

RELIGION: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

As people of different faiths and religions live in human society, their views about religion are varied. Some say that religion is to believe in spiritual and divine beings in the Cosmos. Some say that religion is a belief related to the Universe and its Creator. Some say that religion does not refer to a belief in God or gods, rather it is a psychological framework that shapes the lives and thought of the people. Some say that religion is a set of beliefs and cultural practices followed by different groups of people.

To understand these facts, a brief account of human history and religion is provided in this article and an attempt has been made to analyze the religious trends and to find out what is meant by religion and is there is an authentic religion in the world which is logically acceptable to all the people.

Keywords – Religion, Spirituality, monotheism, polytheism, Atheism, psychology

Brief history of mankind and religion

Philosophers define the Cosmos as 'total existence; everything that has existed or will exist.' They also say that whatever exists in the cosmos, has emerged from a single focal point.

There are references about the beginning of this Cosmos in many religious scriptures, both monotheistic and polytheistic religions. The Quran says, 'Indeed, your Lord (Creator / God) is Allah, who created the skies and earth in six days. (7:54). And 'a day in the sight of your Lord is like a thousand years of your counting.' (22:47). The Bible says, 'In the beginning God created the heavens (skies) and the earth.' (Genesis 1:1–26)

It is evident that, at first, stars and planets came into existence followed by the inhabitant creatures within them. As far as human beings are concerned, followers of all religions in the world believe that they were created from a single male and a female, Adam, and Eve. There is a reference about it, in the Quran - 'O Mankind, surely Allah has created you from a male and a

female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. (49:13)

No one knows for sure the age or the beginning of this Cosmos even though some approximations have been made by some philosophers who suggest that it was 13.8 billion years ago. Also, it is not known for sure since how long human beings inhabit planet earth. It may have so happened that when human beings grew in numbers, they migrated to different fertile lands looking for prosperous living. This way communities evolved in different parts of the world. There is a reference to this aspect in the Quran - 'Mankind was a single community, then Allah sent prophets to bring good news and warning, and with them He sent the Scripture with the Truth to judge between people in their disagreements.' (2:213)

The question is, who was Adam and what he did he teach to his children? In Bible, the name Adam, the first person to have been created, occurs in the narrative of creation (Genesis 2:5–7, 2:15–4:1, 4:25). Quranic accounts confirm that Adam (peace be upon him) was an Apostle of God who taught the oneness of the Creator of this Cosmos to his children. In polytheistic religions, the names of the first male and female are different, however, one thing is common in most of the religions that they say human beings were created from a male and female and that human beings are **not** the genetic evolution from apes, as claimed by some philosophers.

As long as the children of Adam were in small numbers, they might have lived together in one community and the followed his teachings. When they grew in numbers, they started migrating to other fertile lands in search of better living. Gradually people evolved different ways of living in which their environments played a key role.

As the time passed, people started thinking that a single god cannot take care of their vast needs, therefore, they considered that there should be different gods for different works in the Cosmos.

A few generations later, they gave names to these gods and associated divine attributes with them and started worshipping them by making their idols. In some cultures, some gods and goddesses became popular and in others some other gods became popular. New deities were added as the time passed and people continued worshipping them in one form or other.

Greek idols were extremely popular before the advent of Christianity in Europe. Aryans, who came to India from Central Asia brought their own idols for worship which were different from the idols worshiped by the local Dravidian population.

Ancient polytheistic religions

(i) Pre-historic Mesopotamia

Researchers believe that prehistoric Mesopotamia was the birthplace of Idol worship. The first written records of this worship dates to 3500 BC. The people who inhabited this region were known as Sumerians. This area was consisted of present-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Southeastern Turkey, and parts of Western Iran.



Figure 1: Ancient Mesopotamian Civilization

Sumerians believed that human beings were co-workers with gods, and gods took care of daily needs of human beings. They considered gods not as celestial entities, but instead living in temples built for them side by side human beings.

These gods were fed, bathed, and clothed by the priests on regular basis. During festivals, these idols were taken on a ride in the city of Babylon so that they could get fresh air and sunshine.

(ii) Ancient religion of Iran

In neighboring Iran were the Aryans who had migrated to Iran before 3000 BC from central Asia. Their gods were different from the gods worshiped by Sumerians. Their supreme god was known as Ahura Mazda. There were many other gods worshipped by them. They considered that these gods protected them from the evil spirits in their environment.

