Why We Became Religious and The Evolution of the Spirit World

Marvin Harris

The following selection by anthropologist Marvin Harris originally appeared as two separate essays, one entitled “Why We Became Religious,” the other “The Evolution of the Spirit World.” In the first essay, Harris comments on the fascinating possibility of religion among nonhuman species. He also discusses the concept of mana (an inherent force or power), noting that, although the concepts of superstition, luck, and charisma in Western cultures closely resemble mana, they are not really religious concepts. Rather, according to Harris, the basis of all religious thought is animism, the universal belief that we humans share the world with various extracorporeal, mostly invisible beings. Harris closes the first essay with some thoughts on the concept of an inner being—a soul—pointing out that in many cultures people believe a person may have more than one.

In “The Evolution of the Spirit World,” Harris advances the notion that spiritual beings found in modern religions are also found in the religions of prestate societies. Thus, he briefly examines religious thought and behavior pertaining to ancestor worship at varying levels of societal complexity, starting with band-and-village societies, the earliest of human cultures. Next, Harris notes the importance of recently deceased relatives in the religions of more complexly developed societies, such as those based on gardening and fishing. Chiefdoms represent an even higher level of development, one in which greater specialization arose, including a religious practitioner who paid special attention to the chief’s ancestors. Finally, Harris observes that, with the development of early states and empires, dead ancestors assumed a place of great prominence alongside the gods.

Marvin Harris (1927–2001) was a tremendous popularizer of anthropology, thanks to the accessible writing style of his works for students and the general public. He helped develop the theoretical perspective known as cultural materialism, often emphasizing the relationship between culture and ecology.

Human social life cannot be understood apart from the deeply held beliefs and values that in the short run, at least, motivate and mobilize our transactions with each other and the world of nature. So let me ... confront certain questions concerning our kind’s religious beliefs and behavior.

First, are there any precedents for religion in nonhuman species? The answer is yes, only if one accepts
a definition of religion broad enough to include "sup- perstitious" responses. Behavioral psychologists have long been familiar with the fact that animals can acquire responses that are falsely associated with rewards. For example, if a pigeon is given a cage into which food pellets are dropped by a mechanical feeder at irregular intervals. If the reward is deliv- ered by chance while the bird is scratching, it begins to scratch faster. If the reward is delivered while a bird happens to be flapping its wings, it keeps flapp- ing them as if wing-flapping controls the feeder. Among humans, one can find analogous supersti- tions in the little rituals that baseball players engage in as they come up to bat, such as touching their caps, spitting, or rubbing their hands. None of this has any real connection with getting a hit, although constant repetition assures that every time batters get hits, they have performed the ritual. Some minor phobic behavior among humans also might be attributed to associations based on coincidental rather than contingent circumstances. I know a heart surgeon who toler- ates only popular music piped into his operating room ever since he lost a patient while classical com- positions were being played.

Superstition raises the issue of causality. Just how do the activities and objects that are connected in superstitious beliefs influence one another? A reason- able, if evasive, answer is to say that the causal activity or object has an inherent force or power to achieve the observed effects. Abstracted and general- ized, this inherent force or power can provide the explanation for many extraordinary events and for success or failure in life's endeavors. In Melanesia, people call it mana. Fishhooks that catch big fish, tools that make intricate carvings, canoes that sail safely through storms, or warriors who kill many en- emies, all have mana in concentrated quantities. In Western cultures, the concepts of luck and charisma closely resemble the idea of mana. A horseshoe possesses a concentrated power that brings good luck. A charismatic leader is one who is suffused with great powers of persuasion.

But are superstitions, mana, luck, and charisma religious concepts? I think not. Because, if we define religion as a belief in any indwelling forces and pow- ers, we shall soon find it difficult to separate religion from physics. After all, gravity and electricity are also unseen forces that are associated with observable ef- fects. While it is true that physicists know much more about gravity than about mana, they cannot claim to have a complete understanding of how gravity achieves its results. At the same time, couldn't one argue that superstitions, mana, luck, and charisma are also merely theories of causality involving physical forces and powers about which we happen to have incomplete understanding, as yet?

True, more scientific testing has gone into the study of gravity than into the study of mana, but the degree of scientific testing to which a theory has been subjected cannot make the difference between whether it is a religious or a scientific belief. If it did, then every untested or inadequately tested theory in science would be a religious belief (as well as every scientific theory that has been shown to be false during the time when scientists believed it to be true). Some astronomers theorize that at the center of each galaxy there is a black hole. Shall we say that this is a religious belief because other astronomers reject such a theory or regard it as inadequately tested?

It is not the quality of belief that distinguishes religion from science. Rather, as Sir Edward Tylor was the first to propose, the basis of all that is distinctly religious in human thought is animism, the belief that humans share the world with a population of extraordinary, extracorporeal, and mostly invisible beings, ranging from souls and ghosts to saints and fairies, angels and cherubim, demons, jinni, devils, and gods.

