

EPISODE THREE

ORGANIZING RELIGION

Hello everyone. Whether or not you are still on the path that you may or may not have ever been on. This is the third episode of my podcast, ManWomanSexGod. And my name is Michael Folz.

Now last episode I made two important, central points. The first was that you don't have to necessarily believe in God in order to accept the reality of what I am calling the religious experience. The second was that religion itself, and especially any particular religion, doesn't in the end necessarily matter, either.

So today I'm going to at least superficially contradict myself. And talk about religion. Although, hopefully, at the end of the episode, you'll understand why I'm doing this.

Because I do think that in order to properly realize the context and the universality of what is about to come, it is important that we first have some sort of agreement as to what we actually mean when we use the word 'religion'.

After all, as I alluded to in the last episode, for some people the word 'religion' conjures up images of boring sermons, meaningless rituals, and insane theological disputes. But other people might well think of quiet contemplation, of a beautiful and sacred temple, or of serving the poor. Likewise the words 'religious person' might make you think of a televangelist like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson. Or you might associate the term with Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Teresa. Clearly most people attach a lot of emotion, either positive or negative, to the concept.

So I hope that you'll find it instructive if I organize the whole large subject of Religion into three clearly differentiated layers. And if I then proceed from the outermost layer in.

And I'm pretty sure that this is a way of organizing the subject that you've never run across before. So let's begin:

Now the first aspect, or layer, is the most obvious one: A religion is a set of specific beliefs about people and places and gods. That is to say, if you are a Christian, then you believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, miraculously cured people, and then himself arose from the dead. If you are a Hindu,

then you believe that strangely colored eight armed gods exist, and that Krishna lived on this Earth and cavorted with buxom young ladies. If you are a Muslim, then you believe that Mohammed was the last prophet of God, and that he flew up to heaven on a winged steed.

For lack of a better term, I like to call all of these beliefs the Back Story. And if the term sounds somewhat dismissive to you, that's because it's meant to be. After all, whether or not Jesus was born of a virgin does not bear at all on the wisdom or truth of turning the other cheek, loving thy neighbor, or any other of the Christian virtues. Likewise, whether or not Mohammed flew up to heaven on a horse in the middle of the night has nothing to do with the central Islamic doctrines of prayer and submission to the Lord's will.

But on the other hand it would be foolish to pretend that these stories aren't incredibly important to most practitioners of these faiths. Indeed, to all too many of them, belief in these stories seems to be the *essence* of their faith. That's why they call themselves believers. And you would have to be very undiplomatic, to say the least, were you to question the truth of these stories to these people.

All of which would be bad enough. But what makes it even worse is that most skeptics of religion also seem to think that these fabulist tales of water walking and heaven ascending are the totality of religion. Moreover, they seem to think that if they can, for instance, rationally or scientifically prove that no one can do such things, somehow this then proves that the entire realm of religious experience doesn't exist.

So let's start off by making the perhaps bold statement that ***all of these 'religious' beliefs, this entire outer layer of what we commonly think of as 'religion', are entirely beside the point.*** Although acceptance of them seems to be a central issue for a large majority of both adherents and opponents of religion, in the end these beliefs really have absolutely nothing to do with why people are religious.

There. Got it?

And let's let that thought settle in for a few seconds.

Okay, now that we're back, let's get to the second layer. Because if the back story that we are told to believe doesn't in the end matter, what, then, *is* religion all about? Well, it isn't just about showing up at the mosque or church on Friday or Sunday, either. Rather—once you look into it—it turns out that the critical function of every single world religion which is out there is that it also requires that its followers *behave* in a certain way. Now if you are against the concept of Religion you might well say that all of the rules and regulations that a religion asks for are no different from some

incredibly annoying busybody telling other people what to do and, more importantly, what not to do. If you are in favor of the concept then you might respond that those rules are exactly what keep us moral and what protect us from chaos.

But just about everyone will agree that these moral and ethical restrictions are an essential part of every faith.

Now someone familiar with social psychology will already know that the very definition of a group is that it is an entity which of necessity differentiates itself both from other groups and from society at large. And that it does so both by its explicit and implicit rules, and also by the behavior it requires of its members. Even in something as innocuous as a stamp collecting club it is necessary for the members show up at a certain time, that the members refrain from discussing subjects other than stamp collecting, etc., etc.

