

D.C.
john august
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Five Ways of Looking at God

FINLEY

I was a comparative religions major for about a semester and a half. To summarize everything I learned: All major religions are basically the same, but people will kill each other over them regardless. Catholic versus Protestant is about the difference between Coke and Pepsi, with Islam, Buddhism and the rest filling out the beverage menu. Yet somehow as a planet we decided you are what you drink, and we've paid a horrible price for it. I say, fuck it, give me a big bottle of water and I'm good to go.

The whole point of religion is to answer the Big Whys. Why does the sun come up? Why does the rain fall? To a caveman, I could see how these would be valid and frightening questions, and how he might invent God to serve as an all-purpose answer. But over time, we've figured out that most of these Unknowable Things are pretty damn knowable, so that currently the number of questions for which God is the only available answer has become nil.

Okay, not *quite* nil, but infinitesimally small. In calculus, you would say that the function of human learning approaches a limit at Total Knowledge, so there will always be a little wiggle room. But whatever God is squeezed into that tiny place is not the guy pulling the strings and making the thunder rumble.

LEWIS

I agree with Finley on the scientific irrelevance of God. Even the Catholic Church – never the most progressive of institutions – has acknowledged the realities of evolution and the Big Bang. But the reason God and religion stay powerful is their near-monopoly on morality, the vital yet indefinable glue that holds society together.

That's unfortunate, because I see two major problems with how most religions deal with morality. First is the concept of delayed consequences, i.e. evil deeds in this world will be punished in the next. The idea is that the threat of future damnation is enough to keep an individual on the straight-and-narrow path. Experience shows this is rarely the case. If a man steals a hundred dollars, he gets the immediate reward for his wrongdoing. One can argue that he has put himself one step closer to Hell, but since we've already established a merciful, forgiving God, there is always time to make amends.

On a larger scale, delayed consequences also reinforce a culture of victimization. Whether it's battered wives or an ethnic minority, groups may allow themselves to be oppressed while clinging to the belief that their

oppressors will eventually be punished by God. They may let years or centuries pass without taking any action on their own behalf, shackled by their beliefs.

The second troubling concept is absolution, where a wrong may be undone by asking forgiveness – not of the individual harmed, or even society – but of an invisible overseer. This is a dangerous idea, because it shifts the responsibility for justice from the victim and society over to the perpetrator himself. No penance can take the place of law.

SARAH

Morality and reason are important aspects of religion, but they're hardly the point. The unspoken purpose of religion – the true reason it has persisted so many centuries – is that it provides a comforting sense of ritual and community.

If asked, most churchgoers would probably admit they find Sunday services boring. So why do they go every week? I would argue it's largely a social function, an excuse to leave the house, dress up and see friends. It serves as a weekly reminder that they are good, God-fearing people, whose tithes help build massive cathedrals that one individual could not conceivably construct. (What other explanation could there be for the new super-churches of 10,000 members? We live in a society where bigger is better.)

I would draw a distinction between faith and religion. Faith is personal; religion is communal. Faith is ambiguous and difficult; religion is absolute and easy. But that's not to downplay its importance: Religion provides a sense of unity and permanence in a culture that is increasingly diverse and temporary. In that function alone, it's a vitally important part of civilization.

PETE

I go back and forth on whether God exists. Yeah, you can make intellectual arguments one way or the other, but really it comes down to whether you feel him there or not. Mostly, I don't. But I used to.

Between junior high and high school, my Mom and I moved from Phoenix to Tucson. Our apartment was almost exactly the same as the one we left, and the only real difference between the two cities was that all my friends were back in Phoenix. It being summer, there wasn't school for meeting new people, so I started hanging around at the 7-Eleven looking for anyone my age. I found these guys who painted houses and started doing it with them, partly for the cash, but partly just to have something to do.

It turned out the whole painting crew was born-again, and most of the houses we were painting were people from their church. The guys in my crew were

totally normal, and not robotic in that way you see characterized. And I don't honestly think they had an agenda of recruiting me, but the more we hung out, they started inviting me to barbecues, camp-outs and eventually Bible-reading. I went along largely because I didn't have anything else to do, and on some level envied how normal and stable their lives seemed. But honestly, the more I got into the Bible stuff and church services, I started to actually feel the God thing. You look around, and you notice a beauty to things you didn't see before. You feel like you have a secret no one else has, and your friends in the church are the only ones who understand it.

When summer was over and high school started, I immediately fell in with my normal crowds: the jocks, the debate team and the casual druggies. I would see these friends from the church in the hallway, but they weren't a part of my life anymore. And pretty soon, the whole God-feeling went away as well. I kind of regret it, but life moves on.

MASON

Like most American families, ours was very nearly secular. We went to church at Christmas and Easter, and made a point of saying grace only at very important meals like Thanksgiving. I think we were technically Presbyterian, but I could not explain how that differs from any other flavor of Protestant.

I think people find religion so important because it provides a sense of structure and meaning in a world that often seems chaotic. But God doesn't have a monopoly on belief systems. In many ways, I would consider my religion Democracy.

We talk about the separation of church and state, but in many ways, the state is a church. Look at the iconography: the flag, the eagle, temple-like monuments. The anthems. The holidays. The pledges and oaths. They are all designed to inspire reverence and awe, and ultimately, fealty.

While we don't like to admit it (probably so as not to offend the God-fearing), America is a religion, and D.C. is our Mecca.