of the phenomena of religious belief. In my view, Dennett is right to call for fearless critical enquiry. But, though he tries, he is not so good at empathy with religion. And that is not surprising, since he believes there are no supernatural realities at all. When he insists that religions thrive because they ‘pay’, in some sense, he has to think of such payment in terms of worldly or even prudential advantage. It may be salutary to look at religions in this rather sceptical way. But it needs to be noted that the greatest religious teachers consistently ask believers to set aside all ‘worldly’ considerations, and to live for the sake of God alone. A fully critical investigation might take such admonitions seriously. Perhaps materialism is also a spell of which we, as critical investigators of religion, should beware.

This book presents the case for religion. It is not a totally neutral account. I agree with the New Atheists that it is hardly possible to present a neutral account of something as contested as religion. In particular, I look at some well-known arguments against religion, and argue that they are extremely weak. I try to present a more positive view of religion, and to explain how it is that there are so many different religions in the world, and why that might be so. And I make some recommendations about how some of the harmful aspects of religion can be ameliorated, and some of the positive aspects strengthened, so that religion can

change and adapt fully to established new knowledge in the sciences and to new moral insights that have emerged since the eighteenth century in Europe.

Part of the Atheists' argument is that religion should not or cannot change. If it was stupid and primitive when it started, then it must always remain stupid and primitive. Religious ideas developed considerably throughout the Bible and in later Judaism, but Dawkins treats the earliest or most naive statements as though they were on a par with the profound teachings of second Isaiah or of Maimonides, which he does not even mention. This is like talking of chemistry in terms of phlogiston and alchemical attempts to turn lead into gold, and mocking it for its crudity.

When Dawkins deals with the 'Old Testament God', it is worth noting that he never gets further in the Old Testament than the Book of Judges – and even then, he prefers to concentrate on the bloodier parts of these early Bronze Age documents. He says that 'the God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction' (31).

Is this the God who says, 'As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you' (Isaiah 66, 13)? Why does he never mention the major Prophets like Isaiah, or the Psalms? Why does he fail to consult any scholars of the Old Testament, who would have pointed out to him that there is actually a development in the idea of God from that of a savage tribal God to the just and merciful Creator of the whole earth? When he comes to the New Testament, he does seem to admit that at least Jesus had a better idea of God. But then he drifts into a tirade against one interpretation of the atonement that he dislikes quite a lot, without mentioning that many Christians dislike that interpretation too. 'Atonement' just means 'making one with God', and even if you think that is an odd idea, there is nothing immoral about it. There are many interpretations of the atonement in Christian history. If only Dawkins believed there was such a subject as theology, he might have discovered some of them.

Just as human moral ideas have changed considerably over time, so have human religious ideas. The history of any major religion is a history of such changes. Not all of them are for the better, and there can be

long periods of decline and decay. But there is also what we might call progress towards greater respect for human rights, and greater care for the poor and dispossessed.

I would not expect anyone to condemn morality because once upon a time it was thought right to flay people alive and gouge out their eyes. And I would not expect anyone to condemn religion because once upon a time it was thought right to exterminate your enemies and gloat over their dead bodies. Things change, and thank goodness. If we speak of morality, we speak of an advanced, compassionate morality, still in the process of change. The same is true of religion. It is in constant change, and the challenge is to identify what sort of changes will be better, and what worse.

It is an idle dream to think that religion will fade away, although Lenin and Bakunin in Soviet Russia inspired the murder of thousands of priests and monks because they saw religion as a reactionary social force – just as the New Atheists see it. We might think that Dawkins should use the argument that moderate atheists like him are actually dangerous because they openly invite immoderate atheists like Bakunin to exterminate religion by force. Or might he not find this quite so compelling?

So if religion looks as if it is going to be around for a long while, it may be a better policy not to abuse it, but to see if it can be improved. Improving it, like improving society in general, will probably be a hard and thankless task. It will be opposed by forces of reaction. But it might be supported from the most surprising quarters, and holding on to a hope that it might be better able to expand its real positive virtues is better than giving in to a despair that condemns good and bad together in one bout of vitriolic hatred. And such vitriolic hatred, anyway, does not augur well for a future of peace, harmony, and understanding. I fear that, as in the case of Leninism, the alleged cure – getting rid of religion – may prove much worse than the disease. So my book is meant to describe the more positive side of religions, and suggest how ancient religious traditions might best adapt to the modern scientific world. There is an

*The Case for Religion*

adaptation to be made, but to make that adaptation might reveal something like an inner core of religion that carries a vital and living hope for the future of humanity and the world. Maybe religion, though it has been so often misused, is after all not a virus, but an antidote for the hatred, greed, and ignorance that has characterised human history for so long.



# INTRODUCTION

## *A Preview of What is to Come*

Many writers and philosophers of the first rank, from David Hume to James Frazer, from Auguste Comte to Karl Marx, have argued that religion is obsolete, even if people in general do not seem to have realised the fact. It is, they say, a mass of superstitions and delusions, and it has been superseded by science. It is also intolerant and dangerous, and we are only too well aware that civilisation might yet be destroyed by religious hatred. Only when we get rid of religion, they say, will the world be safe to live in and free from delusion and superstition. As civilisations begin to be liberated from superstition, developing and becoming technologically advanced, they will inevitably leave religion behind. The chief hope for humanity, according to such thought, lies in the advance of education and the extinction of religion, which naturally go hand in hand.

Unfortunately for this theory, the most developed country in the world today, the United States of America, is a living refutation of its claims. There has not been a question about religion in the census for over fifty years. But independent surveys such as the American Religious Identity Survey of 2001, carried out by sociologists Barry



Kosmin and Seymour Lachman of the Graduate School at City University, New York, give the proportion of Christians in the population as 76%. There are not insignificant, though very much smaller, numbers of adherents of non-Christian religions, and only 13% of the population described themselves as secular or non-religious. The United States continues to be a standing refutation of the claim sometimes made by European sociologists that religious belief declines in proportion to technological and scientific development – unless, of course, only about 13% of Americans are scientifically developed, which seems unlikely.

Even if we turn to one of the most secular countries in the modern world, Britain, 72% of the population described themselves as ‘Christian’ in the 2001 census. This was very surprising to the clergy, who had never seen anything like that number of people in church. But it seemed to show that nearly three-quarters of the population identified themselves, however vaguely, with a religion. Again, there are many other religious groups in the United Kingdom, in significant numbers, though there are problems about getting reliable data on those numbers. Social surveys also carried out in the United Kingdom show that between one-third and one-half of all people questioned claim to have had a significant religious experience. So religion still seems to be alive and well, even in a very secular society.

So is religion a natural and important part of human life, which can provide meaning and value and psychological stability? Or is it an intellectual aberration, which gives only false hopes and idle wish-fulfilments, and is psychologically damaging?

We first have to try to find out just what religion is. We want to know how religions have developed, and whether they have any reasonable basis. We want to know what social or psychological functions religions have, or what reasons people might have for being religious. We want to know whether religion has a future, and whether we should oppose it, ignore it, or support it (maybe even participate in it).

