

## The Universality of Religion. What is it Worth?

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What is called by one prominent writer "the universal testimony of the human consciousness to the certitudes of religious truth" is a favorite plea among all orders of religious advocacy. From the street-corner evangelist, whose mental condition is far more pathological than normal, to the highly-placed and highly-paid professor, who veils his general disbelief in religious doctrines by emphasizing his special disbelief in a too complete trust in human reason, there is the same triumphant appeal to the universality of religious beliefs among mankind. So far as it goes this universality is a fact. That the majority of people, past and present, have indulged in some sort of religious belief is a statement that none will be inclined to deny, however differently they may interpret the phenomena. The mere existence of religious beliefs is indisputable; their influence on human affairs is unmistakable; but whether these beliefs are solidly on the essential facts of human nature, whether influence has been universally for good, with the relative strength of these beliefs in uncivilized and civilized times, are questions to which the religious advocate seldom addresses himself, and beside which their mere universality is of trifling importance.

For, to the Scientific student, this universality of religious beliefs is not only not surprising, but, if it were otherwise, much of our present reading of primitive human history would be altogether at fault. We have long outgrown the belief that religions are manufactured articles designed with an eye to promoting the interests of priests and kings—although such a view of the matter was far more frequently attributed by religious advocates to their critics, than it was held by the critics themselves. To us religious beliefs are natural and inevitable expressions of mental culture at one stage of human development. They are as natural to the childhood of the race as are measles or scarlet fever to the infancy of the individual. The human mind, whether it be civilized or uncivilized, expresses the same general laws in its phenomena; and exactly the same mental processes that lead a modern scientist to associate the movement of the planets with the same force that governs the fall of a stone, led our primitive ancestors to read their own will and intelligence into nature at large, and afterwards to tremble before and worship the creations of their own imagination.

We do not reason differently to uncivilized people; we have only learned to group our experiences more accurately, and not place in

the same class, things that have no relation to each other. Consequently, all that this universality of religious beliefs means is that, as the human mind is everywhere fundamentally alike, the same general conclusions have always been drawn from the same general conditions. Were it otherwise the uniformity of mental operations would be non-existent, and a Science of mind impossible.

One might be inclined to place more reliance upon the argument from the universality of religious beliefs, if these were always, or even generally, adopted by people when they had reached years of mental maturity. But this is far from being the case. Among a civilized people religious beliefs are never adopted as the result of knowledge or reflection. They find themselves in possession of these beliefs, and reason on them afterwards. Under all the specious excuses put forward by men and women why they retain their religion lies the basal fact that it was impressed upon them before they were old enough to intelligently question its teaching.

But whatever satisfaction any religionist may derive from the fact that the majority hold some kind of religion—and to the average individual there is a sheep-like feeling of satisfaction in the feeling that he is one of a crowd—this feeling might be weakened by another consideration that is equally patent—that is, that the more civilized a people become, the less hold has religion upon them. Among savages the belief in supernaturalism is pretty general. The few exceptions that were thought to exist have been shown to be not such, the confusion arising from investigators either not enquiring deeply enough or else restricting the meaning of religion to its higher and later manifestations. Savage life presents us with the picture of tribes of people whose lives are absolutely governed by superstitions of some form or other. And every step of their subsequent development involves a repudiation of some portion of their religious beliefs. The planting of crops, the breeding of cattle, the building of boats, the first faltering steps that man takes in any and all of the arts and sciences, involve a closer study of the natural properties of things, and consequent diminution of the area over which supernaturalism rules. In the history of any single nation, as in the history of the race at large, to become civilized is to become dereligionized; and the more complete the process of civilization becomes, the greater amount of unbelief existing. The most advanced nations of the world today are not, as is often said, the most Christian; they are the least so. Russia and Spain are far more religious than either Great Britain,

the United States, France, or Germany, and they are less advanced in the arts of civilization. It is in the most advanced countries that we find scepticism strongest; for scepticism is, as Buckle said, not the result of progress, but its essential condition.

