

Religion is one of the most powerful forces in the world. It has caused war and devastation, it is spread across every culture, and its questions cross almost every mind. Around 85% of the world's people are religious (Bruce, Richard. 2008). Religion has cured addictions, fear, and pain. It can bring peace, both inside and around us. It has been the seed of intolerance and an excuse for torture. People die, suffer, live, and triumph because of religion.

So what is it that makes religion so special and powerful? What commanding magnetic draw does religion hold? There are so many answers to this question, and I think that the true answer is that it depends upon each person. Religion is a very personal, individualized thing that people hold deep within them. While exploring this question I will inevitably make generalizations and assumptions, but I want to remember that each person's attachment to (or detachment from) God and religion is his own. Keeping this in mind, though, there are ways that we can look at this relationship and the reasons behind it. There are trends that give us clues into the religion's magnetism, and these are what this investigation is based on.

For this research it became necessary to separate religion into two separate branches: social, organized religion, and spirituality. Obviously these are entangled and involved, but I think that the question of belief in God and something beyond this life, and the adherence to a set of religious beliefs and the participation in ritual or congregation are two different things. The motivations behind them certainly overlap, but they are different in many ways. The question that I am most interested in is that of spirituality. So I will try to be brief in the discussion of organized and social religion, and will no doubt leave out many things that could be said. Here is my attempt, in only a few

(a few meaning around 15) paragraphs, to summarize the basics of this question without getting bogged down in the countless side paths and theories.

Part of what makes religion special is the combination of the biggest questions, the ultimate concerns, and the mundane. Death, suffering, and evil, which paralyze and terrify us, are addressed in religion. But so are the questions of how to eat, which days to rest, marriage laws, etc. This makes religion powerful for two reasons. One of these is that, by giving direction and attaching significance not only to the big parts of life but also to the small, everyday parts (that are, really, what make up our existence) we are able to combat ennui and feelings of meaninglessness by giving almost everything we do an element of the sacred. "The religious man," Victor Frankl (1986) wrote, experiences life "not simply as a task, but as a mission."

The second reason that this makes religion so special is that it is a comprehensive, all-encompassing solution to the problem of how to live, leaving few questions unanswered. (Pargament I. Kenneth. 1997.) Human life is confusing, and such clear direction is something that many people need (or long for). Looking at the lyrics of "If You're Feeling Sinister" by Belle and Sebastian, you can see this need for instruction reflected:

Hilary went to the Catholic church because she wanted information  
The vicar, or whatever, took her to one side and gave her confirmation  
Saint Theresa's calling her, the church up on the hill is looking lovely  
But it doesn't interest, the only things she wants to know is  
How and why and when and where to go  
How and why and when and where to follow. (Murdoch, Stuart. 1998.)  
Not only does religion include both the big and the small, but it also provides

different pathways. Religious feeling, satisfaction and recognition can be gained in more than one way. There are ways to do this through thinking, feeling, acting and relating.

(Pargament I. Kenneth. 1997. Pg 35-40). Religious practice is not just one thing; it's going to church or synagogue, it's going on pilgrimages, praying, studying historical and holy texts, contemplating big questions, making and admiring religious art, singing and listening to music, observing ancient traditions, having spiritual experiences, being part of a community, doing good, and confessing your sins. Religion can be school, family, therapy and community service. Religion is both looking inward and outward, it addresses both the group and the individual. Perhaps part of the reason organized religion is so powerful is that it brings all these elements together in a way that nothing else does.

Some of these aspects of religion are very powerful on their own. For many people, for example, there is great importance placed on ritual and tradition. There are many people who attend church, study holy texts, meditate and observe religious days of rest and celebration without a belief in God.

One reason for this is the power of your upbringing. I found, in the few interviews that I conducted, that religious seekers who were raised in a religion, even semi-casually, tended to come back to some form of that original religion. They were people who explored other faiths and, in some cases, saw little difference in the core belief of some other faiths. But it was the specific religion that they knew best that eventually called them back. For example, in a spiritual experience, it would be Jesus who appeared and resonated with those who were raised in Christianity. This shows me the power of being born into a specific religion, and the difficulty of truly severing the ties with that religion. Many people are taught religion far before they would begin to search for it if left alone, and by the time they are ready to look for what they believe, a particular doctrine has already been ingrained in them.

