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What does Big History Do for the Study of Religion?

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Abstract

Religion, historically, has provided the understanding we need for everything beyond our immediate experience in the absence of science, ideology, philosophy. Big History provides a more comprehensive and valid understanding, at a time when religion is losing its appeal and social change is making it less socially workable. It enables us to see not only the significance of literacy and various social and demographic factors, but also what we may learn about the human propensity for religion from other academic disciplines outside the humanities and the social sciences.

Keywords: *atheism, Axial Age, ideology, literacy, sociality, science, philosophy.*

Religion, whatever our individual (psychological and cultural) experience of it, provides the historical and philosophical framework for our understanding – of everything. While the need to understand the world as a whole may not for all of us be strong enough to make us sincerely religious, for some of us it is strong enough to make atheism, or even irreligion, psychologically somewhat difficult,[1] and has inhibited its historical development. The need for belonging is an additional factor, belonging to a culturally similar community of people with similar needs. We may assume that in the modern world these functions of religion have for many been replaced to at least some degree by science, philosophy, or ideology. But one of the major problems, and deficiencies, in our *scientific* understanding of the world so far, in modern times as much as the past, and in the accumulation of human knowledge, is context, *i.e.*, the relationship between any particular focus of intellectual interest and everything else that we have no particular or immediate reason to relate it to.

Since the early development of modern science in the 17th century, when our academic focus shifted from the scholastic study of sacred texts and com-

[1] Which may explain why the Society of Friends (otherwise known as Quakers), which began in mid-17th century England as the most radical of a plethora of non-conformist Protestant movements, among whom Gerrard Winstanley in 1651 preached 'the Republic of Heaven', began in several of its Meetings a few years ago to spawn subgroups of 'Non-Theists'.

mentaries to the development of the most appropriate methods for the scientific analysis and explanation of the world around us, academia has spawned increasing numbers of independent disciplines, each of which has become a professional identity whose members now steadfastly defend their academic turf. At my university undergraduates can now choose from as many as twenty-nine different disciplinary options for their major in the B.A. program. However, over the past fifty years or so we have very gradually come to understand that however much we may benefit from the increased understanding of some types of detail that may be facilitated by the efficiency of research methods that are more disciplinarily focused, the problems of the modern world do not fall into disciplinary categories. No problem of modern life can be solved within the terms of any single academic discipline. Such problems must be studied inter-disciplinarily by a collaborative team involving several disciplines.

This is where Big History comes in. In David Christian's original formulation some thirty years ago, and as it has developed since then, and continues to develop, Big History enriches our understanding of everything, because of the contextual framework it provides by breaking down the academic barriers between different fields of study, including the different fields that relate to the human condition, and by promoting our awareness of so much else, not simply in relation to the material or the topic we are studying, but also the disciplinary theories that inform that study and the disciplinary methods employed. It creates not only a motivation for inter-disciplinary collaboration but a philosophy. Big History provides the most productive framework for bringing all our academic disciplines into collaboration, and making the most of our accumulation of data, information and knowledge so far. It provides the context that enables us to see the whole-time, space, matter, life: the 13.8 billion years from the earliest event for which we have even suggestive evidence to the current 21st century of our terrestrial Common Era, as a single evolving story of increasing complexity, conditioning everything we experience, everything we know, and everything we would like to find out and to understand.

Religion has generally been studied mostly in departments of Religious Studies. But as we look back on the growth and function of religion in world history, we can see that it has been far too important for us to be satisfied with any attempt to explain it simply in its own terms. Since it has provided the framework for our understanding of everything else, and its history is closely interrelated with everything in our lives, it requires explanation in relation to everything else that we can identify as significant factors, such as location, climate, habitat, resources, biology, food, health, society, culture, language, literacy, technology, and so on. Only Big History – the history of everything – can provide the framework for such an explanation.

