

The Origin of Man's Religions: Evolutionary Artifact or Remnants of Knowing Our Creator

Dr. Zukeran examines different theories on the origin of different religions. Are they made up from different experiences and dominant myths in a region or are they remnants of memories from a common Creator and a common fall from grace? He presents examples of how beginning from the remnant in a culture has been an effective way of introducing the gospel in a culture.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Is It Psychological?

What is the origin of man's religion? Why does every culture in the world worship some divine being? Anthropologists and historians have studied this question, and presently there are three primary theories: the subjective theory, the evolutionary theory, and the theory of original monotheism.

The subjective theory teaches that religion originates with man. Humans have a psychological need for a transcendent being that provides meaning and hope to their existence in this vast impersonal universe. Adherents of this view believe that this religious makeup exists below our conscious awareness. Cultures have various views of reality according to their experience, but the awareness and desire for religion is a universal phenomenon. They therefore conclude that this disposition lies in our subconscious. In other words, our beliefs about a transcendent being are not the result of external realities or interactions with such a being. Rather,

these beliefs derive from our psyches.

These feelings are expressed in more concrete terms through symbols and attitudes, not through a set of defined belief systems. As a culture progresses, these symbols and attitudes are developed into a set of beliefs and practices.

Several proponents were important in promoting this theory. Friedrich Schleiermacher believed that religion began with a feeling of dependence. This led to a need for an object to depend on which resulted in the idea of God. Ludwig Feuerbach taught that the concept of God is really a picture of an idealized person. Sigmund Freud believed that God derived from the basic human need for a father image. The idealized father figure becomes our image of God. [\[1\]](#)

The subjective theory may teach us about human nature, but it does not adequately explain the origin of religion or where this universal desire to know and understand God comes from. Dr. Winfried Corduan writes, "I may carry in my subconscious mind an abstract representation of God, but I cannot on that basis conclude that there is no independently existing, objective being that is God. God may have created me with that idea so that I can relate to God." [\[2\]](#) Every effect has a cause. What is the cause of this powerful desire for a relationship with God? If we are the products of a divine creator, that would explain this universal drive in all mankind to know Him because He placed this desire within us.

The Bible provides answers to the questions the subjective theory cannot answer. Genesis 1 states that we are created in the image of God. Therefore, we were created in the image of God with the intent to have a relationship with Him. Romans 1:20 states that all men have ingrained in their hearts a knowledge of God. Chapter 2 states that our conscience testifies that a moral law giver exists. The desire for God is a basic part of human nature.

Darwinian Theory of Religion

The second theory regarding the origin of religion is the evolutionary approach. This is the most popular view that is taught or implied in the study of religion. Proponents of this theory believe, as in the subjective theory, that religion originates with man. Religion is the result of an evolutionary process in human culture.

In the most primitive period of a culture, the most basic form of religion begins with an innate feeling that a spiritual force exists. This force is impersonal and pervades all of creation. It is called *mana*, derived from the name given to it by the inhabitants of Melanesia. Mana may be concentrated more intensely in some areas and objects more than others. A magnificent tree, or unique rock, or a certain animal may contain a higher concentration of mana.

The goal is to manipulate this force so that one may attain a desired outcome. Objects such as sticks or dolls, called *fetishes*, may contain the force and be used or worshipped.

The next stage is animism. At this stage, the force is visualized as personal spirits. Animism teaches that a spirit or spiritual force lies behind every event, and many objects of the physical world carry some spiritual significance.

There are two categories of spirits: nature spirits and ancestor spirits. Nature spirits have a human form and inhabit natural objects such as plants, rocks, or lakes. Ancestral spirits are the spirits of the ancestors. Both categories of spirits are limited in knowledge, power, and presence. One must maintain a favorable relationship with the spirits or else suffer their wrath.

The next stage is polytheism. Cultures progress from belief in finite spirits to the worship of gods. From polytheism a culture evolves to henotheism, which is belief in many gods

but worship directed to only one of them. The final stage is monotheism, the worship of one God.

