

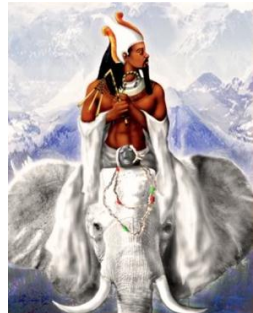
Religious Perspectives on Human Origins

There is a range of religious perspectives concerning human origins and the ways that such perspectives consider the biological evolution of *Homo sapiens*. While the views among and within religious traditions on this subject display great diversity, common themes shared across traditions can also be found.

Traditional Indigenous Perspectives

Almost as long as human beings have been telling stories, some of these stories have been about how and where humanity came to be. So in the lore of virtually every identifiable human culture there are accounts for the origins of humanity, and especially the origin of the community telling the story.

So, the Kayan peoples of northwestern Borneo tell that a vine from the moon married a great tree that sprouted from wood dropped from the sun; the tree gave birth to twins who marry and become the parents of the people on Earth. For the Yoruba people of Nigeria there was



among the gods of the sky, Obatala who created the land, made people out of clay, and baked them in the sun. But it is the supreme Olorun who later offered people the breath of life, enabling them to do the things humans do. For the Quiché Maya of

Guatemala, after trying unsuccessfully to make humans out of mud and then wood, the creators succeed with maize (corn). For the ancient peoples of Persia (Iran) the first human couple emerged from a reed that grew from the blood of a slain primal man.

These examples provide a sense of the variety of stories of human origins that have informed some communities of *Homo sapiens* about where they came from and who they were. In the United States alone there are more than 550 different federally recognized tribal groups, each one distinct from the others. Therefore it is very difficult to offer a single religious perspective even on Native American ideas concerning human evolution. This is complicated further by a broad consensus among Native Americans and other indigenous peoples that they have always been in their place and did not “originate” someplace else.

Nevertheless, a few common features can be identified from among these communities worldwide. It can be said that to be human is to be aware of the relationship between humanity and nature; to be aware of an individual’s responsibilities to family, culture, and community; and to be cognizant that the practice of ceremony or ritual, commonly



with symbols drawn from nature, is an outward expression of the religious perspective. The stories told by indigenous peoples serve to anchor them in the natural world and in their community.

Asian Perspectives

Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Shinto are major religious traditions of Asia. While they exhibit significant differences, the first four in particular share a sense of the dynamism of reality and the interconnectedness of all things. Both of these sensibilities are consistent with an evolutionary understanding of life generally and humanity specifically.

For example, from a Buddhist perspective, the dignity of being human is not based on human uniqueness and superiority relative to other species. Early Buddhist teachings hold that humans are distinguished only by their abilities to attain enlightenment. In the cycles of rebirth it is rare to obtain birth as a human person, more commonly as another sentient creature. So, Buddhism emphasizes the equality of all sentient life. All sentient beings want happiness and satisfaction; all sentient beings want to avoid pain and anguish. Humans and animals are fundamentally alike in this manner, and this inter-subjective condition encourages us to feel compassion towards all sentient life. Buddhism teaches that words have a way



of creating oppositions that blind us to the deep connections between things.

A central insight of Hinduism is the oneness of all being, living and non-living. Everything is derived from Brahman, the Absolute Reality, which is beyond any description and material or conceptual



form. Brahman is not only in everything but is everything. Therefore, there is continuity between not only all living things but between the non-living and living as well. While human beings may be unique they are neither radically different from other creatures nor the end product of evolution. Each creature emerges from Brahman and is evolving towards the realization of oneness with Brahman.

Abrahamic Perspectives

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three western monotheisms, are identified as Abrahamic religions because they all claim religious lineage from the first patriarch of the Hebrew scriptures, Abraham. They also share directly or indirectly the creation accounts in the book of Genesis, the first of which declares that humanity is “created in the image of God.” The specification of this “image” has varied in the history of these faith traditions. At times it has been taken as an indication that humans are created co-creators with God as indicated in the story of Adam naming the animals in the

second creation account in Genesis; on other occasions, that humans have a singular capacity for reason; on still other occasions, that humankind has a distinctive moral sense; and in yet other contexts, this “image” has been identified with a unique spiritual dimension possessed by humans alone.

Some members of these traditions believe that the scriptural accounts of the



creation of humanity exclude any scientific account of human evolution. However, none of these ways of specifying the

“image” necessarily rules out a scientific account of the biological development of *Homo sapiens* in the history of nature. For many in these traditions authentic humanity is understood to be the explicit creation of God. But, this way of thinking assumes that there are distinct material and spiritual domains. Science effectively explores and provides understanding of the former and religion of the latter. Among Christians, the Roman Catholic community, notably in the words of Pope John Paul II, has provided an articulate example of this view.

There are a few Jews, Christians and Muslims who, from a more holistic perspective, see human distinctiveness as an emergent feature of the material evolution of nature rather than the interjection of a unique feature from outside of nature. Still, members of all three of the Abrahamic traditions share an affirmation that nature is a creation

and that humans are one expression of that creation.

As can be seen some religious perspectives on human origins are deeply challenged by the scientific discoveries concerning the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. Other religious perspectives find the science of human evolution interesting but not of religious significance. Still other religious perspectives welcome such scientific findings and seek ways to integrate them into a comprehensive and integral understanding of what it means to be human.

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What Does It Mean To Be Human?



A Variety of Religious Perspectives