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The Psychological Origin and
Development of Religion

A Comprehensive Philosophical and Psychological Treatise on the
Psychical Foundations, Experiential Dynamics, and Evolutionary
Progression of Religious Consciousness

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The Psychological Origin and Development of Religion

1. Introduction: The Nature of Religion and the Psychological Problem

Throughout the vast and multifaceted annals of human civilization, religion has consistently manifested as one of the most powerful, enduring, and universal phenomena. From the earliest prehistoric paleolithic tribes gathered around primeval fires to the most advanced intellectual and scientific cultures of modern times, no human society has ever been discovered that was entirely devoid of religious attitudes, convictions, and practices. As observed in the classic definition

recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, religion is fundamentally "*the recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship.*" C. J. Ducasse similarly emphasizes that religion, in one modality or another, represents a virtually universal and foundational dimension of human existence.

In exploring the genesis and evolutionary progression of this profound phenomenon, two complementary methodologies present themselves: the **anthropological-historical approach** and the **psychological-philosophical approach**. The anthropologist and historian examine external data—archeological relics, grave sites, totemic emblems, ritual dances, taboo systems, and social institutions—in an endeavor to determine when, where, and in what concrete forms religion first made its appearance in temporal history. Yet, as distinguished philosopher of religion George Galloway observes, the historical and anthropological method suffers from an inherent limitation: the inner subjective consciousness of prehistoric man leaves no physical fossils. External artifacts remain mute and ambiguous unless they are illuminated from within by psychological interpretation.

The psychological approach, conversely, does not restrict itself to the empirical question of chronological dates or geographical origins. Rather, it investigates the perennial and invariable constitution of the human mind. It inquires: What are the deep-seated needs, emotional drives, affective longings, volitional impulses, and cognitive capacities within human nature that impel man, across all epochs and cultural milieus, to seek communion with an unseen, superhuman Reality? As D. Miall Edwards cogently points out, there is an underlying *unity and continuity* that threads through the entire evolutionary spectrum of religious consciousness—from the crude, superstitious shudder of the primeval savage before a mysterious stone to the exalted mystical communion of the saint. To discover the psychic roots of this continuity is the indispensable task of the psychological study of religion.

2. Critical Examination of Elementary Psychological Theories of Origin

In the history of speculative thought, various attempts have been made to account for the psychical origin of religion through simple, isolated mechanisms. While these earlier formulations captured partial facets of the truth, modern philosophical criticism and dynamic psychology have demonstrated their theoretical inadequacy.

2.1 The Religious Instinct Theory (Critique of Instinctivism and Tautology)

Following the influential writings of the great German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher at the close of the eighteenth century, a popular view emerged maintaining that man is religious because he possesses a specific, innate "**religious instinct**" (*Religiöser Trieb*), comparable to the biological instincts of self-preservation, sex, or maternal care. According to this view, religion is simply an unlearned, automatic endowment of the human organism.

Critical Refutation:

In rigorous scientific psychology, an *instinct* denotes an inherited, unlearned, stereotypical disposition to respond to a specific perceptual stimulus with a uniform pattern of motor behavior (e.g., the nest-building of birds or the web-spinning of spiders). Religious behavior, however, displays no such uniform, reflex-like simplicity. As British psychologist William McDougall established in his classic work *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, religion is not a single innate instinct, but an exceedingly intricate sentiment formed by the synthesis and integration of multiple primary instincts and emotions (curiosity, fear, subjection, tender emotion).

Furthermore, to assert that "man is religious because he has a religious instinct" is to commit the logical fallacy of **tautology** or begging the question (*petitio principii*). It explains a complex phenomenon merely by naming it and postulating a hypothetical entity behind it, explaining precisely nothing.

2.2 The Religious Faculty Theory (Critique of Faculty Psychology)

Closely related to the instinct theory was the doctrine of a unique "**religious faculty**" (*Sensus Numinis* or spiritual organ), advanced by exponents of old "faculty psychology." These theorists conceived of the human mind as an aggregate of compartmentalized organs or distinct faculties—reason, memory, imagination, will, moral sense, and a specialized religious faculty whose sole function was to perceive divine realities.

