

PART I

Introduction thru Prehistory

(Chapters 1 - 5)



Religion

If one was to take the time to think about it¹, though our goal coming into this is most likely to understand religious practices and thinking as they are found in Judeo-Christian worship, religion in that sense is probably not the place to start. That may sound like a strange statement, but the point of it is that what we think of as 'religion', the structured, organization, dogma, doctrine, and practices of a belief system is not where we want to start. We want to begin by examining the human drive which creates these organizations, doctrines, dogmas and practices and thereby give meaning and context to them.

God

Okay, let us go for that 800 pound gorilla in the room. If it were not for God, we would not even be here right?² The reason that spirituality, religions, even atheism exists is because some sense (or sense of absence) informs us that there is something else out there, something beyond us, or at least that we must deal with the sensation that there is.

In a way, God is a difficult notion. In fact we could probably spend most of our time just discussing the different manifestations of the speculation on the idea of God alone, much less discussing all of the human incarnations of the idea. Yet 'God' notion is a basic³ concept. That is to say, that while there are fringe groups associated with the concept, the concept itself is not a fringe idea. The history of human development is a history bound up with the discussion of some sense of *the other*.

God then, for our purposes will start out as a *concept*. What is the *notion* of God? From there we can move into the different manifestations of God. First we must understand what we mean by the term 'God'. This makes sense when we begin exploring the manifestations, because for most of us the term 'God' denotes the present, monotheistic, Judeo-Christian-Muslim understanding of the term, as opposed to terms like 'gods' which is mainly associated with ancient or polytheistic religions. We will start by using it in a much broader way, denoting the concept rather than the manifestation. 'God' then, is not initially to be equated with the J-C-M denotation. The use of the term is strictly for ease and allows us to rely on a single term.

That said no attempt will be made to accommodate specific religious beliefs with the use of this term. This is not meant to be disrespectful or blasphemous, but again is for consistency in the discussion. It will be capitalized, because it is a proper name or subject.

Atheism and Agnosticism

Why talk about these in a course of study about God? Like the notion of 'God', we need to just get them out of the way. First we tackle *agnosticism*, which comes from a Greek word root (which we will see again later) *gnosis* or 'knowing'. The 'a' at the beginning means the negation of the word following it so *agnosis* means 'not knowing', or in this sense, not knowing if there is a God or not. In the given category, more people would probably categorize themselves as agnostics rather than atheists. *Atheism* is made up of the Greek root *theos*, or 'God', and the already familiar 'a', meaning 'no God'.

¹ With the assumption that because you are here you are....

² Ha, ha. I'm just getting started.

³ The use of the word 'basic' in all its forms early in the work should be seen as an indication of the depth of this work.

Agnosticism can embody a two-fold 'absent god' way of thinking. We might think of the American founding fathers and their *Deism*, especially as expressed by Jefferson, where God is merely a watchmaker who winds up the universe and walks away from it. It may also take on the role of a 'no-proof-there-is-yet-no-proof-there-is-not' uncertainty principle. Many who profess this second sense often speak of a longing for something else and an envy of those who possess certitude.

Next, at the risk of trivializing the arguments, let us say that there are also two philosophical approaches to atheism. The first, and probably oldest, is the thinking that experience tells us there is nothing except this life, so live life to the fullest. We can think of the Greek philosopher Epicurus when we hear this approach. Most likely we associate atheism with the philosophies of Karl Marx and especially of Friedrich Nietzsche (whether we know it or not) and his oft-misquoted 'God is dead' statement. This second approach is more of an attack on the 'idea' of God. It differs from the Epicurean approach in that it is focused more on the institutions which promote God than on the need for intellectual and empirical 'proofs' of God. That is to say, Nietzsche felt (for various and sundry reasons) that there was no need for God, and that the institutions which promoted God merely wish to weaken and enslave others to their own weakened and enslaved lives.

We do not want to spend too much time on these ideas at this time except to put them into their theological context. The thinking which informs them also informs theological thinking. We will keep them in the back of our minds and see how they influence the theological discussion.

The Sacred

So if we *know* there is a God, there must be something which *informs* us of that God. We know that the sun gives light because we can see that the sun gives light. Something tells us about something else. Without delving into epistemology (the study of *how we know*), we can say that we come to know things by two methods: experience and teaching. Experience has taught me that fire is hot. I know this (though I learned it the hard way⁴). I was taught similarly that $x = (-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac})/2a$ and though it is purely an intellectual concept, I *know* it. Experience and innate acceptance are the two modes of learning or as we might think of them experiential and mental, or by their philosophical names: *empirical* and *rational*. The point being that there is then some foundational notion which is the basis for our knowledge.

The foundational theological notion is called 'the sacred', from the Latin with a root similar in meaning to that of the root for 'religion'. The Latin noun is *sacer* or 'holy' and the verb *sacrare*, from which we get our word *sacrament*, which speaks of 'dedication', as in something 'dedicated to' or 'to set apart as holy', from which we get the word *consecrate*, which means to 'set apart or dedicate to the service of the deity'. You get the idea.

The sacred may be less about knowledge as we think of it and more about *understanding*, both empirical and rational. We 'sense' the sacred and we also 'intuit' the sacred. Whatever the source, we understand at multiple levels of experience and thought that there is something else out there. This idea of 'sacred' really comes down to a sense of 'the other', and not just that there is something other than me, like my family or friends, but that that 'other' is *apart* from me and most likely greater than me, worthy of respect and perhaps even deference. Possibly it starts (or at least can be paralleled) with the recognition of others around me. Conceivably it extends to the animals and natural phenomena which surround me. It definitely applies to things which I see as beyond my control and I perceive as being of greater power than I.⁵

⁴ As they say, 'Experience is the harshest of teachers; it exacts the payment first and teaches the lesson afterwards.'

⁵ It is not the purpose of this work, nor is it in its scope to address all of the arguments for or against this notion of God and of the sacred. If you want that, write your own book.

Whatever the source, we assign a sense of 'holy' to that 'other' and we practice deference to it. Holy is the reaction the sacred. We can see this on so many levels in human behavior, starting from recognition of hierarchical authority to respect for that authority (think matriarchs, kings or warriors).⁶ On its own, *sacred*, for our purposes will apply not only to that which we call God but things we associate with God.

Mysterion

As implied above, this sense of *sacred* can be caused by or at least often can contain another element, that of the 'unknown' or the 'unknowable'. The word we use to express that comes to us from the Greek word *mysterion*. It does not mean *mystery* as we might think like a puzzle to be solved or something which cannot be explained, but rather something that is *mystical*, i.e. associated with the sacred. In our discussion, the term refers to something that is outside of our experience, natural reason, or understanding and therefore *requires* some type of extra-human (divine) revelation in order to have meaning, or at least be understandable. The word we might be more familiar with is its Latin translation: *sacrament*, hence the relationship between *sacer* and *mysterion*.

When we think about this we want to think of it in active terms. Mystery or sacrament speaks to the *encounter* with the sacred, the *active* seeking and the act of a perceived response of the sacred. Since it is the *sacred*, then that encounter takes place outside of 'normal' or 'secular' or 'profane' space, i.e. those places where we do not directly encounter the sacred. And like the sacred, there is a type of knowledge which accompanies mystery. We *know* that it is there. We *know* that it is different than the normal world. We *know* some of the attributes (positively or negatively) of the sacred. Mystery is not something which is unobtainable or can be dismissed because it is not directly knowable, but is the word we use to describe something we know which is beyond the directly knowable.

Once again, 'Knowledge' in this sense is understood as perhaps more of a perception than a scientific proof or certainty, an understanding rather than a certainty. The understanding that this kind of knowledge exists is somewhat based in speculation. This is not to say there is not a degree of certainty, but that it is not a certainty in a secular, scientific sense. Mystery implies a connection to something that we do not fully understand yet which we acknowledge and seek, and can have a type of knowledge of. We might think of it as we think of the scientific theories of relativity or black holes. We did not have, for many years, certain 'proof' of black holes, except speculative, logical, or rational mathematical 'proof'.

Mystery and proof may seem at odds, and are often put there, but mystery is the very human trait of accepting things we cannot grasp, see, smell or touch.

Religionem

Okay, now that we have a few terms and basics under our belt, let us take on some preliminary ideas. We need to make some distinctions and we will start with the word 'religion' which comes from the Latin for 'respect for what is sacred' or the equivalent statement 'reverence for the gods', and is derived from the verb *religare* which means 'to bind fast', and by that, not the rodeo calf-roping fast, but fast as in 'stuck fast' (though, I suppose, one could argue a similarity). As indicated above, there is a connection between the idea of the sacred and the acknowledgement of the sacred. The sacred demands some sort of response and that response is first, the recognition and acknowledgement of the sacred and second, is the active seeking and binding of oneself to the sacred.

⁶ As with the above, to keep the record straight, this work is not an attempt at an anthropological, psychological, or sociological exploration of human behavior. There will be on occasion a note of certain behaviors which can be seen in or associated with religious belief and practice. To that point, as with everything else in this work, the author in no way purports to be an expert or trained professional in the arts of human observation.

Religion therefore is both a noun and a verb. It also implies something physical and spiritual in that via it we pass through the profane to reach the sacred (symbols) and yet by means of it also have a direct connection with the sacred (signs). This two road system of signs (things which contain their meaning) and symbols (thing which point to a meaning beyond themselves) fully engages us, using both the physical and the rational.

So religion, in this sense, is the attitude with which one approaches the sacred. It is the *sign* of the decision to bind *and* the action of binding oneself to the sacred, manifested in symbolic practices and rituals. The broader understanding of religion in its organizational sense springs from this meaning but is different. We need to keep this distinction in mind during our early discussions. This meaning will eventually succumb to the later, broader understanding to which we are more familiar.

Theologia

From the 'practical' we turn to the 'rational'. Ultimately, we are studying God and studying our reaction to not just the *concept* of God but to the *reality* of God. So what is theology? Well, theology is, as the Greek word implies, the study of the *Theos*, of God. Okay, got that out of the way – we can all go home now right? If only it were that simple.

In these early stages it is the relationship between God, theology and religion into which we delve, in hopes of coming to a greater understanding of the nature of worship and religious practices. But as with all of the other ideas we will cover we are going to start with the *idea* of theology. Theology does require intellectual disciplines but in the end, theology itself is a *lived experience*, not merely an intellectual exercise. The free exploration of the notions and ramifications of God are not without consequence, meaning that this thinking must inform our lives and in the end affect our behaviors in one way or another.

