

Evolutionary Religion and the God Seminar

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Having read the documents generated by previous meetings of this seminar, I want to offer some impressions as to what's new here, among the relevant ideas of my book *Evolutionary Religion*. I'll also say something about *how* these new things may be relevant to the ongoing work of the seminar.

In the main, and abstracting from details, four things are new. First, an emphasis on zooming out, way out, until we reach the perspective of scientific timescales, and on getting a sense, from that perspective, of just how short a distance we as a species have travelled through time. I call this process and its result **temporal contextualization**. Second, we have a related point – one that's easier to see when temporally contextualized – about the **religious immaturity** of our species. Third, there's the idea that against that backdrop, the backdrop afforded by those first two points, a new way of understanding and perhaps solving the problem of faith and reason becomes visible. For now when we think of religion we can ask: What form of religiousness (if any) would *fit* our place in time and be *appropriate* for creatures as immature as we are? The quest coming into focus here I have called **the quest for evolutionary religion**. Fourth, we have the proposal that the form of religiousness that fits our place in time – that satisfies the quest for evolutionary religion – will keep a very **general conception of the divine** central, rather than a detailed one. Indeed, we now have a new rationale – the immaturity rationale – for accepting something like the emphasis on *mystery* that has been so much a part of theology. But a novel feature of the view is that religious mystery, like much else, may be a function of our early stage of development rather than a permanent fact of human life. By growing up as a species – one of the things that evolutionary religion would help us to do – we may, among other things, help our species (or other species who come after us) approach a fuller understanding of any divine reality there may be.

So: temporal contextualization, religious immaturity, the quest for evolutionary religion, and a general conception of the divine made central. Let me now fill out each of these points just a little.

(1) Temporal contextualization. When we ascend to the level of scientific timescales, we can see that *Homo sapiens* is one species of animal among others, evolving over hundreds of thousands of years, with potentially many thousands or even tens or hundreds of

thousands of years to go. After all, even with 300,000 years under its belt, our species is still relatively youthful: another 200,000 years would take us only about halfway to the average lifespan of mammal species on our planet. *Homo erectus* had a lifespan five times as long as the period of time we've lived through so far.

As to religion, specifically: we may be the first species on our planet to experience religiously; certainly we are the first to mull over religious intellectual problems systematically. And how long have we been doing that? Perhaps 6,000 years? How many more 6,000-year periods will follow? And while we're at it: How many *other intelligent species* – whether organic or non-organic – will follow in the *billion* years or so remaining for life on Earth? (By the way: How many 6,000-year periods do you think will fit inside a billion years? Answer: 166,667.) When temporally contextualized, one naturally and appropriately wonders whether by far the larger part of human religious thought, and of cultural evolution in areas relevant to religion, may not occur in what is for *us* the future. Instead of 'The end is near,' a message often broadcast by religion today, we need to hear 'The *beginning* is near'!

(2) Religious immaturity. It may take temporal contextualization to make us even consider the possibility of religious immaturity. But once you've learned to look for it, it's hard to miss all the evidence that it's decidedly real, including the myopic proclamation, just mentioned, that the end is near. That enterprises like this God Seminar appear to the general public to be *radical* is also grist for the mill! Instead of a pure love of truth, goodness, and beauty, impulses toward such things as self-importance, in-group loyalty, dogmatism, and rivalry have often held sway in religious precincts. Think also of religious violence and the disgraceful treatment of women through much of religious history. Our history features many missed opportunities – across psychological, social, moral, and also intellectual domains – for religious development.

When we consider such things with due humility, after becoming temporally contextualized, we'll see how it might well be the case that fundamental religious capacities remain quite undeveloped for human beings but would, with sufficient time and effort, be enlarged in a manner allowing us to perceive important religious truths that we have not yet contemplated. Perhaps the present human understanding of religious possibilities is no less primitive and misleading than Aristotle's understanding of physical possibilities. Looking at things from the macro-level perspective, we'll not only see the youthfulness of the species but see religion as just getting started, with its fate far from sealed.