Around 1500-1000 BC, a person named Zoroaster from their community claimed that he received revelations from Ahura Mazda, their supreme god. He said humans are free to choose between Ahura Mazda (for truth) or his eternal adversary, Angra Mainyu, the deity of falsehood. The fire worship of Zoroastrians is believed to be as old as this religion.

(iii) Ancient religion of Egypt

Across the gulf of Aqaba in Egypt, the religious practices of people were like Mesopotamia in which humans were considered co-workers of gods. But their religion was a combination of magic, mythology, and spiritualism. The first records of Egyptian religion are dated around 3400 BC in which gods like Isis, Osiris, Ptah, Hathor, Atum, Set, Nephthys, and Horus were worshipped.

(iv) Ancient religion of Greece

Ancient Greeks worshiped twelve 12 gods and goddesses, namely, Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Athena, Ares, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Hephaestus, Hermes, and Dionysus. Each god was responsible for different works in the Cosmos. Certain other lesser gods were also worshipped. Zeus was the Chief god who had control over other gods.

Ancient Greeks believed that, like humans, gods were good and bad. Gods could interact with humans and breed children with them. Gods can be opposed to each other and there are wars between one group of gods with the other.

In ancient Greek philosophies like Stoicism and Platonism, there are indications that some Greeks also believed in a single divine deity.

(v) Ancient religion of China

In ancient China, Idol worship was prevalent around 4500-3500 BC. This is evidenced by the ceramics found in Neolithic site of Banpo village, presently in East of Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province in central China.

During the rule of Xia dynasty (2070-1600 BC) their supreme god was Shangdi. In addition, many other lesser gods, and spirits, were worshiped. This idol worship pre-dated Confucianism and Taoism and later Buddhism and Christianity.

During Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC), the practice of ancestor worship was introduced in China. It was thought that, when a person died, he went to live with the gods and became intermediary between the people and gods. Thus, ancestor worship became core tenets of the Confucianism, founded by Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC) and later, Taoism, founded by Laozi around that time.

(vi) Ancient religion of India

In ancient India, during the Indus valley civilization (2600 - 1900 BC), many idol gods were worshipped by Aryan settlers who had migrated from Central Asia and Iran. Some of these idols have been discovered during excavation in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, presently in Pakistan. Among these, the mother goddess (female dancing god) and the priest king are famous.

Aryan literature, religion and modes of social organization shaped the course of the Indian culture. The Vedic religion of the Aryans was gradually evolved into modern day Hinduism.

(vii) Hinduism

As per the Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics, the word Hindu is not mentioned in any Hindu scriptures before Arabs came to India in 644 AD. In Arabic they called India as Hind. Thus, it is probable that they called the people living in India as Hindu. Jawahar Lal Nehru (1889-1964), the first Prime Minister of Independent India, wrote in

his book 'Discovery of India, (page 74-75) that the word Hindu was first mentioned in 8 AD by a Tantrik to refer to people living in India and not the followers of a religion. As per New Encyclopedia Britannica, Hindu was the name given by the English rulers to the people who follow multiple faiths and beliefs, other than Christians and Muslims.

Hinduism has no religious order or a supreme religious authority or governing body or a prophet or any 'one' binding holy book. One need not be religious in the minimal sense to be accepted as Hindu. One may be polytheistic, monistic, pantheistic, agnostic, atheist, or none of these, but still be considered a Hindu. The only requirement is that he should call himself as Hindu.

Hindu scriptures Vedas consist of; (a) Rig-Veda, (b) Sama-Veda, (c) Yajur-Veda, and (d) Atharva-Veda. Among them, Rig-Veda was written much earlier than the remaining three which were written around 2 BC. The Vedas are collections of hymns and magic spells. Upanishads are the stories told by Gurus to their students over a period of centuries. Mahabharata written by Vyasa is about a war between two groups of cousins. Bhagavad Gita consists of parts 23-40 of Mahabharata which were added to Mahabharata during 1st century AD. And Ramayana is the story of the god Rama and his wife Sita.

In Hinduism, the one omnipotent god is referred as Brahma. He is treated as the 'демиург' (of the Greek gods), a fashioner, who is responsible for the creation of the world and all things in it. Brahma is not the creator in the monotheistic sense. He is the creative aspect of Vishnu whose wife is goddess Saraswati, and whose children are Kumaras, Narada, Daksha, Marichi and others.