That said, theology, as a discipline, does require a certain intellectual framework and understanding of boundaries. This is where the idea of 'Faith' (*NB* the *capital F*) comes in, that is, there is a direct correlation between Faith and theology. There must be a set of understood and agreed upon truths from which speculation can arise; without an agreed upon set of meaningful truths, then theology is mere speculation and applies to nothing or at least has no bearing due to the disconnected and flighty nature of its conclusions. For that reason, while Theology relies upon this basic foundation it is not merely an exercise in justification, that is, coming up with reasons for why something is contained within the repository of Faith (the cart before the horse syndrome). It is a search for an understanding of the mysteries, the divine revelation which makes known to us the inner workings and meaning of the universe. The Faith, the Mysteries, the Revealed Truths, these then are the foundation of theological inquiry and of practice. This is where theology works, in between the Faith and the practice of that Faith, in making sense of mystery through intellectual pursuits but strictly for the enhancement of the practice of that Faith.

Dogma and Doctrine

Okay so then if theology interacts with Faith then we need to take a moment and describe that repository of truths, its intermediaries and dependents. Theology, dogma, and doctrine then are not the same things though the three are certainly dependent on one another. Theology can help to refine both dogma and doctrine and dogma and doctrine provide the framework within which theology operates.

So what are they?

- Dogma:** the principles or tenets upon which a belief system is built.
- Doctrine:** the body of or particular teachings of a belief system.

Table 1 – My Karma Ran Over My Dogma

Simply, dogmas are the ideas behind doctrine. Dogma is the basic ‘truths’ which a belief system translates into thought and action. These truths are based in a variety of experiences, stories, traditions and reason. They are arrived at in various ways, but are understood as ‘revealed’ and so they are the foundational truths which guides and informs any discussion of said truths.

Doctrines are the teachings and ramifications of dogma. Doctrine has the distinction of being rather strict, but as it is the definitions by which one explains and hands on dogma, you can understand how there might be a strict control on both dogma and doctrine. Doctrine requires a caste of authority by which dogma are preserved, interpreted, and passed on.

Philosophos

One might ask, as with atheism and agnosticism, where philosophy fits into all this. Then again, one may not. Either way, I am going to broach the subject. Philosophy terms and influences permeate theology (and *vice versa*), so you have to get used to the idea that it will come up in polite conversation. Philosophy is as old as the questions that it and theology seek to answer. Philosophy for us is the disciplined pursuit of wisdom and should not be confused with *ideology*, to which it often is.

What we are discussing in this chapter is the *language* of the sacred. The common vocabulary we use will allow us to discuss complex ideas within fixed boundaries. We are going to introduce and use words like *a priori* and *a posteriori* and that is where philosophy comes to bear. These are specific terms of philosophical rhetoric, and there will be a very *brief* definition and, if necessary, background, to any philosophical terms we use.⁷ They are important because they are often the language used to explain theological concepts, meaning that the language of philosophy is used as readily as sacred language in order to use words familiar to the listening audience. When Paul speaks to the Greeks on the Areopagus, he uses language that they understand, terms like ‘wisdom’ and concepts like ‘rebirth’. When the Christian apologists of the first and second century wrote to their fellow Romans, they introduce philosophic terms like ‘*Logos*’.

There is and has been a struggle within theology of the place and usefulness of philosophy. Some feel it is the introduction of philosophical thinking which damages or confuses theological thinking; some think that theology is best served by taking profane thinking and bringing it to perfection within theology. This work will not pretend to answer that argument, merely show the place philosophy has played or how theology has influence philosophy. Though, as a personal note, most people come to theological issues through philosophical discussion and that is all I will say about that.

Putting It All Together

Religion and theology are two different things, and yet one cannot really exist without the other. The existence of both speaks to the constant effort of humans to reach out and touch the sacred, to give meaning and purpose not just to their own lives but to the world around them.

Theology takes many different forms, as we shall discuss, but in the end it speaks to the reality of the idea of ‘God’. It is a lived experience not merely an intellectual exercise. The truths discussed in theology are *ontological* and *teleological* in nature, bound into the very fabric of our being, or else what is the purpose in discussing them?

As with any exploration or discussion, one must keep in mind not one’s own bias and background but the context and situation of the people involved. Our sensibilities, our morays, and our prejudices cannot come into play here. We must leave behind biases and intellectual hubris in order to get down to the level, the gut level if you will, of the concepts we are approaching. Many will seem foreign or strange; many terms may be used differently than we are used to hearing them. The utilization of

⁷ For a more in-depth look at philosophy and philosophical notions see our sister-work *15 Minute Philosophy*.

theology, as with its purpose – though not necessarily for us surveyors perhaps but for the people who construct it – is not merely as an intellectual exercise. It is, as Anselm says, *'faith seeking understanding'* and we must keep that in mind.

The extent of this work will be to skim some very basic ideas and does not reflect the large amount of research and history which has already been assembled on this subject. The various and sundry methods which have been employed over the years have produced an impressive bibliography and anything lacking in this work may certainly be found there. If this is sufficient for you then be prepared to bemoan the fact that many juicy bits have been left out and that whole points of view have been ignored. If that is still sufficient then we have an understanding.

"The problem with writing about religion is that you run the risk of offending sincerely religious people, and then they come after you with machetes. So I am going to be very sensitive here, which is not easy, because the thing about religion is that everybody else's appears stupid."

Dave Barry, *He Knows What He Writes*

Telling The Truth: *Myth*

Myth is a word you do not see very often, at least not in polite company.

The position of experience, of *a posteriori* understanding, is not to be discounted in understanding the motivations for belief. Myth often reflects learned behaviors, lessons learned from different types of behavior as well as sacred mysteries (i.e. revelation).

Physics and Metaphysics

First let us start with something perhaps a bit more solid, i.e. sneak in some more basic terms we must come to terms with. These two words of this section title come to us through the philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) from way back in the Golden Age of Greece. Before we jump right in, a word about another word whose meaning (for us) comes to us through Aristotle: *substance*. The world, according to Aristotle, is made up of *substances*. Substance is the word he uses to describe 'what a thing is'; its *essence*, its *being* would be similar translations. Humans have the substance of a 'human', as dogs have the substance of a 'dog'. In other words, all the things that make a human a human or a dog a dog are *its* substance. This means that if you remove anything from its substance, then it ceases to be that thing. Substance is fairly static because if it were in flux then nothing would be anything.

But what about those things which are in flux? These are a thing's *accidents*. These are not mistakes or anything worthy of an insurance claim (minus the deductible⁸) but attributes which are *accidental* to a thing's *substance*. The fact that you have red hair is not part of your substance, but an *accident* to it. That is to say, if you had blond hair instead of red hair you would still *be* you. You are a person regardless of hair color (though perhaps not as stylish).

Alright, that said let us get to the subject at hand.

Physics: physics is the Greek word for 'Nature' and is therefore more than the modern study of motion and matter (though the science does derive its name from this Aristotelian sense). For our purposes it implies all things 'physical' and everything in the physical world. Very basically, Physics deals with the *physical substances* of the universe, those things which we perceive through our senses or *empirically*.

Metaphysics: metaphysics are the substances that are *beyond the physical*. There are things which we seem to know about which do not fall into the category of things which are the physical world. Metaphysics is the study of those substances. These are often things which are known not through empirical perception but by the mind or *rationally*.

We can over-simplify this by thinking that physics talks about the *what* and metaphysics talks about the *why*, or that physics deals with Nature and metaphysics with the nature of Nature, but we have over-simplified this enough. For Aristotle, metaphysics was the 'first philosophy' in that understanding *being* and non-physical substances gave foundation for understanding the world, i.e. understanding metaphysics made the physical world understandable.

So what does all that have to do with the understanding which leads one to be able to price tea in China? Physics speaks to the experience of *wonder and awe* about the world around us, as Aristotle would put it. Myth speaks not just to those aspects of our life which are ethereal, but to our very nature, in the depths of our being. Physics and Metaphysics are both the realm of myth. So it is more than just the physical beauty around us which inspires to reach for the sacred. Metaphysics deals with the

⁸ Ha, ha...a logic joke.

intangibles which we confront in life, the things which give basis for and make sense of the empirical world around us.

As a final note, Aristotle placed the body within physics and the soul within metaphysics. You can probably guess that that will doubtless have some effect later on.

Philosophical Aside: Initially meta-physics was most probably just a term pertaining to the fact that the book of Aristotle's notes on the subject came *after* his book on physics, but it fits the idea for which we use it now.

What Time Is It?

Time may seem like an odd thing to bring up at this moment, but it is essential to understanding religious thinking. If we want to put it in terms of the previous section, we can see that there is a *physical* and *metaphysical* notion to time. We experience a physical world of linear time, of cause and effect but also a metaphysical world of 'memory', of time which is not linear. The Greeks had a handle on this, and they distinguished between the types of time, as they did between the types of love. The two words they used were *chronos* and *kiaros*.

Chronos: watch time. This is the time we operate within and are most familiar with. It includes not just hours and minutes but also seasons and other notable cycles. It is completely linear in its nature.

Kiaros: *God's* time. This is the time which surrounds *chronos*. It is time outside of time if you will. It does not play by the same rules as chronological time, nor is it bounded by the same restrictions. This is the time of memory, of creation, of time before time. It is non-linear, it crosses over and doubles-back, it can jump from one point to another.

Kiaros is the time of myth, though certainly chronological time can enter into it. In the end, the stories recounted in myth, while they happened at 'some time' in the past, are real in the past, the present, and will continue to be real in the future. They are *timeless*.

Say What?

One of the offshoots of this sense of time is the idea of universals, of things which transcend the moment and any relativity that brings. Universals may be arrived at *a posteriori* or may be innate *a priori* things. Whatever the source they are recognized as something that applies without question and across the board. Generally, we can point to things like 'it is bad to kill each other' as a generally recognized universal. It transcends space and time and applies to all humans and seems to be an innate understanding within most humans and even translates into most societies. Myth is a form of preserving and teaching these universals.

With that in mind, our word for definition here is 'Tradition'. This is the proper noun tradition with a big 'T' not a small one. Tradition is part of Faith, one of the sources for those things which are considered true, and are not open to change or broad interpretation. They differ from the small 't' traditions, which should be more associated with the word 'practices' and are in fact flexible and changing. We will further this definition by saying that there are two types of Tradition, *oral* and *written*, but as we shall see, the way we will most often use it refers more to the oral than written. Since so many cultures did not quickly develop written languages, oral Tradition develops first and for that reason always holds equal sway with the later written Tradition. For future reference, we will refer to oral Tradition simply as 'Tradition' and written Tradition simply as 'Scripture' to allow us to easily distinguish between the two.

Oral Tradition (Tradition): When it comes to belief systems, the primary mode for collecting, expanding, and handing-on of the dogma (tenets) of that system is initially done *orally*. This means that stories *verbalized* are the primary means of teaching *and* preserving. Whether they are spoken, sung, or

chanted versions of the stories, they are understood as not written down but recounted orally and retained within memory.

