

## TRANSCRIPT

John:

Welcome to the first in our series on the world religions. It seems to me that our topic is one of the most important, and I'll go out on a limb and say, commonsensical themes imaginable. Few things are more universal in human culture than the religious impulse. Even if it often takes a beer or two to get an Australian talking about the religious impulse, it's there in the background. Some of you will know that I overheard a fascinating conversation at the party of some next door neighbours to these friends of ours we were house minding for. I was enjoying the night sky late one evening, and this amazing conversation broke out from the guests next door. They were your 20 something Chardonnay yuppies. If that's not an offensive thing to say, I might choose my language more carefully at 7:00 PM.

John:

It started with one of them remarking that they'd just been to a happy-clappy Christian wedding. That really got my interest and I moved a little closer along the balcony. I was trying to work out whether they'd think I was a happy-clappy, but then they started to share their views on things spiritual. They ranged from God, to transcendental meditation, to yoga. What happens when you die? The whole gamut of religious topics.

John:

I remember one guy who was obviously knocking back his Chardonnay at quite a rate said, "I don't like Western religion with all the rules and regulations. I prefer Buddhism, because it gives me spirituality without any rules." At which point, I nearly laughed out loud because of course, one of the five commandments of Buddhism is not to drink alcohol, which he didn't quite pick up on. And then one woman made this remark that dropped in like a bombshell, like a revelation. She said, "Hang on guys. I really like the idea of being grateful to someone for the things in my life." The response from the others was complete silence for seconds, which seemed like a long time at this party. They were so fascinated with this idea of gratitude to someone, for the things in their lives.

John:

Now, it was perhaps a little bit unethical of me to listen for 30 minutes or so, but I did then immediately go inside and I wrote up some notes of the conversation to make it research. Here I am proving the worth of it. But what was very striking in this conversation was they were obviously very close friends. They'd obviously never shared their views with each other, but it was clear they had all thought about this stuff really deeply.

John:

I think that's classic Australian approach to these things. It might take a glass of wine or two to get us thinking these deep thoughts, but it's all there. This is true across every culture we know anything significant about. Religion or the religious impulse has always been there even back in prehistoric times. These are the famous paintings in Lascaux in the South of France that are 15,000 BC. They're so out of my understanding of ancient history, but anthropologists recognizing these famous cave paintings, clear shamanistic symbols, indications that the people who painted these not only believed in buffalo, the material world, but in a world the material world pointed toward. A spiritual world you might say.

John:

Not quite so old, but pretty spectacular, the paintings on rocks scattered throughout the deserts of Karkom in Southern Israel. For a documentary, I had the great privilege of going and visiting these, and there are literally thousands of these. Some of them are just animal scenes and so on, but quite a number of them have these clear stick figures with arms raised to the heavens and what is obviously the firmament, the starry heavens above them, in an act of worship. 5,000 BC.

John:

Well, Paul, in Athens first century BC, also highlights just how universal the religious impulse is. He's invited to address the Areopagus, which is the intellectual high court of ancient Greek society. He stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, "People of Athens. I see that in every way, you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown god." Don't you love that? They had so many gods that were named. They also had one for a god that they didn't know the name of, like a covering all bets.

John:

Now, we haven't found any archaeological evidence of this inscription, but we have found another author from the same period that mentions there were these idols or statues with an inscription to an unknown god. Perhaps they were gods whose names were forgotten, and so they were declared to be the unknown gods. My point is that wherever you turn in history, religion is ubiquitous, but it's still here today.

John:

It almost feels embarrassing mentioning the census. The last census, 2011 census, perhaps the last census ever. But in 2011, they discovered that 61% of Australians identify as Christian. 2.5% the next largest religion, Buddhism. Islam is 2.2% of Australia. Hinduism 1.3%. The curious thing about Hinduism is that it's the fastest growing religion in Australia, fastest growing. It almost doubled between the five year census. No religion is 22.3%. One assumes, that is assuming we can rely on the data that comes out in the 2011, 2016 census, that the no religion is going to increase. They moved the no religion to the very top

option in this year's census, which actually seems pretty plausible to me, but it'll be fascinating to watch what happens there. But whatever happens there, this only tells you about affiliation. Doesn't tell you what people actually think.