So that, in place of the formula that the truth of religion is demonstrated by its universality, we may, with the historic process in our mind's eye, lay down the counter proposition, that the whole development of the race is a march from Theism in the direction of practical Atheism. If man is religious in the earlier stages of his history, he becomes less so in his latter phases. Such religion as he possesses now is not a product of present-day knowledge, but a legacy from a less civilized phase of existence. As man carries in his physical structures rudimentary organs that are to the scientist unmistakable evidences of his animal origin, so he carries in his emotional and intellectual nature traces of irrational and savage beliefs. And just as these physical structures have dwindled owing to disuse, so religious beliefs have been, and are, steadily losing their force in the face of developing knowledge.

A brief glance at any, or all of these sciences will demonstrate this. There is no science that has been so closely intertwined with religious beliefs as has been astronomy. Not merely in the purely savage state, where the stars and planets are frequently regarded as actually living beings, but among comparatively advanced people, a close relationship existed. Today there is no science that is so free from supernaturalism. The brilliant generalizations of Kepler, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Laplace, have for ever reduced all astronomical phenomena to problems of physics. Geology, because a much younger science than astronomy, was never so completely theologized; but the reduction of the causes of all geologic phenomena to purely unconscious forces has wiped out the modern textbooks the many references to the power and majesty of Deity that made earlier ones ridiculous. Religious beliefs never linger long where knowledge is in any degree exact; always and everywhere the extent to which man has invoked God to account for what he saw was in exact proportion to his ignorance concerning it.

In the Sciences that deal specifically with living beings theology has lingered longer, because here the phenomena are much more complex, the causes are more obscure, and exact knowledge is not so easily reached. We do not know the exact manner in which life originated, although there exists no doubt, to a really Scientific mind, that the distinction between

the living and non-living is merely a convenient one, and that between the two great classes of facts there is no real break. We do not know the exact relation between molecular movements in the brain and nervous structure and thought, although here again there can be little doubt that the relation between the two is that of organ and function. Still, so long as our knowledge is not exact on these points, it will always give a chance for the religionist to use the ignorance of Science as the warranty for his own beliefs—a chance that he is never slow to avail himself of. To the thoroughly religious mind, a word is usually as good as an explanation; and the word "God"—that asylum of ignorance, to use Spinoza's phrase—may continue to do duty in these departments until a more complete development drives it from these, as it has been driven from others.

Apart, therefore, from the question of whether the decline of religion is to be hailed with acclamation or faced with fear, its existence is a demonstrable fact. The gods grow fewer in number, poorer in quality, and more limited in their jurisdiction. If they are not, like Alexandria, sighing for more worlds to conquer, they are at least dying for want of a dominion to rule over. A king without a throne is nonentity. A God that has no hand in the regulating of the world is an absurdity; and although we may not perceive the ridiculous nature of such a deity at once, it forces itself on public attention sooner or later. To the argument then, that the vast majority of people always have believed in religion, we need only point to the conditions that gave religion birth. To those who plead that a large number still believe in it, we can reply that they do so in a decreasing measure. The growth of the race is from supernaturalism to naturalism. The Theist, therefore, is not merely combating an argument; he is fighting and seeking to reverse the whole process of mental evolution.—[The Free-thinker.

### Was it Christian?

A Miss Duow, a Chinese missionary, instead of having been massacred by the Boxers, lately arrived in San Francisco on the way to her home in Albany, N. Y. Imbued with the spirit of revenge, she is reported to have said in an interview:

"There is no use talking settlement until we have the heads of Prince Tuan and of the empress dowager. It is foolish to think of honest peace while they are living. In my judgement they should be beheaded before negotiations for peace are entered into. That is all I have to say about the Chinese troubles in Pekin."

Others are probably better qualified than we to determine whether the missionary exhibited genuine Christianity in her desire for blood.—[Ex.