It is the shared memory which the oral tradition highlights. It implies a certain amount of dynamic, living knowledge. Not so much that it changes or is in flux (by its definition) but that it is contained within *living* beings. It moves with the people as they migrate; it is mixed up with the skill of the storyteller. It is not dependent upon the experience of the individuals. The knowledge is connected to the group through the living individuals. The destruction of a pre-literate culture usually means the death of its myths and vice versa. The encountering of other cultures may also result in the mixing of myths and oral traditions as well as the loss of meaning and context for some myths.

Written Tradition (Scripture): Eventually, over time, a more permanent system of retaining and passing on of dogma develops. With the rise of stability (agriculture, cities, etc.) written languages take over from the oral Tradition, though the art of storytelling does not die out. Myth moves from a dynamic living thing to a static thing. In some ways this is good; it is no longer dependent upon individual transmittal in order to be retained and is not subject to the same loss as with the loss of culture, as long as the language can be read. Not every culture rises to the level of written language, and so they retain their Tradition but for those who do, the same problems of consistent transmission exists. A case in point would be Hebrew. The original written language did not record vowel sounds. Some of those pronunciations were lost over time (specifically the **Tetragrammaton**, or the four letter Hebrew name for God), and the marks made later reflect a 'best guess' at the pronunciation. Konia Greek, the Greek of the Christian Scriptures, or 'New Testament', produces a similar quandary. Like most written languages until then, there were no punctuation marks, and one had to know how best to copy or translate a given sentence. Customs also change and words loose meaning, which also presents a challenge to later reading of a particular passage.

Written stories require a standardized form of study called *hermeneutics*, explicitly because they are written down. Comparative studies serve to highlight and explain meanings sometime hidden by time and practice.

Tell Me a Story

Oral Tradition speaks to a basic human trait: story-telling. I am not talking about lying (though many might argue that it too is a basic human trait) but the 'art' of storytelling. Often when we want to express ourselves or reveal something about ourselves we do not just spout the fact 'I was born' but more in the form of 'did I tell you the story about the day I was born?' There is a richness of communication which is missing from facts. I can tell you that Edison invented his filament for his light bulb on October 22, 1879, or I could make history come alive and tell you the story of how he came up with that filament, the hours of work, experimentation and failure which resulted in that success. I could throw in the "I didn't fail 3,000 times. I found 3,000 ways how not to create a light bulb," quote and add dimensions and depth to the fact.

That is storytelling. Storytelling is not about facts but speaks to the human hunger for *understanding*. We tell stories to explain, to reveal, and to pass on. Another person or event comes to life in a story; ancestors shed light on the present day when we hear their story. Stories hold not just the facts but the explanation as well: they tell us where we came from and who we are.

Revelation

Before we move on, a quick re-cap and summary of an idea we have touched on. Revelation is the word for the transfer of divine knowledge to humans. It is bound up with the idea of mystery, truths which are unknowable through any human experience and are only available through divine gift. It is important to understand that this is not human knowledge nor is it fathomable through human means.

There might be some confusion, in that many things seem *innate* to us, but that is the result of the gift of this divine knowledge, the way we are made, so to speak and not through any ability or action done by humans. This is knowledge which is different than the distance of the sun from the earth or how to create a microchip. In a sense it is empirical but only because we have been given the means to sense it and the mental capacity to connect the dots.

Mythos

Alright, down to the nitty-gritty. *Mythos* is a Greek word meaning 'story', 'legend', or 'plot'. Our use of the word is toward the 'story' meaning, but that does not fully capture how we mean the word. Myth is the connector of a fact to an explanation. That is to say, the story is more than just a tale told to entertain or amuse. It is the use of a story to connect two things together with meaning, an understood, observed or lived fact and the explanation of that fact. The sun moves through the sky...but why/how? Apollo pulls it along with his chariot sort of thing.

The meaning of the word 'myth' moved from what we might call its original meaning of 'religious story' containing truth to 'legend', 'folktale', or 'untrue rumor' or even 'irrational' or 'implausible' through the dissolution or the dismissal of the connection which created and gave purpose to the myth by the initial teller. This can be a process that often happens over time but may be more immediate. We can see this in what the Judeo-Christian worldview has done with the Greek and Roman stories and as atheists have done with the Judeo-Christian stories.

About the mid-1800's myth begins to take on its present negative connotation. By way of idle speculation we can point to several cultural factors that play into this: the rise of Neo-Classicism and the insertion of these myths against a Christian framework, the rise of Marxism, Existentialism and the burgeoning sciences and the dismissal of all non-empirical thinking. The demands for 'proof', and by that meaning 'empirical proof', meant that stories or understandings which could not produce or stand up under the 'rigorous scientific scrutiny' were dismissed as superstitious and false. The word 'primitive' also starts to take on a more negative connotation.

This began to change after 100 years or so. *"Studied alive, myth . . . is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom. . . . These stories . . . are to the natives a statement of a primeval, greater, and more relevant reality, by which the present life, facts and activities of mankind are determined, the knowledge of which supplies man with the motive for ritual and moral actions, as well as with indications as to how to perform them."* (Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*)

The study of myth in a 'scientific' anthropological forum began to transform the understanding 'myth' into a metaphysical truth-story. This re-established meaning happened in the last 70 years or so, thanks in part to our first guests.

Eliade

Mircea Eliade is perhaps a somewhat controversial figure to start with but he wrote several very influential books, specifically *Myth and Reality* and *The Sacred and the Profane*. Eliade, who was among other things a religious historian, took up the growing fascination with indigenous cultures and what they would be able to tell us about ourselves, seeing them as a sort of comparative *Dead Sea Scrolls* source for cultural beliefs. This was probably also due to thinkers from the *Structuralism* school, like

Michel Foucault who advocated a method of study known as 'archeology', which is basically⁹ 'digging' into the past to understand the present, or to put it another way, an objective 'how did we get here' approach to things.

From his research Eliade concluded that 'primitive' humans really only see the world through two lenses: the *sacred* (pertaining to God) and the *profane* (pertaining to the World). "*All the definitions given up till now of the religious phenomenon have one thing in common: each has its own way of showing that the sacred and the religious life are the opposite of the profane and secular life.*" (*Patterns in Comparative Religion*) What he is getting at is basically that when we look at the world we used to 'see' things that are strictly sacred in nature and things which are strictly profane. But, he concedes, defining the sacred is a difficult task "*almost everywhere the religious phenomena are seen as complex, suggesting a long historical evolution.*" (*ibid*) He explores this history in *The Sacred and the Profane*, and we will focus on three ideas he presents therein.

RELIGIOUS MAN

The sense of humans as 'religious beings', that is, people who exercise practices and beliefs associated with the sacred, goes beyond just recognizing that there is a sacred and a profane, it is the actions of the humans who *realize* this duality. So at the heart of everything is the notion of 'religious man'. This is a fundamental notion, a 'primitive' if you will, independent of culture yet is understood best as people "*of all pre-modern societies*", for whom anything in nature could be the subject of *religious experience*: stones, trees, weather, whatever. Basically, it is the explanation of pre-modern cultural influence and the assignment of sacred. For religious man the sacred equals power.

Religious man recognizes not just that there is a sacred but tries to connect with that sacred because of a desire to be part of its nature as ultimate reality and to its power, as well as what he called the "*enduringness and efficacy*"¹⁰ that is the nature of the sacred. Eliade sees this level, religion itself, a formalization of Faith, as a 'higher order', if you will, not just acting or believing out of ignorance but actively seeking a relationship with the sacred. So, for simplicity's sake, you might think of cave dwelling ancestors who huddle against the lightening from fear and ignorance, assigning it some external as 'pre-religious man', and folks who design myths and rituals to honor and abate the lightening as being 'religious man', and we, with our TVs and I-pods being 'non-religious man' or separated from the sense of the sacred.

Religious man is the one who lives in relationship to the sacred. "*All of the great Mediterranean and Asiatic religions have mythologies. But it is better not to begin the study of myth from the starting point of, say, Greek or Egyptian or Indian mythology.... it is better to begin by studying myth in traditional and archaic societies, reserving for later consideration the mythologies of people who have played an important role in history.... the foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities*" (*Myth and Reality*)

SACRED SPACE

Religious man understands the two worlds of the sacred and the profane and is able to identify sacred and profane spots as well as set aside (*consecrate*) physical space in which to connect to it. Eliade claims that, whereas for us today (i.e. *non-religious man*), the world is seen

⁹ There's that word again.

¹⁰ The meaning of enduringness is obvious, but efficacy means having an effect and not just any effect but the effect for which it exists.

as neutral, that is, every space is like every other space, even if we recognize the 'getting away from it all' aspect, it is merely 'special', but not as *sacred*.¹¹ We do not assign a sense of getting in touch with God to any space. For *religious man* as we have said, the world is experienced as partly sacred and partly profane. Religious man does not 'get away from it all'; he goes to a specific spot in order to *find* and interact with the sacred, that is, 'get to it all'. *Religious man* understands the world as having two opposite sides, containing both sacred and profane and given the choice opts to find the sacred and dwell there. In developed religious systems, there are three levels to the cosmos; not just the things we normally think of as sacred (heaven) and profane (earth) but an *underworld* (not just hell) as well. We can see sacred mountains, sacred wells, sacred 'connecting points' if you will between the sacred and the profane, between the here and the there. There is a before, a now, and a later (recall the time thing from above) which also applies to space.

The sacred is the sense of order in the chaos of the profane; it is the aim and center for *religious man*; he seeks it out in order to dwell in peace and harmony. Sacred Space reflects that sense of order and therefore comfort and peace.

ETERNAL RETURN

There is one last idea to take in, but one which arises often. Eliade talks about a concept he calls 'eternal return' or "*return to origins*" an idea that is often tied to ritual actions but it is also a part of myth itself. It means the ability to always return to the time of the myth, that is, to go to the time of the events described in one's myths and participate in that moment. It is a somewhat different view from the philosophical concept of *eternal return* as espoused by the likes of Nietzsche which is that everything repeats itself. Eliade's form invokes a sense of memory. This sense of 'memory' is not a 'remember when we went to the movie and it was nice' but a going back and reliving that 'going to the movie'; experiencing the emotions, the thoughts, the power, the actual event itself as if you are participating in it or *had* participated in it; and not just you, but someone who did not directly experience it can do so as well. We are able, through some means, to return to the very moment of the event being recounted. Myths therefore are not static, dead history but dynamic and alive events as real to us as to those who first experienced them. "...it is the first manifestation of a thing that is significant and valid, *not its successive epiphanies...* On the occasion of the re-presentation of the myths, the entire community is renewed; it rediscovers its 'sources', relives its 'origins.'" (*Myth and Reality*)

The rote repetition of an event is not the purpose of myth, but its ability to transport us back to that original 'manifestation' and allow us all to relive it.