Critical Refutation: Modern psychology has irrevocably dismantled faculty psychology. The mind is not a collection of isolated compartments or independent mechanical modules; it is an organic, indivisible, functional unity. The psychical elements operating within religious experience are identical with those operating in everyday conscious life: sensation, perception, conceptual thought, feeling, and volition. There is no isolated "religious department" of the soul. Religion is simply the entire unified mind directed toward an ultimate, transcendent object of supreme value.

2.3 The Emotion of Fear Theory (Lucretius, Hume, Ribot vs. The Concept of Awe)

The most persistent naturalistic theory of religion traces its origin to a single primary emotion: **fear**. This doctrine was epitomized by the Roman poet Lucretius in his famous dictum: "*Primus in orbe deos fecit timor*" (Fear first created the gods in the world). The Epicureans, the French materialists of the Enlightenment, David Hume in his *Natural History of Religion*, and modern psychologist Théodule Ribot maintained that early man, terrified by thunderbolts, pestilences, earthquakes, floods, and predators, projected his panic onto external nature and invented demons and deities to be appeased by groveling rituals and bloody sacrifices.

Critical Refutation: While fear undoubtedly played a prominent role in primitive cults, it is completely incapable of explaining the genuine nature of religion for the following reasons:

- **Fear vs. Awe:** Unadulterated fear produces an instinctual impulse of *flight* and avoidance (the reaction of running away). If primitive man had experienced only fear toward the gods, he would have fled from them and sought mechanisms to erase their memory. But religious consciousness is characterized not by mere flight, but by an ambivalent, magnetic attraction. As Rudolf Otto demonstrates in *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*), the foundational religious emotion is not vulgar terror, but **awe** (the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). Awe is a complex emotional synthesis comprising dread, profound wonder, veneration, and irresistible fascination.
- **The Presence of Love and Kinship:** As W. Robertson Smith demonstrated in his groundbreaking *Religion of the Semites*, genuine religion originated not in dread of malevolent demons, but in a profound sense of *loving kinship*,

fellowship, and communion with a benign ancestral deity who was believed to care for the community. In higher religions, fear is systematically purged and sublimated into reverence, filial love, and selfless devotion. As E. S. Waterhouse rightly concludes, fear is far too negative an emotion to account for the positive, life-affirming, and elevating character of religious faith.

3. The Teleological Explanation and the "Will-to-Live"

Having exposed the inadequacy of atomistic and mechanical explanations, contemporary philosophy of religion adopts a **teleological** and functionalist perspective. A teleological inquiry examines human mental life in terms of its aims, aspirations, values, and ultimate purposes. The central question becomes: When human beings turn toward the religious dimension, what are they seeking? What fundamental lack in their psychical existence does religion fulfill?

3.1 The Principle of Ends and Means in Religious Evolution

A vital psychological principle governing human evolution is that which begins as an instrumental **means** to a practical end frequently transforms, through the progressive maturation of consciousness, into an autonomous, intrinsic **end** in itself. Primitive man initially approached the sacred realm as an instrument to secure physical survival, fertile crops, and military victory. Yet, as mental culture deepened, the divine reality ceased to be a mere utilitarian tool and became recognized as the absolute, self-authenticating Goal of human existence.

3.2 The Will-to-Live: From Biological Preservation to Spiritual Expansion

At the physiological and instinctual bedrock of all sentient organisms lies the universal **Will-to-Live**. In non-human animals, this biological urge remains confined to bare survival, nutrition, and species reproduction. In human consciousness, however, the Will-to-Live undergoes a qualitative metamorphosis. As D. Miall Edwards masterfully delineates, human life is characterized by an unquenchable thirst not merely for *existence*, but for *fullness of life* (life in its qualitative richness, depth, and perfection). Man's Will-to-Live unfolds in three ascending dialectical phases:

1. **Self-Preservation:** Safeguarding physical vitality against hostile material and ecological forces.
2. **Self-Expansion:** Extending individual personality into familial, tribal, cultural, and spiritual horizons.
3. **Self-Realization:** Actualizing the highest moral, aesthetic, and intellectual potentialities of the human spirit in communion with the divine.

