# Don't Say All Religions Are Equal Unless You Really Mean It: John Hick, the Axial Age, and the Academic Study of Religion

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Synopsis

Don't Say All Religions Are Equal Unless You Really Mean It:
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This dissertation undertakes a critical analysis of the "pluralist" view of religious diversity, which holds that all religions are responses to the same transcendent reality. Although the pluralist ideal has a long history in western thought, primary focus is placed on recent articulations of the argument as represented by figures such as John Hick, Huston Smith, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Particular focus is placed upon the philosophical theory of religion offered by Hick in 1989. The aim of this work is to show that despite the intention of pluralist thinkers to move beyond the Eurocentric categories that have traditionally pervaded the western study of religion, their arguments invariably remain predicated on the problematic "world religions" paradigm, as well as a number of other discourses that have their root in the cultural hierarchies of the nineteenth century. I therefore suggest that in spite of their egalitarian ideals, the pluralist theory of religions ultimately reifies and reinforces many of the Eurocentric assumptions about "religion" that it seeks to overcome.

This argument is made by employing a discourse-analytical reading of Hick's theory, building upon numerous critical works in religious studies that have addressed the problematic history of the world religions paradigm. After providing a detailed introduction to the pluralist perspective and its place in contemporary debate, attention turns to the various criticisms that have been levelled at the world religions paradigm, focusing particularly on the cultural hierarchies that are implied by the seemingly benign rhetoric of "great" traditions and "world" religions. Focus then returns to Hick's argument with these problems in view, paying attention primarily to his use of the "Axial Age" metanarrative, which serves as the historical backbone of his argument. As will become clear, by following Karl Jaspers' division of religions into "pre-axial" and "post-axial", Hick reproduces a form of civilizational exceptionalism that stems directly from nineteenth-century race theory and other paradigms of cultural difference by which European imperialism was justified. I show that Hick's argument replicates at least six standard tropes of colonial discourse with regard to the non-urban (i.e. "primitive") other, and claim that this undermines his clearly stated methodological and ethical goals. This dissertation therefore also begins to outline a much needed critique of the Axial Age construct, something so far missing from critical literature in the field. The final chapter provides a detailed survey of recent historiographical trends that render the key assumptions of the Axial Age narrative empirically untenable; but in the interests of constructive critique, this discussion is also used to sketch out some alternative approaches to emplotting long-term religious history that are more in line with current historiographical standards.

The Conclusion looks at how these issues impact on the pluralist theory, as well as the larger question of how they relate to contemporary debates about the place of pluralism and theological essentialism in the academic study of religion. Although I suggest that it seems impossible to reconcile traditional theological pluralism with contemporary critical standards, my ultimate contention is that if these issues continue to be addressed, then opportunities will be presented to develop an increasingly sophisticated vocabulary for the treatment of long-term religious history that could bring together many strands of recent scholarship and move the academic study of religion in exciting new directions.

For

Vicki, Con, and Toby

**Preface**


I, James George McLean Tsonis, hereby declare that I am the sole author of this work, which is being submitted under my preferred name of Jack. No part of this dissertation has been published or submitted to any other university or institution. All sources of information have been duly cited. Whilst the body of the work can be read entirely on its own, the footnotes provide substantiation for all relevant claims, and often gesture towards topics that are beyond the scope of the main discussion. In general, works are cited in full the first time they appear in a chapter, in shorthand thereafter. In addition to the main bibliography, a supplementary bibliography has been provided for reasons that are explained within. It primarily includes works that are not discussed in the body of the text, but which are relevant to one of the central methodological concerns of the analysis and informed much of the research.

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## Acknowledgements

I firstly wish to thank my family for their love and support. This work is dedicated to them with gratitude and affection. I also express sincere thanks to the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University for giving me the space to pursue this somewhat idiosyncratic project, and for trusting that it would come together. Thanks also go to Trevor Evans for his facilitation of the Department's weekly seminars, at which early versions of chapters 4 and 5 were presented and profitably critiqued.

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I have had the privilege of working with three exceptional associate supervisors over the last four years. Brent Nongbri read all of the chapters in draft, and his feedback always helped to sharpen my thinking. Cavan Concannon provided important guidance in the early stages of my candidature, when the plan for this dissertation resembled little more than a plate of dropped spaghetti. I also acknowledge the support of Professor Larry Welborn, who set me upon many fruitful paths in the early stages, and whose enthusiasm was infectious. Further thanks go to Professor Edwin Judge, who took the time on several occasions to provide detailed feedback on a number of my proposals. Yet while I am deeply indebted to each of them, it goes without saying that all conclusions offered in this work are mine alone.

I have also been fortunate to receive advice and guidance from a host of generous scholars over the past four years. I particularly wish to thank Ward Blanton for his kind hospitality on a visit to Glasgow in 2011, during which trip (and our many conversations) the foundations of this dissertation snapped into place. Another person who has given me a good deal of her time is Carole Cusack of Sydney University, who regularly suggested readings that kept me moving in fresh directions, and whose eagerness to help has been little short of heroic. I further thank Professor Dale Martin for making time to chat in New Haven whenever I have been in the neighbourhood, and for helping to facilitate a number of useful connections with other scholars.

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In my wider life, I am lucky to have a funny, intelligent, and vivacious set of friends. I single out for particular mention the Esteemed Esquires of the Atterton Academy – Jimbo, Weebs, Nicko and Dravid – who enrich my life immeasurably, and who inspire me always with their own passions and insights. In the game of not taking life too seriously, these are co-conspirators of the highest order.

Finally I thank Sofia Eriksson, the sweetest of Swedes, who has the remarkable capacity of being relentlessly critical while constantly supportive. Not only did she read everything that I put in front of her, but her incessant concern with the nature of discourse has been an unwavering source of stimulation. Without her, the successful completion of this work is unthinkable to me.

# Table of Contents

Chapter 1

**Theological Pluralism and the "World Religions":**
**Sketching Out the Issues**

The topic of the dissertation is the claim that all religions are equally valid responses to the same "transcendent reality". Although not a majority view in statistical terms, this theological but non-hierarchal orientation to religious diversity has become increasingly significant in recent decades, and has assumed a central place in both academic and public debates about religion. It is a view today most commonly called "pluralism".[1]

The general pluralist idea has a long history (a short version of which I will provide soon), but it rose to the level of a widespread paradigm in theology and academic scholarship on religion only from the middle of the twentieth century onwards. One of the early statements came with Huston Smith's 1958 textbook *The Religions of Man*, which catalyzed a new paradigm that revolved around a canonical set of "great" religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity – a set increasingly being called "the world religions". In what was becoming the chief refrain of the pluralist discourse, these great religions were all held to bear witness to a "higher transcendent truth", upon which no single tradition could make a uniquely authoritative claim.[2] Although the same idea had been articulated at various times over the centuries,

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[1] Despite the prevalence of the phrase "religious pluralism" and its seemingly self-evident meaning, the term is actually rather tricky when its broad usage is scrutinized, and can mean substantially different things: (a) the mere fact of religious diversity; (b) a positive ethos of engagement between different cultures in a civic context; and (c) a theological attitude that argues for the transcendent unity of all religions. Yet despite these important semantic differences, very little attention is typically paid to this issue and the consequences it has for contemporary debates on religion. Unfortunately this is something I will not have space to discuss, and a full genealogy of the term remains a desideratum in contemporary scholarship. However, the reader should be aware that at no stage in this work do I use "pluralism" and its cognates to mean either (a) empirical cultural/religious diversity, or (b) an ethos for the negotiation of cultural difference. It is always used to designate a theological attitude, hence my regular recourse to the relatively uncommon phrase "theological pluralism" throughout the dissertation. I wish to stress this point given the general promiscuity of the term in contemporary discourse.

[2] Smith, H., *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1958). I have slightly paraphrased the quotation. For one of Smith's clearest statements of this view from a philosophical standpoint, cf. his laudatory introduction to Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 1984), ix-

Huston Smith represents the period at which this liberal discourse began to take root at a much wider academic and public level.[3]

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's influential 1962 classic *The Meaning and End of Religion* was another agenda-setting articulation of the pluralist view of religious history, one that had a particularly important impact on the development of religious studies as an academic discipline. Cantwell Smith not only urged that religious history must today be treated in global comparative terms, but that the analytically "reified" entities known as "the religions" all reflected, at a much deeper level, "man's variegated and evolving encounter with transcendence".[4]

This was part of a broad push by liberal Christian scholars and theologians to move beyond traditional readings of religious history that treated Christianity as the highest or most "fully developed" religion.[5] Although this perspective received growing support from the 1960s onwards in both academic and theological contexts, the pluralist view of religious history was given its most systematic articulation in the philosophical theory of British philosopher of religion John Hick. In his landmark 1989 work, *An Interpretation of Religion*,

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xxxiv, e.g: "There is a unity at the heart of religions. More than moral it is theological, but more than theological it is metaphysical in the precise sense of the word: that which transcends the world. The fact that it is thus transcendent, however, means that it can be univocally described by none and concretely apprehended by few" (xxii). *The Religions of Man* has since been republished as *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1991).

[3] The spread of the world religions paradigm is discussed in Chapter 3. A good survey of the paradigm's mid-twentieth century emergence is provided in Katherine K. Young, "World Religions: A Category in the Making?" in *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality* (ed. M. Despland & G. Vollée; Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1992), 111-130. I will discuss Tomoko Masuzawa's important analysis of the nineteenth-century background of the world religions paradigm shortly.

[4] Cantwell Smith, W., *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978 [1962]), 134. Cantwell Smith developed this argument over the rest of his career, especially in works such as *Questions of Religious Truth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967) and *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981). For Cantwell Smith's influential role in promulgating this view at a wide level, see Young's essay cited above.

[5] For a good discussion of the general trends of this reorientation, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984). Lindbeck opens the work by stating that "This book is the product of a quarter of century of growing dissatisfaction with the usual ways of thinking about those norms of communal belief and action which are generally spoken of as the doctrines or dogmas of churches."

Hick not only emphasized the fundamental unity of religions as Huston Smith and Wilfred Cantwell Smith had before him, but he attempted to make that argument historically plausible by placing it within an over-arching metanarrative that would make historical sense of the profound similarities across "the great faiths of mankind".[6] The narrative that he adopted was the notion of the so-called "Axial Age", first articulated by Karl Jaspers in 1949.[7] According to the Axial Age narrative, the pivotal point in humanity's religious history was the 1st millennium BCE, when new forms of religion arose independently in Greece, Israel, India and China that all bore a new "transcendent" dimension in comparison to the relatively "world accepting" character of the "primitive" and "archaic" religions that had preceded them. The Axial Age was construed as the birth of the world religions, the birth of history, and the point at which the foundations of the modern world were laid. There will be more to say about the Axial Age below, much of it critical, but Jaspers was likewise trying to move beyond forms of Christian and European triumphalism and to recast world history into a globally unified narrative. Hick followed him, but with a slightly more theological inflection: he construed the Axial Age as "the movement away from archaic religion and the birth of the religions of salvation and liberation".[8] For Hick, Jaspers, and

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[6] Hick, J., *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989). The work is an expanded version of Hick's Gifford Lectures of 1986-87. Hick also wrote the Foreword to the 1978 edition of *The Meaning and End of Religion* and regularly cited the influence of Cantwell Smith on his thought, at one stage calling him "the father of contemporary religious pluralism, rightly so regarded by critics as well as by friends and colleagues" (Hick, J., *John Hick: An Autobiography* [Oxford: Oneworld, 2002], 259.)

[7] The work was originally published as *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zurich: Artemis, 1949), and was translated into English as *On the Origin and Goal of History* (trans. M. Bullock; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953). I explore some of the prehistory of the Axial Age construct in Chapter 4 below. For a good survey of statements about the religious transformations of the 1st millennium BCE that predate Jaspers (going back to the late eighteenth century), see Hans Joas, "The Axial Age Debate as Religious Discourse" in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (ed. R. Bellah & H. Joas; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 9-29. A comprehensive bibliography of both primary and secondary treatments of the Axial Age can be found at the end of the work (469-537). [NB: Jaspers first publicized the concept of the Axial Age at a conference in Geneva in 1946, published soon after as *Vom Europäischen Geist.* (Post-examination edit.)]

[8] This is not a direct quotation from Hick but a paraphrase employing language that recurs throughout his argument (cf. e.g. *An Interpretation of Religion*, 21-33).

most other pluralists, the "soteriological" post-axial traditions represent "religion" in its most highly developed form.

Hick remains an influential philosopher of religion to this day, and his theory is still the most comprehensively argued of any pluralist reading of religious history.[9] But the basic pluralist viewpoint also extends well beyond its explicit formulations (which today includes figures such as Karen Armstrong and Tariq Ramadan) and represents a significant current in contemporary religious thought.[10] Christian theologian Harold Netland has described the situation:

> Pluralistic views on the religions are deeply entrenched in certain academic circles, especially in religious studies. But it is not merely the latest academic fad; pluralist themes are common among ordinary people who have never heard of John Hick or the academic debate on other religions. Although pluralism finds increasingly sophisticated expression among scholars, it is also a perspective that is widely accepted in rudimentary form throughout popular culture, and its influence is increasingly felt within the church as well.[11]

The fact that Hick's position reflects such a widespread popular logic has important implications that will be considered at the close of this work. Netland also points here to the fact that the field of religious studies contains a deeply entrenched element of pluralism. This link has already been suggested above in regard to Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Huston Smith, and the discussion below will demonstrate that Netland's assertion is correct in

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[9] There is a legitimate question about whether Hick's argument can even be called a "theory" of religion, with some critics suggesting it is little more than ecumenical theology operating under the guise of "philosophy of religion". I qualify my use of the term at the start of Chapter 2 and address the issues there. But to anticipate, I do not have trouble saying that Hick is offering a "theory" in the sense of a "sustained philosophical argument".

[10] See e.g. Armstrong, K., *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2006), which is the most popularly-oriented account of the Axial Age; and Ramadan, T., *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism* (London: Allen Lane, 2010). Although these works are of a somewhat different character, they resonate strongly with each other in their overall message. See for example Armstrong's review of Ramadan's book, "Tariq Ramadan's 'Quest for Meaning'" in the *Financial Times Online*, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/85ac8582-9b62-11df-8239-00144feab49a.html#axzz1PGBzaDFS (July 31 2010; last accessed June 24, 2013).

[11] Netland, H., *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2001) p. 24. Netland also discusses how the pluralist trend is also clearly apparent outside of western contexts, but this is an issue which unfortunately falls beyond the scope of this dissertation.

important ways. Particularly relevant will be the towering influence of Mircea Eliade and the "phenomenology of religion" view that all religions throughout history have been "manifestations of the sacred".[12] This position is often called "essentialism" because of the way that it posits an *essence* of religion – i.e. "the sacred" or "the transcendent" – which stands at the core of all religions, and which is not reducible to anything else.

This, then, is a rough outline of the discursive tradition that will be under focus in this dissertation. In my view, the various pluralist historians and theologians have made admirable attempts to rethink the question of religious diversity in the context of the newly globalized and inter-cultural world. They have come to the view that earlier forms of Christian exceptionalism cannot be reasonably sustained upon a broad, comparative examination of human religious history, and that significant paradigm shifts are therefore required at both the methodological and the metaphysical levels. Hick epitomizes this perspective in the opening dictum from *An Interpretation of Religion*, where he says that "a philosopher of religion today must take account not only of the thought and experience of the tradition within which he or she happens to work, but in principle of the thought and experience of the whole human race".[13] Moreover, all pluralists explicitly advocate an ethos of social justice, and invariably offer their contributions with a view toward more harmonious social relations at both a local and a global level.[14] Regardless of the specifics of their argument, these are laudable goals in a world wracked by ideological conflict and cultural misunderstanding.

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[12] See e.g. two of Eliade's most widely read works, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. W. Trask; Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1959 [1957]), and *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (trans. R. Sheed; New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958 [1949]).

[13]  Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, xiii.

[14] A paradigmatic example of this is the introductory chapter to Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man*, where "increased understanding" is championed as the central aim of the work.

However, this dissertation is not a valorization of the pluralist view of religious diversity. In fact, it is precisely the opposite. Attention has already been drawn to the way in which the pluralist perspective is typically structured around a set of "world religions". Despite the way that this seems to "make sense" as a simple descriptive phrase to refer to the major religious traditions of the world, the world religions paradigm has received growing criticism in recent decades for the way that its ostensibly pluralistic orientation is nevertheless predicated upon a very Eurocentric notion of what counts as "authentic" religion. An illustrative example of this can be seen in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's assertion that "the living world religions" constitute "religion's highest and truest development",[15] a view which carries the unstated implication that "primitive", oral, indigenous, and other small-scale traditions are not "fully developed" examples of what religion "really is". The Axial Age narrative employs a similar logic, and Hick therefore bases his argument upon the same notion, valorizing "post-axial" religions over "pre-axial" religion. Huston Smith even admitted late in his life that at the time *The Religions of Man* was published he "dismissed" such religions as "unimportant" (hence their exclusion from the 1958 edition).[16] This hierarchy was also reflected more widely in European scholarship and the sharp methodological partition between history and anthropology, whose domains were "civilizational culture" and "primitive culture" respectively. In turn, these assumptions – which were prevalent even into late twentieth century, and still linger today – are predicated on a series of now-indefensible tropes about non-civilizational cultures that stem directly from the racist and imperialist discourses of the nineteenth century.

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[15] Cantwell Smith, W., "Comparative Religion: Whither and Why?" in *The History of Religion: Essays in Methodology* (ed. J. Kitigawa & M. Eliade; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 31-59, here 38.

[16] See *A Seat At The Table: Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 2. I discuss Smith's comments to this effect in Chapter 4.

Therefore, whilst I respect and in many cases admire the general thrust of the pluralist mood, the primary argument of this dissertation is that *despite the egalitarian ethos of people such as Hick, the pluralist theory of religions ultimately reifies and reinforces many of the Eurocentric assumptions that it seeks to overcome.* I will suggest that this contradiction is important to address for several reasons: (a) because of the seriousness of the discrepancy between the pluralist ethos and what most pluralists have actually argued (which becomes clear once the subtextual implications of their arguments are brought to the foreground); (b) because of the high critical standards that all pluralists advocate, which renders this discrepancy all the more problematic; (c) because the pervasiveness of the pluralist mood in contemporary culture means that any critique of its key assumptions has wide-ranging implications well beyond the academy; and (d) because if these issues continue to be addressed, then opportunities will be presented to develop an increasingly sophisticated vocabulary for the treatment of long-term religious history that could bring together many strands of recent scholarship and move the academic study of religion in exciting new directions. My aim is to convince the reader of these claims by the end of this work.

The specific approach taken in what follows is to scrutinize the pluralist perspective by focusing on the philosophical theory of John Hick. Every pluralist has their own idiosyncratic formulation of the position, so instead of attempting a sweep of theological pluralism *in toto*, this work looks closely at one influential example of it. But Hick is a good candidate here for a number of more important reasons. Firstly, as mentioned, Hick's body of work constitutes the most comprehensive *argument for*, rather than simply *statement of*, the pluralist position. By treating Hick and not others, I will be attempting to critique pluralism in its most rigorously argued form. Moreover, in advocating what he calls his "religious but non-confessional interpretation of religion", Hick was explicit such a theory needed to be fully engaged with academic forms of knowledge, saying

> I shall therefore attempt to construct a comprehensive hypothesis which takes full account of the data and theories of the human sciences but which uses them to show how it is that the response to a transcendent reality has taken the bewildering plurality of forms that history records.[17]

It is precisely this statement of intent to harmonize his argument with non-theological scholarship that causes the undermining contradictions that have already been mapped out; but the fact that Hick positions himself in this way also means that the perspectives adopted in this work are fully consonant with the critical standards that he deemed necessary when considering the "total" religious history of humanity. Again, this is work intended as a serious critique, not a diatribe against a straw man.

Secondly, aside from the fact that he was (and remains) significantly influential, Hick represents better than any other person the confluence of the major elements of theological pluralism: namely the theological and academic elements. I have already highlighted his links to Wilfred Cantwell Smith and the trends in world ecumenical theology, but Hick was also clear that his view of the history of religions was informed at the empirical level by the tradition of scholarship represented by Eliade, the phenomenology of religion. Indeed, the first two footnotes of *An Interpretation of Religion* are specific references to the programs of Eliade and Cantwell Smith, and a firm endorsement of their perspectives. As I hope to show, this means that a critique of Hick has important implications for evaluating all forms of theological discourse and academic scholarship that are predicated on the assumptions of theological essentialism.

Thirdly, Hick is a useful case study because he explicitly employs the narrative of the Axial Age. Although not all pluralist positions are predicated on this metanarrative (Huston Smith and Eliade being examples), the Axial Age construct reflects a broader kind of "great

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[17] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2. Huston Smith similarly argued that his presentation in *The Religions of Man* was carried out "against the backdrop of critical scholarship" (ix).

traditions pluralism" that was prevalent throughout much of the twentieth century and which still has currency in contemporary scholarship.[18] Yet despite its continued salience, there has been little in the way of sustained critique of the Axial Age paradigm, so the focus on Hick serves as a useful foil to begin mapping out why such a critique is necessary, and what it might offer in terms of new research directions. This is another central concern of this work, and will be discussed in more detail below.

Fourthly, as will become clear, Hick is a perfect illustration of the problems with theological pluralism that have already been pointed out – i.e. the undermining contradiction between his methodological and ethical statement of intent *versus* what his theory actually winds up implying when its subtextual implications are brought into focus. Highlighting this tension in Hick's argument thus serves as a solid platform from which to make a more general argument about the non-viability of theological pluralism in any form of scholarship that aspires to credibility within the context of critical academic discourse, a claim I will return to in the Conclusion.

Finally, a sustained focus on Hick is justified by the fact that despite his widespread popularity, his theory of religion has never been subjected to the kind of discourse-analytical scrutiny that I undertake in this dissertation. As will be clear in Chapter 2, although Hick has been the object of extensive criticism since he began advocating pluralism in the early 1980s, this critique has almost invariably come from theological and philosophical quarters and has not paid attention to the way in which he unwittingly reproduced many of the foundational assumptions that he was trying to move beyond. And

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[18] Huston Smith's position is predicated more properly on the tradition of the perennilaism and esoterism, represented most prominently in the twentieth century by René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon (cf. n. 2 above), but also famously figures such as Aldous Huxley (cf. also Smith's major statement of perennialism in *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* [New York: Harper & Row, 1976]). Eliade is similar in the view that all of the world's religions point to the same sacred core, although he provided his own idiosyncratic formulation of the idea that will be discussed below. Both of these positions will be considered at the end of this work in light of the discussion of Hick. An implicit example of the Axial Age idea is Cantwell Smith's argument that the major living faiths of the world constitutes religion's "highest and truest development". An explicit example is Karen Armstrong's *The Great Transformation*.

although Hick has occasionally been implicated in the extensive discourse-analytical critique that has been conducted with regard to scholars such as Eliade and the theological underpinnings of much academic scholarship on religion, he has only ever been mentioned in passing.[19] This dissertation therefore fills an important gap in contemporary critical scholarship on religion.

*Pluralism and the Inescapable Presence of the Other*

One of the central methodological commitments of this dissertation is the motto: "always historicize".[20] Indeed, the inadvertent pluralist reproduction of Eurocentric forms of thought has come about precisely because most pluralist writers have not sufficiently attended to the conceptual baggage that their categories bring with them. So before outlining more fully the critical concerns of this work, it will help to situate the pluralist discourse a little more thoroughly in its historical context. This is particularly important for bringing into focus the *motivation* of contemporary pluralists above and beyond their specific arguments, which will be a crucial issue when later discussing why I think theological pluralism is marked by these problems.

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[19] See e.g. McCutcheon, R., *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 122, 147; and *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 117. See also Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, & Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 95f., 197. Styers' linkage of Hick with the intellectual heritage of the nineteenth century has had a particularly important impact on my thinking over the course of this dissertation, and my work is in many ways an attempt to expand on the brief aside on Hick in *Making Magic*.

[20] This motto is the opening slogan of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1981), although he employs it in a slightly different sense than I do (namely as the historiographical cornerstone of dialectical materialism). My reading of the motto is more akin to the analytical strategies advocated by Bruce Lincoln in his famous "Theses On Method" (first published in 1996; it can be found in his recent collection *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012], 1-3). The other figure instantly brought to mind by this motto is J. Z. Smith, who urges that students of religion must always "be able to articulate why 'this' rather than 'that' has been chosen as an exemplum", which he elsewhere calls being "historically and anthropologically responsible" (cf. the introduction to Smith's *Imagining Religion: From Babylon To Jonestown* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], xi-xii). For other fine examples of this approach, see Smith's *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

The central component of the pluralist position is the prioritization of *experience* over *doctrine*. In other words, whilst most of the formal doctrines of the world's religions are mutually exclusive with regard to their fundamental truth claims (e.g., was the final revelation Christ or the Qur'an?), pluralists typically hold these doctrinal elements to be fallible human accretions to a universal experience of "the transcendent" that has taken place within every major religious tradition throughout history. This means that pluralism generally functions as a *redescription* of humanity's religious history in ways that contradict the self-understanding of many people within the various traditions. This is an important issue that will be addressed in Chapter 2.

The modern discourse of "religious experience" has its roots in the Protestant liberalism of the early nineteenth century. Certainly there were a number of similar views in the mystical, esoteric, and hermetic traditions of medieval and early modern Europe, represented by figures such as Pseudo Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Marsilio Ficino, and Giordano Bruno.[21] Other notable precursors to contemporary pluralism (even if not all strictly pluralistic themselves) can also be found in people such as Nicolas of Cusa, Michael Servetus, Sebastian Castellio, the Socinian and Unitarian traditions of Christianity, as well as English deism.[22]

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[21] Although these were four quite different thinkers, they all represent forms of religiosity that moved beyond the traditional doctrinal framework of Christianity. For a good discussion of Pseudo Dyonisius and Meister Eckhart in this context, see e.g. Abhayanada, S., *History of Mysticism: The Unchanging Testament* (3rd ed [1987]; the 2007 ebook version I possess appears to be self-published), 163-170 and 286-295. On Ficino, who represents well the proto-pluralist tendencies of Renaissance neoplatonism, see e.g. *Marsilio Ficino: his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy* (ed. M. Allen, V. Rees, and M. Davies; Leiden: Brill, 2002). On Bruno's hermetic thought (and his fascinating life) see e.g. Ingrid Rowland, *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). I stress that I am only considering western intellectual history (and very briefly at that); fuller treatments of mystical and esoteric forms of religious thought typically consider a much wide range of examples, generally a selection from traditions both "East and West" (Abhayananda's *History of Mysticism* is a good example of the general scope).

[22] On Nicolas of Cusa in the context of theological pluralism (as well as other early figures such as Peter Abelard and Ramon Llull), see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 84f. For a good discussion of Servetus, Castellio, and the passage of their ideas to the Socinians and Unitarians, see Marrian Hillar, "Sebastian Castellio and the Struggle For Freedom of Conscience", *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* 10 (2002): 31-56.

But the specific discursive tradition of emphasizing "religious experience" is typically traced back to the so-called "father of Protestant liberalism", Friedrich Schleiermacher, and his defence of Christianity in the face of Enlightenment rationalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Whilst Schleiermacher was not a pluralist himself, clearly placing Christianity at the top of a developmental trajectory of religious history, his argument that the rationality of religious belief was grounded in *Gefühl*, "feeling" – the apprehension of an infinite mystery that touched one's soul – became a key motif for many liberal theologians and scholars in his wake.[23]

In the latter stages of the nineteenth century, the most influential proponent of this view was William James, whose famous work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) represents a fully-formed version of "proto-pluralism" that is homologous with the arguments of twentieth-century liberals such as Hick. Craig Martin has provided an impressive synthesis of the basic Jamesian view presented in *The Varieties*:

> 1) All religions start with a "direct personal communication with the divine" (38); 2) The experiences constitute the "essential" (433) "nucleus" (432) of religion; 3) Institutional religion is a secondary thing created by "disciples" and "sympathizers" with a "lust for dogmatic rule" (293); 4) Institutional religion "contaminate[s] the originally innocent thing," and becomes tied up with "hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness" (293); 5) Institutional religion expresses a "tribal instinct," and all "fanaticism" produced by this is external to "the purely interior life" (296); 6) Institutional religion requires "exclusive devotion" and "idealizes the devotion itself" (298); 7) The excessiveness or fanatical nature of institutional religion can be judged by "common sense" (297); 8) Institutional religion is the same for "every church" (38), for these things are "almost always the same" (433).[24]

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Hillar has published a number of other informative pieces on Servetus (two of which are noted in the bibliography). On deism, see e.g. Peter Gay, *Deism: An Anthology* (Princeton, NJ: D. van Nostrand, 1968).

[23] Schleiermacher's *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* ("On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers") went through three editions (1799, 1806, and 1821), all bearing a slightly different emphasis and becoming more conservative (i.e. less pantheistic) as Schleiermacher matured into Germany's greatest living theologian. For an excellent discussion of the work in its times, see the detailed introduction by Richard Crouter to his translation, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1-73. For a critical genealogy of the category of experience and Schleiermacher's foundational role here (including references to other such genealogies), see Robert Sharf, "Experience" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. M. Taylor; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94-115.

[24] Martin, C., "William James in Late Capitalism: Our Religion of the Status Quo" in *Religious Experience: A Reader* (ed. C. Martin & R. McCutcheon; Sheffield, Equinox 2012), 177-196, here 187.

As Martin notes, the binary distinction between "religious experience" and "religious institutions" continues right down to the present day, not just in liberal religious thought, but also in the widespread "spiritual but not religious" discourse and other modern variants of "private religion".[25]

But in terms of theology, which is the trajectory out of which Hick and pluralism would emerge, the pivotal decade was the 1960s. On the Catholic side, this was reflected in the watershed transformations that came out of the Second Vatican Council (1964-1968). In the documents which emerged from the Council, the Catholic Church formally rescinded its centuries-old axiom that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – outside the Church no salvation – replacing this exclusivist view with a far more inclusive message about the positive value of the other great religious traditions of the world and the possibility of salvation from within them.[26] The primary document in this respect was *Nostra Aetate* (the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions", 1965), which explicitly states that the Church "rejects nothing that is true or holy in these religions".[27]

The Protestant world was undergoing a similar shake-up, and began redirecting its long tradition of liberalism toward a new engagement with the other living faiths of the

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[25] Martin also discusses the way that these discourses valorize the good aspects of human behaviour as "religious" (e.g. love, charity), while the bad aspects are said to be "distortions" of "true religion" (e.g. hatred, aggression). He gives an interesting example about how the actions of al-Qaeda are generally regarded by liberal discourses as "perversions" of the "true" message of Islam, rather than the more nuanced approach of seeing al-Qaeda as representing a theological permutation of the Islamic tradition that has arisen in the context of American neo-imperialism.

[26] The history of the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* formula is often discussed by contemporary theologians. For a good survey, see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward A Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 84-109.

[27] *Nostra Aetate* 2. The other conciliar document often cited in addition to *NA* is *Lumen Gentium* ("Dogmatic Constitution of the Church"). The documents of the Council (totalling 16) can be found in Walter Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild, 1966). Many of the documents are also available at the Vatican's website (www.vatican.va; see the Resource Library). The story of the Council is obviously highly complex, and the influence of different ideas and different theologians is much debated. It should also go without saying that while there was a new push towards theological openness, conservative voices represented a significant part of the Council.

world. This was signaled perhaps most famously by Paul Tillich's work *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (1962). Tillich argued that Christianity was in the midst of a *kairos*, a revolutionary point in time that is qualitatively different from the normal progression of time (*chronos*).[28] His work, like that of many theologians and churchmen of the time, began to permeate the thought of a public which was increasingly seeing the effects of globalization, multiculturalism, and (perceived) secularization play themselves out in civic life.[29]

This marked the beginning of a movement by many in the Protestant traditions away from the kind of exclusivism represented so influentially by Karl Barth, whose neo-orthodox position had since the 1930s displaced the influence of Protestant liberalism and set the agenda for much subsequent theology and mission.[30] The World Council of Churches also began to make movements similar to those of Vatican II, and in 1971 officially endorsed a more open attitude toward other religious traditions, publishing in 1979 its *Guidelines on Dialogue With People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*.[31]

This nascent but enthusiastic engagement with other traditions – of which, it must be emphasized, the above examples represent only a tiny fraction of relevant events – had a number of important consequences. On the one hand, there was a "growing ecumenical

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[28] Tillich, P., *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), being the publication of lectures given in 1961/2. Even more commonly cited is the final lecture Tillich delivered before his death, "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian" in *The Future of Religions* (ed. J. C. Brauer; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 80-94; see 85f. for his discussion of *kairoi*.

[29] I say "perceived" secularization because whilst there was certainly an impression in the mid-twentieth century that society was becoming less and less religious, this has ultimately not proven to be the case, and the "secularization thesis" that held sway at the time has now been widely (if not completely) repudiated. This is, however, a debate I cannot explore here. For a good summary of the issues, see Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.", *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 249-273.

[30] On Barth and Kraemer see Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to the Theology of Religions*, 174-186. I am not discussing the long counter-tradition of German liberalism at present, suffice it to note that this is what Barth was reacting against. Yet although displaced, liberal voices still played an important role, with figures such as Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Bultmann being pivotal for the later thought of Jaspers and Tillich.

[31] See Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 138ff.

consensus" of many Christian churches in regard to the need for Christianity to acknowledge the value of other traditions, as well as the need to address the now global situation and reassert itself positively as an active partner in the project of world-building.[32] This led to a second development, namely a new emphasis on inter-religious dialogue. While internal Christian ecumenism had a well-established history and was simply given fresh impetus by globalization, a new recognition emerged about the necessity of engaging positively with *other* traditions if Christianity was to redefine itself in the global age.[33] But the most important development for the present discussion was the beginning of what came to be called "the theology of religions", a term first used in 1965 for a new field in which theologians attempted to account for the presence of other religions and explore their relationship to Christianity.[34] The perspectives taken on this topic naturally varied widely, from highly conservative to highly liberal, but the theology of religions swiftly began to present itself as the primary issue facing most contemporary theological endeavours. As the years progressed, three positions crystalized in the theology of religions, and in 1983 Alan Race first introduced a typology that is still prevalent today: that of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[35]

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[32] *Ibid.*, 135. See also FitzGerald, T. E., *The Ecumenical Movement: an Introductory History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).

[33] The literature on inter-religious dialogue is massive, although most of it is effectively "guidelines" for dialogue, rather than sociological treatments of the phenomenon. For a good recent treatment of the issues, see *Interreligious Dialogue and Cultural Change* (ed. C. Cornille & S. Corigliano; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012). Young also discusses the "dialogcial" character of the emerging world religions paradigm as it gained traction (see "World Religions: A Category in the Making?").

[34] A major landmark which announced the arrival of this field was Heinz Robert Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965). For an extensive overview of the theology of religions, see Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*. An excellent survey of trends in the first two decades of the movement is also provided in Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 73-167.

[35] Race, A., *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1983). A number of theologians have since called into question the utility of this typology, arguing, amongst other things, that it either does not adequately represent the variety of configurations that theological positions can assume with regard to the central issues; or that there are not really three options, but one: exclusivism, because pluralism and inclusivism are simply different types of exclusivism that impose their own universal narrative, however "tolerant" they may be. But for a comprehensive recent discussion of this debate that defends the typology, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel's essay "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology—Clarified and Reaffirmed" in *The Myth of*

*Exclusivism* is a position which effectively affirms the old Augustinian maxim, *extra ecclesiam, nulla salus*. This means that "other traditions are excluded as possible paths to salvation, for salvation comes only through the atoning merit of Christ, which is made available exclusively through the Christian Church".[36] Some of the most prominent examples of this perspective are Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer.

*Inclusivism* is a variant of exclusivism, although it is characterized by a much more open and positive attitude to the soteriologial potentiality contained in other traditions. This position generally holds that "the full light of divine revelation is given to Christianity; but it is inclined to be more generous in recognizing the revelatory works of God and instances of truth outside Christianity. It thus concludes that other traditions are included in God's plan of salvation for the world, although salvation must somehow finally be accomplished through the atoning work of Christ".[37] Prominent examples of the inclusivist position are Jacques Dupuis and Hans Küng.[38]

In marked contrast to these positions is *pluralism*, which constitutes "a move away from the insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity towards a recognition of the independent validity of other ways", specifically emphasizing the way that all religions are legitimate "responses to the transcendent".[39] As Hick and others have

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*Religious Superiority* (ed. P. Knitter; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 13-27. Listing 8 objections to the typology that he has discerned in the literature, Schmidt-Leukel acknowledges that many of the concerns are well-founded but argues convincingly that the typology still has good theological utility once certain issues are clarified.

[36] Plantinga, R., *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 5.

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] On Dupuis and Küng, see Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*, 197-215. Note that the title of Dupuis' work (*Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*) uses "pluralism" in its *descriptive* sense (i.e. meaning "Towards Making Sense of Religious Diversity from a Christian Perspective") rather than the *theological* sense (which, if it were pluralist according to the exclusivism–inclusivism–pluralism typology, would be more like "Toward a Christian Theology that Decentres the Role of Christ"). Dupuis' language is liable to confusion here, making this one kind of example of the problems hinted at in the first footnote of this chapter.

[39] Knitter, P., "Preface" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. J. Hick & P. Knitter; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), viii. This collection represents the first multi-authored advocacy of

suggested, this is a genuine "theological Rubicon" that calls for a total reappraisal of the Christian tradition in a way that inclusivism does not, primarily because of the shift in focus from doctrine to experience.[40]

Aside from their very substantial differences, all theologians engaged in the theology of religions were responding to the same new pressure: intensified globalization and the intensified immediacy of cultural difference. A productive way to see the emergence of pluralist thought in this context is to consider the sociological analysis offered by Peter Berger in his famous work of 1967, *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger's basic perspective was that the "social construction of reality" is constituted by a threefold dialectic.[41] Berger describes the way in which the continued functioning of this dialectic (occasional upheavals notwithstanding) is what gives a symbolic universe its taken-for-granted facticity, something he also calls its "plausibility structure". He then used this perspective to address contemporary secularization, i.e. the way in which the rationalist-capitalist political order of modern industrialized societies had increasingly undermined the plausibility structures of much traditional religion.[42] The rationalist elements of western society had already posed a

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the pluralist perspective in the theology of religions, and was pivotal in the consolidation of "pluralism" as theological category. I mention several other relevant works in Chapter 2.

[40] *Ibid.* For a survey of prominent theologians in the pluralist sector of contemporary Christian thought, see Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*, 282-317. Again I stress that for reasons of scope I am not considering other cultural traditions, even though many examples could be enumerated. Most commonly cited are international figures such as Ghandi, the Dalai Lama, and Tich Nat Hahn.

[41] Berger, P., *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967). Berger's view was more fully elaborated in his work with Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966). In a nutshell, the dialectic comprises e*xternalization*: "the outpouring of the human being into the world"; *objectification*: "the attainment by the products of this activity of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves" (i.e. the process by which society becomes "a reality *sui generis*"); and *internalization*: "the reappropriation of this same reality", which is transformed once again through the processes of externalization.

[42] Berger was one of the key proponents of the secularization thesis in the mid-twentieth century (see e.g. chapter 5 of *The Sacred Canopy* for an influential discussion). Yet he too has completely repudiated the thesis and accepts that is has been "empirically falsified". See "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview" in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (ed. P. Berger; Ethics and Public Policy Centre: Washington, 1999), 1-18; see n. 29 above. It should be noted that Berger still accepts

profound challenge to traditional religious worldviews since the eighteenth century, but when this was combined with the intensified immediacy of cultural difference in the post-WWII era, traditional plausibility structures came under even greater pressure:

> One of the most obvious ways in which secularization has affected the man in the street is a "crisis of credibility" in religion. Put differently, secularization has resulted in a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality. … Objectively, the man in the street is confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete for his allegiance or at least attention, and none of which is in a position to coerce him into allegiance.[43]

I have already pointed out how theology was increasingly dominated by this pressure, and Berger says that these developments "were practically begging for popularization" in cultural mood of the postwar period.[44] One of the most obvious consequences was that more and more people began adopting a pluralistic attitude to the question of religious diversity, even if only at the "rudimentary" level described by Netland above. Thus, put simply, *pluralism is what happened to many religious liberals as a result of globalization* – i.e. when the religious other was no longer a hypothetical question but neighbourly reality (whether in the local or the global sense). Huston Smith's introduction to *The Religions of Man* is an eloquent and representative example of this emphasis on the new global consciousness of human culture.

In an interesting appendix to *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger turned explicitly to the challenges faced by theology. Recalling that these comments were made in the mid-1960s, it is worth citing his prescient analysis:

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many aspects of his earlier analysis of contemporary religious belief, but he is no longer of the view that modernity leads to the "loss" of religious belief altogether.

[43] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 127.

[44] *Ibid.*, 165.

If one shares this inability to hoist oneself onto an epistemologically safe platform, then no privileged status with regard to relativizing analyses can be accorded to Christianity or any other historical manifestation of religion. The contents of Christianity, like those of any other religious tradition, will have to be analyzed as human projections similar in kind to other religious projections, grounded in specific infrastructures and maintained as subjectively real by the specific processes of plausibility-generation. It seems that once this is really accepted by a theologian, … [then] what he is left with, I think, is the necessity for a step-by-step re-evaluation of the traditional affirmations.[45]

As will become clear in Chapter 2, this is a perfect sociological prognosis of what happened to Hick. This is because Hick's autobiography bears out the fact that his argument for pluralism was a direct response to his experience of multiculturalism in the vibrant metropolis of Birmingham, where he developed new relationships with people from other faith traditions and became actively involved in social justice campaigns.[46] His theory was, therefore, more than anything else, an attempt to explain the profound *sense* of unity he perceived amongst the world's "great faiths".

Attention has been drawn to this issue because recognizing the sociological underpinnings of the pluralist mood is important in the context of my overall argument. As will be suggested later, I think that a large part of the reason why contemporary pluralists such as Hick have continued to replicate problematic aspects of nineteenth-century thought is because of the positively-charged *affective sentiment* of pluralism, and its ostensible "fit" with contemporary democratic sensibilities, which has blinded them to the serious problems inherent in the subtextual assumptions of their affirmations. But to make this argument, I need to discuss those problems in a little more detail.

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[45] *Ibid.*, 184. The appendix is called "Sociological and Theological Perspectives". Berger explored these issues in greater detail in his next major work on the sociology of religion, *The Heretical Imperative*: *Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979).

[46] See Hick, J., *John Hick: An Autobiography* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2002).

The phrase "world religions" had an interesting journey to the centre of the cultural lexicon. It first appeared in the work of late nineteenth century scholars to designate "universal" religions as opposed to "national" religions, and referred only to Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Yet by the mid-twentieth century, it had come to designate all of the "great traditions", generally meaning the major "living faiths" of the world treated by Huston Smith: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Other religions often included in this group are Jainism, Sikhism, Shinto; sometimes Greek philosophy; sometimes Zoroastrianism.[47] As will be explained in Chapter 3, the shift in meaning from a *universal* religion to simply *any* of the major religions is a substantial one which indicates that new taxonomic criteria had come into play; yet it came about with virtually no theoretical reflection. The issue is put nicely by Tomoko Masuzawa:

> Poor grammar, fuzzy semantics, or uncertain orthography can never stop a phrase from gaining currency if there is enough practical demand for it in the spirit of the times. In our times, the term "world religions" testifies to this general truth.[48]

Here too we see the affective sentiment of pluralism at play, the way in which nuanced analysis takes second place to a broader emphasis on unity. As Masuzawa and others have argued, this self-evidency syndrome has done more than just result in analytic fuzziness regarding "world religions" as a category of classification: it also allowed a host of nineteenth-century assumptions about religious history to shape the twentieth-century discourse on religion without anybody seeming to notice. Masuzawa has explored these

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[47] Young charts the increased emphasis on "living" faiths in the mid-twentieth century (see "World Religions: A Category in the Making" esp. 113ff). On which cultural traditions have generally gained inclusion in lists of "world religions" see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), e.g. 2-6.

[48] Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 1. Masuzawa's observation would apply equally well, if not better, to the word "pluralism", especially because of the strong affective resonance that the word has gained in recent decades.

issues in her important work, *The Invention of World Religions; Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism.* The title of the work provides a tight summary of her thesis: that while the world religions paradigm reflected a conscious effort to move away from earlier understandings of Christianity as the normative religion against which others should be compared, many of the problematic assumptions about what constitutes "fully developed" religion remain in the background of the new egalitarian approach.[49]

A concrete example will illustrate this point. One of the early motivations of this dissertation was to explore both *how* and *why* someone with such staunchly stated ethical and methodological commitments as Hick, whose concern was to develop a non-triumphalist theory based on an examination of "the whole human race", could say the following even in the year 1980 (in a lecture to a Jewish audience):

> We may say of the early twilight period that men had, in virtue of the natural religious tendency of their nature, a dim and crude sense of the Eternal One, an awareness which took what are, from our perspective as Jews or as Christians, at best childish and at worst appallingly brutal and bloodthirsty forms, but which nevertheless constituted the womb out of which the higher religions were to be born. Here, I would say, there was more human projection than divine disclosure. However, the demands which the primitive consciousness of the divine made upon man's life were such as to preserve and promote the existence of human societies, from small drifting groups to large nation-states. Religion was above all a force of social cohesion. There was at this stage no startlingly challenging impact of the Eternal One upon the human spirit, but rather that minimum presence and pressure which was to provide a basis for positive moments of revelation when mankind was ready for them.[50]

Admittedly, this is not Hick's finest moment, and his argument was significantly polished in his paradigmatic statement of the pluralistic hypothesis a few years later in *An Interpretation*

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[49] It is important to note that Masuzawa only explores the nineteenth-century background of the world religions paradigm, closing her investigation in the early twentieth century with the liberal theologian, Ernst Troeltsch, an interesting precursor to theological pluralism that I cannot examine here. But a good treatment of Troeltsch's importance in this context can be found in Hick's essay "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity", in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 16-36.

[50] Hick, J., *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 44f. One could be forgiven for thinking that 1980 is a misprint for 1880 – but shockingly, the date is correct.

*of Religion*.[51] But the raw nineteenth-century logic of the above quotation is nevertheless still the foundational logic of his more sophisticated argument for pluralism – and is indeed the foundational logic of almost the entire pluralist paradigm. At the heart of this logic are deeply questionable notions about what constitutes "true" religion, which reflect precisely the problems that Masuzawa and others have pointed out in regard to the discourse on "world" religions.

Masuzawa draws attention to a relevant issue. After explaining how the typology of world religions generally includes five to ten traditions, she remarks offhand: "though what makes them great remains unclear…". Aside from the fact that they are all *textual* religions, a crucial issue to which I will return, one of the most insightful answers to this question had already been offered by Jonathan Z. Smith:

> It is impossible to escape the suspicion that a world religion is simply a religion like ours, and that it is, above all, a tradition that has achieved sufficient power and numbers to enter our history and form it, interact with it, or thwart it. We recognize both the unity within and the diversity among the world religions because they correspond to important geopolitical entities with which we must deal. All "primitives," by way of contrast, may be lumped together, as may the "minor religions" because they do not confront our history in any direct fashion. From the point of view of power, they are invisible.[52]

Smith's comment is in reference to traditions of classification in scholarship on religion more broadly, and I will expand on his analysis in Chapter 3. But his observation already goes a long way to explaining the reason why someone like Hick could make such a firm distinction between "primitive religion" and "the great world faiths" – i.e., because these are the discursive pressures of the world religions paradigm, which reflect in a very important way the history of western power at a geopolitical level.