Campbell

Joseph Campbell is probably best known for his influence on George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga and for his collaboration on *The Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers. But he is a major player in the modern view of myth. His approach is different than Eliade's and yet they complement one another in terms of the modern understanding (at least academically) of myth. Whereas Eliade was looking to understand the origins and uses of myth, Campbell was looking at it from the point of view that there is a shared, basic, core 'truth' which permeates myths and which exists not just in 'religious man' but in all humanity, even 'non-religious man'. Spirituality, in all its forms is the reason for myth and ritual. Spirituality is a search for that intangible force from which all comes and to which all returns.

¹¹ A recent exploration of this can be seen in the 2010 book *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* by Sean Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus.

Campbell championed this notion of a common 'end' for the spiritual journey, that all spirituality is basically a search for the same primal, unknown force from which everything came, within which everything exists, and to which everything will return. In his thinking, the evidence for its existence is in the sheer number of stories about it. Although they each highlight different things, or use different characters, he saw that not as a detriment to myth (making it untrustworthy or of little value) but its power; that at the center of every myth was the sacred, that primal, elemental force which because it is not truly 'knowable' forces a myriad of words for what has no words. It is the thing which exists before words, below words, beyond words.

It can however, be touched, and the knowledge of it expressed through ritual actions and stories, though at best, because there are no exact words for it, through "*metaphors*" (*Transformations of Myth Through Time*). This means that for example, the two Genesis 'myths' of Creation in the Bible (or any creation myth) ought not be taken as conflicting or as a literal description of actual events, but rather studied for their poetic, *metaphorical* meaning, looking for clues concerning the fundamental truths they presents to us about the actual world and our existence. Because we do not have actual words to describe the sacred, we use words metaphorically to express the inexpressible and through correct study we can come to have the inexpressible understood. Ultimately, the thing to be understood is that just as all the myths express the same primal reality all religions touch on the same fundamental, transcendent, and universal truths.

The focus of religion (no matter which one) is to raise the consciousness up to these fundamental truths and beyond the dualistic world. Each religion "*masks*" the same truth...that is, it's all in the packaging. At the core is the truth about reality, regardless of the questions which the world poses or the way in which a religion chooses to answer it. The world wants us to think in "*pairs of opposites,*" (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) like Birth/Death, Right/Wrong, Yin/Yang, Being/Non-Being, when in truth the truth lies between them and myth provides the answers. In Campbell this results in a sense of wasted time, of time spent trying to define the questions rather than seeking the answers, when instead we should be seeking the answers which lie within.

Putting It All Together

Myth is the language we use to express ideas which are inexpressible in profane language. It is metaphysical in nature, meaning that it is 'real' to us but perhaps are not 'real' in a physical sense. Myths are expressions of understanding, of concepts which inform our lives at their very roots; ideas and answers which lie beyond words and experience.

We are not talking fables here, but stories which *explain* and not merely teach. They reach into the very bowels of our being and express longings, certainties, fears, desires, and hopes which we *know* but cannot articulate. If the aim of religion is to teach us 'how to live' then myth is the vehicle. And a vehicle in many ways, by not just transporting shared cultural memory to us but actually transporting us to the spot where we can participate in that memory, live and experience it for ourselves and therefore learn the truths it holds as everyone does who has or will ever participate in it.

Myth is not about speculation. Myth is about truth. Not just truth which is the answer to a question but truth which eliminates questions. What is it that we really learn from the Genesis Creation myths? The truth that God physically created the world in seven days or the truth that God created everything? That it is the reason we have seven days in the week or that we do not have to worry about why we are here or where we came from?

The most important thing is that of how we live in the world; do we mold the sacred to fit the world or do we mold the world to fit the sacred?

“These common thoughts are expressed in a shared public language, consisting of shared signs...a sign has a ‘sense’ that fixes the reference and is ‘grasped by everybody’ who knows the language...”

Noam Chomsky, *Language and Thought*

“And Colin thought: Because like say I tell someone about my feral hog hunt. Even if it's a dumb story, telling changes other people just the slightest little bit, just as living the story changes me. An infinitesimal change. And that infinitesimal change ripples outward – ever smaller but everlasting. I will get forgotten, but the stories will last. And so we all matter – maybe less than a lot, but always more than none.

And it wasn't only the remembered stories that mattered...but that there's a place in the brain for knowing what cannot be remembered.”

John Green, *An Abundance of Katherines*

“There is not a time to pray and a time not to pray...you hold the hand of God. Sometimes you talk and sometimes you don't but you are with God all the time.”

Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Soul of My Soul*

Hope And Other Four Letter Words

It is the nature of our discussion which calls not only for the discussion of terms but also of foundational ideas. Before we jump in, let us look at a few of these notions and lay down the groundwork and framework for our further discussions.

Modern Thinking

As has been alluded to, one of the things we have to contend with is ‘modern’¹² thinking on the subject of belief. This is the idea that *faith/belief* precludes or excludes *rational* thought (either philosophic or scientific) or that it relies upon a type of certainty which removes (or denies) *any* level of doubt. We can see this in that many of the modern philosophical systems which even allow for metaphysics produce a stunted metaphysics, such as Phenomenology, and that as specifically taught by Martin Heidegger or Ayn Rand’s Existentialism.¹³

Faith versus Belief

As always, something to get out of the way is not just the meaning of terms but of some of the basic concepts as well, so in this chapter (it being no different) we will try to start tackling the next level of definitions.

If we wanted to, we could simplify human behavior down to two functions: *Thought* and *Action*. Okay, we want to, so let us start there to break it down (rap beat please). We can let *thought* represent all of the experience and understanding we have gathered over time as well as any rational musings and universals. Then we can classify everything else, the act of perceiving, of physical operations, and pragmatic task accomplishment as *action*. There are things we think and there are things we do, and certainly one should inform the other.

Once we do that, we can begin to think about the way we ‘know’ something. But as we have already touched on, ‘*Knowing*’ is a broad term. In itself it implies many forms of understood truth, of levels of certainty of modes of grasping and perception. In this sense *Action* is acting upon thought. For the moment then, let us set action aside.

When it comes to thinking (as I warned you) we can start with two terms: *a priori* and *a posteriori*. These are rather technical Latin philosophical and theological terms, but they apply to *how* we know something, its source or the modes by which we identify the source of something we know. The simplest way to think about them is that *a priori* speaks to those things which we ‘just know’ or can *induce*¹⁴, like $1 + 1 = 2$. It applies officially to those things which we know *before* (*a priori*) we have any experience of them. *A posteriori* speaks to those things which we can *deduce*, like gravity or that the Speckled Band is a snake. It applies officially to those things which we know *after* (*a posteriori*) all of the evidence is before us, that is, in light of experience.

You can see how this has bearing. Belief in God or the divinely revealed truths (the Faith) which speak about God, as well as the practice of ritual and myth-telling, may seem to involve only one or the other, but that is an incorrect assumption. The world of Faith involves both, in a situation where one often feeds the other. This is the thinking that is often brought under fire. We may see God all around us

¹² As a note, the word ‘modern’ does not mean ‘contemporary’ but is a moniker for the time period which began in the 16th century and lasted about 200 years; hence the quotes.

¹³ This is because the other systems which do not allow for metaphysics dismiss any such discussion outright.

¹⁴ We may argue the nature of *a priori* at some other stage in the discussion.

in nature, but for some that is not an *a posteriori* truth but an irrational sentiment because for them there is no empirical evidence that God exists just because Nature exists. All we can conclude is that Nature exists. [The truth is that this is something we do all of the time regardless of it being scientifically or empirically based knowledge or rational insight.] The idea being, in response to that, that because Nature is the way it is, I just *know* that God exists.

Anselm, in the 11th century, posited the ‘non-Faith’ based answer as “God is that thing of which nothing greater can be imagined.” God then, is the greatest thing we can know.

I am sure that you have noticed that even though this section has both the words Faith and Belief in it I have not really addressed that but instead focused on *knowing*. We often want to juxtapose Faith and knowing, implying that one is rational and the other is not. In this case we really want to say that knowing is knowing, and has both an *a priori* and an *a posteriori* element and therefore a built-in level of certainty. After that the ‘*versus*’ makes sense. Faith and belief are not the same things. Faith is the collection of truths which are divinely revealed, both *a priori* and *a posteriori*. Belief is the *action* of certainty associated with the validity of the truths of Faith. These truths, like the idea of myth¹⁵, speak to an objective source of truth which is accessible to everyone within the correct context and shared in terms of a universal experience. There is therefore, a foundational idea which one must take on if the idea of belief is to be a valid one, i.e. that it is not simply human-based but is *objective*. What that means is that the person is not the sole judge of the validity of a belief and that empirical evidence in and of itself is not sufficient to explain belief.

Superstition

As Stevie Wonder says “*when you believe in things that you don’t understand, then you suffer...superstition ain’t the way*” (*Superstition* off of *Innervisions*). Belief is often saddled with the ‘superstition’ label because it is only understood as ‘un-provable’ or ‘incomprehensible’ and therefore by its nature suspect. Superstition by definition¹⁶ dictates lifestyle choices which make no rational sense, i.e. it is *irrational*, outside of any reason. A black cat running across your path does not carry with it empirical evidence of ‘luck’ or ‘no luck’. There is no ‘proof’ that the number 13 carries within it an intrinsic evil or fateful outcome. To operate as if they ‘do’, rather than that they ‘might’, is superstitious, i.e. beyond both reason and experience. On that note, and perhaps separate from superstition, the ideas of luck, fate, and happenstance, which may be relied upon as a counter to religious belief are of the same nature as religious belief, that is, they contain a certain amount of empirical and rational knowledge, but could just as easily be accused of being superstitious – they can be considered the ‘Faith’ by which one acts.

The application of ‘Irrational’ to Faith and belief is incorrect, especially if all of knowledge is merely empirically based, but I digress. Faith and belief, as a knowledge is both an *a priori* and *a posteriori* thing, ergo involves both reason and experience and so by either definition is *not* irrational. Yet the words ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ hold within them a double sense. On the one hand is the sense of ‘knowledge’ or more correctly ‘thinking’ as in “I believe [think] it might rain today”, and it implies an *imperfect* form of perception. It is imperfect because this meaning carries with it a level of uncertainty and speculation. My empirical perceptions of the world inform me (over time) that certain conditions *often* lead to rain

¹⁵ And like myth, these truths are not specific to one religion or another, but are foundational to all humanity.

¹⁶ “A *belief or notion, not based on reason or knowledge, in or of the ominous significance of a particular thing, circumstance, occurrence, proceeding, or the like.*” to be exact.

but that does not mean it will rain.¹⁷ 'Belief' in this form carries a certain amount of *future dependency* with it, a certain amount of uncertainty and unsettledness – it is a specific unknown value based in statistics.

Often this understanding of belief is applied to religious belief, that is, the statement of belief in God is thought to carry with it a certain amount of unknown or is only provable sometime in the future, therefore it is something open to question and doubt because belief is by its nature 'uncertain'. But the statement of belief in God invokes a second sense of the word, one which *entails certainty*. Perhaps it is better said as involving a particular type of certainty, one which does not speak of some future resolution to be 'known', but contains both a *present certainty* and yet has room for *better understanding* later.

