

The Great Divide in Religion

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In a recent book entitled *The Neandertal Enigma*, the science writer, James Shreeve sets out to discover that moment when our prehuman hominid ancestors became human and to explore the relationship between Neandertal and Homo Sapiens Sapiens. In the process, he carries the reader along on a fascinating intellectual journey. Across four continents, through the dusty storage rooms of innumerable museums and in remote archeological digs he searches for the implements, the remains, the traces of behaviors which would suggest that our forbearers had crossed some invisible Rubicon, had left the world of the proto-human and had embarked upon the irreversible path which made them homo sapiens.

I am not certain that Shreeve ever quite achieves his objective. At every turn, the evidence is contradictory, and seems to say more about our continuity with our prehuman cousins than it does about our distinctiveness. And yet, he knows, and we know that at some point, minor quantitative differences had accumulated until a qualitative difference had been produced. At some point, the human mind ceased being simply one more expression of the evolutionary process, and became something else--became a vehicle by which that process might understand itself, might begin to understand the universe of which it is an expression, became a force able, to some small extent, to exert deliberate control of that process. James Shreeve was searching for that moment, that event, that circumstance which triggered so momentous a change.

As I followed him on his journey, it struck me that there probably was no one such moment. Undoubtedly, there were many such moments. But one of them, almost certainly can be discovered very early in the history of the species. Shreeve discusses the burial practices of ancient hominids. He reports on the discovery of grave sites, 60,000 or more years old, in which is to be found evidence that the dead had been carefully placed in their graves. Some of them had been covered with red ocher; others, judging from the layers of pollen, had been placed on and covered by masses of flowers; still others were buried with collections of tools and implements. But most intriguing of all, examination of the skeletons recovered from some of these graves indicated that a number of these archaic individuals had suffered severe, debilitating diseases or had been victims of accidents at some point in their lives--diseases and accidents which had not killed them, but which had left them without the ability to support themselves in the harsh environment in which they lived. The evidence of the bones suggests strongly that these individuals had been cared for by the family or the tribe for years after accident or disease had made of them non-productive members of the community. Over sixty thousand years ago, human or proto-human beings had crossed an important divide--they had learned to care for each other, to protect and sustain those who were least able to care for

themselves, to mourn their dead and bury them with careful ritual. It is not unreasonable to conclude that this learning, as much as any carefully crafted tools signaled their emergence into the human community.

I found myself, as I read the reports, wondering what thoughts might have passed through the mind of Neandertal, as she cared for an injured or ailing member of the tribe. I found myself wondering what emotions stirred the mind of Neandertal as he stood by that ancient burial site as a member of the tribe was consigned to the earth, the body covered with red ocher, the grave strewn with flowers, favorite tools and implements buried with the body. We know that Neandertal was not inferior to modern human beings in the size of the brain. Indeed, Neandertal had a slightly larger brain, on average, than modern human beings. It is hard to believe that the grave sites do not imply a ritualization of existence, that the burials do not point to a symbolic universe, that the grave sites do not hint at some religious understanding all those long millennia ago.

The great temptation, of course, is to assume that modern, conventional assumptions about life and death can be imported into that ancient world and used to make the silent bones and implements speak in our language. Thus archaeologists and anthropologists frequently interpret the tools and implements buried with ancient peoples as evidence of a faith in some life beyond this. Often it is assumed, usually without question, that the appearance of tools and implements in a burial implies a belief that those tools and implements would be needed by the dead in their next life. In fact, of course, all we really know is that occasionally tools and implements were buried with the body. Perhaps people believed that such artifacts participated in the spirit of the person who had died, and belonged to the user of the implements in death as well as in life. Perhaps the grave implements represented a gift of thanksgiving for a life of great meaning to the community. What it meant precisely, we will never know. But this seems clear, life had assumed symbolized meaning more than sixty thousand years ago. And the roots of religion are almost certainly to be found in that development.

We will never know the content of the symbolic structures which defined the cultures of these early people. We will never know what the world looked like through their eyes. But we can make some guesses as a result of the evidence they have left behind. Clearly, all those millennia ago, ancient peoples had developed a sense of reverence before the facts of life and death, and had developed metaphors by which to express that reverence. Bodies sprinkled with red ocher--a material which in later times was a metaphor for the life's blood--indicates sophisticated symbolic and ritual concepts. The presence of flowers suggests a non-utilitarian appreciation of beauty. The care for incapacitated members of the tribe suggests an appreciation of the individual and bonds between individuals which it is difficult not to define as love. And the careful burial of the dead suggests a culture of respect and concern. Clearly, though we are separated by millennia and live in a world transformed, ghostly patterns of thought and behavior, shadowy symbols and rituals flow between us and these ancient peoples.

