

A Single Planetary Heritage?

Homo Religiosus in Big History

by Philip Novak

Introduction

In *Rocks of Ages*, Harvard biologist Steven Jay Gould acknowledges the profound roles played by science and religion in human history.¹ He argues that religio-ethical activity is not only a crucial aspect of our species' past, but also, so long as it doesn't contradict empirical fact, an inevitable aspect of our future.

Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have peered into that future to note that, “we seem to be moving beyond any religious expression so far known to the human into a meta-religious age that seems to be a new comprehensive context for all religions.”² And the comprehensive context of which they speak is what has

¹ This paper was first delivered as a presentation titled “Placing *Homo Religiosus* in Big History” at the inaugural conference of the International Big History Association (IBHA) at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, August 2-5, 2012.

² Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992, 255. Print.

alternately been called the Evolutionary Epic, the Universe Story or Big History—that astonishing synthesis of findings from all the branches of modern science that tells a coherent story of the evolution of the universe from the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago to the present.

When some of the best-trained historians look at religion against this vast evolutionary backdrop, what do they see? After a lifetime of studying the diversity of religious beliefs and practices Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the founder of Harvard’s Center for the Study of the World’s Religions, advised us to see them “as a *single*, if multiform, planetary spiritual heritage.”³ Indeed, contended Smith, “the spiritual unity of humankind’s religious history is obvious, once one sees it. We have, however, been assiduously trained not to see it. Even more strongly, we have been pressured not to think it; and not to feel it. Yet today it beckons our mind.”⁴

Nature’s diversity—manifest in the uniqueness of every fingerprint as of every snowflake—is also manifest in human religiosity and *granted at this paper’s every step*. Yet from Big History’s altitude, much of it is invisible. The aim of this paper is to suggest

³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985, page not found. Print.

⁴ *Ibid*, 6.

that humanity's religious beliefs and practices are *convergent*, a hypothesis which, if sound, is easily massive enough to appear on Big History's radar.

Sections 1, 2 and 3: The Cosmological, Terrestrial and Biological Senses in which Humanity Is One.

Big History has already taught all of us three non-controversial and indelible lessons. Because I need to spend my time on less familiar matters, I must state them so briefly as to run the risk of trivialization. But here they are:

1. Because we are all children of the singularity known as the Big Bang, there is a cosmological sense in which we are one. As Eric Chaisson has cheekily put it "Hydrogen is light, odorless gas, which given enough time, changes into people."⁵
2. Because all of the 110 billion human beings that have *ever* existed have lived on this very tiny island in an unthinkable vast cosmic sea, there is a terrestrial sense in which we are one. We all have the same home. We are all earth beings.

⁵ Quoted in D. Christian, *Maps of Time*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 27. Print.

3. Because “the human genome contains 3164.7 million chemical nucleotide bases and...the order of 99.9% of those nucleotide bases are exactly the same in all people” there is a biological sense in which we are one.⁶

That these common human conditions are very general is no reason they are unimportant. No reason whatsoever.

Yet by themselves they do not provide adequate encouragement for speculating about spiritual unity. Were it not for a quiet advance in anthropology, on which I'm about to report, I would not have bothered to write this paper. But it is precisely that advance, when linked to the lessons of Big History, that makes the difference.

Section 4: The Psychological Sense in Which We Are One: The Lesson of Cultural Universals

Harvard's Steven Pinker has written that, “the new sciences of human nature...expose the psychological unity of our species beneath the superficial differences of physical appearance and parochial culture.”⁷ If Pinker is right, a

⁶ Brown University biologist, Kenneth Miller, at the website <http://www.millerandlevine.com/genome/index.html>

⁷ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate*. New York: Viking, 2002, xi. Print.

hundred years of skepticism over the existence of a universal human nature is over.

Indeed, anthropologists have now confirmed beyond reasonable doubt the existence of a wide array of basic psychological adaptations to life that characterizes *every Homo sapiens culture known to history and ethnography*. Why is this headline news? Because as late as 1982 the distinguished anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach could write that “during the hundred years of their existence, academic anthropologists have not discovered a single, universally valid truth concerning either human culture or human society.”⁸

And not long before that, a ranking academic panel declared cultural universals to be “no more likely than bird-shit in a cuckoo clock.”⁹ What shifted? And how?

The key figure in the story is Donald Brown, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at University of California Santa Barbara. Earlier in his career, as Brown tells it, he had no reason to suspect as incorrect the conviction he shared with the vast majority of his fellow anthropologists—that human cultures were irreducibly variant. But one day Brown bet a colleague who was insisting on the existence of

⁸ R. B. Edgerton, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony*. New York: Free Press, 1992, 23, quoted in William Gairdner, *The Book of Absolutes*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008, 44. Print.

⁹ D. Brown, *Human Universals*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995, 84. Print.

certain human sexual universals that he could find cultures that would be exempt.¹⁰

He tried, and failed. After making, and again losing, another similar bet, he got very curious about how long the list of cultural universals really was.

When Brown re-studied the literature, he found that cultural universals¹¹ had been a persistent if recessive theme throughout the century.¹² A key moment was G.P. Murdock's 1945 publication of a list of 72 of them,¹³ which three decades later was approvingly cited in E. O. Wilson's 1978 *On Human Nature*.¹⁴ Interest in universals burgeoned in the 1980s. Brown published evidence and argument for 311 cultural universals in his superb 1991 book, *Human Universals*, and re-summarized his findings in a 1999 article by the same name in *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*.¹⁵ In

¹⁰ Here I have been paraphrasing Gairdner, *The Book of Absolutes*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008, 61. Print.