In this book I have sought to answer these questions. I begin, in part I, by considering various definitions of religion that have been given, to

get a clear idea of just what we are dealing with. Although this is a highly controversial matter, I suggest a general definition of religion – as a set of practices for establishing relationship to a supernatural or transcendent reality, for the sake of obtaining human good or avoiding harm.

Then I go on to consider some of the best-known attempts to explain why people are religious, from David Hume and Sir James Frazer (classicists and early anthropologists) to Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx (sociologists) and to Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung and William James (psychologists). All except the last two regarded religion as an unfortunate delusion, so that the academic study of religion in the last hundred years has often been a diagnosis of the neurosis of religion and how to get rid of it. I try to show the inadequacy and incompleteness of these explanations, and suggest that it remains an open question whether there is a transcendent spiritual reality to which religions give some access.

Such a reality has been conceived in many different ways throughout history. Part II – chapters 5 through 7 – outlines the way in which religions developed from prehistoric origins to the great canonical traditions we call the ‘world religions’. I show how the great traditions developed four basic models of spiritual reality, the idealist (only the spiritual ultimately exists), the dualist (spirit and matter both exist in relative independence), the theistic (the spiritual and the material both exist, but the material exists in total dependence upon the spiritual), and the monist (spirit and matter are different aspects of the same unitary reality). These models are developed mainly in India, the Near East and East Asia respectively, though elements of them can all be found somewhere in the great traditions. So there are four great streams of religious thought in the world. I have called them ‘canonical’ because they all, in their traditional forms, accept some final and absolute revelation, embodied in one or more holy texts. In these traditions religion comes to consist, not just in relationship to supernatural forces, but in overcoming selfish desire and knowing or realising unity with one spiritual being or state of supreme value. But the canonical religions all seem to offer competing views of that being, and they have got closely involved with

different political and cultural systems, and so religions can look as though they are doomed to perpetual conflict.

However, a dramatic change in religious consciousness occurred in Europe in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, in a movement often called ‘the Enlightenment’. Part III – chapters 8 through 10 – outlines the impact of the Enlightenment on the old religious traditions, especially on Christianity and European Judaism, though the impact has been felt in every religious tradition. At this time traditional religion faced great challenges, and needed to be thoroughly rethought. The two greatest challenges were the principle of evidentialism – that all beliefs should be proportioned to publicly testable evidence – and the principle of autonomy – that beliefs, especially moral beliefs, should not be based on authority. If you accept these two principles religious belief, in its traditional form, cannot survive.

But there is a religious response to these challenges. Religious believers can argue that experience is much wider than publicly testable evidence, and includes experience of a transcendent reality. And they can argue that there is a proper place for authority, based on the teachings of people with special insight into the way of achieving true human fulfilment. The limitation of knowledge to sense-experience and the denial of any legitimate authority in matters of belief turn out to be highly questionable. But the Enlightenment did rightly establish that all religious beliefs are subject to criticism in the light of whatever evidence is available, so they need to be much more tentative about many matters than they have been. And religious beliefs must be assessed by moral criteria, so they have to be seen to be conducive to human well-being.

In the modern world, religions face another change. In part IV – the eleventh and twelfth chapters – I assess the present state of religions, and suggest that the future lies in the growth of a convergent spirituality. Each tradition can accept a distinctive place within a plurality of faiths, as a system of symbols and rituals that seeks with others a convergence on one supreme transcendent reality, in which true human fulfilment is to be found. In this way the modern age offers the possibility, real but

uncertain, of seeing religion as a process of spiritual exploration which will be both imaginatively enriching and morally illuminating. Religion, so conceived, will have the function of giving human life an ultimate meaning, as people find ways of living in conscious relation to a supreme spiritual value, which they are to realise in themselves and in the world. They will be able to accept many other spiritual paths as different ways of seeking such realisation, not just as rivals, but as valuable and complementary forms of life.

So, in presenting the case for religion, this book does four key things:

1. It demolishes some influential arguments against religion which are supposed to be based on science, sociology and psychology.
2. It shows just why and how religions differ – they are not in chaotic conflict, but they explore the logically possible set of answers to basic human questions of spiritual meaning.
3. It provides a rational justification of religious belief – showing how religious faith can dramatically change worldviews, attitudes and behaviour. It shows how faith gives experience of a supreme spiritual reality, overcomes egoism and gives a sense of significance and purpose, inner calm, psychological integration, moral motivation and a transformation of awareness.
4. It shows how the established religions must change in the modern world if they are to be forces for good. They must be more provisional and exploratory than dogmatic and absolute, they must have as their central driving force the eliciting of positive experiences of transcendence, they must be conducive to human flourishing, and they must safeguard freedom of belief.

Religions are now faced with a choice between retreating into introverted and competing ideologies which can only increase misunderstanding and mutual antagonism in the world, and moving on to greater humility, tolerance and understanding through acceptance of a global religious outlook. On that choice the future of religion, and perhaps the future of the world itself, depends.

## 2

### SICK MEN'S DREAMS?

*Explanations of Religion as a Survival  
of the Savage Mind*

When scholars began to study ancient religions, in eighteenth-century Europe and onwards, many of them viewed early human religions as superstitious, barbaric and absurd. It is probably true that they viewed the religion of their own culture (usually a form of Christianity) as irrational, and they wanted to explain it as a remnant of outmoded and irrational beliefs from earlier times and earlier religions. Needless to say, they had little contact with any such religions, and such contact as they had heard of lacked any attempt at sympathetic understanding. David Hume, in 1757, published *The Natural History of Religion*, in which he pretended to investigate the principles that originally gave rise to religious belief. It goes without saying that he had no way of knowing anything about such origins, though he had a good knowledge of ancient Roman writings, often of a sceptical nature, about their own forms of religion. Armed with these classical sources, his *Natural History* is actually a thinly disguised exposure of the lamentable superstitions of eighteenth-century Scotland (by which he meant the Church of Scotland).

Hume was an urbane and civilised man, and something of a saint, if

there can be atheist saints. There is a story that when Dr Johnson visited him on his deathbed, to watch him repenting of his atheism, Hume annoyed him considerably by dying peacefully, if not exactly happily. Nevertheless, one of the strongest impressions that his account of religion gives is of his contempt for the common man. 'The ignorant multitude', he says, 'must first entertain some grovelling and familiar notion of superior powers.'<sup>13</sup> Intellectual theism does not come naturally to human beings. It is 'the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind'<sup>14</sup> that arouse a grovelling belief in the existence of some unknown causes of human happiness and misery, which causes might be personified as beings that might somehow be flattered or cajoled into helping us. 'The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events.'<sup>15</sup> Its primary mood is fear and anxiety, and its cause is ignorance of the future and of the ultimate causes of things. The tendency to believe in invisible, intelligent powers is 'at least a general attendant of human nature',<sup>16</sup> but that, while it explains, in no sense justifies its existence.

