

# The Big Questions

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Many theories have been proposed to explain why so many people the world over have so often been committed to a religion. Not surprisingly, sociologists and anthropologists have tended to seek the answer in religion's social function, while those with a more psychological bent have tended to emphasize some sort of psychological process that produces religious attitudes or beliefs. Marxism held that religion is a natural outgrowth of the large-scale economic forces that shape culture and ideas. Socio-biologists explain religion by its evolutionary role in helping humans to adapt to the environment – religion promotes social cohesion and this helps humans survive. By contrast, those who sincerely commit themselves to a religious outlook normally find such explanations of religion in terms of “external” forces and influences to be superficial at best, and simply wrong or degrading at worst.

Rather than entering into those debates here, I want to suggest something that I believe is far less controversial, and that does not try to “explain religion away” as some of the above-mentioned explanations do. In fact, I don't want to try to explain where religion came from, whether it makes sense, whether it is rational, or whether it is inevitable, given our genes or politics or social needs.

Instead, I want to talk about the long-standing questions that have prompted religious answers over the centuries. My suggestion is this: there are some very natural human questions that thoughtful persons in any culture are likely to ponder at some point, and much of the appeal of religion arises from the perceived ability of religiously-oriented points of view to provide satisfactory answers to such questions. I call these the Big Questions. Here is an example of such a question: “Is there some meaning or purpose to my life?”

So, here is my list of what I will call the Big Questions, arranged in small clusters, in no particular order of importance:

## ***The Big Cosmological Questions***

These are questions about the origins and operations of all of reality, such as...

Where did humankind come from?

Why is there something rather than nothing at all?

Is there some kind of underlying permanence or stability that lies hidden “beneath” the constantly changing face of things?

What makes everything tick? What explains surprising and mysterious events?

Is there anything that gives the apparent chaos and unpredictability of phenomena in our lives some sense, order, or rationality?

Is there some way to influence the way that things happen when they seem so much bigger than all of us? (E.g., can we avoid earthquakes, drought, disease, death?)

## ***The Big Existential Questions***

These are questions about the meaning of life, such as...

Is there any meaning or purpose to human existence?

Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world and in my life? What can be done about it?

How can we make sense of death? Why do we have to die? Is death final?

How can people be happy or feel fulfilled?

Where do I fit into the grand scheme of things? Is there a grand scheme of things for me to fit into? (In ancient times, a more likely variant: how does my social group fit into the grand scheme of things?)

How can we get in touch with or harmonize with the deepest sources of everything?

## ***The Big Practical Questions***

These are questions about morality, right living, social order, such as...

What kind of behaviors and lifestyles are right? What customs and social rules are correct?

Will goodness and justice win out in the end, or will evil often forever go unpunished and successful?

How should the leadership of my social group (my tribe, my clan, my country) be chosen?

So, there you have it. Maybe you can think of some important questions I've left off the list. Maybe you are already annoyed that there are so many questions. But in any case you should stop for a moment to think about this list, to see if you find it reasonable as a list of Big Questions that people inevitably seem to ask.

Not every person is equally interested in all these questions. Nor do the questions always take exactly the same form in every culture in every century. Some of the questions require a higher level of theoretical sophistication to ask than do others. For example, to ask about one's place in the "grand scheme of things" requires that one have the concept that there *is* a grand scheme of things. Such a notion might not be present in a simple culture. Or, again, asking why there is something rather than nothing seems to me to be a rather sophisticated kind of question – more sophisticated than asking where did human beings come from – because it requires the drawing a contrast between two rather abstract concepts: "something" and "nothing".

Nevertheless, I think that a survey of religious ideas and related ideas down through the centuries suggests that some selection from the above questions is constantly being addressed all the time. Indeed, a central feature of religious discourse seems to be a *focus on* answering

some subset of the above Big Questions. The common religious practice of appealing to gods or God in explaining the operation or origin of the cosmos, and of appealing to gods or God as law-giver and cosmic moral enforcer fit here in dealing with cosmological and value questions. I don't mean to imply that the *only* kinds of answers that can be given to the Big Questions are answers that people would generally call "religious". Clearly, some of the questions in the Cosmological group can be given *scientific* answers instead, or answers that combine scientific and religious aspects. Theories of evolution in biology provide a certain kind of answer to the question of where the human race came from, and various cosmological theories in astronomy and physics address questions of the origins of the entire physical universe. Indeed, I think it is because science can offer answers to some of the very same questions that traditionally were answered only by religion, that there can be at least a perception that science and religion are in competition. (It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to talk about which kind of answer to a cosmological question is "better", or even to talk about how the scientific kind of answer differs from the religious kind of answer.)