¹¹ "Human universals—of which hundreds have been identified—" writes anthropology emeritus Prof. Donald Brown of UC Santa Barbara, "consist of those features of culture, society, language, behavior and mind that, so far as the record has been examined, are found among *all peoples known to ethnography and history* (emphasis mine)." Donald E. Brown, "Human Universals, human nature and human culture," in *Daedalus*, Fall 2004, 47-54.

¹² See Appendix A.

¹³ See entry for 1945 in Appendix A of this paper. Murdock argued that "the universal pattern could only find its basis in the fundamental biological and psychological nature of man and in the universal conditions of human existence" (quoted in Brown's *Human Universals*, 25).

¹⁴ Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*. New York: Bantam, 1978, 22-23. Print.

¹⁵ R.A. Wilson and F.C. Keil. *The MIT Encyclopedia of Cognitive Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999. Print. Brown also published a condensed article on the topic, "Universals, Human Nature and Human Culture" in *Daedalus* Fall, 2004, 47-54.

2002, Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, his case for the reality of human nature, dedicated an entire appendix to Brown's list, adding to it some 56 new universals that have since surfaced. In 2008, Canadian scholar William Gairdner devoted a chapter of his remarkable *The Book of Absolutes* to lifting up Brown's work to a wider public.¹⁶

Brown's book offers much more than I can touch on here.¹⁷ What I must touch upon long enough to leave impression is a representative sample of the many universals he (and Pinker) cite:¹⁸

¹⁶ William Gairdner, *The Book of Absolutes*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. Print.

¹⁷ Including a **typology** of various kinds of universals, a review of the **methods** anthropologists use to make their cases for universal traits, and a discussion of the chief **causes** of universals. **Types** of universals include universals, near-universals, statistical universals, surface vs. formal universals, implicational universals (if A is found in a given society then B will also be found), pattern universals, and etic vs. emic universals. He also notes that there are new universals, such as tobacco, and former universals such as high infant mortality rate (Brown, 50). Regarding anthropological **methods** for detecting universals, Brown tells us that they are rarely proven by exhaustive checking through the trait lists of almost 4,000 distinct societies found in the Human Research Area Files database. Rather, the claim that something is a "universal" is based on a preponderance of evidence, an important aspect of which is failure to find counterevidence. If someone known to have read widely and perspicuously in the anthropological literature testifies that a reliable reference to a counterinstance has not been found, and when this is combined with a stated or tacit view that no one appears to be suggesting reasons why this trait shouldn't be universal, we have a strong candidate. It is reasonable to suppose that the trait in question is nearly universal and thus already ready to be considered an important or significant aspect of human nature or condition if not absolutely so. Another way occurs when an exhaustive search to prove something isn't universal – such a when feminist scholars undertook to show that patriarchy might not be – come up empty (Bamberger 1974, Ortner, 1974), their conclusions carry certain weight. Other modes of argument for universals are summarized by Brown on pp. 50-53 of the book. Brown also addresses the **causes** of universals. "Once one has absorbed the lesson of cultural relativity, what was initially astonishing becomes...fully expectable....[Now] the universals stand out as curiosities...A new question emerges: given the immense variability of human behavior how on earth can something be the same everywhere?" (88). Brown surmises that there are three central causes of universals: 1) the diffusion

- Members of every Homo sapiens culture known to history and ethnography adorn their bodies, style their hair, and like sweets.
- They engage in gift-giving and hospitality; they experience empathy and feel affection.
- Many human facial expressions are universal and elicit the same emotional responses everywhere.
- Members of every Homo sapiens culture known to history and ethnography use language as their principal medium of communication and all languages have the same deep architecture, built of the same basic units and arranged according to implicit rules of grammar.
- They have poetry and use metaphor, and apply aesthetic standards.
- They reckon time, distinguish past, present and future, and strive to predict the future, including the weather.

of very ancient useful traits such as food-cooking; 2) the cultural reflection of physical facts such as kin terms which everywhere reflect the relationships created through sexual reproduction; and 3) the operation, structure and evolution of the human mind.”

¹⁸ I owe as much to Gairdner as to Brown for this particular presentation of them.

William Gairdner, *The Book of Absolutes*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008, 65. Print.

- Every Homo sapiens culture known to history and ethnography uses logic, makes binary cognitive distinctions and thinks in causal terms.
- It has concepts of polar extremes, parts and wholes, opposites and equivalents, and distinguishes between normal and abnormal mental states.
- Every Homo sapiens culture known to history and ethnography distinguishes inner from outer body, public from private, flora from fauna; it regulates sex, avoids incest, and has standards of sexual modesty.
- Every Homo sapiens culture known to history and ethnography distinguishes right from wrong and recognizes reciprocity, responsibility and intention. They are all aware of the possibility of cheating and lying, and they all strive to protect themselves from the same.

And so on...And so on...And so on.

Anthropology's rediscovery of human nature means that our thinking about the question of human religious unity feels a fresh wind at its back. If human beings share:

- the same cosmic background,
- the same earth origins,
- a genetic code that differs minutely across the species,

- a universal linguistic deep-grammar,
- and a psychic unity as demonstrated by these many cultural universals, it would be scientifically irresponsible to ignore the hypothesis that within the diversity of global religious life there are also important invariants.