That does not mean, however, that their understanding of the world was only a more simplistic version of later understandings. It occurs to me that perhaps, in some ways,

very early people may have been as sophisticated as any generation which followed them. Thus, I am inclined to believe that faith in an after-life is relatively late and may represent a distortion and degrading of that earlier sophistication. Certainly, well into historic times, belief in a life after this showed all the signs of being a recent development. Among the Greeks, Hades was a shadowy place, ill-defined at best, the common lot of all human beings, regardless of their accomplishments or failures. Among the early Hebrews, Sheol was a similar place, separated from the light and laughter of the world. Neither was a place one might find it useful to carry the implements and tools of this life.

Indeed, as I tried to imagine myself back, standing beside that ancient grave site, all those millennia ago, as I tried to imagine what this event might have meant to the people who enacted this ancient rite, it occurred to me that very likely visions of another world beyond this were not part of the symbolic universe they shared. Indeed, there is a body of evidence, linguistic and cultural--a body of evidence not nearly as old as Neandertal but very ancient--which suggests that our religious roots are to be found in a deep and abiding faith in the natural world out of which we emerge and to which we return. Almost certainly, before the development of our linear world view--which believes that one thing leads on to another and another and past moves forever into future and the old is never recovered--human beings trusted in a cyclical world, a world of recurring seasons and returning moons, and repeating patterns. Almost certainly, before they believed that the world had been created as a resource for them to exploit, human beings believed that they were part of the natural world, kin to all living things, and that the cycles of nature were echoed and repeated in their own lives. In some ancient cultures, the womb and the tomb were seen to be symbolically the same, and death was described as returning to the mother.

And so, I imagine those archaic people, standing by the grave, sprinkling the dead with ocher and flowers, depositing favorite tools and implements beside the body, believed that they were returning their friend and their loved one to the good earth, the great mother who had given him birth, who had sustained her in life, and who now received him back again. If there were to be another life for him, it would be like the life of the grain which, buried in the earth, is born anew in the spring. I imagine those archaic people mourning their loss, but not bewailing a common and inescapable fate which decreed death for all earth's creatures. I imagine that among those archaic people, death was understood as a necessary part of life's cycle. Without death, no life could be sustained, no new life could come into being. In my imagination, I stand with Neandertal by that grave site, and I am profoundly moved to think that over all these generations, we probably share the same sense of loss. In reflection, I am astounded to see how differently the predominant culture of our times responds to the fact of death.

Some months ago, I was engaged in a conversation with my daughter concerning an internship program in which she was involved as part of her theological school training. She was working with a social service agency staffed by women who belonged to a religious order. She was deeply impressed by the skill, the commitment, the courage and the determination with which the women of the order sought to respond to their clients--mostly single mothers, often battered women and their children. She found that her

Unitarian Universalist values were being lived out by these dedicated women who were giving their lives to improve the lot of others. But she went on to say that she had discovered one great divide, one unbridgeable difference between her religious faith and the religion which defined these women.

Intrigued, of course, I asked her how she would define that difference. Without a pause, she replied, "It is how we view death. My co-workers in the agency, the members of the order, see death as punishment, as something to fear, as some ultimate failure, even as evil." she said. "I grew up believing that death, while an occasion for sadness and sorrow, is part of the natural order of things; I grew up convinced that in time death is appropriate and acceptable, and even welcome. I believe that the greatest evil is not death, but violence and hatred. I believe that the ultimate failure is not death, but the refusal to live life as fully as possible. It is when we confront death, and try to talk together about its meaning that I sense a great religious divide opening up between us."

And she is right. Somewhere, over the course of time, the human community crossed another great divide. That event is witnessed to in the first book of the Jewish scriptures. You remember the story: In the beginning, God created a vast garden, filled with plants and animals, watered by rivers, and containing everything that was good for humanity. Then, in his own image, God created man and gave him dominion over the place, and created woman as his mate. Only the fruit of one tree was forbidden to the human pair. In time, of course, man and woman could not resist the temptation to eat from that tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For their disobedience, they were banished from the garden. More than this, God decreed that as an ultimate punishment, each of them, when their years had been accomplished, would die.

