Whence God? The origin of ultimate concern

Paper presented at 2013 CSIR Conference, June, 19-22, Charlotte, NC.

Jonathan Doner, Ph.D.
1052 Bridlewood Trail
Keswick, VA  22947
(434) 973-5176
jfd@donersystems.com

Abstract

Several recent works have addressed the issue of the origin of religion. Some have linked this occurrence to evolutionary mechanisms, others to sociological processes, and still others to psychological functions. Each position has interest and sheds a different light on a necessarily complex process. The paper examines several of these theories and offers a synthetic perspective which integrates psychological, sociological, evolutionary, and theological concepts in a new manner.
When we raise the issue of the origin of religion, we are immediately confronted with two obvious dilemmas. First, what do we mean by religion? Second, given some definition, in what sense does such a thing have an origin?

Defining religion has never been simple; it is not a one-dimensional, monolithic condition. Clifford Geertz (1973), however, has provided a much-cited perspective that paints a realistic picture. He defined religion as a cultural form which “denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [humans] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes about life. (p. 89).”

When it comes to religion, however, nothing is totally certain. Thus, it is perfectly possible for Boyer (2010) to argue the idea into oblivion by simply demonstrating the uncertainty and ambiguity of every major concept Geertz, or anyone else, might ascribe to religion. Nonetheless, though Boyer’s points evoke needed caution, the presence of religion in the real world cannot be dispensed with so easily. Religion, whether you are for it or against it, is a central part of global human culture. It cannot be ignored or finessed, it must be understood.

Recently, Riesebrodt (2010) presented an approach that is particularly illuminating in this regard. He distinguishes between defining religion, understanding religion, and explaining religion. First, he defines religion relative to three primary concerns: surviving misfortune, handling crises, and receiving salvation. Second, he argues that religion should be understood, and therefore studied, in terms of its liturgy, that is, in terms of its institutionalized *habitus*. Liturgies are encoded versions of religious actions/rituals which are considered appropriate for
addressing misfortunes, crises, and the pursuit of salvation. Finally, Riesebrodt explains religion in terms of human beings performing symbolic rituals (liturgies) in order to invoke the action of the higher power relative to one of the three core concerns—misfortune, crisis, and salvation.

Riesebrodt’s perspective applies primarily to *mature* religions, i.e., those possessing stable, printed liturgies. It is thus not a theory of the origin of religion. However, it does provide several clues in that regard. First, it is apparent that ancient people would not have had any difficulty with identifying misfortunes or crises. These are recognized even by animals. Salvation, on the other hand, is peculiarly human. It requires the ability to understand a transcendent state—a state of being beyond our norm. This state cannot be understood other than in relation to some notion of a higher power.

Therefore, if we wish to understand the origin of religion as Riesebrodt characterizes it, we must explain the origin of the conception of a higher power. Once we consider the problem in this manner, it is clear that, without question, having a conception of a higher power is a true universal characteristic of human beings. Everyone, from age five up (Fowler, 1981), whether they believe or don’t believe (Dumitriu, 1982), approve or disapprove (Hume, 1779/1989), nonetheless has some conception of a higher power. Tillich (1957) called this power an *ultimate concern*. We might also call it an *ultimate meaning* within reality. In order to understand the origin of religion we must first explain how this idea arises within the human mind.

*The origin of ultimate meaning*

We can deal with this issue using several different approaches. A theological perspective would say that the idea of a higher power is a gift from that higher power. It allows mankind to contact the sacred. This explanation can be important for an individual trying to make sense of
life. From a scientific standpoint, however, the theological perspective is simply not applicable. Regardless, if it is consequential, the conception of a higher power must have its lawful manifestation in the material processes of human beings. It must exist in the person, in the brain, in the body. It must also exist in the family, in the group and in society at large.

Thus science seeks evidence of the origin of the conception of ultimate meaning in sociological, psychological, and biological processes.

Sociological approaches

It is an oft-hidden truth that the basic unit of life is the group, not the individual. Sociological forces maintain, transform, and utilize religious ideas and practices (Weber, 1956). Frazer was among the first to see a progressive growth in mankind’s comprehension of the universe that begins with primitive myth, progresses through religion, and culminates in the rise of science (Pals, 1996). For Durkheim (1912/1995), the sacred was coextensive with the tribe, that is, the fundamental social unit of which a person is a part. The totem represents the ultimate meaning of the tribe, its dynamic core. The sacred becomes apparent as the person joins completely with their social unit, both living and dead. All societies have importantly linked their spiritual existence with both their living community and their dead ancestors as well (Cassirer, 1944).

Though sociological processes are critical to the evolution of religions, they cannot provide their origin. There are two reasons for this. First, the variability in patterns of religious practice, even within traditions, clearly indicates a bottom-up process. That is, variation begins with individuals. If it was top-down, i.e., coming from society, there would be uniformity.
Second and most importantly, on its own a sociological process cannot give meaning to the concept of a higher power. Meaning must arise within individuals.