And someone familiar with sociology or anthropology might also note that the formation of a group often has more to do with the human need for interaction than it does the purported purpose of said group. After all, one can collect stamps just about as efficiently while alone. Maybe even better. Couldn't it therefore be said that religions, especially organized religions, primarily exist to satisfy the social needs of their congregants? Especially in this age of amorphous, anonymous culture, not to mention incompetent government services, it stands to reason that it would be vitally important to belong to a coherent social group where others will not only know you, but, most importantly, care about and for you.

This is a valid point as far it goes. I would readily agree that there are not that many natural born mystics or theologians out there. Therefore it follows that a very large number of people come to church or temple, not because of intense study or the desire for deep self-knowledge, or even because they consciously want to worship the Divine, but rather for the social benefits that accrue.

Further, if everyone else in your town is already Muslim or Jewish or whatever, it is natural that there would be intense social pressures for you to conform to whatever that dominant faith is.

But these answers are ultimately not that satisfactory. After all, there are social benefits that come from joining the army or from working for Microsoft. Yet nobody suggests that this is the sole, or even main, reason, why these organizations exist.

Moreover, if the 'social benefits' theory were correct, then one would expect that it wouldn't matter which particular rules that any particular religions adopted. And so it would follow that different religions would end up with wildly different moral and ethical rules.

But they don't. In fact, if one makes even a cursory examination of all the various world religions which exist, the commonality of the moral behaviors which they ask of their followers is astonishing. These include: Modesty. Humility. Integrity. Sobriety. Honesty, even if is against your self-interest. A lifetime focused on not much more than hard work and prayer meetings. And, of all things, *Chastity*. You'll note that these are rather severe restrictions to demand of anyone. And hardly the sort of non-demanding badge or secret handshake that would signify membership in some strictly sociable group.

So what's going on? Why would an organization which is (presumably) seeking as many members as possible demand of them that they sign up for such harsh self discipline? Any salesman could tell you that this would seem to be about the dumbest approach possible if one only wanted to make a sale.

Or to put this all in another way: Why are religions such downers? Why do they try so hard to stop people from having fun? Why are they so repressive?

But before we get carried away with that thought, let me add that every world religion also requires other behaviors. Compassion. Charity. Unselfish love. Devotion. These aren't exactly self-hating negative constrictions. These are ways of being that most people would think are really positive and admirable. In fact, they are almost the polar opposites of all the 'don'ts' that I just mentioned..

So why would religions universally ask for the exact same seemingly contradictory mentalities?
What *is* going on?

But before I answer that question, let me repeat what I mentioned in the last episode. Namely, that in the past few years social scientists have come to the uncomfortable (for many of them) conclusion that the religious impulse appears to be hard-wired into the human brain. That is to say, there have been virtually no cultures more complicated than those covering bare subsistence which have not practiced some form of religion. The odds of that happening by chance are next to zero. Moreover, studies have consistently shown that people who are religious are happier, healthier, and even have better sex lives, than people who aren't.

The most common explanation from social scientists is that Religion therefore arose because it somehow codifies behaviors which are necessary for the proper functioning of a highly complex, not just social, but hypersocial animal. Which is what our species is. Indeed, over the past fifty years science has become overwhelmed with all the evidence which shows not only how we are hypersocial, but also how much we are definitely not the rugged individuals of Eighteenth Century theory. And so unless we have strong restrictions on our selfish impulses and strong inducements to share and to care for others, we as a species literally couldn't have existed up to this point. So it would therefore be easy for someone to conclude that the religious impulse is indeed strictly a response to social and societal needs.

A skeptic might even add that the more weird rituals which are thrown in, and the more magical the instructions appear, then the more likely it is that we will all do just as we are told. And then the more the larger society will prosper.

Again, there is something to be said for this sociological line of thought. Modesty and self effacement ensures that the will of the group is more important than that of the individual. Honesty and integrity mean that one can be sure that promises from others will be kept and that the future can be depended upon. Even chastity make sense, since no coherent society has ever existed which tolerated promiscuity during the childbearing years.

But, again, this explanation is not sufficient. And to see why, let's consider those black women in the gospel choir on a Sunday morning. It would be ridiculous to pretend that their joy and happiness has anything to do with their belief in Leviticus or Deuteronomy. Nor does it come from their agreement to, for example, restrain from smoking cigarettes. No, they are *experiencing* something. Something that is so special and exciting that they can't even keep themselves still. They *have* to dance around. And their singing is so emotional that even atheists can be swept away by it.

They are inspired.