In this ancient myth, two symbolic concepts have been combined. The first of this is that the universe is indeed hierarchical in its structure. At the top is God, just below him is man and then woman, and ranking below humans is all the rest of creation. God is not to be found in the created world, nor are humans to be defined as part of the natural world. The ancient kinship between human beings and the rest of life has been sundered, since they are not offspring of a common mother, but are the distinct products of a divine craftsman. But even more importantly, death has been redefined. It is no longer a part of the natural order; it has become evidence of divine anger and punishment for disobedience. Because humanity had disobeyed, all things must die.

And eventually, a corollary was added to this symbolic structure: a promise that if one repented the original disobedience, if one lived a life of humble obedience, after death, one might be restored to that primordial paradise from which the first human beings had been expelled. And we all know the uses to which that faith has been put down through the centuries, as generation after generation has been taught to accept with injustice and inequity in the belief that in some world beyond this all would be put to right again.

As my daughter has discovered, this myth remains powerful in our own times. The fact is that those who believe the literal truth of the Genesis story have been on the defensive for more than a century. And yet, the social implications of this ancient story continue to

work through our culture despite our skepticism about its accuracy. The conviction that death is somehow unnatural, is a consequence of our inadequacy, is a punishment visited upon us which might be evaded if only we are obedient, remains strong and can be seen in a number of the controversies which characterize our times.

Despite our growing power and understanding, or perhaps because of it, human beings are uneasy about the prospect that they might take control over the essential processes of birth and death. Deep in our culture lies the assumption that life is not a natural process; it is a special gift of God. Therefore, we have no right to interfere in that gift, whether that interference is to help the childless conceive or to prevent conception or to abort a fetus for whom we cannot care. Deep in our culture lies the conviction that death is not a natural process, it is God's punishment for disobedience. Many of us cannot shake the feeling that human beings over-reach themselves when they intrude into this divine arena. It is this uneasiness which fuels the debate over euthanasia. Logically, it seems beyond question that mature human beings, when confronted by incurable pain and disease should have the right to decide that life is no longer worth the suffering which accompanies it and be allowed to choose a good death. Even as we struggle with the fact that our science has given us vast opportunities to extend our dying, allowing many of us to move into an existence which has ceased to be life, we are frightened by the fact that in choosing to control our exit from life we are transgressing the divine order.

I find myself wondering what happened in our history that so changed our relation to world and to each other that we should have defined choice as disobedience, that we should have come to see life not as a natural process but as a gift, that we should have come to view death not as a part of life, but as an evil, punishing consequence of our own over-reaching. I find myself bemused by the conventional wisdom which affirms that our inheritance from our past is a violence and brutality so deeply ingrained in human nature that they are held in check only by threat of divine retribution. I find myself wondering if it is not time for us to step back across the great divide in religion and attempt to recover the spiritual assumptions which characterized human culture for so many generations, and which may have its roots in that community gathered around a Neandertal grave site.

James Shreeve ends his exploration with the conclusion that probably Neandertal is not our ancestor, that he belonged to another branch of the hominid tree, that he contributed no genes to our line. He may well be right. But the evidence is clear that Neandertal and Homo Sapiens Sapiens shared the same territory for millennia. Whether we share an genetic heritage, I do not know, but it is hard to believe that behind the accretions of centuries, we are not in some sense the cultural descendants of those archaic beings. The mute evidence of those ancient graves haunts me. What is more, I feel more at home with the earth centered religion they whisper in my inner ear, than I am with the sky centered promises of eternal paradise provided I renounce my basic humanity and am properly humble and obedient before a demanding and puzzling God. Though I may be an anachronism, one born out of time, my heart leaps up at the thought that over 60,000 years ago human communities were caring for the sick and the injured; that they buried their dead with dignity and cherished fragile and perishable beauty; that they valued the work of their hands enough to bury it with their dead. And though it is a great leap, I

rejoice in the thought that as they placed the dead carefully in their graves, as they made farewell, in their minds may have known that this was as it should be, that death is neither punishment nor defeat, but a completion, a rounding of the circle, a return to the source from which all life issues. Confronting the great divide in religion, I stand with our archaic ancestors. In my heart of hearts, I cannot escape the notion that a future which is less violent, less destructive, less lethal and more humane may depend upon our ability to recover the symbolic universe in which our ancestors once lived and moved and had their being.