**Psychological approaches**

Ideas begin, *ex vivo*, in the experiences of individuals. They arise within the symbolic capabilities of the person and become manifest in the meaning of experience and in the structure and purpose of action. Their first appearance may be in a dream, a vision, a thought, or a feeling. From these subjective origins, however, ideas are broadcast into the social nexus, to live and grow, or to waste and die.

The origin of ultimate concern has been hypothesized to derive from a number of different psychological processes. One important approach is to examine the phenomenological nature of the experiences that provide the basis for the person’s conception of ultimate meaning. Both Otto (1923) and Eliade (1959) argued that this method would reveal the uniqueness of the transcendent spiritual experience. Some experiences are unique, but in general, spiritual or numinous experiences can be seen to be part of a spectrum of religiously relevant experiences (James, 1902/1985; Taves, 2009). The importance of this spectrum, though, cannot be ignored. Religions are founded, supported, and rejuvenated by such experiences.

Phenomenology alone, however, only goes so far. Emphasizing the phenomenology of religious experience tends to preclude further analysis. As several critics have noted, phenomenology tends to become theology rather than science. We need to understand the origins of these experiences as part of a whole process, one that is both cognitive and experiential (Lawson and McCauley, 1990).
One extreme perspective regards the source of these experiences as pathological. Some early psychological models, especially those by Freud (1961) and Marx (Pals, 1996), explained religion as a consequence of various psychological disorders. These views have been very influential. Freud argued that the higher power derived from the Father image and that religion consisted in a mass obsessive-compulsive disorder. For Marx, religion was supported by the bourgeois class as a way of opiating the proletariat against their thorough exploitation. Modern perspectives have also argued that a belief in a higher power derives from early childhood trauma (e.g., Abelow, 2009).

It is an unavoidable truth that religion and religious expression has been associated at various times in the past with a whole host and range of psychological disorders. It can be obsessive, manic-depressive, or schizophrenic; it can also be an escape, a means of avoiding reality. Nonetheless, these conditions cannot be the source of the conception of a higher power. A critical aspect of a person’s symbolic engagement with their universe cannot be based on pathology. Pathological conditions do not support growth; they will destroy a species if they dominate. Religion becomes associated with pathology because it connects to the whole person, as does family, work, community and many other aspects of life. All of these, as well, can be associated with the expression of various pathologies. There is nothing peculiar, therefore, about any pathology that would specifically link it to religion.

The antidote to pathology-based models might be taken to be the growing literature on positive consequences of religion in a broad spectrum of life’s circumstances (Reynolds and Tanner, 1983/1995). Religious involvement correlates with higher levels of well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, and lower levels of depression, illness, and suicide (see Paloutzian and Park, 2005).
It is hugely important that religion produces these benefits. They are critical evidence of the success and value of every religion. They also confirm that evolutionary processes are relevant to religion. It is important that religions produce material and psychological benefits. Nonetheless, though they might support someone’s belief in a higher power, these benefits cannot explain the origin of that conception. The huge complex process of religion did not evolve simply to make people feel better, nor to optimize any specific wellness-based variable.

Jung (1938) saw religion as a symbolic expression of the growth of the psyche. Therefore the advent of a higher power symbolizes the evolution of a higher Self, one that is well-integrated with respect to all aspects of its personality. Both traditionally and psychologically, the growth of self is an important aspect of the process of religion (Watts and Williams, 1988). Jung’s perspective, however, is romantic. It envisions the growth of selfhood as if it were a quest. Clearly, such a view is imposed upon the process. Religion did not evolve to send Self on a quest, per se.

Jung and others, however, are correct in seeing the importance of the relation between self-change and religion. I argue that religion has evolved as part of the transformation of the fundamental motivational and emotional pattern of the human animal. Ultimate meaning decreases the power of self-interest, allowing other considerations to have an impact on the person’s choices and actions.

*Biological approaches*

Evolutionary psychologists such as Atran (2002) and Lewis-Williams (2010), see the precursors of religion in certain basic psychological functions with evolutionary relevance (see also, Friedman, 2008). One central issue concerns “agency attribution,” which is to experience a
process as if it was the result of the choice of an intelligent agent. All events are caused. Now suppose we observed one as it happened. If we identify its cause as a loose rock or an earth tremor we are making a physical attribution. If, however, we perceive the rockslide to be the consequence of intelligent choice, then we have made an attribution of agency. Theorists would generally argue that this is “overattribution” and may indicate a conception of a higher power. From this perspective, agency attribution could then be the evolutionary precursor to a conception of a higher power (Petrician and Burris, 2012).

This ignores the fact, however, that agency attribution is a characteristic of high survival value. Virtually all higher animals show some kind of agency attribution. In addition, it is better, i.e., of greater survival value, to over-attribute then under-attribute agency in the world. None of it needs to be about higher powers, however, at least not in a metaphysical sense. So there is nothing special about agency attribution that makes it critical for an understanding of higher power.