Not only does being raised in a religion bind you to that religion internally, but often the social pressure of living in, for example, a community of Catholics, makes it feel nearly impossible to stray from Catholicism. Divorcing the faith of community/family has led, for many people, to anger, disownment, and the fracture of families. (Sweeny, Julia. 2008.)

Even without connection to others and connection to God through ritual, ritual itself is very important for many people. It can be seen as a way to connect to themselves. Holidays, fasts, prayers, and meditations are a time for contemplation, gratitude, and disengaging from the material world. Religious rituals can be a way to spend more time doing these things and separating ourselves from the often small and somewhat petty world which we live in for at least a little while. (Tonti, Matt. 2009.)

In addition to this, many people are drawn to groups and the security that having a firm place in a group brings. Having a community of people caring and praying for you in hard times, people that you know you'll see at least once every week, people with similar views to yours, brings a sense of comfort and safety that most people want. The feeling of being part of a larger group also extends to more than just your community but through time, as you carry on ancient traditions. Practicing traditions that have been around for many thousands of years, practicing the rituals of *your* people, has significance for many people. In *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, Kenneth I. Pargament says, "I had not thought of myself as personally religious. Nevertheless, I was reassured by the idea that I was part of something larger than myself."(Pg 15).

Another thing that belonging to a group can bring is a firmer sense of identity. We tend to assess ourselves in relation to others. Because social interaction is so important to

our sense of self, belonging to a group in which we feel accepted can give us a more positive view of ourselves. By identifying with a group, people attach onto themselves the affirmed status or identity of that group, often a status that they may not have had as individuals. (Seul R. Jeffrey) I also have suspicions that, though we often protest them, many people need/want to be labeled. It makes the daunting and unclear question of who we are clearer and easier to explain. Therefore, when you belong to a religion you gain a label and, in a sense, a definition.

I found in interviews that many people, while searching for answers, were very affected by meeting someone religious. Meeting someone who completely prescribes to one religion and who seems full of joy and assurance makes people, especially someone who is looking for something to make them happy and full of assurance, want to try that.

Religion can provide role models- kind teachers or priests or rabbis who are there and who want to guide you to a better place. Many people never find these models without religion. For many, a religion is the only way they will be encouraged, helped and able to grow. (Pargament I. Kenneth.)

I will discuss only one more theory of the human need for religion, which overlaps with the need for spirituality. People are by nature enemies of civilization. Without someone/something to control them, or a compelling reason to control themselves, civilization could not function and people would live, as they used to, as savages who hardly hesitated before stealing and killing. It is (undeveloped) human nature to care for only ourselves and our families. (Sigmund, Freud. 1927) To control this is the purpose of society and government, true, but these structures are less compelling than true belief and fear. If people believe that God wants them to be kind to their

neighbor, and that if they aren't they may suffer eternally, they are far less likely to steal, rape or kill their neighbor. And if their religious community wants them to be kind to their neighbor, they are more likely to do so. Both of these influences are more commanding than simply being told in law.

It's not difficult to understand the appeal and necessity of organized religion. But what about true belief in God? In this exploration, too, I see an important distinction to make right away. To me there is a difference between a God with human characteristics, a physical form, a sex-essentially God as a superhuman, and God as a force, or an energy. Though much vaguer and harder to grasp, this second definition is much more interesting and sophisticated to me. So, while talking about the humanization of God, I will again try to be brief. But this is another interesting question, and it will also be full of nuances that I can't indulge.

Freud, an ardent atheist, writes about (in *The Future of an Illusion*) the human reaction to nature, or fate. What we cannot control mocks and terrifies us, and if we leave nature as an uncontrollable, random force we will be left in a constant state of panic.

"Impersonal forces and destinies cannot be approached; they remain eternally remote. But if the elements have passions that rage as they do in our own souls, if death itself is not something spontaneous but the violent act of an evil will, if everywhere in nature there are Beings around us of a kind that we know in our own society, then we can breathe freely, can feel at home in the uncanny and can deal by physical means without our senseless anxiety. We are still defenseless, perhaps, but we are no longer helplessly paralyzed; we can at least react. Perhaps, indeed, we are not even defenseless. We can apply the same methods against these violent supermen outside that we employ in our own society; we can try to adjure them, to appease them, to bribe them, and, by so influencing them, we may rob them of part of their power." (Pg 22-23).

