

Was There an Original Human Religion?
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Who would have thought as recently as the 1970s that we would be paying attention to an institution as old as religion\227and for the modern world, one that was obsolete? But here we are in 2010 with religious issues\227some of them deadly\227in the daily news

The Faith Instinct\227How Religion Evolved and Why it Endures, by Nicholas Wade, makes a case that religion not only has an evolutionary (survival) basis, but also all of today\227s religions have evolved out of predecessors, going back to the first one 50,000 years ago.

This is a new way to look at religion indeed. Wade even addresses today\227s secularists\227like myself\227who, although not a believer, practice the best civilizing rules that have come down to us through religion. We do things because they seem right\227not because we fear divine punishment\227but what seems right comes from ancient religion.

Each new religion as it forms attempts to wipe out its predecessor. The monotheists (such as Abraham and his descendants) attack polytheism; religions based on ethnicity (Judaism) becomes an international religion under its daughter religion, Christianity; and Islam tries to wipe out the religions of the people they conquered, as well as their own previous religion. All of these failed to wipe out the remnants of their prior faiths. One of the most illustrative of this is in Iran, where although almost all the original practitioners of Zoroastrianism were either converted, persecuted, or driven out, today\227despite Islam\227defiantly celebrate one of their oldest and most beloved Zoroastrian holidays\227Nowruz (New Day, or New Year).

Islam does not take kindly to competition, but Iranians and all the many people under their cultural sway (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Afghans, Bahrain, Dubai, Georgia, Kurdistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) celebrate the New Year on the day of the Vernal Equinox as they have for many thousand years. This primeval celebration was shaped by Zoroastrianism\227and bears its mark even today. It celebrates equal day and night, the return to light from darkness, springtime, fertility, new life, and joy. Even the Ayatollah Khomeini at his most ferocious could not stamp out this Iranian celebration.

After reading Wade\227s book, I started to see the primeval connections between not only Nowruz, but to Chinese New Year, Passover, and Easter. All of these celebrate Spring; extend at least a week or more (Nowruz is 13 days long; Chinese New Year almost so; Passover is one week; and the Easter season extends from Lent to Easter, 40 days). And all celebrate resurrection from death\227which fertility addresses. All involve foods and family celebration, wishes for good fortune and prosperity, and all deal with hope.

Food plays a major role. Iranians assemble a special table of symbolic items\227mostly foods but also including coins (like the Chinese). Jews also have a special assemblage of symbolic items on the Passover table\227with emphasis on history and fertility; the Chinese feature round-shaped foods that represent wholeness and the Moon; and Easter has Lamb and colored eggs, as do all the others, representing new life and fertility (and the return of eating meat after Lent).

The Iranian holiday has maintained some elements so old that most people cannot explain them. On the Wednesday before the New Year, people build little bonfires that every household member must jump over (an ancestor of Mardi Gras?). On the 13th day of the New Year, wheat sprouted in a dish is several inches tall. People desert all the cities for the wilderness where they cast these greens (representing last year\227s bad luck) into running streams. Luck is also a major fixation during the Chinese New Year, which ends with a dragon dance\227a symbol of fire, power, and luck.

We all think we are so removed from the past\227but it is not so. We still depend upon each other for survival, warmth, and love. We still have remnants of our most ancient ancestors dwelling among us in our dreams and celebrations. And nobody\227and nothing\227can blot that out. We are, like it or not, descendants of our most ancient religions.

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a writer, lecturer, and historian. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.

.