Inspiration. Think about it: What atheist writer or artist has ever taken your breath away? How many atheists have you ever known who were joyous people? How inspirational was Marxism or the Soviet Union? Despite the best efforts of all those dedicated Communists, how much beauty or happiness did they generate?

You probably answered in the negative to these questions. And now we are approaching the essence of the actual religious experience: Whatever the cause, it produces an intensity of joy and inspiration that just about no other human experience does.

Because this is the third, innermost layer of Religion. This is why it exists. This is why all those billions of people love their religion so much. Because it lifts them up above the humdrum of their normal existence. It gets them high.

It inspires them.

And so here is another of those really important points that I want you to pay close attention to. Because here is why each and every world religion throughout history has developed and preached pretty much the exact same set of behaviors, both 'positive' and 'negative'. *Because over the millennia people have found out through (often times unconscious) trial and error that these are the behaviors which help to induce in you that one extra special state of mind which is receptive to this transcendent, joyous experience.*

Got it?

Now if you're having trouble with this idea, think for a moment about 'physical fitness'. Because we can certainly define it in terms of resting heart beat, blood pressure, bench presses, etc. But, much more importantly, we know how it *feels* when we feel fit. And we know that most activities—driving around in the car, sitting in the La-Z-Boy, having a fine meal—are not going to get us there. Further, we know that those varied, yet specific, activities which do instill fitness—swimming, biking, hiking—all have cardiovascular commonalities. One experiences physical fitness solely as a result of a set of rather well defined behaviors. One does not achieve physical fitness merely by thinking about it or reading about it or believing in it.

So it should not be surprising that the way of achieving 'spiritual fitness' would follow a similar pattern.

In fact, one can generalize from this and say that a religion becomes a successful world religion only insofar as it requires the same specific set of behaviors that every other world religion has ever done. It's what they make you *do*, not what they get you to believe. Or to put it another way, someone (or the religion they follow) can have the most absurd beliefs about philosophy, theology, or even science. Yet if a person faithfully follows the set of moral behaviors which their religion requires, then it necessarily follows that they will have at least some aspect of the religious experience.

In other words, you will not get high and/or happy because you are being a dutiful follower. You will only get that way because you actually behave these behaviors. And these behaviors will actually activate an experience that you will experience. And, again, it doesn't matter if you label this experience 'spiritual' or 'psycho-chemical'. For it will be as *real* as anything else that you have ever experienced.

Which brings us back to that first layer of Religion. If what I just said is indeed the case, then why do people need to believe all those stories about Jesus or Krishna or whomever? Why, after all these years, hasn't someone come up with a generic religion, one that would do away with all the myths and silliness, and just prescribe these behaviors?

Well, that's a good question.

And perhaps the best way to answer it is to give you an analogy from the realm of laundry detergents.

After all, if you were to walk down that aisle of your favorite supermarket, all you would see would be garish neon colors trying to draw your attention. But were you to pick up a box of Tide or Gain or All, or whatever it is they're selling these days, and you actually looked at their lists of ingredients, you would notice an almost identical jumble of incomprehensible chemical compounds. In other words, each one of these seemingly different brand names is in reality the exact same product. *They all clean clothes in exactly the same way.*

So, if that's the case, wouldn't it then make great sense to market something like 'Generic Detergent'? Couldn't you put it in a simple black and white box and cut out all the marketing costs? Wouldn't consumers react by being so grateful to be paying a much lower price (not to mention being saved the assault on their senses) that your product would be a great success?

Well, as it happens, they actually tried that in the Seventies. And as it happened nobody bought any of the plain wrapped, no name detergent.

And if no one was 'smart' enough or 'rational' enough to buy a box of chemicals without a bunch of colors and a brand name attached to it, why should we therefore be surprised that generic religions wouldn't sell, either? Because just as most of us aren't chemists, most of us also aren't philosophers or theologians, either. We all need some story to hold on to, some human element, some brand, that we can relate to.

In fact, a fun anthropological fact is that every culture which has ever existed has told stories. And it's another recent finding of psychology that our brains seem to be hard wired so that we most easily learn anything through stories. For instance, attorneys who summarize their cases by a straightforward listing of facts are not nearly as successful in winning cases as attorneys who weave these facts into a story to tell the jury.

But there's another side to this phenomenon, too. Suppose that you had always been frustrated because you had all these dirty clothes which you didn't know how to get clean. Then somebody came along and gave you a box of 'Tide', which miraculously cleaned your clothes. You could be forgiven for thinking that the 'Tide' had done that, and not the chemicals in it. You would probably end up becoming a devoted follower of Tide for the rest of your life. You wouldn't need to know about All or Gain.

