FROM INSTINCT TO INSTITUTION: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE BIRTH OF RELIGION AND ITS EVOLUTION IN HUMAN HISTORY

BEAUTY DAS

Introduction:

Human beings, like any other living beings, are concerned with food and shelter for their survival, but what sets them apart from other living species is their extraordinary reasoning capacity. That means they are distinguished as the unique rational species on Earth. Among various concerns, this rational ability not only fulfils their survival or existential needs, but also causes their moral and religious instincts. Their critical thinking, calculative ability, and autonomous will seek to fulfil such concerns by engaging in complex relationships with fellow beings, other species, and the external world around them. As a result, among the many qualities that characterise humanity, they can be most prominently understood as rational, social, moral, and religious beings, reflecting the multifaceted nature of human existence.

Religion, in particular, emerges from this interplay of human reflection, sociality, and moral concern, and it is inextricably linked with human affairs from their earliest existence. It represents an expression of the human search for meaning, an attempt to understand the mysteries of life and the universe, and a framework through which individuals and communities organise their ethical and spiritual lives. From early symbolic practices to the development of structured religious institutions, religion illustrates the uniquely human capacity to combine reason, imagination, and social cooperation in the pursuit of transcendent truth.

This fact concerning religion inevitably leads to the most crucial question that intrigues many minds: What is religion? And how does this idea emerge in the human mind? Before delving into the definition of religion, it is necessary to engage with the latter question concerning the birth of religion, and the subsequent section will address this issue.

The Birth of Religion

Humans, being inquisitive by nature, often wonder how did the idea of religion originated, or what is the thing that causes the birth of religion, and, more specifically, how organized and institutionalized forms of religion developed over

time. To find the answer, we should look back to the very beginnings of human civilisation. At the very early stage of human civilisation, people were immensely naive and did not understand the causes behind various natural events, such as storms, floods, droughts, and earthquakes etc. Since they did not know the cause of these natural events, they began to suspect that perhaps some powerful malevolent or benevolent force was responsible for all these disasters. This thinking compelled them to find solutions to overcome these predicaments, and the curiosity to find answers to these problems gave rise to the birth of religion.

Here, I intend to highlight this fact because, to my mind, religion is born from the fear that resides in the human mind. From the beginning of human existence, humans have been curious about every aspect, whether it is related to themselves or the external world around them. This happens because they are endowed with a special power or capacity called reason. However, it does not mean that other living species have no rational capacity. They have, but humans‘ rational capacity, degree-wise, is higher than that of any other living creature.[1] Even almost two thousand years ago, this fact was recognised by Aristotle, who claimed that some animals possess a form of practical intelligence.[2] Following him, many other philosophers (such as P. F. Strawson, Daniel Dennett, H. J. Glock, and Donald Davidson) and scientists (e.g., Thomas Suddendorf, Jan Engelmann, and Josep Call) have claimed and demonstrated this fact. So, it can be argued that, although some animals possess some reasoning ability, but humans‘ superior rational capacity or power sets them apart from other living creatures. Due to this highest reasoning capacity, humans have evolved and strengthened their thinking ability, making them curious about things they do not know.

Humans harnessed their rational capacity and inquisitiveness to master the things they feared. Due to this, they have gradually discovered a custom of worship natural things (e.g., rivers, trees, soil, the sun, the moon, certain animals or birds), believing that they are ancestrally or spiritually connected to, or identical with, these natural objects or animals, and that this will protect them from natural disasters or threats to their existence. So, these natural objects or creatures that they began to worship were called ―totems". With the evolution of human civilisation, the customs of worship also evolved. As a result, the totem system gradually evolved over time

and led humans toward the concept of a supernatural being, or God. That means, over the course of evolution, humans have steadily developed the idea of God in their thought process as a solution to every unknown thing they encounter (whether it is about the ultimate reality, the ultimate cause of every creation, or the indeterministic future, etc.).