3.3 The Realization of Supreme Values: Truth, Beauty, and Goodness (Summum Bonum)

Human consciousness is fundamentally teleological because it is oriented toward the apprehension and realization of **Absolute Values**—the classical triad of *Truth (Satyam)*, *Goodness (Shivam)*, and *Beauty (Sundaram)*, constituting the Supreme Good (*Summum Bonum*):

- **Truth:** The cognitive quest of reason to overcome epistemic finitude and comprehend the ultimate ground of reality.
- **Goodness:** The moral striving of the will to transcend egoism and embody universal righteousness, justice, and love.
- **Beauty:** The aesthetic contemplation and creative expression of harmonious cosmic order and sublime joy.

While science pursues Truth, ethics cultivates Goodness, and art celebrates Beauty, religion serves as the grand synthetic sanctuary wherein these transcendent ideals do not remain abstract concepts, but are unified, living, and personalized in the supreme reality of God. Religion delivers human life from triviality and mortality by anchoring human values in an

eternal, cosmic ground that conserves them forever (what Harald Høffding termed "*the faith in the conservation of values*").

3.4 Professor J. H. Leuba's Psychological Formulation

In his authoritative study, *A Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function, and Future*, American psychologist of religion James H. Leuba formulated one of the most celebrated and rigorous psychological characterizations of religion:

"The will-to-live comes to expression as religion when an appeal is made to a class of powers which may be roughly characterised as psychic, superhuman, and usually, but not necessarily, personal."

Leuba profoundly observed that it is not the bare *needs* themselves that distinguish religion from other human pursuits (for science, economic industry, and magic also seek to satisfy human desires), but the **specific method** whereby those needs are fulfilled—namely, by establishing a vital relationship with transcendent psychic agents rather than manipulating inert physical matter. While early developmental stages utilized this relationship for crude material benefits, higher religion elevates the divine agent to the status of Supreme Value itself, wherein God is loved entirely for His own sake.

4. The Tripartite Psychological Factors of Religious Consciousness

Ever since classical philosophy and the tripartite faculty analysis of mind, psychology has recognized that human consciousness operates through three inextricably intertwined functions: **Feeling** (Affective/Emotional), **Will** (Conative/Volitional), and **Thought** (Cognitive/Intellectual). An authentic philosophy of religion must analyze how each of these three psychological factors functions within the religious synthesis:

4.1 The Affective Factor: The Primacy of Feeling

There can be no genuine religion without profound emotional vibration. Friedrich Schleiermacher famously defined the essence of religion as the "*feeling of absolute dependence*" (*das Gefühl der schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeit*). William James, in his masterwork *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, forcefully argued that feeling is the deeper, primary fountainhead of religion; philosophical formulations, ecclesiastical dogmas, and theological systems are secondary over-beliefs constructed post-hoc upon pre-reflective emotional encounters.

The spectrum of religious feeling is extraordinarily vast: it encompasses numinous awe, holy dread, ecstatic joy, cosmic peace, deep contrition, repentance, profound gratitude, and mystical love. Yet feeling, left entirely to itself, is subjective, unstable, and blind; it demands volitional expression and intellectual guidance to avoid degenerating into fanatical hysteria or sentimental quietism.

4.2 The Conative Factor: Volition, Ritual Cults, and Moral Activity

Conation represents the dynamic, outward-reaching impulse of consciousness. As William James observed, feeling is inarticulate and mute; it cannot remain encapsulated within the psyche, but must inevitably discharge itself into action. The conative factor manifests in religion in two primary dimensions:

- **Cultic and Ritual Practice:** In outward gestures of worship, prayer, liturgical singing, physical sacrifice, pilgrimage, and solemn ceremonial assemblies.

- **Ethical Transformation:** In the higher evolutions of religion, ritualism is subordinated to active righteousness. The conative drive transforms into moral discipline, the conquest of baser passions, philanthropy, the defense of justice, and loving service to humanity. Religion becomes a heroic life of ethical action.

4.3 The Cognitive Factor: Belief, Rational Reflection, and Theology

Even at the most rudimentary level of primitive religion, an implicit cognitive element is present: man cannot worship or pray without possessing some rudimentary *belief* or mental idea concerning the nature of the power addressed. As the human intellect matures, these intuitive beliefs undergo critical systematization, producing **theology** (the articulated rational formulation of faith).

When critical reflection advances further, subjecting these theological assertions to universal epistemic and metaphysical tests, it gives birth to the **Philosophy of Religion**. Rational thought cleanses religion of crude anthropomorphism, superstitious obscurantism, and parochial bigotry, enabling faith to become intellectually coherent and spiritually enlightened.