These imagined powers, the gods of polytheism, are, Hume says, 'no better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors'.<sup>17</sup> They are fantasies of ignorance, stupidity, weakness and timidity. When theism arises out of primitive polytheism, it does so simply as the extravagant flattery of one god, in preference to the others. But while theism is rationally preferable to polytheism, it seems indivisible from intolerance and from a tendency to 'sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement',<sup>18</sup> which gives rise to all the contemptible 'monkish virtues' which are so unbecoming to human beings. One might think that, if humans are indeed as stupid as Hume thinks, it is quite fitting for them to feel humble, penitent and abased before an all-wise and morally demanding God. Luckily, however, there are a few, like Hume, who have transcended such stupidity, and can bathe contentedly in the knowledge that they are the rational elect, liberated from superstition and the need for humility and grovelling.

Hume considered that almost everyone else was intellectually irredeemable. 'The vulgar, that is, indeed, all mankind, a few excepted,

being ignorant and uninstructed',<sup>19</sup> it is hardly surprising that the religious principles which prevail in the world cannot be said to be 'anything but sick men's dreams'.<sup>20</sup>

Strange as it may seem, a person of devout faith might agree with much of Hume's account, while not being quite so sure that he or she was one of the few exceptions to Hume's general strictures on the human race as ignorant, stupid and vulgar. Polytheism probably does precede theism, at least in the sense that many gods and spirits are worshipped in indigenous religions more frequently or intensely than the one High God who is often considered as a rather remote being. It probably is a concern for human happiness and misery that motivates much religious practice. A concern for physical and mental health and integration is central to religious practice, both simple and sophisticated. The gods probably are personifications, founded on a natural analogy from human awareness and will, of the ultimate powers which control nature, and the ultimate values which govern, or ought to govern, personal and social life. Whether such personification is more or less adequate than the mechanisation of nature, which was what Hume took from Isaac Newton, is not perhaps as clear as Hume thought it was. Moreover, humans are ignorant and egoistical; so much of their religion will be marked by ignorance and an egoistic concern for personal happiness at the expense of others. But again, whether these worst cases should be made the standard cases of religious faith is highly dubious.

Why should the primal religious attitude to these posited spiritual powers be one of grovelling fear? And why should the attitudes that belief in God evokes be those of mortification, penance, humility and passive suffering? True, some people fear the anger of the gods, and practise self-mortification. But others love the gods and rejoice in their companionship, and their ritual sacrifices are occasions of joyful feasting and communal celebration. Hume offers no evidence that fear is the origin of religion, or that 'monkish virtues' are the fruit of monotheism – a view which both Jews and Muslims (who have no monks, but are certainly monotheists) would be surprised to hear.

In brief, Hume's *Natural History* is no history at all, but a compendium of the views of some sceptical writers on religion from classical Greece onwards, added to Hume's own dismissal of the views of 'all mankind, a few excepted' as ignorant and vulgar. On his own common-sense principles, we might think that if the religious tendency is a general feature of common human nature, as he says it is, then we might expect to find it about as well established as belief in physical objects, causality or other minds – for which he could find no rational justification either.

Hume was the philosopher who held that there is no rational justification for thinking that the future will be like the past. All we know is that the past was like the past, but that is no reason for thinking that the future will be like the past. After all, the future hasn't happened yet, so how do we know? As Phil Connors, the hero of the film *Groundhog Day*, says, 'There may be no tomorrow. After all, there wasn't one today.' Generations of philosophy students have stayed in bed all day, because they have had no justification for getting up. How do they know that the world outside their bedroom still exists? Since their beliefs have to be strictly proportioned to the available evidence, they cannot get out of bed until they have more evidence. So they are forced to stay where they are. That's their story, anyway.

To all of which Hume replies that we must just let common sense take over and assume without evidence that the world still exists. If we can do that, why can't we assume without evidence that God exists too? Belief in God is widespread and natural. Millions of people think they apprehend God. Admittedly not everyone does. But a great many people do, some of them in apparently intense and overwhelming ways. The fact that other people do not apprehend God does not show that God does not exist. So on Hume's own principles we would expect him to think that belief in God is a pretty commonsense, if not absolutely universal, belief. As such, it ought to be perfectly acceptable. But on the topic of religion the greatest Scottish philosopher of common sense refuses to accept common sense, and prefers the opinions of the very rationalists whom he otherwise loves to refute.



Perhaps all the dispassionate observer can say is that there does exist a common, if not universal, human tendency to personify the powers of nature – i.e. to react to the world as though it expressed quasi-personal or spiritual powers. In early human religions, such personification often takes the form of belief in many gods or spirits, or perhaps in the continuing mediating power of the ancestors. But it also leads to belief in one personal God and to extremely sophisticated spiritual philosophies. What the emotional causes or consequences of such beliefs are probably varies in different places, and with different people. There is little real evidence, however, to show that such a tendency is rooted in fear rather than in reverent admiration and moral concern, or that it conduces to grovelling obedience rather than a sense of courageous adventure. Even a devoted admirer of David Hume must admit that Hume's own principle of having to find good evidence for all one's opinions was cast aside when it came to religion.

All in all, what his *Natural History* shows chiefly is how very difficult it is to give a detailed, informed, discriminating and unbiased account of religious belief. Perhaps, after all, Hume was not quite the purely rational being he, at his least rational, thought he was. He was passionately anti-religious, and the roots of that passion are not in reason, but in his aversion to certain sorts of 'undignified' moral outlook, and in his basic belief in the superiority of the cultivated life of the eighteenth-century European aristocracy to anything else on earth. We might say that he suffered, not from sick men's dreams, but from well-fed men's fantasies about their own freedom from the common human condition of sordid vulgarity and ignorance.

Of course, Hume's strictures do apply to some forms of religion. If religion expresses the deepest hopes and fears of humanity, it will be a blend of light and darkness, of optimism and pessimism, of universal aspiration and particular hatreds. The human concern with spiritual reality will be to use it to obtain human good or to avoid human harm. But what is seen as good and harm may differ widely. To sacrifice a child to obtain fertility harms the child, though it is meant to be for the sake of a greater good. To

sacrifice a cock to appease a demon of disease is based on a false view of the causality of disease, but it is meant to orient human lives appropriately to the hidden spiritual powers that underlie all things. It is hardly surprising that beliefs about the supernatural are imbued with the moral and intellectual limitations of specific human cultures. There seems to be no 'pure', culture-free primal revelation of the nature of Spirit. Yet belief in a supernatural reality of some sort seems to be virtually universal in early human societies.

Thus there are shrines to what seem to be goddesses and ancestors in many ancient sites, as well as elaborate burial places, and it is generally thought that ritual played an important part in these human lives. There is unmistakable evidence that by the third millennium BCE the gods were important in human consciousness. The great stone circle of Stonehenge in England, the pyramids of Egypt, the dominating temples of Mesopotamia and South America all testify to belief in spirit protectors, the spiritual significance of the seasons and cycles of nature, and some sort of existence beyond death, whether among the stars or under the earth.

It seems virtually certain that we must regard the origins of religion as rooted in a millennial development of the human mind from pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual forms to the brutal and grandiose structures of the first settled imperial cities. The sense of religion does not seem to have been a sort of clear primordial knowledge. Like all other human knowledge, it grew slowly from a hazy mingling of fact and fantasy, of awe and playfulness, with many false paths and dead ends, but also with unexpected insights and rich imaginative creativity.