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[51] Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 21-33.

[52] Smith, J. Z., "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Relating Religion*, 179-196, here 191-2.

In recent times, as postcolonial concerns have arrived in the study of religion (somewhat belatedly, it must be said), these tendencies have come under increased critical pressure, especially in the context of the new advocacy of "indigenous" traditions.[53] The issue is framed well in the opening comment from Jacob Olupona's preface to *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, which arose as the result of a conference in which scholars were called "to respond to a perceptible lack in Western institutions in the study of 'indigenous' religions." Olupona writes that:

> This lack is especially indicated in the history of religion programs offered at many US universities. Western religious scholarship, generally the world over, has privileged "world" religions by an absolute linguistic separation into two classes of religious studies: "indigenous" religions and "world" religions. This arbitrary and capricious bifurcation of religious scholarship fails to acknowledge the universality of religious systems of belief across the globe. It fails to acknowledge the very sacred spiritual traditions of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and wherever indigenous people inhabit the earth. With the advent of global secular ideologies, based on technological innovation, many indigenous traditions will continue to confront their own decline. The privileging of "world" religions is largely informed by a particular academic orientation of scholars, whose traditions developed out of the "axial age" civilization paradigm.[54]

I will expand on the issue of the Axial Age below, but for now the important point to pick up in Olupona's comment is that in addition to the problems noted by Masuzawa, the

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[53] Despite the widespread reaction to Edward Said's *Orientalism* since its publication in 1979, religious studies has arrived rather late to these discussions – owing, as critics like Russell McCutcheon have argued, to the generally non-theoretical bent of the phenomenology of religion and the continuation of this trend into the discipline of religious studies. Aside from the work of J. Z. Smith, which had moved in a general postcolonial direction since the 1980s (cf. *Map Is Not Territory* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], esp. 278-304), see more recently: *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity* (ed. J. Olupona; New York & London: Routledge, 2004); James Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007); and Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and 'The Mythic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999). King represents the fullest attempt to establish a postcolonial agenda in religious studies. See esp. ch. 9 of the work for how the discipline might begin to move more substantively "Beyond Orientalism".

[54] Olupona, J. K., "Preface" in *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity* (ed. J. Olupona; New York & London: Routledge, 2004), xiv. The conference was held in 1996, and "sought to extend a discussion to all areas in which indigenous religions maintain a strong presence, in an effort to enhance our understanding of indigenous traditions around the world and to make a compelling case to integrate indigenous traditions into teaching and religious studies" (Olupona, "Introduction", 1). I pass over at present the fact that Olupona's comment contains a number of problematic tropes itself, but see below, ch. 3, n. 145.

world religions paradigm also continues to make implicit judgments about *contemporary human communities*, not just those from the "archaic" past.

I will flesh out some of the postcolonial issues more fully below, but the language of "world religions" is not the only element of the western study of religion that has received sustained criticism in recent decades. It has already been mentioned that the phenomenology of religion has also been subjected to extensive critique, and here the importance of Eliade and the issue of theological essentialism can be addressed.

Eliade's *oeuvre* is massive and complex, but the central assumption underpinning his work was that the history of religions represents the history of "manifestations of the sacred", and that this sacred reality was not reducible to anything else. In a key passage, Eliade asserted that

> a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred.[55]

There will be more to say about the tradition of non-reductive theories of religion in Chapter 2, but another famous example of this position is that of Rudolf Otto, whose notion that "the Holy" – which is homologous with Eliade's "sacred" as well as the pluralist conception of a "transcendent reality" – was something "wholly other" (*ganz andere*) to the rest of existence.[56] Eliade also subscribed to this idea with the firm ontological distinction

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[55] Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, xi. For a good discussion of the non-reductive emphasis of Eliade, albeit from a polemical point of view, see Robert Segal, "In Defence of Reductionism", in *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 1-36. I discuss Russell McCutcheon's critique of Eliade below.

[56] Otto's major work was *Das Heilige: Über die Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewendt und Gramier, 1917). The work went through many editions and was swiftly translated into both English (by J. Harvey as *The Idea of the Holy* [orig. 1923; rep. New York: Galaxy, 1958]) and, curiously, Japanese, by a certain Professor Minami (Otto notes this in the preface to the 1921 edition). As an ardent

he posited between "the sacred" (meaningful, eternal) and "the profane" (contingent, chaotic). Hick fits into the same non-reductive tradition when he affirms the view that "the intentional object of religious devotion is not illusory".[57]

This form of essentialism is predicated on a peculiarly western manner of thinking, whereby "religion" is not only distinct from the "secular" realm (however much they interpenetrate), but it is also a "genus" of which there are many "species".[58] In the phenomenological tradition, the common way of describing this was the distinction between "essence and manifestation", language that we can see at play with Eliade. One of the most strident critics of the essence/manifestation paradigm has been Russell McCutcheon, who calls it "the discourse on sui generis religion". He describes that

> What these strategies [of Eliade, Otto, etc.] have in common is the assumption that certain portions of human culture and experience are somehow distinct from historical pressures and influences. The primary vehicle for articulating this assumption is the long-held claim that religious experiences are sui generis, that they are their own cause and belong to a unique category.[59]

As McCutcheon demonstrates, this form of theological essentialism was the central methodological presupposition of religious studies as an academic discipline in the

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follower of Schleiermacher (and even an editor of his works), Otto famously emphasized the non-rational ground of religious belief, i.e. the "numinous" *mysterium* at the heart of reality, which lived "at the core" of "all religions worthy of the name" (ET, 6). Eliade discusses Otto at the opening of *The Sacred and the Profane*. For a comprehensive treatment of Otto's thought, see Philip Almond, *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to his Philosophical Theology* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[57] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 8.

[58] I do not discuss the history of the modern category "religion" in this dissertation, although I have been heavily informed by work on this topic, which has guided much of my research into the discursive history of theological pluralism. Amongst the most informative works (aside from those of Masuzawa and J. Z. Smith), I note Cantwell Smith's classic etymology of the term in ch. 2 of *The Meaning and End of Religion*; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press); and most recently the comprehensive account provided by Brent Nongbri in *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

[59] McCutcheon, R., *Manufacturing Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 34f.

twentieth century – something that can be detected not just in the many overt statements of the "reality of the transcendent" from numerous important scholars,[60] but also in the correspondingly apolitical and nontheoretical forms of analysis that the discipline has promulgated at the pedagogical level over many decades.[61] He similarly draws attention to the way in which the notion of a *sui generis* "sacred" constituted a discursive strategy that elevated the analytical techniques of Eliade & co. as *the only* heuristic approach capable of grasping the "true" meaning of religion vis-à-vis approaches in other branches of the human sciences.[62] This position constitutes what McCutcheon calls "the distinctive character of much of the modern discourse on religion".[63] He continues that:

> Around this sui generis position orbits an elaborate web of undisclosed claims and judgments that hold religion and the essence of all religious experience to be distinctive, irreducible, independent, autochthonous, ahistorical, generically distinctive, self-evident, unevolvable, an a priori category of the mind, original and underivable, unique, primary, necessary, universal, a fundamental structure of the human psyche, an archetypal element, and autonomous from sociopolitical influences.[64]

Highlighting the major problem with this view and its unproblematic use of such categories, McCutcheon states that:

> The danger of this method is that it fails to acknowledge the socially entrenched *judgment* of the researcher concerning what is and what is not *religious* – a judgment that remains unarticulated and therefore undefended because of the presumably self-evident authority of sui generis religion … the sui generis assumption is [therefore] a useful means for camouflaging political

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[60] One example McCutcheon provides is the Marburg Declaration at the tenth International Congress of the History of Religions in 1960 (signed by Eliade and others) that experiences of transcendence are "undoubtedly empirical facts of human existence and history" (*Manufacturing Religion,* 41).

[61] See e.g. ch. 4, "The Poverty of Theory in the Classroom".

[62] For a clear statement of Eliade's prioritzation of the history of religions approach over social-scientific forms of scholarship, see the foreword to *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Bollingen Series LXXVI; Princeton University Press, 1964). A quotation is provided below, see ch. 2, n. 33.

[63] McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 55.

[64] *Ibid.*

statements as if they were neutral, factual, and purely descriptive statements of supposedly self-evident meaning and value.[65]

In other words, the naturalization of what are actually historically-constituted standards of judgment leads scholars such as Eliade to accept "insider" accounts of religious action as authoritative, a view that totally occludes the way in which religious ideologies feed into patterns of social power, and the way in which they legitimate various aspects of human behaviour as if they stemmed from an ultimate, transcendent source.[66] Moreover, it totally overlooks some of the major differences between religions because it is more fundamentally motivated to harmonize them in the face of what was perceived as the growing "rejection" of religion in industrialized rationalist societies. As McCutcheon notes, that this relates to the intellectual battles which began with Schleiermacher's critique of the Enlightenment is more than obvious.

Pursuing similar concerns in relation to the disciplinary autonomy claimed by many scholars of religion, Robert Brown suggests that the *sui generis* claim is instrumental in preventing "the dissolution of the discipline by erecting a barrier to social scientific efforts to 'explain away' religion as merely a natural and cultural phenomenon".[67]

This points to what is effectively the most important methodological divide in the contemporary study of religion, namely the divide between "sympathetic" or "religiously

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[65] *Ibid.*, 57, 71.

[66] As McCutcheon notes, "[Eliade's] findings that myths communicate Being is not strictly limited to phenomenological description (e.g., 'my informants report that myths narrate what they consider to be authoritative, archetypal events of the distant past') but constitutes advocacy of a normative interpretation of these human essences and events" (38), stating elsewhere that "the conceptual tools used by scholars of religion (e.g., the sacred, religion *an sich*, faith, power, the holy) are [therefore] rather interesting constructions with far-reaching and significant discursive and sociopolitical implications" (17). For a series of incisive analyses of how different cultures have adopted similar strategies regarding "the instrumentalization of the past", see Bruce Lincoln's *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). On the "insider" issue, see also *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: a Reader* (ed. R. McCutcheon; London: Cassell, 1999). This issue is also addressed in Chapter 2 below.

[67] Cited in McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 69.

motivated" scholars who defend in various ways the "value" of "religion" vis-à-vis the growing critical challenges of "scientific" modernity; and "critical" or "social-scientific" scholars who seek to interpret religious phenomena according to the same theoretical and methodological approaches by which they would study any other aspect of human behaviour. Admittedly this is an oversimplified caricature; but in asking what characterizes the discourse on *sui generis* religion, particularly as found in "contemporary comparative religion texts", McCutcheon suggests that

> it generally consists in the use of vaguely defined and subjective comparative categories (e.g., the ultimate, the sacred, feelings, mystery); a methodology that can be characterized as sympathetic, or descriptive, hermeneutical intuitivism; an emphasis on the study of personalistic and non-falsifiable contents of religious experience; a prioritized insider's perspective – all of which contribute to an ecumenical theology of religious pluralism. It is a perspective that privileges religious phenomena by removing them from the realm of theoretical and materialist analysis. And in large part it is a perspective that has not changed appreciably since the nineteenth century.[68]

This much therefore gives a rough outline of the nature of theological essentialism, as well as some of the major issues that its critics have articulated. It will become more apparent later how these issues feed into a critique of theological pluralism. Chief amongst my contentions will be that it seems almost impossible to reconcile theological essentialism with new evolutionary readings of human history. However exploring this claim is something reserved for the Conclusion.

But aside from issues pertaining to claims about the *sui generis* nature of religion, the phenomenology of religion is another area that has recently received sustained criticism from the perspective of postcolonial theory, something of even greater interest in this study. As already suggested, the major problem with theological pluralism and the world religions

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[68] *Ibid.*, 124.

paradigm is the way in which they unwittingly perpetuate assumptions about what religion "really is" that have their root in the racist cultural hierarchies of the nineteenth century. Although scholars such as McCutcheon help in drawing attention to such issues, by far the most exhaustive treatment of the phenomenology of religion from a postcolonial perspective is Tim Murphy's work, *The Politics of Spirit*.[69]

Contrary to the common view that behind the phenomenology of religion enterprise lies the figure of Husserl (the founder of phenomenology in its philosophical guise), Murphy convincingly demonstrates that it was in fact Hegel who provided the foundation for the modern study of religion as represented by Eliade.[70] Hegel's thought is even more complex to deal with than Eliade's, and his impact upon western intellectual history is surpassed by few others.[71] This is particularly the case when it comes to western views of world history, the specific aspect of Hegel most relevant for my purposes.

One of the most important concepts in Hegel's arsenal was the notion of *Geist*, or Spirit, a secularized version of God that he construed as the transcendental force guiding the flow of history. The opposite of *Geist* was *Natur*, or Nature, and in Hegel's view the history of humanity was the history of *Geist*'s progressive self-revelation and the corresponding elevation of human culture out of "the conditions of mere nature" towards

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[69] Murphy, T., *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010).

[70] For an example of an otherwise excellent critical treatment of the phenomenology of religion that overlooks Hegel and over-emphasizes the importance of Husserl, see James Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2010), esp. 24-29. For Murphy's convincing argument about the importance of Hegel over Husserl ("more than but not instead of"), see *The Politics of Spirit*, esp. 4-10. Hegel's influence on the twentieth century phenomenology of religion is also clear throughout Murphy's entire discussion. As will become clear in Chapter 3, it was especially through the conduit of C. P. Tiele that the study of religion in the twentieth century inherited the Hegelian structures.

[71] For this reason Hegel has also been the product of a vast secondary literature that cannot be surveyed here. Over the course of researching this work I have learned most from three particular sources: Murphy's *The Politics of Spirit*; Shawn Kelly's *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2002); and the volume *Hegel and History* (ed. W. Dudley; Albany: SUNY Press, 2009). For a good general treatment of Hegel, see e.g. Horst Althaus, *Hegel: An Intellectual Biography* (trans. M. Tarsh; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000 [1992]).

"freedom" and self-determination.[72] Hegel could therefore make the distinction between *Kulturvölker*, i.e. peoples in whom *Geist* was active as witnessed in their cultural products such as religion, philosophy, and politics; and *Naturvölker*, i.e. peoples still living in the conditions of mere nature with no discernible political organization or traditions of philosophical thought. In turn, this corresponded to the dichotomy between "civilizational cultures" and "primitive cultures", one of the most enduring conceptual oppositions of the western historiographical imagination. Murphy spells out the implications of the hierarchy, which he calls a violent "economy of privilege":

> one of the heinous outcomes of … the structural relation between *Geist* and *Natur*, Spirit and Nature, becomes evident when it is applied to human beings, some of whom are classified as *Naturvölker*, while the correlation between *Kultur* and *objectiv*[*er*] *Geist* is elevated to both a methodological and a metaphysical principle. The result is that "civilized" peoples are inherently free and *Naturvölker* are, as Nature/Matter itself, inherently dependent, having their *telos* and purpose outside of themselves. This is, of course, a legitimation for the colonization of the latter by the former.[73]

Murphy goes on to demonstrate the way in which this Hegelian distinction between *Geist* and *Natur* provided the foundational structure of nineteenth-century *Religionswissenschaft*, which transmuted seamlessly into the twentieth-century phenomenology of religion. It can be seen in the nineteenth-century distinction between "ethical" religions and "nature" religions, sometimes construed as the "higher" and "lower" religions – the former being represented by textual, civilizational religions (which, *nota bene*, equate to the contemporary list of "world" religions); the latter being constituted by the "primitive" religions of non-urban cultures, which were thought to be devoid of any form of ethical consciousness.

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[72] Such is the view presented, for example, in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (orig. 1833). I will discuss the "conditions of mere nature" a little more in Chapter 4. On the role of freedom and self-determination in Hegel's system, see Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), s.v. "freedom" (110-112).

[73] Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 13.

Murphy's analysis is particularly valuable here because he not only relates these strategies of representation to the concurrent imperial expansion taking place at the time, but he also ties them to twentieth-century disciplinary practices:

> we cannot ignore the relationship between the phenomenology of religion and the historical phenomenon of European colonialism and imperialism. The set of representations produced by the phenomenology of religion, despite all protests to the contrary, … turn out to have a very strong resemblance to the system of colonial representations as described by colonial/postcolonial discourse theory. … [Therefore,] the phenomenology of religion, and the field of Religious Studies insofar as it is based upon this school, are complicit in the legitimation and reproduction of colonial representations of Europe's Other(s).[74]

Here we can see the concerns of Masuzawa, J. Z. Smith, and Olupona being more fully elaborated, i.e. concerns about the unacknowledged (and even *unrecognized*) legacy of racist nineteenth-century thought and its profound influence on twentieth-century discourses on religion. And to see an example of this, I refer again to Hick's comments above about the preparatory, "childish", and "bloodthirsty" character of pre-civilizational religion, which illustrates perfectly Murphy's claim about the continued reproduction of colonial discourses even in the late twentieth century.

This leads to the final preliminary area of concern I want to highlight, which will help to bring the above considerations together: namely how these issues relate to the metanarrative of the Axial Age, upon which Hick grounds his reading of religious history. Karl Jaspers was one of the last philosophers in the grand tradition of German idealism,

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[74] *Ibid.*, 33. This obviously links with McCutcheon's critique of Eliade and the twentieth-century study of religion in important ways. For other important critiques of the questionable analytic legacy of the phenomenology of religion, and its continued widespread influence, see Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, and Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). However I reiterate that Murphy's is by far the most thoroughgoing treatment of the issues from a postcolonial lens, which is what interests me most in this dissertation.

and he was especially influenced by Plato and Hegel.[75] He was also a proponent of political and theological liberalism, convictions that were galvanized by his torrid experiences in Germany during the Second World War, where he lived in often desperate circumstances with his Jewish wife, Gertrud.[76] In *Vom Urspung und Ziel der Geschichte*, the first postwar philosophy of history in Europe, Jaspers sought to explore the roots of human civilization in an attempt to find the foundations for peaceful global relations as humanity stood at a new threshold in world history.[77] These roots he found in the 1st millennium BCE, which he termed the *Achsenzeit*, the Axial Age, i.e. the "pivot point" at which humanity had first developed the spiritual and intellectual resources that lay at the heart of the modern world (resources that Jaspers believed must be utilized to rebuild that now-broken world). As mentioned above, Jaspers' treatment of this period was far more philosophically than theologically (or historically) oriented, although he nevertheless recognized that it was in the context of the major religious transformations of Greece, Israel, India and China that these developments had taken place. As described by the editors of his writings,

> Jaspers [saw] in the renewal of the unfinished task of reason mankind's vast and only chance of stemming the forces of totalitarianism that threaten to gain the upper hand and to destroy freedom … Jaspers [developed] the theory of the axial times when the impulse of reason first arose in humanity.[78]

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[75] For a detailed treatment of Jaspers' life, which brings out his major ideas in a more accessible way than perusing his writings alone, see Suzanne Kirkbright *Karl Jaspers: A Biography: Navigations in Truth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). On the importance of Hegel, see e.g. 215 ("Jaspers stood in awe of Hegel"); on the importance of Plato, see e.g. 206 (for Jaspers' "ardent defence of Plato's doctrine of Ideas"). For the best collection of Jaspers' writings, which ties his *ouevre* together well, see *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings* (ed. E. Ehrlich, L. H. Ehrlich, & G. B. Pepper; Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1986).

[76] See Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers*, 142ff. See also Joas, "The Axial Age as Religious Discourse", esp. 22.

[77] Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers*, 213f.

[78] Ehrlich et al., *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 381. They also comment that "to Jaspers the sense of the study of history lies in recalling the ancient power of reason and enacting it in its communicative mode" (382). Jaspers' emphasis on the concept of "communication" (which he construed as a "loving struggle" for Truth) was crucial to his program, but to treat it even in outline would necessitate too lengthy a digression.

As with the theological pluralists, Jaspers' intentions are to be admired. But upon closer scrutiny, his view that "reason" first emerged with civilizational culture is part of precisely the same reading of world history that Hegel had offered with the metanarrative of *Geist*. In line with virtually all nineteenth-century historical thought, the Axial Age narrative was predicated on an interlocking set of assumptions about the differences between textual, civilizational cultures, and non-textual, non-urban cultures: civilizational cultures were dynamic, rational, and ethical; primitive cultures were static, irrational, and devoid of ethical principles.[79]

There are certainly major differences between Jaspers' reading of world history and the Hegelian view: where Hegel asserted a clear teleological hierarchy in which *Geist* passed from East to West culminating in enlightened, Protestant Europe, Jaspers pluralized the relationship between the world's major cultures and argued (explicitly *contra* Hegel) that it was across all of them that "Man, as we know him today, came into being".[80] Yet while this statement was intended as a positive affirmation, it also replicates perfectly the Hegelian distinction between *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker*, one of the many permutations of the civilized/primitive dichotomy that infused nineteenth-century thought. So again, just like the pluralists, even though Jaspers' aim was "the greatest inclusiveness and the most categoric unity of human history",[81] he reproduced a form of historical emplotment that valorizes civilizational culture in a way that continues to perpetuate the racist and generally ill-informed perceptions of non-urban peoples by which European imperialism was justified.

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[79] For a good inventory of the tropes I am talking about, and how they have survived in academic, popular, and political discourses well beyond the collapse of colonialism itself, see David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Colonial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). These issues are addressed in Chapter 4 below.

[80] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 1.

[81] *Ibid.*, xvi.

When Hick adopts the Axial Age narrative, he picks up all of this baggage. I refer to both the comment above about the preparatory nature of archaic religion, as well as the fact that the Axial Age narrative is Hick's point of departure in *An Interpretation of Religion*.[82] Enough has already been said enough about the discrepancy between the implications of this view of history and Hick's methodological and ethical commitments, so it is sufficient for now simply to point out Hick's relation to the Axial Age construct. But it should be clear that the Axial Age narrative is also beset by the other problems outlined above: the axial religions are the "world" religions; the axial religions constitute the highest manifestations of the "essence" of religion (i.e. "transcendence"); and the whole "axial" idea is another instantiation of the structures of colonial discourse and their reproduction even into the twentieth century.

It must also be noted that since Jaspers' original formulation, the Axial Age idea has been developed by scholars other than Hick. Much of Jaspers' historical analysis was based upon the comparative historical sociology of Max Weber, and in Jaspers' wake that line of scholarship was continued.[83] Initially, the work was led by S. N. E. Eisenstadt and Eric Voegelin, who began to map out a more comprehensive historical comparison of the axial civilizations, Eisenstadt in particular spearheading a number of multi-specialist collections dedicated to that task.[84] Although philosophical questions have always remained important

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[82] The first chapter of *An Interpretation of Religion* after the introduction is entitled "The Soteriological Character of Post-Axial Religion" (21-35).

[83] In addition to Hegel and Plato, Jaspers also idolized Weber tremendously, as is clear from much of his private correspondence (cf. e.g. Kirkbright 251, where Jaspers says in a letter to his parents of 1910 that Weber "ist die klügste Mann, mit dem ich bis jetzt gesprochen habe", a reverential view he maintained 10 years later upon the sad news of Weber's death [cf. 254]). See also *Karl Jaspers on Max Weber* (ed. J. Dreijmanis; trans. R. J. Whelan; New York: Paragon, 1989), which brings together Jaspers' numerous published writings on Weber and reveals the extraordinary extent of his reverence. Jaspers even called him the "Galilei of the *Geisteswissenschaften*" (xvi), and emphatically regretted that Weber's brilliance had not been more widely appreciated.

[84] Amongst other important works, Voegelin wrote a Japserian-influenced treatment of world history called *Order and History* (5 vols; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956-1987). Eisenstadt's individual contributions include *Revolution and Transformation of Societies: A Comparative Study of Civilizations* (New York: Free Press, 1978) and "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics",

in this trajectory, the primary focus has instead been on social-scientific forms of analysis. Most recently, this trajectory has led to the magnum opus of Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From The Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011), a work that represents a true watershed in the academic study of religious history.[85]

Unfortunately, proper consideration of this body of work falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Certain elements of Bellah's contribution will be considered in Chapter 5 and the Conclusion, but a full treatment would take things too far afield. Suffice it to say, however, that while Bellah has laid the ground for an evolutionary treatment of religion that moves well beyond the methodological divides of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fact that he and his interlocutors still talk in terms of an "axial" age shows that many of the older assumptions continue to play an important role even in the more sophisticated contemporary paradigm.[86] Whilst a few of these issues have been mentioned in critical asides from some of those involved in the current discussion, there is yet to be any sustained interrogation of the central categories of the Axial Age discourse that brings to light the way in which they continue to perpetuate discursive structures that have been rejected in most other academic contexts.[87] Therefore, although I will confine my critique to

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*European Journal of Science* 23 (1982): 294-314. His three important edited publications are *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986); *Kulturen der Achsenzeit* (5 vols; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987-1992), and (with J. P. Arnason and B. Wittrock) *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

[85] Bellah, R., *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). I will mention again later why I think Bellah's work is so much more productive than the typical evolutionary approaches, but in summary it is because he opens space for a more inclusive conversation that can bridge the methodological gap between scholars who approach the question of religion evolutionarily, anthropologically, *and* via traditional means of philological and archaeological analysis. This quality is missing from virtually all other contemporary evolutionary treatments of religion (see n. 95 below).

[86] By "Bellah's interlocutors" I mean primarily the scholars who contributed to the 2012 volume *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (see n. 7 above), which is the companion volume to *Religion in Human Evolution* and was the result of a 2008 conference in which draft chapters of Bellah's work were precirculated as stimulus to the discussion. For the way in which the intellectual legacy of the nineteenth century still has uncritical currency in the contemporary debate, see Jack Tsonis, "Review: *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*" in the *Alternative Religion and Spirituality Review* 3 (2012): 262-267.

[87] Of particular critical value are the essays in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* by Jan Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age" (366-407); José Casanova, "Religion, the Axial Age, and Secular

the Axial Age as deployed by Jaspers and Hick, this begins to address another lacuna in contemporary scholarship on religion and lays the platform for a much more thorough investigation. Some directions that might be taken in this critique will be discussed near the end of this work, as they have important bearing on my overall argument about the problems inherent in using theological essentialism within an evolutionary view of human history.

Having now outlined these concerns and their relation to a number of major critical trends in the academic study of religion, it remains only to explain the way in which the argument will unfold.

*The Critical Shape of this Work*

This dissertation is fundamentally a work of discourse analysis, one that is based upon a rigorous historicization of the conceptual paradigms that inform theological pluralism. It situates Hick in relation to a long European tradition of talking about religious history, examines the way in which he unreflectively relied on a number of problematic ideas, and amplifies the subtextual implications of these ideas to bring out the way in which they fundamentally undermine the pluralistic ethos that animated his life and work.[88] It therefore relies on the strategies of analysis pioneered by figures such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Said, Butler, and many others, including those who have specifically addressed the western

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Modernity in Bellah's Theory of Religious Evolution" (191-221); and Björn Wittrock, "The Axial Age in Global History: Cultural Crystallizations and Societal Transformations" (102-125).

[88] For an excellent outline of the principles of discourse analysis that reflect the approach taken here, see Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, especially the methodological orientation of chapter 2. I treat Hick particular along the lines of Murphy's distillation that "[a] text cannot be seen as a self-contained system of signifiers/signifieds, for its system of meanings draws upon a series of pre-existent meanings, formulae, tropes, clichés, conventions, genres, taxonomies, myths, characters, histories, ideologems, and other historico-cultural-linguistic items" (50).

discourse on religion such as Masuzawa, J. Z. Smith, McCutcheon, and Murphy.[89] Yet in my critique of the Axial Age construct, and particularly when considering different explanatory paradigms that might be developed to account for the cultural transformations of the period in ways that do not rely on ideas like *Geist*, I am also heavily informed by various forms of anthropology and evolutionary history. This dissertation therefore traverses a number of distinct disciplinary domains, but I hope to show that this somewhat unconventional approach can open up new conceptual space in which to interrogate one of the most important currents of contemporary religious thought. The argument proceeds as follows.

Chapter 2 begins with a detailed but non-critical exposition of John Hick and the pluralist theory of religions. By "non-critical" I simply mean a reading that does not yet engage the above concerns, and instead focuses on establishing the structure of Hick's argument. Not only will this lay a base for the subsequent chapters, but introducing Hick in this way is consistent with my attempt to avoid over-simplifying his claims. The chapter begins by addressing the question of whether Hick's argument can be called a "theory" in the proper sense of the term. Although I am sympathetic to scholars like McCutcheon who reserve the term only for "non-religious" explanations of religion, I use the term in a slightly broader sense of "sustained philosophical argument". I justify doing so by first providing an overview of the modern enterprise of theories of religion – mapping out first the history of naturalistic theories, and then the counter-discourse of "religious" theories, which extend from Schleiermacher, through Otto and Eliade, to Hick.

Following this, attention turns to the biographical context in which Hick's theory of pluralism emerged, namely the way in which it grew out of his first-hand experience of

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[89] Bruce Lincoln is another scholar who has made excellent use of the discourse-analytical approach in the study of religion, and his work is constantly cited in critical studies in the discipline. Yet he has focused more on the discursive construction of society than on the concept-historicization approach of someone like J. Z. Smith, hence why I spend more time with Smith in this work (cf. n. 20 above).

multiculturalism. Keeping the biographical context of Hick's theory in view is important, because it highlights the broader ethos that he tried to promote throughout his life, something that will be important to consider later. This will leave things in a good position to then offer a detailed examination of the argument of *An Interpretation of Religion*, particularly the way that Hick augments his ethos at the methodological level via (a) an argument for epistemological perspectivism, and (b) a comparison of the ethical and experiential similarities amongst the traditions. The final section of the chapter provides an extended examination of the traditional criticisms that have been leveled against theological pluralism, outlining what I discern to be the five most common complaints. Aside from helping to demonstrate the distinct contribution of this dissertation, which revolves issues different from those raised in the traditional criticisms, this is important for two reasons: firstly because it defends Hick's theory against a host of criticisms that have typically misread the way in which his argument works (something again in line with the non-critical approach of the chapter); and secondly, because by making this defence I establish a much more justifiable ground from which to launch my own critique.[90]

Chapter 3 shifts gears into a more critical mode, and turns from Hick to the discourse on world religions at a broader level. The particular concern here will be to historicize the rhetoric of "great traditions" that permeates Hick's work, bringing to light the host of unstated assumptions about the apparently not-so-great traditions that are implied in this discourse.[91] In other words, the aim of this chapter is to bring to the foreground the host of

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[90] It is important to mention that Hick responded to 15 years of criticism in the preface to the second edition of *An Interpretation of Religion* (2nd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xvii-xli. In my view, Hick offers a reasonable defence of most challenges that he addresses. But two things must be noted: 1) almost all of the 15 criticisms Hick lists are variations on the theme of pluralism's formal philosophical validity; and thus 2), none of them revolve around the issues raised in the following chapters. As such, rather than survey Hick's points of defence, I offer my own assessment of the traditional criticisms in a way that allows me to raise methodological issues that will become important throughout the rest of this work.

[91] The rhetoric of "great traditions" is effectively homologous to the phraseology of "world religions", and it seems to me that Hick preferred the former mainly on account of its slightly more lyrical flourish.

historically embedded assumptions that constitute the world religions discourse, assumptions that usually operate well below the level of explicit formulation because of the positive sentiment of most pluralist arguments. Specifically, I want to bring into focus (a) the qualitative hierarchy that existed between textual religions and non-textual religions in the period before the twentieth century; and (b) how even in the pluralistic world religions paradigm of the twentieth century, the dominant categories of the discourse continued to perpetuate the racist hierarchies of the nineteenth century in subtle but foundational ways, despite the fact that those hierarchies were denounced at the explicit level.

These issues are brought into focus by tracing changing forms of classification in the western study of religion from the sixteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century, the time at which Hick and Cantwell Smith were writing. The chapter begins by establishing the pre-nineteenth century background of European knowledge about other religious traditions, and the fourfold typology of classification in this period – i.e. the typology of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Everything Else (usually a category such as "paganism" or "idolatry"). The second section then surveys the momentous intellectual transformations of the nineteenth century, mapping two specific trajectories: firstly the emergence of the comparative "Science of Religion", which was grounded in textually-focused philological scholarship and brought about the conceptual differentiation of a number of distinct major religions; and secondly, the concurrent emergence of anthropology as the disciplinary domain for the treatment of "primitive" cultures. As will become clear, this methodological divide was foundational in the discursive circumscription of non-textual religions even in the twentieth century. The third section of the chapter then charts the consolidation of the world religions paradigm in the mid-twentieth century, focusing first on its transmutation from *Religionswissenschaft* into the phenomenology of religion, and then on the influential role of scholars such as Eliade, Huston Smith, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the wide diffusion of the paradigm as "religious studies" became a distinct discipline in the period after the

1960s. The chapter concludes by synthesizing a number of theoretical concerns about the world religions paradigm that have recently been voiced by scholars such as J. Z. Smith, Masuzawa, Olupona, and Murphy, many of which have already been signalled above.

Having brought into focus the major problems that pertain to the discourse of world religions at a general level, Chapter 4 returns to Hick's theory with these concerns in mind and subjects his strategies of representation to detailed critical scrutiny. This is done by focusing on his use of the Axial Age narrative, because it is here that Hick's reproduction of the nineteenth century inheritance is most clear. The first section of the chapter charts the trajectory that the Axial Age construct took from Hegel to Hick, focusing particularly on Jaspers' original formulation and its indebtedness to the Hegelian narrative of world history. After showing the numerous points at which Hick explicitly reproduces this baggage, I then identify at least six standard tropes of colonial discourse with regard to "primitive" culture that are seamlessly woven into his argument – at which point attention is drawn to the fact that these views necessarily pertain not just to "archaic" religions, but also to the many non-world religions that still exist today (something about which critics like Olupona are rightly indignant).[92]

Once this tension is in full view, it becomes clear just how greatly the Axial Age narrative conflicts with Hick's staunch advocacy of anti-racist causes in his wider life – and thus the way it conflicts with the liberal, democratic, non-hierarchal ethos that underpins theological pluralism in virtually all of its contemporary manifestations. The chapter concludes by then reflecting on the question: what would Hick have said if faced with these

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[92] The treatment of Australian Aboriginal groups is one illustrative example of the way in which nineteenth-century ideas can still have major political consequences in a twentieth-century context. For a cogent discussion of how Aboriginal attempts to gain legal rights over certain sacred and spiritual sights were for a very long time confounded – firstly by long-entrenched European attitudes about the "undeveloped" nature of Aboriginal culture, and then by lingering confusions about the nature of "Aboriginal religion" once attitudes did begin to shift – see Marion Maddox, *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics* (Canberra: Department of the Parliamentary Library, 2001), esp. ch. 6, " Sacred Sites and the Public Square", 245-283.

criticisms? I will consider the example of Huston Smith mentioned above, who describes the way in which he initially had no regard for "primitive" religions, but then after an encounter with Native American culture beginning in the 1970s he began to argue that even indigenous and oral traditions bore witness to the same profound truth as all of the great religions.[93] Hick never faced the same impetus to address this issue, but everything about his life suggests that he would have broadly assented to Huston Smith's perspective had anyone pressed him on the question.

However, given that Hick (d. 2012) cannot respond to this challenge, attention turns to the more productive question about why, in spite of his wider commitments, he ultimately articulated a comprehensive theory of religion that reinforced the racially-based Eurocentric narrative of world history that he was trying to overcome, a narrative whose implications are completely counter to the ethos of his life and work. The answer I am proposing is: *the discourse made him do it*. The intellectual formations inherited by Hick – his great-traditions-centrism, the developmental view of world history, non-civilizational cultures as static and unethical – all of these inherited formations caused him to think this way, and made his theory seem like an unproblematic and even egalitarian reading of history.[94] However, I want to stress now, as I will stress later, that *I am not accusing Hick of racism* – I am accusing him of reproducing racist discourse. This is a very different charge, as it keeps the attack *ad theorem* and not *ad hominem*. Moreover, by focusing on the *discourse*, i.e. the way in which scholars have traditionally talked about certain ideas, space opens up for a more productive conversation to take place once the problems have been properly brought to the table.

Yet I will need to make good on this promise, for at this stage the analysis will only have been deconstructive. As such, the final chapter explores some constructive directions

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[93] See n. 16 above.

[94] I note again the way in which Murphy describes any text as necessarily participating in a much larger economy of meaning (see n. 88 above).

that could be taken in the religious history of "the entire human race" that are not predicated on the discourses employed by Hick and Jaspers – because the fact remains that despite the untenable assumptions embedded in the original idea of the Axial Age, there *were* remarkable and far-reaching intellectual transformations across a wide range of geographical locations around the time of the 1st millennium BCE, which set the foundation for some of the most enduring cultural traditions of human history. How are these transformations to be explained? If the old idealist view is no longer sufficient, what alternative explanatory paradigms might be constructed? I will come to that shortly.[95] But up to this point, it will only have been *assumed* that the tropes of the Axial Age are incommensurable with contemporary historiographical practice and contemporary political sensibilities. Just because many of its ideas about non-textual cultures are unpalatable to modern democratic sensibilities, does that mean they are incorrect?

In Chapter 5, I make a sustained case that the key assumptions of the Axial Age can be convincingly rejected by examining a number of shifts in western historiographical practice over the past century, particularly since the 1960s. The reader should be aware that discussion in this chapter will range quite broadly before bringing things back to the Axial Age, although the perspectives generated will be extremely useful when considering explanatory options that seem to avoid many of the traditional problems. Focus is placed

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[95] Let me point out here that Chapter 5 does not deal with the standard evolutionary "explanations" of religion represented by partisans of the atheist movement such as Pascal Boyer, Daniel Dennett, and Scot Atran (even though their scholarship obviously has merit in many respects – particular, in my view, the wide-ranging work of Atran). See esp. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Book, 2001); Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006); and Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Instead, I want to take the more interesting approach of keeping focus on how one might explain the religious transformations of the 1st millennium BCE without the scaffolding of the *Geist* metanarrative, a question which involves a totally different body of scholarship. For an excellent overview of the major contemporary theories of religion (including the three abovementioned), see Michael Stausberg's edited collection, *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion* (London: Routledge, 2009). However as noted above, I regard Robert Bellah's recent *Religion in Human Evolution* as surpassing all of the scholarship surveyed in Stausberg's volume – not just in its explanatory potential, but also because it takes a far less hostile tone to traditional forms of religion, thereby inviting a more productive conversation amongst specialists from different fields (see n. 85 above).

on three different trajectories of historiographical change. The first is the slow movement away from the textocentric paradigm of documentary history that informed the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. Understanding this shift is essential given that Jaspers accepts a fundamental dividing line between history and prehistory, holding the standard view that "History extends as far back as linguistic [i.e. written] evidence … History has therefore lasted about 5000 years".[96] After a glance at how this position was represented by Leopold von Ranke, I survey several of the major critical challenges to this view that emerged in the twentieth century: *Annales* historiography, British marxist historiography, social history, and then feminism and post-structuralism.

The second historiographical shift examined is the changing shape of prehistory, i.e. the complete reconfiguration of the depth and complexity of knowledge about the human past since Darwin's *Origin of Species* and other works of geology that eroded the old chronological parameters of Christian sacred history. Published in 1859, Darwin's work coincided with a number of other important archaeological findings which were placing beyond doubt that "the antiquity of man" extended into the deep geological past. The next major development came in the mid-twentieth century with what David Christian has called "the chronometric revolution", in which methods were finally attained for the absolute dating of material traces of the past that allowed for a global (rather than regional) synthesis of the long period of human history before the epoch of written documents.[97] The most recent major development in the evolutionary paradigm came in the latter stages of the twentieth century with the advent of genetic analysis, which was opened up by the discovery of DNA. In conjunction with the growing archaeological record, this meant that

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[96] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 28.

[97] See e.g. Christian, D., "The Return of Universal History", *History and Theory*, 49 (2010): 6-27, here 17. For elaboration of the issues, see Christian, D., *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 65-67, 494-495.

scholars could finally construct defensible chronologies of hominid evolution and establish the place of *Homo sapiens* in the hominid line, as well as posit a rough outline of the patterns of migration out of Africa.

This has led to a form of viewing long-term human history that has only been consolidated since the 1990s and is still very much carving out discursive space. David Christian has been one scholar at the forefront of this historiographical expansion, and is the architect of the paradigm he calls "big history" – a form of universal history that unites cosmological, geological, biological, and cultural trajectories into an over-arching historical narrative, effectively representing a massively expanded version of the *longue durée* perspective developed by Braudel and the *Annales* historians.[98] Another version of the evolutionary historiographical paradigm is represented by Daniel Lord Smail and the concept of "deep history", which focuses specifically on hominid history over the last 2.2 million years.[99] The work of Smail and Christian represents a new intellectual agenda in the study of human history, one that resonates with earlier attempts at (in Jaspers' words) "the greatest inclusiveness and the most categoric unity" of our species, but which is grounded in a new paradigm of biological and cultural change that is based upon a hugely enlarged empirical and analytical database.

The third and final historiographical reorientation to be discussed concerns recent developments in what I loosely term "communications history".[100] Here I address one of the most important questions that arises in the new evolutionary view: namely, what

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[98] Christian discusses his project in relation to Braudel's *longue durée* in e.g. "The Return of Universal History", 7. William McNeill was one of the pioneers of "world history", which carried a similar emphasis to the *Annales* school; see esp. his *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963).

[99] See Smail, D., *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). For a defence of the deep history paradigm and several case studies of its application, see also *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (ed. D. Smail & A. Shyrock; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[100] The supplementary bibliography has been provided primarily for this section of the dissertation. The reader will be directed to it via the footnotes at various stages of the discussion.

accounts for the astonishing acceleration of human cultural development over the last 100,000 years when no other species on earth has been able to break out of the slow processes of biological change over evolutionary time? While this may seem like an odd question to ask, it is absolutely crucial in the context of my argument, and cannot be avoided in any serious attempt to challenge the idealist theory of the Axial Age – because if *Geist* is not the principal agent of change in human history, then how do we account for that change? Traditionally *Geist*, or something like it, has been the only real answer that scholars have offered. But the possibilities of a convincing new answer have begun to emerge: the key factor in the rapidity of cultural change in *Homo sapiens* is the powerful capacity for *collective learning* inherent in modern human language. After surveying David Christian's argument to this effect and providing some illustrative examples of the foundational role of communications technologies in major periods of historical change, I make clear how this relates to the issue of the Axial Age.[101] The difference traditionally posited between the axial religions and the pre-axial religions is the "transcendent" character of the former versus the "world accepting" character of the latter. My question therefore becomes: is there a manner of accounting for these (perceived) differences *sociologically* by paying attention to the different ideational dynamics inherent in the textually-based religions of sedentary agrarian cultures vis-à-vis the cultural systems of small-scale oral societies?[102]

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[101] The examples are: modern human language, the invention of writing, the invention of alphabetic typography in early modern Europe, and then the development of global information networks opened up by the mastering of electricity in the nineteenth century. Whilst this represents an unusually broad spread, viewing these different moments synoptically helps to bring out the utter fundamentality of such technologies in all other historical change. (But I note that these comments should be balanced with those in n. 106 below on the importance of ecological factors in the rise of large urban societies.)

[102] Let me be clear that "ideational dynamics" refers to the notion of "ideation", i.e. the formation of thought. Therefore ideational dynamics are *the pressures and tendencies by which groups develop, maintain, and engage with traditions of thought.*

Although this question could be addressed from a number of angles, I approach it by turning to evolutionary psychologist Merlin Donald, whose scheme of human cognitive evolution is extremely useful in this regard, particularly because it has been used by Bellah as the narrative backbone of *Religion in Human Evolution*.[103] I outline Donald's scheme by focusing on the three major shifts he posits in the development of modern human cognition: (1) "mimetic" culture, a form of precise voluntary motor control that emerged with *Homo habilis* over 2 million years ago, which laid the ground for symbolic representation long before modern language; (2) "mythic" culture, by which he means the use of *narrative* to frame and understand human life, something that emerged with modern language somewhere between 250,000-100,000 years ago and still plays a central role in human cognition; and (3) "theoretic" culture, a form of collective intellectual activity that becomes possible with the use of writing, i.e. when individuals and groups have access to vast networks of externalized human communication.[104] This last point is particularly relevant in the present context: prior to the invention of writing, human memory was almost wholly contained within biological limits. But once durable systems for the external representation of language had been developed, a completely new dynamic opened up between past and present in all cultures that adopted the new technology, a change that was

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[103] Donald's two key works are *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), and *A Mind So Rare* (New York: Norton, 2001). I cannot fully discuss Bellah's use of Donald, although a basic outline comes through in the discussion of Chapter 5 below.

[104] Donald is clear throughout his works that one stage does not "replace" the other. Rather, the transitions are long processes that involve a complex *overlapping* in which we retain key elements of our biological heritage, and he calls us "hybrid minds". For instance, whilst everybody in the world today is affected somehow by networks of external information, we remain highly mimetic creatures (which helps to understand the way in which different cultures operate with shared forms of emotive embodiment, learned in the earliest years, which are virtually impossible to communicate to foreigners); and we also remain fundamentally oral and narratival creatures despite the manifold ways in which our forms of communication, memory, and culture have been augmented by external devices.

intensified by the vastly different existential pressures entailed in the new situation of stratified, urban societies.[105]

This is precisely the kind of thing that has been overlooked in the traditional idealist reading of the 1st millennium BCE, so I elaborate Donald's examples by drawing in other scholars who have focused on the forms of culture he describes: namely the work of anthropologists on the psychodynamics of oral cultures, and then historians of early civilization who have focused on the foundational role of writing and the massive changes that resulted in the dynamics of cultural memory. This will leave things well placed to return to the Axial Age in the final section of the chapter. I begin by outlining the way in which all of the above developments entail the forceful rejection of the major tropes of the Axial Age narrative, which are untenable at an empirical level even aside from the serious moral issues inherent in the reproduction of nineteenth-century racism and the structures of colonial discourse. Considering that the Axial Age construct still has currency in contemporary scholarship, these issues are particularly important to call to attention.

Discussion then returns to the fundamental question posed above about possible explanatory paradigms that are not predicated on idealism and which pay much more attention to the material factors underpinning the momentous shifts of the period. I will follow Donald as well as Jan Assmann, the primary theorist of cultural memory, who both redescribe the period as one in which the transgenerational dynamics of cultural memory opened up by writing, as well as the new pressures of stratified urban societies, engendered new creative tensions between past and present which resulted in the radically new character of the major textual religions vis-à-vis their smaller oral counterparts. If this

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[105] I rely greatly here on the analysis of Jan Assmann and his work on the concept of "cultural memory" (aside from "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age", see *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1992)]). However I have also been heavily influenced by the work of Walter Ong (see e.g. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* [London: Routledge, 1982]), as well as the numerous other figures listed in the supplementary bibliography.

reading is found even broadly persuasive, then the Axial Age loses its transcendental lustre as *the* pivotal point in human religious history, and becomes simply another fascinating example of how some of the most far-reaching changes in human culture over time have been related to major revolutions in how we communicate with each other.[106]

In the Conclusion, I reflect on what all of this means for theological pluralism. As has been stressed, all pluralists advocate the highest standards of critical scholarship. Indeed, Hick and Jaspers opened their major works with clear acknowledgements that the ground was continually shifting, and that their theories might need to be revised as new information came to light. Moreover, they both welcomed attempts to come up with better theories if the need could be demonstrated.[107] I think it is safe to say that, in light even of the discussion so far, such a need can indeed been demonstrated, and that the traditional idealist reading of human religious history is simply not tenable in the context of contemporary academic discourse. The implications here are far-reaching, but I will save further comment until the argument has been made in full.