As humans believe that a supreme being, or God, is the ultimate creator of everything, they have written various scriptures to support this belief, serving as proof for the existence of God. These theological scriptures comprise various moral teachings that convey a message from God, offering guidance to the people about what is right and wrong. Based on these scriptures, believers in God have established various institutional religions grounded in their respective belief systems, which differ in terms of race, community, culture, and social context. Now, the question is: Why are there different institutional religions, rather than a single one? In response to this query, it can be argued that people began living in groups from the earliest stages of human existence to protect themselves from various predicaments, as they were well aware that unity is strength. This awareness eventually led to the formation of a civilised society. Due to variations among different groups, people's belief systems, rituals, customs, and other aspects also vary. Even for the diversity of people living together, we can witness the rise of differences between various belief systems regarding the idea of God, in the forms of "monotheism" (belief in one God), "polytheism" (belief in multiple Gods and Goddesses), "pantheism" (belief in the combination of God and the universe as one), and "deism" (belief in God as the creator of everything). All these belief systems are responsible for establishing different conventional institutional religions. Hence, by analysing the general history of the evolution of human existence and their civilisation, it is palpably clear how the idea of religion has evolved from mere instincts to institutions over time. Now, in the aftermath of a detailed analysis of the birth of religion, it is pertinent to shed light on various interpretations that not only define the idea of religion but also illuminate its evolutionary aspect, which contributes to its current status.

The Definition of Religion

Before delving into the definition of religion, it is necessary to clarify in which sense I intend to define the term "religion." It is evident that the term

—eligion" bears different meanings as per the Indian and Western perspectives. From the Indian perspective, religion means *dharma*, which is based entirely on ethical principles and duties that guide toward the end of liberation. On the other hand, the Western perspective holds that the term —eligion" derives from the Latin word *religio*, which means —bond." This Western meaning of religion essentially conveys the bond or relationship between human beings and the transcendent, supreme being. That means, according to the Western perspective, religion is the adherence to the organised, conventional institutional religions that are entirely based on dogmatic faith or belief. So, the definition I intend to illustrate here concerns the idea of religion as emphasised in the Western perspective.

Regarding the definition of religion, it can be argued that the definition varies significantly depending on the perspective from which it is approached. In this context, the three most essential approaches need to be illustrated, viz., the mythological, theological, and philosophical perspectives. If we thoroughly analyse the mythological[3] perspective, it defines religion as a fundamental system of divine narratives that intends to explain the nature of the divine or God, the origin and structure of the world, and the purpose of human existence. In this regard, Mircea Eliade, in his book *Myth and Reality*,[4] argued that myth reveals a religious encounter with the supernatural being to explain the order of reality (Eliade, 1963, pp. 5-6). Thus, according to the mythological perspective, religion can be understood as the narration of the symbolic expression of the supernatural being (God) to reveal the truth of reality (which is not based on rational discourse).

In contrast, the theological perspective defines religion in a somewhat different manner. From this perspective, religion is viewed as a means of revealing the true relationship between human beings and the divine or God. That means theology acknowledges the existence of a supernatural being or beings (such as in the forms of —notheism" or —patheism") as the ultimate principle, and religion is the human response to the revelation or the existence of this ultimate reality. To expand this view, Paul Tillich, in the book *Dynamics of Faith*,[5] defines religion as the —ultimate concern" of humanity, which leads them toward the ultimate reality (Tillich, 1957, p. 10). Hence, from a theological perspective, religion is considered a divine revelation, achieved through human faith and worship.

Now, it is essential to turn this inquiry to the philosophical definition of religion. The philosophical perspective aims to define religion through rational reflection, focusing on its conceptual coherence, truth claims, and ethical implications related to the idea of a divine being or God. This approach establishes a distinct philosophical standpoint regarding religion, separate from the other two viewpoints discussed earlier. Notably, in these perspectives, a common idea that they all intend to ponder over is the concept of God, which they consider the subject matter of religion. However, the difference lies in the method used to justify the idea of the divine and religion. That means both the mythological and theological perspectives of religion are based on mere faith. In contrast, the philosophical standpoint attempts to justify such concepts through rational justifications, unlike the former two viewpoints.