Within the general species *homo*, modern man, *Homo sapiens*, probably originated in Africa about one hundred thousand years ago. Whereas the other main branch of hominids, the Neanderthals, did not adapt to the changing environment and became extinct by 35,000 BCE, *Homo sapiens* survived the third Ice Age and went on to dominate the planet. It was this species that developed morality, art, science and religion, and eventually – only in the last fifty years, out of all those hundreds of thousands of years – came to understand the very basis of life itself.

This account of human origins leads us to see modern humans as the descendants of primates, having evolved to a degree greater than any other species a specialised brain capable of abstract thought and decision making. Human religious beliefs and practices have therefore developed gradually over an immense period of time, from ages in which rational thought had not yet developed up to the information explosion of the present.

It is unlikely that our mere five thousand years of moderately civilised life can fundamentally change the deep patterns of thought and response that were laid down in the brains of our ancestors over the long unmeasured aeons of pre-history. We would therefore expect that many basic human beliefs would be pre-rational and pre-reflective, rooted in natural reactions to a largely mysterious environment, and only slowly developing more reflective, systematised forms. Yet there have been moments of sudden breakthrough to a different level of knowledge and understanding. There have been decisive changes in human thought patterns, accelerating over the last five thousand years. So we are looking at traces of a very long pre-rational past, overlaid by a few relatively recent decisive transformations of outlook, which have reconfigured human understanding of the world.

On this evolutionary view, which is founded on the evidence of fossil remains, early burial-sites and caves, geological dating of sedimentary rocks, and now on methods of genetic identification, religious beliefs, like other beliefs, will take shape, not in some supposed original knowledge of hidden truths, but in the imaginative stories told in firelit caves after the hunt, or in ceremonies for helping the first dimly thinking animals to find power for living in a beautiful but dangerous world. It is difficult, if not impossible, to get back to the state of mind of humans one hundred thousand years ago. But it seems certain, if the evidence of the sciences is to be trusted, that religion has a vastly longer pre-rational history than a rational one, and that it has only slowly developed more reflective and sophisticated forms over many thousands of years, though there have been crucial saltations (sudden jumps), especially in recent times. In a word, religion, like life itself, has evolved. Perhaps it is evolving still.

The earliest paintings found on cave walls, mostly later than about 25,000 BCE, represent animals, symbols of the life that must be given, the blood that must be shed, to enable humans to survive. Female statuettes from around the same time seem to be symbols of fertility, of the life-giving power of motherhood. Reverence for the dead, acceptance of the necessity of sacrifice and awe before the powers of fertility and new life are the only traces of their thoughts that our earliest human ancestors have left for us to discover. From all those many tens of thousands of years of human life there is little else that remains to speak to us. From the silence of our prehistory, these symbols of the mysterious powers of death, sacrifice and birth still hold their potency to remind us of the ultimate limiting factors that set bounds to human existence, and unite us in our most basic consciousness with the hunter-gatherers of the third glacial age.

There is little reason to think that prehistoric religion was founded solely in fear and ignorance, which have been overcome by modern civilisation. Why should it not have been founded on a primal intuition that the cosmos expresses, in its forms and rhythms, an underlying spiritual power, or complex of powers, in which human beings can share? As well as fear and ignorance, there was love and understanding, partial and limited but capable of growth. Such a complex affective encounter with the being of the cosmos may embody forms of knowledge and relationship that the impersonal and mechanistic approach of scientific rationalism cannot embrace. In that case, religion may not belong solely to a dead age of superstitious vulgarity. It may retain power to unlock a perception of meaning and value in the cosmos, which is necessary for the realisation of full human cognitive potential. That, at any rate, is a viewpoint that is worth exploring.

## THE GOLDEN BOUGH

It is not a viewpoint, however, which is found in one of the best-known accounts of early religion, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. To

enter into the world of *The Golden Bough* is to enter into a magical world in which an attempt to explain the rule for the succession to the priesthood of Diana at Aricia, an attempt which it might be thought should surely be completed in little more than a short article, grows into twelve volumes of fascinating narrative of ancient customs, bold conjectures as to the origin of human religious beliefs, elegant apostrophisations of the beauties of the natural world and encyclopaedic compendia of comparative anthropology and mythology.

In these magisterial twelve volumes, fortunately for most readers condensed in 1922 into one abridged edition, almost all classical myths and recorded practices of tribal cultures, as well as the superstitions that linger still in the most civilised nations, are to be found. But they are not simply set alongside one another as if in some dusty museum catalogue. They arise and take their place in the narrative, one by one, as successive analyses and ever-expanding explanations of the simple but obscure account of how the priests of Diana met their deaths in the sacred grove of the goddess, and were succeeded by one who had plucked the golden bough of mistletoe from the sacred oak at Nemi.

Enter into this labyrinthine work, and you are in danger of being lost for ever in the rich imaginative thought-world which James Frazer spun out of his training in classics, his skill in romantic descriptions of the natural world, his evident calling to be an anthropological detective, and his monumental assemblage of the best anthropological data then available to him. After reading *The Golden Bough*, you will most likely see dying and rising corn-spirits and tree-gods everywhere. Every sunset and sunrise, every autumn and spring, every cycle of the phases of the moon will display a dying and rising god, calling for propitiation and sacrifice, and reminding you of the primitive though utterly mistaken beliefs which all 'civilised men' carry around beneath the thin veneer of such scientific knowledge as they have.

It is a magnificent work, one that anyone interested in religious beliefs and their origin simply has to read sooner or later. But is it magnificently wrong? Frazer does not present his mass of data in a purely descriptive,

neutral way. Far from it. He has an overtly stated theory, by means of which he hopes to explain the origin of religious beliefs, whether these beliefs are about the bad luck caused by walking under ladders or about the creation of the universe by a Supreme God.

His basic theory is simple. It is that humanity has passed through three main stages of thought, each one higher than and superseding its predecessor. First there is the age of magic, then that of religion, and finally that of science. 'The movement of the higher thought, so far as we can trace it, has on the whole been from magic through religion to science'.<sup>21</sup> In magic humans believe that there is an established order in nature which can be manipulated by following certain simple causal principles. These are the principles of homeopathic and contagious magic. By a natural, though mistaken, application of the association of ideas, 'primitive man' comes to think that like causes like, and that two things that are once contiguous continue to influence each other thereafter. 'Magic is a spurious system of natural law',<sup>22</sup> based on the correct recognition of order in nature, and the incorrect hypothesis that this order can be manipulated by using similarity and contiguity as causal mechanisms.

A simple example of homeopathic magic is the scattering of water to make it rain. Another would be the performance of an act of sexual congress on a cornfield to make the corn fertile. An example of contagious magic would be sticking pins into a doll dressed in cuttings from a person's clothes, in order to cause that person pain or even death. In general, the idea is that certain human acts can cause changes in nature, because of their similarity to, or close connection with, the desired occurrences. Primitive man believes in the omnipotence of the human will, and thinks he can control nature, or even that he is responsible for making the sun rise or the corn grow.