Wherever people believe in the existence of one or more of these beings, that is where religion exists. Tylor claimed that animistic beliefs were to be found in every society, and a century of ethnological re- search has yet to turn up a single exception. The most problematic case is that of Buddhism, which Tylor's critics portrayed as a world religion that lacked belief in gods or souls. But ordinary believers outside of Buddhist monasteries never accepted the atheistic implications of Gautama's teachings. Main- stream Buddhism, even in the monasteries, quickly envisioned the Buddha as a supreme deity who had been successively reincarnated and who held sway over a pantheon of lower gods and demons. And it was as fully animistic creeds that the several variet- ies of Buddhism spread from India to Tibet, South- east Asia, China, and Japan.

Why is animism universal? Tylor pondered the question at length. He reasoned that if a belief re- curred again and again in virtually all times and
places, it could not be a product of mere fantasy. Rather, it must have grounding in evidence and in experiences that were equally recurrent and universal. What were these experiences? Tylor pointed to dreams, trances, visions, shadows, reflections, and death. During dreams, the body stays in bed; yet another part of us gets up, talks to people, and travels to distant lands. Trances and drug-induced visions also bring vivid evidence of another self, distinct and separate from one’s body. Shadows and mirror images reflected in still water point to the same conclusion, even in the full light of normal wakefulness. The concept of an inner being—a soul—makes sense of all this. It is the soul that wanders off when we sleep, that lies in the shadows, and that peers back at us from the surface of the pond. Most of all, the soul explains the mystery of death: a lifeless body is a body permanently deprived of its soul.

Incidentally, there is nothing in the concept of soul per se that constrains us to believe each person has only one. The ancient Egyptians had two, and so do many West African societies in which both patrilineal and matrilineal ancestors determine an individual’s identity. The Jivaro of Ecuador have three souls. The first soul—the mekas—gives life to the body. The second soul—the arutam—has to be captured through a drug-induced visionary experience at a sacred waterfall. It confers bravery and immunity in battle to the possessor. The third soul—the musiak—forms inside the head of a dying warrior and attempts to avenge his death. The Dahomey say that women have three souls; men have four. Both sexes have an ancestor soul, a personal soul, and a mawn soul. The ancestor soul gives protection during life, the personal soul is accountable for what people do with their lives, the mawn soul is a bit of the creator god, Mawn, that supplies divine guidance. The exclusively male fourth soul guides men to positions of leadership in their households and lineages. But the record for plural souls seems to belong to the Fang of Gabon. They have seven: a sound inside the brain, a heart soul, a name soul, a life force soul, a body soul, a shadow soul, and a ghost soul.

Why do Westerners have only one soul? I cannot answer that. Perhaps the question is unanswerable. I accept the possibility that many details of religious beliefs and practices may arise from historically specific events and individual choices made only once and only in one culture and that have no discernible cost-benefit advantages or disadvantages. While a belief in souls does conform to the general principles of cultural selection, belief in one rather than two or more souls may not be comprehensible in terms of such principles. But let us not be too eager to declare any puzzling feature of human life forever beyond the pale of practical reason. For has it not been our experience that more research often leads to answers that were once thought unattainable?

The Evolution of the Spirit World

All varieties of spirit beings found in modern religions have their analogues or exact prototypes in the religions of prestate societies. Changes in animistic beliefs since Neolithic times involve matters of emphasis and elaboration. For example, band-and-village people widely believed in gods who lived on top of mountains or in the sky itself and who served as the models for later notions of supreme beings as well as other powerful sky gods. In Aboriginal Australia, the sky god created the earth and its natural features, showed humans how to hunt and make fire, gave people their social laws, and showed them how to make adults out of children by performing rites of initiation. The names of their quasi-supreme beings—Baiame, Daramulm, Nerunderi—could not be uttered by the uninitiated. Similarly, the Selk’nam of Tierra del Fuego believed in “the one who is up there.” The Yaruro of Venezuela spoke of a “great mother” who created the world. The Maaidu of California believed in a great “slayer in the sky.” Among the Semang of Malaysia, Kedah created everything, including the god who created the earth and humankind. The Andaman Islanders had Puluga whose house is the sky, and the Winnebago had “earthmaker.”