John:

Many people who tick no religion actually have religious thoughts. They just don't identify with a religion, but the same is true of Christian. Plenty of people tick Christian, but don't actually have any deep beliefs. So you've got to drill into other data to find out what people actually think of this stuff, and we have that data too. Nielsen Poll in 2009, very reputable polling system, found that 68% of Australians believe in God or a universal spirit. I think they might have got that language from Einstein actually. That was his version of God.

John:

McCordle research, also reputable, found in 2009 that 63% of Australians believe miracles are possible, and 75.9, believe that Jesus did miracles. I'll just stare at that statistic for a little while and think how on earth can that be? More people think Jesus did miracles than think miracles are possible. I think that's just an indication that people have such a soft spot for Jesus in Australia, that if anyone did miracles, it was him even if miracles aren't possible. Something like that anyway.

John:

Perhaps the most reliable data set that we have for religious perspectives around the world is the World Values Survey from 2010. They do this every five or six years. The latest data that we have, 2010, asked the question right around the world, but here are the Australian data, how important is God in your life? One was not important at all, and 10 was maximally important. Look at that figure. 57.4% of Australians ticked six and above. I don't think you would've worked that out from the conversations you have with people at work. 28% of Australians ticked 10 that God is maximally important in my life. They also found out the number of convinced atheists in Australia, and it's just around 10%. Great Britain, also around 10 or a little more. New Zealand 7. USA 3.6.

John:

My point, is the religious impulse is everywhere in antiquity and today. People have a hunch that there's something more, that material reality points beyond material reality to something else. The question I want to confront tonight is how come? Where does this religious impulse come from? What is the origin of religion? I want to offer two very popular explanations of the religious urge, and then a third that is not so well known outside academic circles, but is probably the best explanation we have today.

John:

The first very popular account of where religion came from is fear of death, a wish for an afterlife. So you do meet people who will say that's all religion is. People don't like the idea of dying, so they invent something that is beyond the grave and that leads you to a spiritual world. The problem with that as an explanation of the origin of religion is that we know many religions, especially early religion, didn't have any view of the afterlife. That seems to have been a later thing in the history of religions. The best example of this is Judaism.

John:

Those of you who know your Jewish history know that for the first several centuries of Judaism, there was almost no teaching about the afterlife. People are puzzled when they read the Old Testament, the first bit of the Bible, that there's very little about the afterlife, and the only statements you get are in the very later portions of the Old Testament. So fear of death cannot account for a religion like Judaism and for lots of other early, early faiths. So what about the second very popular explanation of where religion comes from?

John:

A justification of morality. Some people say that religion was invented or crafted to make people behave because after all, God is watching. And that religion is a social control policy, a really cool one, because you've got a policeman that sees everything you do and you don't see him, and so it's an effective moral control. You hear that, but it can't be the case. For the very simple reason, most of the very earliest religions we know about don't connect religion with morality.

John:

Classic example is all of the Greek and Roman religions. They did not think that morality was important in religion. Morality was a subject for philosophy, not for a topic of religion. So the justification of morality probably isn't a very good explanation of the origin of religion. So what is? One very important answer may seem puzzling, but I think there's a lot of data behind this, is the rational mind. The human pursuit of explanation.

John:

Now, don't mishear me. I'm not saying that all religion is rational. Some of it is kooky. What I'm saying is that religion is the result of the human capacity and propensity to seek answers to fundamental questions. We are beings that constantly ask how? Why? If you think about it, if you ask how and why long enough down the chain of possible questions, you arrive at the most profound questions of all. You arrive at the religious questions. Why is there something rather than nothing? How is nature so rationally ordered? Why can our minds detect nature's order? How do things live? Why do things die?

John:

Given the rational nature of our minds, the built-in longing for explanation, you could almost say that religion is inevitable. That we would end up asking whether nature points beyond itself to something more. I put it to you that rationality is the origin of religion. I'm not just making this up by the way, there's a lot of data.