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[106] I want to be clear that I do not place the same importance on technologies of communication in the wider issue of the rise of large urban societies, as other ecological factors played a much greater role in this early development. Aside from factors at the geological level (especially the end of the ice age and the expansion of habitable worldzones), the other foundational developments were those to do with the invention of agriculture, which allowed larger population densities, therefore a greater division of labour, and thus the creation of a host of new social role unknown in smaller societies. As such, the invention of writing is very much a by-product of those developments, not their cause, as argued cogently by Hans J. Nissen in *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2000 B.C.* (trans. E. Lutzeier & K. J. Northcott; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1983]); see also Massimo Livi-Bacci's *A Concise History of World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), esp. ch. 3 (thanks go to my colleague David Baker here for pointing me in the direction of these works). However, let me stress that writing *is* the most important factor when examining the emergence of the "axial" religions, as will become clear when returning to the work of Assmann and Donald.

[107] See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, xiii; and Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 18. Their comments are considered more fully in the Conclusion.

Chapter 2

**John Hick and the Pluralist Theory of Religions**

So far Hick's argument has been referred to as a "theory" of religion without calling to attention some of the problems with using this term. As was made clear in the previous chapter, Hick stands in the tradition of phenomenological essentialism, which advocates a "non-reductive" approach to religion. Russell McCutcheon has therefore taken issue with Hick's use of the term "theory" to describe his argument, because he understands the concept to designate an analytical approach that *explains* a set of data using critical paradigms, whereas a phenomenological approach such as Hick's merely "interprets" that data set along relatively non-critical lines.[1] At stake here is a debate about the proper methods that should pertain to the (allegedly) non-theological discipline of religious studies, and McCutcheon's complaint stems from his view that the academic study of religion should be comprised of the same methods that constitute the other social sciences. In other words, because McCutcheon rejects the notion that "religion" is an irreducible, *sui generis* phenomenon, then he rejects as "theological" (rather than "theoretical") all approaches that are based on essentialism, such as those of Hick and Eliade. McCutcheon sees no place for these approaches in the academic study of religion, and has been a vocal critic on the issue.[2]

As will become clear at the end of this work, I am sympathetic to McCutcheon's concerns and I agree with many of his methodological proposals. Yet as indicated in the

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[1] Although he has made this point in numerous places, see esp. "'My Theory of the Brontosaurus…': Postmodernism and 'Theory' of Religion" in *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 103-121. Here he suggests that use of the word "theory" to describe arguments such as Hick's rely on a loose, common parlance sense of the term which "now denotes anything from a hypothesis to a conjecture" (111).

[2] In addition to *Critics Not Caretakers*, see also *Manufacturing Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (New York: Routledge, 2003). This call has been echoed by many other critics, see e.g. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Donald Wiebe *The Politics of Religious Studies: the Continuing Conflict with Theology and the Academy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999).

previous chapter, my aim here is to introduce Hick's argument without yet highlighting any points of complaint, in order to lay a base for the following chapters. As a first step of this non-critical reading, I want to avoid a protracted semantic debate about precisely how to categorize Hick's argument. On the one hand, he is not offering a theory in McCutcheon's strict, "naturalistic" sense of the term. On the other hand, he *is* offering a rigorously justified philosophical argument, one that he hoped would be subjected to scrutiny from well beyond the confines of theological debate. Moreover, while McCutcheon views "theory" as inherently "non-religious", if we take his basic position that a theory "goes beyond mere self-reports" in explaining the behaviour of individual and groups,[3] then Hick's argument – whose redescriptive nature will be discussed in detail below – can easily be classed as a theory, because it is a clear attempt to explain pan-human religiosity in ways not fully reconcilable with the self-understanding of each tradition.[4] Furthermore, to say that any explanation which does not result in a "non-religious" conclusion is the only thing that can be called a theory is surely foreclosing the debate a little too quickly, even if I (like McCutcheon) ultimately find those explanations inadequate. And as suggested earlier, treating Hick in this way (rather than simply treating him as engaging in crypto-theology) is consonant with the approach he advocated, given that he attempted to "take full account of the data and theories of the human sciences" and harmonize his views with non-theological scholarship. I will therefore treat Hick as offering a theory of religion in the broader sense

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[3] McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion*, 23. I should add that while I do not have a problem with treating Hick's argument as a theory in the context of this dissertation, I certainly agree with McCutcheon that this would not appropriate in a pedagogical context, which is the main contention in "'My Theory of the Brontosaurus…'".

[4] Other works on theories of religion do sometimes call Hick's argument a theory, simply a "transcendentalist" as opposed to "non-transcendentalist" one. See e.g. the discussion of Michael Stausberg, "There Is Life in the Old Dog Yet: An Introduction to Contemporary Theories of Religion" in *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion* (ed. M. Stausberg; London: Routledge, 2009), 1-21, here 11f. See also the following two footnotes.

of a "sustained philosophical argument", and simply examine the contents of that argument.

But to get a better perspective on this issue, the chapter begins with a brief overview of the modern enterprise of theories of religion. It first surveys naturalistic theories from the sixteenth century through to contemporary scientific theories, and then trace the counter-discourse of "religious" theories of religion, which stem from Friedrich Schleiermacher and include figures such as Otto, Eliade, and Hick.[5] Situating Hick more thoroughly within this trajectory will help to establish the methodological suppositions of his argument without getting bogged down in precise classification.

The middle section of the chapter then undertakes a detailed examination of the "pluralistic hypothesis" presented in Hick's major work, *An Interpretation of Religion*, looking first at the biographical details that motivated its production, then at the methodological operations by which Hick defends his claims. The final section examines the critical response to Hick's work, looking at what I discern to be the five main criticisms that have been leveled against it. This will serve as a literature review, and will thus make clear the specific contribution of this dissertation. Yet because of the inadequacies I perceive in the current body of criticism, in this chapter I will actually defend Hick's argument from the challenges thusfar posed to it. Not only is this consistent with my attempt to avoid attacking a straw man version of pluralism, but it will also leave me well placed to scrutinize the *real* problem with pluralism for the rest of this work.

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[5] These figures are often included in surveys of theories of religion. See e.g. Daniel Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) [discusses Eliade]; James Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999) [discusses Schleiermacher, Otto, William James, and others]; and Seth Kunin, *Religion: The Modern Theories* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) [discusses Schleiermacher, Eliade, van der Leeuw, and others].

Theories of religion have a long history, and fall into one of two broad classes: naturalistic (or "reductionist"), and religious ("non-reductionist" or "essentialist").[6] Naturalistic theories attempt to "explain" religion by *reducing* it to other causal factors – whether sociological, psychological, economic, or evolutionary – and thus treat "religion" as simply another aspect of human culture that can be studied by the normal means of intellectual inquiry. This is the only approach that counts as a "theory" in McCutcheon's view. Non-reductionist theories, by contrast, try to explain the variety of humanity's religious beliefs as different responses to an autonomous reality – God/the Sacred/the Transcendent – i.e. something that is *sui generis* and thus *not* reducible to other causal factors. This means that, in the essentialist view, reductionist theories essentially miss the point of what religion "is all about" by explaining it as something *other* than a relationship with an actual transcendent Reality. As suggested, Hick's argument is a non-reductive theory, and is one of only a few to have been offered in the post-Enlightenment period. The majority of theories have been naturalistic and social-scientific, and it has, moreover, been in response to these naturalistic theories that non-reductionist theories have typically been offered. So before justifying why Hick's argument can be treated as a theory in this broad sense of the term, it is necessary to provide a brief history of naturalistic theories of religion.

Like the idea of "religion" itself (i.e. a generic concept), theories about religion begin roughly with the emergence of the modern state in the wake of the post-Reformation religious wars in early modern Europe.[7] Some of the earliest non-theological attempts to

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[6] In making this distinction I am following the categorization of scholars such as Stausberg, Thrower, Kunin, and indeed Hick himself. Stausberg (11) catalogues other terms used in recent scholarship to describe these two broad classes: Christian vs. secular; theological/insider vs. non-theological/outsider; believers vs. non-believers; theological vs. naturalist; religious vs. social-scientific. (To this list one should also add emic vs. etic.) As noted later, however, not every theory that is *redescriptive* is necessarily *reductive*. This is precisely the case with someone like Hick.

[7] Here I follow the narrative of J. Samuel Preus, who charts the rise of naturalistic theories of religion from Jean Bodin in the late sixteenth century; see *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory From Bodin To Freud* (New

account for the origin and diversity of religious belief were those of Jean Bodin (1530-1596), Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), and especially David Hume (1711-1776).[8] As the Enlightenment gathered pace through the eighteenth century, religion was also redescribed in non-theological terms by thinkers such as Kant and Hegel, both of whom attempted to subsume "religion" (identified mainly with folk superstition or dogmatic theology) under "philosophy" (a more "mature" system of understanding the world that had little time for divine revelation or the authority of tradition).[9]

However, with the exception of Hume, most thinkers of the period were not offering what we know today as theories of religion. The first such modern theory, i.e. the first fully-fledged reductionist account of religion after Hume, came in 1841 with Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, which famously argued that "God" was just an idealized projection of the human subject, but one that had been misrecognised and treated as if it were an independent reality – meaning that all theology was really anthropology,

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Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). On the modern concept of "religion" see n. 58, ch.1 above. The simultaneous emergence of "religion" and "theories of religion" is more than a coincidence, as Peter Harrison has suggested: "Paradoxical though it may sound, it is evident from the philosophy of science that objects of study are shaped to a large degree by the techniques which are used to investigate them. If we apply this principle to the history of 'religion', it can be said that the very methods of the embryonic science of religion determined to a large extent what 'religion' was to be" (*'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 2). Richard King has also helpfully described this as the "iatrogenic" effect of secularism in the study of religion (*Religion and Orientalism: Postcolonial Theory, India, and 'The Mythic East'* [London: Routledge; 1999], 41-44).

[8] Bodin's most important work in this respect was the *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, which Preus sees as representing a paradigm shift whereby "reason" was elevated above "revelation" in the treatment of various religious traditions. Here Bodin's driving concern was to demote confessional authority in the interests of social stability and religious toleration. Herbert of Cherbury is known as the father of deism, whose key tract, *De Veritate* (1622), argued that there were five "common notions" amongst the various religions, meaning that all share an essential core. David Hume was the first systematic naturalistic reductionist, whose basic view was that (in Preus' words) "religion is what happens when persons attempt to cope with life, especially the fears and hopes engendered in the encounter with the most disturbing phenomena of the external world: superior and unknown powers that determine one's fate and future". The literature on these figures is rich, but see Preus, *Explaining Religion*, 3-39 and 84-103 (quotation from 207).

[9] On Kant and Hegel, see e.g. Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories*, 74-90. He notes that rather than providing reductive theories of religion, Kant and Hegel were attempting to make religion acceptable to Enlightenment thinkers. The modern subsumption of religion under philosophy actually began a century earlier than Kant with Spinoza, especially his *Theological-Political Treatise* of 1670; see esp. Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

because to study God was to study man.[10] Shortly after, the Darwinian theory of evolution emerged and was (amongst many other things) swiftly reconfigured by a number of thinkers in support of developmental models of religious history. These models were teleological constructs, in which the categories of fetishism, superstition, totemism, animism, and magic were variously employed as precursors to "the real thing" – i.e. "religion", which itself was often split into the two categories of polytheism/idolatry/paganism on the one hand, and monotheism on the other.[11] Anthropological theories of a similar evolutionary kind were offered in the late nineteenth century by E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer, which were important spurs to the industry of theorizing about the "origin" of religion in human society.[12] During this period, F. Max Müller also inaugurated the so-called "Science of Religion", soon to become the field known as comparative religion, which (in principle, even if rarely in practice) sought to analyze the various religions of the world with a self-professed "scientific" rigour.[13] These figures are discussed in Chapter 3.

The twentieth century saw no decrease in reductionist theories of religion, with the most prominent of the early decades coming from Émile Durkheim (religion is society

[10] Feuerbach stated that "Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge." See Feuerbach, L., *The Essence of Christianity* (Dover Publications: New York, 2008 [1841]), here iii. The translation is from the second edition of *Das Wesen des Christentums* by George Eliot in 1881. Feuerbach's critique of Hegelian idealism also had a major influence on Marx and Engels, see *ibid.*, iv. A modern version of the anthropomorphic theory has been offered by Stewart Guthrie (see *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993]), although observations about the anthropomorphic tendencies of religious thought go back at least to the Greek philosophers (such as Xenophanes and Aristotle, see e.g. Aristotle's *Politics* 1.2.7). See also Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories*, 93-98.

[11] For an early yet authoritative discussion of theories that employed different versions of the developmental path, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), where he characterizes all such approaches as little more than fanciful speculation of the "if I were a horse" type (see e.g. 24f.). I will return to the problems of the developmental models in Chapters 3 and following, as there are still vestiges of this in Hick's understanding of religious history. For another useful treatment of early evolutionary theories, see Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, & Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 73-95.

[12] Tylor is associated primarily with the concept of animism, and Frazer is associated with the evolutionary trajectory of magic→religion→science. Both figures were widely influential, and are treated in most histories of theories of religion (see e.g. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 16-53). I discuss Tylor in particular in the following chapter.

[13] I discuss comparative religion in more detail in the following chapter. The standard history of the topic is Eric Sharpe's *Comparative Religion: A History* (2nd ed.; London: Duckworth, 1986 [1975]).

worshipping itself), and even more famously from Sigmund Freud (religion is the obsessional neurosis of humanity).[14] With the founding of the sociological and the psychoanalytic methods by these two thinkers, coupled with the continued growth of anthropology, the reductionist mode of "explaining" religion became a major part of the twentieth-century social-scientific tradition.[15] Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century and the onset of the twenty-first, theories of religion have never been more prevalent, and virtually all have been reductionist or naturalistic in emphasis. Michael Stausberg notes that when compared to the "classical" theories of religion (of the Durkheim/Freud kind), contemporary theories of religion from the 1990s onwards have increasingly borne the hallmarks of major advances in the natural, evolutionary, and behavioural sciences (hence their often staunch opposition to religious theories). In recent times, some of the most prominent such theorists have been Daniel Dennet, Sam Harris, Scot Atran, Pascal Boyer, and Richard Dawkins.[16]

Whilst there has been little consensus amongst the various theorists over the course of this long tradition (aside from their basic rejection of "religious" accounts of religion), their work has driven the academic study of religion in important ways. However, as was made clear in the last chapter, the field of religious studies has actually been underpinned *not* by these reductionist approaches (hence the frustrated proposals of people such as

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[14] Obviously these are oversimplified distillations, but they capture the general thrust of their positions. Freud and Durkheim are likewise treated in any history of theories of religion, see e.g. the works of Preus, Thrower, Pals and Kunin already cited. Regarding Freud's reductionism, I once heard a colleague quip in frustration to an unsuspecting undergraduate class that "According to Freud, if you're religious then you want to fuck your mother and kill your father – honestly, just go read *The Future of an Illusion*. That's all he says."

[15] Mention should also be given to Max Weber for the consolidation of sociological paradigms for the study of religion, even though he was not as heavily reductive as Durkheim (on Weber in this context, see e.g. Kunin, *Religion: The Modern Theories*, 35-43). One could also discuss the developments in anthropology with Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Geertz, and others, but my aim here has only been to provide a brief overview.

[16] See Stausberg, "There is Life in the Old Dog Yet", 8-9. Stausberg's edited survey of contemporary theories covers over twenty scholars, making it an invaluable synopsis of an ever-burgeoning field.

McCutcheon and J. Samuel Preus),[17] but rather by the notion that religion *is* something unique and thus demands its own unique method of comprehension, and that there is, moreover, a fundamental "transcendent unity" between the various ideational traditions called "religions".

The root of these non-reductive approaches goes back to the first major critique of Enlightenment rationalism, namely German Romanticism of the late eighteenth century, and specifically to its theological spokesman, Friedrich Schleiermacher.[18] Writing especially against the recent work of Kant, who had not only brought religion under philosophy but had also reduced it to basic morals and metaphysics, Schleiermacher's *On Religion* (1799) provided the central component of all future non-reductionist theories: that religion was not morals, was not metaphysics, was not theological systems or dogmas (for which Schleiermacher had little time). Rather, religion was about *feeling* – the ultimate pervading the finite, bringing with it a *sense* of awe and absolute meaning.[19] In other words, religion was all about *experience*, the experience of a mysterious but profound reality.

Although Schleiermacher was primarily conducting religious apologetic against the rationalism and scorn of the Enlightenment (rather than mapping out a fully fledged theory), the category of experience began to play a crucial role in subsequent non-reductive theories of religion.[20] The first systematic extrapolation of Schleiermacher's perspective was offered roughly a century later by Rudolf Otto in his well-known work, *Das Heilige* (1917),

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[17] See McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, and Preus, *Explaining Religion.*

[18] Early German Romanticism is mentioned briefly in Chapter 3 in relation to *Volk* theory and its impact on the comparative study of religion in the nineteenth century.

[19] See the references provided above in Chapter 1 (n. 23). As noted, the 1799 edition of *On Religion* was more strongly pantheistic than its later iterations, and bore the hallmarks of the Moravian pietism in which Schleiermacher was raised. In addition to Richard Crouter's introduction to *On Religion*, see his other useful study, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[20] For an incisive discussion of the concept of "experience", see Robert Sharf, "Experience" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. M. Taylor; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94-115.

where he famously described "the Holy" as the *mysterium tremendum fascinans et augustum*: the awful, terrifying, but seductive mystery.[21] The Holy was something totally Other and *sui generis*, the mysterious reality to which the entire history of religions bore witness (even in the "primitive" stage). Otto even said that "There is no religion in which it does not live as the real innermost core and without it no religion would be worthy of the name".[22] He also coined the word "numinous" (from Latin *numen*, "deity") to describe this otherwise ineffable transcendent force. In *Das Heilige*, Otto combined Schleiermacher's emphasis on non-reducible religious experience with a revised Kantian notion of the religious *a priori*: in other words, the Holy was something that humanity had an innate capacity to experience, but while it had "rational" elements (i.e. could be schematized in concepts), it was more fundamentally a non-rational (i.e. non-schematizable) aspect of human existence.[23] To put it differently, the numinous Holy – the core of being – could be grasped conceptually to a certain degree, but was more fully grasped in religious experience, i.e. when one was overwhelmed by the *mysterium tremendum* and pervaded with a sense of the infinite (note the clear influence of Schleiermacher). In this way, Otto attempted – quite explicitly – to locate

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[21] *Das Heilige* (Breslau: Trewendt und Gramier, 1917) was published in English in 1923 as *The Idea of the Holy*, and was reprinted with new translator's preface in 1958 (trans. J. W. Harvey; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958 [1923]). The German work went through many editions, and eventually contained an overflowing amount of appendixes. The English translation is from the 9th German edition, and has remained popular ever since its first appearance.

[22] *Ibid.*, 6.

[23] The full title is instructive here: *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (The Holy: On the Irrational in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational). The contours of Otto's philosophy are extremely complex: while he operated within a broad Kantian framework, the specific framework he adopted was the revised Kantian program of Jakob Fries. I pass over Fries and the role his system played in Otto's understanding of the Holy; but see the expert treatment of these issues by Philip Almond in *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), where Otto's connections to Kant, Schleiermacher, and Fries are mapped out extensively.

the source of religious experience outside of rational or naturalist inquiry while still claiming that it existed as an actual, *sui generis* force.[24]

It should be noted that while Otto's perspective was a kind of theory, given that it operated with a primarily philosophical framework and counted in its scope the entire religious history of humanity, his project was ultimately theological. It is thus no surprise that he considered Christianity to be the "superior" religion, which had most fully grasped the nature of the Holy (Protestant Christianity in particular, and Lutheranism especially).[25] However I will return to this issue in a later chapter and continue for now with a basic descriptive account.

The other major theoretical perspective that could be described as "religious" was the essentialist method encapsulated in the phenomenology of religion scholarship of the early twentieth century, which was based on a very similar premise to Otto's about the autonomous nature of the sacred.[26] To distill a complex approach, phenomenologists such as Gerhardus van der Leeuw (most famous for his 1933 *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*) held that one must "bracket" one's own beliefs when studying the religion of others, so that reductive, naturalist assumptions which automatically ruled out the reality of "the transcendent" were not imposed by the scholar.[27] While this methodological rule was, in

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[24] Almond explains that Otto's claim about "the qualitative distinctness of the numinous feelings" is not argued, "but is [rather] the presupposition of his whole theory of religion." (*ibid.*, 81. Notice Almond's use of the term "theory" in this context.)

[25] *Ibid.*, 129ff. Almond notes that, in the end, "the Christian believer overpowers the philosophical theologian". Indeed, Otto's estimation is that Christianity "stands out in complete superiority to her sister religions" (*The Idea of the Holy*, 142.). See also Tim Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), esp. 176f. for a range of similar statements made by Otto. I return to this aspect of Otto's thought from a postcolonial perspective in Chapter 4.

[26] For a comprehensive discussion of the phenomenological approach see e.g. James Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences, and Subsequent Debates* (London: Continuum, 2006), as well as his more recent work, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2010).

[27] Van der Leeuw advocated Husserl's interpretive tactic of *epòché*, which he called "intellectual suspense" (see *Religion In Essence and Manifestation* [2 vols; New York: Harper & Row, 1963 (1933)], 683-689). On *epòché*; see Ninian Smart, "Foreword" to the reissue of van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New Jersey:

theory, also applied to overt theological perspectives (which would automatically interpret the other using one's own theological categories), the primary emphasis of those such as van der Leeuw was the rejection of reductionist interpretations of religious belief and practice because they gave too little credit to perspective of believers. This represents the core of the debate known as the insider/outsider problem, an important methodological issue that will be addressed shortly when considering the criticisms of the pluralist theory.

However the non-reductive phenomenologist *par excellence* was Mircea Eliade, one of the most influential scholars of religion in the twentieth century, who was responsible more than any other individual scholar for the methodological orientation of the modern discipline of religious studies.[28] As noted earlier, the central assumption underpinning his work was that the history of religions represents the history of *manifestations of the sacred*, and that this sacred reality was not reducible to anything else (making "the sacred" a basic equivalent of Otto's "Holy"). To repeat the key passage cited in the previous chapter, Eliade stated that

> a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred.[29]

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Princeton University Press, 1986), ix-xix. On the Husserlian underpinnings of the phenomenology of religion, see e.g. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 25-36.

[28] For a thorough discussion of Eliade's foundational influence on the contemporary discipline of religious studies, as well as a critical survey of the rich secondary literature on his life and scholarship, see McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion.*

[29] Eliade, M., *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (trans. R. Sheed; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996 [1958]), xvii. See also Eliade, M., *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. W. R. Trask; New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1959 [1957]), which serves as a basic introduction to his whole program. For another critical appraisal of this approach that links with McCutcheon's concerns, see the classic essay by Robert Segal, "In Defence of Reductionism" in *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays in the Confrontation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 5-36.

This is a virtual manifesto for the non-reductive approach that extends from Schleiermacher all the way to the contemporary discipline of religious studies. Eliade also stated at the beginning of his three-volume *History of Religious Ideas* that the sacred "is an element in the structure of consciousness, and not a stage in the history of consciousness", a claim to which I will return in the Conclusion.[30] His position has thus been described as being that "Religion is based on a universal experience of the sacred and is common to all human beings at any time or place".[31]

Eliade's perspective was less triumphalist than Otto's, in that it did not (ostensibly, at least) privilege any single manifestation of the sacred or any specific religious tradition; rather, Eliade's main concern was to reinject an appreciation of the sacred into what he saw as the desacralized modern west.[32] Moreover, because the sacred was a *sui generis* reality, the comparative phenomenological approach was, in his view, able to provide the unique hermeneutical key for understanding the sacred and making it accessible again in the modern world. It is for this reason that Eliade was so influential in the formative stages of creating religious studies as an autonomous discipline, the establishment of which was justified on grounds that it provided perspectives not attainable through the methods of other established disciplines.[33]

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[30] Eliade, M., *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1 (trans. W. R. Trask; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978 [1976]), xiii.

[31] Kunin, *Religion: The Modern Theories*, 127.

[32] For a discussion of Eliade's disenchantment with the modern world and his consequent "politics of nostalgia", see McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 27-51 *et passim*, esp. 73.

[33] See *ibid.*; see also Segal, "In Defence of Reductionism". For a clear statement of Eliade's prioritization of the history of religions approach over forms of social-scientific scholarship, see the foreword to *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Bollingen Series LXXVI; Princeton University Press, 1964), esp. xv: "Certainly, the psychologist, the sociologist, the ethnologist and even the philosopher or the theologian will have their comment to make, each from the viewpoint and in the perspective that are properly his. But it is the historian [sc. the phenomenologist] of religions who will make the greatest number of valid statements on a religious phenomenon *as a religious phenomenon* – and not as a psychological, social, ethnic, philosophical, or even theological phenomenon."

This, then, is a brief review of non-reductive theories of religion – theories that are not based on traditional theological or confessional models, but which nevertheless hold that all religions (and all religious experience) are responses to a *sui generis* sacred, holy, or transcendent reality. They have been far less numerous than naturalistic theories of religion in a statistical sense, but the non-reductive paradigm has been the dominant one in the field of religious studies, with the alternative naturalistic discourse playing a vociferous but comparatively minor role in shaping the questions asked in the discipline – particularly at a pedagogical level, where the descriptive, phenomenological approach still dominates the curricula of many university religious studies departments.[34]

And it is in this non-reductive tradition that Hick's pluralist theory fits. Indeed, the opening paragraph of *An Interpretation of Religion* notes that while there have been many confessional (i.e. theological) and naturalistic theories of religion, "The one type of theory that has seldom been attempted is *a religious but not confessional* interpretation of religion in its plurality of forms" – and the first footnote of the book even cites the above Eliade quotation as representative of his approach.[35]

Therefore, regardless of whether or not one calls his argument a "theory" (as I do in much of this work), understanding Hick within this trajectory situates the approach he took to the question of religious diversity and enables a detailed understanding of his argument. While much of my critique in later chapters will be directed towards Hick's use of the Axial Age paradigm and his focus on the "great traditions", I will return in the Conclusion to some of the problems with the essentialist position voiced by critics like McCutcheon. But before any further discussion is possible, Hick's argument requires detailed elaboration.

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[34] See esp. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. This issue will be picked up in the Conclusion.

[35] Hick, J., *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1, xiii (italics added). Eliade is quoted p. 15, n. 1.

In the last chapter we saw that Hick was among those who, following the lead of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, believed that the new situation of global awareness demanded a total perspective on the unified religious history of humanity. Yet before developing his pluralist theory, Hick was a conservative Christian who held that explicit faith in Christ was required for salvation.[36] While the seeds of his later pluralism, i.e. his perspectivist religious epistemology, were sown early in his career, it was not until the late 1960s that his views began to change.[37] As Hick describes it, the catalyst was his relocation to the city of Birmingham, a vibrant metropolis with a heavy immigrant population.[38] Here the religious other was not a hypothetical question, but a confronting reality. After being invited to join the religious education panel of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee, Hick swiftly became involved in issues of interreligious dialogue.[39] This led, among other things, to his strong public opposition to the neo-fascist National Front in the coalition group All Faiths For One Race.[40] But this co-operation with members of other religious traditions also had a profound effect on Hick at a philosophical level, and with such increased contact he came to believe that in the places of worship within all of the great faiths,

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[36] Hick, J., *John Hick: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002). See esp. 27ff.

[37] Hick's perspectivist epistemology was the theme of his first major publication, *Faith and Knowledge* (London: Macmillan, 1957). Yet one can see the seeds of these views even in aphorisms that he recorded as an 18 year-old (see *John Hick: An Autobiography*, 32).

[38] Birmingham is the second largest city in the United Kingdom, and assumed major importance in the late eighteenth century as a leading site of manufacturing and the development of technologies of industrialization. Immigration increased rapidly in the middle of the twentieth century, and by 1991 Birmingham had the largest immigrant percentage of any city in the UK. See Christopher Upton, *A History of Birmingham* (Hampshire: Philimore & Co., 2011), inc. 206ff. on the city's diverse cultural landscape.

[39] Hick, *Autobiography*, 159ff.

[40] *Ibid.*, 169-192. Hick was actively involved in the group for its 15 year existence, and he states that their driving motivation was that "we were angry – angry about the injustices of racism" (173). The reader should bear this comment in mind for the analysis of Chapter 4 below, when the racialized structures of Hick's theory are made clear.

men and women were coming together under the auspices of some ancient, highly developed tradition which enables them to open their hearts and minds 'upwards' toward a higher divine reality which makes a claim on the living of their lives.[41]

Hick would elsewhere say in a similar vein that "When I meet a devout Jew, or Muslim, or Sikh, or Hindu, or Buddhist in whom the fruits of openness to the divine reality are gloriously evident, I cannot realistically regard the Christian experience of the divine as authentic and their non-Christian experiences as inauthentic".[42]

This intuition shaped all of Hick's subsequent work. In 1973 he published *God and the Universe of Faiths*, arguing for a "Copernican revolution" in theology and the decentering of Christianity as the highest form of religious faith. In 1976 he completed the cross-cultural study *Death and Eternal Life*, which had a very pluralistic flavour and did not take salvation through Christ to be the normative goal. In 1977 he was the driving force behind *The Myth of God Incarnate*, which sought to bring the debates into the public domain and caused great controversy in Anglican circles. And in 1980 he produced *God Has Many Names*, the first attempt at a fuller philosophical argument for the non-superiority of any single tradition.[43] Throughout the 1980s Hick continued to write on these topics, and began to more thoroughly familiarize himself with the content of other traditions.[44] After editing the pivotal publication of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* in 1987, which formally announced

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[41] Hick, *Autobiography*, 160.

[42] Hick, J., *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 91. I note again that Hick's "conversion" to a pluralistic worldview mirrors precisely the scenario Berger predicted in *The Heretical Imperative*. It is these comments in particular that led to my assessment in the previous chapter that theological pluralism has generally been the result of globalization and the inescapable presence of the religious other.

[43] Hick, J., *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York: St Martins, 1973); Hick, J. *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Macmillan, 1976); *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed. J. Hick; London: SCM, 1977); Hick, J., *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

[44] Aside from Hick's appointment to Claremont Graduate School in California, where he taught widely on the world's religions and also had a sustained "encounter with eastern Buddhism", he also spent time in India and Sri Lanka engaging with Hindu and Sikh culture, taking his first trip to India at age 48. See Hick, *Autobiography*, 193-226 (on India) and 250-310 (on Claremont and Buddhism). Indeed, Hick states that "I'm not sure I would have been able to write [*An Interpretation*] if I had not gone to Claremont with its pervasive spirit of openness to the global reality of religion" (*Autobiography*, 259).

the arrival of "pluralism" as a theological position, he finally delivered a systematic philosophical theory of pluralism in 1989 with his magnum opus, *An Interpretation of Religion*. It is this work I will summarize in what follows.[45]

Hick's purpose in *An Interpretation of Religion* is to offer a "field theory of religion from a religious [and not a naturalistic] point of view". Its scope is defined at the outset when Hick states that:

> a philosopher of religion today must take account not only of the thought and experience of the tradition within which he or she happens to work, but in principle of the religious experience and thought of the whole human race.[46]

He calls his theory "the pluralistic hypothesis". When stripped to its essentials, the pluralistic hypothesis argues: a) that the world's major religious traditions are different culturally-conditioned responses to the same ultimate, transcendent Reality (which he calls "the Real" as a tradition neutral term[47]); b) that none of these traditions have superior access to, or a uniquely special relationship with, this Ultimate Reality; and c) that this can be judged by the fact that all traditions enshrine love and compassion in their basic teachings, with none having clearly displayed more love and compassion than any other. To put it another way, Hick follows Cantwell Smith's perspective that religious truth is not propositional – i.e. it is not about doctrine – but is about a personal relationship with

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[45] *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. J. Hick & P. Knitter; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987). As noted earlier, *An Interpretation of Religion* is the revised version of Hick's Gifford Lectures of 1986-7. It is also worth noting that *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* is the volume that formally crystallized the term "pluralism" as a theological position within the theology of religions after Alan Race had proposed the threefold typology in 1983 (see above, ch. 1, pp. 15ff.). In the context of my comments in the first footnote of Chapter 1 above, this theological meaning of pluralism was thus by far the latest in the western cultural lexicon, as other usages of the term stem from the early twentieth century. Again, a proper genealogy of the term remains a desideratum of contemporary scholarship, especially given the term's widespread cultural currency and its often highly charged resonance.

[46] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, xiii.

[47] For Hick's justification of "the Real" vis-à-vis possible alternatives, see *An Interpretation of Religion*, 9ff.

transcendence which manifests itself in a life-transforming attitude of love, openness, and sincerity.[48]

Hick's field of focus in developing this hypothesis is "the great world faiths", also called the "post-axial" traditions throughout the work. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hick construes the Axial Age as the period in which a movement began from archaic, localised religious traditions to the great religions of "salvation and liberation" (i.e. the "soteriological" traditions), which Hick also calls the religions of "transcendence". These comprise the Semitic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), the Indian traditions (Hinduism and Buddhism; often also Jainism and Sikhism), and generally also include the Asian (Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto), Persian (Zoroastrianism) and Greek (philosophical rationalism) traditions; but Hick confines himself primarily to the Big Five of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. He contrasts these post-axial traditions to pre-axial or "archaic" traditions, which are more concerned with "keeping life on an even keel" than the idea of transcendence, human transformation, or "the possibility of a limitlessly better future".[49] For Hick, this distinction between post-axial and pre-axial religion is crucial, and is the basis of the whole theory he goes on to develop. This will become clear in what follows. But as was established at length in Chapter 1, it is precisely this form of classification that is under scrutiny in this dissertation, because – on my reading at least – this demarcation effectively undermines Hick's entire argument. However, I refrain from such criticism at this point and simply note that beyond these initial comments, Hick says little about pre-axial religion. His focus in *An Interpretation of Religion* is on the

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[48] In addition to the three works cited above in Chapter 1 (n. 4), Cantwell Smith made this argument in works such as *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). On Smith's role as a theologian, rather than his contributions as a historian of religion (in which connection he is usually discussed), see Philip Almond, "Wilfred Cantwell Smith as Theologian of Religions", *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 335-342.

[49] See *An Interpretation of Religion*, 21-69. The term "archaic" religions is grounded in Eliade's usage. Hick also sometimes refers to the pre-axial religions as "primal" religions, a term popular in the late twentieth century. The history of this term is noted briefly below (ch. 4, n. 80). I discuss the shifting appellation of terminology to describe such groups in more detail in Chapter 3.

"great world faiths", which he argues share a higher transcendental unity beyond their phenomenal differences.

Hick begins his argument by noting what he calls "the religious ambiguity of the universe", i.e. the fact that no argument for or against the existence of God – whether naturalistic, philosophical or theological – is logically infallible in the mathematical sense, and that the world can thus legitimately be experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways.[50] The perspective one takes will simply be the result of the kind of experiences one has had: so that if one consciously experiences their life "in relation to the transcendent", then one is justified in trusting those experiences and holding religious beliefs (note again the influence of Cantwell Smith); whereas "it is likewise rationally proper for those who do not participate in any way in the wide field of religious experience to reject, *pro tem*, all belief in the transcendent".[51] By highlighting the religious ambiguity of the universe, Hick is arguing for the rationality of religious belief, and therefore for the legitimacy of his "religious but non-confessional" attempt to make sense of the diversity of religious beliefs that mark human history.

However, Hick is also aware that the numerous ways in which people have claimed that they live in a relationship with a transcendent Reality are so different and mutually contradictory that they cannot all be unquestionably correct – and it is precisely for this reason that he develops the pluralistic hypothesis as what he calls a "middle way" between naturalistic reductionism and dogmatic theological exclusivism (and even theological inclusivism, which still retains Christ as the normative centre). This redescriptive element of Hick's argument was already noted above, and will be important to revisit when addressing

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[50] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 73ff.

[51] *Ibid.*, 13.

the bulk of the criticism of the pluralist theory, as it seems to be one of the least appreciated (or most overlooked) aspects of Hick's justification for the pluralistic hypothesis.

Beyond this general justification for the rationality of religious belief, the pluralistic hypothesis has two primary components: epistemological perspectivism and the soteriological/ethical criteria. The question of religious epistemology had been Hick's primary concern from his first major publication in 1957, *Faith and Knowledge*, and was the cornerstone of his religious philosophy.[52] To summarize his view, Hick contends that while the *object* of religious awareness is something unique and special, "its basic epistemological pattern is that of all our knowing", i.e. schematized through culturally-conditioned ways of seeing and understanding things.[53] This leads Hick to the basic but crucial distinction, famously articulated by Kant, between a thing as it is in human perception, and a thing as it is "in itself" (*an sich*) – i.e. the phenomenon/noumenon distinction.[54] Like Kant, Hick argues that we can never perceive a thing "purely" as it exists, because it is always schematized through our culturally-conditioned faculties of perception and cognition. Hick applies this directly to the transcendent Real and argues, vis-à-vis both naturalism and theological exclusivism, that "the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied versions of it".[55] In other words, by adopting this basic Kantian framework, Hick can postulate (like Eliade and Otto) the existence of an ultimate, transcendent, *sui generis* Divine Reality, but can likewise assert that no single interpretation

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[52] See above, n. 37.

[53] Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 97; cf. *An Interpretation of Religion*, 129-152, esp. 151.

[54] Kant, I., *The Critique of Pure Reason*, B69 (trans. N. K. Smith; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 [1927]), 88. See Hick's discussion of the Kantian model in *An Interpretation of Religion*, 240ff. Interestingly, Hick notes Rudolf Otto as the most prominent Kantian philosopher of religion, but distances himself from Otto's specific use of Kant (250, n. 10).

[55] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 235-6. This quotation is key to understanding the self-consciously redescriptive element of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, as will become clear shortly.

of it is uniquely authoritative or superior. Notice again the redescriptive nature of Hick's theory.

Hick is well aware of the difficulty posed by the fact that some conceptualizations of the Real are personalistic (e.g. Allah, or the Heavenly Father), whereas other traditions conceive of the Real as a non-personal absolute (e.g. Brahman, or the Dharmakaya of Mahayana Buddhism). He therefore provides a detailed phenomenological comparison of the *personae* and the *impersonae* of the Real in order to argue that it "is so rich in content that it can only be finitely experienced in partial and inadequate ways".[56] In a useful analogy, Hick compares the apparent discrepancy between *personae* and *impersonae* to the way in which light appears differently – either as waves or as particles – when observed in different manners: the point being that something we don't fully understand can appear in ways that initially seem mutually exclusive.[57]

A final important aspect of Hick's perspectivist approach is his awareness of the extent to which "human factors manifestly enter into the formation of religious concepts and into the ways in which the transcendent is believed to be encountered".[58] Not only does he refer to the fact that "it is abundantly evident today that each tradition has been deeply influenced by cultural forces which rest in turn on a complex of geographical, climatic, economic and political factors",[59] but he also notes the way in which the "tribal" tendencies of human thought have conspired to shape the self-understanding of the various religions such that "each has come over the centuries to regard itself as uniquely superior to others, seeing them either as lying outside the sphere of salvation, or as earlier stages in an

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[56] *Ibid.*, 247; see also 255-296.

[57] *Ibid.*, 245.

[58] *Ibid.*, 8.

[59] *Ibid.*, 7.

evolution of which it is the culmination, or as less full and authentic versions of itself".[60]

Yet Hick argues that this "cannot be sustained on impartial grounds" in "our consciously pluralistic twentieth and twenty-first centuries".[61]

The above are the epistemological foundations of the pluralistic hypothesis: they allow Hick to argue for the rationality of religious belief vis-à-vis naturalism, and to make the claim that all religions are culturally-conditioned responses to the Transcendence that have taken place within different contexts. To build on these foundations and strengthen his argument that all traditions have the same Divine referent, Hick turns to his other fundamental components, the soteriological and ethical criteria (both covered in the "Criteriological" section of *An Interpretation of Religion*).[62]

The soteriological criterion hinges on Hick's specific definition of "salvation" (which he extends to the more inclusive term "salvation/liberation"), as meaning "*the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness*" (another important redescription).[63] Hick states clearly that "the function of post-axial religion is to create contexts in which [such] transformation … can take place".[64] This leads him to say that the basic evaluative criterion "must be soteriological", arguing that "Religious traditions and their various components – beliefs, modes of experience, scriptures, rituals, disciplines, ethics and lifestyles, social rules and organisations – *have greater or lesser value according as they*

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[60] *Ibid.*, 2.

[61] *Ibid.*, 2, 6.

[62] *Ibid.*, 297-376.

[63] *Ibid.*, 303 (italics added). Notice that "salvation/liberation" is another attempt at an inclusive but tradition-neutral term like "the Real".

[64] *Ibid.*, 300.

*promote or hinder the salvific transformation*".[65] In other words, a religious tradition's "value" can be judged by the way in which it promotes the movement from self-centered egoism to a relationship with Ultimate Reality that manifests itself in an outpouring of love and compassion (as above when Hick saw "the divine reality" as "gloriously evident" in his devout friends from other traditions).

Here Hick's similarity with William James and the tradition of pragmatism can be seen, because he argues that the way one can judge the degree to which a tradition provides an "authentic context of salvation/liberation" is the extent and quality of the "moral and spiritual fruits" it produces.[66] He argues that while this "soteriological transformation" takes place to some degree with most people who participate in a religious tradition, it is especially obvious in those who have been recognized as "saints", Hick's general term for those in other traditions called bodhisattvas, gurus, mahatmas, masters, etc. – i.e. "individuals in whom the signs of salvation and liberation are strikingly visible", something manifested in their selflessness, compassion, and the way they seem to radiate the divine Real.[67] However, while this soteriological transformation is more conspicuous in some, it is the path traveled by those in all religious traditions when they connect with the Real (in whatever way their tradition mediates that contact, e.g. through mediation, prayer, etc.). Moreover, Hick says that on any reading of human history, "It is not possible, as an unbiased judgment with which all rational persons could be expected to agree, to assert the

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[65] *Ibid.* (italics added). This is a crucial statement that will be scrutinized in Chapter 4, as it clearly has major implications for the evaluation of pre-axial traditions – which are, in Hick's view, not "soteriological" in the same manner as their post-axial counterparts.

[66] *Ibid.*, 301; see also Hick, J., "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 16-36, esp. 23. James famously said that one must "be ready to judge the religious life by its results exclusively" (James, W., *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in *William James: Writings 1902-1910* [Library of America: New York, 1987], 1-477; here 28). I must confess a measure of surprise at how little Hick discusses James in *An Interpretation of Religion*, given (a) the similarity of their positions, and (b) the degree to which Hick admired James (see e.g. his *Autobiography*, 262).

[67] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 301. Although he does not mention him directly in this context, Hick seems to especially have in mind figures such as Desmond Tutu, with whom he enjoyed a long friendship (see e.g. Hick, *Autobiography*, 240ff.).

overall moral superiority of any one of the great religious traditions of the world".[68] In other words, no tradition has a moral monopoly: each has produced its fair share of saints and sinners, and if we are to judge a tradition by its fruits – the fundamental measure that Hick suggests that we take – then all traditions appear to be very similar to each other.

In addition to arguing that all religions offer authentic paths to the transformative salvation/liberation of the human individual, Hick says that "From a religious point of view we must … assume the rooting of moral norms in the structure of our human mind and the rooting of that nature in our relationship to the Real".[69] This observation is particularly grounded in Hick's perception of *the universality of "the Golden Rule"*, i.e. the fact that all traditions share the ethical core encapsulated in the maxim "do unto others as you would have done unto you". Hick offers examples of this basic ethical maxim from all of the great traditions, which for him is further evidence for his argument that they are all in contact with the same Ultimate Reality, which imparts its ultimately loving and compassionate essence into the structure of the human mind.[70]

Then, in a procedural step that is crucial for the whole pluralistic hypothesis, Hick extends his observation about the Golden Rule by applying it to his argument for the rationality of *one's own* religious belief. He argues, as we saw, that it is rational and entirely acceptable for people in different traditions to trust their own religious experience as a gauge for the truth of their convictions. Hick therefore says that

> what it is reasonable for a given person at a given time to believe depends in large part upon what we may call, in the cybernetic sense, his or her information or cognitive input. And the input that is most centrally relevant in this case is religious experience. Here I have in mind particularly the fact that people report their being conscious of

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[68] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 357.

[69] *Ibid.*, 312ff.

[70] *Ibid.*, 313. Hick cites examples within Buddhism (*Dharmmapada*, 10:2); Confucianism (*Analects*, XII:2); Daoism (*Thai Shang*, 3); Zoroastrianism (*Dadistan-i-dinik*, 94:5); Christianity (Luke 6:13); Judaism (*Babylonian Talmud*, 31a); and Islam, where the Rule is well attested in the Hadith.

existing in God's presence and of living in a personal relationship of mutual awareness with God.[71]

He continues by stating – *and this is the crux of his entire argument for the non-superiority of Christianity* – that:

> [we cannot] reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst others are not. We can of course claim this; and indeed virtually every religious tradition has done so, regarding alterative forms of religion as either false or as confused and inferior versions of itself. But the kind of rational justification [he has set forth in an earlier chapter] for treating one's own form of religious experience as a cognitive response – though always a complexly conditioned one – to a divine reality must … apply equally to the religious experience of others. *In acknowledging this we are obeying the intellectual Golden Rule of granting to others a premise on which we rely ourselves.* Persons living within other traditions, then, are equally justified in trusting their own distinctive religious experience and in forming their beliefs on the basis of it. For the only reason for treating one's tradition differently from others is the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one's own![72]

Here we have the essence of the pluralist theory of religions: the grounds by which one's own beliefs are justified, i.e. the reality and profundity of religious experience, must be granted to others by accepting that *their* beliefs are likewise grounded in religious experiences of a similar kind. Hick effectively suggests that to do anything else is to employ a hopelessly arbitrary double standard that has far more to do with fear than love. And when one considers the basic fact that no tradition can claim any kind of moral monopoly on love or compassion, but that these ideals are enshrined in them all, the hypothesis suggests itself that this is because all of the great traditions are, in their own way, in contact with the same Divine Reality – an idea that, for Hick, is becoming increasingly plausible as the global age continues to bring the various traditions of humanity into contact as never before. Indeed, in Hick's view, not only is the pluralistic hypothesis becoming ever more

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[71] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 211.

[72] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 235 (italics added). For a similar sentiment, cf. *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 103.

*plausible* as formerly isolated cultures continue to learn about each other, but he argues throughout the work that this kind of tolerant, pluralistic view of religious diversity is becoming every more *necessary* as the age of global integration continues to tie together the fate of all human cultures.[73]

It is clear from the foregoing survey that Hick has, regardless of what one makes of his theory, been true to his fundamental insight from the late 1960s: that his friends in Birmingham who belonged to other traditions lived their lives in relationship with the same Transcendent Reality that Hick himself had worshipped in the context of Christianity, and indeed that all people within all of the great traditions participate, in their own way, in the salvific quest from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. It is also clear, however, that the theory Hick propounds is deeply contestable from many angles, and that it is replete with assumptions – about both "religion" in general and the specific traditions themselves – that many people find completely untenable. Thus, before beginning my own critical appraisal of Hick's theory, it is first necessary to consider the body of criticism that has been leveled at it.

