

A Thesis on the Nature of Religion

By [David Palmer](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

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No supernatural being or beings exists that is or are responsible for the creation of the Universe or for its continuing functioning. (This is the fundamental axiom of an atheist's viewpoint but it is a necessary starting point if the writer is going to be honest with anyone who might read this thesis.)

There are Laws of Nature that do determine the functioning of the physical universe but those laws are inanimate, unconscious and not purposeful. But they do have universal effect.

Desire for the perpetuation of life is a genetic characteristic of all living things. Any species that does not possess this characteristic will not survive. This is also known the survival instinct.

Love is a universal phenomenon. It is necessary for survival inasmuch as many species, including humans, are unable to survive without the support of others of their kind. Being loved is essential to survival. Loving another is essential to ensure reciprocal love in return. Loving and being loved are therefore essential to human survival. The survival of someone who loves you is therefore essential to your own survival.

Belief in a supernatural being or beings is very widespread amongst the human race, almost universal.

Belief in a supernatural being or beings is a psychological construct, a pure creation of the human mind. (This is my fundamental thesis and it flows naturally from the initial atheistic axiom).

Human beings have created the psychological construct of religion essentially as a defence mechanism to enable them to cope with the realization of their own mortality. (This is a basic hypothesis of this theory).

The essence of this coping mechanism is the hope that death is not the end of an individual human's existence but merely the end of this particular phase of existence. Death is a readily apparent phenomenon. The hope of life after death is therefore an extension of the survival instinct.

Concern over the welfare of loved ones is also a universal phenomenon. The loss of a loved one is a traumatic and threatening psychological experience for any who experience it. It is therefore universally sensible and attractive to believe that a departed loved one is not gone but merely residing in another place. This is a psychological defence mechanism to assuage one's sense of loss. As such it is a natural part of the grieving process.

No human being knows how to make the hoped-for transition from this phase of existence to the next. None who have died and are presumed to have made the transition have returned to tell those still living what the afterlife is like. Nor have they been able to explain to potential travellers how to make the journey. Since no human knows how to do it, it is necessary to create a non-human facilitator who can effect or aid that transition.

Since no human being has the power to facilitate such a transition it is necessary to endow the created facilitator with supernatural powers to enable that entity to successfully undertake the task.

The replacement of a lost lover by a surrogate is essential for continued psychological, if not physical, health. Where no human surrogate can be found, it is necessary to create a non-human lover. A mythical being can fulfil this psychological need for if no living surrogate can be found. This provides a psychological defence against the loss but it cannot provide material support. Other mechanisms are required to provide material support to the survivor.

Each human civilization has evolved and is evolving within a unique geographic and temporal space. As a result each civilization creates, endows and articulates the nature and attributes of its conception of the supernatural facilitator in a context that is understandable to its contemporary population.

The universality of these concepts is accomplished through the mechanism of a deeply felt and widely accepted psychological phenomenon. It is the collective psyche of huge numbers of people, whole civilizations. (This is another central plank in this theory). I call this phenomenon: Universal Understanding.

Universal Understanding embodies the hope of, if not the belief in, the possibility of an immortal life. It also embodies the hope of, if not the belief in, the existence of a mechanism for achieving it.

Since the conception of a supernatural entity requires that such an entity must have supernatural powers to be able to perform its primary function, the facilitation of the hoped-for transition to the next phase of existence, it is sensible, reasonable and convenient to assume that such an entity is also able to deliver other extraordinary benefits besides the phase-transition. These supplemental benefits include: rescuing individuals from danger; protecting loved ones; delivering favourable environmental conditions; bestowing rewards for meritorious acts; and delivering a feeling of being loved to those who feel unloved.

Universal Understanding incorporates the shared visions, myths, concepts and ideas of all groups that have been in contact and have interacted with one another. It accepts, incorporates and instils these concepts into each civilization's own cultural and temporal context because they appeal to the deep yearning of all human beings for fulfilment of their basic psychological needs. These needs include: a sense of being special, belongingness, self-worth, security and enlightenment.

The appeal of these concepts is so pervasive because it promises the fulfilment of basic psychological needs that are common to all human beings.

