

Paolo Sarpi on the Origin of Religion

Fra Paolo Sarpi, “Theological counselor” to the Venetian Doge and Senate, penned the following for his *Pensieri sulla religione* (*Thoughts on Religion*). Sarpi applied his “sociology of religion”—according to which man’s belief in the Divine arises from fear, greed, and limitation—not merely to pagan beliefs, but to the God of Christianity. A modern restatement of Sarpi’s Enlightenment tract can be found in such works as William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Sarpi writes:

The purpose of man, like that of any other animate being, is *to live*. *To live* requires maintaining our existence, by the use of our self, and our parts, as well as of things external; that is how nature operates. Cognition is the origin of human activity, and therefore it is necessary to have cognition of one’s own nature; of the nature of human beings, and of other things; and even of the whole universe.

The crude mind forms the following opinion concerning himself: that he is a unity, is passible [i.e., liable to be acted upon—Ed.], is deficient, and is free to act. From passibility, there is born the emotion of fear. And out of passibility and fear, he recognizes the possibility of threats to his existence; and such things are deemed Evil. From deficiency, there arises greed. And from this, he comes to the idea of things which can main-

tain or restore his original condition; such things are deemed Good. As for objects other than himself, the crude mind presumes that they possess the same qualities of unity and freedom; since, owing to his own internal constitution, he cannot think differently than he is.

For those phenomena whose operating entity he cannot perceive, the crude mind now forms the idea of insensible things; this is his first apprehension of Divinity, arising from the foregoing, but principally from fear and greed. Fear is primary, and the first ideas of divinities are of Evil ones.

And, even though through progress he learns that everything does not function as he does (but rather as parts, not operating out of cognition)—such that he distinguishes things whose actions are caused by natural processes, from those which act freely; nonetheless, he continues to make the presumption of freedom for all things whose natures are as yet unclear; a presumption which he maintains perpetually for those things that can never be clarified. And as a consequence, he continues to presume it of everything to which he attributes Divinity. *But, since man is finite and incapable of the infinite, being capable only of operations of an arithmetical sort, when he starts esteeming himself capable of everything, he must deem the universe to be finite, ascribing to it a sort of unity, passibility, and deficiency. And so he ascribes to the Divinity, just what he thinks concerning himself.* [emphasis added]

original discovery, is the key to an higher hypothesis; once one has added an original valid discovery of principle, to the repeated reexperiencing of the original discoveries of others, a higher level of scientific thinking comes into view. A shift in outlook is made, beyond the notion of the act of discovery of valid principle, to the notion of a *method* of repeated discovery of valid principles. This is the Platonic method; this is the principle of *higher hypothesis*.

Thus, from this vantage-point, man’s knowledge of the universe is *not* limited to what science has learned from its latest, crucial-experimental-based discovery of a new principle. Our knowledge of the lawfulness of the universe as a whole is derived from *hypothesizing the principle of higher hypothesis*. It is the proneness of the universe to submit to the will of demonstrable principle of higher hypothesis, which defines natural law, even in advance of new discoveries of principle yet to be attained. The efficiency of that principle of higher hypothesis, respecting man’s increasing power to command the universe, has the import of a corresponding principle of design of the universe.

Third, thus, that much do we know respecting the future. That knowledge provides the basis for defining our efficient accountability to our posterity. Since we know that much respecting the future, we are morally obliged to act accordingly, to impose that knowledge respecting the future, upon our present policy-shaping. This we have just summarized, is the notion of Reason in Plato, Kepler, and Leibniz. This is also the principle of law embedded in the Preamble of the U.S. Federal Constitution, which is, on that account, the best constitution yet designed.⁴⁸

In contrast, consider once more the relevant excerpt we have frequently quoted from so-called “economist” Adam Smith’s 1759 *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*:

The administration of the great system of the universe . . . the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the nar-

48. Even if many among today’s U.S. lawmakers and judges manifestly want the functional literacy required to read it.