Section 5: The Unity-Within-Diversity of Humanity's Religious History

People will argue over religion's worth, but no one disputes its ubiquity. When Freud called religion a universal obsessional neurosis, he at least got the universality part right. And when no less a scientist than E. O. Wilson tells us that "*the predisposition to religious belief is the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and in all probability an ineradicable part of human nature*"¹⁹ (emphasis added), there is little point in denying that as a species we still are, as we apparently have always been, *homo religiosus*.²⁰ Human beings are surely natural creatures, but they are just as surely prone to experience/interpret the natural as having a transcendent dimension or aspect.²¹

¹⁹ E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*. New York: Basic, 1978, 176. Print.

²⁰ See endnote 1.

²¹ If to drive this point home I were limited to one example it would be contemporary China. For well over two millennia the Chinese 1/7 of *Homo sapiens* related themselves to a putative Sacred dimension of life by means of beliefs, rituals and moral codes deriving from Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist and folk ways. The end of that era can be conveniently dated to 1898 when slogans like

“destroy temples to build schools” advanced the reformist agenda that saw religion as antithetical to modernization. For roughly the next one hundred years China witnessed what historians believe to be the severest attack on religion in history. Ian Johnson observes that “even before the Communist takeover in 1949, half of the country’s one million temples had been converted to other uses or destroyed. Over the next thirty years virtually all of the rest were wiped out; by 1982, when religious life was permitted to resume after the ouster of radical Maoists, China had just a few score temples, churches, and mosques still in usable condition—in a country that now had one billion people. After three decades of prosperity—the first significant period of stability in 150 years—... it’s no exaggeration to say that China is in the grip of a religious revival... analogous to America’s Great Awakening in the nineteenth century... Hundreds of thousands of places of worship have reopened or been rebuilt, often from scratch... China now has the world’s largest Bible-printing plant, while thousands of new priests, nuns, and imams of various faiths are being trained every year... By some measures, more Chinese (60 to 80 million) now go to church every Sunday than all the congregations of Western Europe put together, while China is now the world’s biggest Buddhist nation. Some speculate that the government still views religion in Marxist terms as an opiate of the masses—the twist is that instead of eradicating the drug, the Party hopes to use it to keep people diverted from politics. While that may be true, it’s also clear from the writings of some government leaders that they see ...social dislocation [and moral decline] ... being eased by temples, mosques, and churches, which provide social services and a local community of believers to help people cope with the hardships and isolation of urban life... Religion is...creating rudimentary forms of civil society... After a century of bitter experience, religion remains at the core of China’s transformation.” (Ian Johnson, “China Gets Religion!” Dec. 22, 2011, *New York Review of Books*, 55ff).

If I were to add a second case in point it would be a book, Peterson’s and Seligman’s *Character Strengths and Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), a comprehensive cross-cultural study in positive psychology by a well-funded team of social scientists. The key to its structure is the identification of six virtues perennially valued by moral thinkers of the world’s cultures. The first five are: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice and temperance. The sixth is *transcendence*. That is syntactically awkward since virtues are by definition cultivatable dispositions and the single word “transcendence” is not one such. But the authors clarify what they mean: transcendence names that cultivatable relatedness to something larger than ourselves, a higher, greater, or more encompassing meaning or purpose (38). I came upon this book as a citation in materialist philosopher Owen Flanagan’s *The Really Hard Problem: Finding Meaning in a Material World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007). Commenting on transcendence, Flanagan observes that the many people “who say they are spiritual and not religious are saying they are seeking to understand and develop a sense of connection to that which is greater and more comprehensive than their self [and that] ...something like this is universal in culture (199).

Historically religion has taken on no fewer than 100,000 forms.²² 90% of the world's current population engages in spiritual or religious practice of some sort,²³ and there are as many as 9,900 distinct forms of religion still extant.²⁴

Within this riot of religious expression can we discern a “single spiritual heritage?”²⁵ My affirmative answer owes its deepest debt to the late English philosopher of religion John Hick. In his Gifford Lectures published as *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989) and a host of other books²⁶ Hick has produced the most

²² A.F.C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological Study*, cited by E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (1974), 176. Print.

²³ H.G. Koenig, *Spirituality in Patient Care: Why, How, When and What*. Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002. Print, Quoted in R. Walsh, “Lifestyle and Mental Health,” *American Psychologist*, October 2011, 586.

²⁴ David Barrett et al., *World Christian Encyclopedia, 2nd edition*, 2001, as cited in Toby Lester, “Oh, Gods!” *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 2002.

²⁵ If we can, we will owe a massive debt to the many 20th century thinkers who have previously attempted this task. Among them: Aldous Huxley in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945); Arnold Toynbee in *A Study of History* (1954); Carl Jung (implicit in his theory of a collective unconscious and a universal Self) in the most widely read autobiography of the 20th century, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1965); Alan Watts in *Behold the Spirit* (1971) and *The Supreme Identity* (1973), Catholic philosopher John Dunne in *The Way of All the Earth* (1972); Frithjof Schuon in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1975) and other books; Huston Smith, in *Forgotten Truth* (1976); Patrick Burke's brief classic *The Fragile Universe* (1979), Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *Faith and Belief* (1979), *Towards a World Theology* (1981), and many other books; Ken Wilber in *No Boundary* (1979) and many other books; Paul Knitter in *No Other Name?* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985, N. Ross Reat and Edmund Perry in the unjustly neglected *A World Theology: The Spiritual Unity of Humankind* (1991), and Karen Armstrong in *The Great Transformation*. New York: Knopf, 2006. Print.