The understanding of and belief in these concepts is transmitted between separate and distinctive human groups - within and between, tribes, peoples, races, cultures, nations and

civilizations – through the various communications media that exist, and have existed, over time and space. These media have allowed ideas and artefacts to be exchanged between diverse groups. They include such media as: language, art, symbols, writing, mythology, history and memory. They are included both in contemporary exchanges and the transmission of meaning over time. (This is another central plank in this theory).

Meaning is transmitted through the physical senses not through any spiritual or telepathic media. Much of this communication is sub-conscious including such mechanisms as: body language, ambience and subliminal cues. These phenomena are well known to psychologists and are widely used by politicians, clergy, advertising agencies and other communications practitioners.

Religions differ in their conceptions of deities, of life after death and of the mechanisms of the phase-transition because of: the divergent physical demands of the respective habitats of their devotees; the degree of contact of those devotees with the devotees of other civilizations; and with the unique historical journeys of their respective peoples.

Each religious tradition has evolved a distinctive set of rituals that are administered and policed by a special fraternity that is sanctioned and authorized to do so by its society. This is the priestly class.

The political structure of each human group is afforded enhanced legitimacy by securing religious approval from its priestly class for the empowerment of its political elite. The crowning of kings by bishops and popes, the swearing in of political leaders by religious leaders, the establishment of basic laws and regulations such as the Ten Commandments, and the Quar'an, are examples of this authorization.

Hence, the religious and political elite of each tradition has a vested interest in reinforcing belief in its particular conception of the supernatural being and in the enforcing of its particular rituals to the exclusion of other competing ideologies. Acknowledging the legitimacy of other traditions actually undermines the legitimacy of the ruling elite and calls its authority into question.

Religious intolerance actually promotes, encourages and reinforces the legitimacy of the privileged position of the political and religious hierarchy of a particular elite group over its subjects. Religious tolerance actually presents those subjects with an alternative to their current ruling regime.

The principle control mechanism of the priestly class is the threat of excommunication of the laity from the deity. This severance denies the laity both access to contemporary benefits emanating from the deity and to the transmission services of the deity after death. That is, the priestly class controls access to contemporary supernatural benefits and also access to immortality.

The principle control mechanism of the political class is the threat of and actual application of physical violence against the laity for non-compliance with its dictates.

Religion denies the laity the right of appeal to the deity to redress this violence because the deity via the approval of the priestly class has already sanctioned and approved the elite's use of violence.

All law is based on the threat of violence by the political hierarchy for non-compliance of its

dictates. Where this threat is ignored the actual use of violence is authorized by the law. Religion provides the ultimate authorization for the application of the law by the political elite as anointed by the priestly class on behalf of the deity.

Divine authorization for the empowerment of the elite is the preferred mechanism for social control because it is presumed by the laity and actually claimed by the priestly class that the deity operates from a higher level of knowledge, wisdom and understanding, coupled with supernatural powers, than that of ordinary human beings, individually and collectively. The deity is also presumed and claimed to be incorruptible. These are both highly desirable characteristics for most people. Who would not wish for, admire, even love, a benevolent overlord with such characteristics?

The central problem with religion, however, is that neither the priestly class nor the political elite has been able to demonstrate or prove the actual existence of a deity or deities. Neither have they been able to prove that any entity, divine or otherwise, has such characteristics. Moreover, the promised benefits of the deity are not necessarily bestowed by the deity on the laity when requested.

If religion is essentially based on wishful thinking, then it cannot be relied upon as the basis for either law or morality. Therefore, mankind will need to develop other mechanisms upon which to base legal and moral principles. Those principles will need to be universally agreed if corruption and manipulation by unscrupulous and self-serving individuals is to be avoided or remedied.

Since the promise of an afterlife cannot be fulfilled, human endeavour must be focused on: the greatest level of fulfilment for all people currently living and the creation of a world environment that will ensure the greatest level of fulfilment of the lives of future generations.

To ensure the survival of the human species God cannot be the ultimate authority to which mankind is answerable. Humanity collectively must be.

***David Palmer** is a freelance writer living in Perth, Western Australia . Before his retirement in 2003 he practiced as a Management Consultant specializing in Strategic Business Planning.*

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