

On Being Religious

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The question of religion, in one form or another, has been with us humans for millennia. From primitive tribal ceremonies to highly organized scriptures and theological rule books, up to excruciatingly circumlocutory philosophical treatises, we—Homo sapiens—have attempted to answer the question of religion through ages. However, we must investigate this pressing question's roots beyond its obvious antiquity—oldness is not necessarily tantamount to primacy. Most of us on this planet subscribe to some notion of religion or the other. Most human beings inherit, rather than choose, a religious identity and adhere to its ritualistic and theological requirements with different levels of dedication and fervor. However, that we should engage with the question of religion does not foot in the overwhelming myriad of the faithful; predominance does not necessarily mean rightfulness (considering that we have often caused a lot of suffering and damage when we have found ourselves in a dominating majority). We must look into the question of religion rather because, it seems, it persistently and with utter audacity emerges in any mind that is sane and not devoid of the capability of observation and inquiry. We may not be aware of the precise mechanisms in the central nervous system that give rise to this perception—the relevance or urgency of the question of religion—but we seek answers for numerous questions that all are different manifestations of the question of religion: Who are we? Does life have meaning? Is there a supreme being that we call God? Do right and wrong exist? How should we live our lives? Such questions have accompanied us with various depths at different ages of human evolution, presumably starting with the development of consciousness.

When we talk about the question of religion, we do not mean the notion of defining the human existence around a center—a supreme being of singularly high intelligence—that is supposed to irradiate meaning into the universe, or as most of us restrictedly assume, into our planet. That would be the question of “God,” which, through the history of mankind, atheists, theists, and agnostics have attempted to answer, while some, although a rather diminutive minority, have not engaged with this question at all. We shall make some serious effort in this note to approach the actual question: What is religion? That most of us do not regard the existence of a divine being separate from religion is something we shall investigate at some point later but it would distract us in this short undertaking from paying our full attention to the actual subject matter, namely, the question of what it means to be religious.

Any definition of non-physical processes and phenomena, that is, psycholog-

ical, mental, relational, and social, is the product of the human mind, and, as such, is subject to all limitations that it entails. Hence, postulating a definition of religion, no matter how carefully thought out and conceptualized, can never break through the limited scope of the mind. Negation and inquiry, however, may open horizons that are not visible to the human mind that normally relies on speculations based on limited knowledge surrounded by ethnic and cultural modifications. Through negation, which has to rely on observation and inquiry, we can shrink the circle of perception, and through inquiries, we can perforate the rigid web of a mind that relies on what it knows and inevitably mixes facts with imagination, speculation, and wishful thinking.

Admittedly, we may not be able to easily proceed in our inquiry when we exclude the divine notion of a specific deity, and we refuse to define religion. The history of philosophy, which is the history of thought, does not know any other framework; however, to find some pieces of the truth, and we must break through all frameworks and reach deeper levels of thought not bounded by bias and conditioning. How should we make any progress in understanding religion? To overcome this dilemma, we must establish a common understanding that everybody can access with some serious effort (and without the need of any specific knowledge). This common understanding must be all-inclusive to encompass the religious, irreligious, and anti-religious.

We can postulate the following hypothesis: There is meaning in the universe that is beyond our present cognitive capabilities and physical knowledge. This meaning is substantive, real, right, and true, and is not a function of time. The meaning may not be apprehended in its entirety but to approach it one must adhere to substantive, real, right, and true actions, which are not a function of time, in order to understand its nature beyond time. We refrain from labeling the meaning. Some, in human society, may understand it as divinity. Others may understand it as an immense collection of known and unknown physical laws of the universe that may or may not have metaphysical manifestations. As long as we all are on board with the assumption that the meaning is ubiquitous, we can proceed. If our audacious conjecture is false – i.e., if there is indeed no meaning in the universe –, then our note is merely an utterly futile entertainment of intellect.

So, what is religion? Rather, what does it take to be religious?

Perhaps the most paramount question is whether religion is a real phenomenon that exists outside of us or whether we have invented it. If we have constructed the concept of religion, then our understanding of religion and any action emerging from it would be about us, humans, would it not? If religion is true—something of substance that exists outside and beyond humanity—then we are, as sentient beings with consciousness, mere explorers and we cannot be its inventors, can we? What does this mean? Does this mean there could be no religion without human involvement? Does this mean religion can only manifest itself in a human-centric universe? If so, why is that? Because, as the beneficiaries of this view, if we have constructed the religion, this would constitute the most universal case of "conflict of interest" to establish the entire framework of religion around *Homo sapiens*. As far as we know, *Homo sapiens*

are not older than two, maybe three hundred thousand years. If religion has a meaning outside of us, it must be older than us, it must be above and beyond time; religion cannot start with us for it will also not end with us. Hence, we can resort to negation to overcome this immensely formidable challenge to reduce the search space that hopefully contains some answers.