²⁶ Some major works: *Faith and Knowledge*, (1st ed. 1957, 2nd ed. 1966); *Evil and the God of Love*, (reissued 2007); *Death and the Eternal Life* (1st ed. 1976); *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989, reissued 2004); *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (2nd ed. 2005); editor with Paul F.

comprehensive and lucid proposal for understanding both variance and invariance within human religious life that I know of in English.

Hick's first move is to help us see that in today's intellectual ferment there are really only two rational interpretations of humankind's religiousness on offer: the *naturalistic* interpretation of religion and the *religious* interpretation of religion.

The naturalistic interpretation is likely familiar and goes like this: the pan-religious assertion of a spiritual order with which humans should live in harmony—called God, Dharma, Tao, Great Spirit and the like—*is simply false*. There is no such reality. Rather, religion is and has always been humanity's fantastic response to the psychological and social pressures encountered in its own biological niche. Faced with pain, bewilderment and death, not to mention the challenge of achieving moral solidarity, human beings, in a desperate attempt to cope, have always invented higher Powers and projected them into the cosmos via beliefs and rituals. Religion is at best a helpful fiction, at worst a pathology to be sloughed off as we evolve.²⁷

Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (1987); *The Rainbow of Faiths* (published in the U.S. under the misleading title *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2002)); *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (2006). Cf. www.johnhick.org. Professor Hick died on Feb. 9, 2012.

²⁷ The classic 19th century expositors of this view were Feuerbach, Freud, Durkheim and Marx. A contemporary wave of naturalistic interpretation of religion includes books by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran, Loyal Rue, Don Cupitt and many others. Clifford Geertz

So fertile on so many fronts, the naturalistic interpretation is nevertheless inconclusive, for it fails to explain persuasively the vast and insistent throb of religious experience across the globe.²⁸ What I mean by “religious experience” is best expressed by none other than neuroscientist Sam Harris when he says that “[religions] attest to a range of spiritual experiences that are real... and entirely worthy of our investigation; experiences of meaningfulness, selflessness, and heightened emotion”²⁹ that “surpass our narrow identities as ‘selves’ and escape our current understanding of the mind and brain.”³⁰ Naturalists promise that “one day” we will understand religious experience on purely physicalist grounds—but that day is not yet here.

The alternative to the naturalistic interpretation is the *religious* interpretation of religion. Members of the genre share the hypothesis that a spiritual dimension really does exist and that physicalism is an inadequate theory of the world. Hick’s own version suggests that religions are conditioned human responses to a transcategorical

would also be at home in this camp as for him religion was, in all its forms, the human response to three modes of existential chaos namely, unbearable suffering, intractable paradox and moral bafflement.

²⁸ As William James surmised over a century ago, there is much religious experience – mystical experience, sensings of transcendence -- that is not convincingly reduced to psychosocial coping mechanisms or explained away by brain correlations. Cf. John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*. Oxford: One World, 1999, 1-2. Print.

²⁹ Harris, *The End of Faith*. New York: Norton, 2004, 42. Print.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 39. Print.

Real that no set of human constructs can exhaust.³¹ Responses to the Real are variant because the Real is never known as it is in itself, but only as experienced and interpreted through the myriad neuronal, psychic and cultural-linguistic conditions of the human animal.

Neither interpretation has been able to drive the other from the rational field.³² At the Global Court of Human Intelligence, it seems, *the universe has been tried and found to be religiously ambiguous.*³³ Thus, the religious interpretation of religion remains a rational contender.

With that stalemate behind us (whether or not religions might be perceiving something real that nevertheless eludes physical detection), we return to the question

³¹ The religious interpretation acknowledges the validity of many of the naturalistic interpretation's sociological and psychological explanations; it simply can't grant that these explain religion away without remainder. The crucial dividing issue—it still divides 21st century philosophy of religion—is the question of whether God (the Transcendent, the Real, the Sacred) really exists.

³² Note that either stance, if adopted as a way of life, requires a leap of faith and entails risk. The risk in adopting the religious interpretation of religious data is fooling ourselves with wishful thinking. The risk in adopting the naturalistic interpretation of religious data is prematurely closing our accounts with an arguably important higher dimension of reality – a move William James famously warned us against: “One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different...No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded...At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.” William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* New York: New American Library, 1958, 298. Print.

³³ As W. H. Auden would have it, “all proofs of his existence that we tender, return unopened to the sender.”

of the deep unity of religions beneath superficial diversity. Chomsky contends there is a universal grammar beneath humanity's 4,000 languages. Might there be a universal grammar *of religions*?

My case for an affirmative answer to this question unfolds in the following eight paragraphs.

