

Religion Has Two Faces: Benevolent and Malevolent.
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Militant atheists believe that religion is entirely negative, stupid, and harmful to human beings. Religious historians believe that without religion, a civilization has no moral guidance and no sense of community. Some of today's extremist religious sects are growing because modernization has produced such existential pain for them. A key sticking point for many, of course, is the emancipation of women. With freedom for women, they ask, what will happen to families?

We have always been both *homo sapiens* (wise men) and *homo religiosus* (religious men). Religion stems from two sources: fear and awe. Our ancestors feared wild beasts, natural disasters, and, of course, death. Fear brings with it belief in evil spirits and gods who must be placated with sometimes human sacrifices.

Our other religious instinct is awe: awe at the beauty of the moon, sun, stars, fire, seeds that sprout into plants, and the birth process of animals and humans. From this instinct comes reverent rituals, music, drama, and dance.

Human beings ask: Who am I? Where do I come from? How should my community behave and where do I belong in it? Why do we suffer and die? And where do we go after death? Religions that attempt to answer these questions give adherents a modicum of comfort.

Benevolent Religions

Almost all religions have a benevolent side. Ritual provides a comforting rhythm in our lives. Marking the calendar year through special rituals has given shape to the year from ancient Stonehenge, which marked the summer and winter solstices, through Medieval Catholicism, with its cycle of holidays marking the agricultural year.

Almost every temperate-zone civilization celebrates harvests and planting festivals, even today (wine grape harvests, Thanksgiving). The benevolence of religion is found in these community activities, the rituals performed in common.

Malevolent Religions

All human religions have some aspect of malevolence as well. Executing or murdering those who do not believe *correctly* has been with us for a long time. Most egregious in this regard are the monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. With only one god, worshippers of many gods and goddesses had to be crushed. Both Medieval Catholicism and Islam held inquisitions to enforce orthodoxy. Polytheism, for all its ills, was more tolerant.

Christianity began as a pacifist sect spun off from Judaism. For its first several centuries, priests and monks had a horror of violence and bloodshed. This changed with the unification of Christianity under Roman Emperor Constantine. He wanted one empire with one religion, and Jews, Pagans, and Zoroastrians were persecuted in the hope of conversion. The violence of Christianity continued in its conflict with Islam in the 10th century, itself a very violent new religion that was bent upon conversion at any cost. The Crusades of the 10th-through 13th centuries brought out the worst in both Christianity and Islam.

The last official religious violence in Christianity occurred in the Catholic-Protestant religious wars of the 17th century. The destruction was so ugly that it spurred a temporary distaste for religion altogether in a movement called *the Enlightenment*, which happily gave rise to the United States, a country with no established religion. This permits people to believe or not, change religions or not, without compulsion.

Today, Islam is in internal conflict. Extremists have reverted to Islam's original state of violence, warfare against *unbelievers* and the most benighted vision of what a divine power demands of them. They too will either have a reformation and enlightenment, or the religion will self-destruct. Many mainstream Muslims are already living by a secular standard.

However, when religious sects are no longer distinguishable from secular clubs and with decreasing connection to history, they lose members and are on the road to

collapse. The sects enjoying growth are those with ritual and family-supporting values, the idea of community, which has always been the bedrock of religion. But they are also more intolerant of diversity, as monotheism has always been.

Human societies have never thrived without religion, but we appear to be in need of something better than is out there today.

668 words

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