4.4 The Organic Synthesis of the Mental Life

It is of paramount importance to recognize that Feeling, Will, and Thought do not exist as independent psychological compartments operating in succession. As John Caird and George Galloway insist, conscious life is an organic, synthetic unity. Feeling provides the experiential vitality, Will supplies the moral dynamism and active execution, and Thought provides the rational illumination and objective validity. When any one factor claims absolute hegemony, pathological distortion ensues: exclusive emotionalism produces fanaticism, exclusive intellectualism produces dry dogmatism, and exclusive volitionalism produces empty ritualistic legalism. Authentic religion is the harmonious symphony of the whole soul in communion with God.

5. Psychological Demarcation between Magic and Religion

In the pre-animistic dawn of human culture, both magical practices and religious attitudes emerged from a shared psychological matrix: man's confrontation with a mysterious, supernatural power designated by Melanesians as **Mana**. Yet, despite their common historical proximity, dynamic psychology reveals a radical, diametric opposition between the mental postures of the magician and the worshipper:

Analytical Dimension	The Magical Attitude (Magic)	The Religious Attitude (Religion)
Dominant Mental Posture	Arrogance, hubris, self-assertion, and dictatorial control.	Humility, reverent submission, awe, and self-surrender.
Conception of Power	Impersonal, blind, mechanical, occult, and non-moral force.	Conscious, spiritual, superhuman, personal, and righteous deity.
Operational Technique	Coercive manipulation, rigid incantations, and automated spells.	Devout prayer, supplication, sincere praise, and voluntary self-giving.
Sociological Orientation	Individualistic, secretive, occult, esoteric, and frequently antisocial.	Communal, public, unifying, church-based, and socially cohesive.

Sir James Frazer, in his monumental work *The Golden Bough*, advanced the intellectualist hypothesis that magic chronologically preceded religion throughout the world, asserting that when intelligent men realized the empirical failure of magical associations, they abandoned coercion and turned in disillusionment to religion. However, anthropological psychologists such as R. R. Marett and E. S. Hartland have convincingly demonstrated that Frazer credited primitive man with an overly sophisticated intellectual discernment. In reality, magic and religion arose as twin branches from the same undifferentiated root of emotional reaction toward the supernatural, but diverged fundamentally in their psychological intent—magic embodying the egotistical will-to-power, religion embodying the humble will-to-communion.

6. The Historical and Psychological Stages of Religious Development

The psychological evolution of religious consciousness closely mirrors the organic development of human socio-cultural institutions. Following the celebrated typology developed by Dr. George Galloway and endorsed by D. Miall Edwards, the mental development of religion can be classified into three great developmental stages:

6.1 The Tribal Stage (Animism, Polydæmonism, and Totemism)

In the primeval tribal stage, the human mind is governed by immediate biological imperatives, fear, and collective suggestion. The characteristics of this psychical epoch include:

- **Animism (E. B. Tylor):** Inability to distinguish between the animate and inanimate; early man projected his own subjective feelings and volitions into trees, rocks, rivers, and storms.
- **Spiritism and Ancestor Cults (Herbert Spencer):** Through dream experiences and trance states, man arrived at the rudimentary concept of a detachable spirit, leading to the veneration of ghosts and ancestral souls.
- **Totemism (Robertson Smith, Durkheim):** The sacred bond uniting the clan with an animal or plant species, which served as the visible, material embodiment of the collective tribal soul.
- **Pragmatic-Local Scope:** Religion was strictly utilitarian, seeking immediate worldly boons—food, rain, health, victory—with deities regarded as purely local entities belonging exclusively to the clan.

6.2 The National Stage (Moralization of Deities and Henotheism)

With the rise of permanent agrarian settlements, cities, and the consolidation of multiple tribes into an organized **Nation**, the human mind underwent a profound cognitive and ethical awakening:

- **Anthropomorphism and Distinct Personality:** Vague, shapeless nature-spirits were elevated into clearly delineated, individual deities endowed with heroic human attributes and personal names (e.g., Apollo, Osiris, Indra, Thor, Marduk).
- **The Moralization of the Gods:** Deities ceased to be arbitrary, capricious natural forces; they became the guardians of justice, truth, civic righteousness, and cosmic order (e.g., Vedic *Ṛta*, Egyptian *Ma'at*).
- **The Movement toward Monotheism:** Under the influence of centralized political monarchies, religion developed either **Monarchianism** (a supreme king-god reigning over lesser deities, like Zeus or Jupiter) or **Henotheism** (as identified by Max Müller in the Vedic hymns, where a devotee concentrates adoration on one supreme god at a time, momentarily absorbing all divine powers into that singular deity).