So, what is religion not?

Religion is not selfishness. If I am religious, I ought to be concerned with others and sensitive to what happens outside of me. If the outside world is the manifestation of a substantive meaning, then occupying myself with the limited and petty personal world cannot be the focus of my behavior. Whatever may define us as a specific member of human society is part of selfishness: ethnicity, language, culture, and any other psychological, behavioral, or (appearance-based) physiological traits are part of the self that make us human beings as we are, and hence cannot be religious. Religion will have to contain us because we are contained in the universe, but it cannot be just about us.

Religion is not a cult of personality. If my selfishness is not religious, then naturally nobody else's is either. Building an aura of holiness and sanctity, whatever these words may mean, around another human being is externalized selfishness that is then meticulously reinforced by annual rituals for birthdays and demise of the favorite icons, or even more forceful martyrdom. Of course, the cult of personality is fundamentally there to take away from understanding the meaning and export it outwardly to an icon. A cult of personality, at any intensity, negates the immensity of religion; human beings are subject to primitive urges and needs, no one can claim to be beyond time when imprisoned by natural needs and mortality.

Religion is not fear. If I am comprehending the meaning of the universe, if I am psychologically connected to that meaning, then there should be no base for fear. Hence, anything that causes, promotes, reinforces, or cultivates fear is not religious. The concept of reward and punishment is intrinsically based on fear: either I am afraid that I may not get rewarded, or I am fearful of imminent punishment. When I am immersed in a real understanding of the universe—one may call it wisdom—then there should be no room for primitive and low-quality emotions that only inhibit my perception. Fear comes from uncertainty, from mortality, from limitedness, attributes that cannot be part of the universal substance that we call religion.

Religion is not an organization. The true and profound meaning of the universe does not need to and cannot be organized and structured by the limited human mind. Any organization implies limitedness; you can organize it if it is small, manageable, and obsequious. As such, traditions, rituals, ceremonies, liturgies, protocols, procedures, and customs are different shades of attempting to define a structure and to administer the truth. If there is structure and order in the universe, we may discover it but we cannot fabricate or imitate it, nor can we create our own. We may observe some of the order, and we may miss many aspects of the order that do not fit inside our restricted consciousness, but we cannot invent order. Invented order breeds disorder, and invented organization breeds disorganization.

Religion is not noise. The substantive meaning permeating the universe cannot be based on pandemonium. Commotion and tumult stipulate the absence of omnipotence and supreme authority; calmness and tranquility are not just implied, they are a must for a time-free omniscient substance. The unquestionable intelligent dominance of a true meaning cannot go with hubbub. Whatever the true religion is, it does not need advertising fanfare and affirmative screaming and shouting. Both psychological and physical noise are in sharp contradiction to the idea of omnipotence.

Religion is not an emotion. Grasping the depth of what it means to be a being in this universe requires the full extent of our cognitive abilities and the deepest layers of consciousness that we generally do not access. This requires utter seriousness and a solid rationale to observe reality and inquire into the unknown. Sentiments, feelings, and emotions are superficial and cloud perception. Most notably, emotions and sentiments always emerge from the self, from our needs and limited capacity.

Finally, the most important negation: religion is not violence. With violence, we predominantly mean any psychological and physical violation of sentient beings (humans and animals) to cause harm, pain, or suffering. As violence is the drastic surfacing of a lurking conflict, we may also say that religion is not conflict. Religion cannot cause conflict for the mere existence of conflict inevitably leads to some form of violence, psychologically, physiologically, or physically. Religion cannot cause conflicts because it is supposed to be—as the universal meaningful substance—the utmost inclusive imperative there is, and as such, it cannot bear divisions that give rise to conflicts, which can in turn transform into violence. The omnipresence of religion cannot show discontinuities at any separation lines; separations are the very prerequisite for violence and appear to be purely manmade. However, beyond the cosmological rationale behind the complete inclusiveness of religion, there is another aspect of violence that is irrefutably incompatible with religion: causing suffering in sentient beings. Creation and intelligence do not align with insensitivity toward suffering. We all assign the former to core religious values, although through exemption we generally degrade them into justified brutality in favor of our group. It is an irreconcilable contradiction to claim religiosity and to be indifferent toward suffering.