Who Made Whom?

Religion

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by Regis Nicoll

A Big Bang of Religions Sets the Stage for God

Secular historians like to point out the many similarities between Christianity and pagan religions in an effort to prove that, like the gods of pagan antiquity, the object of the Christian faith is a human invention. Sociologist Rodney Stark offers another interpretation.

In his book, *Discovering God* (HarperOne, 2007), Stark references a "big bang" that occurred in the sixth century b.c. No, it wasn't the cosmic explosion of a supernova; it was a spiritual explosion that led to a constellation of religious movements. In the span of a mere one hundred years, civilization witnessed the rise of Zoroastrianism, Orphism, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, the "new" Hinduism, and post-exilic Judaism.

Added to the sudden appearance of these faiths was the introduction of new and shared theological concepts. Doctrines of transcendent morality, sin, the afterlife, and salvation, hitherto unknown, were common among the new religions.

Why the explosion? Why the commonality? Is this "Axial Age" of religion evidence of the discovery or the invention of God? These are questions that Stark explores.

At the outset, Stark notes that, as in biology, the principle of "survival of the fittest" is at work in culture. He writes, "Humans will tend to adopt and retain those elements of culture that appear to produce 'better' results, while those that appear less rewarding will be discarded." This applies equally to concepts of God, which, observes Stark, incline toward deities who are rational, loving, and limitless in scope and power.

Even in the earliest cultures—amid animism, naturism and totemism—there was belief in high gods: eternal, all-knowing, and all-powerful creator-deities who established a moral order and kept an eye on the affairs of mortals. Contrary to the notion that primitives embraced a hodgepodge of superstitions, the fact is that many of them had a more advanced concept of God than those who came later.

The Devolving of Religion

With the rise of civilization, people began moving away from high gods toward polytheism. This move reflected their desire for gods that were more approachable. The Greeks, Sumerians, Egyptians, Mayans, and Aztecs had a rich assortment of deities with limited, specialized powers. Not only were these new gods more human-like, but they were also less morally demanding than the gods of yore.

In fact, the gods of the pantheon were unconcerned with moral behavior, as evidenced by their own petulance and penchant for puerile pranks. Their interest in human affairs extended only to ensuring that they received the worship and devotion owed to them. Hence, with the rise of polytheism, the moral dimension of religion was eclipsed by elaborate systems of ritual and sacrifice.

Because famines, floods, plagues, and other disasters were taken as judgments for neglecting the gods, religion became a matter of national security and welfare. To ensure that their deities were properly appeased, despotic rulers built temples and installed

professional priests, creating "state" religions in which public involvement was not only unnecessary but discouraged, participation being reserved for members of the noble class. Also discouraged was competition from outside religions.

But temple faiths had little to offer commoners besides the distinct "privilege" of financially supporting the religious activities of the elites. Consequently, unlike religions practiced in an open spiritual marketplace, these theocratic religions tended to receive low levels of public commitment. That's because, as Stark observes, "pluralism is the natural state of any religious economy." Nowhere was pluralism more evident than in the Roman Empire.

Plural Rome

Early Rome played host to a plethora of religions, none of which received any appreciable state subsidies. Greek and Roman polytheism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and smatterings of new religious movements here and there made for a brisk religious economy. In this pluralistic, non-subsidized economy, rival faiths were forced to compete for market share.

Hence, unlike earlier versions of polytheistic faiths, the ones in Rome invited public involvement and depended on public support. At the same time, they were burdened by the same shortcomings: gods who were limited in power and who, despite being more human-like, were generally unconcerned with the plights of men, providing no principles, by way of rule or example, for human dignity, moral behavior, or spiritual fulfillment.

But this was a time when popular interest in existential questions had peaked. In a place where up to half of the populace were slaves and where women had few legal rights, a perfect storm was created for the emergence of more humanistic and salvific faiths. The tempest had been building for several centuries.