John:

Here's Olivera Petrovich, a leader in the psychology of religion based at Oxford University's Department of Experimental Psychology. She did a very famous study in 2008, comparing British four and five year olds with Japanese four and five year olds. Quizzing them about how they think the universe came into being, how natural objects exist. What the study demonstrated is that there is no difference between British children raised in a very theistic culture, and Japanese children raised in a non-theistic culture. They all intuited at the same rates, this is the striking thing. At the same rates, they intuited that someone, not something, ordered the world, designed the world. This sparked a huge set of studies based at Oxford, but done around the world.

John:

For the next three years after her study, they did a research project that involved, I kid you not, 57 researchers, 40 separate independent studies, across 20 different countries. At the end of it, the data was really clear that as the ScienceDaily puts it when the data was announced, that humans are predisposed to believe in gods and the afterlife. No matter where you go, this seems to be the reality.

John:

Now, you can either read all 57 researchers, 40 studies across the 20 countries, or you can just read this. Very happily, Justin Barrett of the Oxford Center for Anthropology and Mind, has written this book that is an explanation of all the studies to date on children's innate belief in higher power, Born Believers. To cut a very long story short, he concludes with these words, children's tendency toward promiscuous teleology. Let me pause. That's nerdy language for an incorrigible belief that things are designed. Promiscuous teleology plus their understanding that intentional agents can order and design, makes them prone to believe in a designer or creator.

John:

Of course, we could imagine special cultural conditions in which children are drilled on evolution from an early age, and repeatedly told that there is no God that accounts for any part of the natural world. In such extreme cases, children might learn to override their natural tendencies earlier. But barring such special cultural scaffolding, the natural default position seems to be for children to think that a non-human someone, or someones, are the best explanation for the apparent purpose and order in nature all around. Religion is the result of our rational capacity and propensity for seeking out explanations. Given

the rational nature of our minds and the orderly nature of the universe, it is pretty much inevitable that humans would end up asking the big questions, whether this points beyond itself to something immaterial.

John:

Now, at this point, I can imagine two very strong atheistic arguments against the origin of religion as I've given it. I want to spend some time on these two atheist critiques of religion, and then land this hopefully, in a more practical, less nerdy way. First atheist critique goes like this. If religion arose from the desire to explain the world, religion has been made redundant by the scientific explanation of the world. Sometimes you just hear it in a really simple form. Of course, primitive man needed religion, but now we have science. We explain it all. So even if religion arose as the rational drive of humans to understand big things, now we understand them all through science, and so religion is redundant.

John:

Seems to me, this confuses two types of explanation that are possible. What you might call mechanics and agency. Mechanics and agency. Science brilliantly explains the mechanics of the world; how things function, but it does not explain why things function in such an orderly fashion. The mechanics are beautifully explained, not so much the agency. Let me offer you an imperfect analogy.

John:

Imagine an expert motor mechanic who knows every working part of the mighty Holden Commodore. They can explain to you every single functioning part. It doesn't matter how expert their explanations, how detailed their explanations of the working parts of the Holden, that explanation does not do away with the hunch that there is Holden, that there's a manufacturer behind it. If I can put it like this, a scientific account of the world no sooner explains away religion than a mechanic's account of the Commodore explains away Holden.

John:

In fact, I would go further and say it's quite the opposite. The more a mechanic can tell you about the beautiful functioning of the engine of the Holden Commodore, the more we're going to find ourselves suspicious that there's a Holden behind the Commodore. Almost by definition, scientific explanations will tend to strengthen religious faith. Every discovery of cosmic or microscopic order in the universe will speak to humans about the orderliness of creation, and will cause humans to wonder why? Why order not disorder?

John:

I've often thought when I'm asked by people, "Does science disturb my faith?" I say, "Are you kidding? Every time I hear some amazing explanation of how stuff works, I find my faith enriched because the

mechanics can't take away from the idea of agency." I go further and I say, "The only thing that could weaken the religious impulse is if scientists started to discover there was no order. No mathematics that works at the micro and the macro. Only if all the appearance of laws and equations turn out to be illusions, would this sense of orderliness in the universe, and the wondering why the orderliness would that evaporate. But here's the interesting thing, that would undo science itself, not just religion. The very premise of science is the physical world is orderly and rational, and that our minds are rational enough to understand the orderly rational world." It is a curious, but I think there's a reason for this, a curious reality that both science and religion have the same starting point.