*The Traditional Criticisms of The Pluralist Argument*

In reviewing the wide range of challenges critics have offered to the pluralist theory, I have discerned roughly five distinct criticisms. While I make no claim to be exhaustive, these five are the most commonly occurring in the critical response to pluralism.[74] I characterize these criticisms as follows: 1) pluralism is philosophically incoherent; 2) pluralism is relativism; 3)

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[73] See especially the Epilogue of *An Interpretation of Religion*, 377-380.

[74] There is a substantial theological literature on this question, which cannot be covered adequately here. For a good entry to the theological critique of pluralism, see *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (ed. G. D'Costa; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), the volume which answered the proposals offered by Hick et al. in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.

pluralism is surreptitious universalism; 4) pluralism is inadequate as a Christian theological position; and 5) religions do not share a common core, and to argue that they do is to obscure their very real differences. Often these criticisms overlap, are bundled together, or are framed slightly differently, but they represent the general problems that have been put forth by critics who have challenged Hick's argument.[75]

It is important to note that none of these criticisms address the issues that being explored in this dissertation. Moreover, whilst I have my own complaints, I believe that the five main criticisms have all been made against an oversimplified version of the pluralist theory. Even those that do raise valid concerns – such as the claim of theological inadequacy or the lack of clarity Hick has provided regarding the redescriptive nature of his theory – do not actually challenge the fundamental points of his argument. Thus, if I am going to offer my own rejection of the pluralist theory, I believe it is good academic practice to defend it first against this host of insufficient criticisms.

*Criticism 1: Pluralism is Philosophically Incoherent.*

In the years after *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* and *An Interpretation of Religion* there was, understandably, a strong response to the pluralist movement. In a detailed review article from 1990, Sumner Twiss discussed all of the criticisms that had by that point been leveled.[76] One of the least impressive criticisms Twiss documents is George Netland's challenge to Hick's postulate of the divine noumenon (the Real), which he argues is a

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[75] Other slightly different distillations of the critique (both of which identify 4 main criticisms) include David Ray Griffin, "Religious Pluralism: Generic, Identist, and Deep" in *Deep Religious Pluralism* (ed. D. Griffin; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3-39; and Sumner B. Twiss, "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of John Hick and His Critics", *The Journal of Religion* 70 (1990): 533-568. See also Chapter 1 above (n. 90) for why I pass over Hick's own response to his critics. I note that the same reasons apply for not engaging with the recent *festschrift* dedicated to Hick, *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: An Ongoing Engagement with John Hick* (ed. S. Sugirtharajah; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), which likewise fails to raise any discourse-analytical issues.

[76] Twiss, "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism".

philosophically problematic notion.[77] As discussed above, Hick postulates that there exists a noumenal, transcendent Reality, and that the various conceptualizations of this Ultimate Reality – e.g. God, Allah, Brahman, Nirvana – are simply different culturally-conditioned articulations of this noumenal reality. This reality is unknowable in "pure" form (*an sich*), and has therefore been conceived differently by the limited apparatus of individual and collective human consciousness. Netland's criticism boils down to the fact that these varying conceptualizations of the Real are so different from each other that there is serious doubt as to whether they refer to the same Ultimate Reality, *especially* considering the discrepancy between personal and impersonal conceptualizations of this reality. To use Twiss' paraphrase, Netland is asking, in short, if the postulate of the divine noumenon is really "anything more than an elaborate hypothesis developed to avoid concluding that perhaps all religions are not in touch with the same divine reality".[78]

This seems to be an almost willful misunderstanding of Hick's argument. Twiss concurs, and provides a detailed refutation of Netland's objection, noting two main points Netland appears to have ignored. The first is Hick's analogy with physics and the suggestion that, as with light, our imperfect and always-limited understanding of the Real, in conjunction with its own incomprehensible complexity, means that it has been conceptualized in various ways that appear apparently contradictory to our finite human understanding. In other words, "What Hick is proposing in this phase [of his argument] is perfectly conceivable and coherent, and what he is proposing seems justified (internally) from the perspective of the pluralist hypothesis. Other and stronger reasons must … await Hick's defense of his hypothesis as a whole".[79]

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[77] Twiss cites George A. Netland, "Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism", *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 249-61.

[78] Twiss, "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism", 554.

[79] *Ibid.*, 556.

To summarize the point, Hick's postulate of the divine noumenon is internally coherent within his argument and serves as the basis of making sense of religious diversity without naturalistic reductionism. Netland's basic objection that personal and impersonal conceptualizations of the Real are mutually contradictory more or less totally ignores the complex justification Hick has offered for this postulate. It is still possible, of course, to find the pluralist theory unpersuasive; but it cannot be written off for the reason that Netland suggests.

*Criticism 2: Pluralism Is Relativism.*

A second objection leveled against the pluralist theory of religions, which is likewise founded on an unfair reading of Hick's position, is that pluralism, like postmodernism in general, is self-defeating relativism, in that because it denies the possibility of objective truth it thereby undermines its own claims.

In a representative example, Andrew Kirk argues that because pluralism is an epiphenomenon of postmodernism, then if postmodernism can be shown to be inadequate, so can the pluralist theory of religions.[80] The title of the essay itself, "Pluralism as an Epiphenomenon of Postmodern Perspectivism", is actually an excellently distilled description of Hick's theory; but unfortunately this is where the critical value of the essay ends. Kirk trades in the standard refutation of postmodernism, namely its self-contradictory nature, i.e. that "its own critical stance is dependent on assumptions that are, in turn, undermined by its own critique".[81] He goes on discuss that while postmodernism rejects grand narratives, it operates itself with its own master narrative that "has dismissed the

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[80] Kirk, A. J., "Religious Pluralism as an Epiphenomenon of Postmodern Perspectivism" in *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue* (ed. V. Mortensen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 430-442.

[81] *Ibid.*, 439.

possibility of encountering truly objective reality".[82] He concludes the short essay by noting that with regard to postmodernism, "there is little point" of persuading people to adopt different views "if there is no right or wrong, truth or falsity left". He continues by asking: "Could the same not be said for all pluralist theories of religion? Why should we believe them or persuade others to share our views? … Is it not high time to abandon pluralist theories of religion as mere epiphenomena of a culturally transient, morally dangerous, and ultimately intellectually absurd 'condition'?"[83]

Allow me to paraphrase Kirk's argument: Pluralism is an outgrowth of postmodernism; postmodernism's relativism is incoherent and self-defeating; therefore the pluralist theory of religions is incoherent. To put it bluntly, this a lazy syllogism that totally undersells both the pluralist theory of religions and the cluster of critical movements generally called postmodernism. Postmodern theory does not deny that objective reality exists, but argues (among other things) that no description of this reality is free from the constraints of human conceptualization, and that all systems of meaning are discursively constructed in response to various cultural pressures. Further, postmodern critics argue that all human thought and social action is embedded within complex networks of power relations, meaning that all representations have political implications, even if they are often disguised or indirect.[84] With regard to historical metanarratives, postmodernism is not vapid relativism that bemoans "the end of meaning". Rather, one does better to follow Foucault's distinction between "total history" and "general history": *total* history is the old master narrative (whether theological, Marxist, etc.), which claims to be *the* ultimate story of human existence – and it is this view that "postmodernism" challenges; whereas *general* history, by

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[82] *Ibid.*, 440.

[83] *Ibid.*, 442.

[84] See e.g. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (trans. C. Gordon et al.; ed. C. Gordon; New York: Vintage, 1980).

contrast, still attempts to depict reality external to the human subject in a persuasive manner, but in the awareness that the construal of any such narrative will be a "fiction" intimately related to the questions, motivations, and presuppositions brought to the representation, and thus that all narratives are more fundamentally related to human concerns than any "pure" depiction of *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.[85] This point could further be bolstered by considering J. Z. Smith's cogent observation that the project of the humanities is not concerned with "processes of proof", but rather with "rhetorics of persuasion".[86]

Similarly untenable is Kirk's assertion that the pluralist theory is a form of relativism. What Hick offers is *not* a vapid narrative in which "everyone is right" and thus that there is really "no hope for truth";[87] rather – and this is a fundamental point I will develop over the rest of this chapter – the pluralist theory offers *a redescription of the religious history of humanity*. In other words, Hick's argument is a self-conscious attempt to generate a plausible theory of pan-human religious experience that rejects (a) the normativity each tradition has conventionally ascribed to its own interpretation of reality; and (b) forms of naturalistic reductionism that deem the object of religious experience to be an illusion. Kirk even recognizes this redescriptive tactic himself, but without realizing that it should invalidate his relativistic critique – because he also stresses that pluralism is not as "open" or "accommodating" as it tries to present itself, because its "conviction that the ethical teaching and practice of all the major religion are equivalent [requires] a nonpluralist,

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[85] See Foucault, M., *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (trans A. M. S. Smith; London: Routledge, 2002 [1972]), 10-11. On the concept of all historiography being "fictional" to a degree, see Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), esp. "Interpretation in History", 51-80. I discuss Foucault, White, and a number of other important theorists in Chapter 5. Leopold von Ranke's famous comment is also noted there.

[86] Smith, J. Z., "Connections", *On Teaching Religion* (ed. C. Lehrich; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49-63, here 54.

[87] A similarly misguided critique has been made by Miroslav Volf in an otherwise cogent essay, "A Voice of One's Own: Public Faith in a Pluralistic World" in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (ed. T. Banchoff; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 271-281; see esp. 276, where he calls the pluralist theory "incoherent". For a more sophisticated (yet equally unpersuasive) version of the critique, see Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPK, 1989).

unconditional, noncontextual, unequivocal account of the right and the good".[88] Certainly it does, and this is the next issue that will be considered; but here Kirk contradicts his assertion that pluralism is relativism, because it clearly argues for its own ultimate narrative and does not entail the need to "indiscriminately affirm anything and everything" (to use Miroslav Volf's characterization).[89]

Simply put, pluralism is either vapid, "debilitating" relativism, or it takes a standpoint from which it judges other interpretations of human religiosity to be unpersuasive. It cannot be both. And given pluralism's insistence that exclusivist and inclusivist theologies are wrong in asserting the unique veridicality of their own experience of the transcendent Real, and that naturalistic, social-scientific reductionism is unacceptable, then pluralism clearly takes a firm standpoint. This brings us to a far more important criticism of the pluralist theory.

*Criticism 3: Pluralism is Surreptitious Universalism.*

The charge that pluralism is actually "not at all pluralistic" is the most common problem raised with regard to Hick's position, and has been mentioned by virtually all of his major critics. Although the critique is offered in various forms (e.g. those above), the following is a neat encapsulation of the complaint. Commenting on the essays in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Gavin D'Costa says:

> [it is] ironic that some of the proposals put forward are as triumphalist and imperialist as the old solutions being criticized. For example, in the attempt to affirm the "independent validity of other ways," it seemed that many who did so necessarily employed implicit or explicit criteria for what was deemed "valid," thereby replacing the particularity of Christian criteria with the particularity of other criteria. It is not clear why the replacement of one set of criteria with another, both with their own sorts of problematic exclusivity, was deemed less theologically imperialist. Furthermore …

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[88] Kirk, "Religious Pluralism as an Epiphenomenon of Postmodern Perspectivism", 441.

[89] Volf, "A Voice of One's Own", 276. Newbigin also falls into this contradiction despite the greater nuance of his critique (see n. 87 above).

the "system" of pluralism [seems to many] to operate in curiously absolutist fashion, proposing to incorporate religions on the system's own terms rather than on keeping with the self-understanding of the religions.[90]

This critique contains two main points that need to be addressed: firstly, pluralism falsely pretends to a neutrality from which it can judge all of the great traditions as having different but equal salvific efficacy; secondly, pluralism disregards any theological affirmation which does not square with its own understanding of religious diversity, thereby contradicting the self-understanding of the majority of people within each different tradition. There is clearly much more meat in these two criticisms than the specious charge of relativism or philosophical incoherence; yet neither of them ultimately undermine Hick's actual argument. Let me address them in turn.

Firstly: "*It is not clear why the replacement of one set of criteria with another, both with their own sorts of problematic exclusivity, was deemed less theologically imperialist*". Critics have certainly been correct to challenge the often naively presented "openness" of the pluralist theory, and one does get a sense when reading the pluralist literature that the pluralists feel themselves to be somehow transcending partisanship. D'Costa has elsewhere stated that:

> Despite [the pluralists'] intentions to encourage openness, tolerance, and equality they fail to attain these goals (on their own definition) because of the tradition-specific nature of their positions. Their particular shaping tradition is the Enlightenment … The Enlightenment, in granting a type of equality to all religions, ended up denying public truth to any and all of them.[91]

The result is that "their god is modernity's god", and thus even though the pluralists present themselves as being "brokers to disputed parties", they actually conceal the fact "that they represent yet another party which invites disputants to leave their parties and join the

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[90] D'Costa, G., "Preface", *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ix. See also Griffin, "Religious Pluralism", 30f.

[91] D'Costa, G., *The Meeting of Religions and the Meeting of the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 1. This is Miroslav Volf's main issue with the pluralist theory.

pluralist one". For this reason, D'Costa argues that pluralism is actually its own form of exclusivism, and he calls Hick's view an example of "liberal intolerance".[92]

D'Costa raises a valid concern here; but I would respond to his question about why pluralism is considered by Hick to be less theologically imperialist as follows: it is because of the way that pluralism understands all religious experience to be authentically grounded in the Real, and that no tradition-specific conceptualization of the Real thus has unique authority. That is to say, Hick deems conventional Christian approaches as theologically imperialist because they have sought to ground the supremacy of Christianity in a revelation that is allegedly uniquely authoritative, whereas Hick himself deems no such experience of the divine as more authoritative than any other. As noted above, the crux of the whole pluralist theory is Hick's assertion that "we cannot reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst others are not." One may not agree with him, but that would be his reason. So while Hick is positing with equal "imperialism" that his view of the Real is correct, he has, unlike most Christian thinkers, attempted to ground this view on a broader consideration of the "experience and thought of the whole human race".

This brings up the second aspect of the complaint: *that pluralism seems "to incorporate religions on the system's own terms rather than in keeping with the self-understanding of the religions".* A similar charge has been made by Kennith Surin in one of the more sophisticated critiques of pluralism, when he argues that "monological pluralism sedately but ruthlessly domesticates and assimilates the other – *any* other – in the name of world ecumenism".[93]

These critics are correct in noting that the pluralist theory redescribes the history of religions in terms that are irreconcilable with the self-understanding of each tradition, and

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[92] *Ibid.*, 2.

[93] Surin, K., "A 'Politics of Speech': Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger" in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 192-212, here 200.

here too Hick has been less clear that he ought.[94] Here we come to the important issue of

the insider/outsider debate: i.e. *whether statements about religion are valid if they do not conform to the*

*adherent's own understanding.* This question is based upon the methodological difference

between *description* (what someone says/thinks about themselves) versus *redescription* (what

one says about a person/group using a second-order theoretical perspective).[95] This has

been one of the most important debates of recent times in the academic study of religion,

and we saw earlier that the question was already at stake in the development of the

phenomenological method represented by van der Leeuw and Eliade. An important point

to stress before addressing the issue is that a theory of religion can be "redescriptive"

without being "reductive" – which is precisely the case with the arguments of figures such

as Otto, Eliade, and Hick. This distinction will become clear as the discussion continues.

One of the most famous contributions to this debate is Wilfred Cantwell Smith's

claim that "no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that

religion's believers".[96] This was asserted even more clearly by an earlier phenomenologist,

Wilhelm Brede Kristensen:

> Let us never forget that there exists no other religious reality than the faith of the
> believer. If we really want to understand religion, we must refer exclusively to the
> believer's testimony. What we believe, from our point of view, about the nature or
> value of other religions, is a reliable testimony to our own understanding of religious
> faith; but if our opinion about another religion differs from the opinion and evaluation

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[94] While Hick addressed this squarely with relation to his own tradition by tackling the doctrine of the
Incarnation in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, he never discussed analogous fundamental claims within other
traditions that need to be rejected in the pluralist view – e.g. the claim that the Qur'an is the final revelation of
God's will. Presumably Hick wanted to tread a sensitive path with regard to his comments about other
traditions, even if he was willing to confront his own tradition in this way. But the point remains that
theological pluralists generally seem shy about facing up to this issue.

[95] Much of this debate hinges on the issues broached at the start of this chapter regarding McCutcheon's
argument about what counts as "theory", with his claim being that descriptive portrayals which do not
redescribe religious actors cannot count as such.

[96] Cantwell Smith, W., "The Comparative Study of Religion: Whither—and Why?" in *The History of Religions:
Essays in Methodology* (ed. M. Eliade & J. Kitagawa; Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 31–58, here 49.
Cantwell Smith asserted this view in a number of his works, see e.g. *Toward a World Theology* (esp. 60).

of the believers, then we are no longer talking about their religion. We have turned aside from historical reality and are concerned only with ourselves.[97]

Russell McCutcheon has termed this approach "the methodological rule concerning the interpretive and descriptive authority of the insider".[98] The contributions to this debate are too complex and diverse to consider fully here, so in the interests of staying focused I will only comment on how this idea relates to the question of the validity of the pluralist theory.[99]

No theory about religion commands universal assent, meaning that *every* theory or theology is a redescription of human life that would not be accepted by most people whom the theory/theology purports to describe. This means that it is futile to demand that a theory be acceptable to all whom it purports to describe: for not only is this an impossible condition, especially for theories concerning the ultimate meaning of human life; but to follow this maxim would spell the end of all second-order theorizing that attempts to understand human behaviour in terms that the object of study is either unaware of or does not agree with.[100] In other words, if the descriptive authority of the insider is given the status of ultimate heuristic authority, then there can be no possible attempt to provide explanations or interpretations of human behaviour that take into account factors other than the agents under consideration do.[101] When put this way, one sees how analytically

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[97] Kristensen, W. B., *Religionshistorisk Studium* (Oslo: O. Norli, 1954), 17. Cited in Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 228. See also McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 101ff.

[98] McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 115.

[99] For an extensive discussion, see *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: a Reader* (ed. R. McCutcheon; London: Cassell, 1999).

[100] On this point, see J. Z. Smith, "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion" in *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 160-178.

[101] There is a reasonable point in McCutcheon's somewhat churlish question: "Are we only able to say nice things about those who have already said something nice about us? Or, as our parents might have taught us, if we cannot say something nice about someone, should we just keep our scholarly mouths shut?". This issue is explored provocatively in his piece "'It's a Lie. There's No Truth in It! It's a Sin!': On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves", *Journal of the American*

vacuous the idea of the descriptive authority of the insider is – and it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that it is little more than a poorly thought out reaction against the pressures of secularism and naturalistic reductionism.

A similar observation was made recently by J. Z. Smith in an interview that appeared in *The Chicago Maroon*. It is worth citing in full Smith's amusingly frustrated perspective on the issue:

> If you want one word from me I'm a translator. That's what I do. I translate in both directions. I'm translating other folks' translations of who they think they are or what some figure said, or for that matter I'm translating the translation of the figure who said it. And so, you're always in the middle, because translation's always in the middle. It can't impose its language on someone else's language. On the other hand, if it just repeats the other person's language, it ain't translated. I have colleagues in the religion business who think that's what we ought to do. We ought to repeat their language. We ought to get them to sign off on our version of their language. Nonsense! Translation changes things, there's no doubt about it. I can't imagine any author has been fully satisfied with a translation of their work, even if they translated it themselves. So if I can't get the author to sign off on their own translation, why the hell—and who am I going to ask?
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> There's an example, of a great scholar, also named Smith—Wilfred Cantwell Smith, just died a couple years ago—that was his fundamental principle. His specialty was particularly in Islam, and he held that if he said something about Islam, they had to sign off on it. And I said "Wilfred, the difference between you and me is that I'm at Harvard and you're at Chicago. You're rich, I'm poor. Who are you calling up? My God, what a phone bill! I mean, you're calling up the entire Muslim world, and asking what they think of your sentence? Because if not, I want to know how you picked out the person you asked. And I suspect you picked him out because he talks just like you!" And then you're asking a mirror, "How do I look today?" I mean, it's a crazy idea. Call up the whole world and ask them, "What do you think about what I was about to say? Every sentence?" I mean good lord, what a bill. I think even with the cell phones, I see all the ads say "unlimited"—I don't think they had that in mind. So no. … You get in trouble anyway in this business. Sooner or later, you do something someone's not going to like. … It's the glory and the problem of speech.[102]

In other words, the assertions of Cantwell Smith and Kristensen are simply not valid methodological rules, because otherwise we could say nothing at all about anybody whose views we were not merely repeating or elaborating. As such, to maintain the descriptive

*Academy of Religion* 74 (2006): 720-750, quotation 732.

[102] Sinhababu, S., "Interview with J. Z. Smith", *The Chicago Marron*, June 2, 2008 (http://chicagomaroon.com/2008/06/02/full-j-z-smith-interview/). Accessed May 21, 2013. (I note that the transcription has perhaps mistaken the fact that J. Z. Smith was at Chicago, and Cantwell Smith at Harvard.)

authority of the insider is to maintain a series of contradictory assertions about human life and the nature of reality – and *that* is something far closer to the vapid relativism of which pluralism has so often been accused.

What does this mean in relation to the pluralist theory? It simply means that just because Hick and the pluralists argue for a theory of human religiosity that contradicts the fundamental self-understanding of the great traditions, this does not rule out its plausibility *as a redescripive theory*. In fact, this is the entire point of why Hick constructs his pluralistic hypothesis – for as has been repeated throughout this chapter, pluralism is self-consciously an attempt to provide a theory of humanity's religious history which holds, *pace* traditional confessional understandings, that all of the great traditions are in contact with the same transcendent Reality in equally valid ways, but that the fallible and often "tribal" nature of human thought has resulted in a countless attempts to "limit the sphere of salvation" to those within one specific cultural or confessional group. Just because Hick has not been particularly clear about the redescriptive aspect of his approach, nor about the many traditional claims that he thus has to reject (such as the unique revelatory status of the Qur'an or the "chosen" status of the Jewish people), his theory cannot be dismissed simply because it is redescriptive. Other reasons must be offered that go to the heart of his argument, few of which, however, have been forthcoming from any direction. And just because it makes its own universal truth-claims, this too does not rule out the fact that it may actually provide a more plausible account of religious diversity and the profundity of experience across all cultures than are found in any of the traditional confessional narratives (i.e. the narratives endorsed by many of his critics). Twiss has provided a good articulation of this point:

> It is to be expected that a higher-order theoretical account would identify deeper (and perhaps common) explanatory factors that the more limited traditional perspectives would not have in view. On this reading, Hick simply takes (or assumes) first-order descriptions of soteriological processes and goals as the phenomena or data for which

he now seeks an explanation in more comprehensive theoretical terms. That this might be seen as explanatory reduction is no objection at all.[103]

To summarize, critics have been right to point out that pluralism makes its own universal truth claims; but they are wrong to suggest that this somehow invalidates the theory. They may still find it unpersuasive because it does not conform to their own experience of the world, but the argument remains plausible and coherent. Indeed, while pluralism leaves open the question of how it can be justified given the extent to which it contradicts the self-understanding of each tradition (something for which Hick attempts to provide comprehensive justification), a conventional inclusivist or exclusivist Christian view, for example, similarly leaves open the question how and why every human ideational community throughout history has held conflicting views about the ultimate nature of reality with the same level of conviction and with the same degree of self-evidency as Christians. This is, however, a question that Hick's Christian interlocutors typically do not address. So, if I am to offer my own redescription, the primary reason that all critics so far mentioned reject the pluralist theory is *not* because of a formal incoherence in an otherwise persuasive theory, but because they deem it insufficient as a Christian position.

*Criticism 4: Pluralism is Inadequate as a Christian Theological Position.*

All critics so far mentioned are Christian theologians, as have been most direct critics of Hick. This fact is of importance when assessing the criticisms that they have leveled at the pluralist theory of religions. So far the charges documented – of philosophical incoherence, relativism, and universalism – have been shown to not actually undermine the basic argument Hick makes, which simply offers a redescription of humanity's religious history

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[103] Twiss, "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism", 544.

that does not square with a traditional Christian understanding of that history.[104] This has led me to the view that the primary problem of these critics is actually that Hick's pluralism is an insufficient base for a genuinely Christian theology. Addressing the question of pluralism's theological adequacy is inappropriate in the context of this dissertation, but I do want to make a general observation about the issue.

While pluralism is undoubtedly an insufficient base for Christianity from a conservative or orthodox perspective (given that it does not place Christ at the centre of human history), the pluralist view has been defended by a number of liberal Christians as providing an adequate base for a genuinely Christian position. Although it could fairly be argued that pluralists are trying to have their cake and eat it too – to maintain the old Christian symbols (of God, Christ, salvation etc.) while arguing for a view that radically undermines the premises on which these traditional symbols were founded – there do on the other hand exist a number of well justified proposals for the theological legitimacy of theocentric models of Christian faith and fellowship.[105]

The issue, in other words, seems to boil down to what has already been mentioned with respect to Hick and Cantwell Smith: whether one regards *doctrine* as ultimately authoritative, or whether one regards religious *experience* as ultimately authoritative. In the doctrinal view, pluralism is hopelessly inadequate and represents a capitulation to the pressures of Enlightenment modernity. But in the latter view, pluralism provides by far a stronger explanation for pan-human religiosity than any inclusivist or exclusivist Christian approach, both of which seem to offer little explanation for the depth of conviction held by

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[104] See Chester Gillis' defence of Hick in this context, where he argues that Hick's theory has been widely misread at an attempt at Christian theology, when in fact the argument of *An Interpretation of Religion* is fundamentally philosophical, not theological ("John Hick: Theologian or Philosopher of Religion?" in *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World*, 137-151). Although as both Gillis and Twiss note, Hick is certainly culpable for blurring the lines between his role as a philosopher and a theologian in certain publications.

[105] The most eloquent attempt at this I have seen is Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Towards A World Theology*, esp. 152-179. At one stage he declares that his proposal is "unabashedly theocentric" (177).

those in other traditions other than a generalized notion that notion that the Spirit is universally operative and that all religions have a part to play in the economy of salvation.[106]

Hick certainly *wants* pluralism to be an adequate basis for Christian theology and he uses it as such himself; but even if it is deemed insufficient as a theological base, this does not actually challenge the basic argument of pluralism *qua* redescriptive theory of religion. As such, all that its theological critics can ultimately say is that they are not persuaded by Hick's argument because it is not Christian enough – but this offers no substantive challenge to the specific claims that he makes.

This point needs to be emphasized: theological critics seem to have spent far more time trying to refute Hick's argument than trying to offer alternate answers for the profound similarities to be found across all religious traditions – and given that their rejection usually entails a quiet (or sometimes loud) affirmation of the central truths of Christian doctrine, one is surely justified in asking *how they respond to Hick's central claim* that they are trusting their own form of religious experience as somehow uniquely authoritative vis-à-vis the claims of other traditions, which are patently grounded in experiences of the same sincerity and profundity. To put it more concretely: Do they have, for example, a sociological explanation for the conviction of the Islamic community regarding the revelatory status of the Qur'an? Is there a psychological explanation for this claim, revolving perhaps around the human desire for objective certainty, or the power of charisma? If so, why do these reductive explanations not apply to Christian claims? These questions are simply not addressed by the theological critics of pluralism, even though their rejection of

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[106] Jacques Dupuis is a good example of this tendency. His response to Hick and the pluralists is theologically complex, but entirely self-referential within established Catholic discourses. He therefore in no way addresses the wider body of non-theological knowledge that lies behind Hick's argument (see *Toward A Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999]). The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for most theological critics of pluralism.

Hick's argument – which does attempt to explain the conviction of the Islamic claim, however imperfectly – surely requires that they address such issues.

*Criticism 5: There is No Common Essence Amongst Religions.*

The final criticism is similar to the issues already raised, especially the problem of pluralism's redescriptive universalism, but it is treated separately here because it is the only regular criticism I have discerned in the non-theological literature (even though some theologians have made the same claim). A prominent recent example of this complaint comes from Stephen Prothero in his book *God Is Not One*.[107] Prothero starts by noting the long history of the view that "all religions are one". In recent times this view has been expressed by figures such as Gandhi, the current Dalai Lama, Karen Armstrong, and Huston Smith. Prothero gives special consideration to Smith and the perennial philosophy, which he sees as the prime contemporary manifestation of the belief that all religions share the same core.[108] It should be noted that he does not consider Hick and the theological pluralist discourse; yet pluralism and perennialism are very similar ideas, so his criticism applies equally to Hick's argument.[109]

After citing a number of versions of the view that the only difference in religions is their external trappings and that they all share the same core (especially the Golden Rule), Prothero says "This is a lovely sentiment but it is dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue".[110]

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[107] Prothero, S., *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run The World* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

[108] Although Aldous Huxely is the figure most commonly associated with perennialism, Smith's major influence was the Swiss scholar and mystic, Frithjof Schuon (see ch. 1, n. 2 above). For a good introduction to Schuon, see *The Essential Frithjof Schuon* (ed. S. H. Nasr; Indiana: World Wisdom, 2005), esp. the detailed introduction by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1-64).

[109] I am unaware of any comparative treatment of pluralist theology and perennialist thought. The two positions are broadly homologous, but have different discursive histories and so have rarely been in conversation. Huston Smith's easy convergence with Hick's perspective is a good example to support the point, but a fuller comparative study of the two schools of thought would be interesting (even if only from the perspective of intellectual history).

[110] Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 2.

He says that "no religion … sees ethics alone as its reason for being", and that "For more than a generation we have followed scholars and sages down the rabbit hole into a fantasy world in which all gods are one".[111] The reason he argues this is that, contrary to the intentions of these pluralists, by not taking religious differences at face value this "naive theological groupthink … has made the world more dangerous by blinding us to the clashes of religions that threaten us worldwide".[112] Prothero therefore characterizes the difference-muting approach of Huston Smith et al. as "pretend pluralism", and he says that while the sentiment is admirable, what the world needs now is more "realism" than "idealism" in our reflections on religious diversity.[113]

This is all true enough, at least from the pragmatic perspective of the civic negotiation of cultural difference. But the problem with Prothero's argument as an actual criticism of the pluralist theory is that he bluntly advocates that all we should do is remain at the descriptive level and deal with religious traditions *as they understand themselves*. Because the world's religious traditions patently "do not share the same goals", he decries the way in which the perennial philosophers (and by implication Hick and the theological pluralists) "conscript outsiders into their tradition quite against their will".[114]

The problem with this approach was made clear above in the discussion regarding the insider/outsider debate: what this approach implies is that any attempt to think about traditions in terms other than those with which they describe themselves is ruled out as unacceptable – but this cannot be a valid methodological rule to which scholars should adhere. Prothero is effectively saying: "don't think about the evolutionary origins of religious and cultural diversity, don't speculate about the phenomenological similarities

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[111] *Ibid.*, 2-3.

[112] *Ibid.*, 3.

[113] *Ibid.*, 5 -7.

[114] *Ibid.*, 6.

amongst the traditions and how these might be understood using the intellectual advances of the past century, and don't say anything with which the adherents themselves would not agree – that is a waste of time, it is unethical, and it stops us getting on with the job of getting along". But this criticism rests on an oversimplified understanding of the pluralist argument, and recapitulates the untenable logic of Cantwell Smith's view that nothing about a religion is true unless confirmed by the believers themselves. How can a scholar deny the right of other scholars the attempt to think about human history in ways that try to make sense of so many otherwise incompatible accounts? If Prothero does not wish to do that in pursuit of other interests, then that is of course a reasonable choice. But to deny the legitimacy of this *in toto* is nothing less than bad scholarship.

In other words, Prothero's criticism fails to take account of the redescriptive nature of the pluralist perspective, and he writes it off far too quickly simply because it attempts to delve beyond the descriptive level (i.e. the level at which mutually contradictory assertions about the human condition abound). Prothero is obviously correct that many people will not be convinced by the pluralist theory, and that time might thus be better spent on other forms of fostering peaceful intercultural relations. But he offers no argument against pluralism itself other than the fact that it goes beyond the descriptive level – which is to say he offers no argument at all.

A final version of the "no common core" critique worth noting is from Russell McCutcheon, which relates to his critique of essentialism that was mapped out in the previous chapter. As noted, McCutcheon charges that there is no common essence because he adopts a naturalistic understanding of "religion" that views the cluster of activities usually held to be "religious" as explicable through normal modes of social-scientific explanation. He further charges that the discourse on *sui generis* religion has subtle but serious political implications, especially in terms of the assumptions about "human nature"

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that it makes normative. For example, McCutcheon argues that Eliade's call for the establishment of a "new humanism"

> ostensibly proclaims the radical equality of all human religious experience. However, such talk of abstract sameness can effectively overlook the differences that most often define actual lived experience. No doubt some aspects of the discourse on sui generis religion may be commendable, but the social scientific analysis that today confronts religious experiences and behaviours does not seek to dissolve such states into monocausal origins, as was characteristic of earlier analyses, but to understand better and explain human behaviors and beliefs utilizing multiple points of view, theories, and scales. To continue to promote the analytical usefulness of autonomous religious experience, as opposed to the polymethodic approach, fails to identify the complexity of human actions entrenched in their contexts.[115]

McCutcheon's driving concern in this observation is to explicate "the role played by the category of sui generis religion in excluding sociopolitical analysis from much scholarship on religion".[116] This is clearly a rather different issue from all of the abovementioned criticisms of pluralism, even though it also challenges the way that the pluralist understanding of religion mutes difference. But McCutcheon is not trying to offer a philosophical argument against pluralism; he is rather *assuming* the inadequacy of Hick's argument and instead seeking to explore the sociopolitical implications of the discourse on *sui generis* religion.

Thus, rather than McCutcheon offering a specific critique of pluralism that can be discussed here, his approach instead hinges on what suppositions should guide the academic study of religion. As is clear, his main concern is to advocate for a more polymethodic approach than the still heavily descriptive/phenomenological approach that dominates contemporary religious studies. This is an important issue, but is of a different nature than the primary questions being investigated in the bulk of this dissertation. But as noted, I return to McCutcheon's reservations at the end of this work when reflecting on the

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[115] McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 23.

[116] *Ibid.*, 27.

wider methodological and pedagogical implications that are entailed in rejecting Hick's argument.

*Summary: What's the Problem With Pluralism?*

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide a detailed introduction to the pluralist theory of religions so that its core assumptions can be subjected to critical scrutiny in the rest of this work. After qualifying my use of the term "theory" to describe Hick's argument, situating him within the trajectory of non-reductive theories that have their root in Schleiermacher and the tropes of "experience" and a "*sui generis*" sacred, and then outlining his theory in detail, I addressed the five traditional criticisms leveled against it. My argument was that all of them, perhaps with the exception of McCutcheon's (which revolves around a quite different issue), do not present a fundamental challenge to Hick's argument. The charge of philosophical incoherence did not seem to understand Hick's postulation of the noumenal Real and how this was a justifiable hypothesis to account for the religious diversity of humanity. The charge of relativism was equally flimsy – not only did it rest on a reading of pluralism that seemingly wanted to reject it at first chance rather than to reflect seriously on what Hick was saying, but critics who charge relativism also accuse pluralism of being surreptitious universalism. The latter claim is more accurate, but it effectively undermines the argument that pluralism simply affirms that "everything is true" – which of course it does not. Thus the third charge, that pluralism is its own universalist narrative despite the agreeable character it tries to project, was a more important criticism. Yet the basic issue at stake here was that pluralism redescribed the religious history of humanity in terms not reconcilable with the self-understanding of each tradition (at least, most strands within the traditions) – and I argued at length that this is simply beside the point as an actual critique of the argument. To reject pluralism because it is not reconcilable with an

adherent's own view of their tradition is a specious criticism, especially when made by theologians, because they too hold views that are not reconcilable with the self-understanding of others. I was thus forced to conclude that it seems far more likely that the theological critics of pluralism simply find the pluralist theory "not Christian enough", and then attack it for superficial reasons *without ever actually addressing the challenge Hick poses to them about why their faith experiences are somehow uniquely authoritative*. The Christian rejection of pluralism is therefore thoroughly unconvincing. The final charge that religions do not share a common core was similar to the charge of redescriptive universalism, but was the only criticism offered by non-theological critics. Yet as was clear in the discussion of Prothero, he offers no challenge at all to the actual argument, and while he is certainly justified to pursue more pragmatic concerns, he is *not* justified in declaring "disrespectful", "unethical" and "unhelpful" the attempts of those such as Hick who are trying to make sense of how a species with unitary biological origins could come to develop such diverse and irreconcilable accounts of human existence and the nature of reality.[117] Thus, when these five criticisms are all considered, I believe it is clear that the challenges they pose to the pluralist theory fail to seriously undermine the argument that Hick makes.

But as has also been made clear, I believe there is major tension in Hick's argument that he (along with his critics) has failed to notice. So, what's the problem with pluralism? The problem is that in his valorization of the "great traditions" and their "soteriological" goals, something reflected particularly in his use of the Axial Age paradigm, Hick reproduces a host of problematic views regarding what counts as "authentic" religion that have their root in the Eurocentric discourses that he is trying to overcome. I will demonstrate this at length in Chapter 4. But to do this, it is first necessary to establish how

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[117] Prothero uses these terms in *God Is Not One*, 3.

these assumptions play out in the broader discourse in which Hick operated: the world

religions paradigm.

Chapter 3

## Historicizing the Rhetoric of "Great Traditions":
## A Genealogy of the World Religions Paradigm

When Hick deploys the concept of the "Axial Age" and the corresponding distinction between "pre-axial" and "post-axial" religions, he is picking up some heavily freighted baggage. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, the Axial Age construct is ultimately grounded in a Hegelian view of world history that saw modern, Protestant Europe as the culmination of the religious history of humanity. Even though Karl Jaspers' twentieth-century construal of the Axial Age is a more "pluralized" version of the Hegelian narrative, rejecting Hegel's developmental logic and incorporating the full range of "world" religions into the fold, it nevertheless remains fundamentally Eurocentric in the categories it employs and the meaning it ascribes to the historical process. This is especially visible in the way that Jaspers omits any "minor" and "primitive" religions from his narrative about the dawning of "authentic" religious consciousness, regarding them in Hegelian fashion as immobile, static, and thus non-participants in historical development. This is the conceptual baggage that Hick picks up: and it means that despite his egalitarian position, he participates in – and indeed actively reproduces – a universe of discourse in which world religions are "higher" than local religions, in which "civilization" is the antithesis of "savagery", and in which "primitive" culture represents the childhood of the human race – precisely the logic of the European triumphalism that he so strenuously tries to renounce. The central claim I am making in this dissertation is that this fundamentally undermines the pluralistic ethos that animates Hick's work.

Yet the Axial Age is only one specific permutation of a wider field of discourse, and Hick's theory is the product of a number of other discursive pressures that shaped the mid-

twentieth century study of religion.[1] Focus will be placed on Jaspers, Hick and the Axial Age in the following chapter, where I offer a re-reading of Hick's argument more critically attuned to the questionable assumptions that pervade his work, especially the two-fold division of the world's religions into "pre-" and "post-" axial. But in order to lay the ground for that analysis, this chapter looks at the broader issue of how the classification of the world's religions has taken place in western scholarship over the past five centuries, with a particular focus on the formalization of comparative religion in the nineteenth century and how this transformed into the twentieth-century study of religion.[2]

Readers will have noticed that Hick generally employs the phraseology of "great traditions" to refer to the major textual religions of the world. As indicated in the first chapter, this is effectively the same as referring to them as "world religions". As such, this chapter looks at two specific issues: 1) the multiple forms of classification that underlie and culminate in the pluralistic world religions paradigm of the twentieth century; and especially 2) the concomitant place of the "primitive" and other non-world religions in these schemes of classification. This chapter will therefore historicize the rhetoric of "great traditions" used by Hick and bring into the foreground the host of problematic assumptions implied by this language. Thus, by establishing the historically embedded assumptions of the world religions paradigm and the way in which it consistently operated with an implicit hierarchy that devalued all "lower", "minor", and "primitive" religions, I will be able to return to Hick's pluralistic hypothesis in the next chapter to more clearly highlight and then challenge its formative logic.

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[1] To use the parlance of post-structuralism, the Axial Age is a specific act of *parole* formulated from within the *langue* of European discourses on religion.

[2] I use "comparative religion" to designate the broad field of scholarship treated by Eric Sharpe in his classic study, *Comparative Religion: A History* (2nd ed.; London: Duckworth, 1986). Noting the generic nature of the term, Sharpe explains that comparative religion "is now subdivided into the history of religions, the psychology of religion, the sociology of religion, the phenomenology of religion and the philosophy of religion (not to mention a host of auxiliary disciplines) … Each of [which] has its own approaches and its own appropriate methods" (xiii). All of these areas exerted influence on Hick.

I examine the history of the world religions paradigm in three stages, attempting to track shifting patterns of classification in European scholarship from the sixteenth century through to the contemporary pluralistic model. The story, in short, is that forms of classification kept changing due to increased accumulation of data.[3] The aim is to examine important examples of classification from each century over this period, demonstrating (a) how they relate to the continued accumulation of ethnographic evidence about non-European cultures, (b) what they reveal about attitudes to the non-European other, and (c) how they fit into the broader intellectual currents that sustained ideologies of European and Christian exceptionalism, such as ideas about progress, evolution, race, and nationalism. These ideologies reach their apex in the late nineteenth century, although it will be clear that the pluralistic world religions model has by no means expunged their influence in the way that it categorizes the various religions of the world. For a model that prides itself on its liberal egalitarianism, this is an unacceptable state of affairs.

I first establish the pre-nineteenth century background, beginning in the sixteenth century with the European response to the new problem of cultural diversity thrown up by the discovery of the Americas.[4] In this period of epistemic rupture, when many a brow was furrowed trying to establish how the peoples of the New World could be fit into the general order of things (that is, the Scholastic order of things), the operative form of classification was the fourfold typology of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Paganism (the latter being one of many "residual" categories that would mark the western tradition of classification). This model in fact persists even into the nineteenth century, although Christian theology

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[3] This is a paraphrase of a comment made by J. Z. Smith in "Religion, Religions, Religious", a piece that was deeply influential in directing the early stages of research for this dissertation (Smith, J. Z., *Relating Religion*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004] 179-196, here 186). Indeed, the present chapter is in many respects a re-run of the narrative Smith charts regarding the classification of religions in western scholarship, albeit one that has been tailored to suit my own specific interests.

[4] Amongst the many works on the impact of the discovery of the Americas, see J. H. Elliot, *The Old World and the New: 1492-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

also furnished other taxonomic categories (such as "natural" versus "revealed" religion, or "true" versus "false"), which were often simultaneously employed.[5] After examining some important examples of the fourfold taxonomy from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, attention turns to the advent of formal scientific classification instigated by the publication of Carl Linnaeus' *System of Nature* in 1735. Not only did Linnaeus settle long-running questions regarding the place of "primitive" peoples in the Great Chain of Being by officially accepting them as a variety of the species *Homo sapiens*, but his system also laid the base for the future division of peoples in European scientific discourse by the controversial category of race.

This leads to the nineteenth century, which was a profoundly transformative time in the western study of religion: at the start of the century, the fourfold typology was still more or less in place; by the end of the century, a very different model had been consolidated that looks much more like the twentieth century world religions paradigm (albeit one that was still heavily Eurocentric and Christian-apologetic). In order to maintain focus on classification and not get lost in the mass of detail that makes up nineteenth-century history, the analysis is restricted to two main issues: *philology* and the invention of world religions, and *anthropology* and the invention of primitive culture.[6] While these two disciplines occasionally overlapped, for the most part they were carried out in relative isolation from

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[5] On the categories of "natural" and "revealed" religion, which gained currency especially in the late seventeenth century, see Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 24 (inc. n. 19, p. 185). As Harrison notes, the "truth or falsity" of particular "religions" is a concept that gained increasing traction once piety became tied to "propositional" forms of faith which focused upon "articles of belief" (26). This point was, of course, famously made earlier by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (*The Meaning and End of Religion* [orig. 1962; New York: Harper & Row, 1978)], upon whose study Harrison builds. On the shift to "belief", see also Smith, J. Z., "Religion, Religions, Religious", 181ff. A useful frame for understanding these important semantic shifts is provided in Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

[6] Here I deliberately echo two important works that are utilized below: Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London: Routledge, 1988). Obviously "invention" here is synonymous with "discursive construction".

each other, and need to be tracked separately in order to understand their different contributions to the problems embedded in the twentieth-century model.

I begin with philology in the late eighteenth century, discussing how European colonial expansion into the Near East (represented especially by the watershed Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and the British colonization of India) was responsible for the so-called "Oriental Renaissance", i.e. the European discovery of eastern religious texts that formed the basis of the closely-related disciplines of philology, linguistics, and comparative religion. These enterprises were fueled by a desire to recover a newly conceived Indo-European past, and the textual accumulation of this period laid the ground for one of the most important concepts in nineteenth-century thought: the establishment of Aryan and Semitic as racial categories. This framework received articulation in the new "Science of Religion" inaugurated by Friedrich Max Müller in the 1860s, whose organization of the world's religions according to the linguistic categories of Aryan, Semitic and Turanian represents the first in a series of major shifts from the fourfold scholastic typology towards the contemporary world religions model. Yet Müller's approach, whilst highly influential, was quickly superseded by models that were less linguistically oriented and were instead structured around the notion of *evolutionary development*, wherein the primary distinction was between "natural" and "ethical" religions. This new model was represented in the taxonomy of Cornelis Petrus Tiele, whose work in the 1870s established a new *status quaestionis* regarding the classification of the world's religions in light of the vast expansion in European knowledge (and power) over the preceding century. An important instantiation of this was the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which reflects almost perfectly the way in which the fourfold scholastic typology had, by the end of the nineteenth century, been replaced with a new model in which each "world" religion (i.e. each textual, "historical" religion) was accorded its own legitimate place as an authentic

species of religion – but also how the entire model was still underpinned by a quite overt hierarchy in which Protestant Christianity was unquestionably at the top.

The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions is also instructive for the way in which it totally excludes all of the "lower" religions from its field of vision, so at this stage the discussion return to Linnaeus and traces the alternate tradition of ethnography and the place of "primitive" culture in European thought of the nineteenth century, focusing especially on how these cultures fared in the new formal taxonomies of the comparative religion enterprise. After looking briefly at the way in which "fetishism" had become the prominent label for all primitive religion by the early eighteenth century, attention is primarily paid to the major shifts that occurred after the epoch-making publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. While this had an enormous influence in the philologically-oriented discipline of comparative religion (as will be clear when looking at Tiele's focus on religious development), its impact on the study of early human history was even more pronounced, with the discipline of anthropology swiftly emerging as the primary locus for the study of human culture in an evolutionary context.[7] Beginning with the (somewhat curious) interest in primitive culture by legal historians, I then explore the work of E. B. Tylor, the "father of anthropology", whose concept of "animism" was to supplant "fetishism" as the major term of classification for the earliest stages of religious history.