In the early Vedic texts, the word Shiva meant auspicious or sacred. It did not relate to any god. However, in later texts, Shiva became a god. He was also referred as Bhrahman, the supreme universal consciousness.

Hindus believe that gods also manifest as incarnations in human form, like Krishna, Rama, etc. Animals like cows and snakes are also revered and worshiped by the Hindus.

There is no limit of gods in Hinduism. It is believed that their number is over 33 million. New gods are added as a continuous process. The first Hindu temple built outside India was in UK in 1995 for Swami Narayan (1731-1830) who is worshipped as one of the gods of Hindus.

(viii) Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha, who lived in ancient India between (563-483 BC). He was born in a rich family of rice farming tribes in a place called Lumbini in the present India-Nepal border town. Buddha's father was Suddhodana and he was the chief of the Shakya clan. His mother Maya died in his infancy. He was raised by his stepmother Mahapajapati Gotami. Gautama Buddha was born during the reign of Bimbisara (558-491 BC) whose capital was Kapilavastu.

It is a common contention among scholars that Gautama practiced yogic meditation under two teachers. However, he felt unsatisfied and moved to another teacher named Udraka Ramaputra. Later, he started to meditate on his own. He started spending his time in remote forests during his spiritual striving. He would take minimal food, practice different forms of breath and mind control which made him very lean as his bones became visible through the skin. During this time, he realized that the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification was not a noble path. Thus, he chose to be moderate. Following this realization, he sat down to meditate with the determination not to get up until the full awakening (Samma-Sambodhi) is achieved. And he achieved it under a Ficus religiosa (Peepal) tree (now known as the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, Bihar). Upon attaining the awakening, he started travelling and spreading his message among the people. The following 45 years he spent in spreading his message among people. During this time, he received the patronage of the kings of Kosala and Magadha where he spent a lot of time in their respective capitals, Savatthi and Rajagaha.

Analysis of ancient polytheistic religions

The beliefs, narratives, and mythology in all parts of the globe from ancient times had been based on polytheism in one way or another. All religions, from prehistoric times, shared idol

worship even though their cultures may not have a direct contact with each other. In every culture we find similar patterns which include the existence of several gods and goddesses. Also, people worshipped dying and reviving gods who die and come back to life again as a different avatar.

When we ponder over it, the logical mind does not accept that what people practiced in the name of religion was anything but the fact of this Cosmos. The idol gods worshiped by them were so diverse that a logical mind gets confused about this entire scenario.

During my research, I tried to find some commonalities among all the people of the world in their belief system. I realized that there may have been some people in all ages and in all parts of the world who thought differently from the masses. When I went back into the history of mankind and reached to the first human being who inhabited the Planet earth, I realized that he is the only commonality who is accepted as the father of humanity by all of us.

Since he is accepted as the father of humanity by all of us, naturally he is the first teacher of humanity as well. Therefore, what he believed and taught was the original religion of humanity. This original religion is referred to as 'the Adamic religion' or as per Andrew Lang, the Urreligion (original religion).

Scottish anthropologist Andrew Lang concluded that Urmonotheism or urreligion was the original religion of mankind. It is also known as Original Monotheism, Primeval Monotheism, Primitive Monotheism, etc. As per Andrew Lang, all non-monotheistic and polytheistic religions in the world were the degenerated forms of this original religion.

Urmonotheism was defended by many scholars. German scholar Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), in his work *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, opposed the 'revolutionary monotheism theory' that says that the emergence of monotheistic thought was the result of the gradual process spanning the Bronze and Iron Age polytheistic religions of classical antiquity.

Schmidt provided evidence from Native American mythology, Australian aborigine, and other

primitive civilizations in support of his views. Writing in 'the origin and growth of religion' in 1930s, he said, the Supreme Being became dim only among later peoples.'

Monotheistic religions

(i) Brief history of Judaism

It is an accepted fact that all Prophets sent to Jewish people, believed, and taught the same Adamic religion, which is the belief in one Omnipotent God.

There are references to this effect in all surviving scriptures of Abrahamic religions. Torah says, 'God, the Cause of all, is one. This does not mean one as in one of a pair, nor one like a species (which encompasses many individuals), nor one as in an object that is made up of many elements, nor as a single simple object that is infinitely divisible. Rather, God is a unity unlike any other possible unity. (Yesode Ha-Torah 1:7).