We do not have space in this paper to deal with all of the relevant factors. The space we do have, however, will be sufficient to make some of the more

important arguments that explain why religion has been a cultural *sine qua non* for a particular historical phase of human life in Big History, from the early Palaeolithic in the Pleistocene to the latter part of the 20th century, when the process we have come to recognise as globalisation began to accelerate and change its social base, as a result of a century of particularly high population growth and the resulting expansion of our arenas of social interaction. As our social universe expands and our need to belong is satisfied in different ways, the significance of religion and its relationship to society appears to be diminishing.

The field of religious studies in academia may be one of the last fields to benefit from the advantages of increasing interdisciplinarity, since it is divided not only by disciplines – history, sociology, anthropology, and others, besides Religious Studies – but by the ideological factor of faith, between the different academic approaches and historical experience of various communities, as well as the challenge of culturally different intellectual and educational traditions. My own approach is anthropological. And anthropology, especially American 'four-field' anthropology, provides an easier entry to Big History than most disciplines, because it has developed over the past century and a half, from its beginning in the 1830s, as the study of human life and the human condition globally and historically, from its beginning in the emergence of our species, and its diversity in small isolated communities outside the major civilisations, not only physically or biologically, but also socially, culturally, and linguistically, from our emergence as an identifiable species into the age of globalisation.

Anthropology is a major branch of social science, and one of the biggest problems in social science generally has always been how to understand the relationship between the individual and society, which I am now re-defining as the problem of human sociality. It was the human proclivity to cluster and interact in larger and larger numbers, especially after about 10,000 BCE, when as a result of climate change and the end of the last Ice Age, we began to settle and to overcome the limitations of carrying capacity by producing our own food, that advanced our abilities for interaction in larger and larger numbers, by means of language, literacy, technology and collective learning (cf. Christian 2004: 146), far beyond those of any other species. Our most significant innovations since then – food production in different habitats, as well as our use of writing, paper, printing, industry and now digitization – have all occurred in the locations that had the largest number of people in interaction with each other, such as the largest cities, which before the 18th century were not all in the Western world.

Since the initial emergence of *H. sapiens*, some 300,000 years ago, and our dispersal from southern Africa into Asia, Australia, Europe and finally the Americas between 120,000 and around 15,000 BCE, long before we began to

settle, produce food, and live together in larger numbers, what enabled us to accumulate and share knowledge, and work collaboratively, giving us an advantage over our primate cousins and other species, was our advanced sociality. But the limitations of carrying capacity in different habitats also generated the conditions that made us not only culturally and linguistically diverse, but also religiously. Culture evolved within interacting groups of people needing to know what to expect from each other, and how to collaborate. Religion began as an extension of that process, around issues beyond the immediate needs of everyday life in the larger context of our relationship to everything else in time and space. Then when writing began to be used to record religious teaching (what we have called scripture) towards the end of the Axial Age (800–200 BCE, cf. Jaspers 1953[2]) as an aid to religious practice religion began to spread beyond the bounds of cultural communities, and to become the basis of religious identities. Since that time religious identities with texts (especially Christianity with the Bible and Islam with the Qur'an) have become the largest social identities in human history.

Culture, language and religion are all successive products of the collective learning that is generated by human sociality. They differ from one arena of social interaction to another, and change qualitatively as the arena changes in size. Big History has introduced us to the academic context that enables us to appreciate these changes. So long as all human social interaction was oral (until the initial adoption of writing as an aid to long-distance trade towards the end of the 4th millennium BCE), each social group was different not only culturally but also linguistically and religiously, because no ways of talking or understanding could be shared or negotiated collaboratively beyond the arena of face-to-face interaction. Culture, language and religion had begun as stages in the advancement of sociality. Culture evolves in the largely subconscious negotiation among people routinely interacting and communicating with each other about how to interpret their shared experience, in ways that make it possible for them to know what to expect from each other, to be able to depend on each other and make the most of being members of a community rather than lone individuals. Language is a refinement of that process and religion is an extension of it into issues relating to changes in our environment and natural resources, where we came from, what happens when we die, and what causes natural disasters (all requiring super-natural explanation).

