

Religion and Human Decision Making

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Apart from perceptual inputs, every human decision and action is informed by some combination of three mental processes: reason [analysis], intuition [synthesis], and emotion [plus and minus associated feeling]. The human perspectives on self and reality – human worldviews – are created as a result of inputs from these three sources. Different types of decisions and actions rely to different degrees on different ones of these three inputs. It is relatively easy to “mess up” in the process of attempting to arrive at quality decisions and actions as humans strive to utilize these mental resources effectively. This is especially true at the level of individual decisions and actions. Fortunately, most errant individual decisions get adjusted by the input of the surrounding social collective, but collective societal decisions can also go awry under the “right” circumstances [stress, threat, propaganda, charisma, subjugation, etc.].

The social institution of religion, which arises in complex society and tends to become entrenched and resistant to change, is one of the zones of collective human decision making and activity where severe “error” is common.

Why?

Religion tries to answer the challenging questions of why humans and their societies exist and take the form that they do. The more detailed and absolute the claims are that religions make, the more gratifying can be the belief in these claims. And attributing primary cause in these religious explanations to agents [gods] outside of the realm of human existence, places “proof” beyond challenge from the human knowledge base. It takes huge changes in this knowledge base to form even a moderately effective basis for challenging ensconced religious belief systems which, in their appeal to external cause, strong emotional commitment, and collective certainty, are designed to survive such challenges.

All of our current major religions were formulated and codified by the end of the 12th century, and they have survived mostly intact in spite of the enormous growth in human knowledge of the universe and the mechanisms of its operation – much of which conflicts with basic claims in these religions. While in response to this “new” knowledge base, many humans have withdrawn from commitment to the more moderate versions of these standard religions, many devotees have adopted the opposite course and become more emotively emphatic and fundamentalist in their commitment. So, comprehensive and contrary information/evidence clearly does not void the viability of religion.

What’s the answer?

Some insist that modern humans must give much greater importance to reason and critical, evidence based thinking in their evaluation of the relevance of modern knowledge to the truth value of religious belief systems. And indeed, this is one “reasonable” approach, but it unfortunately leaves the basic “why” questions and answers for the significance of human life and death – that are addressed by religion – unanswered.

Is there an alternative?

Religion as a social institution only arises when human societies achieve the complex society state – this beginning in the last 10,000 years and only applying to the majority in the last 5,000 years. For 96+% of human history, humans lived in smaller, hunter-gatherer, band/tribe societies. In these societies, spirituality based on human intuitive [synthetic] competence was pervasive with some individuals – shaman – somewhat more accomplished than others in intuitive capabilities. But the perspective of all humans had an intuitive base as well as a rational base, and these two sources of inputs were relatively balanced. Importantly, active intuitive competence [synthesis] provides both individuals and their societies with the awareness that all of existence is totally interconnected as one phenomenon. The identity of the individual, society, and all of reality is unified, offering basic answers to the “Why,” “Life” and “Death” questions. Human intuitive competence [spirituality] confirms all as belonging to the whole and supports both cooperation among humans and respect for the surrounding ecology. There is no need for religion as an explanatory institution in this balanced mental and societal setting.

Universally shared human intuitive competence and the holistic perspective it engenders unfortunately gets lost as authoritarian based complex society arises. Stratified complex society with its elites, administrators, commoners and slaves usurps the human intuitive propensity by developing elaborate other worldly belief systems and surrounding religious structures to justify itself. In this process, universal spirituality gets lost along with the social and ecological egalitarian principles it supports in hunter-gatherer society.

Unfortunately, modern, democratic, capitalistic, scientific, complex societies have not responded to retrieve spirituality. Instead, they have promoted the perspective for understanding both self and reality of secular materialism combined with the exclusive rational-reductive approach from science. While this perspective is justifiably anti-religious, it unfortunately throws the baby [spirituality] out with the bath water [religion]. With no alternative offered to support the core human intuitive/spiritual perspective, religion retreats into the extremes of fundamentalism, rejects cooperation, promotes conflict among diverse social groups, and ends up inviting a return to authoritarian rule.

So, what is the solution to the negative influence of religion as an institution in modern complex society? Yes, greater respect for rational competence and the science based knowledge it produces can contribute. But it is by no means sufficient. Recovering spirituality and the positive role of human intuitive [synthetic] competence at both the individual and societal levels is essential. Humans are by nature both rational and intuitive. Achieving balance in the input of these mental functions is the key to the overall success of humans in complex society including addressing the unproductive and conflict oriented excesses of our antiquated modern religions.