There are several problems with this theory. The first is that these stages of development have never actually been observed. There is no record of a culture moving in sequence from the *mana* stage to the monotheistic stage as described in the evolutionary model. With *mana* and animism, evolutionary proponents expect that cultures in these stages would be free of the notion of any gods. However, this is not the case. Animistic cultures have gods, and most have a belief in a supreme being. Finally, there is evidence that indicates religions actually develop in the opposite direction from the evolutionary model.

For these reasons the evolutionary and subjective theories do not provide an adequate explanation for the origin of religion. Does history or even the Bible provide us with a better answer?

Original Monotheism

The third model for the origin of religion is original monotheism. This theory teaches that religion originates with God disclosing Himself to man. The first form religion takes is monotheism, and it deviates from there. Dr. Winfried Corduan identifies nine characteristics of man's first form of religion.

- *God is a personal God.*
- *He is referred to with masculine grammar and qualities.*
- *God is believed to live in the sky.*
- *He has great knowledge and power.*
- *He created the world.*
- *God is the author of standards of good and evil.*
- *Human beings are God's creatures and are expected to live by his standards.*

- *Human beings have become alienated from God by disobeying his standards.*
- *Lastly, God has provided a method of overcoming the alienation. Originally this involved sacrificing animals on an altar of uncut stone. {3}*

Studies of world cultures have revealed that each one has a vestige of monotheistic beliefs which are described by Dr. Corduan's nine qualifications. Cultures that are very primitive provide some of the strongest proof of original monotheism.

Anthropologists Dr. Wilhelm Schmidt, author of the 4000 page treatise, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, and, more recently, Don Richardson, author of *Eternity in Their Hearts*, documented this fact in the hundreds of cultures they studied. They discovered that the religion of some of the most ancient cultures were monotheistic and practiced little or no form of animism or magic. In almost every culture around the world, the religion of a particular culture began with a concept of a masculine, creator God who lives in the heavens. He provided a moral law by which the people would enter into a relationship with him. This relationship was broken when the people were disobedient, and as the relationship deteriorated, the people distanced themselves from the creator and their knowledge of him faded. As the civilization moved further away, they began to worship other lesser gods. In their search to survive in a world filled with spiritual forces, they desired power to manipulate the forces, and thus there was an increase in the use of magic.

This theory fits very well with what is revealed in Scripture. Genesis teaches us that God created man and that man lived according to his knowledge of God and His laws. However, from Adam's first act of disobedience, mankind continued his sinful path away from God. Paul summarizes this history in Romans 1. The theory of original monotheism is the most consistent with

Scripture and appears to have strong historical support.

Examples of Original Monotheism

Here are just a few examples. The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* states that the Chinese culture before Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, 2600 years before Christ, worshipped Shang Ti. They understood Him to be the creator and law-giver. They believed that He was never to be represented by an idol. When the Zhou Dynasty controlled China during the years 1066-770 B.C., the worship of Shang Ti was replaced by the worship of heaven itself, and eventually three other religions were spawned in China.

In a region north of Calcutta, India, there lived the Santal people. They were found worshipping elements of nature. However, before these practices developed, they worshipped Thakur Jiu, the genuine God who created all things. Although they knew Thakur Jiu was the true God, the tribe forsook worshipping Him and began entering into spiritism and the worship of lesser gods who ruled over some aspect of creation.

In Ethiopia, the Gedeo people number in the millions and live in different tribes. These people sacrifice to evil spirits out of fear. However, behind this practice is an older belief in Magano, the one omnipotent creator.

The Incas in South America also have this same belief. Alfred Metraux, author of *History of the Incas*, discovered the Inca's originally worshipped Viracocha, the Lord, the omnipotent creator of all things. Worship of Inti, the Sun God, and other gods are only recent departures from this monotheistic belief.

These examples follow Paul's description in Romans 1 where he states that men departed from worship of the creator to the worship of the creation.

