

Between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand years ago, a mere nanosecond on the clock of the earth's existence, three things entered life that announced the arrival of human beings, as we now define them. The first was that consciousness grew into self-consciousness and awareness into self-awareness. The second was that the medium of time was expanded so that these human creatures could, in a conscious way, remember the past and recall it, and anticipate the future and plan for it. The third was that these creatures began to identify human sounds with both objects and actions, and in this way language, which is the essence of abstract thinking, came into being. At some specific moment, perhaps not at the same time, or in the same place, and certainly not in one solitary individual who might be called the mythological Adam/Eve, the first of the species that we identify as *Homo sapiens* came into being. This planet earth now possessed an inhabitant who was self-conscious, was time-aware and had the ability to communicate with words. Something new and wondrous had emerged out of the evolutionary soup—something that was destined to transform natural history into human history.

I try to imagine that mythical moment in which consciousness became self-consciousness and awareness became self-awareness. What was it like in the creatures in whom this new reality was dawning over whatever number of years it took to become the norm? All we know is that these human creatures evolved to the place where they saw themselves not as part of nature, but as separate from nature, even as standing over against the natural world. These human creatures had evolved to the place where they could look out on the world from a new center as separate, self-aware and self-conscious beings. It was probably both a startling wonder and a traumatic moment of fear and enormous anxiety. What does it mean to see yourself suddenly as one who is alone, fragile, self-consciously living in fear in the midst of powerful natural forces that you can identify, but over which you have no control? I suspect these first of our human ancestors shook in their skins at the new vision of what life had become and all that it now entailed. While they could experience these powerful changes, they could not possibly understand them except in the most primitive of ways.

Accompanying this self-awareness was the sense that their lives were lived inside an ever-flowing dimension called time. These human creatures recognized that there was a time before they existed as conscious creatures and there would be a time after that conscious existence ended. That is, they came to see themselves as bounded on each end by a sense of being transitory. Embracing their own finiteness, they began the inevitable contemplation of their own mortality. Finally these creatures developed the ability to articulate in symbolic sounds their fears and at the same time to embrace their limitations, their powerlessness and their sense of meaninglessness with the power of words.

Look at what this meant. It is one thing to die; life in many forms does that in vast numbers daily. It is quite another to know that you are going to die, to plan for it and to accept its inevitability. That was the human situation. It is one thing to be unaware that your existence has no meaning, as is the case for the billions of insects that are devoured each day as food for other living things; it is quite another to deal with that reality consciously and to battle against it. It is one thing to be part of the routines of life and death in the world of nature; it is quite another to be aware and self-conscious of the fact that you are a link in the food chain.

Human beings, as the centers of consciousness, now know that they will die and are aware that they will disappear. This is the knowledge that raised (and still raises) the questions of meaning and meaninglessness in them. Because that knowledge is now inherent, every human being is forced to inquire as to whether or not humanity's self-conscious life has any ultimate significance. To be human is, therefore, to endure the trauma of self-consciousness. It is to be aware of the existential shock of the threat of nonbeing. No other living thing before us has ever been required to embrace this level of anxiety. Part of what it means to be human is to know ourselves to be chronically anxious creatures. It means seeing

ourselves as those who must embrace our own mortality. It means that if life has no ultimate meaning, we alone of all other creatures embrace the threat of meaninglessness. In response to that threat, human life is driven to create meaning. It was and is the human experience to tremble before these realizations. It is, however, also the acknowledged human destiny not to win the struggle for meaning, for survival or for life. The fate of all living creatures is to lose, but only the human life knows this self-consciously. It is thus not easy to be human. We will be felled, destroyed and eaten by natural enemies—that is what germs and viruses are, after all—and our flesh and bones will in our turn feed other forms of life.

If the anxiety initially arising out of this knowledge had not been banked by our ancient forebears, I don't think that self-consciousness could have survived. It would have been a step in the evolutionary process that could not be sustained, because what was required to sustain it was more than our human coping mechanisms could manage. That is the moment in which I believe this emerging human being asked the question for which the concept of God, understood theistically, was the answer. Theism is, I believe, a direct result of the trauma of self-consciousness. Theism is not God; it is rather a human coping mechanism.

Human beings began to ask questions like these: Is there someone or some presence in the universe like me, self-conscious and aware, but possessing more power than I possess, and able thereby to cope with the anxieties of existence that I now face? Where does this presence abide? Will this being or this presence be my ally or my enemy in the struggle to survive? Will this being or this presence use the power I imagine it must have to come to my aid? How can I win the favor of this being? How can I accommodate this "other's" presence? How can I secure the blessing of this power?

At first this thinking process took a very basic form. The lonely self-conscious human beings observed that there were living things, plants and animals, that existed quite independently of human life and so our ancient ancestors wondered where these living things came from, just as they wondered about their own origin. They observed vital natural forces in the world, like the flowing of a river, the tides of the ocean, the power of the wind, the warmth of the sun and the light of the moon. Some power must animate these things and make them able to do the things they do, they reasoned. Could that power protect and defend them also? To these things human beings began to assign a force that they called spirit. Spirit was unseen, mysterious, yet its power could be readily observed. Could they relate to this world of spirit, win its favor and enjoy its protection? the human creatures wondered. Out of the sky, they observed, came thunder, lightning, wind, rain, warmth, cold. Was there a spirit beyond the sky who controlled these forces? Was that spirit benevolent or malevolent? Could they do anything to make that spirit more friendly? What was it that might please the source of these apparently living things?