Certainty is a hard word. Even scientific certainty is open to revision at a later time, and to believe otherwise, well that would just be superstitious. So, all that said, there apparently is an element of superstition in any human system.

Liturgia

Faith practices which border superstition do not necessarily mean that all practices are suspect or that even those which seem to border on superstition are suspect. We talk of 'Voodoo Economics' or 'Quackery' meaning that the practices are suspect and therefore the underlying system is suspect. At the same time, suspect does not mean false or untrue because these accusations are often made from positions outside of the understanding of the practice and utilizing a specific bias. We must admit though, that some practices are suspect, and are identifiable as such by any objective observer from the inside or the outside. All that is to say that if you do not believe in God then the practice of prayer may *appear* to be suspect; on the contrary, if you say you believe in God and yet practice an insincere or disingenuous prayer then that practice *would be* suspect.

Social commentary aside, the last chapter if you recall, discussed the idea of myth, the purpose and place of myth, and specifically Myth as the vehicle of teaching and preservation of Faith as well as placing one in direct touch with sacred events. In this section we will look at its compliment: *Rite* or *Ritual*. Ritual performs a similar function as myth but is the formal expression of the truths revealed in myth, or to put it another way, the expression of Faith. The word comes to us from the Latin *ritus*: a religious observance or ceremony, custom, usage, possibly from the word for 'number'¹⁸ and is related to the Greek word *leitourgia* which is a composite word meaning, originally, a public duty, a service to the state undertaken by a citizen. Its root is *leitōs* (from *leōs, people*) meaning *public*, and *ergo*, meaning *to do*. Both imply action, as in this is something you do. It is the proper and commonly understood response required of every individual. Liturgy comes up here because it is one of the last concepts we need to discuss, specifically because it is tied to the idea of *worship* and it is tied to the *Religionem* section in Chapter 1. Ritual is the means of accomplishing the functions of religion, the binding of oneself to the sacred for both the purpose of subjecting oneself to it and to receive some portion of its power. Ritual is the expression of Faith.

A rite or ritual is an element of Liturgy. If we want we can argue the source of ritual as we argued the source of Faith. Okay, so we do, well, at least we are going to. The sense of the sacred, that non-verbal, pre-cognizant, *a priori* and *a posteriori* understanding that there is *something else*, creates an equal and similarly internal, gut-level, *a priori* and *a posteriori* response, as when shouting for joy when extremely

¹⁷ On the other hand, the form of belief my Grandmother employed when carrying an umbrella to keep it from raining, whether she believed there was a probability of rain or not, is something *entirely* different and not within the scope of this work...or its author.

¹⁸ Which may on the outset seem strange, but the Romans were big on numbers...and the word describes much of their 'ordered' thinking. More on that later.

happy – it is not a rational decision but almost an instinctual one, and in that sense there is only one appropriate response (tears of joy must be explained, a shout does not).

Worship, from the Old English, is a single word which we use to cover a multitude of sins. Keeping in mind all that we have spoken of in terms of *sacred*, there are two ‘levels’ of reverence that are connected with the sacred, only one of which applies to the word *worship* as most people think of the word. Like the understanding of love and time, this first level is signified by the Greek word *Latria*, which speaks to the relationship of a servant to a master, with Plato using it to correspond more to our usage, that of the idea of *divine service* or the action of reverence and worship which is reserved *for God alone*. The second is *Dulia*, the idea of reverence and honor reserved for all other sacred people (i.e. consecrated things). We might think of it in Native American terms such as *worshipping* the Great Spirit and *honoring* the buffalo.¹⁹

Worship then is the response to God, *honor* is the response to consecrated or sacred related things. Liturgy is the rites and rituals which are performed for *worship*. Liturgy contains references or utilizes things which are honored (consecrated objects and people), but it is directed to the sacred, not to the consecrated things (articles, signs, symbols, words). *Worship* then is larger than passive, feel-good kumbaya moments or items, but is the active, liturgical actions which bring one in contact with and are a reaction to the sacred; it is literally the service *due* the sacred, the ‘work of the people’.

Common Ground, Holy Ground

That takes care of the majority of early terms, so now let us examine some of the root aspects of beliefs. There is what we might call ‘grounding concepts’ which are shared across a wide variety of belief systems about the sacred. We bathe ourselves in the concept of ‘the other’; Mother Earth, Gaia, Mother Nature however you want to designate it, as well as a sense of common responses to the concept, offerings, prayer, behaviors. This pervasive notion is based on the sense of the sacred, but what is the nature of the sacred? Our foundational idea is manifested in many ways and that colors the way in which we think of our relationship vis-à-vis the sacred.

Here, There, Everywhere....

Let us not hold back and examine that statement. In this discussion it goes without saying that something must be sacred (we can at least imagine it), but just what is the *nature* of the sacred? Is it *Transcendent*, apart from us, or *Intimate*, somewhere around or within us? We assign many positive superlatives to God, like omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (everywhere), and omnipotent (all-powerful), what is known as *cataphatic* (from the Greek for ‘go along with’ or ‘to affirm’) thinking. This is also known, in Latin, as *via positiva* (the positive route or way). For all those half-empty glass people out there we also use what is called *apophatic* or ‘negative’ (from the Greek with the negative ‘a’ meaning ‘go against’ or ‘to deny’) thinking to define God, as in we cannot say what God is, but we *can* say what God *is not*. This is where words like ineffable, mystery, and *not* human are used. This negative form is actually seen in a positive light, as an attempt to avoid *limiting* God, as when saying that ‘God is omniscient’, we limit God to human understanding of knowledge. Therefore, instead, we say that God is *unknowable*, and we make no statement about what God knows. This is known, for obvious reasons, as *via negativa*.

Ultimately, cataphatic thinking is all about what we *can* say of God, that is, what words are appropriate, especially in light of what has been revealed. Apophatic thinking is all about the limitations of language, that is, the inability of language to describe God, who is totally other and utterly beyond human comprehension.

¹⁹ If you want you can use this to answer the question of ‘how can someone eat what they worship?’

That said, or unsaid as the case may be, one of the foundational characteristics of God is that of *Creator*. Creator implies the nature of our being and our relationship. If we are not God (the sacred being totally other) then we must be the non-God; the *creature*. Further, if God is Creator then God is the definition of *Be-ing* in that God had to exist before creation such that God could create it. But what is the *nature* of that *Be-ing*? Is God many (Polytheism) or is God one (Monotheism)?

Once the creation aspect is settled (*Being* being a given), there comes the discussion of the nature of the *presence* of God, that is, how is God manifested to creation? Is God everything (Pantheism) or just *in* everything (Pan-en-theism)?

There is a basic need to 'define' God. Starting with the notion of the sacred, the sense of sacred and profane within the world, and the understanding of a need to respond to that sacred, what God *is* becomes important to the conversation. For the most part, the sacred is understood in terms of 'Good', that is it is benevolent or at least neutral. This is because of the nature of our observations and reasoning about the world around us. We benefit from creation as well as being subject to its whims. For the most part, day in and day out, life is 'good', and we live in relative comfort and ease in terms of the Creator.

Something Wicked This Way Comes....

If the sacred explains the good aspects of the world then it goes without saying that there must be 'evil' to explain all of the bad aspects, right? Evil in some form is pervasive throughout human religious thought. And yet, what is the nature of evil? How is it manifested to us? The question of evil usually comes down to one of *personification* (like the Devil), *force* (like Karma), or *consequence* (of human action).

This dichotomy, these two designations of *good* and *evil*, are not necessarily shared across all religious thinking. For some, there is neither *good* nor *evil*, there just *is*. For some, they are seen as two halves of a whole and are therefore not in opposition in the usual sense.

Ethics

With an understanding of 'good and evil', come the requisite rules for living, warnings and instruction dealing with 'right' actions and 'wrong' actions, and its source is the sacred. Moral behavior is an integral part of most sacred systems, recounted in Tradition, and forms the basis for expectations of individuals within the collective. Many times this subsystem is based in the notion of the sacred, and reflects understandings about the nature of the sacred as well as way the sacred is connected to the world. You might think of it as how we relate to the sacred is the way we relate to one another.

Now That I Think About It....

Okay, so many things influence our thinking, but the one we do not always think about is the influence of profane thinking. Profane/secular thought also is a consideration for us when approaching these subjects. Regardless of religious thought, certain aspects of 'the nature of things' and 'moral living' are constant within human thought and it often provides insight into as well as impetus for religious thought.

The Greeks, of the likes of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (to whom we were introduced earlier, though not really formally), provide much of the foundations for our understanding of the nature of the sacred and being, as well as morality. Just the political influence of Greece alone permeates the Western World, and extends as far as India in the East, Egypt south and

later into Rome. It goes without saying that religious thought eventually had to deal with Greek thought.²⁰

After that, Christian scholars provide a religious nature to secular thought. Thomas Aquinas wrote that “*Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the known*” (*Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q. 1, art 2), that is, the thing known is relative to the way in which the knower can know it, or how it is presented to him. This is a fundamental epistemological (the study of how do we know things) idea and it speaks to the *way we know* something. Aquinas is seeking to understand thinking such that he can talk about how we can think about God. For the record, he thought that although God is *simple* (basically because he is the ultimate and most complete Being), God can only be known by human beings through *complex* propositions. We can think of this in terms of *cataphatic* and *apophatic* – we can understand that God *is* but our ability to *express* God requires complex thinking. He was basing in Aristotle but it is strictly Theo-centric.

From there we are influenced by the ‘modern’ thinkers like Descartes, Locke, and Kant. These guys are looking to avoid Aquinas’ Theo-centric reasoning and look for the answer within. For Immanuel Kant, the mind interprets perceptions in terms of innate categories, interacting in time and space, that is, there are internal ideas which help us to understand all of the sensory data we take in. Kant distinguished between the world in itself, or *noumena*, and the world as we perceive it, which he called *phenomena*. The knowledge of things “*depend upon the mode of intuition of the subject, this object as appearance is to be distinguished from itself as object in itself.*” (*Critique of Pure Reason*) this sounds similar to Thomas but has the subtle difference of creating a gulf between the knower and the known.

Our ability to know God is colored by many factors. Whether we approach it from a position of belief or an epistemological one, many other questions arise as to the nature of God and the nature of the sacred, and how we interact with it.

Putting It All Together

Terms and foundations help us to place our discussion within a common boundary as well as help us to sort out our own understandings as we undertake this effort. Keeping in mind the biases and pre-conceived notions we bring to the table will help us to overcome them, or at least apply them critically. Many of the things we have discussed may not be familiar to us in the framework of our own faith (or lack of faith) experiences but they are anthropologically foundational. An open mind is essential for understanding the progress and end of theological thinking, no matter what the source.