However, to adequately justify the philosophical idea of religion, it is necessary to examine the reflections of various philosophers on this concept and its evolution throughout the history of philosophy.

The Evolution of the Idea of Religion

This section aims to elaborate on the evolution of the idea of religion in detail, highlighting the dynamics behind the concept of religion through the lens of ancient Greek to contemporary philosophers. This analysis of the philosophical history of the idea of religion not only emphasises the philosophical perspective on religion but also sheds light on the evolution of this idea, which changes over time in response to human or social needs.

Importantly, this shift in perspectives has generated numerous complex questions that challenge both the conceptual clarity and normative authority of religion. For example, what exactly constitutes religion, and how should it be understood in an ethically and philosophically justifiable way? Is it possible to establish a universal definition of religion in a world marked by diverse and often conflicting institutional beliefs? Should religion be evaluated through rational justification, or is it inherently grounded in faith? Does morality stem from religion, or does religion rely on a pre-existing moral framework? How can the truth claims of religious doctrines be critically assessed? To what degree can institutional religious authorities be separated from spheres such as governance, education, law, and public life? Finally, can a secular, pluralistic society safeguard religious freedom without

reinforcing institutional dominance? These questions reflect fundamental philosophical concerns regarding the definition, epistemology, and socio-political dimensions of religion. The subsequent sections aim to explore the historical development of the philosophy of religion and address these issues.

The Idea of Religion in the Light of Ancient Greek Philosophers

While religion has often been viewed primarily through the lens of mythology or theology, philosophy approaches it in a distinct and more systematic way. Philosophy‘s role is to critically investigate the meaning, nature, and epistemological foundations of religious beliefs, rituals, and the concept of the divine. In this way, philosophy does more than comment on religion; it provides a structured and reflective framework for assessing its significance, evaluating its truth claims, and understanding its impact on moral and metaphysical perspectives.

To grasp how philosophy approaches and critically examines religion, one must trace its historical development, beginning with the insights of ancient Greek philosophers who first sought a rational understanding of humanity‘s religious life. For instance, Plato (428–348 BC) conceives of religion not merely as a collection of rituals or the outward worship of divine beings. Instead, he advocated a philosophical engagement with the divine, which, in his metaphysical framework, is grounded in the ―form of the good‖ (Purshouse, 2006, pp. 93–94).[6] This supreme form serves as the ultimate source of knowledge and value, linking the divine to ethical purpose. Accordingly, Plato views religion not through myth or ceremonial practice, but as a rational and moral pursuit of the good, i.e., a philosophical and ethical path aimed at cultivating virtue and achieving the highest moral ideals or the form of good.

In contrast, Aristotle, while sharing some critical perspectives on traditional Greek religion, presents a distinct approach to it. Both he and Plato agree that the anthropomorphic gods of Greek mythology lack philosophical credibility. However, Aristotle examines religion through the framework of social and metaphysical order, viewing religious beliefs and practices as important for fostering unity and cohesion within society (Jowett, 1908, pp. 275–276),[7] even though much of it is rooted in tradition and lacks rational justification. From a philosophical perspective, many conventional religious views, therefore, are untenable in Aristotle‘s assessment. Yet, in his metaphysical exploration of change and motion in the cosmos, he introduces

the concept of the ―Unmoved Mover," i.e., a being defined by pure actuality, absolute perfection, and self-sufficiency. This abstract, non-anthropomorphic entity functions as the first cause, initiating all movement without undergoing any change to itself. Through the idea of the Unmoved Mover, Aristotle offers a rational explanation of the dynamic order of the universe.

Thus, both Plato and Aristotle, though differing in emphasis, align in viewing religion not as mere worship, but as an endeavour to understand the divine through rational and ethical reflection. Thus, although Aristotle rejects the mythological and irrational aspects of traditional religion, he nonetheless acknowledges the philosophical necessity of a principle that accounts for existence and the order of the cosmos. His concept of the Unmoved Mover provides a rational alternative to conventional theistic portrayals, demonstrating his commitment to a reasoned, metaphysical understanding of the divine (Ross, 1924, pp. cxxxiii–cxxxv).[8] In this way, despite their differing emphases, both Plato and Aristotle share the perspective that religion should not be seen merely as ritualistic worship, but as a pursuit of understanding the divine through metaphysical, rational, and ethical inquiry.

