



A New Role for Religion

by

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This is the fourth in a series of presentations where I discuss the basic concepts of an Existential God. In this presentation, I am going to present an overview of how the role of religion in our lives has changed over time, and why we should not distance ourselves from organized religions just because we have developed our own personal Existential God.

Overview

In order to talk about a new role for religion, we need to look at what religion is and how it developed from antiquity. We will start with a definition of “religion”, and then explore how it developed. Next, we will examine what happens when religious leaders are also temporal leaders. We will contrast this with what I call the Great American Experiment where we made separation of Church and State a fundamental part of our culture. Within that context, we will examine how religion has changed in American society and what it is like

growing up with an organized religion. Then, we will look at how the religious freedom we have in the United States gives us leeway to develop our own personal Existential God. We will conclude with why being part of an organized religion is still important.

Definition of “Religion”

Rather than going with a dictionary definition, I am going to give you my own definition of religion. To me, a “religion” is a set of spiritual beliefs and rituals developed by a person, or small group of people, that is accepted and practiced by a large group of people. The fact that religion is a “set of spiritual beliefs and rituals” that are “accepted and practiced by a large group of people” pretty well goes along with anybody’s definition of religion. Where my definition may differ from others is in the middle part of the definition where I say that a religion is “developed by a person or small group of people”.

To me, all the great religions started out as someone’s personal Existential God. As these founders preached their beliefs, they developed a following of people that accepted the beliefs of the founders. These people then went out and taught the beliefs to others. These people, in turn, taught still others. As the group of people who accepted the founder’s beliefs grew large, a new religion came into existence.

Before Religion

As we saw in the previous lecture, a belief in something higher is what separates mankind from the rest of life on our planet. Each group of people, or tribe, developed their own folklore regarding their ancestors. Great hunters and leaders were given supernatural powers in this folklore, and rose to the level of being gods. As tribes conquered and assimilated other tribes, the gods of each individual tribe were combined with other tribes to form a type of polytheism.

As we look at what spiritual beliefs developed in different parts of the world, we see quite a diversity of beliefs. For example, in Africa, ancient Greece and Rome, the polytheistic view led to the concept of offering sacrifices to win the favors of individual gods. Upon death, everyone went to an “underworld”.

In the Middle East, the different gods gave way to the belief in a monotheistic God who was involved in a cosmic struggle with the forces of evil. In this set of beliefs, one goes to Heaven or Hell depending on which force wins your soul.

As we move farther East into India, we find there is not a belief in one all-powerful God. Rather, when people die, they are reincarnated. Depending on the karma they received in their previous life, they may be reincarnated into a higher caste, a lower caste, or possibly a lower life form.

In China, there developed a belief that the universe is balanced and ordered. A good life keeps you in balance with nature. Death was nothing to be feared as it was just a transition into a different reality - from being to non-being.

Beginnings of Religion

Religions did not come into existence until the different beliefs were formalized in some type of written document. The oldest of these was the *Tao De Ching* which formalized the religion of Taoism in China. It was purported to have been written by Lao Tsu between the 4th and 6th century BCE.

The Vedas was another set of early manuscripts that formed the foundation of the Hindu religion in India. The Vedas were written between 2300 and 1200 BCE by an unknown author, or group of authors.

The Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible, was purportedly written by Moses around 1300 BCE. The Torah, which formed the foundation of Judaism, was believed to be the written result of a set of beliefs imparted to Moses on Mount Sinai by the one monotheistic God.

Religions Attributed to Individuals

The origins on Taoism, Hinduism, and Judaism are shrouded in antiquity. Hence, it is almost impossible to attribute these religions to the personal Existential God of any one person. However, as time passed, additional religions came into existence that can be attributed the Existential Gods of individuals.

Siddhartha Gautama, known to millions as Buddha, lived around 500 BCE. His philosophy builds upon Hinduism. He conceptualized that reincarnation was just suffering begetting more suffering in each new reincarnation. He proposed that we should achieve nirvana which was the cessation of reincarnation and suffering. The followers of Buddha spread this new concept throughout India and Southeast Asia in the form of the religion Buddhism.

Confucius, who lived in China around the same time as Buddha, built his philosophy around Taoism. He developed a complex philosophy which regarded humans as teachable entities that can achieve moral perfection and virtue. Like Taoism, Confucianism does not have a belief in a God or gods. But, his philosophy is one person's view of life and death. Hence, I would classify it as an Existential God. Confucianism went on to become the state religion of many eastern countries.

Jesus Christ was born into Judaism. His message expanded upon traditional Jewish monotheism. The one true God has three manifestations – God the Father, who was the creator of all things; Jesus, as the Son of God, who became mortal and became the perfect sacrifice to defeat the forces of evil; and God the Holy Spirit, who brings

God's wisdom and grace to the people of earth. The twelve Apostles, who were the followers of Jesus Christ, spread Christianity throughout the far reaches of the Roman Empire and beyond.

Paul, who proclaimed himself to be an Apostle of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, became a very dominant figure of early Christianity. His location in Rome allowed Paul to greatly influence the early Christian Church with his own personal take on the message of Jesus Christ. The followers of the Apostle Paul created the Catholic Church.