This, Frazer thinks, is the original, most primitive stage of human thought. But sooner or later humans discover that it is all a mistake – the sun rises whether or not you sacrifice a young maiden each day, and the spring comes whether or not you perform sexual orgies in winter. Nature goes on

its way regardless of human actions. Then, says Frazer, 'in the acuter minds magic is gradually superseded by religion',<sup>23</sup> wherein nature is thought to be governed by 'certain great invisible beings' who need to be propitiated if humans are to get what they desire from nature.

Magic, then, is 'nothing but a mistaken application of the very simplest and most elementary processes of the mind, namely the association of ideas';<sup>24</sup> it is 'the bastard sister of science'.<sup>25</sup> Religion is in one sense higher, because it recognises that magic does not work. But in another sense religion is morally inferior, as well as being just as mistaken. For it supposes, wrongly, that events happen because of the whims of supernatural gods, to whom we must bow in submission and craven fear.

'By religion', says Frazer, 'I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life'.<sup>26</sup> The words that Frazer chooses are worth noting carefully. 'Propitiation' is an action by means of which one hopes to appease or placate an offended or threatening enemy. 'Conciliation' is, similarly, something meant to overcome distrust or hostility, to turn aside some dangerous action. In using these words, religion is at once characterised as something concerned with fear and self-abasement, and its object, God or the gods, is seen as an enemy, a dangerous and powerful agent who is yet vain and stupid enough to be placated by various rituals and incantations.

Now it is indeed Frazer's belief that primitive humans were largely lost in 'the jungle of crass ignorance and blind fear',<sup>27</sup> so that the older a belief is the more ignorant and obtuse it is likely to be. Primitive religion, then, will obviously be a mass of ignorance and fear, and the more primitive (the earlier) it is the more benighted it will be – but it is Frazer himself who has decreed that it must be so, by his assumption that 'primitive men' were superstitious and mentally undeveloped.

We might pause, then, to ask whether it is really quite so obvious that our hunter-gathering ancestors were much more mentally undeveloped than Cambridge classicists, and whether we can be quite so sure that the 'primitively scientific' approach of magic preceded the first

contemptible and ridiculous efforts to placate the hidden and arbitrary gods which saw the birth of religion.

A fairly typical passage from Frazer reads as follows:

If in the most backward state of human society now known to us we find magic thus conspicuously present and religion conspicuously absent, may we not reasonably conjecture that the civilised races of the world have also at some period of their history passed through a similar intellectual phase, that they attempted to force the great powers of nature to do their pleasure before they thought of courting their favour by offerings and prayer?<sup>28</sup>

It is the unfortunate Aborigines of Australia who were usually selected as the most backward humans available, and whose practices were then projected back to the universal childhood of humanity. In assessing such comments and comparisons, it must first be granted that an evolutionary account of human origins is almost universally accepted by natural scientists. So presumably for hundreds of thousands of years there existed humanoid beings with mental abilities somewhere between those of modern *Homo sapiens* and chimpanzees. In other words, the human race, or its immediate evolutionary predecessor, has passed through stages of mental development, and any beliefs and practices such beings had would be much less abstract and certainly much less informed than those of typical modern Cambridge classicists. If we could discover the practices of early humanoids, they would be much simpler and less sophisticated than those of the best-educated members of the species as it now exists.

Sir James never met any of these savages – when he looked for their nearest counterparts, he looked among the superstitious peasantry of Europe, or the more backward parts of the Scottish Highlands. He did not actually ask them for some account of their beliefs and practices, but relied on the vast store of information, which he gathered from classical texts, the reports of missionaries and businessmen, and folk-tales of the world. And his principle, put rather crudely, seems to have been



this: what is superstitious and absurd among civilised nations now is what is completely normal among the primitive races and was universal in the early history of humanity. It is by looking at folk-tales and rustic rituals that we can discover, admittedly by a great deal of reconstruction and detective work, the origins of religion in the earliest history of the human race.

It is indisputable that there is a great deal of deceit, superstition, manipulation, and credulity in matters of religion, as there is in matters of politics, art, morality, and anything touched by human thought. Today's astrology columns testify to the persistence among large numbers of people of a scientifically unfounded belief in some sort of ability to predict the future from the position of the stars at the time of a person's birth. Perhaps some far future historian, from a study of some newspapers that somehow survived the great disaster that destroyed our civilisation, would surmise that the foundation of our religious beliefs was a false scientific theory of how the stars cause things to happen by magical influence.

So in religion there are many well-attested accounts of human and animal sacrifice, of the burning of witches, and of gruesome rites of self-torture and flagellation. These occur not only among 'primitive tribes' – the Aborigines know few things of that sort, in fact – but among the so-called 'higher' religions, where they tend to recur from time to time. It would be agreed by all that such practices go against the spirit of the great religions, and far from being their foundation are aberrations of a wholly reprehensible sort. Their occurrence may be adduced by the mythological detective as evidence for the survival of earlier, more primitive strands of religion, through a later, more ethically developed, faith. But why should they be the more primitive and original, rather than what they might more naturally seem to be, degradations from a quasi-personal relationship of reverence and awe before the great spirit or spirits who is known in and through the immediate apprehension of the human environment?

The evolutionary anthropologists E.B. Tylor and James Frazer both opposed the 'degradation' theory as an unsubstantiated theological

dogma, which depended on there being some supernatural and original revelation, from which humans had subsequently declined. Against it they set the evolutionary view that human thought had developed greater sophistication and ethical insight as time went on. On the other hand, they did admit that humans had not in fact progressed morally to a great extent, as the devastating wars of the twentieth century were to prove.

On evolutionary principles, at least as understood in a roughly Darwinian sense, there is no reason why things should progress in any uniform direction. We are familiar with the fact that great civilisations, such as those of Egypt, Greece and Rome, can fade away and be succeeded by ages of barbarism. So, in the long history of human development, is it not possible that some abilities and sensibilities may degrade, or remain unused, and by their lack of use atrophy?

Shifting attention from the Aborigines, consider a safely extinct religion, that of the Aztecs, which most people would consider truly horrible in its extravagant reliance on human sacrifice. No doubt this is based on a belief that the sun god requires human blood to give warmth and heat. But what evidence is there that such a belief is a truly ancient one, which the Aztecs have preserved intact, while other cultures have given it up long ago? I think the plain answer is that it is simply so repugnant that it seems to call for a less cultivated, and therefore less evolved, moral sensibility than that of Cambridge professors.

Frazer himself thinks this to be a degraded belief, in the sense that it is 'religious' propitiation of the sun god, which has morally degraded from a simple magical mechanism for keeping the sun going, though it has intellectually upgraded in seeing that the magic does not work automatically. But might it not be degraded from a prior properly religious belief that the sun god was not to be placated by human blood, but adored by reverence, love of nature, and hard work? Why, in other words, should the bloody, repugnant and immoral be the original?