(1) *Without exception, religions are constituted by an ethos and a worldview that co-imply one another.* Clifford Geertz, who usually shied away from talk of cultural universals, lost all his inhibitions on this point. Said Geertz: “A meaningful relation between the values a people holds and the general order of existence [it envisions] ...is an essential element in all religions,”³⁴ and “*though it is logically possible for a people to have an ethics without a worldview, we do not seem to have found such a people.*”³⁵ Let us briefly close our eyes (and

³⁴ “Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, 127. Print. The co-implication of ethics and worldview, Geertz contends, is “the source of religion’s peculiar moral power, that is, the fidelity with which it is felt to express the fundamental nature of reality” (126). Moreover, says Geertz, “human symbolic activities are not disguised representations of something else, but precisely what they seem to be: attempts to provide orientation for an organism which cannot live in a world it is unable to understand” (140-141).

³⁵ Geertz’s exact words are: “...though in theory we might think that a people could construct a wholly autonomous value system independent of any metaphysical referent, an ethics without ontology, we do not in fact seem to have found such a people. The tendency to synthesize world view and ethos at some level, if not logically necessary, is at least empirically coercive; if it is not philosophically justified, it is at least pragmatically universal. “Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, 127. Print.

optionally bow our heads) to imagine the massive quantity of ethnographic data Geertz's brain crunched before producing such an observation.

Of course Geertz's statement does not mean that it is impossible for us brave new citizens of global science to one day do what no human group has done before. But against that consider E. O. Wilson's declaration that we are a "mythopoeic species" with a "primal need" to be (or even seem) a "part of something greater than ourselves,"³⁶—a need, I may add, that might well have been a key selective pressure in the co-evolution of brain and language.³⁷

³⁶ E.O. Wilson, "Foreword," in Loyal Rue, *Everybody's Story*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000, ix. Print. "Metanarratives exist," writes David Christian, "they are powerful, and they are potent. We may be able to domesticate them; but we will never eradicate them...[A] 'modern creation myth' already exists just below the surface of modern knowledge. It exists in the dangerous form of poorly articulated and poorly understood fragments of modern knowledge that have undermined traditional accounts of reality without being integrated into a new vision of reality. Only when a modern creation myth has been teased out into a coherent story will it really be possible to take the next step: of criticizing it, deconstructing it, and perhaps improving it." David Christian as quoted on the website *Metanexus*.

³⁷ Terence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*. New York: Norton, 1997. Print. Deacon writes: "[We are] *homo symbolicus*... I don't propose this as an idle terminological exercise. Biological species are defined in terms of their ability to reproduce viable offspring, that is, to [inherit] ... their genes from and contribute them to a common closed genetic pool. This genetic criterion has a clear semiotic counterpart. All symbol using hominids are linked via a common pool of symbolic information, one that is as inaccessible to other species as are human genes. We are all heirs of symbolic forms that were passed from one generation to the next and from one group to another, forming a single unbroken tradition. We derive all our symbolic "traits" from this common pool and contribute to its promulgation. Being a part of this symbolic information lineage is in many respects a more diagnostic trait for "humanness" than any physical trait...Without considering this lineage, the most distinctive physiological feature of the human species, a uniquely modified brain, would lack an evolutionary explanation" (340-41).

What I am suggesting is that the need for an ethically resonant cosmos is *primal* and *built into the structure of the human brain*. If so, it is little wonder that after two hundred years the European Enlightenment's master project, to provide humanity with an ethics whose robustness owes nothing to cosmic resonance—the cosmos being pointless—appears barely begun.³⁸

(2) *The Axial Religions*³⁹ contain a common *psycho-ethical program*, as outlined in 2a-2d below.

³⁸ Loyal Rue contends that “the most important human insight of all time is expressed in the imperative to live in harmony with reality, a principle fundamental to the life process itself.” *Everybody's Story*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000. Print.

³⁹ Though pre-Axial religions admit of the co-implication of ethos and worldview (above), the remaining characteristics apply only to the Axial faiths, a.k.a. the great world's religions (and their countless offshoots) which for the last three thousand years have comprised the religious beliefs and practices of an overwhelming portion of humanity. Robert Bellah has called the worldview-and-ethos shift of this age one of “the massive facts of religious history.” And Karl Jaspers, likening its import to nothing less than a change in the way the world turns, dubbed it the Axial Age. The historical import of the Axial Age has been the subject of recent studies by Karen Armstrong (*The Great Transformation*, 2006) and Robert Bellah (*Religion in Human Evolution*, 2011). What happened in the Axial Age? Nothing less than the emergence of a radically new kind of worldview and a radically new motive for right human action in accord with it. For tens of thousands of years religion had been about world-maintenance, i.e., warding off disaster and attracting good fortune by propitiation of a host of inconstant spiritual powers. Yet within a brief one-thousand years, across a vast stretch of human cultures, and in ways that cannot be traced to diffusion from a single source, a new motive for alignment with higher power(s) emerged: no longer simply world-maintenance but radical personal transformation. As Bellah puts it: “[Now] the religious goal of salvation (or enlightenment or release...is for the first time the central religious preoccupation.” The new ethos went hand in hand with a new species of worldview which affirmed an infinitely valuable higher realm of reality, overall kindly bent toward us rather than fickle and inconstant, and one rather than many. Archaic humanity had been at home in the everyday world and its pictures of post-mortem states were not of anywhere you were dying to go. The worldview that dawned in the Axial Age, via ideas common to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Confucian-Buddhist-Taoism complex

(2a) *Each sees human life as an opportunity for a profound transition from the deluded or distorted character of our present existence in its untransformed condition to a limitlessly better condition.* The metaphors are legion: from being lost to being found, from blindness to sight, from death to life abundant, from discord to harmony, from sleeping to waking, from bondage to liberation, from forgetfulness of God to remembrance. Commonly expressed in these metaphors is the possibility of psychological change with unknown limits, a movement away from natural self-centeredness—the ego point of view which is source of all selfishness, greed, exploitation, cruelty and injustice—to a recentering in the Real. Moreover, each religion suggests that death is not the end of the change begun (or continued) in this life.