Religion as Conceived by Scholastic Philosophers

It is now relevant to consider medieval Western philosophy, in which scholastic thinkers examined the nature of God and advanced arguments for God‘s existence, which is a central topic in religion. During this period, philosophers endeavoured to reconcile faith with reason to explain the essence of religion. Nevertheless, in some instances, they placed greater emphasis on faith and divine revelation rather than on rational analysis. Within this framework, scholastic philosophy proposes three key arguments for God‘s existence, which form the foundational basis of the concept of religion.

Firstly, in his 1078 work *Proslogion*,[9] St. Anselm presents the ontological argument for God‘s existence, asserting that the very concept of a perfect being in the human mind necessitates its existence both in thought and in reality. Secondly, St. Thomas Aquinas, in his 1274 book *Summa Theologica*,[10] introduces the cosmological argument, which maintains that everything that exists must have a cause, implying the necessity of a first cause, i.e., God, responsible for the creation of the universe. Third, Aquinas also formulates the teleological, or design, argument, which observes that the

purposeful and intricate order in the world and universe points to an intelligent designer, identified as God. Collectively, these arguments reinforce institutional religious beliefs in God‘s existence and affirm faith in a first cause or a supremely perfect being. In this way, these philosophical interpretations closely align with theological perspectives, making it at times difficult to clearly distinguish between philosophical reasoning and theological explanations regarding religion.

Modern Enlightenment View of Religion

The rise of the modern Enlightenment era prompted a critical re-evaluation of traditional religious doctrines, which had been primarily based on faith and revelation. While many philosophers of this period made notable contributions to the understanding of religion, but this study focuses on Immanuel Kant‘s concept of rational moral religion, which represents a pivotal philosophical revolution in the philosophy of religion. Kant‘s critical philosophy is fundamentally rooted in reason, and guided by this framework, he seeks to reinterpret religion within the boundaries of rational inquiry.

In his seminal work *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1792/1998),[11] Kant argues that any authentic form of religion must be grounded in morality, which is guided by the principles of pure practical reason inherent in the human mind (Kant, 1792/1998,pp. 40–41). He emphasises that humans are epistemically limited beings, i.e., our cognitive capacities are confined to knowledge derived from sensory experience. As a result, central religious concepts (such as God, the soul, and immortality) lack empirical foundations and therefore lie beyond the scope of theoretical or speculative reason.

This prompts a significant question in light of the ontological argument for God‘s existence: if such concepts have no objective empirical basis, why do they hold such enduring power in human thought? Kant addresses this by highlighting a distinctive feature of human reason, i.e., its peculiar drive to surpass its own limits in the pursuit of knowledge beyond empirical verification (Kant, 1781/1929, p. 7).[12]This intrinsic quest for coherence and completeness extends to all areas, giving rise to metaphysical ideas, including the concept of God. Such metaphysical entities, therefore, exist as ideas of reason rather than as objective realities. Nonetheless, Kant argues that while humans cannot achieve theoretical knowledge of these entities, they

can adopt them as postulates of practical reason, which helps them to guide moral endeavours and fulfil the rational demands of human thought.

Kant, therefore, proposes that concepts traditionally associated with religion should be regarded as postulates of practical reason (Kant, 1792/1998, pp. 34-35).[13] In other words, although God cannot be known through speculative reason, but rational faith in God as a postulate plays a guiding role in moral life. Practical reason assumes the existence of God, freedom, and immortality as necessary foundations for understanding moral duty and striving toward the highest good.