Few would today maintain that God really walked in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, and that the original revelation, from which

all else has degraded, is to be found there. But might it not be true that the requirements of bloody sacrifices and sexual orgies, which characterise some ancient cultures, represent the triumph of the will to aggression and lust over an earlier, or at least over an equally ancient, set of rituals which were much gentler, and concerned with establishing harmony with the natural world and good relations among humans and animals?

Perhaps at a very early stage there existed a matriarchal society, which was later overturned by male militarism and the corruption of religious ritual by imperial ambitions. I would not insist upon this, though some feminist anthropologists and archaeologists have adduced some evidence for it. What I would suggest is that we simply do not know enough about the pre-literate origins of religion to be sure. And if you were inclined to think there actually is a creator God, it might seem reasonable to suppose that the earliest humanoids were able to relate to that God – probably not explicitly known as one creator – as a beneficent power. Since most theists would also say that at an early stage in history humans followed a path of egoism and the will to power, when they need not have done so, it would then follow that human religions, too, would reflect the egoism and lust to power of their adherents. It is not at all absurd to think of many degradations in religion, and to think that the earliest ritual practices might have been as much concerned with ideas of harmony and balance in nature as with gratifying selfish human desires by appeasing wrathful gods.

What I chiefly want to point out, though, is that Frazer does appear to assume that the earlier a practice is, the bloodier, more repugnant, absurd and immoral it must be. That sort of evolutionism does not seem to be well evidenced, and it evinces a view of human nature that might be counteracted by the reflection that the early stages of human evolution may well have shown traits both innocent and benign, as well as the cruder dispositions that came to dominate human history.

Frazer also assumes that the study of primitive religious practices will reveal the essential nature of religion most clearly. As Durkheim, who disagreed that primitive religion was based on fear and propitiation, put

it, in primitive religion 'all is reduced to that which is indispensable'.<sup>29</sup> 'In the primitive religions, the religious fact still visibly carries the mark of its origins.'<sup>30</sup> So the earlier you get, the nearer you come to the essential core of religion. That was an agreed position among the early investigators of religion.

It is, however, a very odd position to take. Suppose someone said, 'In primitive chemistry, you discover what is really essential to chemistry. In fact, alchemy is the essential core of chemistry. That is what chemistry really is.' Or you might say, 'Astronomy began in Babylon with astrology. Therefore astrology is the core of astronomy.' These statements are clearly absurd. The earliest beginnings of any human activity are likely to be the least adequate or satisfactory, and to pre-date all the advances which define that activity at a later, more mature stage. So you might think that religion, too, begins with speculations and practices that were to be modified enormously in the course of history, and which are a very misleading guide to what religion essentially is – if, indeed, it is essentially anything. It is of interest to know that the earliest humans of whom we know had beliefs and practices which seem quite close to what we call religious beliefs and practices, and also that present-day undeveloped tribal societies have recognisably religious practices. This suggests a certain common human inclination to form religious beliefs, to have a religious orientation. What is odd is to think that the study of such beliefs will reveal what is central or most important to the present religions of developed technological societies. The very opposite is more likely to be true.

## AN EXCURSUS ON THE HEBREW BIBLE

It is indeed hard to deny that there has been a certain sort of moral and spiritual development in the recorded history of humanity. The Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) is one of the earliest and most complete records of the religious history of a human culture, and it shows clear signs of developing insights over many years.

In the written Torah, which is everything from Genesis to Deuteronomy, including, by tradition, 613 commands of God given through Moses, one command is the extermination of those citizens of Canaan who refuse to accept Israelite domination. Men, women, children and even cattle are to be wholly exterminated, 'devoted to God', and nothing is to be taken as booty.<sup>31</sup> Such a command, given today, would be regarded with horror, and no modern Jew would believe that God would issue it now.

Moral advances have been made from time to time in human history. Within the Bible itself, there has developed a greater sense of individual responsibility, of humane punishment and of protection of the innocent. These are advances, and they have sometimes been made in the face of opposition and with difficulty. But that is not to say that religion began in fear and cruelty, which were overcome only as the sense of religion weakened.

There was fear and cruelty, but there was also kindness and compassion, expressed in the Old Testament laws enjoining compassion and mercy, and setting out times of celebration of the joy of life and of liberation. It was the great prophets who deepened appreciation of what justice and mercy requires, and insisted that ancient tribal taboos be interpreted in ways that made for human flourishing.

Such progress as there was did not move from religious fear to secular responsibility. It was a development within the religious tradition, highlighting the elements of reverence and love of neighbour that had always been there, and discarding old interpretations which were more clearly seen to be in conflict with the basic religious principles of *chesed*, loving-kindness, and *chokmah*, wisdom.

Thus the prophet Ezekiel uttered a new injunction, in about the eighth century BCE, that only the guilty are to be punished for their own crimes.<sup>32</sup> This is a definite advance on the earlier view that whole families could be punished for the crimes of one of their members.

There are also many rules in Torah which are concerned with ritual uncleanness caused by such things as menstruation, and again this

provides evidence of a time when issues of blood were regarded as dangerous manifestations of holy power, against which people needed to be protected by taboos.

Many of the rules of Torah seem totally obscure to contemporary believers, whether they are Orthodox or not – they are often called ‘inexplicable ordinances’. It is one of the major insights of early modern anthropology to find parallels to such rules in the practices of undeveloped and pre-literary tribal cultures in the modern world, and so explain their origin in earlier stages of Hebrew culture. Whereas few, if any, members of European societies would seriously think that eating pigs was actually dangerous, one can find tribal cultures in which the ordinary eating of pigs, or other animals, is prohibited, precisely because they are regarded as receptacles of holy power, which may break out and harm the populace. A study of primal cultures can show the widespread incidence of rules of ‘holiness’ or ‘sacred power’, which set apart animals or things as powerful and dangerous vehicles of spirit force, to be surrounded with prohibitions and rituals of various kinds. This illuminates many of the rules of Torah, and gives a high probability to the view that they are survivals of earlier beliefs that have been superseded.

The Bible also shows beliefs being superseded within its own pages. Whereas Yahweh was regarded as one among many gods, the god of Abraham and his descendants, it was the great prophets of Israel who firmly established Yahweh as the one and only creator of all things, the only god, before whom all other gods were unreal. In the history of Israel, we can trace a development from polygamy to monogamy, from punitive punishments of whole groups to the idea of proportional retributive punishment, from a world of many national gods to the idea of one creator, and from rules for ritual purity and elaborate animal sacrifice to the idea that the true worship of God is found in the pursuit of justice and mercy.

So in the Hebrew Bible we can see a development of beliefs about moral conduct and about the character of God, which is associated very largely with a series of critical reforms in the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE,

and the rise of the major prophets – Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The Bible itself, which was once thought to speak of a primal perfect knowledge of God in Eden, followed by a degradation of beliefs through sin, actually illustrates very well that moral and religious beliefs in some ways changed as moral principles were more clearly seen as rules for imitating God’s justice and mercy. The Bible, while it may at first sight suggest a degradation view of religion, actually manifests an evolutionist view, of a progress, made through a series of reforms, from the existence of sets of taboos associated with a tribal war god (the Lord of Hosts or armies) towards a more moral and rational concept of God. Possibly the fairest view to take is that there is both progress and degradation in the biblical record, in differing respects. But that there is some progress seems clear.

