

2001 AAR Western Region Submission to the Philosophy of Religion/Theology Session

The Essence of Religion (Abstract)

Mircea Eliade, who was perhaps the most important theorist of the history of religion in the 20th Century, has described human beings as essentially religious. Eliade was a believer, but what if there really is no god? The non-existence of god does not answer the great questions in the history of religion, but asks more. If there is no god or gods, why do humans behave in ways that many people describe as essentially religious?

If we take Frederick Engels at his word, and he was not a believer, the fundamental nature of reality is material and dialectical. If reality is the material world and it moves dialectically, that is in very complicated ways, perhaps, what we have previously understood as religious behavior is simply the behavior of humans trying to cope with a mysterious world. We may speculate that our world is mysterious, not because of the elusiveness of a god or gods, but because of the complexity of its dialectical motion. Religion has always expressed our sense of awe in the face of mystery and beauty.

From the position of this evaluation of religion without god or gods, there is a great deal to be learned from religious behavior, theology, and the ritual practices of human beings around the world and throughout time. From the dialectical materialist point of view, we find three levels of religious expression which are necessary to all societies: these three are the Social, the Existential, and the Aesthetic.

We observe that our biology delimits certain possibilities and imposes certain necessities. Among these is the fact of our being social creatures, animals that live together and must of necessity cooperate to some significant degree. Then there is the complexity introduced by thought, which results, in particular, in the need for collective consensus about our societies and selves. We need to know how we fit together, and what we are to make of our lives -- this is the Existential. We also find, and must incorporate, the fact that being human ultimately involves an Aesthetic sensibility, which includes the capacity for wonder and even awe. This Aesthetic level is the one we often think about first in describing religion, the poetic side of being human. Religion, even understood without idealism -- without god and god talk -- must still take into account these three very different, but very integrated, levels in which being human expresses itself.

Religion, most significantly though, addresses the question of how human beings fit in the world, and fit together. Engels taught that this level of reality, too, is determined by the material world and moves dialectically. The Sociologist Peter Berger has argued that religion forms the basis for social constructions of reality. Even though these constructions may have been attributed to a god or gods, societies are the creations of human beings. These creations are complicated, and have relied upon religious understandings of reality, as Eliade described, for their justifications. Berger's analysis implies that even after humans have progressed to the point of recognizing these social constructions as being our own profane creations, the complexity remains, and the necessity for intentionally creating meaning in society remains.

Richard Curtis