The Quran says – Say, Allah is one. Allah is independent. He does not have children. Nobody has given birth to him. Nobody can match Him or equal Him.] (112: 1- 4).

However, in Judaism and later in Christianity, the identity of the one God blurred under the influence of polytheistic influences on their societies.

All Israeli prophets from Isaac, Jacob, to Moses and Jesus (عليهم السلام) taught the Adamic religion. However, by 8 BC, the Jewish society got divided into many groups and subgroups who worshiped different gods. The oldest books of the Hebrew Bible reflect this situation. Their famous ancient books like Hosea and Nahum, condemn the apostasy of the people of Israel, threatening them with the wrath of God if they do not give up their polytheistic cults.

Yahweh was originally the national god of the Kingdom of Israel. Later the name of their god was changed to Elohim. Some Jews believe that Yahweh and Elohim are two separate gods who together created this world.

Similarly, some Jews believe in henotheism, meaning, worship of a single, predominant god while not denying the existence of other lower gods.

It is said that in the Kingdom of Judah, the henotheistic cult of Yahweh grew increasingly militant in its opposition to the worship of other gods. Later, the reforms of King Josiah imposed strict Monolatry on Jewish community. Monolatry is worship of one God, at the same time not denying that others can worship other gods/divine beings within the community with equal truth.

King Josiah or Yoshiyahu was the sixteenth king of Judah (640–609 BC) who, according to the Hebrew Bible, instituted major religious reforms by imposing monolatry on Jews. As described above, monolatry is the worship of one God, at the same time not denying that people can worship other gods/divine beings within the community with equal truth.

Who were these divine beings that can be worshiped? They believed Angels were the daughters of God and certain prophets were the sons of god. Jews could worship angels and other powers in heaven, but they were to offer sacrifices to the god of Israel.

There is a reference to this aspect in the Quran - The Jews call (Prophet) Uzair (عليه السلام) a son of God, and the Christians call Isa (عليه السلام) the son of God. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers (polytheists) of old used to say. (9:30)

(ii) Brief history of Christianity

As we have described above, all Israeli prophets taught the religion of Adam, which is belief in one omnipotent God. There is a reference to this aspect in the Quran - 'Say (O' Prophet ﷺ) We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down on us (the Quran), and sent down on Abraham (Ibrahim - عليه السلام) and Ishmael (Isma'eel - عليه السلام), Isaac (Is-haq - عليه السلام) and Jacob (Ya'qub - عليه السلام), and the Tribes, and in that which was given to Moses (Musa - عليه السلام) and Jesus (Isa - عليه السلام), and (among) the prophets of their Lord; we make no division between any of them.' (2 - 136).

Christian history testifies that there was debate in early Christian orthodoxy about the nature of god. Some people denied the incarnation of god into many people, except in the deity of Jesus. This is known as Docetism. Docetism is a concept

that Jesus's body was not human but either a delusion or real but was made of celestial substance (similar to the substance with which Gods body is made). Therefore, his sufferings were only apparent, not real.

Some people defended the Ariunic philosophy based on the beliefs of Arius of Alexandria (256–336 AD). It is a belief that Jesus Christ is the begotten Son of god and is different from the Father. In other words, he is smaller god, not co-eternal and Divine as the Father.

Arius was a Christian priest in Alexandria, Egypt. His teaching became dominant Christology among Christians during his lifetime. Ariunic Christology was considered a heresy by other groups of Christians who considered Jesus Christ as Divine god similar in substance and nature with Father God.

In 325 AD, Roman emperor Constantine I, (272-337) called for a meeting of the council of different Churches, in ancient Nicaea (Iznik, Turkey). The King presided over the first opening session of the meeting. After several sessions, the council condemned Arius and accepted the creed that Jesus Christ, the son of God was, in absolute equality with Father God. After this decision, the emperor exiled Arius branding him as heretic.