Nonreligious approaches are not limited to the Cosmological questions. There are also many proposed secular answers to the Existential and Practical Big Questions, especially in the Western world over the last three hundred years. One might, for example, seek to justify a system of government solely on the grounds of what it will do for enhancing the life of the citizens, or one might try dealing with the meaning of life questions by finding meaning in organized daily activity, or connection with family and friends. It is not my point to argue here that the Big Questions can be answered *only* by religion, or *best* by religion. Rather, the point is that the history of religion shows that religions focus on such questions, and that people seem generally to have been drawn to religious answers to these questions.

### **Some qualifications and clarifications**

In providing this list of questions, I am not trying to give a scientific or psychological explanation of how religion came about in the first place, or what causes people to adopt the religious views they adopt. So, I am not trying to do the same job that the sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and so on mentioned at the start of this essay are trying to do. True, I am suggesting that religious people find their point of view to be satisfying, or appealing, because of its ability to deal with at least some of the Big Questions they find important. But, even if I am right about that, I am still not trying to explain why people find such questions important, or why they think religious answers are appealing. I offer no theories as to why certain ones of these questions are important to some people and not to others, or why these questions seem to be so important to so many people. Nor do I offer any explanation for why psychologically satisfying answers to these questions tend often to be noticeably religious in character, rather than scientific or otherwise nonreligious, for many people (but not for others). And I have nothing to say here about where the particular details of religious answers to these questions come from. (Revealed by God? Cynically imposed by the priestly class on unsuspecting commoners in order to keep them in line? Pulled up from the human subconscious?) Those are certainly interesting matters to wonder about, but I don't wonder about them here.

So, even if you think that I am right about the general importance given to these Big Questions and their religious answers, that doesn't settle the hard debates about whether religion makes sense or whether religious ideas are outmoded in today's scientific world. To

get into those debates here would take us far away from the simple matter of trying to identify the questions themselves and to connect them with religion.

Religious people *perceive* that their religious views give satisfactory answers to some of these questions – or so I claim. But this means you are free to agree with me that that is what religious believers *perceive* without agreeing with the religious person that their religious outlook really and truly does provide satisfactory answers to the questions. You might think the questions on my list are important without supposing that any religious point of view succeeds in dealing with them, or you might think only one religious point of view is actually successful in dealing with the questions.

Nevertheless, I claim that the perceived success of religion in answering some of these questions is the explanation for the appeal of religion to so many people in so many cultures over so many years. In other words, no matter what causes religions to grow and flourish, no matter what causes people to become religious, and no matter what makes these questions seem important to people, without the appeal that religion provides in answering these questions, it is not likely that it would continue as a force in anyone's life.

I assert all these things without proof, or even any tiny bit of presented evidence. The only real evidence I have to support my list of questions is my reading about many different religions, both contemporary and ancient. I've tried to understand what they are getting at – what makes them seem to make sense to their adherents. I start with the assumption that religious people are human beings, mostly sane, and bound to be something like me and like others I know well, at least in the fundamentals. They are wounded emotionally when a loved one dies; they are afraid of living a life of suffering; they get tired and lonely; they want to be happy; they have various hopes and dreams. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure I'm not. You will have to decide for yourself if I'm right, on the basis of whatever evidence and reasons you can muster.

If I'm right, human beings typically want answers to a number of questions like the ones listed above, and religious outlooks have popular appeal only when they can provide what look like decent answers to at least some of these questions.

It will be the main focus in this course to think about how religious answers to such questions have come into competition with non-religious, secular answers in modern times, and how different religious people have developed different ways of dealing with that competition.