Evidence of behaviour that we can recognise as religious survives from the Palaeolithic, for example in cave paintings in the Dordogne (France). As communities grew larger after humans began to settle and then to farm and produce food in larger and larger quantities, starting around 10,000 BCE, communities

[2] Jaspers observed that all the major philosophical and religious teachings in world history began with Confucius, Gautama (the Buddha), Socrates, Zoroaster and others within the period from 800 to 200 BCE.

grew larger than single arenas of social interaction, developing sub-communities, and sub-cultures – including religious sects, as well as dialects – as they became more complex. A certain degree of diversity began to develop even within cultural communities. They established formal methods for selecting leaders and defining responsibilities, duties and rights. The emergence of differences of religious belief was more problematic, and resulted in the appearance of prophets claiming supernatural inspiration to legitimise their authority. It is interesting that this appears mostly to have occurred in the Axial Age.

Every community needs some form of leadership. As it grows in size and becomes more socially complex, it needs a political structure that will legitimise some form of government with a leader. But it also needs an authoritative interpreter of its religious teachings. Until recently, these two types of authority have been essential in every society, and things worked more smoothly if they were unitary or at least closely related. The relationship began to become problematic towards the end of the Axial Age (in the 3rd century BCE when the opening of the Age of Scripture was beginning to expand new religious identities beyond the bounds of local political identities. The expansion actually took off in the 1st and the 2nd centuries CE, first in Christianity in the West, then in Buddhism in the East, and later in the 7th and 8th centuries in Islam both East and West). The problem of authority was managed in the expanded Christian community starting in the 4th century by the relationship between the senior cleric, the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) and the Roman Emperor. The Pope's authority continued from the fall of the Empire till the Reformation (long before the Pope's infallibility was formally recognised), and since the Reformation it was recognised by national Protestant churches to be the responsibility of national leaders: for example, for England and the British Empire by Henry VIII and his successors on the British throne. But for Islamic civilisation it was a bigger problem, because the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, who died in 632 CE (11 AH), unlike Jesus and the prophets of the Judaic tradition, had been not only the Prophet and the interpreter of the Revelation. He had also been the ruler of the community of believers, the *umma*, with the result that, unlike Christians, who expected Church and State to be organised completely separately, Muslims expected church and state to be a single organisation, and spiritual and secular authority to be unitary. This created a problem when the Prophet died, since no one could replace or stand in for him. The problem was complicated even further by the fact that none of the teachings of Islam, not the Qur'an or the Hadith or the Sunna, provided any political model, or any way of legitimising political authority. It was understood that a government was necessary for the reliable application of the *Shari`a* (Islamic law), and it was taught therefore that any government should be tolerated so long as it provided the necessary security for Muslims to practise their religion. It was this uncertainty about the relationship between Islam and the state that underlay the division of

the *umma* into Sunni and Shi`a denominations just three decades after the death of the Prophet (even though Islam taught that there could be no divisions in the *umma),* because the urban populations of the Persian (Sasanian) empire, who were converting to Islam from Zoroastrianism and from Christianity, felt the need for a single paramount religious authority. But neither the Sunni nor the Shi`i interpreters were able to work out a lasting solution. The Sunni Caliphate, which was established in Arabia, before the Arabs brought Islam north into the cities of the Persian Empire in Mesopotamia, did not work in the expanded Muslim community, and the line of Imams who were the established authority according to the Shi`i model lasted only ten generations, till the end of the 9th century.