John:

We find ourselves living in a rationally ordered universe that has somehow produced rational minds that now seek to explain the rationally ordered universe. It's the spooky connection between the rationality out there and the rationality in here that leads so many people to think there's got to be something more. Science explains how. The mechanics. Religion pursues why. The agency. And so I genuinely believe that success in science can only bolster the religious impulse, never critique it or take it away.

John:

There is a second atheist critique of the religious impulse, and it goes like this at point B. The fact that there are so many different religions makes religion itself dubious. There are so many different religions and they don't agree, so none of them can be right. You sometimes hear something like that. Now, it is true that the religions don't agree on a whole bunch of stuff. The variety of religion is amazing. In fact, the passage read to us has Paul in Athens, and we are told the religious options.

John:

You see there, he is confronted by the fact that the city is full of idols. That's one religious perspective, but he also meets Jews, who completely disagreed with idol worship. And then he bumps into Epicureans. They believed God was distant and not the least bit interested in humanity. And then he also meets the Stoics, who believed that God is the great preserver of the universe and of human beings. And then of course, Paul brings his own perspective, Jesus and the resurrection. So it's clear, there are many different religions, and that's before we even turn to the modern world.

John:

For some, this wild variation in religious claim is a reason to believe none of them. You sometimes hear it stated like this in various atheist books and on the internet, Christians are atheists with respect to all gods but theirs, true atheists are more consistent, rejecting one god more. It's the atheists just go one god more thing. It's kind of cool. It's like straight out of a 101 atheist jokes about Christians.

John:

I sometimes feel like saying to my atheist friends, and I do, I say to them that's just like a dogmatic celibate, trying to convince me that celibacy and monogamy are basically the same thing. You've just rejected one more partner and arrived at celibacy. But as if celibacy and monogamy are close to each other. Anyway, I'm not saying that this evening. The logic of this argument is that when I realize why I reject Zeus, Ra and Vishnu, I'll see the good sense of rejecting my own God. In other words, my arguments against Zeus, Ra and Vishnu come back to bite me. They become reasons for me to reject my own religion too.

John:

Right on cue, I kid you not, just yesterday, one of my lovely Facebook atheist friends posted this little meme on my wall. It goes like this. Did you know there are roughly 4,200 religions today? We won't worry about that, but here's the point that they're trying to make. Some say that 4,199 are false. Some say that 4,200 are false. So in other words, you've got the Christians who think all the religions are false except mine, and then you've got the atheists who just goes one religion further. It's nice. But there seems to me a deep misunderstanding here about the nature of the disagreement about religion, and there's a logical error at the very heart of it.

John:

I think I can convince you of both of these. Firstly, the misunderstanding. Christians don't deny the idea behind Zeus, Ra and Vishnu. They simply deny the claims about the manifestations of these deities in the world. The idea behind Zeus, Ra and Vishnu is brilliant. The rationality of the universe that has produced rational minds that now understand the universe is best explained if there is mind behind material reality. So I'm on the same page as these other religions.

John:

Paul, in fact in Athens said something similar. He rejected idolatry, yes, but notice what he does in affirming the background idea in all Greek religion. He says, "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with an inscription to an unknown god," as I've already read. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, and this is what I'm going to proclaim to you. So he sees common ground here, but then he says, "For in him," the deity, "we live and move and have our being, as some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring." Now we know which poet said that. It's the pagan Greek poet Aratus, third century BC, and this is a hymn to Zeus that he's quoting. A hymn to Zeus.

John:

Paul would not have accepted the stories about Zeus going around in Greek culture. No, of course not. But he accepts the idea behind the notion of Zeus. Absolutely. In the same way, I don't personally believe



that Vishnu appeared through the God Krishna to Prince Arjuna on the battlefield, as the Bhagavad Gita claims. But I do believe in the notion of a preserving deity, such as Vishnu embodies. I don't believe that Ra, the sun, is the throne of the eternal deity. I don't believe that, but I do believe in the idea behind Ra that there must be an eternal deity.

John:

My point is this little meme about atheists just going one god further, misunderstands the nature of religious disagreement. It also makes a simple logical mistake. Let's see if I can convince you of this. The differences between the various religions may tell you that they are not all revelations of God. Their contradictions may tell you that. But not for a moment, do the differences between the religions tell you that not one of them is a revelation of God. See if this analogy works for you.