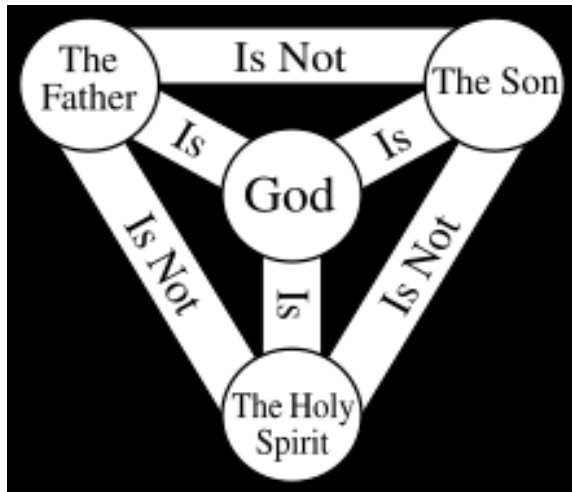


Figure 2: Christian concept of trinity

The above decision was further developed by Cappadocian Fathers; (i) Basil, the bishop of Caesarea (330-379), (ii) Gregory, the bishop of Nyssa (335 – 395), and (iii) Gregory of Nazianzus, the Patriarch of Constantinople (329-389). They considered God to be a triune entity

or the Trinity, comprising three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Ghost). These three are described as being of the same substance.

All Christian traditions, like Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestants believe in Trinity. They also believe that the three persons of the Trinity are in one union in which each person is also a whole God. They also believe that Jesus is an incarnate of God. They deny that one of the three divine figures is God alone, and the other two are not, but that all three are mysteriously God and one.

Some Christian groups like Unitarian Universalism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, etc., differ with the mainstream Christianity saying Godhead consists of separate individuals that include Father God, His son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, each having a distinct purpose in the grand existence of human beings. In essence, they believe that Jesus Christ and Holy Ghost are smaller gods, subordinated to the Father God.

(iii) Brief history of Islam

For Muslims, Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) is the last prophet sent by God to humanity. Their first Prophet was Adam (عليه السلام). The Quran is the revealed book of Islam.

The Quran is a book which has remained unaltered ever since it was revealed about 1500 years ago. Its first compiled copy in Arabic was preserved by Muslims ever since it was revealed. No other religious scripture equals it in this context. In other words, the teachings of Islam remained unchanged from the beginning till today.

Muslims believe that there is one God who is the creator of this Cosmos. They worship Him during their 5 times prayers in a day. They do not associate any divine beings or partners with God as they consider everything in this cosmos, including human beings, are His creatures. God is free from the considerations of body, form, shape, etc. He is independent, everything is dependent upon Him. He does not have children, and no one has given birth to him. He is there from the beginning and will remain so forever. Everything in this cosmos is His creation. His

creations are appearing in the cosmos in specific shapes/forms/characteristics as per their facts.

Quran says - 'Allah, there is no God but He, the living, eternal, self-subsisting, ever sustaining. Neither does slumber come near Him nor sleep. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. And who can intercede with Him except by His command? Known to Him is all that is present before men and what is hidden (from them), and not even a little of His knowledge can they grasp except what He wills.' (2:255)

Muslims believe in all Prophets sent by God, including Abraham (Ibrahim عليه السلام), Moses, (Musa عليه السلام), Jesus Christ (Isa عليه السلام) as human beings. Muslims believe that Islamic teachings and its philosophy remained the same, i.e., believe in one God, from Prophet Adam (عليه السلام) to the last Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم).

Throughout the history of Islam, there have been instances where some scholars (influenced by the Hellenistic philosophies) tried to mix the Greek culture with Islamic teachings. However, these attempts were successfully refuted by the Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali, thus leaving the core teachings of Islam untampered and unchanged.

In the past two centuries or so, there were attempts by some deviant sects like Salafis, Wahhabis, Deobandis and likeminded groups who call themselves Muslims, but believe in a Planet size God who has physical body and limbs like humans, who is sitting over the skies in a certain direction. Meaning, they have made an idol of their God in their minds and worship him 5 times a day. These sects have been refuted by all Islamic scholars.

Conclusion

The gist of the above description and analysis of polytheistic and monotheistic religions is that Adamic religion is the original religion of mankind which was based on monotheism/oneness of the Creator of this Cosmos who is all powerful. Everything in this Cosmos is His creation, including human beings, and divinity cannot be associated with anything other than Him. This was the teaching of the Adamic monotheism/religion.

The Adamic monotheism constitutes the foremost article of Islamic faith which has been described in the Quran unambiguously.

All prophets sent by God from Adam (عليه السلام) to Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) preached the same faith.

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Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.