For this reason one of the most remarkable developments in the history of the Middle East, generally not recognised either there or elsewhere, has been the recent application of an innovatively new model of state organisation in Iran following (somewhat unexpectedly) on the success of the Revolution in 1979, because it solves a major problem not only in Iran but in human history, a problem that has been experienced in different ways at different times in different parts of the world for over two thousand years, between state and religion, and especially in the Islamic world. Finally, nearly 1,300 (solar) years after the death of the Prophet, in 1932, for a small part of the Sunni community a secular authority was for the first time formally legitimised for Arabia by a relatively new local interpretation of Islam, the Wahhabi movement, in the form of the Saudi monarchy, when the monarchy established and nationalised the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. But starting just a decade later, a new long-term Shi`i solution was being worked out by a prominent Shi`i scholar in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and in 1979 he succeeded in using the Iranian revolution, which had begun as a political (communist) rebellion against a traditional autocratic monarch, and came to fruition as a national religious rebellion because the monarch, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, was an American puppet who did not pay sufficient attention to Islam, to apply his historic solution. Starting in February 1979 the post-revolutionary regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran developed a new system of government with combined democratic secular-political and Shi`i Islamic religious-legal authority, which although it was worked out by a Shi`i cleric, was based on Islamic scholarly principles relating to the Law, that would be equally acceptable in Sunni Islam (though perhaps not in those parts of Sunni societies that are still tribally organised, with a somewhat different expectation of authority from that of urban societies). Khomeini's new model, which he called 'The Guardianship of the Jurist' (*velayato'l-faqih*), was in fact the most comprehensive and (for believers) both politically and philosophically satisfying resolution of the problem that has been worked out not only in Islam but in any religion in world history since the Axial Age.

Unfortunately (for believers), the final solution of the problem with the application of this new model coincided with the early stages of a global historical change in the relationship between religion and society. As population growth has increased, and the arenas of social interaction have expanded, in Iran and the Islamic world as much as elsewhere, in the current *crucial phase* of globalisation (Spooner 2015), as religious thinking is changing with the changing social context, from societies of thousands, to millions, to billions, spiritual or religious authority is no longer considered so important as secular political authority.

As a social anthropologist I have offered a social explanation of the global change in the relationship between religion and society. But Big History has more to offer, because the context is philosophically larger. Religion has mostly been studied in the Humanities sector of the curriculum, and to a lesser extent since the 19th century as a branch of one or other of the social sciences: Sociology and History for religion in the West, and some other complex societies; Social or Cultural Anthropology for the comparative study of religions, especially in non-literate and so-called 'tribal' societies in other parts of the world.

But religion is not only a belief system and a way of thinking, but an activity, *i.e.*, a practice and a way of living, that features in the lives of every known society, prehistoric, historic and current. Our awareness of the universality of religion has led us to assume that being human involves a propensity for religion. And atheism (although it has been known in some form since the Ancient World, and is becoming more common in our modern globalizing world) has emerged as an elite philosophy of social and cultural rebels, not as a feature of society without religion. But if societies without religion, areligious societies, do not exist, then religion is not a social or a cultural factor, and the social sciences and the humanities (although they can study religions comparatively) will not be able to explain it. They will need to turn to psychologists, or to biological scientists like E. O. Wilson, one of the most interesting writers on biological evolution, who wrote, 'Nature holds the key to our aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive and even spiritual satisfaction' (Wilson 1971) or to neuroscientists like Andrew Newberg, who find neural proclivity for religion as an evolutionary feature of the human brain (Newberg *et al.* 2002). But in order to understand not only why there is no society without religion, but also how religion evolves in its social and cultural context, in addition to the approaches of the Wilsons and Newbergs, and the social sciences and humanities, we need other approaches that will help us understand the larger social, historical and natural context, as well as the biological evolution behind it.

This brings us into Big History, which provides the interdisciplinary collaboration that enables each specialist to think outside their own academic box and approach a new problem in a more comprehensive and contextually balanced way. What I am arguing in this paper is that there is something missing

in the approaches of all these specialists (including myself), who are working within the confines of a single discipline, something which only Big History can supply. Part of what is missing should have come from social anthropology, my own specialisation within the interdisciplinary field of anthropology, which since it has been neglected, is why I am trying to supply it here.