John:

Five men all claim to be the only son of Jack. What do you do? I'm the son of Jack. No, I'm the son of Jack. Now, you could do a DNA test of all five sons, and if the DNA tests came back showing that those five people, completely contradictory DNA, they don't have the same father, there's no way they're related. What could you conclude from that? What do the differences in the DNA tell you? It certainly tells you that not more than one of them is the son of Jack. But in no way, could you logically say this proves that not one of them is the son of Jack.

John:

In the same way, the differences between the religions might tell you that not more than one of them can be a revelation of God, if, particularly at the point at which they profoundly disagree with each other. But that doesn't for a second, tell you that not one of them is the revelation of God. To discover that you have to do a different kind of test. You have to find the religious equivalent of a direct DNA match between one of the claimed sons and Jack, which of course, we can't do in the divine realm, but you can do this. You can test religious claims against this world reality. You can test religious claims against this world reality. The profound differences between the religions might tell you they can't all be true, but it doesn't tell you that none of them is true.

John:

I am not an atheist with respect to the idea behind all the other religions. I'm not. I agree there's a son of Jack. We're on the same page. I just don't happen to believe in the real world evidence for what other religions claim God did and said. I'm not convinced by the real world evidence, but I am convinced by the real world evidence for the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. It seems that this narrative breaks the religious mould by being a verifiable this world claim, not simply a religious claim.

John:

I got this from the apostle Paul, by the way. Didn't make it up himself. At the climax of his speech in Athens, having talked about the things they agree on, he then comes right out and says, "In the past, God overlooked such ignorance," he's talking about the idol worship, "but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, change their minds. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.'" What's Paul saying?

John:

To the intelligentsia of his day in Athens, he's saying we all agree. There must be a mind behind it all. Yes, but I'm here to tell you, there is an X marks the spot on the world stage. A proof of the mind of God that breaks the mould of a mere religious claim, because it comes in the form of a historical piece of data. The resurrection. Now, I realize that's a huge claim to make. I realize that some here may inwardly sneer. I'm cool with that. People have been doing that from the beginning. Look, they sneer. That's fine. I'd love to think that some of you will take up the offer of the Life of Jesus course, which by the way, is free.

John:

Someone came up and asked me, "How much does it cost to do the Life of Jesus course?" It's Jesus, it's free, like all the stuff in Jesus. Buff and I run it in our home. We'll be running it probably a month after this series ends. We'd love to have you in our home to explore the life of Jesus, where you can look at the data, the evidence, as well as the significance.

John:

I want to end on a more practical note. I know I've told some of you of the party that Buff and I went to. A Christmas party some years ago, sailing around Pittwater on a gorgeous, massive yacht, drinking spectacular wine and eating beautiful pate. Buff introduced me to a friend of hers, and I got chatting with her on the boat as the sun was going down. It was a gorgeous setting. Way above our pay grade. This woman started telling me how wonderfully things were going.

John:

Her husband had received a promotion, so she was feeling financially really secure. They'd settled on a property on the Northern Beaches, so domestically, they were set. And the youngest kid was about to start school, so she was like, yippee. And then she said, without any prompting from me, I promise, "But John, sometimes I wonder if there's maybe more to life. Some kind of, I don't know, spiritual dimension I've never really looked into." Of course, you imagine my eyes light up in the turn of conversation. But as quickly as she began that little pondering looking off into the sunset, she stopped and she said, "But I don't want to talk about it. I'm not really that interested. Do you want some more wine?" And like that,



we were back to talking about the pate and the wine and how beautiful the sunlight on the water looked, and all the other beautiful distractions.

John:

I tell you that because that to me is so classic Australian. The spiritual hunch we have, we share with all of human history, but the challenge I want to lay before us all is, don't just pursue that hunch in those pensive moments with a sunset and a glass of wine. Ponder it with fully sober brain cells and find out if this deep human longing for explanation has an intellectually and emotionally satisfying answer. I believe it does. The rest of this series will seek to unpack that in the context of the fairest account of the major world faiths that we can muster. And then of course, the Life of Jesus course that follows in our home will be a great opportunity for you to see if there's a satisfying answer to this inescapable longing we have for explanation.