

Among primitive humans, the world was frightening and animated by benign or hostile spirits. Our ancestors feared the power of these unseen forces, believing that sacrifices could calm these spirits. Sacrifices ranged from sharing food (burning foods so that the smoke could reach the deities) or, in dire circumstances, human sacrifices to pacify an angry god or goddess.

As we developed as a species, these nature spirits evolved into a system of many gods and goddesses, spelled out with elaborate stories about the origins, relationships, and favoritism of gods for certain human beings. Polytheists were tolerant, willing to add the gods of strangers among them for worship. After all, one never knew

When monotheism (only one god) came into the world, people adapted several policies. The early Hebrew tribes believed that for them, there must only be their own god (henotheism). They did not disbelieve in the other gods, but forbade their worship among their own people. This changed in 539 BC, after the Jews, held captive in Babylonia, encountered an older unique religion, Zoroastrianism, with the belief that there was indeed only one god, and that he was god of the universe. The Jews became monotheists from then on.

Christianity, a spinoff of Judaism, soon became a powerful missionary religion. Their numbers grew when converted polytheists were permitted to revere their former gods and goddesses as saints. This decision was essential in the growth of Christianity as a religion that could grow beyond tribe (Judaism) or empire (polytheistic Rome). When Rome adopted Christianity (312 AD) as the state religion, their former religious toleration melted. Those not accepting the new god and new faith could be seen as enemies of the state. Religious intolerance became the norm.

Islam came into the world in two phases: when the Prophet Mohammad was a missionary seeking to convert his fellow Arabs, his first ten years introducing his new religion, and the final ten years (622-632 AD) in which he was a warlord, using terror and force to convert Arabs. The ultimate intolerance built into Islam was when Mohammad expelled all tribes from Arabia that did not accept his new religion. To this day, Arabia (Saudi Arabia) bars non-Muslims from the country.

Christianity was the first of the great monotheistic religions to officially abandon forceful conversion and to begin the long process of religious toleration. This came after several centuries of religious wars between the Catholics and protesting new cults (Protestants) when these sects signed a peace treaty (1648). Because Christianity was always separated from secular rule, it had constraints on what it could compel. Sects emerged with very differing interpretations of the faith. Quakers, in their pacifism, are the gentlest face of Christianity. Puritanism was the most dour form of a fear-based Christianity. Nobody was prosecuted for leaving any sect or converting to another.

The new British colonies in North America quickly morphed from passionate religious ideology (Puritan) to the beginnings of tolerance. In 1649, the colony of Maryland passed the Toleration Act, providing for freedom of worship for all Christians. The young nation that emerged in 1776, the United States, from the start separated faith from state governance. There was no state religion, but every peaceful religion was permitted to practice. George Washington himself, gave a speech in the country's first Jewish Synagogue welcoming Jews and promising religious toleration.

Western Europe, beginning with Protestant England, evolved in the 19th century to recognize the rights of peaceful religions to practice and to give full citizenship rights to Catholics after the Pope in Rome (reluctantly) gave rights to Protestants. That same pope, however, gathered Rome's Jews and locked them up again in the Ghetto.

Today, all liberal Democracies support religious freedom. However, China persecutes religions as destabilizing. Muslim-majority countries, revolting against the Enlightenment, resurrect the worst excesses of militant Islam. Russia has restored the Orthodox Church and the state has begun persecuting even Seventh-Day Adventists. Even polytheistic, supposedly secular India persecutes Muslims and Christians for insulting Hinduism. Bad customs are contagious.

We must insist on religious tolerance, but such tolerance must be reciprocal.

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