

Lesson 1: The Development of Beliefs Through Ages

Among the fundamental intellectual topics that concern human life, religious questions enjoy a particular importance. They have always been regarded, in fact, as the most basic concern for the well-being and destiny of man and have produced profound insights and extensive knowledge.

Scholars and researchers have undertaken wide-ranging and comprehensive studies on the origins and motives of man's religious concerns, pursuing their researches with a particular point of view and methodology that governs also their judgments and conclusions.

The truth of the matter is that since the earliest prehistoric times, faith and belief have always been part of the texture of human society; neither in the past nor in the present is it possible to find a society in which religious issues have not been raised.

The Noble Qur'an refers in several verses to the historical fact that heaven-sent Prophets constantly appeared in past nations where, in addition to their beneficial spiritual influence, they also played a fundamental role in the creation of human civilization.

The study of the way in which human life has evolved and knowledge developed, together with the knowledge yielded by the most distant horizons of history, shows that man was attached to religious belief before he became fully aware of the methods of rational deduction.

The first era of man's knowledge and industry does not, therefore, enjoy primacy over the earliest eras of religion and belief. It may even be claimed that human endeavor in the realm of religion and belief has been more strenuous and longer-lasting than his efforts in the area of knowledge and art, for the knowledge of a transcendent reality that is the essence of the world of being is more difficult and less accessible than the essence of those things which knowledge and art strives constantly to attain.

The essential nature of the resplendent sun, which is the most manifest of all things, remained unknown to man for many centuries and its movements and effects were subject to all kinds of interpretations;

although none could deny the luminosity of its rays, the minds of most men remained in deep darkness with respect to its knowledge.

The perception of great truths, is, then, impossible without logical examination, deduction and comprehensive study. If superstitions and religious myths are to be found among ancient peoples, constantly being infused into new moulds because of deficiency and weakness in thought and restriction in knowledge, this does not mean, then, that religion, with its doctrinal content, is false.

Rather, it demonstrates the primacy and autonomy of religious aspiration in the very depths of the human soul and heart. Moreover, from the science that seeks to explore prehistoric times, we cannot expect that it will uncover more of ancient religions than the traces of myths and superstitions decipherable in the vestiges of primitive man and beneath the earth.

Since human conduct and activity are always accompanied by two clear characteristics—primacy and autonomy, on the one hand, and comprehensiveness and universality among the members of the species, on the other hand—it appears entirely logical that we should posit some origin for that conduct and activity in the depths of the human spirit.

The existence of such a continuous phenomenon in an eternal and universal form, throughout history and prehistory, cannot be regarded as the effect of customs and habits; it is the manifestation of a primordial thirst and imperative instinct for truth. All religious beliefs, with their different aspects and forms, arise from a single gushing, abundant source—the primordial nature of man, which is neither externally imposed nor accidental.

First there comes into being within man's disposition, the capacity to accept belief, and then belief takes form. The same inward inclination that impels a person to intellectual investigation and research in order to perceive reality is an indication of man's need of religious knowledge. This, of course, does not mean that an inward state and predisposition is necessarily accompanied by a correct and fully formed belief.

In just the same way that the body desires nutritive substances without this desire, does not imply the goodness and wholesomeness of the food, the soul, too, seeks out its food—namely faith and belief—insistently seeking awareness of its lord and wishing to supplicate at His threshold. But the instinct that impels it to search is unable to recognize and assess beliefs and creeds, distinguishing the true from the false.

Scholars are agreed that religious beliefs have always been intertwined with human life. However, their opinions differ concerning the fundamental roots of religion and the factors that have played a primary role in its establishment and development. Their judgments, in this respect, are generally based on studies of superstitious religions and primitive beliefs, with the result that their conclusions are, in the final analysis, defective and illogical.

It is true that certain religions, lacking a connection with the principles of revelation, have been

influenced in their appearance and growth by the social environment and similar factors. However, it is illogical to ascribe the foundation of all faiths and religious tendencies to material or economic circumstances and demands, to fear of the terrifying forces of nature, to ignorance or to considerations rejected by science.

Without doubt, one of the factors in the emergence of anti-religious ideas and a phalanx of deniers of God, has been the false teachings, the inadequacies and the intellectual perversions of the followers of some religions. The peculiarities and separate characteristics of each religion must, therefore, be individually examined when studying the reasons that have led men to adhere to that religion.