Preparing the Soil

Thus, after a long hiatus, monotheism began its comeback. In the sixth century b.c., belief in an uncreated, eternal, omnipotent, and beneficent God was introduced to the Persian Empire through the combined influence of Jewish exiles and the teachings of Zoroaster. Common to these two religious streams were the concepts of one true God, who is both creator and sustainer of all things; the existence of good and evil; individual moral responsibility; an afterlife; and the eternal consequences of personal choices.

Further east, the doctrines of good and evil and of the importance of right moral conduct (karma) were introduced by several concurrent movements: Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism, Buddhism, and a revamped Hinduism. In contrast to the moral muteness of traditional polytheism, each of these religions addressed man's irrepressible need to know "How now shall we live?", with the latter three advancing doctrines on how to achieve a meritable afterlife.

Moral codes and concepts of sin, salvation, and life after death were revolutionary developments that prepared the soil for Christianity.

The Rise of the Christian Faith

The early appeal of Christianity came from its message of an afterlife that was attractive and accessible to all people as a gift to receive, rather than as a reward to earn. Novel teachings about human dignity, social responsibility, and loving one's fellow man produced followers whose attitudes and lifestyles were fetchingly distinct from those of their pagan counterparts.

In a culture endemically indifferent to the disadvantaged, writes Stark, "Christians created a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services." Their

care for the poor, widows, orphans, and sick extended beyond their own households to the wider community.

This was particularly evident in the second and third centuries a.d., when plagues ravaged the empire. As pagan leaders, priests, and doctors fled the cities in frenzied haste, Christians stayed behind to attend to the sick and bury the dead. Their sacrificial love not only led to higher survival rates in the communities they served, but also to increased levels of immunity against future outbreaks in those communities. To hearts that had been yearning for an interactive, caring God, the lives of Christians became a convincing argument that such a God existed.

Little wonder that, by the fourth century, the Christian population had grown to become the majority in Rome and in the principal cities of the Aegean world.

Pagan Parallels

The apparent similarity of certain aspects of Christianity to early pagan religious elements (ritual cannibalism, Olympian deities impregnating human women to sire half-gods, and dying and rising Corn-Kings) is consistent with a self-revelatory God operating under the principle of "divine accommodation"—that is, limiting revelation to what people in their present capacity can grasp.

C. S. Lewis saw things this way. To him, myth at its best is a penumbra of divine light that inspires the human imagination about the true nature of things. Much of this mode of revelation is stamped onto the design of nature.

For example, myths about Corn-Kings abounded because of the natural pattern of life, death, and new life, which presaged the "*real* Corn-King who will die once and rise once at Jerusalem," Lewis writes. "We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when

or where, to a historical person . . . *under Pontius Pilate*." He concludes, "We must not be nervous about 'parallels' and 'pagan Christs': they *ought* to be there—it would be a stumbling block if they weren't."

Two Criteria

Faced with a multitude of disparate religious doctrines, how does one distinguish human fabrication from divine revelation? Stark suggests two criteria.

The first is *consistency*. Faiths whose doctrines deviate from a consistent core "can be relegated to human origin." Stark sees little compatibility between most religions. Some believe the universe was created; others insist it is uncreated. Although most religions acknowledge the existence of God, there are widely varied doctrines about the number of gods, their nature, and the duty man owes them. There is little agreement on the afterlife: for some, it's a conscious state of bliss, for others it's an impersonal state of obliviousness.

The other criterion is *increased complexity*. According to the principle of divine accommodation, revelation should become increasingly sophisticated, telling us more, not less, about God over time.

By those measures, the monotheistic religions stand out. The exception is Islam. Its doctrine of Allah as capricious and unknowable makes Islam *theologically* regressive. But it is also *morally* regressive. With its mission to spread the faith "by the sword," Islam is a throwback to the ancient theocratic religions.

Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity, on the other hand, share fundamental beliefs about the nature of God, man, and creation. And, in contrast to Islam, they involve a progression from divine "baby talk" to the unfolding of a mature, comprehensive belief system. This is especially true of Christianity, with its deeply challenging doctrines of the

Trinity, substitutionary atonement, and other-centered love, which are embedded in a historical, rather than mythical, context and are corroborated by multiple eyewitness accounts.

"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. . . . For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:16,21)

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