We have been taught since the beginning of life, Freud says, that the way to influence a situation is to establish relations with those in charge. So why not

extend this to the greatest forces? It is natural and instinctual for us to project a human form onto what we don't know or understand because we are narcissistic creatures. In addition to this, Freud proposes our view of and relationship with God is connected to the child's relationship with their parents (in particular their father). As children we are helpless without the aid of our parents. When we are very young they seem almost omnipotent, and we appeal to them for help in almost everything. So as we get older and encounter another situation of helplessness, we assign nature/fate a similar personality/identity. (Pg 34-35).

But no matter what kind of God you believe in, you're offered certain things by such belief. If you truly believe that there is something/someone (I'll just refer to God as "someone" for the sake of convenience) out there, someone in some way regulating the world and watching over you, if there is an all-powerful being that cares about you, then you can never feel truly lonely or helpless. Believing that there are just people and random acts of nature and coincidence, that no one is looking out to make sure that you're okay, leaves many people feeling terrified and lost. If you don't believe in God life can be really scary, both because bad things inevitably happen and because simply existing as a human (a neurotic animal) is hard.

I think that the gospel song "Precious Lord Take my Hand" helps illustrate this point. These lyrics show the way that people use and need God to guide them and make them feel safe and supported.

I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm alone  
Through the storm, through the night  
Lead me on to the light  
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home (Dorsey, Thomas. 1932).

Another thing that illustrates this is the average age of conversion. According to *The God Part of the Brain* the average age of religious conversion is 15.2 years old, and the most common age group is 15-20. This is also the age group with the highest rates of suicide, drug abuse, eating disorders, and depression. (Pg 175). This is the age when people are trying to figure out who they are. This is when people are trying to become responsible and competent and able to fend for themselves. People are often telling teenagers to prepare for the real world, to ready themselves for something more. And being expected to be in charge of yourself is scary.

I, as a 16 year old presently under some stress, am in a unique position to look at this. Lately I think so much about competence, about being strong and smart in comparison not just to the small world of my school and family and Vermont, but in relation to this wider, "realer" world that I am so often being told about. The future, these days, will not leave me alone. It feels like almost everything that happens in my life reminds me, screams at me, to think about what comes next. I spend so much time thinking about what life really is, what makes it better and how to exist in such a hard place. I, like many people who turn to religion, am looking for answers.

And the stress of this, the fear of both the world and myself in relation to the world, is taking its toll on me. I sometimes have the feeling that if I was to let go, to let the weight of these things crush me, I would go crazy. I feel, some moments, that it would not be so hard for me to dissolve into insanity, the kind you see in the movies. Just the other day, when things seemed particularly heavy and the choice between competence and craziness seemed to be staring me straight in the face, I did let myself go. I sat in a dark bathroom for a long time and I let myself go a little insane. I tore at my hair and

mumbled things and hit my head against the side of the metal stall. I decided that I would never move, that I could never move, that going outside and acting like a functioning person was just impossible.

But when the lights came back on and everyday life began calling to me, I did come back. And I was able to, probably because I have such a solid foundation. I have friends, teachers, and my family to call me back. But what if I didn't? It is so easy for me to see how so many people can dissolve without help.

Religion and God are help. As I mentioned earlier, religion gives answers. The holy books are, essentially, books of answers. But even beyond these things, I think, God gives a sense of safety and security and of being loved that makes people not care about the answers so much. God, to many people, is the only answer necessary. If someone believes in God, going out into the "real" world is not so scary. Leaving parents and childhood and an old identity is less frightening. Worrying about taking care of yourself is no longer necessary if God is taking care of you.

A similar theory about the development of spirituality is proposed by Mathew Alper in *The God Part of the Brain*. He, in explaining the development of what he believes to be the spiritual function of the brain (meaning that human brains are "programmed" to be spiritual), talks about death and anxiety. He explains that almost all our impulses and actions are because of pain; we eat to relieve the pain of hunger, have sex to relieve the pain of sexual tension etc. Pain is what allows us to survive because if we didn't feel it, we wouldn't eat, reproduce, sleep, etc. Anxiety and fear is pain that serves the purpose of keeping us on our guard, of being able to defend ourselves and to

think about the future. Fear of rabid elephants, for example, makes us run when we are near one, which might save our life.