Having traced these two nineteenth century trajectories, the final section examines the consolidation of the world religions model in the twentieth century. One of the themes that will be emphasized is how the disciplinary separation of anthropology and philology in the nineteenth century fundamentally shaped the discourse on religion in the twentieth century, playing a key role in the problems I have identified with Hick and the Axial Age

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[7] Although it is not possible to explore wider historical ramifications of Darwin's work, see for example Mike Hawkins' excellent study, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

narrative. The section begins by noting how this separation is reflected in the two most important scholars of religion of the early twentieth century, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim: Weber representing the trajectory of philology and its focus on the textual "world" religions, and Durkheim representing the trajectory of anthropology and its construction of primitive culture as the "elementary form" of human society. There was little cross-fertilization between these two fields, and in the twentieth-century study of religion, the philologically-grounded world religions paradigm proved the dominant one, with non-civilizational cultures being almost totally relegated to the discipline of anthropology. This is demonstrated by looking at a number of prominent examples of the new world religions model that emerges in the era after the Second World War, when the Christian triumphalism of the nineteenth century was explicitly repudiated in favour of a more pluralistic model with no (ostensible) hierarchy. Looking first at Huston Smith's widely popular 1958 work, *The Religions of Man*, which was a major catalyst in bringing the world religions paradigm to popular attention, I show how the model employed by Smith (which he later acknowledged gave no value to the "lower" religions) was reproduced again and again over the ensuing decades, something that James Cox has noted "continues unabated into the twenty-first century".[8] Attention is also paid to how the chief engine of this reproduction was the creation of religious studies as an academic discipline in the 1960s, which was heavily imbued with the subtle theological agenda of the phenomenology of religion and was thus resistant to the theoretical challenges posed by the different strands of postmodern and postcolonial critique that were reshaping so many other fields.[9]

The chapter concludes by synthesizing the concerns voiced by scholars surrounding the persistent usage of the world religions model in the contemporary study of religion.

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[8] Cox, J., *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 51.

[9] Critical theory is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Using the insights of J. Z. Smith as a starting point, I look at how scholars of religion in the late twentieth century began applying the strategies of critical discourse analysis not just to the world religions paradigm, but to the entire discipline of religious studies itself. Much of this criticism has been directed towards the phenomenological orientation of the discipline, demonstrating the way in which it effectively ignores a host of pressing moral and political concerns, particularly regarding the place of local and indigenous peoples in the discourse on religion, and thus how it perpetuates the Eurocentric legacy of great-traditions-centrism despite its avowedly "liberal" orientation. The chapter closes by looking at the more explicit postcolonial turn of the last decade. The major agendum here has been to highlight the historical marginalization of "indigenous" religions, both politically and discursively, and to undertake a fundamental restructuring of the study of religion in order to more effectively dismantle the colonialist legacy of the world religions paradigm. Thus, by the end of this chapter, a firm base will have been laid from which to revisit Hick and bring into view untenable assumptions that lie beneath the seemingly egalitarian surface of the pluralist theory of religions and its valorization of "the great traditions of mankind".

*The Pre-Nineteenth Century Background*

The sixteenth century was a turbulent time in Europe. Society was changing rapidly, and the world was growing bigger.[10] Driving these changes was a host of technological developments, foremost amongst which being the astonishing new pace of communication opened up by the printing press, which served as the central engine of the intellectual

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[10] Aside from the numerous works cited below, my understanding of this period has also been informed by the broader treatments of Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (4 vols; 2nd ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th – 18th Century* (trans. S. Reynolds; 3 vols; London: Fontana, 1981-1984); and William McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

transformations that took place in the early modern period.[11] The massive upheavals of the Reformation had shattered the idea of unified Christendom, creating new religious ideologies and conflicts, and intensifying the consolidation of a new form of social order centered around the political state.[12] Meanwhile, colonial expansion – especially the discovery of the Americas – had opened up vast conceptual and geographical horizons that were deeply troubling for European thinkers.[13] Whilst all of these themes are of fundamental importance for the history of comparative religion, given my interest in the specific issue of classification (and the brevity I am attempting to maintain in this chapter), I restrict my focus in this section to geographic expansion and the growth of ethnography that ensued.

From the beginning of European colonial expansion in the early fifteenth century, a fresh mass of data began accumulating about the world and its peoples that needed to be worked into European schemes of knowledge. The new accessibility of printed books had

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[11] Some might find this claim a bit exaggerated, but in my view it is difficult to overestimate the role of print technology in the raft of social and intellectual developments that followed it. See e.g. Elizabeth Eisenstein's excellent study, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); see ch. 1 of the work ("The Unacknowledged Revolution") on the historic neglect of the role played by print technology in European historiography. As noted earlier, the issue of communications technologies and cultural change will become a central issue in Chapter 5 when discussing the Axial Age, and it will be interesting to recall the impact of print against this larger evolutionary backdrop. Works that complement Eisenstein's study can be found in the supplementary bibliography.

[12] A good account of the rise and consolidation of the political state in early modern Europe can be found in Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 vols; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). On the importance of the Reformation in this context, see William T. Cavanaugh, "'A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House': The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State", *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 397-420. On the impact of these events on the modern category of "religion", see Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 97ff.

[13] In addition to Elliot's *The Old World and the New*, a useful survey of documentary sources on the impact of the American discovery on European thought is provided in Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). For a helpful overview of cartographic changes in the period, see David Woodward, "Cartography and the Renaissance: Continuity and Change" in the impressive University of Chicago series, *The History of Cartography* (3 vols [6 projected]; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3.1: 3-25. See the supplementary bibliography for full details of the series.

increased the appetite for knowledge by the early sixteenth century,[14] and works soon appeared that tried to synthesize the wide-ranging material and offer readers a survey of the varieties of human behviour, generally under the rubric of "manners and customs".[15] One of the most influential example was *Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges, & Ritus ex Multis Clarissimis Rerum Scriptorum* by the German Hebraist Johann Boemus, first published in 1520 and reprinted many times over, being translated into English as *The Fardle of Façions* in 1555.[16] Boemus' intentions in this work were twofold: to make the variety of human behaviour accessible to the ordinary reader (arranged according to a geographical plan); and to improve the political morality of his readers by making them familiar with the laws and governments of other peoples.[17] As Margaret Hodgen describes, Boemus represents a new phase in ethnography that began in the latter stages of the fifteenth century, in which authors no longer strove to present a generic account of "all customs" of "all men", and instead began to use more specialized taxonomies of different categories of customs and manners, such as "the rites, ceremonies and beliefs associated with religion; the rites and regulations associated with marriage, and caring for a family, the ceremonies and beliefs

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[14] On the rise of books and reading in the post-Gutenberg era, see Lucien Febvre & Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: the Impact of Print 1450–1800* (trans. D. Gerard; London: Verso, 1997 [1958]). See also *A History of Reading in the West* (ed. C. Cavello & R. Chartier; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). Further relevant works are provided in the supplementary bibliography.

[15] In what follows I am deeply indebted to Margaret T. Hodgen's work, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964). On this new form of ethnography and its wider public audience, see 162-206. I also note that Hodgen's work is not discussed by J. Z. Smith in "Religion, Religions, Religious", even though it seems inescapable to me that he had not read it, given how many of the figures treated by Hodgen are also discussed in Smith's genealogy.

[16] *Ibid.*, 131. For a lengthy discussion of *The Fardle of Façions*, which Hodgen describes as "an instant success" that was "widely consulted for well over a hundred years" (132), see 111-161. The full title of the English translation was *The Fardle of Façions; conteining the aunciente maners, customs, and lawes, of the peoples enhabiting the two parts of the earthe, called Affrike and Asie* (London: Jhon Kingstone & Henry Sutton, 1555).

[17] As such, Boemus' work fits into the popular "handbook" genre of the early modern period, the most famous example of which being Machiavelli's *Prince*. See Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 132.

accompanying the disposition of the dead; the customs of political organization; the customs of shelter, dress and diet, etc."[18]

Naturally, given the salience of theological disputes in this period, especial interest was given to the religion of unfamiliar peoples.[19] Whenever this topic was broached, the scholastic model of classification naturally imposed itself, i.e. the division of the world into Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Paganism/Idolatry/Etc.[20] Boemus uses this basic model, although he also reflects the tendency to use other categories as well, discussing not only "the problem and origin of idolatry",[21] but also the varieties of polytheism and their differences with monotheism.[22] It should be noted that Boemus was not trying to generate a new form of classification for "the religions" of the world – itself a concept virtually non-existent at this time; his taxonomic efforts were instead directed more broadly at bringing together customs, manners, and social institutions under manageable frameworks.[23] But the importance of his work lies in the large influence it exerted in the swiftly expanding ethnographic tradition of this period, which furnished the materials with which subsequent European scholars would continue to construct an image of the less familiar peoples of the

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[18] *Ibid.*, 168.

[19] I note again that my concern here is not to discuss the history of the modern category of "religion", although ethnographies such as Boemus' were certainly important in driving the semantic shifts documented by Nongbri and Harrison, et al. (see above, ch. 1, n. 58).

[20] For a detailed discussion of the history of this typology, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 47-64. As many scholars have noted (including Harrison and J. Z. Smith), the fourth category (variously: idolatry, paganism, polytheism, heathenism) was inherently unstable, given that it effectively encompassed every known tradition that was not one of the three "revealed" religions. Yet as Masuzawa notes, "Despite, or perhaps because of the mutability and instability of the categories, the four-way system endured and remained useful … recur[ring] in book after book with little variation from at least the early seventeenth up to the first half of the nineteenth century" (58-9).

[21] See Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 140ff., 169ff.; also 354-385.

[22] Boemus made barely any mention of Islam, although he does call the religion of the Turks and the Saracens "the brainesicke wickednesse of a countrefeicte prophet" [*sic*] (*ibid.*, 140).

[23] Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 61.

world, thus serving as important forerunners to nineteenth-century comparative religion.[24] However, even though Boemus was writing almost three decades after the Columbian voyages, his work did not include any mention of the newly discovered peoples and lands of the Americas, and was still structured around the old tripartite world that comprised of "thre partes, Affrique, Asie, and Europe".[25] Yet this was changing rapidly, and Boemus represents the last gasp of this medieval paradigm, with writers almost immediately after him beginning to pay much more attention to the new material at their disposal.[26]

This is clearly apparent in works similar to Boemus' that appeared roughly a century after his *Omnium Gentium Mores*, two important examples being *Purchas His Pilgrimage* by Samuel Purchas (1613), and *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chiefe Parts of the World* by Edward Brerewood (1614), works that were also structured with a primarily geographic focus.[27] Without wishing to engage in an extended analysis of these texts, a few things are worth mentioning. The most conspicuous difference between these works and that of Boemus is the inclusion of America in their descriptions of the world. As Hodgen describes Purchas vis-à-vis Boemus, he was "a far more sophisticated man than his German predecessor", who "knew of the existence in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas of peoples Boemus had never heard of" – and the encyclopaedic scope of Purchas' massive work is truly something to behold in the context of its times, as are the

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[24] Sharpe discusses pre-nineteenth century ethnography in this context in *Comparative Religion*, 1-26.

[25] This attests to the somewhat delayed impact that the discovery of the Americas had on European thought in the initial stages. See e.g. Elliot, *The Old and the New*, 8-27.

[26] Hodgen gives special mention to Michel de Montaigne as the first man to "deliberately [break] with scholastic epitomizations and with the type of cultural data to be found in classical literature", noting in particular his famous essay of c.1580, "Of Cannibals" (Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 191).

[27] Brerewood, E., *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chiefe Parts of the World* (London: Printed for S. S,, J. M., & H. H, 1674 [1614]); on America, see 94-96. Purchas, S., *Purchase His Pilgrimage: Or, Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in all Ages and in all Places Discovered, from the Creation unto this Present; In Foure Parts* (London: Printed by William Stansby for Henrie Fetherstone, 1614 [1613]); on the "relations, discoveries, regions, and religions of the New World", see 717-817. See the full title of Purchas' work in the bibliography. Both of these figures are discussed by Hodgen (see e.g. 218f. and 171 respectively), and were by no means the only authors of such works in the period.

statistical efforts of Brerewood in attempting to discern the religious demography of the population of the entire known world.[28]

Yet despite the major changes in how Europeans were beginning to conceive of the world, there were several significant continuities in how the new information was conceptualized. While the discovery of the Americas had severely shaken the European understanding of global geography, the narrative of universal history remained completely grounded in the framework of sacred history and its roughly 6000 year chronology. This meant that cultural difference was understood as the result of a historical process of *degeneration*, because the explanations offered by all writers of this period were fit somehow or other into the narrative provided by Genesis 1-11 – the historical sequence of Creation, Eden, the Fall, the first peopling of the earth from the stock of Adam, the purification of the Flood, and the second peopling of the earth from the stock of Noah.[29] This sequence provided the authoritative record of early human history in European thought at the period, and allowed scholars to construct elaborate hypotheses about the historical origins of newly discovered heathen groups in Africa and the Americas (even if "many of the efforts to insert these newcomers to into the Adamic lineage were ludicrous in the extreme").[30] Here is not the place for a detailed discussion of degeneration theory, although it will come up

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[28] Purchas' impressive *Pilgrimage* amounts to almost 1000 pages of tightly packed text. For Brerewood's discussion of global demographics, see *Enquiries*, 81-131, esp. 105-111 on "the Sundry Regions of the World Inhabited by Idolaters".

[29] Hodgen notes that "as shown by Purchas' *Pilgrimage*, Grafton's *Chronicles*, Ralegh's *History of the world*, and every other inquiry which, at that time, took mankind as its object of interest, no one embarked upon a substantial piece of work in which the problem of cultural diversity was at issue without taking into account both Genesis and the commentators on Genesis" (227). See further Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[30] Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 231. In a nutshell, degeneration theory held Cain and Ham to be the authors of all irreligion and heathenism; therefore all idolatrous peoples were traced in some manner back to these dubious forefathers, generally through speculative narratives of travel and cultural diffusion (see Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 254-269; and Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 101-112). Another theory of cultural difference that enjoyed notable influence was that of environmentalism, according to which political and ethnic diversities were ascribable primarily to differences in topography and climate. Jean Bodin was a notable proponent of this view. In addition to Hodgen and Harrison, see the comprehensive treatment of environmentalism by Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

again below when considering how "heathens" and "idolaters" began to shift into "primitives" as the narrative turned from degeneration to development in the nineteenth century. It will suffice for now simply to note that while the continually growing number of peoples who could not be fit easily into any Noachian lineage caused considerable anxiety for men such as Boemus and Purchas, the problems were not sufficient to call the biblical worldview into doubt at any fundamental level.

Thus, even though European thought had suffered a rude shock with the discovery of the Americas, the fourfold classification of the world's religions remained firmly in tact throughout the seventeenth century (particularly in ethnographic works), and every group of people who were not Christian, Jewish, or Mahometan, were either idolaters, heathens, pagans, or polytheists.[31] This typology is clearly reflected in both Brerewood and Purchas: Brerewood stating that "There are four sorts or Sects of Religion, observed in the sundry regions of the World: namely, Idolatry, Mahumatenism, Judaisme, and Christianity" (with Idolatry making up two-thirds of the world in his reckoning); and Purchas declaring on the title-page of his *Pilgrimage* that he would investigate "the Ancient Religions before the Flood" and "the Heathenish, Jewish, and Saracenicall in all Ages since".[32]

As mentioned, this form of categorizing the world's religions persists until well into the nineteenth century, despite the fact that there was sometimes a wide differentiation within the fourth category (i.e. the recognition of different forms of idolatry across the globe), and despite the fact that in theological treatises the primary distinction was more commonly between "natural" and "revealed" religion (or other similar binaries).[33] Yet it is

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[31] The history of appellation for the tradition now called "Islam" and the people now called "Muslims" is a complicated one. Without going into detail, see for example the etymological information in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *Islam (n. 1613); *Islamic (adj. 1747); *Mahometan (n. 1529); Mahometanism (n. 1613); Mahometism (n. 1584); Mahomite (n. 1559); Muslimite (adj. 1829); Mahometry (n. 1481); *Muslim (n. 1615, adj. 1777). Asterisks indicate the most important entries; the list is far from exhaustive.

[32] Brerewood, *Enquiries*, 96; Purchas, *Pilgrimage*, title page.

[33] See n. 5 above. I note again that I am not concerned here to track theological categories.

important to emphasize that while the fourfold typology was widely employed by ethnographers in this period, it by no means had the character of a rigorous "scientific" form of classification, and is better considered a kind of "incidental" or "implicit" typology that was the naturally imposed by the inherited traditions of western theological thought. Masuzawa frames this point helpfully, saying that due to the nature of the new global ethnographies,

> [it is not surprising that] early modern accounts seem far more interested in collecting and enumerating empirical particularities and material details than in discovering any organizational principle that might help systematize these particulars and details… As such, [the items noted by early modern writers in connection with "religion"] are often mixed up with a great many other "customs and ceremonies" which we today do not consider necessarily or obviously religious. The titles of some of the texts betray this peculiar conceptual disposition, which seems to us strangely haphazard and disorderly, and certainly not very scientific.[34]

Yet formal scientific classification was not far off in Europe, and the epistemic shifts underlying the modern scientific worldview had been gaining pace in learned circles since at least the fifteenth century. I will come to that shortly. However, as the industry of ethnography rumbled along and new peoples continually entered the horizon of thought, the simple designation of "idolatry" started to become less and less sufficient. One major factor at play was the rediscovery of the Greek and Roman heritage in the Renaissance. While certain aspects of Greco-Roman thought had long been incorporated into Christian theology, under the fourfold typology the increasingly familiar cultures of antiquity were still varieties of idolatry, as were all of the major eastern cultures of which Europeans had knowledge. But there was *definitely* a difference between these classical pagan cultures and the idolatry of the primitive savages in Africa and America – wasn't there? This was an unsettling question with tremendous significance.

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[34] Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 61.

As Hodgen explains, "even though the tribes of the Red Man and Black Man were sometimes little remarked in Europe, except as figures of curiosity or fun, there were at least a few thoughtful scholars who saw in them a very disturbing and disconcerting intellectual problem".[35] The problem arose in light of the fact that European thought was structured by a strict, immutable hierarchy of being in which everything had a place in the natural order: with God at the top, the angels beneath him, man beneath them, and everything else beneath man (i.e. animals, plants, and inorganic matter).[36] Man was considered a unified whole, created by God but dispersed after the flood, existing in different states of degeneracy. Thus, the question became: where do these primitive and uncivilized peoples fit into the hierarchy? The first issue to settle was whether they belonged to the class of man or animal. Three options presented themselves:

> First, the savage could be accepted as a man like other men, and inserted into the scale of being with European and other known men; second, he could be regarded as something different from, and less than, European man, and inserted in the scale in a secondary human category; or third, he could be interpreted as an animal, and given a place, perhaps the highest, amongst the other animals.[37]

Although there were certainly voices claiming that the savage was an inferior man or an outright animal, by far the majority position was the first option, that of Christian orthodoxy: these were humans to be inserted into the scale of being.

> Doctrinally, savages were men, first, last, and always – bestial and degenerate in their behavior perhaps, but still men and thus children of God. This was the logical and unavoidable conclusion from premises written down or logically implied in Genesis concerning the Noachian period of sacred history.[38]

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[35] Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 359. As Hodgen notes, "Erasmus and Luther, leaders of the intellectual and religious Reformation, were little concerned with the problems of New World ethnography. Their minds were elsewhere."

[36] See the classic work by Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

[37] Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 405.

[38] *Ibid.* This is, of course, the response that lay behind all attempts to account for the peoples of the New World according to the degeneration narrative.

But Christian orthodoxy was swiftly losing its authority in determining such matters; and owing to a number of factors, the monogenetic account of human origins found in Genesis was soon displaced amongst learned men by a polygenetic theory that argued for the second option: there were different kinds of humans, and Europeans were at the top of the scale.[39] Hodgen continues that, as the secularized intellectual culture of the Enlightenment emerged,

> philosophical and ethnological opinion concerning the savage and his place in nature departed from the Christian position. It no longer seemed possible to hold the mirror up to European man and see in it the reflection of mankind as a whole. It came to be believed that there were multiple kinds of men, each with his rightful place in the natural order but inferior to European man.[40]

This idea would take shape with breathtaking force in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and served as one of the foundational assumptions on which attitudes of European superiority were predicated. As will become clear below, this represents the embryo of evolutionary ideas that would become crucial after 1859; but for the moment I want to consider the first major articulation of this idea in one particular group of scholars in the early eighteenth century: botanists – and especially the famous Swede, Carl Linnaeus.[41]

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[39] Naturally I am not able to discuss the wide range of developments that led to the loosening of ecclesiastical authority over the production of knowledge after the fifteenth century. But I would stress again that virtually all such developments (the Reformation, the emergence of the state, the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, the formation of modern nation states) were all made possible at a fundamental level by the new potential for communication enabled by print technology.

[40] Hodgen, Early Anthropology, 408.

[41] Here I skip over some of Linnaeus' important forerunners: Sir William Petty's *Scale of Creatures* (1676-77), and Sir William Tyson's *Orang-outang, sive homo silverstris; or, the anatomie of a pygmie* (1708). Although not botanists, both precipitated Linnaeus' move to spilt Man from a perfect whole into a gradation of varieties. They are discussed in Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 418ff. The foundations for modern botanical taxonomy were also laid a few generations before Linnaeus with John Ray's *Methodus Plantarum Nova* (1682); see Morton, A. G., *History of Botanical Science: an account of the development of botany from ancient times to the present day* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 194-214.

By 1600, over six thousand plant species had been described. By 1700, that number had more than tripled, and although occasional efforts had been made over the centuries to classify this data, the catalogue was in total disarray.[42] Not only were some plants listed in multiple locations, but different plants were also often given the same nomenclature. Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* (1735) was designed to overcome these difficulties and provide a single, comprehensive system of classification for the entire contents of the natural world.[43] Using the categories of Kindgom, Class, Order, Genus, Species, and Variety, the Linnaean taxonomy provided a ready-to-hand framework into which all specimens could be fit, both existing ones and anything newly discovered.[44] However, Linnaeus was not interested only in plants, and the *Systema Naturae* also included minerals, animals, and humans within its scope. Yet although the work had a rigorous scientific character, its structure was nevertheless still heavily informed by the hierarchal order of being in which God, the angels, and man were at the top, arranged "in conformity with the doctrine of immutable design".[45] Thus Linnaeus straddled two worlds: for while he still "subscribed to the reality

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[42] Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 424. For a good overview of Linnaeus that points to his wide secondary literature, see Morton, *History of Botanical Science*, 259-276. A richly illustrated account of botanical history (focusing on the pre-Linnaen period) can be found in Anna Pavord, *The Naming of Names: The Search for Order in the World of Plants* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).

[43] I have consulted the important tenth edition of the *Systema Natuare, per Regna Tria Naturae* (10th ed.; Stockholm: Laurentius Salvius, 1758). The first edition was published in Leiden in 1735. It was in the tenth edition of the work (along with the *Species Plantarum* [1753]), in which Linnaeus' presented his binomenclatural system in full (Takman, J., "Notes on Linnaeus", *Science and Society* 21 [1957]: 193-209, here 198).

[44] As Takman notes, (citing J. D. Bernal): "What Linnaeus gave science was precisely the fixed principles and laws that were necessary if research was to be able to master the multiplicity of living nature. Linnaeus created order, clarity and a fixed terminology. His system gave a logical, consistent and thoroughgoing division into higher and lower categories with definite denotations; it was easy to understand, convincing and applicable in practice. It was therefore new of its kind, no matter how much it was built on previously existing foundations" (*ibid.*).

[45] Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 424. It should be noted that Linnaeus' stance on the evolution of species is a complicated question. As Takman notes: "The first edition of the *Systema Naturae* (1735) contains what is perhaps Linnaeus' most famous sentence: '*Species tot numeramus, quot diversae formae in principio sunt creatae*' (We count as many species as the number of different forms created in the beginning). This is the doctrine of the creation, and leaves no room for a development from lower to higher, from fewer to more numerous species. Even in the *Philosophia Botanica* (1751) he denies that new species can come into being." Yet Takman then goes on to suggest that "his rigid standpoint in the *Philosophia Botanica* must have been a concession to the church", pointing to indications that Linnaeus did anticipate the principles of evolutionary theory as it would emerge in the following century (see Takman, "Notes on Linnaeus", 205). So while Linnaeus did for the most part

of fabulous, monstrous men", and "was subservient to unexamined medieval ideas", here also the genus *Homo* was not the unified whole imagined by scholastic thought, but a genus differentiated into two species and many varieties.[46]

This division was based partly on skin colour, and partly on cultural factors such as social organization and attire.[47] The classification ran as follows: the genus *Homo* was in the *Regnum Animale*, under the Class *Mammalia*, then under the Order *Primates*, with *Homo* being the first genus of that class (and in fact the first group treated in the whole *Systema Naturae* – a clear intimation of the hierarchy at play in the work).[48] *Homo* was divided into two species: *Homo sapiens*, and *Homo troglodytes*, the latter effectively being a repository of mythical and fabulous creatures. Of the first species, *Homo sapiens*, there were a number of varieties, each with specific characteristics:

1. Wild Man (*Homo Ferus*): four-footed, mute, hairy.

2. American (*Homo Americanus*): copper-colored, choleric, erect. Paints self. Governed by custom.

3. European (*Homo Europaeus*): fair, sanguine, brawny. Covered with close vestments. Governed by laws.

4. Asiatic (*Homo Asiaticus*): sooty, melancholy, rigid. Covered with loose garments. Governed by opinions.

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consolidate the view of the immutability of species, a closer, contextualized reading would need to come to a more nuanced evaluation of his position. On this tension, see also Morton, *History of Botanical Science*, 264ff.

[46] Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 426.

[47] This focus on observable differences (which we would now call cultural differences) is different from the way in which Linnaeus treated plants, which he influentially categorized according to their reproductive organs. See Morton, *History of Botanical Science*, 268ff.

[48] I note that the current scientific taxonomy of our species is more complicated. *Homo sapiens* is now grouped as follows: Kingdom: *Animalia*; Phylum: *Chordata*; Class: *Mammalia*; Order: *Primates*; Family: *Hominidae*; Tribe: *Hominini*; Genus: *Homo*. Amongst the most authoritative recent treatments, see *The First Humans: Origin and Early Evolution of the Genus* Homo (ed. F. Grine et al.; New York: Springer, 2009); and *Patterns of Growth and Development in the Genus* Homo (ed. J. Thompson et al; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Other works are noted in Chapter 5 below.

5. African (*Homo Afer*): black, phlegmatic, relaxed. Anoints self with grease. Governed by caprice.[49]

This form of characterizing different human groups would echo throughout the following centuries, and would soon serve as the basis of one of the most potent and pernicious ideas of European modernity: the division of humanity by the category of race. Racial theory had not yet crystalized, which would take place in the nineteenth century; but Linnaeus' system of classification provided formal scientific grounding for such theory as it was about to emerge.[50]

But before coming to the nineteenth century, it will help to recap quickly on the state of affairs up to this point regarding what all of these developments meant for the classification of religions. Despite the fact that scientific and Enlightenment discourses had established new intellectual agendas and displaced the hegemony of ecclesiastical authorities on the production of knowledge, the fourfold typology of categorizing the world's religions was still widely used throughout the eighteenth century in all works of cross-cultural ethnography.[51] But the ground was shifting. The category of idolatry had become more problematic since the increase in knowledge about primitive peoples and the realization of their stark differences to the often-valorized pagan cultures of antiquity. This tension was amplified by the influx of ancient texts from eastern religions that began streaming into Europe in the late eighteenth century through the channels of colonial expansion – texts

[49] I have reproduced Hodgen's slightly abbreviated translation of this section of the *Systema Natuare*. Although the translations themselves are generally correct, Hodgen somewhat skews the organization, making *Homo Monstrosus* a separate species, even though it is clearly a specific variety of *Homo* upon examining Linnaeus' text – namely the sixth variety of *Homo*, which includes groups such as *Alpini*, *Hottentoti*, *Chineses*, and *Canadeases*. As such, this final variety was simply a repository for groups that might have been fit into the other five varieties. The other species is *Homo Troglodytes*, which included *Homo Sylvestris* (the *Orang-outang* described by Tyson, see n. 41 above) and a certain *Homo Nocturnus*.

[50] As Hodgen notes, "whatever the triumphs and blunders of Linnaeus as a botanist, the step taken by him in inserting man into his catalogue, and its import for ethnological thought and future race relations, cannot be overemphasized" (*Early Anthropology*, 425). I will note some connections between nineteenth-century race theory and Linnaeus in the following section.

[51] See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* (2 vols; New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995).

which made clear that, unlike the savage peoples, these ancient cultures possessed forms of wisdom and culture that could command the respect of enlightened European moderns, and thus needed to be grouped differently from the savages. As will be seen in what follows, with this new profusion of textual data available, alternative organizational principles began to take shape that moved firmly away from the fourfold scholastic typology and opened up the categorization of religions according to quite different sets of criteria than the framework provided by the Christian theological tradition. And one of the most important features of these new models was the way in which they consolidated the perception of a profound *difference* between primitive peoples and the civilizational cultures of antiquity – a tendency which is still very much alive in the contemporary world religions model and which underlies precisely the problems I am arguing pervade Hick's work. But this is moving a little too fast.

*World Religions and Primitive Culture in the Nineteenth Century*

As indicated above, the intention of this middle section is to chart two different intellectual trajectories in the nineteenth century: those of philology and anthropology, which provided the seedbed of two crucial categories in twentieth-century discourse on religion – "world religions" and "primitive culture". I begin with the first category, world religions, which is the product of the "Science of Religion" inaugurated in the 1860s (an enterprise that would come to be called "comparative religion").[52] But comparative religion was made possible by a series of developments in the preceding century, so before coming to its formalization, a little background is useful.

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[52] On the term "comparative religion", see n. 2 above.

Comparative religion as an academic enterprise was made possible above all by a single factor: an influx of religious texts from the east and the deciphering of the languages in which they were written.[53] As Raymond Schwab has written of this "Oriental Renaissance", "Only after 1771 does the world become truly round; half the intellectual map is no longer blank".[54] Here Schwab refers to the watershed publication in 1771 of the *Zend Avesta* by the adventurous Frenchman, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, which "marks the first approach to an Asian text totally independent of the biblical and classical traditions", and represents "the first time anyone had succeeded in breaking into one of the walled languages of Asia".[55] In his biography of Anquetil-Duperron, Schwab eloquently describes the momentous changes that followed:

> In 1759, in Surat, Anquetil finished translating the Avesta; in Paris in 1786, with his translation of the Upanishads, he dug an isthmus between the hemispheres of the human spirit and liberated the old humanism from the Mediterranean Basin … Before him, Latin, Greek, Jewish, and Arab writers were the sole sources of knowledge about the distant past of the planet. The Bible appeared as an isolated rock, a meteorite. People believed that text contained the whole universe; hardly anyone seemed to imagine the immensity of the unchartered territories. His translation marks the opening of a discovery that then spiraled with the excavations of Central Asia, with languages that arose after Babylon. He cast a vision of countless and ancient civilizations, an enormous mass of literature into our schools, which to this day arrogantly keep the door shut behind the narrow legacy of the Greek-Latin Renaissance; from now on, a

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[53] Given then limited scope of this chapter, I pass over the details of the Orientalist project, including the watershed expansion of the British into India and the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (2nd ed.; New York: Vintage Books, 2003 [1978]), esp. 31-110 on "The Scope of Orientalism".

[54] Schwab, R., *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880* (trans. G. Patterson-Black & V. Reinking; New York: Columbia University Press, 1984 [1950]), 16. I leave to the side for now Schwab's claim that "half of the intellectual map no longer remained blank", which replicates precisely the form of civilizational exceptionalism being critiqued in this dissertation.

[55] *Ibid.*, 7. I describe Anquetil-Duperron as adventurous because unlike any other scholar in Europe, he actually set of for India in order to translate the mysterious Zend Avesta, copies of which existed in Oxford and Paris (*ibid.,* 19). The resulting work was *Zend Avesta, Ouvrage de Zoroastre* (3 vols; Paris: Chez N. M. Tillard, 1771). This translation was, however, made from a modern Persian text, not the original Parsi version. Europeans did not yet possesses the linguistic competencies for such work, although this soon began to change following the famous declaration of Sir William Jones to the Asiatic Society of Calcutta (on February 2, 1786) about the clear relationship between Sanskrit and the European languages. For a useful discussion of Jones' work and its relation to the subsequent industry of Indo-European studies, see Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), esp. 76-100. Jones is discussed by Schwab *passim.*

few European provinces are no longer the only ones that engrave their names in history.[56]

The floodgates had been opened. While a dim awareness had been growing since the discovery of the Americas that the world was bigger and more full than most Europeans had imagined it, the events that followed from Anquetil-Duperron's translation of the Avesta and the Upanishads fuelled the final dissolution of the medieval worldview and set the stage for the intellectual transformations of the nineteenth century. Anquetil-Duperron's translations, in combination with the newly attained understanding of Sanskrit and other ancient languages by European scholars, gave rise to a veritable industry, and "the written legacies of foreign cultures, which had long been a sealed book, were deciphered one after another by Europeans and began to yield their contents".[57]

Amongst the more important works to be published in this energized atmosphere were the following: the *Bhagavad Gita* (Wilkins, 1784; the first major Sanskrit text to be translated and published in Europe); *Translation of the Persian Sassanid Texts* (de Sacy, 1793; de Sacy would soon found scientific linguistics); the *Institutes of Hindu Law* (Jones, 1794; this work popularized Indian cosmogony); *Report on the Deciphering of Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (Champillion, 1822; one of the most famous works of this period); *Comparative Grammar of Sanskrit, Zend, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Old Slavonic, Gothic, and German* (Bopp, 1833; a crucial text that consolidated the Indo-European paradigm); and *Translation of Old Persian and Old*

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[56] This quotation comes from Schwab's 1934 biography of Anquetil-Duperron, and is cited in Hans Kippenberg's informative study, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (trans. B. Harshav; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 23-4.

[57] *Ibid.*, 25. Further treatment of this issue is not possible here, but again, see Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance* for extensive documentation.

*Babylonian Cuneiform Texts from Behistun* (Rawlinson, 1847, 1850, 1851; which began to flesh out the religious heritage of the first urban cultures).[58]

Even this highly selective sample illustrates the extent to which European consciousness had moved, in only a matter of decades, from the parochial Mediterranean outlook of the middle ages to the far more geographically expansive awareness that marks European history from this point onwards.[59] Schwab summarizes this remarkable period by saying that "A whole world that had been entirely lost became, within a few years, entirely known. For the first time the image of India regally entered the configuration of the universe".[60]

When Friedrich Max Müller announced the Science of Religion to the world in 1867, he was emphatic about how central the events just described were in making the new discipline possible:

> During the last fifty years the authentic documents of the most important religions of the world have been recovered in a most unexpected and almost miraculous manner. We have now before us the canonical books of Buddhism; the Zend-Avesta of Zoroaster is no longer a sealed book; and the hymns of the Rig-veda have revealed a state of religion anterior to the first beginnings of that mythology which in Homer and Hesiod stands before us as a mouldering ruin. The soil of Mesopotamia has given back the very images once worshipped by the most powerful of the Semitic tribes, and the cuneiform inscriptions of Babylon and Nineveh have disclosed the very prayers addressed to Baal or Nisroch. With the discovery of these documents a new era begins in the study of religion.[61]

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[58] This is a highly selective list. It is reproduced from the list provided in Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History*, 25. See also Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*, 51ff. under "The Arrival of the First Authentic Texts". As Schwab notes, Sanskrit claimed "the lion's share of efforts at decipherment" (7).

[59] The Mediterranean focus had, in fact, begun to shift northwards even in the fifteenth century with the rediscovery of Tacitus' *Germania*, which had brought into focus the northern parts of Europe and gave "Germans, Scandinavians, Dutch, and Anglo-Saxons their first taste of the prestige derived from a deep and noble past" (Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 48). However the Oriental Renaissance certainly recalibrated European consciousness to a profound degree.

[60] Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*, 7.

[61] Max Müller, F., *Chips From a German Workshop* (3 vols; New York: Scribner, Armstrong, & Co., 1876 [1867]), 1: 373. Müller also discusses this in the Preface to the work, see xiff. Müller's other seminal contribution to the fledgling field was his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1882 [1873]). The latter text comprises four lectures given at the Royal Institute in 1870. On Müller's inauguration of the enterprise, see Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, xi; on the content of his contribution, see 27-47.

But before coming to exactly what the Science of Religion meant for the classification of religions, I want to quickly highlight some of the broader consequences of this textual saturation, issues that are important both below and in the following chapters. A central point to make is that because the decipherment and organization of the continually emerging religious texts required highly specialized knowledge, philology and linguistics (or rather, philologists and linguists) swiftly attained a near-total interpretive monopoly on the production of knowledge generated from the material.[62] Aside from giving these textually oriented disciplines formal institutional consolidation (not to mention powerful political influence),[63] two specific things happened that are of especial interest in the story being tracked at present.

Firstly, a number of independent traditions emerge out of the earlier shadow-zone of "idolatry", and by the mid-nineteenth century scholars could talk freely about entities such as "Buddhism", "Brahmanism", "Zoroastrianism", "Confucianism", "Taoism" – traditions that had hitherto never been distinguished so explicitly in European thought.[64] It is crucial to note here that *every religious tradition that attained status as an independent entity in this period is a religion with written texts that had been recovered, translated, and analyzed by European scholars*.[65] Indeed, in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, Müller speaks warmly of the

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[62] I pass over the important relationship between philology and early comparative linguistics. See e.g. Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century* (trans. A. Goldhamer; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008 [1992]).

[63] As Olender notes, "One of the many functions of Indo-European research was to provide answers to a series of questions that first became urgent in the nineteenth century, questions pertaining to the origins and vocation of a Western world in search of national, political, and religious identity" (*ibid.*, 139).

[64] See e.g. Philip Almond's instructive study, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988). See also the collection of documents edited by P. J. Marshall in *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970). See further Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 174; and Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 125-128.

[65] On the importance of textuality in the discursive construction of these traditions, see e.g. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, 24-28; and Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 210-216. I approach the prioritization of textual cultures in European historiography from a different perspective in Chapter 5.

"aristocracy of the book religions" (Buddhism, Brahmanism, Zoroastrianism, Mohommedanism, Christianity, Mosaism, the "religion of Confucius", and the "religion of Lao-Tse") – even going so far as to say that "With these eight religions the library of the Sacred Books of the whole human race is complete", a task that had been accomplished by the European mastery of Sanskrit, Pâli, Zend, Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and Chinese.[66]

The second major outgrowth of the philological enterprise was the "discovery" of an Indo-European heritage, and the corresponding discovery of the two primary linguistic families: Aryan and Semitic.[67] While it is not my intention to get sidetracked here by exploring the importance of Indo-European studies in nineteenth-century history at large, a few major points are worth noting: (1) the Indo-European idea consolidated the division of humanity by "race" that had emerged with Linnaeus and the enterprise of scientific classification;[68] (2) this in turn was fed by the powerful currents of *Volk*-theory that had been developed in the context of Romanticism (especially in Germany by figures such as Herder, Schlegel, Schelling and Hegel) and the closely linked development of European nationalism; (3) the idea of the *Völker* was underpinned by the idea that each *Volk*, i.e. each "race" of people, had a specific, defining characteristic; and (4), due primarily to the influence of Romanticism, language and religion were seen as reflecting the essential spirit of a particular *Volk*. As such, when philologists had distinguished the Aryan and Semitic

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[66] Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 54-6, quotation 56. I again note that Müller's claim that such works represents "the whole human race" is replicated even by Schwab (see above, n. 54).

[67] For a detailed discussion of the Aryan/Semitic binary, see Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*. See also the useful discussion of these issues Tomoko Masuzawa in *The Invention of World Religions*, 147-178.

[68] For a discussion of Linnaeus in the context of European racial theory, see David Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 206; and Said, *Orientalism*, 119f. The first systematic treatise on race was offered by Artur, Comte de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55). On this work, see Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 68f., and Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 61. See also David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 61-75.

language families, they had also distinguished Aryans and Semites as fundamentally different peoples.[69]

These ideas all had a powerful influence on Müller. Trained as a historical linguist by the greatest Indo-European scholars of his day (Franz Bopp and Eugène Burnouf), he was deeply imbued with the categories supplied by what was then called "the Science of Language" (i.e. historical comparative linguistics).[70] Thus, although Müller strongly repudiated the racist connotations that generally pertained to the Aryan/Semitic distinction, these categories were still fundamental to his thought; and when he came to establish the Science of Religion, he did so explicitly using the model of the Science of Language. This played out as follows.

After eloquently describing the panorama of the world's religions now available to the scholar, Müller exhorted the need for a proper method of classifying these religions, saying that: "All real science rests on classification, and only in case we cannot succeed in classifying the various dialects of faith, shall we have to confess that a science of religion is really an impossibility".[71] Although Müller diverged from other scholars in the approach he took, with this fundamental point he articulated a new principle in academic scholarship that established the study of religion as a formal, comparative enterprise. Moreover, what one sees here is also a permanent shift away from the old fourfold typology that had previously dominated European thought. From this point onwards, that mode of classifying

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[69] On *Volk* theory, see Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, passim; Shawn Kelly, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2002), 33-39; and Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 52-54.

[70] See Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 208-209. See also Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, 7.

[71] Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 68.

the religions of the world played no further part in serious academic scholarship, with idolatry remaining a category only in theological and missiological work.[72]

Müller begins by expressing his dissatisfaction with the prevailing forms of classification – which he lists as: (a) true v. false religion; (b) natural v. revealed religion; (c) individual v. national religions; and (d) polytheistic, dualistic, and monotheistic religions – all of which he regards as "unscientific" models for grouping the data.[73] Then, fitting squarely within the system of thought regarding language, race, and cultural identity sketched out above, he argues instead that

> *the only scientific and truly genetic classification of religions is the same as the classification of languages*, [and that] there exists the most intimate relationship between language, religion, and nationality … if this dependence of early religion on language is once clearly understood, it follows, as a matter of course, that whatever classification has been found most useful in the Science of Language ought to prove equally useful in the Science of Religion. If there is a truly genetic relationship of languages, the same relationship ought to hold together the religions of the world, at least the most ancient religions.[74]

Müller then explains that the Science of Language has identified three chief linguistic families: Aryan, Semitic, and Turanian;[75] and – because of the link between language and religion – he claims that we thus "really have clear evidence of three independent

[72] For a list of early nineteenth-century works of comparative religion that still employ the category of idolatry, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 59.

[73] Müller discusses these forms of classification in *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 68-82.

[74] *Ibid.*, 82, 90 (italics added). See Müller's discussion of Schlegel and Hegel at 84, 87. Going beyond the Romantics, Müller would say that "It is language and religion that make a people, but religion is even a more powerful agent than language" (85).

[75] *Ibid.*, 91. As Müller explained elsewhere, Turaninan comprises "all languages spoken in Asia or Europe not included under the Aryan and Semitic families, with perhaps the exception of Chinese and its dialects" (cited in Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 230f.). Yet as Masuzawa notes, the term Turanian "never managed to settle into a definitive meaning but remained malleable, now seeming to do one thing, now seeming to another" (228; on the category, see 228-242). Given the empirical range the taxon was supposed to cover, this instability is hardly surprising.

settlements of religion, the *Turanian*, the *Semitic*, and the *Aryan*, concomitantly with the three great settlements of language".[76]

Such was Müller's attempt at classifying the world's religions. Yet, perhaps for understandable reasons, this heavily linguistic approach did not find many supporters, and was ultimately a false start in the pursuit of a viable scientific taxonomy. While the broader enterprise of comparative religion had been firmly established under Müller's influence, other scholars found his tripartite division of religions too constrained, and soon offered different taxonomic models that were more explicitly oriented around a theme that had been gathering great momentum in this period: the idea of *development*, construed as a chronological and teleological story of progress.[77] Although this idea had been brewing for quite some time before the 1860s, it became extremely influential after that point (especially in light of Darwin's epoch-making publications), and forms of evolutionary thinking began to dominate the new Science of Religion.[78]

While there were a number of scholars who applied developmental thinking to the fresh corpus of religious material made available by philological scholarship, the most important (even more so than Müller in this respect) was the Dutch Egyptologist, Cornelis Petrus Tiele, whose entry on "Religions" in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

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[76] Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 91.

[77] Again, without wishing to get sidetracked on the wider details of the evolutionary paradigm, I point to Mike Hawkins' *Social Darwinism and European and American Thought*. See also the following note.

[78] The role of evolutionary perspectives in the nineteenth-century study of religion has been discussed by many scholars. An important general point to make is that "developmental" models of cultural change long predated Darwin, namely forms of cultural or social evolutionism. As George Stocking notes in his invaluable study of nineteenth-century anthropology, while these earlier paradigms were important for biological evolutionism, they were not exactly homologous with it (Stocking, G. W., *Victorian Anthropology* [New York: Free Press, 1987], xv. He calls the former "classical evolutionism" and the latter "biological evolutionism"). Indeed, as Adam Kuper notes, "early anthropologists were seldom Darwinians in the strict sense", instead adopting a more Lamarckian view (Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 3). The first chapter of Stocking's work (8-45) provides a detailed survey of the notion of "progress" in European thought up to 1850, all of which was crucial for later comparative religion. For a useful history pre-nineteenth-century scholarship on religion which foregrounds the increasing importance of the ideology of progress, see Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959). Eric Sharpe also provides a useful discussion of evolutionary theory and comparative religion, see *Comparative Religion*, 47-71.

in 1884 articulated a paradigmatic statement of position regarding how European scholarship now categorized and classified the various religions of the world.[79]

After introducing the reader to the mission and necessity of the science of religion (much as Müller had done), Tiele lists the major groups of religion that can be discerned from the data-set of the history of religions, which come under both linguistic and geographical headings: Aryan, Semitic, African, Mongolian, Ural-Altaic, Chinese, Japanese, Finnic, American, and Malayo-Polynesian. But he then addressed the question of how these different families of religion are to be *classified*, and he directly disagrees with the suggestion by Müller to use linguistic models, instead suggesting his own form of classification.[80]

Tiele dwells on a set of categories that Müller had mentioned but swept to the side, namely the distinction between an "individual" religion (i.e. which has an individual founder) and a "national" religion. Tiele says, explicitly *contra* Müller, that in fact "*there is no more marked distinction among religions* than the one [between] race religion and religions proceeding from an individual founder".[81] He then states the fundamental taxonomic distinction between the two: the principle of race religions is that of "nature", whereas the principle of religions founded by an individual is "ethics". Indeed, Tiele even goes so far as to say that "there is nowhere in the whole history of the development of religion so distinct a cleavage, so sharp a demarcation, as between what we have called the nature and the ethical religions".[82]

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[79] Tiele, C. P., "Religions" in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (9th ed.; Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1886), 358-371. Tiele's other major works were *Outlines of the History of Religion to the Spread of the Universal Religions* (London: Trübner, 1877 [1876]); and the published version of his 1896-8 Gifford Lectures, *Elements of a Science of Religion* (2 vols; Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1897-1900). For a good overview of Tiele's influential career, see Arie Molendijk, "Tiele on Religion", *Numen* 46 (1999): 237-268. At this stage, the detailed treatment of the phenomenology of religion provided in Tim Murphy's *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010) becomes extremely useful. After establishing the early Hegelian basis of the enterprise, Murphy discusses Tiele (101-131), then a number of other figures through to Eliade.

[80] Tiele, "Religions", 359.

[81] *Ibid.*, 366.

[82] Tiele, *Elements of a Science of Religion*, 63.

This distinction is based upon Tiele's specific conception of "religious development", by which he meant a series of different "stages" in the universal history of religion, wherein ethical religions are developmentally superior to all natural/national religions.[83] The four stages ran as follows: 1) a primitive stage of "animism" during "the childhood of the human race"; 2) polytheistic national religions; 3) "nomistic" religions, founded upon a law or sacred writing, which "[subdue] polytheism more or less completely by pantheism or monotheism"; 4) and "universal or world-religions, which start from principles and maxims".[84]

Tiele explains that stage one (primitive peoples) and stage two (the civilizational cultures of antiquity) constitute the natural and national religions, while the latter two stages constitute the ethical religions: Taoism, Confucianism, Brahmanism, Jainism, Mazdaism, Moasism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – a list which represents more or less the same as Müller's "aristocracy" of the book religions, and which is also the same as most contemporary lists of "world religions". I emphasize again that this is a qualitative hierarchy, underpinned by a teleological metanarrative in which the ethical (world) religions are "higher" than the nature religions – i.e. they are more "fully developed" manifestations of the phenomenon "religion". It will be important to keep this in mind when looking at how the twentieth century deals with this inheritance.