In many historical events, religion can be seen to have dominated all relationships. If religion were not a primary phenomenon it would have to be enclosed within the four walls of material motives. However, what factor could have given religious personalities such firmness and steadfastness for the sake of their religious goals?

Was it the expectation of material benefits and personal gains that made the bitter hardships of misfortune and difficulty sweet-tasting to their souls? On the contrary, we see that they sacrificed all their material resources prosperity and personal desires, to their religious sentiments and ideals, going so far as lovingly to sacrifice their souls.

In the story concerning the Pharaoh and his sorcerers, we read that he summoned all his magicians in order to defeat Moses, the one addressed by God (peace be upon our Prophet and him), hoping that with their ingenuity and magical powers, they might compel him to submit. But thanks to the miraculous power vested in Moses, they were overpowered and they turned to the true belief.

The furious Pharaoh, whose arrogance had been broken, began to slander and threaten them, saying he would punish them with the worst of tortures: the severance of their limbs. But a profound revolution had taken place in the souls of the sorcerers; they remained firm and steadfast in the face of the threats and capling of the Pharaoh and his painful tortures. They replied, with remarkable fortitude,

"..give orders for us to be tortured; your writ runs only in this narrow world." (20:72).

This was a clear display of the strength of the innate desire for truth and reality in man when confronted with suppression, coercion and brute force. Men who had lived at the very heart of the Pharaoh's apparatus and had benefited from it, raised up their heads in rebellion and were ready to renounce their own lives.

The specific inclination of man to religious concerns cannot, therefore, be explained in terms of materialist interpretations; on the contrary, incidents such as that of the sorcerers demonstrate the primacy of the religious sense in man.

Illogical beliefs do not pertain only to religious questions. Before they were properly refined, many of the

sciences were commingled with superstitions. Men found their way from incantation and magic to true and beneficial medicine and from unrealistic alchemy to realistic chemistry.

No one can claim that if man once committed an error in searching for something, he is bound always to remain in error and will never find a way of reaching the truth. Those who believe in scientific philosophy and the primacy of the experimental method, accept that their experiments may yield erroneous results although they invariably give them the status of truth.

Those who deny God insist on the conclusion that God is the product of human thought. For example, the English philosopher, Bertrand Russell, regards the fear of natural forces to have been the origin of religion. "In my opinion, religion is above all founded on fear: fear of the unknown, fear of death, fear of defeat, fear of the mysterious and the hidden. In addition, as already remarked, a sentiment comes into being enabling everyone to imagine that he has a supporter in all his problems and struggles."¹

This is merely a claim, unsupported by any evidence.

Samuel King says, "The source of religion is shrouded in mystery. Among the countless theories of scholars on the subject, some appear to be more logical than others, but even the best of them is open to objection from the point of view of scientific proof. They cannot transcend the sphere of logical speculation. There is, therefore, intense disagreement among sociologists concerning the origins of religion."²

Nonetheless, we can respond that even if we accept the original and fundamental motive for man's belief in a creator to have been fear, this in no way proves that the existence of God is a mere fancy without reality.

If fear motivated man to seek a refuge and if in the course of that search he discovered a certain reality (God), is there any objection to be made? If fear is the cause for the discovery of a certain thing, can we say that that thing is imaginary and unreal because it was fear that prompted man to seek it out?

It would surely be illogical to maintain, for example, that the science of medicine has no reality because man has sought and discovered it out of fear, fear of disease and death? The truth of the matter is that the science of medicine is a reality, irrespective of whether the original motive of man in discovering it was fear of disease and death or some other factor.

In all the affairs and occurrences of life, belief in a wise and powerful Lord is a real refuge and strong support. This is quite a different matter from whether or not men's motive in searching it out was fear of vicissitudes and the search for a refuge or not. The two matters are quite separate and must be studied separately.

No doubt, in the primitive stages of his life, man was, indeed, prey to humiliating and painful terror when faced with awesome natural occurrences such as storms, earthquakes and diseases. A nightmare of

fear cast its inauspicious shadow on all aspects of his life and his thoughts, and in the unceasing struggle he waged against impotence and fear, he sought a support where he might take refuge from his terrifying environment and find inner peace. Finally, through unrelenting effort, he conquered the nightmare of abjection and fear and attained a remarkable triumph.