In addition, humans have the unique ability to realize themselves. Unlike other animals, we know that we are alive. This means that we also know that we're going to die. And we know that we could die at any time. This combination of foresight/fear and awareness of our mortality puts people, particularly our early ancestors who first developed this trait and who lived much more dangerous lives, in a state of paralyzing, inescapable terror and dread (as discussed by Freud).

This combination is the cause of human neurosis, of the killing of one another, of all kinds of self-protection. And it is the cause of the realization of life's meaninglessness? And it could have been the cause of human extinction. Why fight so hard for life when it appears to be meaningless? So, Mathew Alper proposes, natural selection created (through such pressure on our cognitive evolution) a species of people able to cope with this fear and anxiety by believing in something more.

It occurs to me that the word "more" is an important one in this investigation. Spirituality is believing that there is more. Belief that the world is not just a collection of atoms and moving particles and energy. Someone spiritual may believe that the world is these things, but they would also believe that it is more. That there is more to us than just our bodies and neurochemistry, that each one of us has an everlasting soul. Spirituality almost always goes along with the belief in more life than just this one, whether it's heaven, hell, or reincarnation. This belief has a lot of power. I already discussed the relieving power of God, but there is also that of the belief in life beyond this one.

In *Letting Go of God* Julia Sweeney talks about losing her faith and God, and that when this finally happened, she had a new realization of death. She realized that all those she had lost, which included her brother, everyone she had ever known who had died, she would have to say goodbye to again. She had always believed that she would, in some way, see these people again. When she lost her spirituality, her belief in more, she lost all these people again. (Sweeney, Julia. 2008)

This different view of death, that it is a transition rather than an end, gives a believer at least two options. One is to disengage from this world. If all this is only temporary, it doesn't matter, right? (Loder, Kurt. 1984.) Some might think that there is no need to overinvest and torture yourself over the (often upsetting and difficult) troubles of this world if you truly believe that there is more. This devaluing of this life is shown in the lyrics of the song "I'll Fly Away":

Some glad morning when this life is o'er,  
I'll fly away  
To a home on God's celestial shore,  
I'll fly away...  
When the shadows of this life have grown,  
I'll fly away;  
Like a bird from prison bars has flown,  
I'll fly away. (Brumley E. Albert. 1929)

This also shows the feeling of a goal, or something to look forward to, that believing in life beyond this one gives. Another song that illustrates this is "Orphan Girl", by Gillian Welch, which shows the belief that troubles and hardships of this world will be appeased in the next life:

But when He calls me I will be able  
To meet my family at God's table  
I'll meet my mother my father  
My sister my brother  
No more orphan girl.

The other option given by belief in more is to engage more fully. If you believe that this world will either get you to heaven or to hell, that it will bring you to your next life in the form of a flea or a prince, then you are more likely to do what you think is right. Some people that I interviewed talked about the way that the world changed after they began to believe; they were no longer living for themselves. They knew that God wanted them to live for others and to make the world a better place, and they were living for God.

Okay, so there are benefits to believing in more. It becomes slightly extraneous for me to enumerate and explain each of them when my true question becomes clear. It may be great to have faith and religion, but how and why do some people possess this while others don't? What makes one susceptible to faith?

One thing that many people talk about is the "spiritual experience," in which the presence of some sort of God, be it through Jesus, the appearance of gods, or a feeling of oneness, is clearly felt. It is, according to those who have experienced such a thing, indescribable and unlike anything else. For many people it is a point at which faith begins and is the proof that so many people look for that God does exist.

According to Mathew Alper, spiritual experiences, including near death experiences and speaking in tongues, can be scientifically explained and attributed to neurochemistry. I won't go into the details of this science, but it has been shown that activating certain parts of the brain artificially can trigger such feelings (as well as belief in aliens and belief that one has been abducted). It's also been shown that 25% of those afflicted with epilepsy that affects the temporal lobe have a spiritual experience before

they have a seizure. And it's thought by some, based on records and accounts, that a good portion of the world's prophets and spiritual leaders suffered from this kind of epilepsy.

Studies have also shown that meditation and repetitive chanting and rhythm (activities that often go along with religious belief) stimulate parts of our brain that gives feelings of serenity and arousal. All these findings (and more) seem to suggest that spirituality is a product of our own neurochemistry. (Pg 135-148).

