

BOOK REVIEW

**RELIGION AS WE KNOW IT:
AN ORIGIN STORY**

Religion As We Know It: An Origin Story.
 By Jack Miles. W.W. Norton,
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 \$14.95 (paperback)

If anyone can define religion, surely distinguished Biblicist (pardon the outdated, but sensible term) Jack Miles can—along with his many readers, especially the smaller heroic corps who have trekked through sizable stretches of his gigantic 4,448-page *Norton Anthology of World Religions* (2014). But wait, the *Norton* covers only Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, inevitably consigning thousands of lesser known “faiths,” alive or extinct, to oblivion. And Miles, who cites some twenty-three different scholarly notions of religion, instantly makes clear that religion can’t be univocally defined because it’s not one distinct thing, as we see in the endless permutations of folk practices, languages, cultural traditions and histories that it has fused with.

Many religions don’t even have a word for “religion” or their own variety of it (as the British baptized the Hindus with the umbrella-concept Hinduism). Plenty of religions have no personal God (Buddhism); and practically all

religions evolve and change in major directions (e.g., the late, tiny traces of belief in the afterlife found in the Hebrew Bible, not to mention today’s liberal Christian views of homosexuality). Too bad we can’t just stick with the handy old triad of creed, code, and cult, as found, for instance, in the classic work Miles never mentions, Huston Smith’s *The World’s Religions* (originally *The Religions of Man*, 1958). Smith’s first title, by the way, exposes a problem that the *Norton*, with its stunning array of theologies, cosmologies, and philosophies surveyed and explicated, hardly has the time to address: the overwhelming predominance of males as founders and licensed promulgators of religion. Nowadays Religious Studies may be, or may soon become, a majority-female discipline, like Comparative Literature; and that development has already revolutionized the field. But for the most part the men got there first—with more than a few deleterious results.

Miles’s book is simply an expanded and more personal version of the “Concluding Unscholarly Postscript” (alluding to Kierkegaard, of course) that he ended the *Norton Anthology* with. His point there was that Christian Europe invented comparative religion, and thus provided the conceptual framework we westerners use to describe and discuss religions of any sort. The early Christian Fathers did something exceptional: they separated the three hitherto inextricable elements of

religion, ethnicity, and culture: They took Yahweh, the Jewish Lord of history, radically refashioned his interaction with his people and the world, drastically transformed the Torah, and abandoned key notions like a sacred language, homeland, and specific Holy City—even while clinging to essential Jewish religious ideas, “including monotheism, revelation, covenant, scripture, sin, repentance forgiveness, salvation, prophecy, messianism, and apocalypticism.” One is tempted to irreverently call this the boldest hijacking in religious history (akin, in a minor way, to what Virgil did to Homer). In any case, with the coming of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, Christian academics started to apply the tools of secular analysis to biblical texts and doctrines, drawing upon burgeoning advances in the *Wissenschaft* of ancient languages, history, archeology, etc.; and so religion became the “subject” we are likely to think of today, repeatedly coming to conclusions that alter or flatly contradict familiar ways of thinking about the Abrahamic religions. All the unspeakably vivid literal images and teachings of Scripture have been demythologized, but not necessarily disenchanting, into “religion as we know it.” Sentimental regrets and Fundamentalist hankerings aside, there’s no way back.

All this is interesting and convincing; but the best part of Miles’s presentation is the account of his own brand of belief. He was a Jesuit seminarian for a decade (1960-1970), and is now an Episcopalian (and choir member). He’s long

since left the Thirty-Nine Articles behind (and had the audacity to compose a lengthy biography of God); so whence does he approach institutional Christianity now (and with such enthusiasm)? Perhaps surprisingly, he cites Robert N. Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) for a crucial, often neglected source of religion: the instinct of *PLAY*.

That would explain a lot of things: the use of marvelous, but not literally credible, fictions, the intrinsic and often jovial communality of religious services, the artificial (supernatural) worlds conceived by play (creed), the frequency of precisely determined rules of the game (code), the curious, elaborate ways of performing ceremonies and “fooling around” (cult, a feature it shares with sports). And one could readily attach to religious play the related realms of Song and Dance. Is God’s existence itself a sublime form of play that worshipers admire and participate in?

Miles extends such reflections (without necessarily naming or following upon them) by borrowing from Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *As If: Idealization and Ideals* (2017), which in turn takes its inspiration from German philosopher Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933)’s *The Philosophy of “As If”*. “It must be remembered,” Vaihinger wrote, “that the object of the world of ideas as a whole is not the portrayal of reality—this would be an utterly impossible task—but rather to provide an instrument for finding our way about more easily in the world.” In this pious version of pragmatism, the “useful untruths” of religion serve as indispensable guides

to life, which is too unimaginably vast to be comprehended by and constrained in one flawlessly accurate “big picture.” A familiar example of such an untruth would be the Virgin birth or Thomas Jefferson’s idealistic phantasm that “all men are created equal, ... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights”: a patently false (by empirical standards) statement that nonetheless could be, and sometimes has been, a key to opening treasure houses of both charity and social opportunity. For a non-religious contemporary instance of this, Miles cites Michael Bloomberg’s donation of \$1.8 billion to Johns Hopkins, thereby assuring free tuition to all present and future students. As for his own stance, he summarizes it with a brief piece by Japanese poet Saigyō Hōshi (1118-1190) “On Visiting the Grand Shrine at Ise”:

Gods here?
Who can know?
Not I.
Yet I sigh
and tears flow
tears on tears.

(N.B. Ignatius Loyola, Miles’s former spiritual master, was a devoutly prodigious weeper and used to spend hours lying on the roof of the Gesù, the Jesuit headquarters in Rome, staring up at the starry night sky, dissolved in ecstatic tears—the polar opposite of Pascal’s *libertin*, who was famously

terrified by the eternal silence of infinite space.)

Of course, the “as if” theory of religious runs into a grand, not to say enormous, body of difficulties, starting with the mortalist’s objection that both humans and their splendid religious cultures are doomed to disappear, as in Bertrand Russell’s eloquent essay, “A Free Man’s Worship,” which demands acceptance of the fact that ultimately “the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.” That dire vision can no more be definitively proved or disproved than the blissful conclusion to the scenario of Sacred History; but anyone siding with Russell might be tempted to write off Miles as a tender-minded William Jamesian fideist. If so, he remains a fabulously well-informed, open-minded, and multi-faceted one. Friedrich Nietzsche, a fierce critic of Christianity (but certainly not of Greek paganism and various other religious *Weltanschauungen*) would insist that there is no pure Platonic essence of “religion,” only religions as we know them, i.e., as interpreted by people with prefabricated schemata, e.g., members of the American Academy of Religion. But there’s no necessary harm in that. And if such interpreters can also, like Miles, earnestly and joyfully play the game of faith, so much the better.

—Peter Heinegg