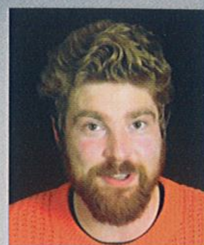
Why are humans religious?


Luke Pollard

Luke Pollard reflects on the reasons for religion.

I was baptised in the slush-cold spring sea. We were next to the *nouveau-riche* beach huts of Hengistbury Head, Dorset. My church and family watched from the shore. I was perhaps 12 years old and shivering in my Bart Simpson trunks. The shock of the cold saltwater made me involuntarily inhale as I was plunged underneath. Taken up again by my vicar, I felt a sense of unexpected warmth as I was welcomed into the love of Jesus. I turned to thank my vicar. But spat water in his face.

Everyone I knew was religious. I had grown up in an evangelical household. We often had missionaries to visit. Bible studies and church youth groups were my social framework. Objective morality, meaning and purpose were provided by my faith. The stars and Earth itself had been placed there by the God of Love who had, in warmth, welcomed me from that cold spring sea.

But spurred on by niggling doubts, I began studying philosophy in my early teens. I wanted to shore up my Christian faith with rigorous argument. William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland and C.S. Lewis were my bread and butter.

Disappearing meaning

But the façade of my youth came crashing down while studying at Oxford. Among the ancient stone walls, I read Bertrand Russell, J.L. Mackie and A.C. Grayling. I questioned my previous beliefs and came to realise they were not intellectually defensible. It felt as though the stars and Earth had been ripped away. All meaning and purpose had disappeared; the warmth had gone and the cold was back. I then had, oh so predictably, a mental breakdown.

The shock of atheism was new to me but had rippled through academic communities long before my teenage melodrama. In the early twentieth century, existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus wrestled with the emptiness of a world without God.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Hamish Hamilton 1955), for example, Camus observed that humans desperately want to find meaning in the universe. But the universe does not know that we exist. The chasm of these two irresolvably different sides is one that cannot ever be closed.

The stark, shocked reaction of the twentieth-century atheistic existentialists reflects the momentous shift in our perception of the world. Much like I experienced on that beach all those years ago, our social structures and worldviews have always involved a religious structure.

Our concepts of 'physics' (loosely defined) have been as much informed by religious mythologies as by our observations of the natural world. The Ancient Babylonians, for example, believed that the Earth was sandwiched between two great oceans, above and below. The one beneath us leaped forward as springs and rivers, while the one above leaked as rain. You can see this water-centred mythology paralleled in the Hebrew texts, when in Genesis 1:2 God floats above the waters. He creates a gap between them in Genesis 1:6–10 for the sky and Earth. The same sandwich, different filling.

Creation is only part of mythology's purpose. Contemporary natural events also have religious explanations. For instance, in Norse mythology it was believed that Loki, the trickster god, was punished by Odin by being held captive in a cave, tied in the entrails of his son Nari. Above him was put a venomous snake which dripped continuously. Loki is exposed to the excruciating venom, and writhes so much that the Earth shakes. This, in Norse mythology, is the origin of earthquakes.

As well as attempting to explain our physical world, another function of religion is in its formation of our social structures. Religious activity, it seems, is as old as the agricultural revolution – and perhaps older. As Reza Aslan notes in *God: A Human History* (Random House 2017), it is likely that religious buildings formed a focal point for nomadic hunter-gatherers who later decided to settle nearby. It is possible that religion played a role in the birth of civilisation itself.

Religiosity: a universal inclination?

The priestly class has also been an integral part of political organisation since there was such a thing as politics. As Larry Siedentop notes in *Inventing the Individual: the Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin 2015), the ancient concept of religion was a form of ancestor worship. In the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome, the paterfamilias (father of the family) was charged with the priestly roles. The ancestors were buried in the soil and lived in the flames of the family hearth. The paterfamilias kept the family fire alight, and the gods with it. Over time, the priestly role became divorced from the family unit as political organisation became more centric. It passed from city magistrate to king. And, with the emergence of state bureaucracy, the priest took on its own professional role. But the old ways have left their trace. When we fight for our land, our *terra patria*, we are being *patriotic*.

The human inclination to religious belief is universal, found in every civilisation and time. It informs our social structures and our worldviews. Why is religion seemingly an innate human trait? The dunking I received at Hengistbury Head was not unique to me, but part of a great tradition in religious rites of passage performed throughout our species' history.

Evolution favours the genes that survive. Those that fostered a form of religion, then, must be favoured by evolution. So, how does religion promote survival of the gene?

Neurology and our susceptibility to God-beliefs

One explanation of religious beliefs in early man is that they are a by-product of the way our brains have developed. Our brains set about making us as safe as possible. They find food, shelter, company. They also protect us from prey. One of the central ways in which they do this is by being over-sensitive to patterns. Specifically, finding faces in the forest, even when there may not be any. Or attributing strange noises to unseen strangers, rather than blind natural forces.

If you have ever seen a tree with the right number of knots disgorging its side and thought 'Hey, that's looking at me', then you will know what I mean. You are experiencing what is known in neurology as HADD (Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device). This is an evolved neurological trait that means we are over-sensitive to believing that things may have been caused by an animal or human.

The theory goes that our ancestors are more likely to have survived if they had seen the face of a tiger when there was no tiger. More likely to survive, that is, than the person who had seen no face when a tiger was there, preparing to pounce. Evolution favours the genes that survive. And genes that lead to HADD have a higher survival rate than those that do not.

HADD also means (and I am sure you are ahead of me already) that we might often infer that there are supernatural forces at work. Just as a hut is made by human hands, the clap of thunder might be the result of Thor's hammer and the sunrise be Helios driving his chariot across the sky. Our instinct to see faces in all things extends beyond the pre-historic forest undergrowth to the atmosphere and heavens itself.

However, Robin Dunbar, in his book *How Religion Evolved* (Pelican 2022), argues that the HADD explanation is partial at best. It offers us an explanation for religious *belief* but not for religious *practice*.

Teamwork or conflict?

The socio-biologist Edward O. Wilson, in *The Meaning of Human Existence* (Liveright 2014), argues that with social animals such as us, evolution needs to be understood both individually and on the group level. On the individual level, the more selfish a person is, the more likely they are to procreate. Get that great job, earn prestige, buy the big house. But on the group level, the tribe that co-operates together the most succeeds. Teamwork beats internecine competition every day.

The genes that programme individuals for just the right amount of selfishness and just the right amount of altruism win the game. The group succeeds, but the individual also succeeds within the group.

But what forces could tie together a group of selfish individuals? Morality, honour, tribalism ... religion. Religious practice, more than religious belief, binds our society together in shared ritual and tradition. It fills us with a sense of belonging and promotes the survival of the tribe. Think of that warm glow I felt as I surfaced from my baptism. Perhaps it was not just the sun, or the encroaching hypothermia. Perhaps it was not the warm glow of God at all, but the community waiting for me on shore.

Luke Pollard is Head of the RS and Philosophy Department at Bryanston School, Dorset. He is also the founder of Cogito Education, a website of tutorial videos and documentaries created to help students learn A-level RS. It can be found at cogito.education