## PRIMITIVE SCIENCE AND RELIGION

The two great contributions of Tylor and Frazer, the comparative method of seeing religious beliefs and practices in a global context and the evolutionist method of tracing many beliefs as survivals of or developments from earlier and simpler beliefs, greatly helps the understanding of biblical belief. I think we may take it as established that ‘wherever there are found elaborate arts, abstruse knowledge, complex institutions, these are results of gradual development from an earlier, simpler, and ruder state of life. No stage of civilisation comes into existence spontaneously, but grows or is developed out of the stage before it.’<sup>33</sup>

The evolutionist method leads us to see present religion as a development from earlier, simpler forms. And we can find evidence of those simpler forms in extant documents from ancient cultures such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, in archaeological remains of even earlier states of human existence, and in the practices of non-literate societies throughout the world. Of course present non-literate traditions cannot immediately be assumed to be the same as those of Stone Age humans, for instance. But their practices are remarkably similar to many of those recorded in

ancient documents, including the Hebrew Bible, and they are certainly less intellectually articulated and simpler than most literate forms of religion. So they are suggestive of earlier stages of religion, even if they cannot be taken as actually showing us what earlier religion was like.

All this Frazer shows us. But problems begin to appear when he develops his own theory that magic preceded religion, and that religion is the placation of angry gods. Frazer thinks of early humans as primitive philosophers, seeking to explain and control their environment. He assumes that the most elementary form of explanation is the association of ideas, found in homeopathic and contagious magic. Religion, involving the more abstract hypothesis of a controlling spirit, arises only when that elementary theory is found to fail.

There are two hugely questionable assumptions here – that early religion was a matter of theoretical, quasi-scientific explanation, and that religious practice is a matter of getting things to happen in the way one wants, either by magic or by obsequious pleading. It is at once obvious that these assumptions could only be made by one who does not belong to any living religious tradition, and who in fact regards religion as some sort of theoretical mistake.

Frazer does not disguise this fact. As he concludes *The Golden Bough*, he compares magic, religion and science to ‘a web woven of three different threads – the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science’.<sup>34</sup> He says, ‘There rests on the middle portion of the web, where religion has entered most deeply into its texture, a dark crimson stain’. And then he asks, ‘Will a reaction set in which may arrest progress and even undo much that has been done? Will it [the web] be white or red?’<sup>35</sup> Clearly, religion is now a reactionary, anti-scientific force, which should be encouraged to fade away as rapidly as possible.

Now if religion is what Frazer thinks it is, a mistaken series of immoral and irrational beliefs, we can understand his point of view. But might it not be better to ask sophisticated modern adherents of some religious tradition what they think religion is and what it means to them?



One immediate result of such an enquiry would surely be to suggest that people are not primarily interested in trying to explain why events happen, and their practice is not primarily intended to make things happen as they wish. The contemporary Christian does not go to church to find out how televisions or transistors work, or to make sure that she gets a good job. Appeal to God is so far from explaining anything that it is more often a puzzle than a clarification. The query, 'Why does God allow suffering?' never explains it; it intensifies the problem. So it seems very odd to suggest that the motivation for belief in God is a desire for explanation. Similarly, Christians are usually castigated by preachers for trying to use religion as a means to worldly success. Abandonment to the divine will is more often recommended than attempts to get God to do what one wants. Of course, in prayer people often do ask God to do what they would like to see. But it again seems very odd to suggest that this is the primary reason for their practice, when it is so frequently and vehemently criticised by most Christian teachers as mislocating the primary importance of the adoration of God as a being of supreme value.

Is what is going on, then, an interpretation of religion in terms of its worst features – those features that religious teachers themselves criticise – and a complete neglect of the question of how religious belief differs from scientific, moral or aesthetic belief and practice? If we could isolate something distinctive about religious belief, we might seek its roots in some more elementary forms at the dawn of human history. But we would not be compelled to think that these roots are going to be a complete compendium of all the worst features of present religion, which are assumed to have been its total content in the cruder and simpler days of savagery.

The most questionable part of Frazer's analysis, then, is his thesis that magic is prior to religion, and is an attempt to explain nature in a quasi-scientific way. The beliefs that the cosmos exhibits an unchanging order, and that the human will can control this order by homeopathic or contagious practices, are really quite sophisticated, as is science. Would it not seem simpler, more elementary, for humans to take nature as representing

the same sort of personal forces that they find bodies, themselves small parts of nature, to represent? The personalisation of natural forces and events suggests itself as readily as the acceptance that human bodies are those of persons. As far as simplicity goes, Frazer's 'religion' seems to be simpler than his magic. But this might also lead us to think that such personalisation is not an attempt to explain the occurrence of events. It is rather an attempt to enter into certain sorts of personal relation with natural powers – relationships of awe, reverence, gratitude and, yes, intercession. This is not a scientific hypothesis, but the adoption of a basic reactive attitude to the natural powers that surround us, and of which we are part. This supposal could well seem as arbitrary as Frazer's conception of the savage as a very naive empiricist philosopher. But there is overwhelming evidence for it in the 'primitive' religions that exist in the world today, and that Frazer uses as the evidence for his theory.

#### THE NUER AND HOPI

It is possible to see this by examining a case that can easily be thought to give support to a Frazerian attitude to 'primitive' religion. The case can be found in the work of Edward Evans-Pritchard, Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford from 1946 to 1970, who published a classic anthropological study of the African tribe the Nuer.<sup>36</sup> Their religion could easily be seen, and has been seen, as an almost wholly superstitious, animistic and terror-inspired religion of fear. The Nuer have whole rafts of sacrificial and propitiatory rites to appease the spirits who bring disease and misfortune to the tribe, and they seem ideal candidates for a Frazerian treatment. But Evans-Pritchard gives a much more sympathetic account, in which he points out that the primary motivation of the Nuer is to drive away sickness and evil, and achieve wholeness of life and well-being. There are many spirit powers, both good and evil, but they all relate to – or are forms of – Kwoth, the great 'spirit in the sky', who is a friend and presence as well as a distant and fearsome creator. The spirits are imaginative constructions that present particular ways in

which Kwoth, Spirit, is apprehended in events in tribal and personal life. In the end, Evans-Pritchard claims, 'Nuer religion is ultimately an interior state ... externalised in rites'.<sup>37</sup> It is not a theoretical attempt to explain the world, and it is not simply a set of magical techniques to avert evil. It is centred on 'a strong sense of dependence on God', even though it involves many beliefs about spirit influences, which complicate the understanding of how people can achieve right relationship to Kwoth. Many aspects of Nuer religion – its acceptance of witchcraft and demon-possession, and its taboos and rituals for appeasing ghosts of the dead – might appear undesirable, psychologically harmful and pre-scientific. But we would misunderstand the religious life of the Nuer completely if we simply saw it in such terms. More important is the idea of Kwoth, Spirit, as expressed in personal experiences and historical events, and as evoking personal attitudes of reverence, gratitude and dependence in its devotees.

