

Religion in Society

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Executive Summary

This paper sets out to examine the practical implications of religions within the framework of society in general. It begins by considering the ways in which religions first began and then goes on to consider what religions are and actually achieve. The paper concentrates the effects of religion on society and its members. The thrust of the argument is that, because of the origins and beliefs associated with religions, the effects on society are far removed from the original intentions. It is concluded that it is not unreasonable to claim that religion is at best self-gratifying and, at worst, thoroughly evil.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Why is there religion?	1
3	What is religion?	2
4	The effect of religion	3
5	Conclusions	4

1 Introduction

The place of religion in society has become increasingly contentious in recent years. In the past few centuries, most stable societies have been underpinned by a single religion. Naturally there have been competing factions within the religion contained in a single society. Often, as in the case of different sects, there has been a division within society on religious grounds. However, the differences have been of what Christians often refer to as inter-denominational rather than a conflict of religion. Nevertheless, there have been indisputable conflicts, often politically based. These have been present in all the major religions of the world for several centuries. In addition, there has been a tradition of religious proselytising between the religions over the centuries, although this usually manifested itself as the result of a clash of cultures and traditions. It also resulted from the expansion of populations or political spheres of influence.

A number of factors have led to the importance of religious divides in recent decades. One cause is the rapid expansion of communications and international transport. Another is the increasing amount of persecution and refugees, either political or economic. In the aftermath of empires stretching across the world, people who were subjects of western imperialism naturally turned to the seats of their empires to help to sustain their welfare, because those same empires had often offered them welfare in exchange for exploitation. The result in every case has been the rapid mixing of cultures, traditions and religions. This is not a new phenomenon. Migrations and refugees have contributed greatly to the growth and richness of societies over the centuries. What is different in this case is the pace at which the confluence has occurred. There has always been friction where incoming cultures and religions have been implanted in an established society. Such “interlopers” have often seemingly threatened the existing stability and order. However, in most cases, when the rate of assimilation has been slow or the scale relatively small, the symptoms were rarely cataclysmic. It is true that there were often religious and political crusades to suppress or conquer the inhabitants of “foreign” lands, but these should be regarded as political power seeking or ideological truculence rather than the result of a clash of religious cultures.

2 Why is there religion?

Religion is said to help to satisfy the human need for spiritual fulfilment. This at once raises the question of what spiritual fulfilment is. One description of spiritual fulfilment is **the need to feel comfortable with things that are beyond human understanding**. Thus the need to believe in a god or gods arises from the inability to understand the origin and purpose of life. Note that the need relates to things beyond human understanding, rather than personal understanding. Thus, in a technological society, the fact that a person does not understand the principles of television or inertial guidance systems does not give rise to a religious explanation. It is widely recognised that there are, within that society, those who understand the principles of these systems. This is aided by a class of individuals who specialise in either explaining them in simplified terms or popularising them to ordinary people. However, to someone in a society that has no previous contact with these concepts, they may engender mystical or religious belief.

Given the need to come to some understanding of things that are not understandable within society, it becomes clear that the birth of religion was a consequence of the gradual realisation by the human race of its awareness of cause and effect. This can be seen from the perspective of early mankind. How do natural phenomena occur, what causes them, where did we come from, who made us, why are their good times and bad times? These must be just some of the many questions asked by the emerging human race. It was easy to see cause and effect where there was human activity. It would have also been accepted that animals cause things to happen and that plants grow and die. But beyond this, people must have looked for some form of “Human” cause. When it came to accounting for wind, earthquakes, rain and floods, drought and famine, the Sun, Moon and stars, it must have been inconceivable that there could not be some hidden hand or hands behind them. And so they invented gods. In the Middle East, there were monotheistic religions. In Europe there were polytheistic religions. In Asia there were mystical religions. It has been asserted that God made man in his own image. It is probably more correct to say that man made God in his own image.

When things went well it was because the gods were well pleased. When things went badly it was because the gods were angry. People began to offer prayers and supplications to the gods to appease them and enlist their help. Those who claimed to understand the gods, or who could predict happenings such as eclipses, became the priests to the gods. It was seen that human emotion could be swayed by sorrow, remorse and pleas for forgiveness. So it was only natural for the concept of repentance to become part of the rites for appeasing the gods. Those who controlled religion realised that it was a great source of power. It offered reserves of strength when cultures clashed. By the time social complexity reached the point which we might describe as civilisation, religion was well established and accepted by almost everyone.