And we have many sources from which we draw our sense of religion. The problem with all of these systems is the fact that each of these diverse sources expresses different and sometimes incompatible notions about the nature of reality, the sacred, liturgy, the modes and routes of divine action, and about the nature and end of humanity. Often the measure for an adherent to a particular religion must be the notion that every other system be flawed or incomplete, and for that reason is not to be followed.

Realizing that there are common understandings and practices can take us a long way on the road to exploring the meaning held within all systems. In the end, each system must be evaluated in its ability to sufficiently answer the questions which one poses to it.

²⁰ Aristotle himself was the tutor of Alexander the Great.

"The purpose of a book of meditations is to teach you how to think and not to do your thinking for you. Consequently if you pick up such a book and simply read it through, you are wasting your time. As soon as any thought stimulates your mind or your heart you can put the book down because your meditation has begun. To think that you are somehow obliged to follow the author of the book to his own particular conclusion would be a great mistake."

Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

"Religion consists of a set of things which the average man thinks he believes and wishes he was certain."

Attributed to Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain)

Aspects Of Faith

As we might do with any system we now look at what branches or disciplines arise within that system. Looking at this list will also give us a sense of what the concerns and focus of this study will be.

I Am The Vine

So, theology is our root. Theology informs and enlivens. While its ultimate focus is the study of God, there are branches which bear fruit in our conversation. As said, some of these branches overlap with secular thinking, and much back and forth takes place. Still, theology is what we are looking at, and whether theology is a branch of philosophy or that philosophy is the ‘handmaiden’ of theology is not the question we are looking to answer here.

Theology is, at one and the same time, both an exploration of and a definer of sacred things, that is to say, at one moment it seeks to clarify and pin-down meaning and understanding and in the next seeks to push the boundaries of that definition, adapting and applying meaning to sacred things. In the end, it is about dialog, a give and take with the sacred, an attempt to better approach and enter into the sacred. In the end, we are studying the relationship of ourselves to the sacred.

You Are The Branches

As said, many of the branches of theology are similar in nature to the branches of philosophy. Anyone who has studied philosophy in a serious fashion (and you know who you are) are more than just geeks, but will be able to easily recognize most of the following disciplines.

<i>Ontology:</i>	The study of creation and being
<i>Eschatology:</i>	The study of ends and end-times
<i>Cosmology:</i>	The study of the nature of creation
<i>Soteriology:</i>	The study of the doctrines of salvation
<i>Ethics:</i>	The study of right conduct per the precepts of the sacred

Table 2 – The Main Branches of Theology

These branches rely solely on theology, in a way different than the branches of philosophy do. There is no single central idea in philosophy from which springs distinct ontological or epistemological philosophies; that is to say, the specific nature of those branches are not directed solely at God. Theology on the other hand relies completely on the idea of God, and all discussions rise from and report back to that central idea. Discussing ontology in theology only has purpose if there is a God, some type of *being*, and that *being* is part of or responsible for individual *being*.

Simply put, in theological terms, these are the journeys of exploration. Each starts with a basic concept and then develops outward from that concept investigating its ramifications. In that sense all roads emanate from God and return back to God, but along the way new insights and connections are made which add clarity to our understanding of God. In a sense you might argue that these journeys lead to God, but only because they emanate from God.

You Are What You Are, or Mommy, Where Did I Come From?

As a quick illustrative story²¹, I was telling my four-year-old the four-year-old-level facts-of-life in response to the age-old question but at the end of each statement, she would ask “yeah, but how did it *get* there?” This really does speak to the nature of ontology. Not just looking at the fact that we are here, but the *how*, the *why*, the *implications* of being. Officially, *Ontology* is the study of *be-ing*, from the Greek *ontos* or “that which is”, but it deals with *all* the questions of be-ing. How is it we are? What is our nature? What is being? How did we get here?

Being is the subject of metaphysics (in a way, for Aristotle, it *was* metaphysics), and so it therefore also deals with many of the other intangible things that we also think about when we think about being. In a sense, then, being is what *everything* is about. If God is not, if we are not, if the universe is not, then what *is*?

Warning: there are some more big words coming up but they are the language for discussing the concerns of ontology:

1. **First and foremost then, obviously, is a definition of *Being*:** as with any discussion you need to lay down the ground rules. This is the objective concept of being in its widest possible meaning and use. It explores ‘modes’ of being, *actual* and *potential* (actual being and being-to-be) and the problems concerned with *essence* (a thing’s ‘nature’) and *existence* (being alive, or an instance of essence). Words like ‘act’ and ‘potency’ are discussed, and the *primary* principles — meaning, identity, etc. — are shown to *emerge* from the concept of entity (being a being).
2. **Which brings up things corresponding to or analogous with being:** you might think of these subjects as the markers of being, that is, things which only have meaning because of being; they are also things which could be considered as giving meaning to being, things like unity, truth, and goodness, and associated concepts like order and beauty. This level of the conversation helps to orient and focus the concepts of being, that is, things which really have no physical manifestation (beauty is different in different cultures and time even though it relies on physical attributes).
3. **And for the more pragmatic, who or what have being:** this is a fundamental question because it is part and parcel of the definition of being. Do all things have being? Do rocks have being? It is focused in *how* do things have being, meaning that it speculates on the fundamental divisions of being, or *finite* (having an end) and the *infinite* (having no end), the *contingent* (based on) and the *necessary* (must be), etc. As you might guess, we fall into the finite and God into the infinite. As said though talking about God’s being is hard, so as they say ‘write what you know’ so there is a lot of concentration on the finite. It subdivides the finite into the categories (as initially described by Aristotle, but re-characterized throughout time) *substance* and its *accidents* (quantity, quality, etc.). The objective — the reality of substance, the meaning of personality, the relation of accidents to substance are the most prominent topics at this level.
4. **The final portion of ontology is devoted to the concept of *cause*:** another term or translation, if you will, of cause might be ‘change’ but we will try to not confuse the two. While you may be inclined to think of this subject as a ‘scientific’ idea and odd in relation to being, it gets down to the ‘something or nothing’ question, one which may have ‘scientific’ bearing but also goes to the heart of the more speculative aspects of being. Cause is the linear logic of being; something had to cause everything, that is, things have to come about somehow. So we look at its four primary divisions *efficient* (what gets it going) and *final* (the end of the chain), *material* (what it is made of) and *formal* (how it is put together) — with the objectivity and analytical character of the principle of *causality* receiving most attention. We will deal more with this one later.

To break it down simply, ontology helps us to get the ground rules out of the way. We create a definition of being, the boundaries and realm of being, the assignment and ramifications of being, and

²¹ A myth in one sense but not in the other.

finally place being within our everyday activities. It deals with the foundational questions of life, and does involve epistemology, in that we have to define how or why we even think about these things. Once all of that is done, the final question is 'where are we going?'

The End Of The World As We Know It

Eschatology, from the Greek for 'last' or 'last things', could also technically be part of ontology but it is separate because we what we are thinking about here really the study of merely 'ends'. Ontology and eschatology are not the opposite studies of 'life' and 'death', that is, eschatology is not the opposite study of *be-ing* but is instead the thinking about *ends* almost aside from being. Life and death are plain before us; *finite* things begin and then they eventually end. This naturally flows into the study of the overall end. Will everything end? When? How? Why?

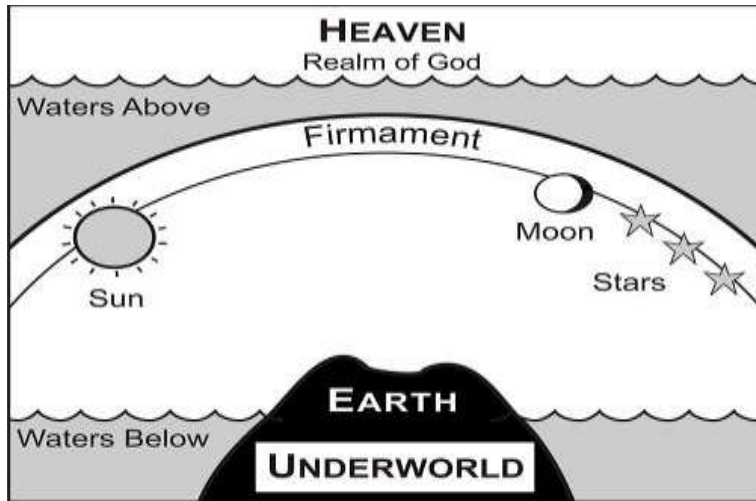
Eschatology nowadays brings with it a sufficient load of baggage, particularly as viewed in religious contexts over the last 150+ years. What we are focusing on here is the movement through, that is, not the *cause* of the thing but its *end*. If I move my arm through the air, there is a point at which it starts, moves, and then stops moving. To what end did I move my arm? We might argue that eschatology is about *purpose*. For what reason did I move my arm? Notice how this is different that why my arm moved.

Within Eschatology there is a notion called *teleology*, or the study of the ends of things, and in a sense it informs eschatology, but it is not eschatology. As a side wandering, this word, while based in the Greek word *teleos* for 'perfect' or 'complete' (from *telos* which means 'end goal'), is a fairly modern construct, having been coined in the mid-1700's. The idea is used in several complex ways but for our purposes we will dumb it down to roughly mean 'the end to which something is created', though I reserve the right to mess with that limitation later.

Teleology will also come up in ethics, but what we are thinking about here are more *final* ends.

Where Y'at?

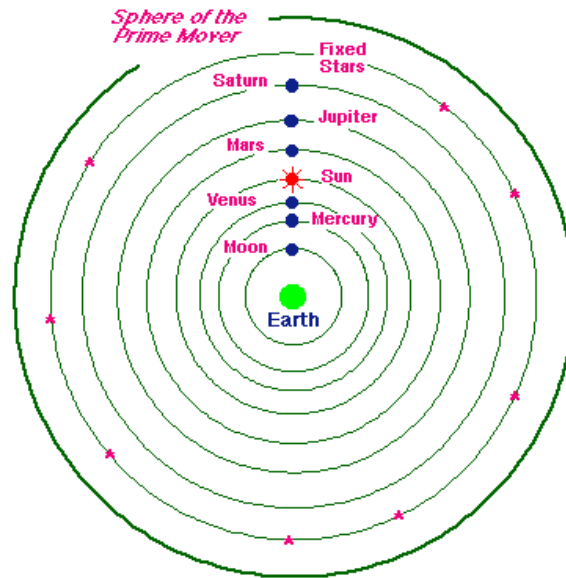
Cosmology is the looking at being in *situ*, at the context of being if you will. When we think about creation, we think about all that *is*, all that has essence, existence, purpose, ends. Cosmology is the study of the nature of Nature. As an example we will talk about the Hebrew cosmology, the one which we glean from Scripture. There is no stated official cosmology, but we are able to extrapolate and understand how the Jews saw the universe, and then develop meaning and put together a cosmology, or context of existence.