The study of the different stages in the life of primitive man, and the discovery of evidence that fear prevailed in his thoughts, do not prove that fear and ignorance were the sole fundamental factor in man's inclination to religion. Such an assertion would be the result of seeing only one dimension of the matter.

General conclusions can be drawn from historical research and studies only when the entirety of history, with all the different periods in the life of man, is investigated and researched, not one corner of his vast and variegated history.

The domination of human affairs by fear and abjection in specific and limited periods must not be made the basis for a general judgment concerning all eras. Would it not be a hasty judgment to say that all the religious ideas and sentiments of men, the inclination to the worship of God in all periods down to and including the present, have been caused simply by terror, by fear of the wrath of nature, of war and disease?

In actual fact, the most firmly convinced among men are by no means the weakest. Those who, in the course of time, have raised high the banner of religion have been the strongest and most steadfast of men. A person's faith is never increased in proportion to his weakness, and the leader of a people in matters of religious belief is not the foremost among them in weakness, abjectness and impotence.

Is the belief in religion of thousands of scholars and thinkers the product of fear on their part of storms, earthquakes and disease? Can their inclination to religion, the result of scholarly studies, of logic and rational proof, be attributed to their ignorance and lack of awareness of the natural causes of phenomena? What would be the answer of an intelligent person?

Moreover, it is not in order to attain some kind of peace that man turns to religion. Rather, it is after attaining belief and conviction that he begins to enjoy the fruits of religion—peace and tranquility.

In the opinion of divinely guided scholars, the world is a compendium of finely calculated causes and reasons, the precise system of the cosmos bearing witness to the existence of a source characterized by knowledge and power. The confused and incomprehensible brush strokes of a painting cannot be taken as the indication of a skilled artist, but precise strokes and designs with meaningful content are indeed evidence for the existence of a talented painter.

There are also people who regard belief in a reality beyond nature as to be the product of economic factors. They make strenuous efforts to establish some connection between religion and economics.

They claim that religion has always been in the service of imperialism and exploitation and that it was the invention of the ruling, exploiting class as a means for breaking the resistance of the exploited masses.

Religion has been used, they claim, to stupefy the deprived toilers and to encourage them to accept their deprivation. There is no doubt that, like everything else in the world, religion can be misused.

When diverted from its true aims, it becomes a tool in the hands of profiteers who wish to enslave the nations. However, this misuse of religion should not provide opportunists with a pretext for mercilessly attacking everything that bears the name of religion. A clear separation must be made between perverted religions concocted by imperialism to stupefy the masses, and authentic, constructive religions.

It is possible that in many human societies, unfavorable economic conditions, stagnation and backwardness may coexist with religious belief. But this coexistence does not necessitate any causal relationship; one cannot be presented as the cause of the other. Sometimes we see a society enjoying prosperity and flourishing economically that is deeply attached to religion, while another society that enjoys similarly favorable economic conditions is totally averse to religion.

Similarly, in an environment of poverty and backwardness, the sun of religion may set, while in another such environment, the influence of religion may be at its zenith. The obvious lack of congruity between economic conditions and the prevalence or decline of religious influence is a clear proof of the fact that contemporaneity does not suffice to establish a causal relationship. Some special factor must obtain for the emergence or disappearance of one to be linked to the existence or non-existence of the other.

We can clearly observe this lack of congruity in two societies that are both under the oppressive domination of the exploiting class. In one of them, religion has totally left the scene, while in the other, its influence has expanded.

Objective realities show us, then, that man is drawn to religion in a variety of external circumstances. Wherever religion demonstrates its appeal, one must look for the fundamental inward motive in the specific nature of religion, not in economic circumstances.

In addition, when we examine the aims of the heavenly religions, we reach the conclusion that the provision of prosperity and establishment of a just economic system based on religion have been one of the reasons for the sending of the Prophets. This, too, is one of the reasons why men have gravitated to religion and one of the benefits humanity has gained from religion.

[1.](#) Russell, Why I am not a Christian., p. 37.

[2.](#) King, Sociology, p.99.

<https://www.al-islam.org/god-and-his-attributes-sayyid-mujtaba-musavi-lari/lesson-1-development-beliefs-through-ages#comment-0>