Yet it was not simply a matter of ethical religions being uniformly more developed than natural religions, for amongst this group too there was a hierarchal division: the third stage of "particularistic" or "nomistic" religions – Confucianism, Brahmanism, Jainism,

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[83] The notion of development is another non-biological form of evolutionary thought that was given new currency after 1859 (cf. n. 78 above). Molendijk provides another useful overview in "Religious Development: C. P. Tiele's Paradigm of Science of Religion", *Numen* 51 (2004): 321-351. However, Molendijk's essay fails to note the way in which Tiele's reading of religious history was influentially structured by Hegelian philosophy, a point crucial to grasp for the argument of this dissertation. For the Hegelian notion of *Entwicklung*, see Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 71ff.; for Tiele's appropriation of the concept, see 102-108. These issues are discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter.

[84] Tiele, "Religion", 367ff. "Animism" is discussed below.

Mazdaism, Judaism – ranked lower than the ultimate stage of "universalistic" or "world" religions – Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.[85] And even within the latter elite group there was a clear hierarchy: Islam was a "wild offshoot of Judaism and Christianity", and Buddhism, for all its nobility, had "never been victorious except where it had to contend with religions standing on no very high degree of development".[86] Yet the appearance of Christianity – fusing the Aryan with the Semitic and thus transcending all particularism –

> inaugurated an entirely new epoch in the development of religion that all the streams of the religious life of man, once separate, unite in it; and that religious development will henceforth consist in an ever higher realisation of the principles of that religion.[87]

Tiele may not have been quite accurate in his prediction, but the main assumptions on which the developmental narrative was predicated (such as the idea that the major textual religions were "superior" to all minor and primitive religions, and that Christianity was the "highest" of the major religions) were held by virtually all scholars of comparative religion, including Müller.[88]

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[85] As mentioned in Chapter 1, this sense of "world religions" is different from the sense that developed in the mid-twentieth century. This shift is discussed in more detail shortly. It is interesting to note that Tiele actually advocates abandoning the term, as "Strictly speaking, there can be no more than one universal or world religion" ("Religions", 369). He instead advocates the more nuanced term "universalistic" ("not universal"), to indicate the scope of the missionary ambition of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Had later scholars followed this suggestion, the classification of religions in the twentieth century may have taken a less conceptually imprecise course.

[86] As Philip Almond notes, although Buddhism was obviously found wanting in comparison to Christianity, it "generally fared the best of all the non-Christian religions", and it was "the active side of Buddhism, its ethics especially, that the Victorians were particularly interested in, were most easy to assimilate, and in general to endorse" (*The British Discovery of Buddhism*, 135, 131). Almond also notes that the Victorian image of Buddhism was shaped to an important degree by anti-Catholic polemics of the period, which influenced both the denigration of certain aspects of Buddhist practice as well as the more positive appraisals of Buddhism as being the Protestantism of the east (73). This idealized form of Buddhism was also used by the British as a foil for the continued denigration of Hindu religious practice (72). On Islam (and its denigration in nineteenth-century scholarship), see Masuzawa's chapter, "Islam, a Semitic Religion" in *The Invention of World Religions,* 179-206.

[87] Tiele, *Elements of a Science of Religion*, 211-212. A similar comment is made in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry, in which he claims that "If religion really is the synthesis of dependence and liberty, we might say that Islam represents the former, Buddhism the latter element only, while Christianity does full justice to both of them" (369).

[88] For Müller's view of Christianity as "superior to all other religions", see Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, 90f.

One of the most prominent manifestations of this new paradigm was the landmark World's Parliament of Religions of 1893, which reflects three main tendencies of the emergent world religions discourse that had been forming around the work of Müller, Tiele, and others.[89] The Parliament was in many senses a quite remarkable gathering, where representatives from "what were considered to be the world's ten great religions" (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) came together in an unprecedented congress in which each made a comprehensive statement of their faith and the service it had rendered to mankind.[90] In this list we see the first tendency of the nascent world religions discourse reflected by the Parliament: its focus on the "great" religions, corresponding to the "aristocracy" promoted by Müller and the "ethical" religions promoted by Tiele. While they were not yet called "world religions" with any regularity at this stage (Tiele's language as yet only applying to three of them), these were the candidates for the label once it became more common. Moreover, one also sees here an incipient mood of ecumenical pluralism in which all major religions were positively affirmed, and an impassioned call was made by the chairman of the Parliament for "uniting all religions against all irreligion".[91] This too would be a major hallmark of the twentieth century study of religion.

Yet despite this apparent ecumenism, the Parliament also represented a second tendency that had been clearly present in Müller, Tiele, and many other scholars of religion

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[89] On the Parliament, see Robert Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1995). For the fullest documentation of speeches from the event, see *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893* (ed. R. Seager; La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1993). Neither Müller nor Tiele were present at gathering, although both sent addresses to be read out at the Parliament (along with four other important scholars of the day). On the Parliament's important role in the comparative study of religion and the emerging world religions paradigm, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 265-274.

[90] See Seager's editorial introduction to *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 1-12. An influential contemporary textbook on comparative religion that echoed the Parliament's organization was James Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions: A Comparison of all Religions* (Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co.: 1883). On this work, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 77-79.

[91] Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, xvii. The chairman of the Parliament was John Henry Barrows.

of the late-nineteenth century, namely the privileging of Christianity (almost invariably meaning Protestant Christianity) as the most highly developed form of religion. This superficially pluralist framework manifested itself quite clearly in the Parliament: for on the one hand, the organizers hoped to inaugurate "a new epoch of brotherhood and peace" amongst the religions of the world; on the other hand, the whole conference was underpinned by an explicit Christian universalism, with the closing speech of the event even bearing the title: "Christ the Unifier of Mankind".[92]

The final tendency of the emerging discourse reflected in the Parliament was the total exclusion of any tradition that was not one of the "ten great religions" from the field of vision. This tendency was particularly conspicuous in the exclusion of all "savage" religion from the proceedings of the Parliament – an especially symbolic fact being that not even local Native American peoples were invited (although one "highly general" paper on them was apparently presented by an academic anthropologist, even though it appears not to have been preserved).[93] Instead, "primitive" cultures were on display not in the Parliament of Religions, but as a spectacle of amusement in another part of the Columbian World's Fair.[94] This provides an unfortunately good reflection of the fate of these traditions in the twentieth century discourse on religion; but in order to explain how the pluralistic world religions paradigm effectively perpetuates this kind of racially based cultural hierarchy, it is necessary to retrace the story for a moment and provide a little more detail about the ideas that had been forming around the notion of "primitive culture" up to this point.

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[92] *Ibid.*, 453-475.

[93] *Ibid.*, 6f. Seager also notes other exclusions from the Parliament: Mormons were not invited, and the only people of African descent were from Christian denominations. And whilst some liberal Protestant delegations included female participants, the representatives of each tradition's contingent were almost exclusively male.

[94] For a good critique of the Parliament from this angle, see William Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 171-179.

As discussed earlier, an important landmark had been reached in European thought when it was admitted that the uncivilized peoples of Africa and America were in fact humans (even if degraded and inferior specimens of the species). While their religion was generally described as idolatry in the majority of ethnographic and missiological literature, another category had also become popular in the eighteenth century to describe the lowest state of religion, namely the label of "fetishism". Coined by Charles de Brosses in 1760, the term designated etymologically that this form of religion was centered around the worship of "made" objects (as opposed to having reverence for the more "sublime" objects of contemplation in the higher religions; cf. Tiele's natural/ethical distinction).[95]

This term proved to be of lasting influence, such that most eighteenth and nineteenth century thinkers understood fetishism as the chief form of idolatry.[96] Yet from the 1860s, a new image of primitive religion began to take shape, one that would be bequeathed to the twentieth century. Two broad factors were at play in this change. The first was the continued colonial expansion of European powers, and thus the increased contact with peoples believed to be living in a still "primitive" state in Africa, Australia, and elsewhere. In a sense, this threw up a renewed version of the same question that had plagued thinkers such as Montaigne and Boemus in the sixteenth century – i.e., what does it mean for our understanding of man if we admit that these crude, uncivilized savages are also of the same species as Europeans? This question required serious mental gymnastics, and in the latter stages of the nineteenth century the tradition of ethnography transmuted

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[95] De Brosses, C., *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches, ou parallèle de l'ancienne Religion de l'Egypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* (Paris, 1760). See Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, & Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 63; see also Sharpe 18f. Kippenberg provides a brief note on the etymology of the term (*Discovering Religious History*, 51).

[96] One of the most influential figures to adopt the notion that fetishism was the earliest form of religion (following which came polytheism, then monotheism) was Auguste Comte in his six-volume *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1830-42). See Styers, *Making Magic*, 67, 74f.

into the discipline of anthropology, whose *raison d'être* was to address precisely this sort of issue.

As discussed above, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the dominant theory of cultural difference was framed in terms of *degeneration*, i.e. the notion that "savages are, as a general rule, only the miserable remnants of nations once civilized" (a view effectively determined by the historical framework of the Genesis narrative).[97] Yet it was at this time that the new paradigm of *development* became dominant: i.e. the view that all cultures had started from a state of primitive savagery, a state that was still present in certain groups of humans. This idea, related to the larger concept of "progress", was extremely influential in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and was the second major factor changing European conceptions of non-urban cultures.[98] What effectively happened when the notion of cultural evolutionism replaced degeneration theory was an epistemic flip in which certain non-civilizational cultures (both past and present) moved from being considered the "most degenerate" to the "least developed".

I have already demonstrated the importance that the idea of development had amongst philological scholars such as Tiele, where primitive religion was placed at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder. Yet it was in the new discipline of anthropology – influenced by advances in areas such as biology and geology – that work on primitive culture was undertaken at its most serious level.[99] Interestingly enough, the first stage of this new interest was directed not towards the religion of primitive cultures, but towards their

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[97] The quotation comes from one of the most important figures of early anthropology, Sir John Lubbock, in his seminal work, *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1865), here 337. This work is briefly discussed again in Chapter 5. In addition to the material cited earlier with regard to degeneration theory, see also Margaret T. Hodgen, "The Doctrine of Survivals", *American Anthropologist* 33 (1931): 307-324, here 308f.

[98] Although I omit wider discussion of the concept of progress here for reasons of scope, see n. 78 above.

[99] On the rise of anthropology in the context of Darwinian thought, see Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 76ff, and Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 144-185. These issues are discussed momentarily, and again in Chapter 5.

political organization – represented most prominently in works such as Henry Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861) and Lewis Henry Morgan's two works, *System of Consanguinity* (1871) and *Ancient Society* (1877).[100] The latter work, *Ancient Society*, is a particularly instructive example to consider in the present context for the way in which Morgan articulates a principle that was now operative across most fields of thought in this period:

> It can now be asserted upon convincing evidence that savagery preceded barbarism in all the tribes of mankind as barbarism is known to have preceded civilization. The human race is one in source, one in experience, and in progress.[101]

Notice two things here: 1) that *savagery*, *barbarism*, and *civilization* are precise technical terms that describe different stages of historical development within a given society; and 2) the same universal laws of development apply to every single human society. As Adam Kuper has noted, this served as the central presupposition of all thinkers in the period who addressed the question of humanity's long evolutionary history.[102]

One such figure was the influential Edward Burnett Tylor, the most important scholar in carving out the initial discursive and institutional space of academic anthropology.[103] Tylor had come to prominence in 1865 with a work entitled *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*, although his most influential

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[100] Maine, H., *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and its Relation to Modern Ideas* (London: John Murray, 1861); Morgan, L. H., *System of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (Washington DC: Smithsonian, 1971); and *Ancient Society: Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York: Holt, 1877). See also n. 97 above on Lubbock, whose work first popularized the term "prehistory". On the initial framing of these researches as a branch of legal studies, see Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 3. Other important figures of the period passed over at present include Johann Jacob Bachofen, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, and John F. McLennan.

[101] Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 6. See Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 65ff.

[102] *Ibid.*, 2.

[103] Kuper sums up Tylor's role here: "In 1871, the year of *Primitive Culture*, not yet forty years old, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. In 1875 Oxford awarded him an honorary degree. In 1881 he published the first general textbook in English on the subject, his *Anthropology*, which for held the field for a generation. In 1884 Oxford created a Readership in Anthropology for him, and in 1896 he was made a Professor by personal title. By now the likes of Max Müller were talking of anthropology as 'Mr Tylor's science'" (Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 81). Further details are provided in Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History*, 54f. On the early stages of institutionalizing anthropology, see Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 238-273.

contribution to the study of early humanity was his landmark *Primitive Culture* (1871), which sought to account for the intellectual and cultural development of human society along explicit evolutionary lines.[104] Unlike other scholars whose focus was mainly social institutions such as marriage and kinship structures of early human groups, Tylor gave significant attention to religion, devoting the entire second volume of *Primitive Culture* to the question.

Tylor called the earliest stage of religion "animism", which he defined as "the theory which endows the phenomena of nature with personal life".[105] This was an explicit attempt to recast the concept of primitive religion, as he made clear:

> The President de Brosses, a most original thinker of the last century, struck by the descriptions of the African worship of material and terrestrial objects, introduced the word *Fétichisme* as a general descriptive term, and since then it has obtained great currency by Comte's use of it to denote a general theory of primitive religion, in which external objects are regarded as animated by a life analogous to man's. It seems to me, however, more convenient to use the word Animism for the doctrine of spirits in general, and to confine the word Fetishism to that subordinate department which it properly belongs to, namely, the doctrine of spirits embodied in, or attached to, or conveying influence through, certain material objects.[106]

With this manoeuvre Tylor reframed the terms of debate regarding primitive religion, and his theory that animism was the earliest stage of religious development became widely

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[104] Tylor, E. B., *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (London: John Murray, 1865); and *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion Language, Art and Custom* (2 vols; London: John Murray, 1871). The literature on Tylor is substantial. Amongst works already cited, useful information can be found in: Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*; Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*; Styers, *Making Magic*; Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*; Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History*; Hodgen, "The Doctrine of Survivals"; and Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*. On Tylor in relation other theories of religion, see also the works of Pals, Thrower and Kunin cited in Chapter 2 (n. 5).

[105] Tylor, "The Religion of Savages", *Fortnightly Review* 6 (1866): 71-86, here 84. Space does not permit for a proper examination of Tylor's theory, but see the following note.

[106] Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2: 144. Although Tylor expounded the theory of animism across numerous publications (including "The Religion of Savages" and several other pieces noted in the bibliography), *Primitive Culture* stands as his definitive statement on the issue. For a good discussion of the way that it "effectively eclipsed" earlier theories of fetishism, see Styers, *Making Magic*, 74-9. However, this should not be taken to mean that the *details* of Tylor's position were completely original; and indeed, Kuper suggest that "His theory of religious development owed a great deal to Comte, and his 'animism' is hardly to be distinguished from Comte's 'fetishism'. Even his ideas about sacrifice owed much to the German biblical scholar Wellhausen" (Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 81).

influential. Not only did it stand as the first stage in Tiele's paradigmatic articulation of the developmental view of religious history, and not only was Müller soon calling anthropology "Mr Tylor's science", but Tylor's view of early human religion became archetypal in western thought for almost a century after his first publications (even though it underwent periodic modification).[107]

Yet unlike Tiele, Müller, and the host of other philological scholars with a theological agenda, Tylor was not a Christian triumphalist. His apologetic agenda was different, and was situated within the wider context of emergent scientific modernity and its challenge to the traditional Christian worldview. The biblical timeline of world history had by now become untenable: geologists were beginning to understand the much older age of the world, and archaeologists – armed with the new concept of "prehistory" – continued to unearth findings that proved beyond doubt that humans had existed for much longer than 6000 years.[108] Meanwhile, the Darwinian theory of evolution provided another blow by challenging the view that the order of Creation was fixed, suggesting instead the idea of evolution by natural selection. Darwin had skirted the question of the human in *The Origin of Species* (1859), but rounded out his account in *The Descent of Man* by applying the theory of evolution to explain the existence of the human species.[109] *The Descent of Man* was published in 1871 – the same year as Tylor's *Primitive Culture*. As described by Adam Kuper,

> [Tylor's book] added what was a potentially devastating challenge to orthodox Christians. He argued that even the earliest men had some form of religious belief. Religions could be ranged in a series according to intellectual sophistication, but later religions all derived from a primitive system of theology [i.e. animism], and retained

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[107] On Müller's comment, see n. 103 above. Similarly, Tiele not only used the category of animism, but even declared that "I cannot speak of it without mentioning the name of the author who first threw clear light on the subject, I mean Dr E. B. Tylor, Professor in the university of Oxford" (*Elements of the Science of Religion*, 68).

[108] The transformations of historical consciousness in the mid-nineteenth century are discussed more substantially in Chapter 5. A useful summary is provided in Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History*, 29-35.

[109] Darwin, C., *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1859); and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871).

traces of their origins. The clear implication was that classical Christianity might have been outgrown by modern man. Increasingly, religious belief would yield place to scientific theory.[110]

This apologetic orientation was made obvious through Tylor's famous argument that all forms of religion, even those in contemporary European society, were nothing other than "survivals" from old cultural forms that ultimately found their root in the original, primitive condition of mankind.[111] Thus, as Randall Styers has shown in a penetrating study of the category of "magic", Tylor is representative of a number of figures in this period who used primitive religion (and by implication all religion) as a foil for constructing the identity of modern Europe as scientific and rational.[112] This was a crucial difference between those involved in philological scholarship and those engaged in the new "science of man", because virtually all scholars involved in anthropology, by the time they were writing, were either agnostics or atheists.[113] This was certainly not the case with the philologists.

This divide between the two fields also became manifest by the way in which anthropology was constructed as an academic discipline that was clearly distinct from philology in both its data and its methods. For although anthropology and philology shared

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[110] Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 79-80.

[111] On survivals, see e.g. *Primitive Culture*, 1: 16, where Tylor defines the term as referring to "processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved". See also Hodgen, "The Doctrine of Survivals".

[112] Given the limited focus of this chapter on the history of classification, I am not able to discuss issues surrounding the politicized nature of the magic/religion binary. On the importance of Styers' work in this dissertation, see Chapter 1 above (n. 19).

[113] This point was noted long ago by Evans-Pritchard. He went on to say that: "We should, I think, realize what was the intention of many of these scholars if we are to understand their theoretical constructions. They sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage, induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way" (Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, 15). See here Styers, *Making Magic*, 10. Evans-Pritchard continued: "whether they were right or wrong is beside the point, which is that the impassioned rationalism of the time coloured their assessment of primitive religions and has given their writings, as we read them today, a flavour of smugness which one may find either irritating or risable" (15).

a common point of departure with the developmental view of world history (and thus

overlapped occasionally), they effectively constituted two completely different fields for the

study of comparative religion. Eric Sharpe describes the situation well, saying that

> The philologists were of course interested only in textual material, and their methods
> as historians of religion were essentially those which had been developed for the
> purpose of dealing with Semitic and Indo-European texts. Other data concerning the
> earliest history of mankind, and man's earliest religions, interested them hardly at all.[114]

The division of labour between philology ("history") and anthropology ("prehistory") was

an extremely durable one. A convenient illustration of this separation, which helps move

the discussion into the twentieth century, can be seen in a comparison of the two most

important early twentieth-century scholars of religion: Max Weber and Émile Durkheim,

who represent the trajectories of philology and anthropology surprisingly well.

Durkheim, although usually associated with the establishment of sociology, is in

many respects the culmination of nineteenth-century anthropological scholarship. His

analysis of Australian indigenous religion as "the most primitive and simple religion which

we can observe" was structured around the idea of "totemism", an idea that had been

developed alongside Tylor's animism by James Frazer and William Robertson Smith.[115]

Durkheim's work was based on the ethnographic data that had constituted anthropology in

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[114] Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 47.

[115] Durkheim, É., *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (2nd ed.; trans. J. S. Swain; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976 [1912]), 23. I do not discuss totemism here, although the main figures who lie in the pre-Durkheimian background of the concept are John Ferguson McLennan, William Robertson Smith and James Frazer. McLennan coined the term (under influence from Tylor's early work) in "The Worship of Plants and Animals", *Fortnightly Review* 6-7 (1869-70): 407-582, 194-216. Robertson Smith expanded upon the concept in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1889). This in turn heavily influenced the young Frazer, who had worked closely with Robertson Smith and whose first small book was called *Totemism* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1887). But Frazer soon began to distance himself from totemism, and indeed from Robertson Smith himself, which he made clear in the preface to the second edition of his influential classic, *The Golden Bough* (2nd ed.; 3 vols; London: Macmillan, 1900 [1890]), 3. For a useful discussion of this trajectory, see Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*, 76-91. For a slightly wider discussion of the trajectory that better illuminates the importance of Robertson Smith in Durkheim's thought, see Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History*, 65-80. Kippenberg notes that Durkheim acknowledged in 1907 that it was only when he read the lectures of Robertson Smith that he clearly saw the central role of religion in social life (80).

the nineteenth century, and he placed that data in a similar developmental framework. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* deals exclusively with primitive religion, and does not engage any material regarding the world's major textual religions.

Weber, by contrast, dealt exclusively with material from the major civilizational cultures in his wide-ranging corpus of historical sociology, and represents the outgrowth of textually focused history of religions scholarship, particularly from Germany.[116] After publishing his famous economic analysis of the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, Weber embarked on the more ambitious task of examining *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen* (1915) – "the economic ethic of the world religions", which became part of his massive (but incomplete) *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.[117] The opening paragraph of his introduction is indicative of the new logic that would soon culminate in the twentieth century world religions paradigm:

> By "world religions," we understand the five religions or religiously determined systems of life-regulation which have known how to gather multitudes of confessors around them. The term is used here in a completely value-neutral sense. The Confucian, Hinduist, Buddhist, Christian, and Islamist religious ethics all belong to the category of world religion. A sixth religion, Judaism, will also be dealt with. It is included because it contains the historical preconditions decisive for understanding Christianity and Islamism, and because of its historic and autonomous significance for the development of the modern economic ethic of the Occident … References to

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[116] Weber's apparent non-engagement with any literature on primitive religion is noted by Evans-Pritchard, who says "he appears to have read little about them" (*Theories of Primitive Religion*, 117). As Talcott Parsons has said of Weber as a scholar of religion, "If the *Protestant Ethic* was Weber's point of departure, his immediate scholarly destination was the series of comparative monographs in the sociology of religion of which three were completed, those of Chinese religion (Confucianism and Taoism), of Indian religion (Hinduism and Buddhism), and of Ancient Judaism. … This series was left incomplete at Weber's death. He had planned, at the very least, comparable studies of Islam, of Early Christianity, and of Medieval Christianity" (Parsons, T., "Introduction" to Weber's *The Sociology of Religion* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1964], xxix-lxxvii, here xxxi). Space does not permit a proper discussion of Weber's inheritance of nineteenth-century German scholarship. For a useful treatment, see Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History*, 113-124.

[117] The work originally appeared as "Die Wirtschafts Ethik der Weltreligionen", a portion of Weber's massive unfinished work, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: J. C. B Mohr, 1922). See the English translation, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (2 vols; ed. G. Roth & C. Wittich; New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).

other religions will be made only when they are indispensible for historical connections.[118]

Not only does this represent the first major shift in taxonomic logic from Tiele's rigorous definition of a "world religion" to the more theoretically vacuous twentieth-century definition of the term, but the very different projects of Weber and Durkheim highlight just how significantly the study of world religions had diverged from the study of primitive culture by the start of the twentieth century. As I have been suggesting, the implications of this are still playing out today.

*The Consolidation of the World Religions Paradigm in the Twentieth Century*

As the heady decades of the late nineteenth century came to a close, the "science of religion" – now well-established as an independent conceptual field distinct from theology – began to transmute into the "phenomenology of religion", an enterprise that connected closely with Tiele and the Dutch school. Tiele had already articulated the basic premise of the enterprise: to study the *essence* of religion through its empirical *manifestions*, the religions.[119] This approach in fact stems back to Hegel, whose premise in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* was that essence (*Wesen*) can be approached through a study of its manifestations (*Erscheinungen*).[120] This principle was taken up fully by Tiele, and is reflected in the two parts of his *Elements of a Science of Religion*: (1) "morphological", which was "concerned with the constant changes in form resulting from an ever-progressing evolution"; and

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[118] Weber, "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen". The essay appears in translation as "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Historical Sociology* (ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills; New York: Oxford University Press, 1948) 267-301, here 267.

[119] On Chantepie de la Saussaye, the other founder of the Dutch school, see Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 179-206; Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 222. Useful background is also provided in Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33-53.

[120] See Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 221. I discuss Tim Murphy's treatment of Hegel in the next chapter.

(2)"ontological", which explores "the unalterable element in transient and ever-altering forms—in a word, the origin and very essence of religion".[121]

In Tiele's wake, however, the the "essence and manifestation" paradigm began to shift away from the overtly developmental model, and instead paid growing attention simply to the task of discerning the essence of religion as a response to the threat of social-scientific "reductionism". Understanding this subtle shift is crucial for my critique of the twentieth-century world religions paradigm, so a little elaboration is in order.

The phrase "phenomenology of religion" was first coined by Dutch theologian P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye in 1887, who had been at Amsterdam before arriving at Leiden in 1899, where Tiele had also been. In 1900, a successor to Tiele's chair arrived at Leiden, namely Wilhelm Brede Kristensen.[122] In addition to Kristensen, the other major second-generation phenomenologist was Gerhardus van der Leeuw, both of whom were discussed in Chapter 2 in the context of non-reductive theories of religion – van der Leeuw for *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1933), which Murphy calls "the seminal statement of classical phenomenology of religion", and Kristensen for his articulation of the (impoverished) cardinal rule of the discourse: the descriptive authority of the insider (i.e. "the believer is always right").[123] The third generation of phenomenologists was dominated by Mircea Eliade, the most important mid-twentieth-century scholar in carving out autonomous disciplinary space for the study of religion.[124]

As discussed in the previous chapter, the phenomenological method of the

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[121] Tiele, *Elements of a Science of Religion*, 27. See Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 101ff.

[122] Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 179.

[123] *Ibid.*, 207. Eliade also called van der Leeuw "the first authoritative representative of the phenomenology of religion" (*The Sacred and the Profane The Nature of Religion* [trans. W. Trask; Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1959 (1957)]), 232.

[124] Other important figures include Joachim Wach and Joseph Kitagawa, both of whom were at the University of Chicago with Eliade. See Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 26f.

twentieth century was predicated on the notion of an ontological "sacred" or "transcendent" reality that could not be grasped properly by other means of enquiry (sociological, psychological, etc.), and could *only* be grasped by the hermeneutical method of Eliadean-style "history of religions" scholarship.[125] As discussed seveal times so far, one of the driving motivations of the phenomenologists, along with related figures such as Rudolf Otto, was to defend the *sui generis* nature of religion in the face of "reductive" naturalistic and social-scientific theories. We can now see their arguments about the "essence" of religion in a slightly broader context, something Murphy helps to emphasize:

> The unity of this "school" was also at least *somewhat* self-conscious, as can be seen by a trail of citations. Dilthey credited Schleiermacher and was influenced by Hegel; Otto also edited Schleiermacher and was clearly influenced by him. In the opening lines of *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade credits Otto; in the beginning of *Patterns*, he cites van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion*; van der Leeuw cites Chantepie, "As regards Phenomenology itself, Chantepie's volume should be consulted." Chantepie, in turn, cites Hegel as well as Schleiermacher, but especially the former. This circle of references indicates that the phenomenology of religion was, indeed, an intertextual phenomenon.[126]

Given that I am arguing in this dissertation that Hick's theory replicates a form of Hegelian logic, seeing this chain of connections is vital in understanding how Hegel's ideas flowed so seamlessly into the late twentieth century. Yet as mentioned above, the major difference between the late nineteenth-century (Tiele) and the mid-twentieth century (Eliade) is the loss of emphasis on the idea of *development* that had been so dominant in the nineteenth century.[127] While the study of religion was still directed in large part towards the major textual religions of the world, which reinforced the developmental logic that these

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[125] The terms "phenomenology of religion" and "history of religions" (as well as "*Religionswissenschaft*") are roughly equivalent, although there are certain subtle differences which I pass over here. See Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 27f.

[126] *Ibid.*, 29-30.

[127] The examples of E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Claude Lévi-Strauss are enough to demonstrate that even well into the twentieth century, "primitive" religion was the preserve of "anthropologists", not "scholars of religion" in the normal (i.e. philological) sense.

represented the highest or best forms of religion, the more explicit emphasis in the twentieth century was not on *ranking* religions, but on *discerning the essence* of religion. In other words, an important shift took place from a *diachronic* model of the relationship between the religions, to a *synchronic* model – recall e.g. Eliade's comment that the sacred "is an element in the structure of consciousness, and not a stage in the history of consciousness".[128]

A related consequence of the new essentialist paradigm was that the overt Christian triumphalism of scholars like Tiele and Müller began to recede into the background. Although it is true that most phenomenologists of the early- and mid-twentieth century, such as van der Leeuw and Kristensen, were Christian scholars with often explicit theological agendas and motivations (as is clear from any analysis of their allegedly "non-theological" scholarship),[129] it became much less common as the twentieth century continued for scholars of religion to flatly assert the superiority of Christianity, at least within the context of the new field of religious studies (now institutionally distinct from theology).

These elements, in conjunction with the philological legacy and its focus on the textually-based "great traditions" of the world, serve as the foundation of the world religions paradigm of the late twentieth century. While elements of the world religions paradigm had been brewing since the nineteenth century (witness e.g. the World's Parliament of Religions), it was not until around the 1960s that the paradigm became widely entrenched in Euro-American discourse. As discussed at the outset of this work, a watershed moment came with the 1958 publication of Huston Smith's widely popular

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[128] I take the language of diachronic and synchronic from Murphy, whose study first drew my attention to this important conceptual shift.

[129] Aside from Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, the theological heritage of religious studies as an academic discipline is analysed by the scholars cited in n. 131 below. Timothy Fitzgerald has been particularly strident regarding the claim that religious studies is little more than "a disguised form of liberal ecumenical theology" (*The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 6).

textbook, *The Religions of Man*, which resulted from a 1955 television series that Smith claims reached over 100,000 people.[130] Articulating the basic taxonomic model that would dominate the second half of the twentieth century, Smith treats the seven canonical "great" religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Notice the way in which this list of "world religions" remains virtually unchanged from the list of "ethical" religions in the "upper" stages of development in the models of nineteenth-century scholars like Tiele and Müller.

However the substantial difference between the world religions model and the earlier developmental view is that the new paradigm was explicitly pluralistic. Being structured around the essence/manifestation distinction that it had inherited from the phenomenology of religion, the emerging model of world religions was one in which there was avowedly no hierarchy. In other words, the synchronic shift had *horizontalized* the relationship between the religions – again, something that "fitted" with the growing liberalism of the post-WWII era.

However, an important consequence of this was that the discourse began to shift *away* from the "origins of religion" debate, instead focusing with renewed ecumenical vigour on the world's *living* religions, i.e. major traditions with a visible, vibrant presence in the modern world. Yet because of this, the old methodological separation between philology and anthropology endured into the second half of the twentieth century, and with it the implicit hierarchy between the great traditions and primitive culture. *The Religions of Man* is a good illustration of this tendency, and the institutionalization of religious studies in the

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[130] Smith, H., *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper, 1958). As noted, the work has since been repackaged along more gender-inclusive lines as *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1991). I discuss another important difference between the two editions in the Conclusion. Smith makes the claim about the size of his television audience in the 1965 reprint of *The Religions of Man* (ix).

1960s created a wide market for works of a similar nature.[131]

Another important scholar in the story is Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who played a major role in promoting the terminology of "world religions" through his involvement at Harvard's new Program in World Religions, inaugurated in 1960.[132] Cantwell Smith is especially instructive for the way he reflects the tendency of the new discourse to focus on the "living religions":

> Whereas at the turn of the century a typical introductory course in this field would emphasize "primitive religions," and a typical book would address itself to the "nature and origin of religion" (the phrase implicitly postulates that the reality or truth of religion is to be found most purely or most surely in its earliest and simplest forms), today it is normal to give chief or even sole attention to Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, along with Christians and Jews – groups that between them constitute the vast majority of today's population, and between them claim most forcefully to represent *religion's highest and truest development*. And whereas once such attention as was given to *the great religions* was primarily to their scriptures and historically to their early, classical phases, today these religions are seen primarily as the faith of present-day groups …
>
> … [And, singling out *The Religions of Man* for specific attention, he continues that:] The same omission of primitives and concern for *the great religions* is true of the recent brilliant text of Huston Smith ... a luminous example of the treatment of religion as the faith of persons ... This work is perhaps the first adequate textbook in *world religions*, precisely because it treats religions as human.[133]

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[131] As noted below (see n. 140), the world religions textbook market is still thriving in the twenty-first century. Of works already cited that deal with the formalization of religious studies as an academic discipline, see: Sharpe, *Comparative Religion* (267-319); Young, "World Religions: A Category in the Making?"; Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*; Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous* (33-52); McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*. See also the essays collected in Smith, J. Z., *On Teaching Religion* (ed. C. Lehrich; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Cox's chapter on "Essentialism and the World Religions Paradigm" (33-52) is particularly useful for its discussion of the consolidation of religious studies in the British context. He notes the role of Ninian Smart in founding the first UK religious studies department at Lancaster, as well as E. E. Kellett's *A Short History of Religions* (rep. 1948), which began to popularize the world religions discourse at a popular level in a similar way to Huston Smith's *Religions of Man* in the US.

[132] Young says that: "it was Smith, especially in his role as director of the Center from 1964, who gave intellectual formulation to what may be termed a growing cultural fashion: focusing on the contemporary aspect of certain religions" (115). She also notes the following (116): "Scrutiny of the various statements by Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggests that his criteria for the category 'world religions' were (1) living, (2) major in the sense that they involved the vast majority of today's population, and (3) great in the sense that they could claim between them to represent religion's highest and truest development."

[133] Cantwell Smith, W., "Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (ed. M. Eliade & J. Kitagawa; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 31-59. The quotations are from 37-38, although I have retained the instructive italics used by Young to highlight the emerging tropes of the discourse (see "World Religions: A Category in the Making?", 114).

It was in this context that Cantwell Smith called for a wholesale reappraisal of the study of religion in the west, whereby its partisanship to Christianity was dropped in favour of a model that grappled with "the total religious history of mankind", in which all "faith" was understood as reflecting differing patterns of "man's variegated and evolving encounter with transcendence".[134] And as also discussed, John Hick's entire philosophical program was explicitly an attempt to take up Cantwell Smith's challenge by developing a comprehensive theory of religion which did just that: describe the total religious history of mankind as differing human "responses" to the same transcendent reality. I will come to Hick and his relationship to this discursive history in the next chapter.[135] But first, as a way of providing a summary, it is important to clarify specifically what all of these developments meant for the classification of religions in the new paradigm.

At the start of the twentieth century, the diachronic developmental model of religious history, as articulated by Tiele, was broadly dominant in the enterprise of comparative religion. Yet as the phenomenology of religion gained momentum, its emphatically non-reductive focus shifted the model to a synchronic, essentialist one whereby religions were not classed in "stages", but were held to be manifestations of an irreducible, *sui generis* reality – whether called "the Sacred" (Eliade), "the Holy" (Otto), "the Transcendent" (Cantwell Smith), or "the Real" (Hick). Moreover, as I have also attempted to show, this new essentialist model, whilst heavily indebted to early European and Christian triumphalism, was almost invariably an explicit attempt to move beyond such Eurocentrism and to affirm the value of all "religion", regardless of its manifestation.

In this context, the term "world religions" acquired a very different meaning to the

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[134] See above, ch. 1, n. 4.

[135] I pass over Hick's relationship with a number of important British thinkers, not least Ninian Smart, whose chair of Philosophy Hick filled at Birmingham when Smart moved to Lancaster. See Hick, J., *John Hick: An Autobiography*, 143ff. See also n. 131 above.

one it had been given in the developmental model. Tiele had used the label of "world" religion as the equivalent of a "universal" religion. Universal religions were the upper stage of the ethical religions, and were the three religions with a genuinely "universalistic" (as opposed to a "national" or "ethnic") orientation. But in the essentialist model, especially from the 1960s onwards, the notion of a "world religion" underwent a significant shift that reflects the movement from teleology (Tiele) to essentialism (Eliade/Huston Smith). As Jonathan Z. Smith describes,

> Later scholars expanded the number of world religions to seven by collapsing Tiele's two classes of "ethical religions" in an odd venture of pluralistic etiquette: if Christianity and Islam count as world religions, then it would be rude to exclude Judaism (ironically, the original model for the opposite type, "national nomistic religions"). Likewise, if Buddhism is included, then Hinduism cannot be ignored. And again, if Buddhism, then Chinese and Japanese religions.[136]

This "pluralistic etiquette" defines the world religions paradigm: not just in its sense of liberal ecumenism ("religion" is a good thing vis-à-vis secularism and disenchantment), but also in the way that it reifies a theoretically impoverished mode of categorization (Smith calls it methodologically "unprincipled"). Katherine K. Young makes several further cogent observations about this terminology: (1) the period 1951-61 saw a marked increase of this usage of the compound "world religions" and its cognates ("the world's religions", etc.); (2) the term "world religions" had an air of natural self-evidency, to the point that it was virtually never defined despite its vacuous theoretical nature; and (3), describing the broader context I have touched upon several times so far,

> Several reasons seem to have prompted the use of this term. (a) The desire by the West to solve world problems, be good world citizens (especially in the wake of imperialism and the world wars), and create a peaceful transition to religiously plural societies in the West itself through understanding or dialogue. Hence the emphasis on living religions

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[136] Smith, J. Z., "Religion, Religions, Religious", 191. Smith had made the same point two decades earlier in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 289-309, see 295f. He comes at the issue again in "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion" in *Relating Religion*, 160-178, see 169f.

practiced by large numbers of people. (b) The interest in successful religions in terms of spread and continuity; hence the interest in "major" religions. (c) The wish for a convenient selection principle for textbooks to enable a manageable number of religions to be surveyed and give the appearance of being global.[137]

These critical remarks bring us back to the penetrating observation of J. Z. Smith discussed at the beginning of this work:

> It is impossible to escape the suspicion that a world religion is simply a religion like ours, and that it is, above all, a tradition that has achieved sufficient power and numbers to enter our history and form it, interact with it, or thwart it. We recognize both the unity within and the diversity among the world religions because they correspond to important geopolitical entities with which we must deal. All "primitives," by way of contrast, may be lumped together, as may the "minor religions" because they do not confront our history in any direct fashion. From the point of view of power, they are invisible.[138]

Smith has elsewhere described "primitive" and "minor" as "residual categories" for religions not classifiable under the dominant system, and after discussing in particular his experiences in dealing with this persistent issue as the general editor of *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, he continues that

> The category "Religions of Traditional Peoples" is the best illustration of my previous remark that while we are capable of taking infinite pains at splitting "world religions" in an endless dialectic of unity and diversity we tend to lump together so-called 'primitive' religions. … The fact is that there is no satisfactory way of classifying these traditions. Neither geographical nor linguistic groupings have proved fruitful or gained wide assent. Until such is developed, we will continue to use prescientific categories, largely lumping these folk together by the putative absence among them of cultural indicators we associate with ourselves (from clothes to writing to historical complexity).[139]

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[137] Young, "World Religions: A Category in the Making?", 117. Masuzawa goes even further than Young on the administrative appeal of the world religions model: "In the unapologetic free market and entrepeneurial climate pervading universities and colleges … it is clear that the consistently large enrollment figures in world religions courses – as well as derivative courses, such as course in 'Asian religions,' 'biblical traditions,' and 'religious diversity in America', to name a few – has been the single most powerful argument and justification for maintaining the steady budget line and faculty positions in the religious studies departments and programs" (*The Invention of World Religions*, 9).

[138] Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious", 191-2.

[139] Smith, "A Matter of Class", 171-2.

This circumscription plays out clearly in H. Simth's *The Religions of Man*, which is representative of most other books in the "world religions" genre.[140] Not only did the first edition of this work concern itself only with the seven "great faiths of man", but Smith later admitted that until his encounter with Native American culture in the 1970s, he had "dismissed" all of the world's tribal religions as "unimportant", something also seemingly advocated in Cantwell Smith's insistence on the primacy of the "living" religions.[141] This effectively summarizes the logic of the world religions paradigm as it stood in the middle of the twentieth century – the time that Hick was writing – and is a perfect illustration of J. Z. Smith's observation about what has "counted" as a world religion in western discourse. Huston Smith "dismisses" all of the not-so-great religions of the world because the discourse that supplied the formative logic to his thinking had been historically constructed to do so. As we will see next chapter, Smith even admitted this later in his career.

Recent critics have amplified these concerns about the circumscription of the non-civilizational other, and to close out I want to start outlining the challenges to the world religions model that have been offered from the perspective of postcolonial theory, something that will be continued into the next chapter. One sustained attempt to address the difficult issue of appropriate nomenclature for the religion of peoples from small-scale oral societies has been James Cox's advocacy of the category "indigenous". While recognizing the many problems (ethical, political, methodological) that attend the issue of classification, Cox argues that, carefully defined, the category of indigenous offers a far

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[140] A useful survey of early world religions textbooks can be found in Young, "World Religions: A Category in the Making?". For other surveys with an even stronger critical focus, see the postcolonial critique of James Lewis, "Images of Traditional African Religion in Surveys of World Religions", *Religion* 20 (1990): 311-322; and *Religious Studies Review* 31 (2005), a special issue comprising essays focused on the political implications of the world religions paradigm (see esp. MacWilliams, M., et al. "Religion/s Between the Covers: Dilemmas of the World Religions Textbook", 1-36).

[141] See *A Seat At The Table: Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 2. The 1991 edition of his textbook (*The World's Religions*) included a chapter on "primal religion". I return to this episode in the Conclusion.

better conceptual rubric than previous categories, all of which he rightly notes are grounded in the dynamics of either theological or imperialist marginalization.[142] In addition to advocating the use of indigenous as a *category*, Cox further advocates the inclusion of indigenous religions in *curricula* of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at an international level, speaking even of western scholarship's "intellectual duty" to do so.[143] A similar call has also been made by Richard King, who has argued that:

> The introduction of a variety of indigenous epistemic traditions is, in my view, the single most important step that postcolonial studies can take if it is to look beyond the Eurocentric foundations of its theories and contest the epistemic violence of the colonial encounter. [144]

Concerns about their exclusion from such curricula were also a key point of criticism for the contributors of *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. As discussed earlier, this work arose as the result of a conference in which scholars were called to respond to "a perceptible lack in Western institutions in the study of 'indigenous' religions." To repeat, Olupona writes that:

> This lack is especially indicated in the history of religion programs offered at many US universities. Western religious scholarship, generally the world over, has privileged "world" religions by an absolute linguistic separation into two classes of religious studies: "indigenous" religions and "world" religions. This arbitrary and capricious bifurcation of religious scholarship fails to acknowledge the universality of religious systems of belief across the globe. It fails to acknowledge the very sacred spiritual traditions of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and wherever indigenous people inhabit the earth. … The privileging of "world" religions is largely informed by a particular academic orientation of scholars, whose traditions developed out of the "axial age" civilization paradigm.[145]

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[142] Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous*, esp. 53-74 on "Defining Indigenous Scientifically". While Cox's proposals are cogent in many respects, I remain unconvinced about the utility of "indigenous" as a serious category of classification for broadscale cultural comparison. I leave this issue to the side for now, as it is discussed further in the Conclusion.

[143] See *ibid.*, 169-171 (quotation 169).

[144] King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 199.

[145] For the reference, see above, ch. 1, n. 54. I note again that Olupona's comment contains several tropes that have been problematized by McCutcheon and other critics of the discourse on *sui generis* religion, especially the statement regarding "the universality of religious systems of belief across the globe". However I pass over these issue now and simply point to McCutcheon's works already cited. See also more recently William Arnal

This complaint articulates precisely the problem I have been attempting to highlight in this chapter, namely the great-traditions-centrism of the world religions paradigm and the way in which it reflects the geopolitical power structures of the preceding five centuries of European global expansion. Even though the paradigm is an ostensibly pluralized structure with no hierarchy, a silent economy of privilege is actually at play in which "world" religions are considered (in Cantwell Smith's words) as "religion's highest and truest development". Again, Olupona's complaint is particularly instructive because of the way it foregrounds the way that this assumption continues to marginalize a wide range of contemporary human communities, not just those from the archaic past.

The issues raised by Cox, King and Olupona are related to broader streams of deconstruction of western regimes of knowledge that have been underway since the 1960s. As Mary Louise Pratt describes, "In the last decades of the twentieth century, processes of decolonization opened the meaning-making powers of empire to scrutiny, as part of a large-scale effort to decolonize knowledge, history, and human relations".[146] Postcolonial theory has especially focused on the "meaning-making powers" of western discourse, i.e. the diffuse systems of representation through which images of the Other have been constructed, as well as how these representations have functioned in the dialectic of knowledge and power. Although it took some time for these concerns to receive serious attention in the field of religious studies (dominated as it was in the twentieth century by the theory-averse phenomenological approach), this critical agenda has now been well established in the discipline and is becoming increasingly visible.

& Russell McCutcheon, *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[146] Pratt, M-L., *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 2008 [1992]), 3. Richard King's *Orientalism and Religion* is a good discipline-specific example of the project Pratt describes.

As Tim Murphy has demonstrated in by far the most thorough postcolonial reading of the history of religions enterprise, "the structures of the discourse of the phenomenology of religion are remarkably similar to the system of colonial representations as described by postcolonial theory".[147] He further contends that

> This narrative of Religious Studies [i.e. the pluralistic essentialist one] breaks down when viewed from the perspective of postcolonial theory: the phenomenologists of religion, it turns out, are engaged in the symbolic cultural subordination of peoples of color by their metaphysical, teleological, and taxonomic views—unwittingly, in most cases I would add, but not all.[148]

This is a good comment to bring the focus back to Hick, because it captures two separate issues: (1) the fact that the modern paradigm of "world religions" is underpinned by Eurocentric discourses that have their root in colonialist systems of representation; but (2) that these assumptions are usually replicated "unwittingly" by most scholars. It is important to recall that aside from the specific argument that Hick makes, the ethos animating his work is a thoroughgoing rejection of all forms of Christian triumphalism and all forms of racism. This is the ethos of theological pluralism and the world religions paradigm at large. The fact that this paradigm is so deeply implicated in the intellectual formations that it seeks to cast off is therefore surely problematic – morally problematic, because of its complicity in the reproduction of colonial discourse; and methodologically problematic, because the key assumptions about cultural difference on which it is predicated are now incommensurable with contemporary historiographical standards. These new standards will be discussed more fully in the final chapter; but first it is time to demonstrate how these problems play out in Hick's argument.

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[147] Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 59.