Let me then conclude by summarising my (social) anthropological contribution. Humans became the globally dominant biological species not simply because of their larger brains but because of their sociality and the abilities it generated culturally, especially in adaptation, language, and collective learning, as they functioned collectively in increasingly large numbers. It is for this reason that in the past few decades, as the process of globalisation continues to accelerate, we have seen the highest rate of technological innovation in world history. Not only are humans a social species, in that despite our individualistic principles we continue to interact with each other in the largest numbers that conditions allow, from the bands of the Palaeolithic, to the Facebook friends of the current digital age, and we collaborate. We learn and plan as groups and communities as much or more than we do as individuals. Other species may be highly social (cf. Wilson 1971, on insects), but we are the greatest communicators and collaborators. Human history has to be seen in terms of what humans do together, and any feature of human life that is collaborative, *i.e.*, a shared activity, has to be understood in its social form. Individuals can be studied anatomically, but anything in the experience of their lives needs to be understood in social terms, in terms of their relations with each other. While this may seem straightforward for activities like agriculture and industry, it is less so for religion. But it becomes clearer if we begin at the beginning.

Human sociality begins with Palaeolithic period of gathering and hunting for the first 95 % or more of human prehistory, when the size of our collaborative communities was limited by carrying capacity, because we were unable to do anything that would make more food available so that larger numbers of people could live together. The smaller the group, the more essential it is that they know what to expect from each other so that they can collaborate efficiently. They develop a mutual understanding about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Such an understanding involves agreement not only on the organisation of social life, such as whether they are all equal, but also seniority and special responsibilities, and their relationship to their larger context: their environment and how to use its resources, their relationship to other groups, how did they get there, and what causes disease, or drought, what happens to them when they die – all the behaviour and all the ideas and ways of thinking that underlie human diversity, which (starting in the 19th century) anthropologists identified as culture (in order to replace the implicitly biological term ‘race’) and have been studying comparatively ever since.

This work of anthropologists enables us to see that what we recognise as religion, from the 'dreaming' of Australian Aborigines to the nomocentrism (law-centric) and orthopraxis (emphasis on correct practice) of Judaism, the sacred law of Islam and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is a developmental extension of culture, and the larger the (socio-)cultural grouping the more complex it becomes and the further removed it becomes from the culture of everyday life, needing new levels of organisation to enforce it. For this reason, in small non-literate societies (of which Australian Aborigines were, and to a limited extent continue to be, a uniquely extreme form, because of the geographical size and isolation of Australia) it is not easy to separate religion from culture, whereas in the modern world it is no longer always clear that religion has anything to do with culture, because it may be something that is practised privately rather than collectively, and just at certain times of the day or week, if at all. The history of this increasing complexity, from aboriginal and prehistoric to modern globalising culture, began only about 12,000 years ago, with the beginning of settlement around 10,000 BCE, leading to the rise of civilisation in southwest Asia as adaptation to climate change and population growth. A major step forward in the process can be seen in Jaspers' Axial Age, when as a result of the increasing size and complexity of the time religious teachings began to be written down and to become scripture, and religious affiliation was no longer simply a question of membership of a local culture, but an identity in a large social complex. It was at this point, in the Greco-Roman world, where we have the first indications of rejection of religion as it was culturally understood at the time.

Even though the historical, and perhaps also neurological, propensity for religion may be an evolutionary product, religion is not necessarily a given in human life. It evolved as an extension of culture that grew out of our social need to agree on answers to questions we could not answer through our senses. It became more complex in the Axial Age, when literacy made possible the introduction of scripture, which led to the extension of religious identities beyond the bounds of cultural identities. But as our social lives have become increasingly more complex in the current crucial phase of globalisation, our rising global awareness is making religion no longer culturally functional – though the rate at which this is happening is geographically uneven. Religion grew out of our evolutionary inquisitiveness and was associated with our cultural need to understand each other and legitimise our morality. As our arenas of social interaction have expanded to what is now far beyond what was possible when we had no other means of interaction except face-to-face, beginning for most people only in the last century, we are becoming accustomed to some degree of diversity within our own cultural community, religion is losing its relationship to culture, and for many of us no longer satisfies any social needs. We now have other ways to satisfy those needs. It is not only the progress of