(3) The quest for evolutionary religion. When we take that macro-level perspective, we are able to ask the following question: Might the problem of faith and reason, concerned with reconciling the religious and rational dimensions of human existence, properly be regarded as the problem of finding a form of religious faith that is appropriate *for the present early stage of human existence*, when all these immaturity-related issues still loom? After all, no matter how thinly or thickly time is sliced here, that stage might in ordinary terms endure for a very long time indeed. A related question is whether, thus construed, the problem of faith and reason may not be a lot easier to solve. We need to become temporally contextualized and aware, in a more focused way, of issues about our species' religious immaturity to even think of asking such questions. Those who have addressed the problem of faith and reason in the past haven't thought to do so. They have generally assumed that it has no such temporal aspect – that either religious faith is rational or it is not, without matters of time coming into it. If this view is mistaken, as I've proposed it is, then we can become aware of the importance of a new quest, the quest for *evolutionary religion*, which I've defined as a form of religion that *does* fit, that is indeed well adapted to, the present stage of human development. Then we can focus on solving the problem of faith and reason for *our* time – which again might be considerably extended – instead of assuming that the solution must hold for all times.

(4) A general conception of the divine. In the book I offer my own candidate for evolutionary religion, which, among other things, makes a highly general conception of the divine central, instead of any detailed one. One part of the rationale for this is that it is too *early* for details. It's good to have clarity, of course, instead of some unnecessarily fuzzy notion without clear content, but we can have clarity without detail. In particular, it can be clear that we're talking about a *religious* notion of the divine if we are careful to include not just a metaphysical component but also axiological and soteriological components. Let me explain. To learn something about a divine 'reality' is indeed, as the term suggests, to learn something about what there is and so metaphysics, but if it is a 'divine' reality it must also have some appreciable inherent value and thus be axiologically relevant; moreover if the divine reality is to be *religiously* appropriable, it will have to be something with a broadly soteriological bearing, something conducive to our own good and the good of the world. I think one will discern this three-part structure in any religious notion of the divine. Not only that, but the most *impressive* religious idea, one that is able to challenge us and stimulate the imagination and accommodate the most powerful of past religious experiences as well as the inadequacy of past religious investigation due to religious immaturity, will be of something metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically *transcendent* and indeed *ultimate*. The

existence of something ultimate in all three of those ways would be the deepest fact, it would embody unsurpassable inherent value, and it would be the source of our deepest good.

I call the proposition that there is such a triply ultimate reality *ultimism*, and in the book I argue that the content of this idea, though quite general, is well suited to our place in time and our religious immaturity. Not only is it too early for us to expect a detailed conception – an idea that *fills out* the ultimistic conception – to survive indefinitely, but a number of the elaborated ultimisms on offer today reflect our religious immaturity and fill out (or try to fill out) that majestic idea unworthily. Thus it may be a step toward maturity to undertake a kind of conceptual *purge* that allows us to look upon ultimism alone. Such a look, if sustained, may furthermore itself inform a religious form of life, and so there is enough content even in this general idea to take us forward in the sphere of religious practice. Finally, the general idea provides an excellent framework for religious *investigation* into alternative ways of thinking ultimistically, including ways that we may not yet have thought of – one that can survive all the turbulent changes of religious life over millennia to come. Such investigation now can become *part of the religious life*; here seeking, in a way, *is* finding. Finally, by making a general idea central in religion, we do not need to do any disservice to detailed, elaborated ultimisms and other religious or quasi-religious ideas that have emerged in humanity's short religious history. If they don't survive investigation – as I have argued the theistic idea of a personal agent God does not – they may still figure in some other, perhaps religiously meaningful way, for example by being usefully metaphorized or religiously fictionalized.