(2b) *Each teaches that this opportunity exists because we are encompassed by a “higher reality,” which, from the human point of view, is fundamentally friendly, and which is to be sought or otherwise responded to.* The putative higher reality is variously conceived and has many

of China, replaced post-mortem pessimism with the view that death did not cut off one’s commerce with that higher realm. The best brief summation of the Axial period of which I’m aware is contained in Loyal Rue’s *Everybody’s Story*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000, 28-34.

When Deacon contends that, “Biologically we are just another ape; mentally we are a whole new phylum of organism” (Deacon and Goodenough, “The Sacred Emergence of Nature” in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 862-863), writers like Bellah (following Merlin Donald) would suggest that the Axial Age brought this new mental phylum to maturity. As Bellah contends, “It is then that the third human cultural capacity after the mimetic and the mythic emerges, namely the theoretic, the capacity to think critically, both cognitively and ethically.” Robert Bellah, “Religion in Human Evolution,” a paper given at the University of Chicago to the Department of Sociology’s Committee on Social Thought, October 18, 2011, 15.

names—Dharmakaya, Brahman, Rta, Allah, Tao, Way of Heaven, Shang Ti, God, One, Form of the Good, Great Spirit—and enough others to fill a small phone book. But what else would one expect from a receptive apparatus—the human brain—that can’t smell what dogs smell, can’t hear what bats hear, and, within an electro-magnetic spectrum extending from cosmic rays as short as four ten-thousand-millionths of an inch to radio waves as long as eighteen miles, responds *only to those between sixteen and thirty-two millionths of an inch?* The epistemology in play here is critical realism, as in “yes, there really is a world out there (that’s the realism part), but we become aware only of those dimensions of it which register on our particular neurological grids. Applied to a hypothesized Transcendent, critical realism suggests we could never be aware of it as it is *in itself* but only as it impacts our particular human cognitive machinery and cultural conditioning.

(2c) *Each proposes practices by which human beings can seek, find accord with or otherwise respond to the Real.* These practices seem to fall into four major types: 1) systematic cognitive reflection); 2) emotive engagement, i.e., practices of devotion and gratitude; 3) supererogatory service to our fellows; and 4) psychological cultivation of interiority.

(2d) *The great religions comprise a set of essentially common ethical ideals.* The tip of this iceberg is the universality of the golden rule. The basic teaching of *all* the world’s

religions [is] that we should behave toward others as we would wish others to behave towards us.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Hick writes: “The basic teaching of *all* the world’s religions [is] that we should behave toward others as we would wish others to behave towards us. This has appealed to the human conscience in every part of the world and in every generation: ‘One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to oneself’ (the Hindu *Mahabharata*, Anushana parva, 113:7); One should go about ‘treating all creatures in the world as he himself would be treated’ (the Jain *Kritanga Sutra*, I, 11:33); ‘As a mother cares for her son, all her days, so towards all living things a man’s mind should be all-embracing (the Buddhist *Sutta Nipata*, 149); ‘Do not do unto others what you would not like yourself’ (the *Analects* of Confucius, XII:2); A good man should ‘regard others’ gains as if they were his own, and their loses in the same way’ (the Taoist, *Thai Shang*, 3); ‘That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self’ (the Zoroastrian *Dadistand-i-dinik*, 94:5); ‘As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise’ (Jesus in *Luke* 6:31); ‘‘What is hateful to yourself do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah’ (*Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbath 31a); ‘No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself’ (Muhammad in the *Hadith Ibn Madja*, Introduction, 9); ‘Lay not on any soul a load which ye would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things ye would not desire for yourselves’ (the Bahai *Gleanings from the Writings of Baba’u’llah*, 66,127); and going behind the post-axial faiths to ‘primal’ religion, ‘Grandfather Great Spirit, all over the world the faces of living ones are alike. With tenderness they have come up out of the ground. Give us the strength to understand and the eyes to see. Teach us to walk the soft Earth as relatives to all that lives’’ (Sioux prayer in *Earth Prayers* by Roberts and Amidon). John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*. Oxford, OneWorld: 1999, 227-28. Print.

In contrast to the variety of their God-concepts and afterlife visions, religions agree profoundly on ideals of human character and conduct. We see that always and everywhere human groups have valued courage over cowardice, honesty over falseness, compassion over egotism, humor over bitterness, justice over injustice, freedom over oppression, harmony over turmoil, beauty over ugliness, patience over rudeness, and fidelity and loyalty over fickle promiscuity. Human life, character and activity are noble when they are marked by generous goodwill, love, compassion, patience, justice, courage, humility, self-sacrificing concern for others, generosity, kindness, forbearance and forgiveness. This is what W.C. Smith means, I think, when he says that “religious life is at heart a matter not of creed but of character and conduct.” W.C. Smith, *Towards A World Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985, 145. Print.