Donald Hughes, in his work on American Indian ecology, takes an even more positive attitude to Native American beliefs, which Frazer would undoubtedly have dismissed as savage and superstitious. Indians, says Hughes, see 'a community in nature of living beings among whom the Indians formed a part, but not all. There were also animals, trees, plants, and rivers, and the Indians regarded themselves as relatives of these, not as their superiors.'<sup>38</sup>

He points out that the Hopi spend about a third of their waking lives in ritual dances, prayers, songs and preparation for ceremonials. But these are not scientific experiments to cause changes in nature. They are celebrations of 'the mysterious interrelatedness of all that is, and attempts to stay in harmony with nature and maintain its balance. "The offerings made ... are not so much sacrifices as things given in exchange for other things taken or killed, to maintain the balance. A ceremony is one way in which people contribute to maintaining the world as it should be."<sup>39</sup> 'Indians regarded things in nature as spiritual beings, not because they were seeking some explanation for natural phenomena, but because human beings experience a spiritual resonance in nature.' The ceremonies are not, as Tylor and Frazer supposed – never having asked a

Native American – attempts to bend nature to the human will, but ways of subordinating the human will to natural rhythms. Black Elk said, ‘with all beings and all things we shall be as relatives’.<sup>40</sup>

One may sometimes feel that tribal religions are here being given a Romantic and sentimentalised makeover, tailored to an ecologically aware and rather guilty audience. Nevertheless, these accounts give a much better idea of what tribal believers might say – and it is interesting that primal religions throughout the world are experiencing a revival, in opposition to what are seen as the destructive, patriarchal and repressive tendencies of the ‘great religions’, and of Western liberal imperialism. The marks of that revival are a reiteration of reverence for the natural world, in contrast with the Western tradition, which has seen nature as just a means to human dominance and comfort. The revenge of the savage mind is to see Frazer as cut off from his roots in nature, as having a radically self-deceived view of the superiority of rational human thought to feelings of unity with nature, which the primal traditions celebrate.

Native Americans do regard everything in nature as powerful, able to help or harm. Things mediate *wakan*, sacred power that permeates all its forms (in this it is similar to the Nuer idea of Kwoth). *Wakan-Tanka* is the great Mystery of which nature and human alike are parts. Indian life is a ‘constant conversation with the sacred universe’.<sup>41</sup> Is this to be seen as an infantile personification of impersonal laws and forces, a projection of the human mind onto the external world? Or is it a recognition, not formulated in any systematic way, that nature herself is a sacred power, the giver of life, to be revered as well as respected, the Power which embraces humans as those called to respect and further her inborn potencies?

Tylor and Frazer were right in saying that there is a fundamental divide in human thought, between those who see nature as an ordered and impersonal system in which one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency, and those who see nature as a system of signs and symbols of an underlying quasi-personal reality.

What we call 'religion' seeks to evoke an intuition of such spiritual power, and that is its most fundamental role. To overlook that fact, which is testified to by religious believers themselves, is to overlook the central distinctive feature in religious belief, and to assume the truth of materialism – and can such an assumption really underpin an 'explanation' of what religion is?

With hindsight, it is easy for us to say that the evolutionism of the early anthropologists erred in assuming that the more elementary and primitive a belief the more stupid, fearful and morally crude it must be. We need to be much more discriminating in our treatment of primal traditions. They may indeed embody pre-scientific worldviews and morally limited perceptions. But they can be seen as responses, from particular cultural settings, to what is perceived to be of transcendent, objective and commanding value. That value may not be clearly identified and fully reflected upon – it would be hard to say that our current notions of value have been! It may be mixed, as much religion is, with cruder ideas of human sacrifice and magical rituals. But a theist might expect that early religion is founded basically upon reverence and gratitude, upon self-examination and moral commitment, upon the celebration of value in symbolic forms taken from the environment and from crucial events in tribal history. They were right to look for an evolutionary account of religion, but highly dubious in assuming that it was originally founded on fear and on mistaken attempts to explain why things happen.

In a rather similar way, the comparativism of these thinkers is groundbreaking in its insistence on treating religion as a global phenomenon, and in looking outside one particular religious tradition to find what is characteristic of religious thought and practice. But it is also restricted, in finding the common basis of religion to lie in a quasi-scientific search for explanation. Is it at all plausible to think that the elaborate genealogies of the gods, the highly imaginative descriptions of their powers and properties and the narratives of their quarrels and exploits are attempts to explain natural phenomena? Stories of the gods are more like literature than like physics. That is what Tylor and Frazer

missed – and at least in Frazer's case, that is very ironic, as *The Golden Bough* is one of the finest literary fairy-stories ever told.

If these religious stories explain, it is in the sense that art explains, and it might be wondered whether that should be called 'explanation' at all. They do, or they do hope to, tell us something about the world. But what they tell us is that there is a transcendent depth, underlying the visible and tangible, to which we can relate, knowledge of which will bring a distinctive sort of fulfilment. That is not explanation. It is revelation, in the true sense – drawing back the veil of space and time to reveal what is hidden, what is beyond, what, among all the concerns and cares of everyday life, might easily be missed.

Who draws back the veil? Those with the ability to penetrate beyond, whether that is by being taken up into the world of the gods, or by the attainment of wisdom and enlightenment through long self-discipline. Thus Moses and Muhammad hear the gods, or God, speak. Jesus is claimed to be a unique mediator between God and the world. The Buddha attains *nirvana* through meditation. Confucius apprehends the Tao through wisdom. And Plato works it all out by pure thinking – or so his followers say. All of them bring back to this transient world metaphors and images, which glow with the mysterious light of eternity, which resound with a beauty and power which time-bound understanding can never match. On their words are founded traditions which seek to re- evoke the origina- tive insight which they express, so that other, more mundane lives can, in a form and to an extent that is possible for them, share in eternity.

All of this may indeed be a mistake, a deep and ineradicable human illusion. Proponents of the secular worldview would say that it is. But there is no way of establishing on neutral grounds that it is so, and it is largely prejudice that leads some to think that the systematic study of religions must assume it to be so. Secular worldviews are as ideo- logically committed and value-laden as any religious worldview, and methodological atheism, far from being necessary to the scientific study of religions, may plausibly be thought to impede the understanding of religious belief.

*Find out more . . .*

James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (abridged edn 1922, republished Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996). Still a classic, though anthropologists would regard it as archaic. Reading chapters 1–4, 16, 23, 27, 28, 49, 68, 69 and the conclusion will give a good impression of the overall work.

David Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin ([1757] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), is one of the first (but very prejudiced) accounts of the nature of religion in English.

E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), is a good case study of one African traditional religion. The same author's *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) is a hilarious critique of early theories of religion.

Daniel Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), presents excellent expositions and critiques of seven major theorists of religion, including Tylor and Frazer.

J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), gives a very clear exposition of Bodin, Herbert, Fontenelle, Vico, Hume, Comte, Tylor, Durkheim and Freud – all important writers on religion. Preus has an axe to grind – religious studies must be committed to naturalism. He dislikes talk of ‘the transcendent’, holding it to be superfluous and vacuous.