In fact, you might well end up becoming highly suspicious of All or Bain. After all, how could *they* claim to clean clothes when you had just had a first hand experience of Tide accomplishing that? Their box doesn't look at all like your box. Therefore they must be fraudulent.

And therein lies the great irony of people of faith. If the world's people of faith ever were to join together, they would greatly outnumber the people of disbelief. Instead, unfortunately, each religion and each subset of religion is highly suspicious of all the others.

Worse, the back story, that narrative framework that believers need in order to give them a coherent meaning to all of the behaviors that they must do in order to achieve the spiritual experience, all too often that narrative framework, that back story, becomes an end in itself. And thus it interferes greatly with their ever attaining that experience. Indeed, it all too often makes them forget the original purpose of joining whatever religion they are part of.

Talk about irony.

Okay. One final point about all this. Because let's say that, even after the sympathetic depiction of religion that I just gave in this episode, you are still creeped out about what you see as rampant hypocrisy or foolishness in organized religion. Well, as I've already mentioned in a previous episode, I'm fine with that. I mean, back in the Seventies I was one of the few people who thought that Generic Detergent would be a great idea. (Although, come to think of it, my wife back then continued to buy the Tide.)

What's more, to go back to the analogy of physical fitness, I personally hate the idea of gyms. They're metallic, mechanical, artificial, and often loud. At least half of the people who go there do so for reasons of vanity, not fitness. And if I wanted to be a cynic, I could point out that gyms traditionally make all their profits by getting people to sign up who then never show up. So that if one wanted to one could make the argument that the whole 'gym' phenomenon is nothing but a hypocritical scam to rip off gullible people desperately hoping for a 'fitness' that they will never attain.

The point here in reality, though, is that I don't like gyms and I don't use them. I prefer to walk in the national forest. And I also have a set of weights at home.

But let's be real. I don't walk when the temperature is less than 40 or more than 80. There's a month or more in the spring when everything is too muddy. And those weights sit around a lot more than they are lifted up.

In other words, those people who do go to the gym religiously are no doubt in much better physical shape than I've ever been in my 'independent' mode.

So... Back to spiritual fitness. Because, yes, of course you can pursue the state of mind and being which I call the religious experience quite independently on your own. And if that is your outlook, then hopefully all that I will be outlining and explaining in this podcast will be even more important in your understanding as to how the path proceeds forward.

Just keep remembering, though, that any exercise, physical or spiritual, is of use only if you are actually doing it. And if you are going solo, then you're just going to have to accept that, because you won't have the social reinforcement, you're going to need a lot more focus and determination than those who are going the organized route.

Also, I would hope that you recognize that those who are going down the organized route aren't just hypocrites or fools. Some of them, undoubtedly yes. Just like some of the people who go to gyms are vain jerks. But just like a lot of people who go to gyms are in way better physical shape than I am, we should all always remember that there are a lot of people who go to church or temple who are in way better spiritual shape than you or I.

Not to sound preachy or anything....

Anyway, to summarize this episode, let's go over how to organize religion once again. But this time from the inside out:

First, the real purpose why every world religion ultimately exists is to facilitate this state of being which I am calling the religious experience. Which, whether it is psycho-chemical or not, is as real as anything else that you will ever experience in this life. Which, what's more, also gets you really inspired, high, and/or joyous. And which, when experienced, is pretty much the same thing for everyone, across all cultures and throughout all time.

Second, organized religions do this by getting their followers to undertake a specific list of behaviors, some of which call for extreme self discipline, and some of which call for extreme self denial. And these sets of behavior are pretty much the same for every religion, no matter where or when it has happened.

And finally, third, since most of us are not philosophers or theologians, or incredibly self-disciplined hermits or yogis, religions get their followers to adopt these behaviors by having them believe in some set of stories, myths, legends—whatever you want to call it. I call it the back story. It's the icing on the cake that gets people to eat the cake. Or whatever other metaphor that you want to use. Unfortunately, however, this back story often has little or nothing to do with the behaviors that the religion is promoting and the experience that it is trying to duplicate. And worse, tragically, some people end up fixating on the icing and never get around to eating the cake.

But if you ever wanted to know why Religion exists, now, hopefully, you do.

And right now we've gotten to the end of the third episode. Which means that it has now become time for my friend the engineer to... cue the music.