3 What is religion?

Religion is almost always a belief in some form of supernatural happenings or causes. It is always associated with some sort of discipline, be it physical, mental or psychological. Such disciplines often manifest themselves as religious ritual or habitual behaviour. Religion underpins the emotions and logic of almost everyone. In today’s secular societies, many deny the fact, but all are so steeped in the traditions and ideas basic to religion that it is impossible to shake off its effects. Even in societies where the official line has been that there is no God, the ordinary people have been so exposed to a long tradition of religious concepts that almost no-one could be devoid of its effects. Religion effectively provides an identity for those who consider themselves to be members of a particular group. Even those who do not consider themselves to be members, or do not actively participate, but are associated mainly with those are members of a sect, effectively identify themselves and are identified by others, as belonging to the culture of the sect.

The act of following the discipline of a religion, however sparingly, is associated with the idea of generating a sense of well-being. When people confess their sins, they feel better about themselves. When people are devout and follow the discipline rigorously, they often feel that they are superior to those who are less rigorous. They have generated a self-excuse for condemning and despising others. This type of behaviour is, of course, not confined to religion. There are many examples where people are bound by other common elements, such as living as neighbours, working as colleagues or supporting the same football team. However, all these groups take on some elements of religion, because there are common beliefs and values. Those who are seen to have a disregard, or even disrespect, for those values are seen as a threat to the group. This has always been the case with religion. It has been used as an excuse to persecute others. Thus, the real nature of religion is that it forms individuals into groups, who share common superstitions, common ideals, common fears and common means of achieving a sense of well-being.

4 The effect of religion

In general, religions set out to be idealistic, to achieve common good and encourage their members to be better people. On the surface, they provide a vehicle for individuals to account for things which otherwise would be unexplainable and offer a safety valve for the relief of guilt. They also provide a framework that serves as a code of behaviour. They do this via the mechanisms of commandments and sin. The latter can be defined as behaviour proscribed by a religion. Many religions notionally encourage believers to consider those who are less well off than themselves. All these attributes operate at the level of the individual, which many may argue is the correct level for religious activity. So much for the good news. Now for the bad news, which unfortunately outweighs the good news by a considerable amount.

As has been discussed above, religions have the societal effect of dividing people into “us” and “them”. This unfortunately has the same characteristics as any other form of discrimination, such as racialism [1]. It becomes easy to consider “us” as the righteous and “them” as unrighteous. When things go wrong, when there is friction between communities, the unbelievers become an easy target for blame. It is easy to become self-righteous and look down upon those we consider to be inferior. These feelings are not of course, stated aims of religious leaders, but they do gain strength in an environment where there is fear and a lack of understanding. Wherever there is a dispute between factions of society, whether it be of a racial, nationalistic or class-based nature, religion is often brought into the equation to recruit support from within a religious base, whether or not that support is justified. Indeed, religion becomes the embodiment of evil, quite contrary to its original intent.

At both the societal and individual level, religion also has another considerable consequence. Because it depends on a belief in the divine, it encourages a belief in divine intervention. It is somehow thought that prayer to the divinity will change the course of events. In that respect it is a substitute for action and decision. Sometimes prayer can be used to gain personal fortitude to resist fear, which can be beneficial on occasions. However, the use of prayer can also take the form of wishing ill to others, effectively acting as a curse. It is thought that the divinity will vent anger on those who are judged to be oppressors or sinners. This is a short step from believing that the cause justifies evil in the name of the divinity. It also reinforces

the attitude that there is no need to understand or be awed by things that are beyond our comprehension. So, instead of seeing beauty in creation without a deity, only impossible chaos can be seen. Such an attitude reinforces the belief in a deity. Thus religion has become a self-reinforcing mental prison.

Religion can also be used as a tool of suppression. It is easy to maintain order and nullify dissent by citing religious grounds. It is often used to pour scorn on those who do not believe, so that when individuals question the right to govern, the right to interpret religion or the existence of the deity, indignant repugnance is generated in those who are in a position to impose censorship. Often this can be achieved by simple peer group pressure. Religious “ethics” are cited in support of many spurious theories and taboos. The basis of many of these is that the life force is somehow holy, that life is the sole preserve of the deity. Such is the arbitrary nature of the arguments that, even within a single sect of a single religion, there will be theological disagreements about what is ethical and what is unethical. Because secular laws are believed to be made with religious principles underpinning them, it is easy for the judiciary to fall into the trap of condemning individuals to cruelty and inhumanity in the belief that it is ethical to do so.

5 Conclusions

At a personal level religion fulfils the role of accounting for a lack of knowledge and offering hope in the face of difficulties. It also offers a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, these personal attributes of religion are all too easily swamped by its societal consequences. Thus it can be reasonably argued that religion, although claiming to lead people towards truth, actually leads them in the opposite direction. It nurtures censorship, suppression and domination of the majority by a few. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to claim that religion is at best self-gratifying and, at worst, thoroughly evil.

6 References

[1]L D Howe *Racialism in Society* <http://www.innovationgame.com/general> (2001)