[148] *Ibid.*

Chapter 4

**From Hegel to Hick: Pluralism and the Problem of the Axial Age**

The previous chapter has established the broad character of the world religions paradigm, which provided the organizational logic for the treatment of comparative religion in the twentieth century. It was primarily concerned to demonstrate the way in which the paradigm operated with a hierarchal relation between world religions and non-world religions – religions variously called "primitive", "savage", "natural", "national", and more recently, "indigenous". It further attempted to show the way in which this paradigm had been historically constituted to focus almost exclusively on the major civilizational religions, with the consequence that small-scale traditions were almost invariably excluded from major treatments of religious history, instead being left to anthropology and other disciplines. And when they *were* included in global treatments of religion, for example in introductory textbooks, they were lumped together as one generic phenomenon while the world religions were subjected to detailed and sophisticated differentiation.[1] I noted the point at which Hick can be situated in this trajectory, namely occupying a position that built explicitly upon the program of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, one of the principal architects of the twentieth-century world religions model. The analysis in that chapter already goes a long way to explaining why Hick's theory – which purportedly set out to incorporate the "experience and thought of the whole human race" – in fact only concerned itself with the "great faiths of mankind" and therefore perpetuated the racist cultural hierarchies of the nineteenth century, but without him ever realizing it.

This chapter returns to Hick with these concerns in mind, and subjects his argument to a more critical reading than the exposition offered in Chapter 2. In particular, I want to

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[1] I note again on this issue James Lewis' excellent article, "Images of Traditional African Religion in Surveys of World Religions", *Religion* 20 (1990): 311-322. See n. 52 below.

focus on the way that Hick uses the Axial Age as the central historical narrative underpinning his theory, not only because this aspect of his argument has not been sufficiently dealt with in the critical literature to date, but because it is here that his replication of nineteenth-century discourses is most clear. In other words, the aim of this chapter is to amplify the subtext of Hick's argument in order to show that there exist a number of major problems with his reading of religious history, ones that effectively undermine his entire position.

The discussion begins by examining Jaspers' original formulation of the Axial Age, discussing (a) what Jaspers meant by the idea, (b) how it was grounded in a Hegelian reading of world history, and then (c) how it was adopted by Hick without any substantive changes. The following section demonstrates the way in which the hierarchal logic of the Axial Age paradigm plays out in *An Interpretation of Religion*, identifying six standard tropes of colonial discourse that structure Hick's view of religious history. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the degree to which this undercuts the entire program Hick was advocating. Once this is in focus, I reflect on the question of *why* Hick wound up in this contradictory tangle, suggesting that he only construes religious history in this way because of the logic of his discourse, not because he is actually racist himself. As discussed earlier, this still leaves open the important question of how else to explain the cultural transformations of the 1st millennium BCE, but this will be the focus of the following chapter.

*From Hegel to Hick: A Brief Genealogy of the Axial Age*

Writing as of a philosopher of history, Karl Jaspers posited the existence of an "axis" in world history. He said that "This axis would be situated at the point in history which gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be, the point most

overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity".[2] On Jaspers' reading, "It would seem that this axis of history is to be found around 500 BC, in the spiritual processes that occurred between 800 and 200 BC. It is there that we meet the most deepcut dividing line in history … For short we may style this the 'Axial Period' [*die Achsenzeit*]".[3] His first comments under the heading "Characterization [*Charakteristik*] of the Axial Period" run as follows:

> The most extraordinary events are concentrated in this period. Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being, including those of Mo-ti, Chuang-tse, Lieh-tsu and a host of others; India produced the Upanishads and Buddha and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to scepticism, to materialism, sophism and nihilism; in Iran Zarathrusta taught a challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance, from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of Homer, of the philosophers – Parmenides, Heraclitus and Plato – of the tragedians, Thucydides and Archimedes. Everything implied by these names developed during these few centuries almost simultaneously in China, India, and the West, *without any one of these regions knowing of the other*.[4]

Attention is drawn to the final words of this comment in order to highlight a fundamental aspect of Jaspers' thought about this period: namely that it was the *independent* emergence of the various "axial" moments that proved this period to be "the manifestation of some profound common element, the one primal source of humanity" rather than a mere "historical coincidence". Jaspers is at pains to emphasize this point.[5]

The Axial Age narrative was also directed explicitly against Christian and occidentalist readings of world history, such as those of Hegel and Leopold von Ranke, and was intended to foster what his biographer describes as "an open attitude to spirituality", an

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[2] Jaspers, K., *On the Origin and Goal of History* (trans. M. Bullock; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 1.

[3] *Ibid.* The German terms have been provided from the original edition of the work, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zurich: Artemis, 1949).

[4] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 2 (italics added).

[5] *Ibid.*, 12. See 11-13 for Jaspers' comments on the parallelism of the events.

attitude that dovetailed with Jaspers' political liberalism.[6] It is also worth emphasizing again the specific context in which he put forth the thesis concerning the Axial Age – namely in the immediate aftermath of WWII:

> After experiencing totalitarianism in Germany, Jaspers' emphasis on the ancient sources of mankind's civilization was an attempt to discover in the dim and nebulous past an even deeper revival of the original openness that he applauded during the 'axial' period when tolerance seemed to be captured in a kind of Golden Age, with the parallel awakening of the world's religions.[7]

But to scrutinize Jaspers' characterization of the Axial Age properly, especially the distinction between "axial" and "pre-axial" cultures, it is essential to understand the conceptual background he was working against. Although there were a number of significant influences, the key figure underpinning this view of history is Hegel. As such, in order to understand how Jaspers (and thus Hick) viewed the events of the 1st millennium BCE, it is necessary to provide a short overview of Hegel's influential understanding of world history. Only once this is in place will it be possible to see the ways in which Jaspers departed from Hegel – but also the ways in which he reproduced the Hegelian paradigm to a very strong degree.[8]

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[6] Kirkbright, S., *Karl Jaspers: A Biography: Navigations in Truth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 210. I do not discuss Jaspers' wider life in dissertation, although Kirkbright's biography situates his work nicely in relation to the events of his time. See also *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings* (ed. E. Ehrlich, L. H. Ehrlich, & G. B. Pepper; Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1986) for a contextualization of Jaspers' various commitments and arguments.

[7] Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers*, 213. Kirkbright provides further useful contextualization: "To read the Bible in Hitler's Germany had been an act of verification about the hardship of surviving the inhuman force of a brutal régime. In that turmoil, Gertrud and Karl Jaspers [who were confined to a single residence in Heidelberg for their security during the hardest years of the war] found inner peace in the Old Testament prophet, Jeramiah, in the Book of Job, and in Gospel teachings. Jaspers now discussed their Bible reading as a striving for inner redemption that was to be set apart from the complex theological question of interpreting the authority that the texts revealed" (202).

[8] As noted in Chapter 1, I make no pretentions towards an exhaustive treatment of Hegel, nor even of Hegel's philosophy of history. My understanding of his influence on both Jaspers' and the wider European study of religion has been informed primarily by three works: Tim Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010); Shawn Kelly, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2002); and the volume *Hegel and History* (ed. W. Dudley; Albany: SUNY Press, 2009). The only other work I will cite at present is Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford:

For Hegel, "history" is not everything that has happened, but is rather everything that has played a part in the actualization of freedom. Michael Inwood describes the "core notion" of Hegel's use of freedom (*Freiheit*) as follows: "something, especially a person, is free if, and only if, it is independent and self-determining, not determined by or dependent upon something other than itself".[9] The desire for freedom, Hegel argues, is the constitutive feature of humanity, and that all humans therefore seek to establish the conditions in which they can be free. Over the course of time, freedom has been understood in various ways by various peoples, who have thus produced a variety of cultures. As Will Dudely summarizes,

> Hegel attempts to make sense of this cultural variety by ordering the possible understandings of freedom from the least to the most adequate, from those that grasp the truth only partially (or abstractly) to those that grasp it most fully (or concretely). He then identifies cultures that have actualized these understandings of freedom in their legal, moral, social, economic, political, aesthetic, religious, and philosophical endeavors. Hegel employs the resulting mapping of cultures onto understandings of freedom to define historical epochs. These epochs, he concludes, are constitutive of the historical process through which human beings have gradually come to understand the freedom that is their own defining characteristic, and in so doing have been able to achieve an increasingly complete liberation.[10]

This process of historical development (*Entwicklung*) is underpinned by Hegel's famous notion of *Geist* – variously rendered in English as "Spirit" or "reason".[11] In Hegel's system, *Geist* is the transcendental force that pervades and structures history. He calls it "the law of the world".[12] It is *in* and *through* the progressive self-revelation of *Geist* that history is propelled toward its goal, *viz.* the actualization of freedom. The self-revelation of *Geist* is, in

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Blackwell, 1992), which I have found particularly useful in coming to grips with Hegel's obfuscating vocabulary.

[9] Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, 110 (s.v. "freedom").

[10] Dudley, W., "Introduction" in *Hegel and History*, 1-12, here 2.

[11] On *Geist*, see Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, s.v. "spirit" (274-277). Cf. also the discussion of Tiele and *Entwicklung* above in Chapter 3.

[12] See Kelly, *Racializing Jesus*, 40.

effect, the self-*realization* of *Geist*. Therefore *Geist* has manifested itself most fully in those cultures which have attained the highest levels of self-reflexivity and creative philosophical thinking.[13]

Recall that Hegel is interested in ordering the actualizations of freedom as these have occurred in various cultures throughout time, from the least to the most adequate. Dudley thus continues that:

> The agents of reason, those whose deeds do the most to further the actualization of freedom, Hegel calls "world historical" individuals and peoples. In the course of time, they have inspired and lead humanity to fulfill its potential for self-determination. Hegel traces the path of this fulfillment from East to West, asserting that the consciousness of freedom and its objectification in the world first appeared in Asia and then spread to Europe, intensifying in ancient Greece before culminating in modern Germany.[14]

This is what Shawn Kelly calls "the myth of the west", which takes the following narrative form.[15] Hegel divides world history into four stages: (1) the Oriental; (2) the Greek; (3) the Roman; and (4) the Germanic. The first stage, which Hegel calls "the childhood of history", begins in China, moving westward through India and then the Near East.[16] In a statement from his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, which Hegel repeats throughout his corpus, he says: "Orientals do not yet know that Spirit—Man as such—is free. And because they do not know it, they are not free", going on to assert in the vein of classical Orientalism that they instead have only despotic culture and are marked by servility and sensuality (a view

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[13] I pass over the complex trinitarian dialectic that Hegel posited for the *Entwicklung* of *Geist*, noting in what follows only the basic details. For good treatments of Hegel's system, see Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 69-82; and Kelly, *Racializing Jesus*, 33-63.

[14] Dudley, "Introduction", 3.

[15] See Kelly, *Racializing Jesus*, 42ff. Kelly provides a detailed discussion of the way that Greek thought in particular was venerated by Hegel and other nineteenth-century figures involved in discourses of aesthetic nationalism. His critique is strongly influenced by Martin Bernal's provocative work, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987). I pass over these issues here, although they would be important to consider in a more detailed study of Jaspers' valorization of Greek thought.

[16] See Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 75ff. The quotation is from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1833).

which, as seen in the previous chapter, had been already codified into European scientific knowledge with Linnaeus).

Hegel then evaluates the following three stages:

> The consciousness of freedom first arose amongst the Greeks, and therefore they were free; but they, like the Romans, knew only that a few are free, and not man as such … Therefore the Greeks not only had slaves to whom their lives and their beautiful freedom was tied, but their freedom was itself only an accidental or contingent, undeveloped, passing and limited flower, involving a harsh servitude of the human and humanitarian sentiments. Only the Germanic nations have in and through Christianity achieved the consciousness that man *qua* man is free, and that freedom of the spirit [*die Frieheit des Geistes*] constitutes his very nature.[17]

For Hegel, the trajectory of world history thus followed the path of the sun, although with one crucial difference:

> The history of the world travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning … [But] although the Earth forms a sphere, History performs no circle round it, but has on the contrary a determinate East, viz., Asia. Here rises the outward physical sun, and in the West it sinks down: here constantaneously rises the sun of self-consciousness, which diffuses a nobler brilliance.[18]

This captures *in nuce* the teleological structure of the Hegelian metanarrative. Modern Europe – which is to say Enlightened, Protestant, Germanic Europe – triumphantly represents the culmination of history and the apex of Man.

As is clear, this view of history is thoroughly grounded in the nineteenth-century *Volk* theory that was discussed in the previous chapter, and Hegel was a key figure in this trajectory.[19] Recall that the idea of the *Völker* was underpinned by the idea that each *Volk* had a specific, defining characteristic that was held to be their essence – such as how Orientals and Semites were static and conservative, while Aryans were dynamic and

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[17] See Kelly, *Racializaing Jesus*, 49.

[18] See Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 75.

[19] See Chapter 3, n. 69.

progressive (cf. again the Linnaean taxonomy). Recall also that within the frame of Romanticism, religion was held to be *the* quintessential reflection of the essence of a *Volk*.

This means that Hegel's understanding of *religious* history is a direct analogue to the metanarrative of *Geist*. Because each religion is nothing less than the manifestation of a *Volk*'s essential character, then the trajectory of religious *Entwicklung* follows the trajectory of *Geist* – from Asia, through the Near East, Greece, Rome, and ultimately to the Protestant West. "Religion" gradually becomes more and more "authentic", "pure", "perfect", and "closer to the Absolute" as it develops dialectically with *Geist*. And because modern Europeans have attained the highest levels of self-reflexivity – which can be seen in their science, philosophy, art, and political arrangements – then Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, is the most highly developed form (or manifestation, *Erscheinung*) of religion. This is the basic pattern later followed by Tiele and Otto.

Having established this outline (and I stress that it is no more than an outline), consideration must also be given to the other major structural element that enables Hegel, and those who follow him, to conceptualize human history in this way: namely the distinction between *Geist* and *Natur* – between "spirit" and "nature". The best way of approaching this is looking at Hegel's view of "Africa", which effectively stands for any culture that falls outside the civilizational sweep of *Geist*'s trajectory. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel stated that:

> Historical movements in [Africa] … belong to the Asiatic or European world … Egypt … does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, *still involved in the conditions of mere nature*, and which had to be present here only as on the threshold of the World's History. Having eliminated this introductory element, we find ourselves for the first time on the real theatre of History.[20]

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[20] See Kelly, *Racializing Jesus*, 50 (italics added).

The story of *Geist*, which begins in Asia, is thus the story of *Geist*'s progressive emancipation from *Natur*. Kelly continues, stating that:

> Hegel's narrative has no place in it for the indigenous populations of Africa and elsewhere … His own racial convictions, which reflect the values of his day, preclude him from including the African in his narrative of the development of consciousness, rationality, and history. This is no mere oversight on his part, no accidental omission … Hegel chose to expel Africa from his narrative … because he, like virtually all of his contemporaries … did not credit Africans fully with humanity, rationality, civilization, or history. The Orient may represent an early stage in the process of civilization, but Africa and its descendants reside outside of civilization entirely.[21]

In his detailed exposition of the Hegelian paradigm, Tim Murphy has spelled out the implications of this view:

> "History" is a history of human beings forming the state, or an objective rational structure, and moving toward the self-conscious realization of freedom. As such, there is an "inside" and an "outside" to history: some people are "in" history and some lack the sufficient development of *Geist* to contribute to the progressive realization of history and so are not "in" history … The taxonomic distinction between "ethnographic" studies of peoples "who have no history" and "history" as peoples who have formed a civilization is a direct reflection of this conception of history – which is predicated on a *qualitative* distinction between *Geist* and *Natur*. This is an idea, formulated in different ways, that runs throughout the discourse of the phenomenology of religion.[22]

The fact that this metanarrative was constitutive of the discourse on religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was made clear in the last chapter: it is evident in Tiele's affirmation that "there is nowhere in the whole history of the development of religion so distinct a cleavage, so sharp a demarcation, as between what we have called *the nature and the ethical religions*", and this distinction remained in place even deep into the twentieth century on account of the sharp methodological demarcation between philology (the study of historical religions) and anthropology (the study of nature religions). Murphy continues:

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[21] *Ibid.*, 51.

[22] Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 80.

one of the heinous outcomes of … the structural relation between Nature and Spirit becomes evident when it is applied to human beings, some of whom are classified as *Naturvölker*, while the correlation between *Kultur* and *objektiv[er] Geist* is elevated to both a methodological and a metaphysical principle. The result is that 'civilized' peoples are inherently free [even if in different gradations], while *Naturvölker*, like Nature/Matter itself, are inherently dependent, having their *telos* and purpose outside of themselves. This, of course, is a legitimation for the colonization and subordination of the latter by the former. [23]

Murphy is emphatic about the way in which the opposition between *Geist* and *Natur* "is used as a qualitative and normative differentiation between human beings of different cultures and different historical periods".[24] Hegel characterizes those in whom *Geist* is insufficiently developed as "wild", "barbarous", "unfree", superstitious", and "fearful", grouping all of these peoples under the rubric of *Naturvölker*, the lowest level of humanity, who stand outside reason, Spirit, and the sweep of history. As Murphy notes with regard to the continued prevalence of this idea:

This metanarrative is the structural principle for Hegel's history of religion, a structure that has so influenced the constitution of the idea of "world religions" that many textbooks on the subject in the twenty-first century still implicitly follow this basic pattern.[25]

Murphy's comment is clearly confirmed by the discussion of the previous chapter. But before coming to what Jaspers does with this way of thinking, I want to close the treatment of Hegel by summarizing these problems from the perspective of postcolonial theory. A good way to do this is to consider Rudolf Otto. Although Otto was appropriated and popularized by phenomenologists such as Eliade, who operated with a synchronic notion of the sacred and thus made "the Holy" seem like a non-developmental concept, Murphy demonstrates that Otto's narrative of religious history is quintessentially Hegelian, and that

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[23] *Ibid.*, 13.

[24] Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 85.

[25] *Ibid.*, 86. See again Lewis, "Images of Traditional African Religion in Surveys of World Religions".

it thus "conforms nearly perfectly with the structures of colonial discourse as this has been discussed and analyzed by theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Edward Said".[26] He provides some firm but appropriate critique:

> A poststructuralist-postcolonial reading of Otto allows us to translate his abstract, metaphysical dichotomies, such as *a priori/a posteriori*, Spirit/Nature, sense/reason, into a kind of veiled speech about historically real social groups: Indians, Chinese, Africans, Native Americans and so forth. … [Now,] If the matter were merely academic, or a matter of an abstract system of concepts, this would be one thing. However, applied to real human groups as Otto does, the metanarrative of *Geist*, whether articulated diachronically or synchronically, is simply and factually a narrative of the *supremacy* – Otto's term, not mine – of white, Christian Europe over black, 'primitive' Africa and a movement away from brown or yellow 'despotic' Asia. It moves *from* the South *to* the North; *away* from the East *to* the West. It moves out of Asia, through Greece and into the heart of Europe. It moves away from 'nature' to 'spirit'; out of bondage to freedom, it transcends 'law' and culminates in 'love', and goes beyond 'sensualism' to 'pure reason'. And this narrative, this metaphysics [of peoples] … works thus whether or not its 'articulator' is 'personally' racist or prejudiced, whether or not they are, in any sense of the terms, 'liberal' or conservative, whether or not they are believers or atheists, whether or not they consider themselves theologians or historians, whether or not they praise Hegel or damn him … This is a racist, colonialist discursive structure, more virulent at times, less at others admittedly, but racist nonetheless. It professes a universalism; but, in the end, time and again, uses that very same universalism to marginalize the already marginal and denigrate the already denigrated in the silent-so-all-the-more-insidious constant reiteration of its logocentric, Eurocentric, and Christocentric colonialist hegemony. When its core, constitutive, structural oppositions are unmasked, it is seen to be the vicious, self-aggrandizing, and monstrously narcissistic ideological formation that it is, not only potentially heinous in its practical effects, but also, from a scientific point of view, patently false.[27]

It is precisely this sort of arrogant western triumphalism that Jaspers tries to move beyond when he comes to write *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. This is made clear on the very first page of the work:

> In the Western World the philosophy of history was founded on the Christian faith. In a grandiose sequence of works ranging from St. Augustine to Hegel this faith visualised

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[26] Murphy, T., "*Religionswissenschaft* as Colonialist Discourse: The Case of Rudolf Otto", *Temenos* 43 (2007): 7-27, here 7. This article is an earlier version of chapter 6 of *The Politics of Spirit*. It has been reworked with only minor changes, but the following long quotation packs more punch in the article.

[27] Murphy, "*Religionswissenschaft* as Colonialist Discourse", 25-6. Murphy is also scathing about the still dominant tendency in religious studies to "valorize Otto and even depoliticize him", noting in particular the recent study of Melissa Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1997). See *The Politics of Spirit*, 178.

the movement of God through history. God's acts of revelation represent the decisive dividing line.

> … But the Christian faith is only one faith, not the faith of mankind. This view of universal history therefore suffers from the defect that it can only be valid for believing Christians.[28]

Jaspers continues by saying, specifically with reference to Hegel, that his own view of history does not hold to the notion of progressive stages of development:

> Our thesis involves something altogether different. It is precisely this series of stages from China to Greece whose reality we deny; there is no such series, either in time or in meaning. The true situation was rather on of contemporaneous, side by side existence without contact.[29]

As noted above, this fact was crucial for Jaspers, because the independent nature of the various axial moments was not only proof of the fundamental unity of the human spirit, but the similarity of insights about the human condition delivered by the axial prophets and philosophers had established the basis for genuine cross-cultural, supranational communication – something that was of especial relevance in the years after the Second World War.[30]

Jaspers did consider himself a Christian, but an extremely liberal one; and although pluralist language had not yet crystallized, Jaspers' form of faith is effectively that of pluralist orthodoxy. Consider the following comment:

> The claim to excessive possession of truth, that tool of fanaticism, of human arrogance and self-deception through the will to power, that disaster for the West – most especially so in its secularized forms, such as the dogmatic philosophies and the so-called scientific ideologies – can be vanquished by the very fact that God has manifested himself historically in several fashions and has opened up many ways towards Himself.[31]

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[28] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 1.

[29] *Ibid.*, 10.

[30] See Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers*, 337f., n. 23.

[31] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 19-20. A good snapshot into Jaspers' perspective on Christianity can be found in the fascinating exhange between him and Rudolf Bultmann published in *Myth and Christianity: An Enquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth* (trans. N. Guterman; New York: Noonday, 1954). The German

Jaspers even pronounces the chief pluralist dogma: "That which binds all men together …
cannot be revelation but must be experience."[32] It is this orientation that makes him so
appealing to Hick.

A final salient point of difference between Hegel and Jaspers was the greater mass
of information at Jaspers' disposal with which to evaluate and compare the cultures of the
ancient world. Hegel was writing in the early stages of the Oriental Renaissance, when
knowledge of the religious and philosophical thought of Eastern cultures was still highly
limited. By contrast, Jaspers was able to draw on more than a century of rich comparative
studies, none being more important than those of Max Weber, whose broadly pluralistic
treatment of the *Weltreligionen* provided much of the empirical base for Jaspers'
understanding of comparative religious history (something which also explains Jaspers' total
lack of focus on non-world religions, again reflecting the consequences of the divide
between history and anthropology).[33]

Yet while it is easy to see Jaspers' pluralism on display through the pages of his
work, shining through in equal measure is his strongly Hegelian sense of what counts as
"history". To highlight this, below are some of the other ways in which Jaspers describes
the events of the 1st millennium BCE. Immediately following his first comments on the
*Charakteristik* of the Axial Age (cited above), he continues thus:

> What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes
> conscious of his Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the
> terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face
> with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his

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title of the work, *Der Frage der Entmythologisierung*, shows the link to Bultmann's famous agenda of
"demythologizing" the New Testament.

[32] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History,* 19.

[33] See above, ch. 3, n. 116. See also Chapter 1 on Jaspers' veneration of Weber more generally (n. 83).

limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence.

*All this took place in reflection. Consciousness became once more conscious of itself, thinking became its own object.*

The *Mythical Age*, with its tranquility and self-evidence, was at an end. The Greek, Indian, and Chinese philosophers were unmythical in their decisive insights, as were the prophets in their ideas of God. Rationality and rationally clarified experience launched a struggle against the myth (*logos* against *mythos*); a further struggle developed for the transcendence of the One God against non-existent demons, and finally an ethical rebellion took place against the unreal figures of the gods. Religion was rendered ethical, and the majesty of the deity thereby increased.[34]

Jaspers continues by saying that "For the first time *philosophers* appeared", and stressed that this represents the emergence of speculative, critical thought – the point at which the unquestioned self-evidency of the world was lost and humanity began to ask "radical questions" (something emphasized in Arnaldo Momigliano's subsequent description of the period as "the age of criticism").[35] Jaspers even describes pre-axial cultures (including those of Babylon and Egypt) as "appear[ing] in some manner unawakened", saying that

Measured against the lucid humanity of the Axial period, a strange veil seems to lie over the most ancient cultures preceding it, as though man had not yet really come to himself.[36]

He even asserts in quite Hegelian fashion that "This overall modification of humanity may be termed *spiritualization*". And in what is probably his most memorable formulation of the Axial Age, he states that in the Axial Age "Man, as we know him today, came into being" – a sentiment he echoes later when saying that "only with the beginning of history did man become truly human". [37] While it would be easy to continue, this much makes clear that

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[34] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 2-3 (italics added in the first paragraph).

[35] Momigliano, A., *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 9.

[36] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 6-7.

[37] *Ibid.*, 3, 1, 47.

Jaspers shared Hegel's conviction that history begins with civilizational culture, and that the birth of history equates to the birth of self-reflexive thought.

Before moving to Hick, let me summarize the nature of the Axial Age narrative as presented by Jaspers. To put it succinctly, *Jaspers pluralizes the Hegelian version of world history without altering its fundamental structure*. He actively repudiates the Eurocentric and Christian-triumphalist structure of Hegelian thought, particularly the notion that there has been a developmental progression from China to Europe. But beyond this, Jaspers is a quite orthodox Hegelian. In effect, Jaspers is saying that there are no stages of *Geist*, because *Geist* manifested itself in the Axial Age once and for all. Thus he still accepts a fundamental dividing line between history and prehistory, and held the standard view that "History extends as far back as linguistic [i.e. written] evidence … History has therefore lasted about 5000 years" (with the implication that "man as such" has only existed for the same time).[38] Africa still resides outside of the historical process, and all non-civilizational peoples are still involved "in the conditions of mere nature", unable to contribute to the progress of *Geist*.

Jaspers thus follows precisely the structure of textocentric historiography that underlies not just the world religions paradigm, but the entire historiographical tradition of Euro-American scholarship. That textocentrism is, in turn, grounded in the aggressive Eurocentric race theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was one of the most important conceptual ballasts in the justification of European colonial expansion. While in many respects it is not surprising that Jaspers thought in these terms – this was simply the view at the time, even for sophisticated academic professionals with a liberal

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[38] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 28. It is worth noting here that, unlike Hegel, Jaspers was aware that the world was millions of years old, and that a long process of biological evolution had taken place (even though he stresses that the axial shift is more than a matter of biology). What is particularly interesting here is the way that Jaspers thus represents a point in time at which the broadscale understanding of human and cosmological history had become well instituted in western *scientific* discourse, but when *historiographical* paradigms had not yet transformed much from the days of Hegel. As discussed in Chapter 5, only in recent decades has western historical discourse begun to move beyond the documentary paradigm of history.

orientation – the problem is that these ideas still play a significant role in the discourse on religion even into the present day.


<div align="center">*Amplifying the Subtext: Beneath the Positive Affirmations of Pluralism*</div>

The discussion up to this stage leaves things well placed to finally demonstrate the major point of this dissertation: the way in which Hick's explicitly anti-racist and egalitarian reading of history still remains heavily structured by racially-grounded, Eurocentric tropes about cultural difference. Much of this critique has already been implied in the discussion of Hegel and Jaspers, as well as in the previous chapter. But I now want to be explicit about the problems with Hick's argument when focus is placed upon the Axial Age narrative.

Hick adopts the idea of the Axial Age from Jaspers almost wholesale, although he does give it a more theological inflection in comparison to Jaspers' more traditionally philosophical view of the period. As discussed earlier, for Hick the Axial Age is the moment which sees the transition "from archaic religion to the religions of salvation and liberation". Like Jaspers, Hick emphasizes that whereas the culture of pre-axial peoples is that of unquestioning world acceptance, the primary characteristic of the post-axial cultures is a new focus on "transcendence", and the corresponding vision of a "limitlessly better future".

It is important to note that Hick seems to have a sense of the problems I have been describing. Early in *An Interpretation of Religion* he says:

> Before turning to the post-axial forms of religion … may I remind the reader that no religious stigma should be attached to the term 'archaic'. It is not implied that it is better, from a religious point of view, to be literate rather than pre-literate, or to live within a contemporary rather than a now extinct way of life.[39]

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[39] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 28.

Yet unfortunately, this sentiment has not penetrated Hick's thinking in any meaningful way. Let me demonstrate the superficiality of this concession by first revisiting the comment from 1980 discussed in Chapter 1, which I repeat here:

> We may say of the early twilight period that men had, in virtue of the natural religious tendency of their nature, a dim and crude sense of the Eternal One, an awareness which took what are, from our perspective as Jews or as Christians, at best childish and at worst appallingly brutal and bloodthirsty forms, but which nevertheless constituted the womb out of which the higher religions were to be born. Here, I would say, there was more human projection than divine disclosure. … There was at this stage no startlingly challenging impact of the Eternal One upon the human spirit, but rather that minimum presence and pressure which was to provide a basis for positive moments of revelation when mankind was ready for them.[40]

This follows precisely the logic of Hegel's comment that Africa stands only upon "the threshold of world history" – it reflects Tiele's claim about the fundamental "cleavage" between textual and non-textual religions – and it echoes closely Otto's comments about the "abrupt, capricious, and desultory character of the earliest form of numinous emotion".[41] And although Hick had begun to use different language by the time of his major publication, the idea remained fundamentally the same. This is how he describes pre-axial religion in *An Interpretation of Religion*:

> Pre-axial religion has both psychological and sociological dimensions. Psychologically it is an attempt to make stable sense of life, and particularly of the basic realities of subsistence and propagation and the final boundaries of birth and death, within a meaning-bestowing framework of myth. This serves the social functions of preserving the unity of the tribe or people within a common world-view and at the same time of validating the community's claims upon the loyalty of its members. The underlying concern is conservative, a defence against chaos, meaninglessness and the breakdown of social cohesion. Religious activity is concerned to keep fragile human life on an even keel; but it is not concerned, as is post-axial religion, with its radical transformation.[42]

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[40] Hick, J., *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 44f.

[41] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 133. Other citations provided earlier.

[42] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 23.

While this may seem like a less derogatory characterization, it nevertheless restates Jaspers'

view that the Axial Age represents a *spiritualization* of religion, a world-historical "discovery

of transcendence". As evidence for this, Hick cites the characterization of Australian

Aboriginal religion by W. E. H. Stanner, saying that "for the Australian aborigines there is

'no notion of grace or redemption; no whisper of inner peace and reconcilement; no

problems of worldly life to be solved only by a consummation of history …'". [43] Hick

implies that this is characteristic of all "pre-literate forms of religion", some of which have

even "existed down to our own day in parts of Africa, the Americas, Indonesia, Australasia

and the Pacific Islands".[44] He also notes that this form of religion, which had a "basic

concern" for the "absence of change", continued in the "national religions of the ancient

world", albeit in "much more complex" ways.[45] Citing Egypt and the Near East as other

examples of the "essentially conservative, rather than revolutionary, nature of the archaic

religious outlook", he stresses that in pre-axial religion "There was no thought of

renouncing the goods of this life to realise a limitlessly better future".[46]

To appreciate the full significance of these comments, let us return to the

"Criteriological" section of *An Interpretation of Religion*, where Hick discusses the criteria for

claiming the soteriological and ethical equivalence of the great traditions. Hick states that

"Within our pluralistic hypothesis salvation/liberation is defined as the transformation of

human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness", and that behind all of the

world religions "there lies a soteriological concern". This is in contrast to the way that pre-

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[43] *Ibid.,* 24. Hick cites Stanner, W. E. H., "The Dreaming" in *Cultures of the Pacific* (ed. T. Harding & B. Wallace; New York: Free Press, 1970 [1956]).

[44] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 23.

[45] *Ibid.*, 24.

[46] *Ibid.*, 26.

axial religion is primarily about "keeping life on an even keel".[47] He can thus posit the following:

> [Because] the function of post-axial religion is to create contexts within which the transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness can take place … the basic criterion must be soteriological. Religious traditions and their various components – beliefs, modes of experience, scriptures, rituals, ethics and lifestyles, social rules and organisations – *have greater or lesser value according as they promote or hinder the salvific transformation.*[48]

The implication is clearly that because pre-axial religions do not engage in the salvific transformation, they rank qualitatively lower than the post-axial, soteriologically oriented world religions. Thus, despite Hick's concession that "no religious stigma is attached" to not belonging to one of the soteriological world religions, his entire argument is in fact predicated on a hierarchy in which "the great faiths of mankind" rank qualitatively higher than all other religions, past and present.

To demonstrate further the way in which this hierarchal structure operates, particularly with regard to small-scale oral cultures, I want to now highlight the way in which Hick's argument is based upon some of the major tropes of European discourse regarding the "primitive", non-civilizational other. Firstly, Hick conflates all pre-axial cultures throughout history as being the same – from the distant stone age right through to the present day – via a discursive mechanism that Johannes Fabian has called *allochronism*, or "the denial of coevalness". Fabian describes this as

> a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.[49]

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[47] *Ibid.*, 303, 300.

[48] *Ibid.*, 300 (italics added).

[49] Fabian, J., *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (2nd ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983]), 31ff. As described in Matti Bunzl's useful foreword to the new edition, Fabian's work had a major impact in shaping subsequent critical debates within anthropology.

This was a central feature of nineteenth-century anthropological discourse, as discussed earlier with reference to Tylor and other founders of the field – particularly the way in which they regarded even contemporary savages (usually called the "lower races") as specimens of paleolithic humanity.[50] Fabian also describes how the denial of coevalness turned from "an explicit concern" in Victorian anthropology, "into an implicit theoretical assumption" in the twentieth century.[51] As James Lewis has noted in an excellent critical article on the problems associated with the world religions paradigm from a pedagogical point of view, this trend is particularly evident in the portrayal of "African religions" in surveys of world religions, especially those in world religions textbooks.[52]

The Axial Age paradigm is, I would argue, another classic example of the allochronic tendency because of how its two chief taxonomic categories operate: post-axial religions equate to the "world religions" or "the great faiths"; pre-axial cultures are necessarily everything else. Therefore, pre-axial cultures are not only those that existed before the 1st millennium BCE, but they are all cultures in which "the axial discovery of the transcendent did not take place", including those "pre-literate" religions that Hick notes have "existed down to our own day".[53] In other words, any and all of the cultural traditions that are not members of the elite world religions group are classed as pre-axial or non-axial – even contemporary traditional, indigenous, and small-scale religions, all of which are

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[50] In addition to the discussion of Chapter 3, see also Tylor, E. B., "On The Tasmanians as Representatives of Paleolithic Man", *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 23 (1894): 141-152; and "The Philosophy of Religion among the Lower Races of Mankind", *The Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* 2 (1870): 369-381.

[51] Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 39.

[52] Lewis notes several themes that recur throughout such textbooks: "the tendency of authors to (1) emphasize sensationalistic items of information, (2) treat different religions unevenly, and (3) arrange religions into implicit evolutionary hierarchies" ("Images of Traditional African Religion in Surveys of World Religions", 313).

[53] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 23.

regarded in allochronic fashion as belonging to another time. It is precisely this sort of clumsy taxonomic logic that J. Z. Smith so penetratingly took issue with in the comments about what has "counted" as a world religion in western discourse, and the "residual" categories that have been used to lump the rest together. As noted, this problem persists even into the twenty-first century through the world religions textbook industry, where temporal conflation is still a regular feature in the often awkward treatment of "traditional religions" (recall also Murphy's comments above about the way in which the *Geist/Natur* binary still structures such textbooks).[54]

This is related to the second trope active in Hick's argument, namely the notion of *primitive stasis*. We have seen this play out in Hick and Jaspers' conception of non-historical cultures as static and immobile, and critics have long pointed out that this is another central component of European discourse about the non-European other. As such critics have also pointed out, the conception of these cultures as static – and its corollary that the west is "progressive", "dynamic" – was crucial in legitimating the European imperialist enterprise.[55] This way of thinking thus maps on seamlessly to Hegel's view that it is "historical" peoples who are the agents of reason, the agents of change, the agents of *Geist*. This is an aspect of Hegelian thinking that remains unchanged in Jaspers and Hick. Even though both of them reject the developmental logic with regard to the relation between civilizational cultures, they nevertheless view all "non-historical" cultures as trapped within the rhythms of nature and unable to instigate meaningful, dynamic change through their own agency. Perhaps they would reject this claim if faced with it explicitly, but this is the clear implication of the argument.

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[54] As Masuzawa suggests of the numerous terms that have now taken the place of "primitive" to describe small-scale oral cultures: "The restless shifting of appellations may be a measure of the discomfort felt by contemporary scholars of religion in their effort not to appear condescending to those peoples who used to be referred to as savages" (*The Invention of World Religions*, 4).

[55] On the denial of historical agency to primitive peoples in western discourse, see Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 98ff., 156-169.

Thirdly, this way of conceptualizing history means that religions and cultures are ranked in a clear *developmental, evolutionary hierarchy*.[56] The way in which this hierarchy worked was outlined in the previous chapter when discussing Tylor and the presuppositions of anthropology, as well as Tiele and the notion of development from natural religions to ethical religions. Although it is certainly a legitimate analytic question to address the differences between cultures possessing different levels of technological capacity and different forms of political organization,[57] the problem with the developmental view from a postcolonial perspective is that, using the conceptual scaffolding of allochronism, "traditional" non-urban peoples are effectively held to be fossils ("survivals", in Tylor's parlance) from a much earlier stage in human history. Jaspers even noted how any traditions that were not swept up in the transformations of the Axial Age remained "primitive" and "continued to live that unhistorical life which had been going on for tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of years".[58] Therefore, *Homo axialis* is held to be the fullest representation of what it is to be human. Everything else is *praeparatio*, not yet having entered, in Hegel's words, "the theatre of history".

Fourthly, the developmental logic has the corollary that primitive peoples (even contemporary ones, in the allochronic view) represent "the childhood of the human race". This is the trope of *infantilization*.[59] Hick uses this language in the quotation from 1980 supplied above ("at best childish forms of religion"); and even though that language is sanitized in *An Interpretation of Religion* his basic perspective remains unchanged, suggesting

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[56] See Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*; Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*; and Lewis, "Images of Traditional African Religion in Surveys of World Religions".

[57] One of the more notable recent examples of this is Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999).

[58] Jaspers, *One the Origin and Goal of History*, 7.

[59] Spurr treats this in the chapter "Naturalization: The Wilderness in Human Form" (*The Rhetoric of Empire*, 156-169).

that "the Axial Age could even be seen as the fall of humanity from a state of religious innocence".[60] As David Spurr discusses in detail, one of the primary functions of infantilization was the justification that it provided for the paternalistic intervention of the "civilizing" European powers.[61]

Fifth, the infantilization trope is also grounded in the view that non-civilizational peoples are not only childlike, but they are *irrational*.[62] In the ideology of progress, reason was active in history in the same way as *Geist*: through the channel of the world historical peoples. All those who reside outside of history, i.e. the *Naturvölker*, have therefore not developed the faculties of reason. Obviously this is linked to other tropes such as the notion of primitive stasis, which held that non-civilizational cultures remained within the conditions of mere nature and had not achieved the "breakthrough" to self-reflexive thought. Hick reproduces this idea in *An Interpretation of Religion* (recalling that, for him, the Axial Age is more of a "spiritual" than a philosophical moment), saying that while the pre-axial period did see occasional insights into the human condition, "in comparison with the new insights of the Axial Age, which have shaped so much of the religious life of humanity since, these seem like hillocks in comparison with great mountains".[63]

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[60] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 28.

[61] See Spurr's chapter "Appropriation: Inheriting the Earth" (*The Rhetoric of Empire*, 28-42).

[62] A good representative of the view that primitive thought was governed by "emotion" not "reason" is Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose work sparked debates about "primitive rationality" that survived into the late twentieth century. Without reviewing this important history, see Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. chapter 3, "Lévy-Bruhl, Durkheim and the Scientific Revolution" (63-104). See also Robert Segal, "Relativism and Rationality in the Social Sciences: A Review Essay of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *How Natives Think*", in *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays in the Confrontation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 167-180.

[63] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 35, n. 10.

The final troublesome trope reproduced in Hick's argument is what I will call *the Hobbesian dystopia* – the idea that "non-civilized" life is brutal, bloodthirsty, and unethical.[64] The feral, barbarous nature of primitive culture has been a part of the European ethnographic imagination for as long as ethnography has existed, and only intensified during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This maps onto the view, both Hegelian and Victorian, that civilization – i.e. the State, an "objective rational structure" – is necessary for the cultivation of ethics, to bring man out of his "natural" barbarous state.[65] In Jaspers' thought, this trope manifested itself in his view that through the shifts of the Axial Age, "religion was rendered ethical". For Hick, this transmutes into the fact that all post-axial religions share "the common ethical ideal", whereas pre-axial cultures were devoid of true ethics. He even describes how "the archaic images of a blood-thirsty super-power who demands human and animal sacrifices is clearly morally defective" compared to the compassionate ethics enshrined in the great traditions.[66]

The view of primitive culture as unethical has particularly important implications for Hick's classification of religions because of the role of the "ethical criterion" in his evaluative ranking of the world's religions – for he went to great lengths in arguing that "the transformation of human existence which is called salvation or liberation shows itself in its spiritual and moral fruits"; that "no one tradition stands out" as superior in this respect; and

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[64] As the classic quote runs, the lives of savages are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. The savage people in many places of America … live this day in that brutal manner" (cited in Hodgen, *Early Anthropology*, 206, n. 51).

[65] I pass over here the important counter-discourse of the so-called "noble savage", represented by figures such as Montaigne and Rousseau, whose idealized constructions of early human life served as a rhetorical foil in their contributions to social, political, and moral philosophy. See Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 125-140. See also Ter Ellington's detailed study, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[66] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 339. On the revulsion with which "primitive" cultures were often regarded, see Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent", *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 166-203. See also Spurr on the various rhetorical strategies of "debasement" that recur in colonial discourse (*The Rhetoric of Empire*, 76-91).

that the moral parity of the great traditions is demonstrated by the fact that their doctrines all embody the Golden Rule.[67] Hick is emphatic about this, saying

> It is not possible, as an unbiased judgment with which all rational persons could be expected to agree, to assert the overall moral superiority of any one of the great religious traditions of the world.[68]

But apparently, according to the logic of the argument, it *is* possible to assert the overall moral superiority of the world religions over all "national" and "natural" pre-axial religions – which we have seen Hick describe as "at best childish and at worst appallingly brutal and bloodthirsty", and whose vision of gods that demand human and animal sacrifice are "clearly morally defective".[69] As such, the logic of Hegel and much of the nineteenth century – the idea that ethics began with the "historical" religions – can still be seen in place in the late twentieth century, even in arguments that were designed to overcome the racialized structures of these discourses.

One could continue performing an inventory of colonial tropes about the non-European other that are at play in both the world religions paradigm and arguments such as Hick's. But the six tropes just detailed are a good representation of that fact. They are all interrelated, and they all intersect – e.g. primitives are unethical because they lack reason; they lack reason because they lack civilization; they lack civilization because they are static and their cultures do not change; and because they lack civilization they have no hope of moral progress, leaving them in the savage, uncultivated world of the Hobbesian dystopia.

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[67] *Ibid.*, 301.

[68] *Ibid.*, 337.

[69] A similar implication follows from the somewhat selective way in which Hick applies his perspectivist epistemology – for while he is at pains to stress that all religions are different, culturally conditioned responses to the same divine reality (in the same way that there is no hierarchy of languages), it nevertheless turns out that some culturally conditioned responses to Ultimate Reality are more equal than others.

All of this boils down to a view of the non-European other, especially the non-civilizational other, that not only justified and legitimated the paternalistic intervention of European powers, but even allowed them to construe their intervention as necessary.

It needs to be stressed that what is particularly problematic about this paradigm is not simply the fact that it is grounded in racist views of the non-civilizational other that have been used towards pernicious ends – but also, more importantly, the fact that those negative views are based on *empirically dubious assumptions about non-textual cultures*. But before justifying this claim, I want to highlight the other major problem with how Hick construes his reading of religious history – the problem of what might be called *flimsy idealism*. As demonstrated, the Axial Age is grounded in a thoroughly idealist view of history, which sees the period as the dawning not just of history, but of authentic, self-reflexive consciousness – it is the birth of *Geist*, the birth of reason, the birth of "Man as such". But this view pays absolutely no attention *whatsoever* to the material factors at play in the cultural transformations of the period. Jaspers does at least give sociological factors a brief consideration, but he quickly concludes that they "merely illuminate the facts and do not provide a causal explanation of them".[70] Hick likewise does not give any consideration to material factors, and simply makes comments such as: "in marked contrast to relatively simple world-acceptance of pre-axial religion … in the axial age the human mind began to stand back from its encompassing environment to become conscious of itself as a distinct reality with its own possibilities".[71] Because no other factors are considered, the idea is that it could be *nothing but* the dawning of authentic religious consciousness, the "breakthrough" to a vision of transcendence.

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[70] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 18.

[71] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 32.

This way of looking at history therefore pays no attention to how the "world-rejecting" character of post-axial religion might be related to new tensions between various social groups that arose within the emerging context of empire and urbanization, a context that entailed drastically different existential pressures from life in non-urban situations. Nor does it draw any attention to how the "critical", "non-mythical" character of post-axial thought might be understood differently by focusing on how the technology of writing reshaped the dynamics of intellectual activity in large urban societies, leading to radically different forms of engagement with inherited traditions.[72]

The fact that Hick pays no attention to the material causes of the Axial Age is rendered even more problematic because of the fact that he *does* pay attention to important contextual details when comparing the different character of some of the world religions – such as in his detailed examination of how the substantial differences between the New Testament and the Qur'an (particularly the much more extensive social and legal framework presented in the latter) can be attributed to the different social contexts in which the texts were produced.[73] Hick also states elsewhere when discussing the issue of modernity that

> to compare a West which has emerged from its medieval phase with an East which is now only in the throes of emerging, attributing the wealth and productivity of the one to Christianity and the poverty and economic backwardness of the other to Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, is to ignore the immensely important non-religious factors in history.[74]

But where is an awareness of "the non-religious factors of human history" when it comes to discussing the religious transformations of the 1st millennium BCE? It is a question that does not even get raised, despite Hick's concession that "the whole subject of the axial age,

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[72] See Jan Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age" in *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (ed. R. Bellah & H. Joas; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 366-407. This is one of the central points of focus in the following chapter.

[73] See *An Interpretation of Religion*, 331ff.

[74] *Ibid.*, 329.

its causes, nature and consequences, is ripe for further investigation".[75] Here, at least, Hick is correct, and Chapter 5 will explore some of the lines that this investigation might take. However a few final words are in order.

<p align="right"><em>The Discourse Made Him Do It</em></p>

When all of the subtextual implications of this form of history are brought to the foreground, Hick's argument begins to look rather less pluralistic than he intended. His theory was grounded in the belief that one had to take into account "the experience and thought of the whole human race". In both his work and his broader life, he denounced the racist legacy of European thought and fought actively against manifestations of it in the modern world. He was a proud proponent of inter-religious dialogue and inter-cultural understanding, and dedicated his life to a global vision of social justice and faith in many forms. Yet when the pluralist theory of religions is scrutinized properly, it is clearly based upon a view of religious history that has its genesis in the racist cultural hierarchies of the nineteenth century. Moreover, it is a theory that remains completely structured around forms of religiosity that developed in textual, urban cultures – i.e. the post-axial cultures – making these the normative form of religion and leaving all other cultural traditions on the periphery. While the "great traditions" may represent a majority of human beings in recent millennia, they represent a tiny minority of the ideational communities that have existed throughout human history. This represents too great a tension for someone with such a clearly stated global vision.