scientific research, publication and popularisation that reduces the role of religion in our cultural lives. It is the quantitative – and qualitative – change in the underlying basis of culture and society that is changing the way religion functions in our everyday social lives. The cultural product of a global society of ten billion or so will be far more qualitatively different from the cultural products of the communities we have lived in from the Palaeolithic (in scores) to the earlier stages of globalisation (in thousands and millions), so much so that although we can see trends (which already include a diminishing interest in religion) though we do not have any comparative experience that would allow us to foresee the society of the future.

For a social scientist the focus of the study of religion is not the quality of its explanation of our place in the world, or its truth, which is irrelevant, but the history and sociology of its following. As an extension of culture, it began in the small communities of the Palaeolithic. As communities grew larger in the Neolithic and the Bronze Age, their religions (generated in the same way, but by larger and larger numbers of people) became more complex, and since unlike the rest of culture they were not the product of actual everyday interaction, but rather of everyday interactive speculation, their increasing complexity generated a need for authority. They needed to know which answers to their larger questions were the ones that could represent the identity and the interests of their community. The emergence of prophets in the Axial Age resulted from this need, and the Axial Age culminated in the adoption of scripture as a concrete symbol of community identity. This was a new stage in the expansion of arenas of social interaction, which had begun with the prehistoric growth of cities on the Nile, the Euphrates and Tigris, the Oxus and Jaxartes, the Yellow River and the Yangtse, that had generated inter-urban networks of trade from the Mediterranean to China by the fourth millennium. This was the earliest significant stage of globalisation. Soon after writing was adopted as an aid to trade around 3000 BCE it was extended to administration, generating the expansion of cities to city-states and the development of empires. Each of these changes increased the size of communities and expanded the arenas of social interaction. They were the earliest significant stages of a long-term process that we now refer to as globalisation. The earliest literature (*i.e.*, writing used for the recording of stories) dates from the 2nd millennium, and finally towards the end of the Axial Age writing was used to record the teachings of prophets – the beginning of scripture.

Scripture changed the relationship between religion and society. Before scripture, each society had its own culture and each culture its own religion. Scripture extended religion beyond the bounds of its social and cultural base. But culture did not require an authority. It was only with the teachers and prophets of the Axial Age that certain aspects of culture began to spread. The first example

began with Socrates (who ironically did not himself promote literacy because it conflicted with his 'Socratic method'), which led not only to the spread of Greek learning as well as Greek literature in the Ancient World, but also to Neo-Platonism and its influence on Christian and later also Islamic teaching. It was scripture that made possible the spread of Christianity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE and later. And Islam, beginning in the 7th century CE identified itself with the written word by defining its scripture, the Qur'an, as not the writing up of Muhammad's teaching but the revelation of an original 'uncreate' text – the most highly developed relationship between religion and society.

Beginning with Christianity this relationship between religion and society began to weaken as the arenas of social interaction that form the basis of all social change grew at an accelerating rate in the modern world. Just as the relationship between culture and society is different in the globalising world of today than in earlier periods of history, or in small isolated non-literate communities such as the Australian Aborigines, so the need for an extension of culture into understandings that became known as religion, is very different and is satisfied in different ways.

I have attempted to show not only that everything in religion is related to our sociality, but that in order to understand our sociality, and how and why it should generate these very varied and continuously changing religious products it is necessary to bring in all the other academic disciplines that impinge in one way or another on the human condition: explaining our habitat and way of life, our biology and evolution, our culture, language and history, and the way all these factors in our experience are in constant change. This was never possible until the advent of Big History.

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