Homo Religiosus?

Are humans naturally predisposed to religion and supernatural beliefs? If so, does this naturalness provide a moral foundation for religious freedom? This volume offers a cross-disciplinary approach to these questions, engaging in a range of contemporary debates at the intersection of religion, cognitive science, sociology, anthropology, political science, epistemology, and moral philosophy. The contributors to this original and important volume present individual, sometimes opposing, points of view on the naturalness of religion thesis and its implications for religious freedom. Topics include the epistemological foundations of religion, the relationship between religion and health, and a discussion of the philosophical foundations of religious freedom as a natural, universal right, drawing implications for the normative role of religion in public life. By challenging dominant intellectual paradigms, such as the secularization thesis and the Enlightenment view of religion, the volume opens the door to a powerful and provocative reconceptualization of religious freedom.

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Homo Religiosus?

Exploring the Roots of Religion and Religious Freedom in Human Experience

Edited by

TIMOTHY SAMUEL SHAH
Baylor University and Georgetown University

JACK FRIEDMAN
University of Maryland
The philosophers of the eighteenth century explained the gradual weakening of beliefs in an altogether simple fashion. Religious zeal, they said, will be extinguished as freedom and enlightenment increase. It is unfortunate that the facts do not accord with this theory…

The short space of sixty years will never confine the whole imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never suffice for his heart. Alone among all the beings, man shows a natural disgust for existence and an immense desire to exist; he scorns life and fears nothingness. These different instincts constantly drive his soul toward contemplation of another world, and it is religion that guides it there. Religion is therefore only a particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself. Only by a kind of aberration of the intellect and with the aid of a sort of moral violence exercised on their own nature do men stray from religious beliefs; an invincible inclination leads them back to them. Disbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity.

In considering religions from a purely human point of view, one can therefore say that all religions draw from man himself an element of strength that can never fail them, because it depends on one of the constituent principles of human nature.

— Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Vol. I, Part 2, Chapter 9

Man can hardly be defined, ..., as an animal who makes tools; ants and beavers and many other animals make tools, in the sense that they make an apparatus. Man can be defined as an animal that makes dogmas. As he piles doctrine on doctrine and conclusion on conclusion in the formation of some tremendous scheme of philosophy and religion, he is, in the only legitimate sense of which the expression is capable, becoming more and more human. When he drops one doctrine after another in a refined skepticism, when he declines to tie himself to a system, when he says that he has outgrown definitions, when he says that he disbelieves in finality, when, in his own imagination, he sits as God,
holding no form of creed but contemplating all, then he is by that very process sinking slowly backwards into the vagueness of vagrant animals and the unconsciousness of the grass. Trees have no dogmas. Turnips are singularly broad-minded.

— Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Heretics, Chapter XX

He has made everything beautiful in its time: also he has put eternity in men’s hearts, so that no man can find out the work that God does from the beginning to the end.

— Ecclesiastes 3:11
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