6.3 The Universal Stage (Ethical Monotheism and Spiritual Emancipation)

The culminating phase in the psychological development of religion occurs when religious consciousness shatters the artificial boundaries of clan, tribe, race, and nation, emerging as a truly **Universal Religion**:

- **The Prophetic Breakthrough:** Universal religions do not arise from state machinery or hereditary priesthoods, but from the personal, revelatory experiences of great prophetic personalities and spiritual masters (Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ, Prophet Muhammad).
- **Universal Brotherhood and Spiritual Equality:** Proclamation that all human beings, irrespective of ethnicity or social caste, are spiritually equal and entitled to salvation.
- **Ethical Monotheism and Inner Inwardness:** Mechanical animal sacrifice and ritual legalism are decisively discarded in favor of inner purity of heart, compassion, forgiving love, and contemplative union with the transcendent Godhead.

7. Comparative Analytical Matrices

Table 1: Evolutionary Comparison of Religious Stages

Developmental Stage	Primary Mental Motivation	Conception of the Divine	Central Cultic Expression	Ethical Horizon
Tribal Religion (Primitive Clan)	Biological self-preservation, physical terror, and clan solidarity.	Undifferentiated nature-spirits, totems, and ancestral ghosts.	Magical rituals, blood sacrifice, and rigid tribal taboos.	Purely group-centered, pre-moral, and hostile to outsiders.
National Religion (Civic State)	Civic duty, national prosperity, and imperial protection.	Polytheistic pantheon; personalized, moralized national gods.	Priesthood-administered temples, state sacrifices, and liturgies.	Civic law, social justice, and national moral codes.
Universal Religion (Global / Spiritual)	Spiritual self-realization, salvation, and divine communion.	Ethical Monotheism; Absolute Spirit, Transcendent Love, and Truth.	Inward prayer, moral holiness, loving service, and meditation.	Universal love, boundless compassion, and cosmic brotherhood.

Table 2: Comparison of Primary Theories of Origin

Theoretical School	Key Proponents	Core Postulate	Primary Philosophical Flaw
Instinct Theory	Schleiermacher (popularized)	Religion stems from a dedicated, innate biological instinct.	Commits tautological fallacy; ignores complex psychological synthesis.
Faculty Theory	Old Faculty Psychologists	A separate mental organ perceives divine reality.	Dismantled by modern psychology; denies mental organic unity.
Fear Theory	Lucretius, Hume, Ribot	Panic before natural disasters generated the gods.	Cannot explain awe, devotion, spiritual love, or ethical nobility.
Teleological Theory	Leuba, Galloway, Edwards	Will-to-Live seeking total fulfillment and supreme values.	Comprehensive, academically validated, and philosophically sound.

8. Philosophical Evaluation and Concluding Synthesis

The rigorous psychological examination of the origin and development of religion leads to an incontrovertible philosophical conclusion: religion is neither a transient historical aberration, nor an infantile neurosis, nor a fraudulent invention of self-serving priests. On the contrary, it is the natural, necessary, and culminating expression of man's self-conscious spiritual nature.

As the eminent Hegelian philosopher John Caird profoundly observed in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, the very capacity of man to know himself as *finite* proves that the **Infinite** is already stirring within him. An unconscious, purely physical object is finite, but cannot know its finitude. Man, by the very fact of recognizing his limitations, mortality, and imperfection, transcended those limits in thought and reached out toward an all-comprehending, infinite Mind.

In tracing the psychological journey of religion from the crude instinctual Will-to-Live to the exalted contemplation of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, we witness the glorious Odyssey of the human soul. Religion begins in the soil of biological hunger and fear, but blossoms into the divine realm of absolute value and unconditioned love. It remains, in the final philosophical analysis, humanity's supreme endeavor to overcome finitude, heal the rift of alienation, and attain immortal union with the eternal Ground of all existence.

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