"The 3-Tier Universe" - The regional geography led ancient Near Eastern people to the reasonable conclusion that the earth was encircled by a sea. Journeys in any direction eventually led to a body of water: the Mediterranean Sea is west, Black and Caspian Seas north, Persian Gulf east, and Arabian and Red Seas south.

Figure 1: Hebrew Cosmological Layout

This is different than the Greek conception of the universe, where things like motion and atoms and space which are not part of the Hebrew cosmology abound. Aristotle's cosmology has the planets and the stars being carried round the heavens on a clock-like mechanism of nested solid crystalline spheres that function through a sort of friction drive with the mainspring outermost sphere being moved by the unmoved mover (the *prime cause*).



Aristotle's Universe

Figure 2: Greek Cosmological Layout

Ancient cosmologies are more about the meaning, purpose, and function of the cosmos than about their empirical factual configuration. Recall that we are still in the realm of religious-man, that their ways of thinking of the universe saw it as 'enchanted' and *meaning-full*. Ergo cosmology in our sense is not 'provable' at a scientific level but has its 'truth' at the level of *meaning*.

Early cultures saw the earth as literally at the centre of the cosmos. Scientifically this view is simply mistaken or what scientists call 'absurd' yet when we think about it, they are perfectly sensible descriptions of the world as we actually experience it without the aid of telescopes and delicate sensors. However, the mythic cosmology may still be held to be correct in affirming the centrality of earth in the divine purposes – we are here and still we have found no evidence of others. Primitive cosmology cannot be discarded because it stands aside or science, but needs to be seen as a means by which God can reshape the way that we see the cosmos. Much of the truth we know about ourselves is contained within these early cosmologies. It is the reason one can read those myths with the same resulting insight today as those who read them millennia ago.

Wha'Cha Doing?

Ethics technically also flows from ontology, but we pull it out on its own because, after ontology, it is probably the thing which most concerns us because it is all about right and proper behavior. Belief in the sacred carries with it a sense of responsibility, not just between persons, but between persons and the sacred. And you might notice that I state that the focus as '*all about right and proper behavior*' and *not* about right and wrong. That is because it is really about correct behavior and not about the rules for what is right and what is wrong. That may not seem like a difference but it is really not subtle. While there may be discussion about right and wrong, right behavior is about participation in the sacred, which by its definition is not about evil or wrong.

In a philosophic sense it is all about systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. In our theological sense, where God centers all, it is about cooperation in and with the sacred. Ethics starts from the teleological idea of 'happiness' (as in what makes us 'happy': basic pain and pleasure things), and moves to the idea of 'excellence' or 'true' happiness (becoming the self for which one was created). Ethics then is bound not to just instinctual behavior and avoidance but is attached to our 'higher' functions, ones beyond what Aristotle might call the 'vegetable' and 'animal' functions. He saw ethics as part a parcel of the realization of the potential person, that is to say, through ethics, one became one's self.

In early cultures, 'Wisdom' is the idea of right behavior and understanding, one which is in concert with the sacred. So for the likes of Socrates and Aristotle practical wisdom is not something which is learned by rote memorization or acquired solely by learning general rules or through the old carrot and stick approach. Practice makes perfect. We learn, through practice of the 'rules', the judgment, emotional, and social skills that translate our general, objective understanding of happiness and well-being into ways that are suitable to the situation. We can similarly translate that into theological terms. Starting from Revelation, we understand the Good, and through practice of that good, we come into contact with and receive from the sacred satisfaction and final reward.

Ethics is bound to the concept of the 'soul', in that the soul and its 'end' are dependent upon one's behavior.

How Y'a Doing?

That sense of a soul, and of a soul which has an 'end', leads us to our final subject. *Soteriology* comes from the Greek word *soter*, for 'savior' or 'preserver', and refers to the study of the concepts and doctrines dealing with salvation or what are known as the 'economy of salvation', meaning the plan and means by which God operates.

Soteriology ultimately deals with the healing of separation between the created and the creator. While not every cosmology entails such a break, it is a common explanation for evil, and therefore often enters into most systems. In some it is a constant struggle, in others it is a one-time event. In some it has yet to happen and in others it happened early on and others eventually. Ultimately it is bound up with

behavior in that something brings about the fall and only through the correct ritual or action can it be undone, or at least held at bay.

Salvation per se is not an across the board concept, as it does require some sort of fall and need for redemption, but since many belief systems follow that paradigm, especially the Judeo-Christian one, we will throw it in here.

Putting It All Together

Okay, okay; it really is all about being. We give these disciplines different names but they all come down to being. Still, the purpose of disciplines is the ability to concentrate on one aspect and that is very useful in building the overall picture of being. The hub of any system goes far in determining the way we think within that system. That means that the way theology approaches and thinks about being is completely dependent upon the existence of a God, and in this way differs from philosophical approaches which by their very nature are more relativistic – but are so only because each approaches the question of being from a different starting point.

While we will not study each of these disciplines explicitly, we will rely on what those who have studied them have to say.

“No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says: He is always convinced that it says what he means.”

George Bernard Shaw

“The mistake about Revelation is that because it can be humanly interpreted in a variety of subjective ways it is merely a subjective human construct. The failure of the human subject to grasp the Sacred is not proof of its inexistence any more than failure to understand the motor of a car from the exterior is proof that it does not exist.”

Anonymous

Basic Map of Majority Religious Distribution

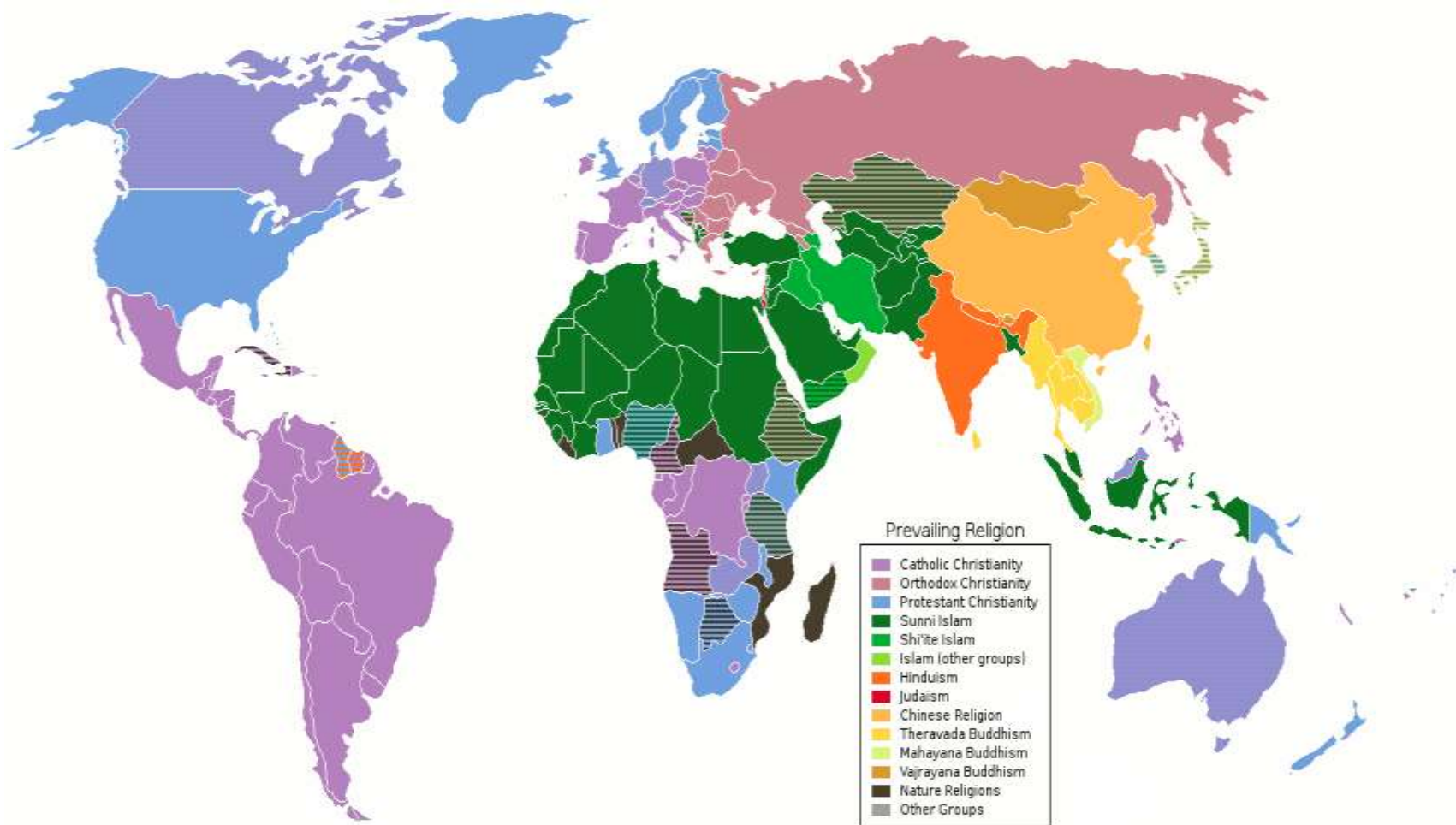


Figure 3: Distribution of Major World Religions

Genesis

Where to start?

The understanding of God is a progressive one, but at all times, we are bound to and aware of the overall idea of the sacred as we have discussed it; we must keep in mind that at the core is the sacred and the drive to identify the sacred. Not just as individuals but as communities, societies; in this effort we are people of common purpose.

In The Beginning

We will take a trip back to Anselm and his ontological argument for the existence of God. *God is that thing for which we can think nothing greater.* God for Anselm is the Prime Mover. In earlier cultures, ideas of movement, and cause are much more localized, that is to say, they just ain't that big a deal. One is seeking connection with the sacred. One is looking for the sacred. So that is where we begin; where is God?

Group Hug

It is the coming together of people which allows for the stability that is the hallmark of many people working for the common good. One person spends more time just trying to eat than the day has. Very little external speculation takes place in solitary hunter/gatherer situations. It is the distribution of roles that allows for leisure and the larger questions to be addressed. So it is the community which allows for exploration, not just physical but mental as well. But it is also the nature of the community to seek stability, and things which disrupt stability are often frowned upon. This goes to the physical world, where weather or large many-toothed animals can put a dent in the community's regularity. It also goes to the spiritual and mental worlds. Conformity and innovation must work hand in hand, but in most cases, conformity dictates stability.

People who did not agree with this or live it were considered not contained within the group nor did they share in the benefit of the group. This communal understanding can be seen throughout time. There is no direct requirement to participate, but the one who separates oneself from the fold, becomes vulnerable. It is seen as *abnormal* behavior. The Greeks had a specific word for those who separated themselves from the community, *idios*, the root of our word *idiot*. I am not making a judgment here, merely an observation that deep down even we think that complete individualism is not a good idea.