This mere primer of a universal grammar of religions nevertheless allows us to hypothesize that in the biggest possible picture religions have functioned as vast enabling contexts for the moral evolution of *Homo sapiens*.⁴¹

Section 6: Our Emerging Moral Unity

In *The Evolution of God*, evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright sticks his neck out to identify a moral *telos* to the universe. He claims that humanity is moving erratically but steadily toward an expansion of its moral compass, indeed, toward a moral universalism in theory and in practice. More and more of us, he says, are

⁴¹ And how well they do this job is really the only gauge we have for judging their worth. “By their fruits shall you know them,” suggested Jesus, and far as anyone can confidently say, the pluses and minuses of all the peaches and bad apples produced across millennia by these vast orchards provide a picture in which none of them is a clearly superior or privileged response to the Real. Hick argues that shaping ethical human beings is not only a common focus of the religions but the trans-cultural criterion for measuring any religion’s spiritual authenticity. Judged by that criterion, argues Hick, there is none that is obviously superior. It is impossible to say with any confidence that the saintliness, goodness and virtue produced by Taoism, Judaism, Sikhism, and so on, is, on average and across vast stretches of time, superior or inferior to that produced Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, and so on. So far as we know the great traditions are basically on a par as regards the validity with which they respond to the Transcendent. Any religion seeking to prove its spiritual primacy would have to do so on the basis of the goodness it produces. The authenticity of any religion that loses its power to help produce human goodness is in doubt. Both as a positive and negative criterion, saintliness – lived virtue, lived goodness – is pivotal. And each of the great traditions has produced and continues to produce its harvest of persons who manifest these ethical flourishings, persons who are, in other words, saintly. Cf. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*. New Haven: Yale, 2004, 299-342; *The Fifth Dimension*. Oxford, OneWorld: 1999, 163-218; *A Christian Theology of Religions*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1995, 76-82; *New Frontier of Science and Religion*. London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2006, 39-54. Print.

placing others of us within the circle of their moral consideration and thereby affirming the equal moral status of all human beings. “*Homo sapiens* is moving more closely than ever before toward the simple-sounding yet hard-to-realize moral discovery that people everywhere are people just like us,”⁴² says Wright. Is Wright right? Might we be in the midst of a slowly emerging uptick in *Homo sapiens*’ moral quotient?

How dare we ask? Because improbable emergences of somethings-from-virtual nothings—even if they require tens of thousands of years—are *precisely what Big History has taught us to expect!*

- From the Big Bang itself,
- to the emergence of matter from pure radiation,
- to the de novo appearance of oligonucleotides without which life would not have been possible⁴³,
- to the emergence of life out of its own absence,

⁴² “Time has drawn us toward the commonsensical-sounding yet elusive moral truth that people everywhere are people, just like us.” Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 434. Print.

⁴³ Joyce and Orgel, *The RNA World*, cited in D. Berlinsky *The Devil’s Delusion*. New York: Basic Books, 2009, 202. Print.

- to the apparently sudden emergences of protein folds, major groups of viruses, principal lineages of prokaryotic archaea and bacteria, eukaryotic supergroups and animal phyla⁴⁴,
- to the emergence of human consciousness,
- and finally to an entirely new *dimension* of evolution—cultural evolution—that consciousness makes possible...

Big History teaches us that the universe is not a static cosmos but a continuous and irreversible cosmogenesis—a recurrent and partially lawless birthing of the radically new.⁴⁵ One of Big History’s biggest learning outcomes is that nothing transcends Nature like Nature herself.⁴⁶ And we need look no farther for evidence of this cosmic pattern than our own individual lives. As Terence Deacon and Ursula Goodenough observe:

⁴⁴ Eugene Koonin, “The Biological Big Bang Model for the Major Transitions in Evolution,” cited in Berlinsky, *The Devil’s Delusion*. New York: Basic Books, 2009, 192. Print.

⁴⁵ B. Swimme and T. Berry, *The Universe Story*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992, 223. Print.

⁴⁶ I believe these are the words of Loyal Rue in *Everybody’s Story*, but I have lost the page reference. Compare Stuart Kaufmann: “We live in an emergent universe in which ceaseless unforeseeable creativity arises and surrounds us. And since we can neither pre-state, let alone predict, all that will happen, reason alone is an insufficient guide to living our lives forward. [The universe’s] ceaseless creativity...is the bedrock of the sacred that I believe we must reinvent.” *Re-inventing the Sacred*. New York: Basic, 2008 130, re-ordered. Print.

Human consciousness is not merely an emergent...phenomenon. It epitomizes the logic of emergence in its very form. Human minds, deeply entangled in symbolic culture, have an effective causal locus that extends across continents and millennia, growing out of the experience of countless individuals. Consciousness emerges as an incessant creation of something from nothing, a process continually transcending itself. To be human is to know what it feels like to be evolution happening.⁴⁷

Religions have heretofore been humanity's primary vehicles for answering two of the biggest Big Questions, namely, "Why be good? And how? Whether the old religions of *Homo religiosus* will continue to help us up this road, or whether their habit of narrowly literal renderings of cultural symbols will subvert their ethical teachings

