

Why Does Religion Exist? Explaining Religion and Religious Beliefs

Problem of Explaining Religion:

Religion is a pervasive and significant cultural phenomenon, so people who study culture and human nature have sought to explain the nature of religion, the nature of religious beliefs, and the reasons why religions exist in the first place. There have been as many theories as theorists, it seems, and while none fully captures what religion is, all offer important insights on the nature of religion and possible reasons why religion has persisted through human history.

(Given below are examples of answers to the question "Why does religion exist?" provided by the author of this article.)

Tylor & Frazer - Religion is Systematized Animism & Magic:

E.B. Tylor and James Frazer are two of the earliest researchers to develop theories of the nature of religion. They defined religion as essentially being the belief in spiritual beings, making it systematized animism. The reason religion exists is to help people make sense of events which would otherwise be incomprehensible by relying on unseen, hidden forces. This inadequately addresses the social aspect of religion, though, depicting religion and animism as purely intellectual moves.

Sigmund Freud - Religion is Mass Neurosis:

According to Sigmund Freud, religion is a mass neurosis and exists as a response to deep emotional conflicts and weaknesses. A by-product of psychological distress, Freud argued that it should be possible to eliminate the illusions of religion by alleviating that distress. This approach is laudable for getting us to recognize that there can be hidden psychological motives behind religion and religious beliefs, but his arguments from analogy are weak and too often his position is circular.

Emile Durkheim - Religion is a Means of Social Organization:

Emile Durkheim is responsible for the development of sociology and wrote that "...religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden." His focus was the importance of the concept of the "sacred" and its relevance to the welfare of the community. Religious beliefs are symbolic expressions of social realities without which religious beliefs have no meaning. Durkheim reveals how religion serves in social functions.