Some would argue, however, that it was God who made it that way, allowing us to connect with it/him, her etc. But the purpose of this paper is not to discuss whether God truly exists or not; whether or not someone made us that way or it was a product of nature, neurochemistry is a possible explanation for how spirituality and spiritual feelings work.

It seems, especially based on some of my interviews, that spiritual experiences, and faith in general, come to those who want them. It seems that those who search for, pine after, and work towards believing, are those who often end up with the strongest faith. Several people who I interviewed had been looking for faith, exploring various religions, searching for answers (and were often quite depressed), before they were finally, suddenly, able to believe. Ellen Peixoto spoke about the night when she first truly believed in God; she remembered suddenly strongly feeling and thinking, "God, I can't live without you anymore." From then on she simply had faith. Other accounts similar to this suggest to me that part of what makes faith possible is the strong desire and/or need for it.

Freud addresses this in a way, saying that such a strong wish for religion and spirituality makes the belief in it suspect. Humans are quite capable of convincing

themselves of things if they want or need to. (Sigmund, Freud. Pg 47.) Others would say that this is just how things work; what you put out into the world is in some way reflected back to you, perhaps by this force itself. God, some would say, wants you to have to chose to do the right thing, and so makes him(it)self available to those who want faith. As you can see, there seems to be a pattern in these arguments; each can be twisted to fit either view. But either way, I find it likely that the openness and desire for faith has something to do with being and becoming spiritual.

All this is leading up to faith, though. What about faith itself? Faith is trust. Not necessarily trust based on proof or even truth. But, I think, to many people who believe in God, proof and scientific truth do not matter. They are willing to accept what they feel, what some part of them or the world is telling them, as true. And maybe once you let that in, if it is a real, sincere faith (based less on the fear and needs talked about earlier and more on the feeling of God), little to nothing can challenge or overturn your faith. Once you believe, one person that I interviewed said, you see so many things to prove it. When looking through the lens of faith, God is everywhere. (Peixoto, Ellen. 2009.)

A difference, maybe, between those who do and don't believe in God is the ability to stop questioning. Nonbelievers cannot put their trust in something that is so mysterious, cannot believe in something that they cannot see evidence of and whose nature we can't truly understand or describe. Believers are willing, and able, to put that aside.

During my research, as I went further and further into this question, I began to think that perhaps the belief in God, when God is seen as a force, energy or oneness, is not so different than my (and other nonbeliever's) thoughts. Both groups believe in love,

and that we are all connected in some way. But, when you step back, it seems that there is a difference. And the difference is that *more*. I believe in science, that the right thing to do is to make what you can of what happens to you. I believe that things happen because some scientifically measurable thing caused it to happen. I don't believe that things happen for a spiritual reason, but that we can give things meaning after they happen. Those who believe in God believe that there is a force behind everything, that things happen for a reason, that love is not just something that occurs but that it's a force. The primary difference, perhaps, is the way we react to randomness. (Segal, Amit. 2009.)

And this difference, I think, is chiefly a matter of personality. Whether it would be called a function of a "religion gene" passed down through family (Alper, Mathew.), the inclination of our soul, or the affect our environment, I think that the chief difference between those who believe and those who don't is similar to any other difference in our personality. Just as one person may be good at music and bad at articulating her feelings, and just as another is great at music but terrible at writing, some of us are simply "good" at believing, and some are not.

Some people, perhaps those who are "good at believing" walk through the woods on a beautiful day and see, in each leaf and in the light through the branches, God. I, for example, walk through the woods and see simply beauty. Some feel love and worry for their friends and feel, in that emotion, God. I feel love and worry and I call it love. I see people doing good work and I see it coming from them, from their own love while someone else would see them channeling a force of love from something greater. This, I think, is the difference between those with faith and those without.

But does this difference really matter? In many ways the causes of religion and spirituality discussed in this paper matter immensely. Many people allow their wishes, needs and neurosis to inform and affect their actions. When we let these things cause hate and intolerance and pain, of course this matters.

But I am going beyond this question, to the difference between sophisticated, true faith and no faith. I think that in terms of curiosity and investigation, which is maybe what this paper is really about, it does matter. It is an interesting difference and it offers a study in human nature and human differences. But maybe in a more concrete way, in the way we live our lives and treat others and find happiness, it doesn't really matter. And I think that that is a nice way to end this paper.