Original Monotheism and the Missionary Revolution

If original monotheism is true, it should impact our strategy for missions. {4} In fact, this theory has had a tremendous impact on evangelistic strategies throughout the world.

Don Richardson's book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, illustrates how this theory shaped the missionary effort in China and Korea. In ancient China, the Lord of the Heavens was referred to as Shang Ti. In Korea, he was referred to as Hananim.

Over the centuries, the Chinese departed from the worship of Shang Ti and adopted the beliefs of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that taught the worship of ancestors and the Buddha. However, even after two thousand years, the Chinese still mentioned the name of Shang Ti.

The first Christian missionaries to China arrived in the eighth century A.D. In the years that followed, instead of capitalizing on the residual monotheistic witness already in the land, missionaries imposed a completely foreign name to the God of the heavens. They emphasized that the God of the Bible is foreign and completely distinct from any God the Chinese had ever heard of before. As Don Richardson writes, "Those who took this position completely misunderstood the real situation." {5} Roman Catholic missionaries adopted new terms like Tien Ju, Master of Heaven or Tien Laoye for God in the Chinese language.

When Protestant missionaries arrived, they debated as to whether they should use Shang Ti or another term for the Almighty. Some argued that there should be a new name for a new thing. Those who chose to use Shang Ti did not take advantage of the full meaning behind the term. As a result, Protestant missionaries did not have as great an impact in China as they were to have in Korea.

In 1884, Protestant missionaries entered Korea. After studying the culture, they believed that Hananim was the residual witness of God. As these missionaries began to preach utilizing this remnant witness, their message was enthusiastically received. Instead of introducing a foreign God from the west, they were reintroducing the natives to the Lord of their ancestors whom they were interested to know. The Catholic missionaries who had been in Korea for decades were still employing designations for God from Chinese phrases like Tien Ju. As a result, the Korean people responded to the message from the Protestant missionaries and Christianity spread throughout the country at an explosive rate.

Paul writes in Acts 14, "In the past he (God) let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony." (vv. 16-17) The fact that all cultures have this remnant witness has had—and should continue to have—an impact on the missionary movement all over the world.

Notes

1. See Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 22-23.
2. Ibid., 24.
3. Ibid., 33.
4. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura: Calif.: Regal Books, 1984), 33-71.
5. Ibid., 67.

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Atheists and Their Fathers

How does one become an atheist? Does a person's relationship with his earthly father affect his relationship with his heavenly Father? These are some of the questions we will explore in this article as we talk about the book Faith of the Fatherless by Paul Vitz.

Vitz is a psychologist who was an atheist himself until his late thirties. He began to wonder if psychology played a role in one's belief about God. After all, secular psychologists have been saying that a belief in God is really nothing more than infantile wish fulfillment. Dr. Vitz wondered if the shoe was on the other foot. Could it be that atheists are engaged

in unconscious wish fulfillment?

After studying the lives of more than a dozen of the world's most influential atheists, Dr. Vitz discovered that they all had one thing in common: defective relationships with their fathers. The relationship was defective because the father was either dead, abusive, weak, or had abandoned the children. When he studied the lives of influential theists during those same historical time periods, he found they enjoyed a strong, loving relationship with a father (or a father substitute if the father was dead).

For example, Friedrich Nietzsche lost his father (who was a pastor) before his fifth birthday. One biographer wrote that Nietzsche was "passionately attached to his father, and the shock of losing him was profound." Dr. Vitz writes that Nietzsche had a "strong, intellectually macho reaction against a dead, very Christian father." Friedrich Nietzsche is best known as the philosopher who said, "God is dead." It certainly seems possible that his rejection of God and Christianity was a "rejection of the weakness of his father."