In time these individual spirits, thought to inhabit both creatures and vital forces in the natural world, provided the content for human beings' earliest religion, called animism—that is, the belief that something called spirit animated all that lived. The religious task was not to anger these spirits, but to please them so that they would serve our needs. God as something external to our life, supernatural in power, was born. Theism had appeared.

As life evolved and changed, so did theism, but it never transcended its original definition. When the human shift from hunters and gatherers toward more settled agricultural activities occurred, theism took on the form of the earth mother who brought life out of her womb to sustain the human struggle for survival. In that transition, theism began to display feminine characteristics. Later these supernatural spirits came to be thought of as something like a family of gods or spirits living in a polytheistic universe. Still later these divine powers, sometimes called gods, seemed to organize according to earthly standards of tribal life, with varieties of powers and functions, but with a supreme deity ruling over lesser spirits.

This was when the human imagination conceived of a heavenly court under the leadership of a Jupiter and Juno or a Zeus and Hera. Still later, patriarchy drove the feminine out and theism moved from the world of many spirits to the form of one solitary deity who, like a tribal chief, ran the world as a kind of expanded tribal god who watched over and protected only the tribe that served this particular deity as its chosen people, and later who, as the universal God, ruled over all of life as a kind of king of the universe.

Yet in each of these images the theistic definition of God remained steadfast, ever saluted, and always intact. God was, as I see that definition emerging, "a being, supernatural in power, dwelling outside this world and able to invade the world in miraculous ways to bless, to punish, to accomplish the divine will, to answer prayers and to come to the aid of frail, powerless human beings." As soon as this theistic idea of a deity was established, anxiety lessened, since anxiety was the primary reason for the human creation of this theistic deity in the first place. Now, these human beings reasoned, there is a being beyond us, more powerful than we and capable of defending and protecting us, the self-conscious ones. All that was needed to turn this theistic coping device into a religious system was to discern what it was that pleased this deity. What would it take to gain divine favor or to avoid divine wrath in order to enlist the help of this supernatural being in the struggle to survive? The moment that question was asked, religious systems, all of which are consciously devised to accomplish exactly those goals, came into being. Human life was now generically defined as "religious human life."

Analyze any religious system and you will discover that it contains two specific divisions: The first is: What is the proper way to worship so that God's favor will be gained? The second is: What is the proper way to behave or to live in order to gain God's approval? Later, in more formal religious settings, this would be called our duty toward God and our duty toward our neighbor and would be enshrined in the Hebrew tradition on two tablets of stone as the Ten Commandments.

Security, however, is not finally achieved until the religious system successfully claims to possess ultimate truth by some form of divine revelation. This claim of authority normally comes in one of two forms. Either this truth has been revealed to some human entity who stands near to God—a high priest, for example—or the absolute will of God has been spelled out in some inspired writing which God's representative alone can interpret properly. It is this claim to possess absolute truth that keeps anxiety in check. Relativity in religious claims must be repressed, because it always allows our original debilitating anxiety to return. Under this system the idea that we have genuine security requires that we do not doubt the meaning of our own created security system.

So the idea of God as the Almighty One, who watches over us and protects us, came into being. We win this God's favor with proper divine worship. We please this God with lives marked by proper behavior. When in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness or any other adversity, we pray to this God for intervening help and we expect answers. When tragedies strike, we wonder what we have done to incur the divine wrath.

This is the meaning and the legacy of theism and it became the dominant content of all religion that is theistic in its self-understanding. What we need to embrace from this insight is that human religious systems have never been primarily a search for truth; they have always been first and foremost a search for security. Because theism was the primary way human beings conceptualized God, it was inevitable that when a group of first-century people believed that they had encountered God in the story of Jesus, they saw theism as the content of Jesus. The Jesus story was thus turned into an account of a theistic God coming to our rescue, invading the human world from above. Theism was the fully operative definition of the God we claimed we had met in Jesus. A literalized concept of incarnation was and is the theological language used to convey this idea. The doctrine of the trinity, which purports to define the reality of God, brings Jesus and the theistic concept of God into oneness.

The invading God from above needed a way to get into the human arena to engage the human situation, so a landing field was created capable of receiving the deity. Christians identified that landing field as the virgin birth. Through this miracle the theistic God put on human flesh and came among us. While he was on this earth, this Jesus (as he was described) could do all the things that people assumed God could do, for he was God in human form. So stories were told in which Jesus stilled the storm, walked on water, expanded the food supply, healed the sick and even raised the dead. If people pleased the God that they claimed to have met in Jesus, this God, still theistic in nature, would bless them by answering their prayers, intervening in their history and finally by accepting them into eternal life at the moment of their death, overcoming once and for all the human anxiety about our finitude.

The ancient human anxiety met by the development of the theistic understanding of God is still today operative in most of the traditional forms of Christianity. Religious systems are very slow to change. Theism still seeks to give meaning to life, to answer our questions about our self-conscious existence with authority and to calm our anxiety about mortality with promises of eternal life.

The fires of anxiety, born in self-consciousness, are thus banked by religion and we are content, if not grateful, to live inside the theistic definition of God that we created. Theism, therefore, is not who God is. Theism is a human definition of who God is. There is a vast difference.

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