⁴⁷ T. Deacon and U. Goodenough "The Sacred Emergence of Nature" in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 864 of page proofs. Print. Methodological materialists, the authors' emergentism compels them to ask: What is the religious potential of the emergentist perspective? Their answer is surprising. Reminding their readers that they are in no way conventionally religious, these scientists yet venture to affirm that not only they, but every one of us, are religious in one or more of three senses: (1) an interpretive sense—in which we find ourselves asking questions that science can't answer (2) a spiritual sense—in which we find ourselves inwardly feeling gratitude, awe, humility, reverence, assent, and at-one-ness; and (3) a *moral* sense—in which we, in our interactions with others, find ourselves feeling care, compassion, fair-mindedness, responsibility, trust and commitment" 864 of page proofs.

and thus their relevance, is a debated issue.⁴⁸ But with or without the help of the old religions, insists complexity theorist Stuart Kaufmann in *Reinventing the Sacred*, “the task

⁴⁸ Loyal Rue has given these questions a trenchant airing in *Religion is Not About God*. Though he believes the old religions may well be evolutionary dead-ends he suggests that because we are “natural beings engaged in a continuous search for a more satisfying relationship with Reality” we may nevertheless “expect a vigorous future for alternative forms of the religious life.” *Everybody’s Story*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000, 137. Print. Rue’s argument is that religions have provided, in a way heretofore unmatched by any other culture-product, avenues for social cohesion and personal wholeness. He implies that any new story we tell ourselves must significantly answer these needs.

By way of contrast, the distinguished UC Berkeley sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah, is sanguine about the continuing relevance of the Axial religions, a feeling linked directly to his understanding of religion’s bio-psychological origins. The following brief summary can’t do justice to his recent *Religion and Human Evolution*, but saying nothing about it in the context of the current article is not an option. Bellah contends that around 200 million years ago, nature decreed that mammalian infants, first birds then others, would require a prolonged period of parental, usually maternal, care in order to survive. This created the crucial Goldilocks condition for the emergence of **two inestimably important mammalian traits**. The first was **empathy**, the seed of all later moral consideration. Bellah summarizes: “The suite of capacities that develop from the emergence of parental care are absolutely basic to the entire story I want to tell, basic to the development of empathy and ethics, even among many species of animals, and ultimately religion among humans...[R]eligion begins in the nurturing relationship between mother and child... the earliest behavior we can call love.” (“Religion in Human Evolution,” an unpublished paper given at the University of Chicago to the Department of Sociology’s Committee on Social Thought, October 18, 2011, 4). The phrase “earliest behavior we can call love” is from *Religion and Human Evolution* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2011), 61. The second trait was **play**. Parental care provided the “relaxed field” indispensable for the arising of play, since “young animals whose primary needs are taken care of by others, who are fed and safe, are the ones most likely to play” (*Religion and Human Evolution*, Cambridge: Harvard, 2011, 53. Print.). Play is not directly functional for survival. In fact, it is useless. Yet without it what is there to survive *for*? Play is the archetype of *useful uselessness* in that play is the crucible of all dreams, plans, fictions and hypotheses, all products of hope and possible worlds of the imagination, and all theory and collective learning. Bellah quotes Gopnik: “It isn’t just that without mothering humans would lack nurturance, warmth, and emotional security. They would also lack culture, history, morality, science, and literature” (A. Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009, 15. Print).

Is Bellah a naturalistic interpreter of religion? No. The problem with the reality of everyday life, says Bellah, is that none of us can stand it for very long, so “I will ...affirm the “reality” of “multiple realities. If, for methodological purposes, we must affirm the world of daily life as the “paramount

of finding a common spiritual, ethical and moral space to span the globe could not be more urgent.”⁴⁹

Big Historians should understand that the origin story they are telling *necessarily* provides its hearers with the germ of a moral outlook. And the very logic of Big History requires that its moral outlook—whatever it is—be species-wide. *The notion of an emergent moral unity thus appears to be a necessary condition for any Big History that isn't frankly nihilistic.* We call on Big Historians to be explicit about their role in creating the kind of global ethical-spiritual space that scientists like Kaufman have called for.

reality,” that does not mean that other possible worlds lack a reality of their own. Possible worlds and multiple realities have consequences we could not live without.” (Robert N. Bellah, *Religion and Human Evolution*, Cambridge: Harvard, 2011, 73. Print.). This seems to me very close to Jung's position that God is a *psychic fact* and that no further test of God's reality is necessary, let alone possible.

⁴⁹ Stuart Kaufmann, *Re-inventing the Sacred*. New York: Basic, 2008, 278. Print. Similarly, Eric Chaisson, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at Tufts University and author of *Cosmic Evolution*, writes: “Perhaps now is the time to widen the quest for understanding still further, to expand the intellectual effort beyond conventional science—to engage the larger, non-scientific communities of philosophers, theologians, and others who often resonate with the cosmic-evolutionary theme even if not in name, all in an ambitious attempt to construct a millennial worldview of who we are, whence we came, and how we fit into the cosmic scheme of things as wise, ethical, human beings. Humankind is entering an age of synthesis such as occurs only once in several generations, perhaps only once every few centuries. The years ahead will surely be exciting, productive, perhaps even deeply significant, largely because the scenario of cosmic evolution provides an opportunity to inquire systematically and synergistically into the nature of our existence—to mount a concerted effort to a modern universe history (*Weltallgeschichte*) that people of all cultures can readily understand and adopt. As we begin the new millennium, such a coherent story of our very being—a powerful and true myth—can act as an effective intellectual vehicle to invite all cultures to become participants, not just spectators, in the building of a whole new legacy” (Eric Chaisson, *Cosmic Evolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. Print.)

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