"Why Do Religions Persist?"

Part II of the 2025 Lenten Sermon Series
"What is the Value and Importance of Being Religious?"

This is the second in a sermon series which I am preaching this Lent, exploring what, if any, value or importance there is in being a "religious" person in America today. For as noted in last week's sermon, there has been an explosive expansion in this country of the "nones," the none of the above preference group in religion, an huge increase in numbers which has taken place in a very short time period, where remarkably beginning only in the 1990's the number of "nones" has risen from their previously

steady trendline of about 7% of the American population to a surprising 25% to 35% now. The reasons for this were many but were primarily thought to be the end of the Cold War, the rise of the religious right and the Moral Majority, and the introduction of the internet and the Information age. So today, many people claim to be "spiritual," but not "religious," which for most of them simply seems to mean that they left behind the religion of their upbringing and distrust "organized religion" itself, if not all institutions in general. That has caused many to wonder whether religions will survive in the future? And why in this modern scientific age of ours have they lasted as long as they have?

Perhaps because of this rapid change, it has often been suggested that religious belief only arises and persists because of ignorance and superstition. And so, if that is really the case, one might well expect religion to gradually fade away completely as societies became better educated and more scientifically oriented. So, is that what is happening in our country today?

Here are at least two reasons why I believe that religions will persist, and both of them are somewhat scientific. One is the simple sociological fact that, on average, studies have shown again and again and again that religious people are generally happier, healthier, and live longer. For better or for worse, when the time comes, they also have easier deaths. The other reason is that religious people are more likely to feel that they belong to

a community, and so not surprisingly in a recent survey, those who reported attending religious services were depressed less frequently, felt their lives were more worthwhile, were more engaged with their local community, and felt greater trust towards other people. These are enormous sociological benefits for a society, that suggest not only that religions have enduring appeal, but that our religious practices somehow fit into our evolutionary cycle – and thus are likely to continue as an important factor for our social bonding.

Social bonding in the evolutionary cycle is of course important to many species, but there's an aspect to religion itself that seems to be peculiarly human, which is illustrated surprisingly simply by our being able to engage in religious discussion itself. For religious discussion depends upon certain kinds of mental processing skills that play a crucial role in managing our everyday human relationships, that is, in our social bonding. These are the skills that allow us to understand what someone else might be thinking, and to grasp their intentions. To be able to do this, one has to be able to step back from the immediacy of the physical world we live in, so as to imagine the possibility that someone might or might not think this way or that, *and* that someone else might or might not believe whatever you thought they did, *and* even, whether *what* they had in mind did or did not mean what others thought they meant. Apes can do the

first two steps in this chain, but that's the limit of their species.

For human beings, this mental process comes easily to us though, bringing with it an ability to imagine alternative considerations, to imagine what others might be thinking even if we do not think that way ourselves, and thus to imagine other possibilities and other scenarios than those we had in mind, even some that might involve invisible forces or beings, which is the origin of many superstitions about how the world works. Thus, a proclivity for this kind of religious thinking appears then to be part of our genetic inheritance, part of our survival mechanism, part of what it means to be human, part of what bonds us together.

But that's not all. The same cognitive abilities that give us organized religions, also allow us to ask why the world has to be the way it is (giving us science) and to imagine entirely fictional worlds (giving us literature). Thus, you could no more have a world where organized religion was cast aside as simply superstition, than you could have one without science or stories. And thus, not surprisingly every known civilization in the world has had some kind of science, literature, and organized religion, they all go together from our ability to imagine different possibilities.

So, over the past few weeks, I've also been reading the book, "Believe: Why Everyone Should Be *Religious*," by Ross Douthat, the

conservative American author and New York Times columnist. And one of the striking things in his work is how different people react to different arguments for believing in God, or some other kind of Higher Power.

You'll get some people, he notes, for whom it seems perfectly reasonable to consider religious possibilities in light of the evidence of the vast order and design of our universe at the deepest level, but who then just can't swallow the idea that there might be supernatural realities — visions, encounters, literal miracles — all of which inherently evade the capacities of modern science to measure and dissect. Then you'll get another person for whom it's just the reverse, for whom the primary case for religion is experiential, while attempts to discover God in, say, the cosmological constants of reality just leaves them cold.

Douthat thinks that the most compelling case for being religious therefore — before you get to the specifics of creeds and doctrines of organized religions, is that the universe, as he puts it, was made for a reason and we're part of that reason — suggesting that this belief is found at the convergence of multiple different lines of argument and the analysis of multiple different aspects of the existence in which we find ourselves.

Consider then just three big examples of religious thinking in our world today: 1) the aforementioned evidence for cosmic design in the fundamental laws and structure of the universe; 2)

the unusual place of human consciousness within the larger reality; and 3) the persistence and plausibility of religious and supernatural experiences even under supposedly sterile and observed conditions.

Each of these realities alone, I think, offers good reasons to take religious thinking seriously. Indeed, I believe that each of these on its own should be enough to impel someone toward at least some version of Pascal's famous Wager, the philosophical argument that it is better to believe in God and be wrong, than not to believe in God and be wrong. However, I find it most compelling that a religious perspective makes sense out of all three of these examples: that religion seeks to explain why the universe seems calibrated specifically for our understanding, *and* why consciousness has a supernatural-seeming dimension to it, *and* why even nonbelievers report having religious experiences. That religion can make sense of all three of these is, I believe, the strongest case for some form of religious belief and for the persistence of organized religion of some kind.

In the end, we are not just in a universe that we can observe; we're in a universe that's deeply intelligible to us, a cosmos whose rules and systems we can penetrate and articulate, whose invisible architecture we can map and plumb, whose biological codes we can decipher and rewrite, and whose

fundamental physical building blocks we can isolate and, with Promethean power, break apart into a nuclear explosion.

"Is it credible to think, then, that simple natural selection for fitness in the prehistoric past should have fixed these capacities that are so effective in such theoretical pursuits that were unimaginable at the time?" Douthat asks. Evolution's pressures on our capacities were for prehistoric survival only, and not the discovery of calculus or $E=mc^2$. So why should the capacities that naturally evolved, because we needed to hunt gazelles and light fires, also turn out to be the capacities that enable us to understand the deepest laws of physics and of chemistry, to achieve manned spaceflight, and to condense all of human knowledge onto a tiny piece of silicon?

Thus, we humans seem to actually matter in the scheme of things and that in fact our own godlike powers are proof of something that was claimed by the ancient religions from the very beginning: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him," Genesis 1.27. Thus, the universe was made for a reason and we're part of that reason, Douthat argues.

In conclusion, there does seem to be something inherent in our biological make-up that creates so-called 'religious thinking,' good for our social bonding and our survival as a species. So, before we get to any specifics of creeds and doctrines of organized religions, we find an intrinsic part of

human nature that is simply “religious,” or “spiritual.” It appears to be a genetic part of what it means to be a human being, that we have this unique ability to remove ourselves from the immediate objective reality of our lives, and imagine alternative scenarios, different possibilities, other worlds, which we see has then leads us to science, literature, and religion in its some form or another. So, we humans have this inherent ability for religious thinking, which of course, eventually leads to the formation of those creeds and doctrines, and also consequently to our subsequent questioning and doubting of those creeds and doctrines! Thus, the question arises can one go to church and not believe, which fortunately is next week’s sermon topic! Amen.