Point in case might be the idea of America, filled with 'rugged individuals', yet even that myth does not fit the idea of being an American, i.e. part of the group. The community gains from the talents and individual skills of each member and gives the benefit of leisure to its members.

Truth

The ability of the individual to experience, seek out, and employ the sacred is based in the stability the group offers as well, as the nature of the community. The experience of the group's individuals shapes the nature of the group's relationship to the sacred at the same time the group memory informs the individual. The Myths and Rituals employed by the community are directly related to that community. Not to say that Truth is relative, but that the core truths which allow for stability and fullness of life (leisure) are made evident within the context of the experience of the group. We may therefore rightly ask about the nature of the Truth which these early manifestations of religious activity portray, and what they tell us about Faith in general.

Once again, we go back to the basic ideas of Faith, Myth, and Ritual and their place within religious thinking and action (theology and liturgy). What we want to explore here is the meaning of these aspects of religious thinking within praxis, i.e. how they come about.

Nature

If the sacred is an observable fact, then Nature seems the perfect place to start looking for it. At some time in our development we humans made the transition to self-awareness. I have no clue when, but at some point we realized that we were separate from the world around us, that it was different than we were. Nature then is the primary Other.

About the same time, *personification*, or the action of assigning personality to a thing develops.²² This is a natural offshoot of this 'other' thinking and many natural things were worshipped – earth, sun, moon, sea, wind, wolves, eagles, etc. as 'persons'. This led later to more complete 'personification' into 'personhood', that is, the sun or earth as a divinity or spirit essentially separated from the sun or earth themselves, like Apollo or Mother Nature, but still closely aligned or associated with the object. Here we also place the development of things like the 'elf', 'sylvan', 'wood sprite' or such things which are spirit, yet bound to the natural object with which they are associated.

So the core and essence of nature-worship is that nature is 'animated' or 'spirited'. Early societies see the world with what may seem to us a childlike wonder; awe and delight possess them (we think once again of Aristotle). The succession of the seasons, night and day, storm and cloud, wind and rain, the growth of living things, show us nature (i.e. the world), in constant flux and varied change. Natural phenomena are the effects of causes which are *other*, beyond comprehension and control, i.e. mysteries. Within consciousness of self, though not so much of a soul apart of the body, there is a type of understood equality with everything else, as in they must be like me. Ultimately, humans need the cooperation of these nature 'persons' to accomplish things using the power one associates with them.

Animals And Rocks

The form this belief takes is called *animism*, from the Latin word for *soul* or *spirit*, and it is this practice of rituals that appease and/or befriend the spirits within natural objects in order to control or share in their power. In early cultures there is no real distinction between the animate and the inanimate. All Nature changes and is therefore 'alive' and the means of this is the 'in spiriting' of everything, that is, like me, every object is controlled by its own independent spirit. Spirits possess or are part of the rivers, lakes, fountains, woods, mountains, trees, animals, flowers, wind, grass, and the birds. There is also the semi-independent spirits who are good, benevolent, mischievous, or even evil like elves, gnomes, ghosts, manes, demons, etc. which inhabit almost every part of the world. The end result being that almost everything qualifies as an object of worship, with both myths and rituals associated with it.

We see the examples in many cultures. For the Inuit, the Milky Way is the path of the souls leading to the spirit-land and the Northern Lights are a vision of the dancing of dead warriors and wise ones in the heavens. The Aborigines say that the sounds of the wind in the trees are the voices of the dead communing with one another or warning the living of approaching events. Yet there is a subtle difference in this. It is not a superstition but recognition, not a fear that everywhere spirits, ghosts, and evil surround us but the understanding of the connection of all spirits, as we have said, it is the recognition of the sacred and spiritual nature of the world around us. The focus is usually an animal species, more rarely a plant, and even more rarely an inanimate object (the sun, wind, or rock).

²² This is more than mere *anthropomorphism*, which simply assigns human qualities to a thing.

Some cultures translate this into the idea of *totem*. The original signification is from Ojibway meaning a person's family or tribe, and in a narrower sense one's belongings, that is, it is a *signifier*, something which is both identified with and identifies someone. The idea has expanded and *Totemism* is the name for the custom of using *totems* for spiritual purposes. Think of it as the intimate relation that exists between an individual or a group of individuals and some object in nature by which they (and also in a sense their belongings) are identified in a *mystical* way. The result of that association is expressed by bearing the name of the *totem* and the practicing of certain rituals and customs associated with a particular totem and its attributes.

There is still the two-fold aspect of the sacred and the profane here, but as always the sacred informs the profane. The sacro-religious understanding of the intimate relationship between totem and human produces actions and customs which result in profane, sociological behaviors. This is the idea of connection which the word *totem* has; one has the eyes of an eagle, the heart of a lion, or is named 'Dances-with-wolves'; one 'owns' and is guided by the strengths of one's *totem*.

Tribe

With the deeper understanding of *Self* and *Other*, came also the understanding of 'us'. As intimated above, the community becomes the foundation of living. Individuals perform roles and have personality within a larger social order. In terms of the sacred, it is the binding force of the community. We are together not just for protection and efficiency but because we are literally created to be together in community, that is, the structure of society is the structure of humanity by virtue of its creation. In this thinking, the idea of *idios* makes more sense.

So the 'tribe' becomes the structure within which wisdom is gathered and from which it is preserved and dispensed. Myth is a *shared* experience; Ritual is a *communal* expression. These are therefore related to the community. So hunter-gatherers are likely to have myths and rituals involving the animals they hunt. Pastoral groups who are also more mobile will tend to be linked with herd animal. Farmers, who tend to be more tied to a specific area, focus on the fruit of the land. As an example, in the book of *Genesis*, we read of Abel offering the first-born of his flock (herder) and Cain offering his crops (farmer) as a sacrifice to God.

The tribe has many needs: Fertility; Burial rites; threshold experiences; atonement; appeasement; sacrifice. The profane actions of the tribe are mirrors of, guided by, or are the result of some sacred reality. The roles which develop within a tribe define the purpose of the individual in the order of things. Order and stability are what society are all about, or if you want to put it another way, *repeatability*. Knowing where to graze, who is to plant, when to plant, when to reap, when or who is to do anything which necessitates consistency requires a plan, a program, and a means of consistently carrying out that important task. Just as those whose strength and leadership keep the community safe, those who control and distribute that information become important, not just as rulers or consultants but as servants to the tribe, because they are literally the difference between life and death in the stable situation, as the king may be in times of peril. Security comes from knowing that someone has your back or someone has the correct understanding to practice a particular role. This co-dependency, if you will, is a natural product of the *inter-dependence* of the members of the community.

Shaman

So there develops the role or caste if you prefer, of an individual or persons who fulfill the need of the many for the security which comes from knowledge. Often it starts with someone who seems to have a special connection to the sacred.²³ Other times it is almost a culling, a test of many individuals to

²³ Within this there is often the deference to the mentally ill, but that is not the only situation.

see who has the power. It can eventually become genetic in nature, passed from father to son, mother to daughter. Whatever the nexus, the function is that of the Go-Between. Not because individuals are incapable of connecting. This arises ultimately for very practical reasons: because myths require people to tell them and rituals require people to carry them out. Not just someone to participate in them but someone to remember and lead them. This is a necessity, not an option, because ritual connects a society to the sacred at a level beyond the profane, in the realm of mystery and unspoken truth. Everyone is not capable of fulfilling the role because of the nature of the role. As we spoke of earlier, an important aspect of myth and ritual is repeatability; you need someone who has done the routine before, experts who have been taught the secrets, someone with a link to the spirit world who can also hand it on. There can hardly be religion without some sort of priestly caste.

In 'primitive' tribes the priests are generally known by the title 'medicine men', 'priest', or *shamans*. They have an ability to communicate with the *spirits*, the *totems* achieved by some means like a trance or by drugs (like peyote) but always within a ritual. Ritual actions (like Myths) produce *real* effects. The contact with the sacred is not without effect or meaning. The truths which are touched or the advice and counsel which are produced, have real meaning in the world. The shaman's advice, after contact with the sacred, has real bearing. For this reason, priesthood and politics, in any deeply religious society, are never far apart. Beside the actual political ruler stands the shaman, and sometimes in a position of greater power.

This is also because of the nature of Myth and Ritual. Both require some sort of explanation or interpretation, and explanation involves one of the most basic human talents, that of storytelling. The shaman are special people who have a special connection with the sacred, or have gone through sacred rituals which set them aside, consecrate them, to allow them access to the sacred. They have been subjected to great stress and testing with the ritual often involving 'death' and 'rebirth'; rituals that reveal or create the individual, who is now beyond the veil, who has left behind the mundane world and life and entered into the sacred. They stand on the threshold between the sacred and the profane. They are able to open doors into the sacred which normal mortals cannot; they have visions because of their proximity to the sacred all because they have undergone this transformative ritual. This is an indelible mark, a complete spiritual transformation and only ends with death.

Putting It All Together

The earliest expressions of the sense of 'other' are not shrouded in mystery in that we still see them practiced. Our role in society may seem more individually based than in the time we are talking about, but essentially that is *not* true. Altruism may seem subservient to self-serving but society still operates on a service-to-the-society basis. People are often judged by their participation or 'usefulness' to society. The decision to allow individuals to operate within society is a controversial one, whether we see that or not.

Society is the basis of human interaction. That is to say, it is the framework and the rules by which we interact. Even those who are 'off the grid' rely upon the nature of society. The purpose of roles in society is not to restrict but to maintain the nature of the society. We can argue, of course, that it is the other way around: that myth and ritual *force* us to perform functions within the society. That priesthoods, rather than serving, repress. We have today a luxury that many of these societies did not have – consistency and stability. We might rely on our wits more than our myths and scoff at those who still live by them. But without our myths and our rituals and our wits, how do we truly adapt?

If the world is a sacred place, if the profane is actually not the normal world, then the roles we take on have special significance, because they are not directed towards ourselves or the world but to the sacred. I plant within the circle of the sacred; my planting provides not just the food I and others eat, but recalls the sacred cycle of life. I work by means of myth and ritual action; I perform and fulfill my role

within society. My role may entail profane actions but those actions are ritualized and consecrated, giving more import to them, making them more important – they become part of my response to the sacred.

It is our connection to the sacred which gives life its significance. In a world connected to the sacred I am unable to cast aside my obligations. Those who do, who seek individualism at the expense of the tribe are relegated to the edges of the society, by their own choice.

“...in societies where myth is still alive the natives carefully distinguish myths – ‘true stories’ – from fables or tales, which they call ‘false stories.’...Whereas ‘false stories’ can be told anywhere and at any time, myths must not be recited except *during a period of sacred time* (usually in autumn or winter, and only at night)”

Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*