Actually, I believe that the problem with most current evolutionary perspectives is that they fail to recognize that virtually all aspects of higher cognition and affect are relevant to religious traditions. For example, Tweed (2006) has argued for a conception of religion as process, based on the critical importance of crossing and dwelling. Both processes find ample utilization in a variety of religious contexts, and both derive from basic animal behavior, e.g., migration and nesting. Thus a range of high-level processes are relevant to the evolution of religion. Agency attribution, theory of mind, migration, meaning making, territoriality, kin and social processes, in fact, all major higher hominid-level cognitive and emotional processes have their role in the ongoing process of religion. They are all part of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) of
religion. They are thus means, they are tools. They are not the source. They do not explain the
origin of the higher power.

Neural theories of religion are in their infancy but have nonetheless had a large impact on
many perspectives concerning the nature of religion (Newberg and Waldman, 2009). The central
difficulty, however, which faces all neurotheologists (Newburg, 2010), is that until there exists
an over-arching theory that provides a neural explanation of higher-order human behavior, in
general, there can be no currently meaningful explanation of such a complex and extensive
process as religion. McNamara’s (2009) is a good effort. Yet its most important aspect is its
recognition of the importance of the transformation of the self. McNamara sees the need for a
self not bound by self-interest. This is simpatico with my approach.

A new perspective

According to the perspective that forms the foundation of the present work, the origin of
ultimate meaning derives from two interacting processes. The first is symbolic consciousness,
itself. The power of human being’s ability to generate and analyze symbolic systems is
absolutely phenomenal. The human brain is capable of generating languages of languages
(Doner, 2013) concerning all things real and unreal. In principle, it has no limits. Such a system
is surely capable of generating a conception of a higher power. However, this fact reveals that
something else is also needed. The conception must not just be generated, it must be valued.

Here we see the point of contact with the principle of self-interest. Valuing a higher
power leverages against self-interest. This is the action of the archetype of ultimate meaning, a
structure that modulates ongoing symbolic consciousness. This structure is capable of utilizing
our symbolic construction of experience to create self-transcendent actions and experiences of the world, others, and oneself.

However, this process cannot exist for the purpose of producing an awareness of ultimate meaning. That constitutes a teleological assumption that would beg the question, not resolve it. Rather, the change induced through the archetype of ultimate meaning must come about due to the evolutionary solution to a different kind of problem. This problem has an immediate, mechanical aspect, and a more global, conceptual aspect. The second provides the context for the first.

The global problem consists in the construction of a societally-modulated system of intelligent production and utilization; a societal mind, really. The societal mind is the only means powerful enough to control, modulate, and utilize the symbolic processing power of the human brain. A single person is a necessary but insufficient condition for getting the most out of their own brain. This requires a dynamic, symbolic cultural form.

The mechanical problem concerns how to forge a complex societal mind out of components operating solely on the basis of self-interest. The principle of self-interest, random variation, and natural selection are the cornerstones of evolutionary theory. Evolution works because organisms are constantly trying to fulfill themselves. They are always acting so as to satisfy their own interests. It is a powerful concept. However, it is a basic contention of my perspective that the incredible power contained within the intelligence of human beings can only be fully realized if humans are capable of operating under a non-self-centered perspective (see Wayment and Bauer, 2008). New motivational principles, e.g., humility, patience, beauty, peace, the good of all, must become operational.
The principles cannot arise, however, simply because of their moral strength. Rather, their advent must relate to real issues in the symbolic intelligence of human beings. In other words, these things do not come about because they are “good”, or even because they are of great value. These benefits are apparent only after the fact. Rather, the evolution of symbolic consciousness must be driven by factors intrinsic to symbolic consciousness.

Further directions

This paper began by showing that the core concern in understanding the origin of religion is the need to explain the origin of the conception of a higher power.

However, humans’ symbolic computational capabilities are so great they are capable of modeling anything, anything real, anything imagined. Hence there is no actual problem with possessing a conception of a higher power. Literally, everyone has one. Consequently, the question concerning the origin of a higher power becomes the question of how the concept of a higher power, a mere image, becomes an ultimate concern, something of personal value.

My position is that an ultimate concern can be recognized as having a particular organization. I call this the archetype of ultimate meaning. It consists of a three-part ontology of ultimate power and meaning, and a dual praxis of engagement with the ultimate concern (see, Doner, 2012). A higher power becomes an ultimate concern when the person begins to regard it as such. It gains in significance as the person participates in actions meant to affirm its ultimate meaning. I believe recent conceptions of embodiment, such as that discussed by Csordas (2002), are important to the understanding of these processes.

A key moment is when the person begins to live as if the ultimate meaning is a higher power. This moment will be reinforced to the extent that the person experiences this core power.
and meaning within their world, within their society, and within themselves. And their actions, whatever they may be, will seek to express ultimate meaning either through their symbol-based engagement with society, or through their symbol-based engagement with the higher power. The first builds a society that is maximally healthy; the second builds a person that is willing to build a society that is maximally healthy.

References