Contrast Nietzsche with the life of Blaise Pascal. This famous mathematician and religious writer lived at a time in Paris when there was considerable skepticism about religion. He nevertheless wrote *Les pensées* (Thoughts), a powerful and imaginative defense of Christianity, which also attacked skepticism. Pascal's father, Etienne, was a wealthy judge and also an able mathematician. He was known as a good man with religious convictions. Pascal's mother died when he was three, so his father gave up his law practice and home-schooled Blaise and his sisters.

Here we are going to look at the correlation between our relationship with our earthly father and our heavenly Father. No matter what our family background, we are still responsible for the choices we make. Growing up in an unloving home does not excuse us from rejecting God, but it does explain why some

people reject God. There may be a psychological component to their commitment to atheism.

Nietzsche and Freud

Friedrich Nietzsche is a philosopher who has influenced everyone from Adolph Hitler to the Columbine killers. His father was a Lutheran pastor who died of a brain disease before Nietzsche's fifth birthday. He often spoke positively of his father and said his death was a great loss, which he never forgot. One biographer wrote that Nietzsche was "passionately attached to his father, and the shock of losing him was profound."

It seems he associated the general weakness and sickness of his father with his father's Christianity. Nietzsche's major criticism of Christianity was that it suffers from an absence, even a rejection, of "life force." The God Nietzsche chose was Dionysius, a strong pagan expression of life force. It certainly seems possible that his rejection of God and Christianity was a "rejection of the weakness of his father."

Nietzsche's own philosophy placed an emphasis on the "superman" along with a denigration of women. Yet his own search for masculinity was undermined by the domination of his childhood by his mother and female relatives in a Christian household. Dr. Vitz says, "It is not surprising, then, that for Nietzsche Christian morality was something for women." He concludes that Nietzsche had a "strong, intellectually macho reaction against a dead, very Christian father who was loved and admired but perceived as sickly and weak."

Sigmund Freud despised his Jewish father, who was a weak man unable to support his family. Freud later wrote in two letters that his father was a sexual pervert, and that the children suffered as a result. Dr. Vitz believes that Freud's Oedipus Complex (which placed hatred of the father at the center of his psychology) was an expression of "his strong unconscious

hostility to and rejection of his own father.” His father was involved in a form of reformed Judaism but was also a weak, passive man with sexual perversions. Freud’s rejection of God and Judaism seems connected to his rejection of his father.

Both Nietzsche and Freud demonstrate the relationship between our attitudes toward our earthly father and our heavenly Father. In both cases, there seems to be a psychological component to their commitment to atheism.

Russell and Hume

Bertrand Russell was one of the most famous atheists of the last century. Both of Russell’s parents lived on the margin of radical politics. His father died when Bertrand Russell was four years old, and his mother died two years earlier. He was subsequently cared for by his rigidly puritanical grandmother, who was known as “Deadly Nightshade.” She was by birth a Scottish Presbyterian, and by temperament a puritan.

Russell’s daughter Katherine noted that his grandmother’s joyless faith was “the only form of Christianity my father knew well.” This ascetic faith taught that “the life of this world was no more than a gloomy testing ground for future bliss.” She concluded, “My father threw this morbid belief out the window.”

Dr. Vitz points out that Russell’s only other parent figures were a string of nannies to whom he often grew quite attached. When one of the nannies left, the eleven-year-old Bertrand was “inconsolable.” He soon discovered that the way out of his sadness was to retreat into the world of books.

After his early years of lost loves and later years of solitary living at home with tutors, Russell described himself in this way: “My most profound feelings have remained always solitary and have found in human things no companionship The sea, the stars, the night wind in waste places, mean

more to me than even the human beings I love best, and I am conscious that human affection is to me at bottom an attempt to escape from the vain search for God.”

Another famous atheist was David Hume. He was born into a prominent and affluent family. He seems to have been on good terms with his mother as well as his brother and sister. He was raised as a Scottish Presbyterian but gave up his faith and devoted most of his writing to the topic of religion.

Like the other atheists we have discussed, David Hume fits the pattern. His father died when he was two years old. Biographies of his life mention no relatives or family friends who could serve as father-figures. And David Hume is known as a man who had no religious beliefs and spent his life raising skeptical arguments against religion in any form.