Finally, Muhammed, who lived around 600 CE, received revelations from the one, true God. Mohammed developed a system of laws that believers should follow. The followers of Muhammed put his revelations into the Quaran, and his system of laws became the Shariah. Both of these are the basis of the Islamic religion today. Both Islam and Christianity share the idea that, upon one's death, the believers will go to Heaven or Paradise, and the non-believers will go to the eternal flames of Hell.

The Mixing of Religion with Temporal Authority

As we have seen, the religions of the western world (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), those of the Indian subcontinent (i.e. Hinduism and Buddhism), and the religions of the Far East (i.e. Taoism and Confucianism) differ greatly in their views of God, life, and death. However, each believes their views are the correct and true views.

Some religions, such as Christianity and Islam, have tried to force compliance with their views.

When leaders of these religions are also temporal leaders, then they can wield significant influence. When the Catholic popes became the de facto leaders of the Western Roman Empire, they were able to spread Christianity across Europe. Similarly, Islam spread across the Middle East due to governments following the Shariah.

Individuals were forced to strictly follow the tenets of the religion. Several means were used to keep a religion pure. Persecution of non-believers was common. For example, Christians and Jews were forced to pay a special tax in order to live in a Muslim country. In the Catholic Church, any free thought that contradicted a tenet of the Catholic Church was declared a heresy. Over time, the Catholic Church even engaged in torture and executions of free-thinking individuals through the use of religious tribunals like the Inquisition.

With religious leaders holding power over armies, religion became the cause of many wars throughout history. A prime example was the Crusades where Catholic Europe tried to take control of the Holy Lands from the Islamic Middle East. The repercussions of that conflict are still present today in the distrust that exists between the two religions.

Another great religious conflict was the 30 Years' War (1618 – 1648) which pit Protestant countries against Catholic countries. By some estimates, almost a quarter of the population of Germany died during that conflict. Even in the present day, hatred between Protestants and Catholics still swells up in places like Northern Ireland.

The Great American Experience

When Europe discovered the Americas, people who were persecuted for their religious beliefs came to the American Colonies to escape their persecution. This started what I like to call the Great American Experiment.

The Church of England was one of the key religious persecutors of the day due to the fact that the King of England had both temporal and religious authority over the Church of England. As a result, when the American Colonies won their independence from England, they created a government that strictly forbade the government from endorsing a specific religion. This separation of Church and State is embodied in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America.

America eventually became a melting pot of many nationalities and religions, with no one nationality or religion having temporal authority.

The result of this Great American Experiment is that the different religions live in harmony with each other. There has never been a religious war fought within America. People in the United States have religious freedom to worship God in the manner of their choosing.

Religious Freedom

As a result of the success of the Great American Experiment, people in the United States are free to belong to whatever religion they choose. They can switch between religions if they want. People are even free to start their own religions. This newfound sense of religious freedom from the Great American Experiment is now starting to defuse to other parts of the world – most notable Europe.

As the scientific revolution is challenging traditional religious beliefs, people are free to adapt their beliefs to these new discoveries. Because religions lack any temporal authority in America and Europe, people can now adapt their beliefs without fear of retribution.

As a result of the Great American Experiment, we now have a favorable environment to develop our own personal Existential God.

A New Role for Religion

In general, religious preachers in the United States and Europe do not preach hatred toward other religions. Of course, there are those few exceptions to the rule. But, even in these cases, people are still free to go to a different church somewhere else.

The major religions teach us to help others, even if they are of a different faith. As a result, many religious communities have outreach programs to help the needy. This is a major reason why the United States stands ready to help people in other parts of the world who

suffer from poverty and natural disasters. The United States provides more aid to people outside of the United States than any other country in the world.

Religious communities provide a good environment in which to raise a family. Births, marriages, and deaths are all celebrated with the rituals of the religion. These communities provide a support network for families and wholesome activities for people of all ages.

Religious education helps bring moral values to our young children. By presenting each church's individual set of beliefs, children gain a religious foundation upon which they can develop their own personal Existential God as they move into their adolescent years and beyond.

Existential Gods Do Not Replace Religion

Developing your own personal Existential God should not be an excuse for not being part of a religious community. While it is true that Existential Gods are very personal in nature, there is still a need to practice what you believe. Religious communities provide that community aspect of your faith.

The Three Themes of Existential Gods

As we have said in previous presentations, an Existential God follows the three themes of modern existentialism. The first theme is religious freedom. Today's society, in many parts of the world, gives you the freedom to develop your own personal understanding of God. The second theme is developing a belief that is unique to you. A personal Existential God requires that you take the time to think about and discuss your personal beliefs. The third theme is that you live your life passionately according to your beliefs. A religious community offers you the opportunity to live your faith passionately with others who also have a strong belief in God.

As long as an organized religion is tolerant of your beliefs, there is no reason to leave an organized religion as you develop your own personal Existential God. Also, as long as you do not try to force your beliefs on others, you are not a threat to the organized religion.

For More Information

If you would like to learn more about Existential Gods in general, or about my personal Existential God, please visit

www.ExistentialGod.org.



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