Mythos and logos: Are people programmed to ‘need’ religion?

Many in the West think of Religion in terms of believing in a supernatural God. A better term for this is theism, and we do not think it is wise to equate the concept of Religion to theism. Instead, we see Religion in broader terms: It provides a mythos for a culture or group.

To understand what we mean by mythos, we need to examine how the human brain organizes conscious experience around a symbolic order. Terrence Deacon calls this ordering the “defining attribute of human beings.” That symbolic order enables people in any community to interpret their world so that they can cooperate in meeting the deepest challenges to their survival.

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In more concrete terms, people need a structure of understanding to explain both why things are the way they are and what is the right way to live, which are implied in their symbolic orders.

We believe that humans need to have coherent justifications for both what is the case and what ought to be the case. We can see through the Greek terms “logos” and “mythos” that these are two different kinds of justifications, but we need them both. Science has given us a good way to develop our logos. However, it has not been framed in a way that also is conducive to cultivating a mythos that gives us a shared narrative for how we ought to live in the world. We believe this is one of the great tasks of this century.

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