Both Russell and Hume demonstrate the relationship between our attitudes toward our earthly father and our heavenly Father. In each case, there is a psychological component to their commitment to atheism.

Sartre, Voltaire, and Feuerbach

Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the most famous atheists of the last century. His father died when he was fifteen months old. He and his mother lived with his maternal grandparents as his mother cultivated a very intimate relationship with him. She concentrated her emotional energy on her son until she remarried when Sartre was twelve. This idyllic and Oedipal involvement came to an end, and Sartre strongly rejected his stepfather.

In those formative years, Sartre’s real father died, his grandfather was cool and distant, and his stepfather took his beloved mother away from him. The adolescent Sartre concluded to himself, “You know what? God doesn’t exist.” Commentators note that Sartre obsessed with fatherhood all his life and

never got over his fatherlessness. Dr. Vitz concludes that “his father’s absence was such a painful reality that Jean-Paul spent a lifetime trying to deny the loss and build a philosophy in which the absence of a father and of God is the very starting place for the good or authentic life.”

Another philosopher during the French Enlightenment disliked his father so much that he changed his name from Arouet to Voltaire. The two fought constantly. At one point Voltaire’s father was so angry with his son for his interest in the world of letters rather than taking up a career in law that he “authorized having his son sent to prison or into exile in the West Indies.” Voltaire was not a true atheist, but rather a deist who believed in an impersonal God. He was a strident critic of religion, especially Christianity with its understanding of a personal God.

Ludwig Feuerbach was a prominent German atheist who was born into a distinguished and gifted German family. His father was a prominent jurist who was difficult and undiplomatic with colleagues and family. The dramatic event in young Ludwig’s life must have been his father’s affair with the wife of one of his father’s friends. They lived together openly in another town, and she bore him a son. The affair began when Feuerbach was nine and lasted for nine years. His father publicly rejected his family, and years later Feuerbach rejected Christianity. One famous critic of religion said that Feuerbach was so hostile to Christianity that he would have been called the Antichrist if the world had ended then.

Each of these men once again illustrates the relationship between atheism and their fathers.

Burke and Wilberforce

British statesman Edmund Burke is considered by many as the founder of modern conservative political thought. He was partly raised by his grandfather and three affectionate

uncles. He later wrote of his Uncle Garret, that he was "one of the very best men, I believe that ever lived, of the clearest integrity, the most genuine principles of religion and virtue."

His writings are in direct opposition to the radical principles of the French Revolution. One of his major criticisms of the French Revolution was its hostility to religion: "We are not converts of Rousseau; we are not the disciples of Voltaire; Helevetius has made no progress amongst us. Atheists are not our preachers." For Burke, God and religion were important pillars of a just and civil society.

William Wilberforce was an English statesman and abolitionist. His father died when he was nine years old, and he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle. He was extremely close to his uncle and to John Newton who was a frequent visitor to their home. Newton was a former slave trader who converted to Christ and wrote the famous hymn "Amazing Grace." Wilberforce first heard of the evils of slavery from Newton's stories and sermons, "even reverencing him as a parent when [he] was a child." Wilberforce was an evangelical Christian who went on to serve in parliament and was instrumental in abolishing the British slave trade.

As mentioned earlier, Blaise Pascal was a famous mathematician and religious writer. Pascal's father was a wealthy judge and also an able mathematician, known as a good man with religious convictions. Pascal's mother died when he was three, so his father gave up his law practice and home-schooled Blaise and his sisters. Pascal went on to powerfully present a Christian perspective at a time when there was considerable skepticism about religion in France.

I believe Paul Vitz provides an important look at atheists and theists in his book *Faith of the Fatherless*. The prominent atheists of the last few centuries all had defective relationships with their fathers while the theists enjoyed a

strong, loving relationship with a father or a father substitute. This might be something to compassionately consider the next time you witness to an atheist.

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