From this perspective, Kant famously claims that morality serves as the guardian of religion (Kant, 1792/1998, p. 35). The implication is clear, i.e., the proper role of religion is not to make supernatural assertions based on revelation or tradition, but to nurture and enhance human moral capacities. Religion, therefore, should not enforce dogma but promote ethical development guided by reason. Consequently, Kant rejects the authority of institutional or dogmatic interpretations of religion. Instead, he envisions a universal moral religion accessible to all rational beings. In his framework, the concept of God is not an object of theoretical knowledge but a necessary moral postulate that serves to motivate adherence to moral law. Through this approach, Kant reconceives religion as essentially moral and rational, rather than ritualistic or doctrinal.

Religion in the Contemporary Philosophical Landscape

An analysis of post-Kantian to contemporary philosophy reveals that, following Kant, many thinkers have begun to question and critically challenge the authority of institutional religions. These critiques arose for various reasons, including concerns about the entanglement of religion with power structures, its impact on political life, its role in sustaining social hierarchies, and other mechanisms of domination. An analysis of philosophical reflections on religion from the 19th to the 21st centuries reveals a prevailing perspective that implies religion is not a transcendent or eternal truth, but rather a human and social construct. To fully grasp this viewpoint, it is important to consider the contributions of Foucault and Habermas regarding the concept of religion.

At first, it is essential to consider the French philosopher Michel Foucault's perspective on religion. A close examination of his work shows that Foucault‘s analyses of madness and sexuality reveal his view of religion as a mechanism of social governance and regulation. He contended that sexuality is not an inherent trait but a historically constructed concept, profoundly shaped by religious discourses (particularly Christianity), through ideas such as original sin, human fallibility, and finitude. Furthermore, Foucault emphasises the intricate relationship between religion and power, demonstrating how religious institutions have historically played a pivotal role in shaping modern forms of social control and governance. This fusion of power and religion underscores the inherently regulatory function of religion in shaping and managing individual beings. Accordingly, Foucault exposes the methods of control employed by institutional religions through practices such as confession and pastoral authority, which aim to govern human behaviour as well as social and political life (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 58).[14]

At this juncture, it is crucial to recognise that Foucault did not produce a comprehensive treatise on religion, nor did he critique institutional religions from a theological standpoint. Nevertheless, his work provides one of the most influential frameworks for understanding religion as a system of power and subject formation. Foucault examines religion through a subtle, genealogical, and methodical lens, focusing not on doctrines but on the operational practices of religious institutions, such as confession, pastoral authority, spiritual supervision, and regulation of the body, which shaped human subjectivity and laid the foundation for modern power structures. He demonstrates how these practices were adapted into religious institutions and continue to inform contemporary forms of governance (Foucault, 1979/1999, pp. 135-152).[15] Consequently, Foucault can be regarded as a significant analyst and critic of religion, not for dismissing faith itself, but for revealing its historical role in structuring and controlling both society and individuals. In this sense, he functions as both a constructivist and a deconstructivist of religion.

Now, in the aftermath of Foucault, it is crucial to examine how the living philosopher Jürgen Habermas perceives the idea of religion. Through his philosophy of religion, Habermas seeks to uncover a secular aspect of religion, studying it in light of the needs of modern democratic societies. His interpretation is grounded in his

theories of communicative action and public discourse, which shape his view of religion's societal role. He contends that religion provides valuable contributions to the public sphere, i.e., an arena where individuals participate equally in rational discussions about social, legal, and political norms, thus supporting democratic life.

Habermas characterises contemporary society as "post-secular," acknowledging that while it is primarily secular, religious influences still shape cultural and political life (Habermas, 2008, pp. 19-20).[16] The concept of "post-secular" thus reflects the ongoing, intricate coexistence of secular and religious forces in society. In this regard, Habermas suggests for a rational dialogical method that connects secular and religious perspectives to address this complexity. He believes that such engagement allows both viewpoints to retain legitimacy, fostering mutual understanding and consensus.

This type of rational discourse encourages religious individuals to critically and openly reflect on their traditional values, allowing them to be expressed in the public sphere. At the same time, secular individuals are expected to engage with religious perspectives with openness and receptivity. From this standpoint, Habermas is primarily concerned with addressing religious conflict in society, which underlies his proposal for a communicative framework to mediate and resolve such tensions in the post-secular context (Habermas, 2005/2008, pp. 113-115).[17] Consequently, Habermas's approach to religion focuses less on metaphysical questions about God and more on a practical, social, and communicative perspective that prioritises rational dialogue and mutual understanding for maintaining the peace within democratic societies.