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So much for what's new here, among the relevant ideas of my book *Evolutionary Religion*. The second question I said I would address is about *how* these new things are relevant to the ongoing activities of this seminar. The full name of its theme is 'God and the Human Future.' This signals that the seminar already appreciates the religious importance of changes to come in the future of cultural evolution. One might think of my views as representing a way of showing just how much is packed into that phrase 'human future' and how important it is. As for the focus on God: though I am an atheist in the sense most widely recognized in philosophy – that is to say, it is my position that there is no personal agent God and that traditional theism is false – nothing in my evolutionary view *requires* that this position be adopted; one might be no more than a skeptic about traditional theism, a doubter or agnostic on that score, while accepting everything I say

in *Evolutionary Religion*. Perhaps more interesting still: the imaginative kind of faith directed to ultimism that I have defended is available even to those who *are* atheists in that sense. Although theism logically entails ultimism, the converse doesn't hold: ultimism could be true even if theism is false. Ultimism provides a broad frame of reference accommodating many more specific conceptions of the divine disjunctively. (Though it's a western contribution, it could have global relevance.)

Ultimism therefore appears to accommodate many of the forms of "post-theism" discussed in previous meetings of this seminar. I stand to be corrected, since the information I have consumed is limited, but let me offer some impressions. The tentativeness and uncertainty of weak theology and anatheism, as well as their emphasis on things to come and human incompleteness, are well accommodated by my overall view, which trades belief for imagination. But must one also reject "big stories"? Here I'd only note that one can have a big story without details, which provides a kind of framework for the investigation of details. As for Tillich's idea of God as the ground of being: if this seems too metaphysical, perhaps we only need the leavening of axiology and soteriology, which is what you get with ultimism. To give up metaphysical concerns altogether seems to require the sacrifice of both curiosity and imagination. How about the death of the "Alpha God" and of God as "Supreme Being," proclaimed here in recent sessions? These ways of speaking suggest that the idea of a divine agent, of a personal God, is bound up with notions of dominance and masculine power, but that seems to me a mistake. One must beware of conflating concepts with images. There is nothing masculine or dominating in the bare *idea* of personal ultimacy. Indeed, we can appeal to insights from recent moral evolution, which would have us associate goodness with such things as nonviolence and relational sensitivity, to show this (more on that in my other comments). In any case, none of the nasty stuff purportedly in traditional theism infects the idea of triple ultimacy alone. What about religious naturalism? This seems to me well worth developing, but it's based on an error if based on the idea that our only options are traditional theism or naturalism. Here I'd simply add, in light of all the human lives wrecked by nature, that if we are really ever to have justice for *all*, there will have to be a reality beyond nature. Apophaticism? Ultimism holds, disjunctively, all the ultimistic religious ideas we haven't yet conceived, and would serve, religiously, on its own even if we will never conceive the true details, so an imaginative commitment to ultimism is compatible with apophaticism of a kind, though that view is in error if it assumes that mystery *now* means mystery *forever*. Ultimism also can hold various instances of panentheism and even pantheism, though not material forms of the latter, which may rest, again, on a premature specification of our options and a premature acceptance of scientific naturalism. Where pantheism is concerned, I prefer a broadly

Spinozistic view, which has it that there are infinitely many 'modes' of divinity beyond the mental and material modes with which we are acquainted. Here is an invitation to evolutionary imagination!

A last suggestion about God and ultimism. We might distinguish two senses of the word 'God' in theology, the one referring to the supernatural agent of (what I call) personal ultimism and the other to what we'd have if ultimism *in one way or another* were to be true. God we might think of in the traditional agential way or, more broadly, as what we'd have if there were a triply ultimate reality – a reality metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate. Correspondingly, we have two senses of the word 'atheism,' one narrower and one broader. It would be open to theologians, then, to say that although they embrace atheism in the narrower sense, they have a job at all only because they decidedly do *not* embrace atheism in the broader sense. And they might invite other participants in the wider cultural discussion of religion to join them in certain investigational aspects of this job, finding themselves buttressed, when dealing with scientific naturalists such as the new atheists who appeal to evolution, by their ability to recommend the macro-level evolutionary picture I have been talking about. Against the background of such a picture, the strategies of the new atheists may come to look ironically non-evolutionary, if not decidedly backward. We can now ask *them* whether they reject God in the broader or only the narrower sense, making very clear what the difference is, and offering clear support for the view that the broader idea should not be rejected out of hand, even if the narrow one has to go, since if there is a divine reality we should expect it to be still mysterious to us. Given due evolutionary humility, we will accept that we may just have dipped our toes, so far, in a sea of religious possibilities.