Although prestate peoples occasionally prayed to these great spirits or even visited them during trances, the focus of animistic beliefs generally lay elsewhere. In fact, most of the early creator gods abstained from contact with human beings. Having created the universe, they withdrew from worldly affairs and let other lesser deities, animistic beings, and humans work out their own destinies. Ritualy, the most important category of animistic beings was the ancestors of the band, village, and clan or other kinship groups whose members believed they were bonded by common descent.
People in band-and-village societies tend to have short memories concerning specific individuals who have died. Rather than honor the recent dead, or seek favors from them, egalitarian cultures often place a ban on the use of the dead person's name and try to banish or evade his or her ghost. Among the Washo, a native American foraging people who lived along the border of California and Nevada, souls of the dead were angry about being deprived of their bodies. They were dangerous and had to be avoided. So the Washo burned the dead person's hut, clothing, and other personal property and stealthily moved their camp to a place where they hoped the dead person's soul could not find them. The Dusun of North Borneo curse a dead person's soul and warn it to stay away from the village. Reluctantly, the soul gathers up belongings left at its grave site and sets off for the land of the dead.

But this distrust of the recent dead does not extend to the most ancient dead, not to the generality of ancestor spirits. In keeping with the ideology of descent, band-and-village people often memorialize and propitiate their communal ancestral spirits. Much of what is known as totemism is a form of diffuse ancestor worship. Taking the name of an animal such as kangaroo or beaver or a natural phenomenon such as clouds or rain in conformity with prevailing rules of descent, people express a communal obligation to the founders of their kinship group. Often this obligation includes rituals intended to nourish, protect, or assure the increase of the animal and natural totems and with it the health and well-being of their human counterparts. Aboriginal Australians, for example, believed that they were descended from animal ancestors who traveled around the country during the dream-time at the beginning of the world, leaving mementos of their journey strewn about before turning into people. Annually, the descendants of a particular totemic ancestor retraced the dream-time journey. As they walked from spot to spot, they sang, danced, and examined sacred stones, stored in secret hiding places along the path taken by the first kangaroo or the first witchetty grub. Returning to camp, they decorated themselves in the likeness of their totem and imitated its behavior. The Arunta witchetty-grub men, for instance, decorated themselves with strings, nose bones, rattails, and feathers, painted their bodies with the sacred design of the witchetty-grub, and constructed a brush hut in the shape of the witchetty-grub chrysalis. They entered the hut and sang of the journey they had made. Then the head men came shuffling and gliding out, followed by all the rest, in imitation of adult witchetty grubs emerging from a chrysalis.

In most village societies an undifferentiated community of ancestral spirits keep a close watch on their descendants, ready to punish them if they commit incest or if they break the taboos against eating certain foods. Important endeavors—hunting, gardening, pregnancy, warfare—need the blessings of a group's ancestors to be successful, and such blessings are usually obtained by holding feasts in the ancestors' honor according to the principle that a well-fed ancestor is a well-intentioned ancestor. Throughout highland New Guinea, for example, people believe that the ancestral spirits enjoy eating pork as much as living persons enjoy eating it. To please the ancestors, people slaughter whole herds of pigs before going to war or when celebrating important events in an individual's life such as marriage and death. But in keeping with a big-man redistributive level of political organization, no one claims that his or her ancestors merit special treatment.

Under conditions of increasing population, greater wealth to be inherited, and intrasocietal competition between different kin groups, people tend to pay more attention to specific and recently deceased relatives in order to validate claims to the inheritance of land and other resources. The Dobuans, South Pacific yam gardeners and fishermen of the Admiralty Islands, have what seems to be an incipient phase of a particularized ancestor religion. When the leader of a Dobuan household died, his children cleaned his skull, hung it from the rafters of their house, and provided it with food and drink. Addressing it as "Sir Ghost," they solicited protection against disease and misfortune, and through oracles, asked him for advice. If Sir Ghost did not cooperate, his heirs threatened to get rid of him. Actually, Sir Ghost could never win. The death of his children finally proved that he was no longer of any use. So when the grandchildren took charge, they threw Sir Ghost into the lagoon, substituting their own father's skull as the symbol of the household's new spiritual patron.
With the development of chieftoms, ruling elites employed specialists whose job was to memorize the names of the chief's ancestors. To make sure that the remains of these dignitaries did not get thrown away like Sir Ghost's skull, paramount chieft built elaborate tombs that preserved links between generations in a tangible form. Finally, with the emergence of states and empires, as the rulers' souls rose to take their places in the firmament alongside the high gods, their mummmied mortal remains, surrounded by exquisite furniture, rare jewels, gold-encrusted chariots and other preciousities, were interred in gigantic crypts and pyramids that only a true god could have built.

Study Question

What are some of the ways in which beliefs in souls, gods, and other spiritual beings vary among societies?

Related Readings and Media

Bellah, Robert N.
2011 Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press. Intricate coverage of the development of religious phenomena among humans, including attention to the Middle East, Greece, China, and India as well as prehistory. By a preeminent sociologist.

Collection of comments about the concept of soul, from leaders of various religions in the United States, from the popular website beliefnet.com.

National Geographic magazine article on ancestor worship in ancient China, including a gallery of photos.