Conclusion:

As a concluding remark, it can be argued that the long arc of humanity's religious consciousness, stretching from prehistoric fear to institutional systems of belief, reveals that religion is neither a fixed metaphysical certainty nor merely an illusion imposed from without. Instead, it is a profoundly human creation, born from the conjunction of instinct, imagination, and reason, and transformed across history by society's changing material and intellectual needs. The earliest humans, confronted with an unpredictable and often terrifying natural world, responded with the only interpretive tools available to them, i.e., curiosity, fear, and the rudiments of

reason. In this crucible of uncertainty, religion first emerged as a symbolic means of making sense of the unknown and navigating the conditions of existence. What began as the worship of the natural forces in the name of totems, attempts to appease or domesticate what was feared, slowly evolved into more abstract conceptions of supernatural agency, culminating in the sophisticated theological systems of later civilisations.

The birth of institutional religion, therefore, cannot be understood apart from the fundamental human impulse to impose order on chaos. As rational capacities developed, mythic narratives became more refined, eventually giving rise to metaphysical systems that sought not merely to explain the world but to orient ethical and communal life. Ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle initiated a pivotal transformation, i.e., they detached the idea of the divine from ritual and myth, repositioning it within a framework of rational inquiry and ethical purpose. What had been a response to natural fear became an intellectual problem that requires conceptual clarity about its metaphysical grounding and moral justification.

This philosophical inheritance shaped the medieval scholastics, who attempted to reconcile inherited faith with rational argumentation. Yet even in its most sophisticated theological form, religion remained entwined with structures of authority, offering assurances that reason alone could not provide. The Enlightenment, epitomised by Kant, marked another decisive shift, indicating that religion was stripped of its dogmatic pretensions and reconstituted as a moral enterprise grounded in practical reason. The divine ceased to function as an object of speculative knowledge and instead became a regulative idea necessary for moral agency. Religion thus survived not as a supernatural explanation, but as a rationally purified orientation toward ethical life.

In contrast, a thorough analysis of the contemporary status of the idea of religion reveals that philosophers like Foucault further complicate the narrative by exposing how religion has historically served not only to provide meaning but also to organise power, shape subjectivity, and regulate social behaviour. Religion becomes here a cultural technology, a mechanism through which societies produce obedient and morally disciplined subjects. On the other hand, Habermas, responding to the post-secular complexities of modernity, offers neither a rejection of religion nor a

return to pre-modern faith, but a proposal for coexistence. That means a communicative framework in which religious and secular voices engage everyone through shared rational discourse. In this contemporary philosophical landscape, religion remains significant not as a source of metaphysical truth but as a reservoir of rational insight that can contribute to democratic discourse.

Taken together, these perspectives show that religion is not a static entity handed down from beyond the human sphere. It is a historically evolving human project, one that originates in instinctual fear, develops through rational reflection, institutionalises itself through social organisation, and is continually reinterpreted through philosophical reflections. Its persistence does not prove the existence of a transcendent divine order; rather, it testifies to humanity‘s unending struggle to make sense of themselves, their moral obligations, and their place in the cosmos.

The birth of religion, then, is ultimately the birth of humanity‘s self-awareness, their recognition of vulnerability, their drive for meaning, their capacity for imagination, and their aspiration toward ethical community. Religion begins as instinct, evolves into myth, and is eventually subjected to reason. In this ongoing dialectic between fear and understanding, between tradition and critique, the story of religion mirrors the story of humanity itself. That means a restless movement from darkness to light, from unknowing to reflection, from dependence to autonomy. Whether religion will continue to transform or gradually dissolve into new forms of secular meaning remains uncertain. Still, its origin and evolution reveal something enduring, indicating that humans are rational beings who must interpret the world, even before they can control it. In doing so, they inevitably create the frameworks through which they understand themselves and one another.

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