Why then did Hick articulate a comprehensive theory of religion that reinforced the racially-based Eurocentric narrative of world history that he was trying to overcome, a

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[75] *Ibid.*, 31.

narrative whose implications are completely counter to the ethos of his life and work? The answer I have been suggesting throughout this analysis is: *the discourse made him do it*. The intellectual formations inherited by Hick – his great-traditions-centrism, the developmental view of world history, non-civilizational cultures as static and unethical – all of these inherited formations caused him to think this way, and made his theory seem like an unproblematic and even egalitarian reading of history. This is a perfect example of how discourse works, which Foucault describes as diffuse, interlocking systems of representation that "impose on an author, without his realizing it, postulates, operational schemata, linguistic rules, [and sets] of affirmations and fundamental beliefs", and which therefore structure thought below the level of explicit awareness.[76]

To emphasize this, I pose the question: Would Hick, a man deeply committed to inter-religious dialogue, have made the same comment about the childish and bloodthirsty nature of pre-axial religions – would he have given that same reading of history – had he been speaking to an audience of indigenous Australians? It is an open question, but I suspect that he would be following many other contemporary pluralists who are now championing the cause of indigenous religions. I refer again to the example of Huston Smith that was discussed earlier – and this is a good point to at which to elaborate Smith's comments a little, because they effectively confirm my contention about why Hick articulated ideas so contrary to the broader message he was advocating.

In discussing his appearance at the 1999 World's Parliament of Religions with the American Indian delegation, Smith said

> The Parliament vividly brought back to me a string of memories relating to my discovery of the place of Native Americans (and through them indigenous religions generally) in the history of religions. The discovery took place during the 1970s, the decade when I taught at Syracuse University, in upstate New York. When I accepted

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[76] Foucault, M., *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith; New York: Pantheon Book, 1972), 150.

the invitation to teach there I didn't even know that the Onondaga Reservation is only five miles from the university. As the decade progressed, I found myself spending more and more of my weekends hanging out with the chiefs. Up until then I had dismissed the whole family of indigenous religions—namely, the tribal and the oral— as unimportant.[77]

After recounting a number of specific encounters that caused him to revise his old perspectives on oral cultures, Smith explains that

these moments, along with innumerable others, were major factors in inducing me to bring out a second edition of my book *The World's Religions*. So thirty-five years after the first edition had appeared, I added a chapter about the primal religions, making it eight, instead of seven, religions covered in the book [notice the allochronic principle here]. There are still other important religions, such as Sikhism and Shinto, not included, but I didn't want to make the book just a catalog. I wanted to provide space to go more deeply. I knew I had to do that because the religions I had dealt with in the first edition were all part of the field we call "historical religions," which have sacred text and histories recorded in writing. But these religions are only the tip of the iceberg. They are only about four thousand years old, whereas the primal, tribal, oral religions can be traced back archeologically into the twilight zone of prehistory, perhaps forty or fifty thousand years ago. To omit them from the first edition of my book was inexcusable, and I am glad I will not go to my grave with that mistake uncorrected. The added chapter honors the primal religions as fully equal to the historical ones.[78]

I leave to the side for now Smith's allochronic conflation of all indigenous religion as "primal" religion, and also the way in which his declaration that primal religions are "fully equal" to historical religions is an assertion made without any historical or theoretical justification. These issues will be revisited in the Conclusion.

Instead, I want to focus on a comment that has salience with regard to Hick and my contention that the discourse made him do it. The comment comes when Smith reflects on *why* he formerly dismissed indigenous religions as unimportant:

I blame my teachers for this, for they dismissed them. After all, they said, they can't (or until recently couldn't) even write, so what did they know? I was young and

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[77] Smith, *A Seat At The Table: Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 2.

[78] *Ibid.*, 4.

impressionable. I simply accepted what they said until my Onondaga friends set me straight, and I will never be able to adequately repay the gift they gave me.

… I was taught that tribal religions were "primitive," with a pejorative [*sic*] built solidly into that word. I went into the first fifty-five years of my teaching with that prejudice instilled in me. Students are young and impressionable; they just believe what their teachers tell them. Great danger! I might have stayed in that mode if I hadn't moved to Syracuse. Those ten years in the shade of the Onondaga Reservation absolutely transformed my view of indigenous religions.[79]

This is as clear an admission as possible that Smith did not *actively* devalue oral cultures, but that *his inherited discourse was structured by these assumptions.* This is why such racially based tropes remained invisible, which is precisely the case with Hick. It is also, incidentally, another example that supports the claim I made in Chapter 1 that theological pluralism has typically been the result of actual encounters with other traditions, and that its positive affirmations are almost invariably attempts to explain a perceived *sense* of unity. In other words, Smith's positive valuation of indigenous traditions came about in the same way that Hick was led to developing the pluralistic hypothesis.

As mentioned earlier, Hick never faced the same pressure to address the question of indigenous traditions. But it seems impossible to me that, faced with comments such as those made by Huston Smith, Hick would have continued to assert that Smith was wrong, and that "primal" religions *were* in fact magical, bloodthirsty, and irrational.[80]

Yet if this is the case, then the whole Axial Age narrative breaks down, because the concession that indigenous traditions are "fully equal" with the historical traditions effectively removes the qualitative distinction between axial religions and non-axial

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[79] *Ibid.*, 2, 5. This is an interesting reversal of the traditional academic gesture of thanking others while taking full responsibility for one's conclusions, and a fascinating admission for the discourse-analyst to chew on.

[80] I have not so far discussed the term "primal" religion. Briefly, it gained currency around the 1970s as "primitive" was finally cast aside (although cf. the way it lingered into the 1960s with Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion*). It became standard until the end of the twentieth century, and appeared in textbooks, university curricula, as well as academic works. It has since been superseded by "indigenous". On this history, see Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous*, 22-26. The most recent work I am aware of to use this term in a sustained manner is Arvind Sharma, *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006). Although Sharma opens with a detailed justification for his use of the term (1-4), few scholars seem to have followed him recently. "Indigenous" is in the discursive ascendency at present.

religions. Therefore while this leaves all traditions in a position of parity, it also becomes a view that is unsupported by any historical metanarrative. In other words, whilst it is an admirable sentiment to place all religions on the same footing, this is usually done without any theoretical or historical justification, and it therefore remains fundamentally at odds with the critical standards elsewhere advocated by people such as Jaspers, Hick, and Smith.

But before closing this chapter and addressing those concerns, let me reiterate that I am not accusing Hick of racism. Rather, I am charging that his argument reproduces racist discourse, and is untenable as such. These are different accusations, and it is important to maintain a distinction. By focusing on the fact that it is the *discourse* that is the problem, a productive new set of questions arise. Most pressingly: what happens to the emplotment of the 1st millennium BCE when the key ideological and rhetorical components of the Axial Age narrative have been rejected? What kind of metanarrative might be developed that could plausibly account for their emergence in ways that are not predicated on the racist hierarchies of the nineteenth century? There is no question that the 1st millennium BCE represents a fascinating and transformative time in human history, and that it is a rich ground for comparative historical study. The problem is the way that the events of the period have traditionally been *emplotted*, i.e. within an idealist and developmental framework that is no longer tenable. It is untenable at a moral level because its representation of the non-European and non-civilizational other remains grounded in the racist tropes of the nineteenth century; and it is untenable at the methodological and empirical level because it is based upon a textocentric paradigm of historiography that operates with spurious and demonstrably false assumptions about the character of non-urban, non-textual human communities.

While my contention at the end of this dissertation will be that this problem seems insurmountable as long as one remains within the framework of theological essentialism – even if it is expanded well beyond the great-traditions-centrism of someone like Hick – this will only be possible after discussing how the 1st millennium BCE might be viewed differently using some of the new evolutionary perspectives on human history that have been developed in recent decades.

Chapter 5

**Beyond the Great Traditions:
Towards a Redescription of the Axial Age**

The main concern of this study has been to demonstrate the way that John Hick's theory of religion is grounded in a view of history that perpetuates the intellectual legacy of the nineteenth century despite his clear intention to the contrary. To recap, the main problems with the Axial Age construct are (1) that it operates with an outdated methodological divide between history and prehistory, equating "culture" and "religion" only with literate, urban societies; and (2) that it is correspondingly structured by a number of tropes regarding the non-European other that have their root in nineteenth-century race theory, in justifications of imperialism, and in other notions of European exceptionalism. These problems run counter (a) to Hick's methodological concern to include "the whole human race"; and (b) to his ethical concern to overcome the racist legacy of European thought. A further charge was that reading of history underpinning the Axial Age is guilty of what I termed "flimsy idealism", whereby material factors are neglected as agents of historical change. Jaspers even says that the period "is in the nature of a miracle, in so far as no really adequate explanation is possible within the limits of our present knowledge".[1]

Yet as indicated at the outset, the aim of this dissertation is not to be merely deconstructive. If Hick and Jaspers' reading of humanity's religious history is untenable, then surely alternative explanatory paradigms must be suggested. But throughout the last chapter, the forms of representation inherent in the Axial Age construct were simply taken for granted as problematic in relation to contemporary historiographical standards. In this chapter, I want to make clear *why* the traditional reading of the 1st millennium BCE is so problematic in relation to these standards. Not only will this allow for suggestions at the

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[1] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 18.

end of the chapter about possible ways of redescribing the transformations of the period, but the issues covered will also leave the discussion well placed to return to theological pluralism in the Conclusion and argue that not just the Axial Age, but *any* form of historical emplotment predicated on theological essentialism is almost impossible to maintain in relation to the basic facts about long-term human history that have been established in recent decades.

I work towards this goal in three sections, tracking several different trajectories that outline how the "written record" view of history has been superseded in western historical discourse since the mid-twentieth century. The first section focuses on movements in social history and critical theory that demoted written documents to merely one type of source material, including the development of discourse-analytical forms of historiography that brought to the foreground the political nature of all of narrative emplotment. The second section focuses the array of intellectual, archaeological, and scientific developments that eroded the old conceptual barrier between "history" and "prehistory" and have thus recast human history into a much larger evolutionary framework. I will be particularly concerned to highlight the new agenda of what has variously been called "big" or "deep" history, which bring these developments together in an attempt to formalize a new historiographical paradigm for treating human history in the long-term view – again, surely something that is necessary for anybody today genuinely concerned to treat "the experience and thought of the whole human race". The third section then explores developments in what I am calling "communications history", particularly focusing on scholarship that can help to reconceptualize the differences traditionally held to exist between large urban societies and smaller oral cultures. The reader is reminded that the discussion will range quite widely before returning to the Axial Age, but the final section brings focus squarely back to this question in order to make explicit why the tropes of the Axial Age are intellectually

indefensible, and to suggest some of the redescriptions of the 1st millennium BCE that are implied by this critique.

<div align="right">*The Demotion of the Document*</div>

A lot has been said in this work about the "textocentric", "documentary", or "civilizational" mode of historiography. As discussed in Chapter 3, texts were the central component of the European philological enterprise and its construction of western knowledge about non-European religions, with forms of religion that had produced written documents being regarded as qualitatively higher than those that had not – something for example reflected in the hierarchy of "ethical" religions (Müller's "aristocracy of the book religions"), over "natural" and "national" religions. Chapter 4 further showed how this played out in Karl Jaspers' conceptualization of the 1st millennium BCE, for which he used a paradigm that explicitly equated the birth of history with the birth of writing, thus perpetuating the view that religions having produced large textual corpora were more "authentic" manifestations of "religion" than the cultural products of oral societies.

Whilst Hegel represented an idealist trajectory that had a primarily philosophical orientation, a positivist current also developed in Germany that sought to cast history as a "scientific" discipline. The paragon of positivist documentary historiography was Leopold von Ranke, whose argument that history must be a discipline constituted exclusively by textual analysis was extremely influential in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[2] Ranke

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[2] In what follows I have largely employed the helpful survey of Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). On Ranke and the tradition of historical objectivism in the twentieth century, see 9-28. See also Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); and *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline* (ed. G. Iggers & J. Powell; Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

believed that the historian had to "extinguish himself" before "the facts" in order to arrive an objective, factual, and even scientific account of the past, and has long been (in)famous for his assertion that the historian's task was *bloß zu zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen* – "simply to show how it really was".[3] Whilst not all scholars in his wake were so naïve with regard to the role of interpretation in historical writing (though many of them were), virtually every professional historian who followed him agreed with the methodological dictum that "no documents, no history".[4] For Ranke, this meant that prehistory was not "real" history, and he regarded forms of history from India and China as only marginally better.[5] Rankean documentary history is thus clearly (and unsurprisingly) predicated on the same logic as Hegel, one that denied "culture" – and indeed any form of meaningful historical agency – to all societies that had not risen to sufficient levels of political, philosophical, and technological complexity. This was obviously related to the tropes discussed in the previous chapter, particularly the notion of non-civilizational stasis and the view that it was modern European cultures (with their roots in classical Greece) who were the true, dynamic "agents of history".

Whilst many of these presuppositions dominated professional historiography until well into the twentieth century (and their vestiges are by no means entirely gone even in the twenty-first), the documentary view of history received its first serious challenge with the emergence of the *Annales* school in France. Initiated by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929, the *Annalistes* adopted a macrohistorical focus that focused both on human affairs as

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[3] Ranke, L., *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations, 1494-1514* (trans. G. R. Dennis; London: G. Bell, 1915 [1824]), vii. On Ranke's "realism", see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 163-190.

[4] See Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 10. For a similar (but more polemical) discussion of Ranke and documentary history, see Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 45ff.

[5] Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 198, n. 6.

well as "deeper" phenomena shaping the flow of history, particularly environmental ones.[6] In explicit contrast to the regnant positivist view that the historian should "submit" to the documents, Febvre claimed that "There is no history; there are only historians", anticipating one of the major critical concerns of later generations.[7] The *Annalistes* also rejected what they saw as "event history" – war, politics, and the pursuits of great men – in favour of a model that was concerned with long-term social, economic, and environmental trajectories. This is what Fernard Braudel famously called *la longue durée*.[8] A final salient feature was the determined interdisciplinarity of *Annales* scholarship: unlike documentary historiography, whose domain was textual artefacts alone, the *Annalistes* drew on a wide variety of resources, from the social sciences to archaeology to the natural sciences. This was another movement that prefigured the reconstruction of the disciplinary boundaries of professional historiography in the late twentieth century.

Whilst these developments were taking place in France, Anglophone historiography underwent a similarly substantive set of transformations beginning in the 1960s. British Marxist historians began the movement by championing a form of "history from below", where the "below" was firmly centred around class struggle, power, and questions of human agency.[9] The most famous work produced in this context was E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which proved a catalyst for subsequent generations of leftist historians.[10] As feminist critique also gained pace in academic

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[6] Bloch, M. & Febvre, L., "La Vie scientifique: sur les routes de l'entr'aide", *Annales d'histoire économique et social* 9 (1937): 75-76 (cited in Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 235, n. 19).

[7] See Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 65ff.

[8] Braudel, F., "History and the Social Sciences: the *Longue Durée*" (1958; cited in Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 236, n. 27).

[9] Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 79.

[10] *Ibid.*, 80 (see 246, n. 161 for the impact of the work). See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (rev. ed.; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980 [1963]).

discourse, challenges to androcentric and textocentric modes of historiography became louder. Feminist critics called to attention, among other things, the way in which the sexism and gender hierarchies of European society had their counterpart in the near-total relegation of women from western historiographical attention. In a manner somewhat analogous to how civilizational cultures were held to be the agents of history while primitive cultures were trapped in the cycles of "mere nature", so too were men held to be the rational, guiding agents of history while women were equated with irrationality and unchanging, biological patterns.[11]

Social historians also joined the critical clamour, represented especially by works such as Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* (1982) and Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978).[12] Both Wolf and Burke were explicit about the fact that the peoples they sought to integrate into European history were the peoples who were traditionally the province of anthropology or folklorists, and that these projects "emerged from the intellectual reassessments that marked the late 1960s".[13] Wolf sums up the agenda of the times well:

> Such rethinking must transcend the customary ways of depicting Western history, and must take account of the conjoint participation of Western and non-Western peoples in this worldwide process. Most of the groups studied by anthropologists have long been caught up in the changes wrought by European expansion, and they have contributed to these changes. We can no longer be content with writing only the history of victorious elites, or with detailing the subjugation of dominated ethnic groups. Social historians and historical sociologists have shown that the common people were as much agents in the historical process as they were its victims and silent witnesses. We thus need to uncover the history of "the people without history"—the

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[11] See the detailed discussion in Josine Blok, "Sexual Asymmetry: A Historiographical Essay" in *Sexual Asymmetry: Studies in Ancient Society* (ed. J. Blok & P. Mason; Amsterdam: G. C. Gießen, 1987), 1-57.

[12] Burke, P., *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (rev. ed.; Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994 [1978]); Wolf, E., *Europe and the People without History* (2nd ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997 [1982]). Wolf in particular stands in the tradition of Marxist historiography, although he distinguishes his approach as "Marxian" rather than strictly "Marxist", wisely wishing to draw a line between "the analyst and the prophet" (xi).

[13] *Ibid.*, xvi.

active histories of "primitives," peasantries, laborers, immigrants, and besieged minorities.[14]

The intellectual reassessments of the 1960s also generated new streams of critical theory that came in the wake of French structuralism, i.e. the cluster of theoretical trends generally grouped under the rubric of post-structuralism. The most important figures, as far as historiography was concerned, were Roland Barthes, Hayden White, and Michel Foucault. Many of the early debates were about the nature of narrative in historical writing. Since Ranke, objectivist historians rejected the notion that history could be equated with literature or narrative, being instead the presentation of "facts" rather than a form of literary artifice. Since structuralism, however, thinkers like Paul Ricoeur acknowledged the important differences between history and literature, but stressed that emplotment in historical writing was nonetheless based upon the chronological and episodic form of narrative.[15] Critics further stressed that narrative was not a "neutral" form, but an always ideologically freighted device for imposing continuity on fragmentary images of the past. Barthes addressed these issues in a famous essay of 1967 called "The Discourse of History", where he critiqued the problem of historians thinking that they were innocent of interpretation, such that history "seems to be telling itself all on its own".[16]

Hayden White describes Barthes' project as "nothing less than the dismantling of the whole heritage of nineteenth-century 'realism'", something towards which White also exerted considerable effort.[17] Influenced heavily by structuralism and literary theory, White argued that every historical narrative presupposes a full-blown philosophy of history. Given

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[14] *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

[15] On "narrative and history", see Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 86-105.

[16] Barthes, R., "The Discourse of History" (1967), cited in Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 257, n. 82.

[17] *Ibid.*, 97.

the inherently fragmentary nature of source material, historians always operate with metahistorical presuppositions and varying strategies of "explanation, emplotment, and ideological implication" in order to create narratives that make sense of the fragments of the past.[18] These strategies, whether conscious or not, shape the narrative from start to finish. The historian's interpretation always involves a "web of commitments", the use of an "explanatory paradigm", and an ethical choice about how to draw out a narrative's ideological implications.[19] White thus insisted that all historical writing "entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications", and that correspondingly there is no "politically innocent historiography".[20] Frank Ankersmit offers a good summary of White's goal, one that also addresses the often-levelled charge of relativism:

> Precisely by focusing on and by problematizing the historian's language, White demonstrates not the impossibility of getting hold of past reality, but the naivete of the kind of positivist intuition customarily cherished in the discipline for how to achieve this goal.[21]

This paradigm shift towards greater representational self-reflexivity was propelled with even greater influence by Foucault. Foucault not only continued to focus on the way in which power pervaded all forms of discourse, but as Elizabeth Clark describes, his "challenge to the presumed 'naturalness' of such concepts of madness and sexuality has been of signal importance to the reconceptualization of history".[22] Foucauldian scholar Paul Rabinow provides a good articulation of the commitments that such historicization entails:

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[18] White, *Metahistory*, 431.

[19] White, H., "Interpretation in History" in *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 51-80, here 69-71.

[20] See Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 103 (262, nn. 147f.).

[21] See *Ibid.*, 101.

[22] *Ibid.*, 117.

> We need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal (this includes epistemology and economics); make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world … we must pluralize and diversity our approaches [and] avoid the error of reverse essentializing; Occidentalism is not a remedy for Orientalism.[23]

Aside from sexuality and madness, Foucault also pronounced "the death of man", by which he meant that the human sciences had never discovered a "human essence".[24] This is an important issue when considering the problems with the Axial Age idea, and I will suggest later that it can be bolstered by perspectives from the new evolutionary view of human history.

In the midst of these theoretical developments, the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1979 heralded the start of the postcolonial turn.[25] Said explicitly acknowledged his debt to Foucault's notion of discourse analysis at the start of *Orientalism*, and thereby expanded the gaze of critical theory to the rhetorical strategies employed by western discourse in its construction of the non-European other. This has led to a call similar to the one Wolf made about the peoples without history, although this time with a more global focus on the manifold groups that had been marginalized throughout western history, both politically and discursively.[26]

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[23] Cited in Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and 'The Mythic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999), 5 (219, n. 3).

[24] Foucault made these comments in a 1978 interview, translated as "Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse: Who Is a 'Negator of history'?" (see Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 116 [273, n. 99]).

[25] Said, E., *Orientalism* (2nd ed.; New York: Vintage Books, 2003 [1978]). See 3 for his debt to Foucault.

[26] Two of the more influential recent works in postcolonial studies are Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2nd ed.; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007 [2000]); and Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 2008 [1992]). See also King, *Beyond Orientalism*, 187-218.

These developments alone are enough to call the textocentric logic of the Axial Age into serious question, but there have been other important intellectual transformations in recent times that are necessary to take account of in such a critique, especially the complete reconfiguration of the notion of "prehistory" in western imagination. Colin Renfrew writes that:

> Two centuries ago, prehistory did not exist … the very notion of 'prehistory', in the sense of a broad stretch of time going back before the dawn of written history, had not been formulated. There was absolutely no notion that the human past involved tens of thousands of years of development and change.[27]

In what follows, I want to provide an outline of how that view has changed in the last two centuries, concluding with a discussion of the new intellectual paradigms of the most recent decade that have arisen to make sense of human history within the vast framework of evolutionary history.

As discussed earlier, until the mid-nineteenth century the European historical imagination was structured by a biblical perspective on the age of the world. A few major changes had taken place, especially the shift to a heliocentric cosmology and the development of a genuinely planetary consciousness that began after the fifteenth century. But regarding the reach of human history beyond written records, the very idea was inconceivable. Even Ranke's pronouncement that with no documents there could be no history was not just a denial of historical agency to non-civilizational cultures, but was grounded in the belief that the period before written history was completely unknowable.

However, archaeological finds had begun surfacing in the eighteenth century which strongly suggested that humans had at the very least existed for tens of thousands of years,

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[27] Renfrew, C., *Prehistory: The Making of the Human Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), 3.

such as the discovery by John Frere in 1797 of flint implements that were twelve feet below the ground and associated with the bones of extinct animals.[28] In the same period, geological studies had also begun to formulate the notion of a long-term, gradual environmental history that stretched far beyond the biblical framework, with James Hutton's *Theory of the Earth; or an Investigation of the Laws Observable in the Composition, Dissolution and Restoration of Land Upon the Globe* (1785) being one of the earliest works to scientifically dismiss the idea of the Deluge in favour of a model which posited a much longer process according to laws that were "natural to the globe".[29] This gradualist approach found its culmination half a century later with Charles Lyell's groundbreaking *Principles of Geology, Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface by Reference to Causes Now in Action* (1830-33), one of the first works to argue that the world was at least 300 millions years old.[30]

As discussed in Chapter 3, the year 1859 was a watershed for European views about human history. The growing archaeological record was confirming for a growing number of scholars that humans had existed for much longer than previously thought, and in that year papers were delivered to both the Royal Society and the London Society of Antiquities that argued for the "Antiquity of Man" – a view that received general acceptance, establishing what would soon be called "prehistory" as a legitimate field of intellectual inquiry.[31]

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[28] *Ibid.*, 9-10. In addition to Renfrew, a useful discussion of pre-nineteenth-century understandings of the biological history of humans, see Andre Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (trans. A. B. Berger; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993 [1964]), 6-13.

[29] Cited in Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 8.

[30] Lyell, C., *Principles of Geology, Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface by Reference to Causes Now in Action* (3 vols; London: John Murray, 1830-33). The work was a major influence on Darwin, and went through no less than 12 editions (the last published in 1875).

[31] *Ibid.*, 10. The phrase "the antiquity of man" had wide currency in the mid-nineteenth century, and appears for example in the works of Tylor, Lubbock, and Lyell. For a good summary of these developments, see Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (trans. B. Harshav; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 29-35.

In the same year came Darwin's epochal *On the Origin of Species*, which for the first time made possible a coherent narrative of human history that could be fit within the new scientific paradigm established by Lyell and Hutton – allowing that human history, just like geological history, could be explained with reference to uniform natural laws of development and change. Darwin soon followed *On the Origin of Species* with a work that explicitly dealt with the human trajectory of natural selection, namely his 1871 work *The Descent of Man*.[32]

However, Darwin was by no means the only scholar to begin rethinking the long trajectory of human history, and a new industry arose around the question. The most important work was John Lubbock's *Prehistoric Times* (the work that first popularized the term "prehistory"), which sought "to elucidate, as far as possible, the principles of prehistoric archaeology; laying special stress upon the indications which it affords of the conditions of man in primeval times".[33] Similar works were also produced shortly thereafter, two of the most notable being E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* and Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*, whose importance was also documented in Chapter 3. Whilst all of these works had an almost exclusively European focus and posited a far-too-linear model of the trajectory from savagery, through barbarism, to civilization, they nevertheless completely recast the study of human history – which now included theoretically the entirety of the species, past and present, rather than simply urban cultures that had produced written

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[32] Darwin, C., *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1859); and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871). Darwin was given a copy of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* by the captain of the *Beagle*. It formed the basis for his thoughts about biological evolution, and he famously described how he saw the earth "through Lyell's eyes" on his global journeys. See Janet Brown, *Charles Darwin: A Biography. Volume 1: Voyaging* (2 vols; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995-2003), 1: 183-190.

[33] Lubbock, J., *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1865), vi. This was also one of the first works to split the deep human past into "paleolithic" and "neolithic" stages (see Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 12f.).

documents (the strict disciplinary separation between philology and anthropology notwithstanding).

These paradigm shifts inaugurated a new phase of archaeological work in which the early history of European culture and other civilizational societies were areas of intense industry, often undertaken within an explicit Marxian (i.e. materialist) framework.[34] Such research quickly established a rich database of information, even though most work was still undertaken with a narrowly regional focus rather than a global or systematic one. One scholar who did begin to piece together a more general overview (though still only of Europe) was the industrious archaeologist V. Gordon Childe, whose work *The Dawn of European Civilisation* (1925) provided the first integrated perspective for the neolithic and bronze ages of Europe, which "was to form the basis of the accepted view of European prehistory for the next forty years".[35] Childe was also one of the first scholars to explore in detail both the "neolithic revolution" and the "urban revolution", and the consequences of these massive shifts in human culture.

Despite these advances, the focus was still very much on neolithic archaeology, with paleolithic researches being little pursued outside of France and hardly integrated into the wider corpus of archaeological theory.[36] As such, Renfrew has argued that "It seems fair to say that, over much of the period from the revelations of 1859 until the aftermath of the Second World War around 1950, archaeological theory did not develop very far", and that it is possible to think of this as "the long sleep of archaeological theory, with little radical

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[34] Renfrew provides a brief discussion of the influence of Marx and Engels in the study of prehistory in the early twentieth century, particularly in Soviet Russia (*Prehistory*, 34f.). Engels' work *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) was, in turn, heavily influenced by Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society : Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York: Holt, 1877).

[35] Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 33. Renfrew notes that Childe was also heavily influenced by Marxist views of early human history.

[36] On the French origins of paleolithic archaeology, see *ibid.*, 17f., and Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 9-18.

nature of the discussion of prehistory".[37] One of the major problems of this period was that despite the mass of detailed archaeological findings, the theory of human cultural development still revolved broadly around a nineteenth-century theory of cultural "diffusion" which had by no means accepted – or even seriously considered, in many cases – the view that human history began in Africa, instead operating with nineteenth-century notions of a diffusion of culture "from the light of the East" (*ex Oriente lux*), which Childe described as "the irradiation of European barbarism by Oriental civilisation".[38]

Another major problem was that despite the growing fossil record, which now included human remains from Africa, Europe, and Asia, there was no method of absolute dating, and thus no chance of asserting the priority of any single location as the "origin" of the human species. Yet the second half of the twentieth century saw massive changes in the conception of prehistory, which were initially underpinned by the so-called "radiocarbon revolution".[39] As Renfrew describes, the development of radiometric dating methods, especially radiocarbon dating, allowed the construction of an absolute (rather than relative) chronology of prehistory for every part of the world, thereby opening up a completely new form of world prehistory that could finally move out of its geographically constrained focus on single regions. This necessitated the rewriting of global prehistory by totally reworking older views about the cultural diffusion of "civilized culture", with early recognitions being that the megalithic structures of northern Europe were far older even that the Egyptian

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[37] Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 37.

[38] *Ibid.*, 32, 33.

[39] *Ibid.*, 41-52. Renfrew had earlier published one of the first works to popularize the results of radicarbon dating in *Before Civilization: The Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973). David Christian has more recently referred to this as the "chronometric revolution"; see e.g. "The Return of Universal History", *History and Theory*, 49 (2010): 6-27, here 17 (see 18 for other methods that enable dating beyond the 50,000 year range of radiocarbon analysis). For elaboration of the issues, see Christian, D., *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 65-67, 494-495.

pyramids, and that metallurgy had been practised for at least 6000 years, often outside "major" urban centres.[40]

New methodologies in the physical sciences also arose that complemented these dating techniques, such as paleoethnobiology (the study of plant remains) and archaeozoology (the study of animal remains), as well as important methods of climate science that greatly expanded upon the work of geological work of Lyell and pushed environmental history into its current scale of hundreds of millions of years. Not only have these established absolute dates for the age of earth and a typology of the various environmental epochs of the world, but even this framework has now been expanded to place the natural history of the earth into a much longer cosmological story beginning roughly 14 billion years ago (a story I will not delve into here).[41] As Renfrew notes, these advances in geological knowledge all provided "an indispensible background to the study of human activity during the paleolithic period, when climatic conditions were key determinants for the human population".[42]

The first work to use the new insights of radiocarbon dating at a systematic, global level came in 1961 with Graham Clarke's *World Prehistory: An Outline*.[43] Clarke offered the first synthesis that included not only the traditional regions of archaeological inquiry, but he also brought regions such as south-east Asia and the Pacific into his global survey. Yet this new paradigm threw up difficult questions of its own, especially regarding the longer-term history of the species *Homo sapiens* – particularly the question of human origins, something that could not be sufficiently understood with only the use of radiometric dating

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[40] See Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 53-75.

[41] For a detailed survey of current consensus on cosmological history, see Eric Chaisson, *Epic of Evolution: Seven Ages of the Cosmos* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). See also Christian, *Maps of Time*, 17-75.

[42] Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 51.

[43] Clarke, G., *World Prehistory: An Outline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

techniques, nor even with then-current forms of evolutionary theory, which were not yet able to employ genetic analysis.

By the late twentieth century, the fossil record strongly suggested that hominids – i.e. members of the genus *Homo*, of which *Homo sapiens* is the most recently differentiated species – had existed for millions of years, and had probably originated in Africa.[44] Artefactual evidence suggesting similar conclusions had also accumulated, and the earlier conception of a "neolithic revolution" soon came to be replaced with a view that despite the profound shifts that occurred with agriculture and sedentism, hominid history is in fact marked by a much deeper evolutionary feedback loop between the intentional use of objects and physio-cognitive change – especially the stone tools that took place of actions such as cutting and crushing, altering earlier hominid physiology and eventually leading to modern *Homo sapiens*.[45] But it was not until the discovery of DNA and the development of associated analytical techniques that these speculations could be put on firm scientific footing.

The DNA double-helix was first discovered in 1953 by Francis Crick and Jim Watson, a revolutionary finding that finally offered scholars a clear mechanism through which Darwin's theory of biological evolution could be confirmed and properly understood.[46] This gave rise to the new fields of molecular genetics, which began analysing

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[44] Amongst he most up-to-date specialized discussions of human evolution that I am aware of are:; *Rethinking the Human Revolution: New Behavioural and Biological Perspectives on the Origins and Dispersal of Modern Humans* (ed. P. Mellars et al.; Cambridge: The McDonald Institute, 2007); *The First Humans: Origin and Early Evolution of the Genus* Homo (ed. Frederick Grine et al.; New York : Springer, 2009); and *Patterns of Growth and Development in the Genus* Homo (ed. Thompson, J. et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also the four volume series *The Human Fossil Record* (ed. Schwartz & Tattersall et al.), listed in the bibliography.

[45] The evolutionary dialectic between "Brain and Hand" is brought out in fascinating detail in Leroi-Gourhan's *Gesture and Speech*. See also *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (ed. D. Smail & A. Shyrock; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 67-75. See further *The Evolution of Hominin Diets: Integrating Approaches to the Study of Paleolithic Subsistence* (ed. J. Hublin & M. Richards; New York: Springer, 2009).

[46] The discovery was announced in Watson J. & Crick F., "A Structure for Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid", *Nature* 171 (1953): 737–738. See also Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 88ff.

human biological diversity using rigorously scientific methodologies (as opposed to the quasi-scientific methods based upon nineteenth-century race theory). These fields were initially very limited in the light they could shed on the deep past, although with the application in 1987 of DNA analysis to mitochondrial DNA (i.e. the maternally inherited DNA of the mitochondrion of the cell, rather than the nucleus), new research directions were opened up that enabled the development of archaeogenetics, the study of biological transformation over millions of years.

These results were recently summarized by the geneticist Peter Forster in 2004, based on studies that have accumulated from 1992 onwards in conversation with archaeological and other scientific research. On the basis of mtDNA, it has become certain that all living humans are closely genetically related and have descended from ancestors living in Africa roughly 200,000 years ago.[47] It has also been demonstrated using genetic evidence that the principal dispersal of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa took place roughly 60,000 years ago, a conclusion supported by the fact that the earliest fossil remains of *Homo sapiens* in places such as Indonesia and Australia are dated to around 45,000 years ago.

But the new constellation of scientific techniques and the continually expanding fossil record have also allowed the story of human evolution to be significantly expanded into the frame of hominid evolution. As a very brief overview, the current scientific consensus now places the emergence of the genus *Homo* roughly 2.6 million years ago with *Homo habilis*, an emergence characterized by the first significant increase in brain size since the split with primates over 5 million years ago, and the first widespread use of stone tools (although I note that bipedalism, a crucial physiological factor in increased cranial capacity, seems to have become regular in the close evolutionary ancestors of hominids, the

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[47] Forster, P., "Ice Ages and the mitochondrial DNA chronology of human dispersals: a review", *Philosophical Transaction of the Royal Society* 359 (2004): 255-264.

*australopithecines*).[48] The next stage of species differentiation came with *Homo erectus* and *Homo ergaster* around 1.8 million years ago, something discerned by shifts in physiology (such as larger brain size) as well as the first production of "Acheulian" hand axes produced by a more sophisticated "flaking" technique than earlier tools.[49] These varieties of hominid were also the first to migrate out of Africa, a claim supported by fossils found in Georgia, Java, and Israel that have been dated to over 1.5 million years.[50] By one million years ago, *erectus* and *ergaster* appear to have mostly displaced other hominid species, and by 700,000 years ago there is evidence of them existing not just in Africa, but also in regions of southern Asia parts of Eurasia.[51] Following this came another species differentiation, in which *Homo neaderthalis* began to split from the ancestors of modern *Homo sapiens* (something that modern genetics suggests took place 550,000-700,000 years ago), making neanderthals more like cousins of early humans rather than direct evolutionary ancestors. Neanderthals populated Eurasia from at least 400,000 years ago, marking the second major hominid dispersal from Africa.[52] Then around 200,000 years ago, the archaeological record shows that there was another stage of refinement in the complexity of stone tool technologies, implying further cultural and physiological change, with current consensus placing anatomically modern humans somewhere in this period, existing exclusively in Africa (cf.

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[48] For a measured discussion of bipedalism, see Christian, *Maps of Time*, 154f. See further Ian Tattersall, *Becoming Human: Evolution and Human Uniqueness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 121. Leroi-Gourhan states that "the brain was not the cause of developments in locomotory adaptation but their beneficiary". This is why he considers locomotion to be "the determining factor of biological evolution" in *Homo sapiens* (*Gesture and Speech*, 26).

[49] See Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 57-60. See also *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present*, 67-75. See also n. 82 below on Acheulian tools.

[50] *Ibid.*, 57, 58.

[51] Christian, *Maps of Time*, 163ff. Renfrew also notes that "In all discussion about early hominid fossils, the archaeologist is very much at the mercy of the changing terminologies" devised by biologists and anthropologists (*Prehistory*, 58).

[52] *Ibid.*, 165-168.

the above reconstruction by Forster) and then migrating from Africa throughout the rest of the world in the third major hominid dispersal, beginning roughly 60,000 years ago.[53]

Whilst this represents a remarkable new *status quaestionis* regarding the history of our species (especially vis-à-vis earlier accounts of human origins), many scholars have recognised that a serious issue remains unexplained in this trajectory: the reasons underpinning the massively increased rate of change in the history of *Homo sapiens* compared to every other species on earth, including even our hominid relatives.

I will address this question shortly, but I want to interject here and note the way in which these changes in understanding about the deep past have impacted upon western historiography. As discussed above, challenges to the documentary form of historiography came in the first significant instance from the *Annales* school, who emphasised the *longue durée* over traditional "event history" (represented especially by Braudel's sweeping history of the Mediterranean). One of the first Anglophone works with a similarly expanded frame of reference (one in fact larger than Braudel's) was William McNeill's *The Rise of the West*. Here McNeill sought to place the modern ascendency of Europe into a much larger historical pattern beginning with paleolithic culture, thereby attempting to reject all forms of European exceptionalism by demonstrating how Europe's relatively recent global supremacy was contingent upon a very long trajectory of interrelations between various human cultures, rather than because of any inherent superiority of European culture.[54] The studies mentioned above that dealt with the depth of human prehistory underlay McNeill's work, as did the *Annalistes* and many others, all of which provided strong propulsion for the continued restructuring of the European historiographical imagination at a wider level.

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[53] See Forster, "Ice Ages and the mitochondrial DNA chronology of human dispersals".

[54] McNeill, W., *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963). McNeill notes that the book was conceived as early as 1936. Amongst more recent works, see Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

The industry of what might loosely be termed "evolutionary studies" has accelerated significantly in recent decades. It is not my aim here to provide a catalogue of those wide-ranging developments, suffice it to say that they have been undertaken in an array of academic disciplines and have created new ones in the process.[55] However, it was not until the 1990s that the insights provided by archaeology and the sciences came to be integrated into research agendas that amounted to new historiographical (rather than simply scientific) paradigms. While McNeill continued to advocate a vision of history that unified scientific and humanistic perspectives, scholars such as David Christian began to argue for the necessity of changing "world" history (generally a globally oriented perspective on the last 6000-10,000 years) into the notion of "universal" history, placing the events of human history and natural history into a large-scale narrative encompassing the entire history of the universe.[56] In 2004, Christian published his landmark work, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, which attempts to provide "a unified account of how things came to be the way they are", integrating cosmological, geological, biological and cultural trajectories into an over-arching narrative.[57]

A similar agenda promoting the idea of "deep history" has recently been pursued by Daniel Lord Smail and Andrew Shyrock, whose work is particularly useful for the way in

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[55] For a useful survey of evolutionary studies, see the various works employed by David Christian in *Maps of Time*, 79-203.

[56] Christian announced his program in "The Case for 'Big History'", *The Journal of World History* 2 (1991): 223-238. See most recently Christian, D., "The Return of Universal History", *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 6-27. Christian has been a strong advocate of expanding big history into the realm of high-school education, and has even forged a high-profile partnership with Bill Gates to promote the development and use of an open big history syllabus for this purpose. See The Big History Project (www.bighistoryproject.com/home; last accessed June 13, 2013). As the website currently states, "The Big History Project is a collaboration designed to bring big history to life for high school students. It is entering the second year of a pilot program designed to create and refine a world class curriculum and online experience that will ultimately be freely available to schools worldwide."

[57] Christian, *Maps of Time*, 2. McNeill wrote an appreciative foreword to the work, and Christian in turn acknowledges McNeill's influence on his thought (xxi). The big history paradigm has often come under criticism. Although some of this criticism is warranted, Christian has provided a good defence of the paradigm vis-à-vis four of the most common complaints (*Maps of Time*, 8-11). I pass over these debates here.

which it places specific focus on the human aspects of long-term history.[58] In an interesting continuity with the historiographical shifts described in the first section of this chapter, they also note that "The logic that makes Neanderthals and other early hominins [*sic*] visible to a deep history is the same logic that has made subalterns everywhere visible to modern historical praxis".[59] Smail says elsewhere that

> In light of these arguments, deep history is a natural extension of historiographical trends that began in the mid-twentieth century. The goal of the social history of this era, after all, was to uncover the world of the people without history. This move was seconded by branches of world and postcolonial history that sought to apply the same logic to colonial peoples deemed historyless before the arrival of the Western colonial and imperial enterprise.[60]

It is for this reason that I am focusing on evolutionary perspectives on human history, and it will soon become clear how this approach pays off. Whilst the big history perspective is not intended to supplant older forms of historical analysis (a fact often overlooked by its critics), the agenda represented by Christian and Smail centres around an explicit call for two things. Firstly, they argue that it is only with such a large-scale focus that patterns of human history can be discerned that remain invisible when working within the traditional timeframes of European historiography, even forms of social history that had moved away from the documentary approach. As Christian puts it,

> A return to universal history will show that there are indeed "simplifying perspectives" that reveal a profound orderliness in human history [vis-à-vis the "chaotic" character it has when viewed in smaller timeframes]. However, the large patterns can be seen clearly only at scales of many millennia, or at the even larger scales of human history as a whole … At large scales, the pixels of human action generate clear patterns, and awareness of these patterns will inevitably change how we think about history at smaller scales.[61]

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[58] See Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*; and *Deep History* (ed. Smail & Shyrock).

[59] Smail & Shyrock, *Deep History*, 15.

[60] Smail, *Deep History and the Brain*, 54. This work is a polemical advocation of deep history that highlights how deeply entrenched the documentary view of history has remained even to the present day.

[61] Christian, "The Return of Universal History", 20-21.

Secondly, in light of this view, they place a strong emphasis on the need to reintegrate forms of intellectual inquiry that became fragmented into isolated academic fields over the course of twentieth century.[62] Christian puts it as follows:

> A revival of universal history will affect the context of historical scholarship much more than its practice. After all, rigorous empirical research is the meat and drink of scholarship in all fields including the natural sciences. So I suspect that for most historians "normal history" will carry on regardless. But the context of historical research will be transformed. Seeing human history as part of a much larger story will affect how historians think about research, the questions they ask, the ways they collaborate, and the way they judge the significance of scholarship.[63]

Again, thinking about new forms of intellectual cross-fertilization is central to the way I am viewing the Axial Age and its redescription, and I agree with Christian that "Excessive respect for disciplinary boundaries has hidden many possibilities for intellectual synergy between disciplines".[64] But before coming to that, this is a good point to return to the question left open above about how one can account for the remarkable intensification of change in human history of the last 100,000 years, and especially in the 10,000 years during which agriculture, sedentism, and urbanization became such catalystic forces. Christian frames the issue well: "What makes human history different from the history of, say, our biological cousins, the great apes? After all, as individuals they are just about as clever as we. Why do we have a rich history of long-term change when they, apparently, don't?". He continues that:

> Darwin's great achievement was to explain how species [change] through the mechanism of natural selection. But the patterns we see in human history are different.

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[62] On the intellectual fragmentation of institutionalized disciplines, see e.g. Christian, "The Return of Universal History", 13ff. Eric Wolf also discusses this fragmentation in detail, see *Europe and the People without History*, 7-19.

[63] *Ibid.*, 19 (italics added).

[64] Christian, *Maps of Time*, 9.

Humans do not just adapt, they *keep* adapting, and at a pace that cannot be explained by natural selection alone. Continuous adaptation provides the species as a whole with more resources than are needed simply to maintain a demographic steady state. Something unusual is going on. … How can we explain this remarkable capacity for sustained and accelerating adaptation that seems to be a new emergent property of our species and the primary driver of change in human history?[65]

Renfrew pursues a similar line of questioning. He notes that a child born today, in the twenty-first century, "would be very little different in its DNA – i.e., in the genotype, and hence in innate capacities – from one born 60,000 years ago". Therefore, "the differences in human behaviour that we see now, when contrasted with the more limited range of behaviours then, *are not to be explained by any inherent or emerging genetic differences*".[66] We must, in other words, find an explanation for the rapidity of cultural change in the human species that involves more than just the longer-term mechanisms of natural selection.

In effect, scholars are now asking: if we reject Hegel's *Geist* as the driving force of historical change – or indeed any other transcendental entity – how then are we to account for that change? This is a question of the utmost importance, and although it has received growing attention across the field of evolutionary studies, in my view the most attractive answer is something like the one proposed by David Christian – the key lies in the nature of human language and its capacity for *collective learning*:

the key is the remarkable precision and fluency of human language, which allowed humans alone to share learned knowledge so precisely and in such volume that it could accumulate with minimal degradation within the memory banks of entire communities. Human language linked humans into highly efficient information networks through which the learning of each individual could be shared, added to, and passed on to future generations. *The slow mechanism of genetic inheritance was overlaid by the much faster mechanism of knowledge transfer.* The long-term trends that make human history so different are driven, in other words, by a new and more rapid adaptive mechanism that we can call "collective learning." As a species we cannot help accumulating new knowledge by exchanging it. That explains our remarkable plasticity, the astonishing variety of behaviors that we find in individuals and in different human societies, and the extreme difficulty we have in trying to pin down any single "human nature." Yet

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[65] Christian, "The Return of Universal History", 19-20, 23-4.

[66] Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 92-3 (italics added).

behind this variety there is one constant: our propensity for sharing the insights of each individual, thereby generating a collective capacity for sustained adaptation. It is this propensity that seems to have driven human societies with radically different cultures and in very different environments along broadly similar paths, and ultimately toward greater control of resources, larger populations, and greater social complexity.[67]

This argument is so convincing because the correlation between technologies of communication and the rapidity of cultural (rather than genetic) change is a pattern visible across the full span of human history. This can be highlighted by noting four key examples which provide a snapshot of Christian's point. Firstly, the emergence of language, and the inter-generational symbolic/informational networks it enabled. This new capacity underpinned the ability of *Homo sapiens* to collaborate to such a high degree that they drastically expanded the ecological niches in which they could survive, leading to the successful global dispersal of the species.[68] As Roy Rappaport has similarly pointed out,

When social organization and rules for behaviour are stipulated in conventions expressed in words rather than specified in genes and inscribed on chromosomes they can be replaced within single lifetimes, even sometimes, overnight. This has made it possible for a single interbreeding species to enter, and even dominate, the great variety of environments the world presents without having to spend generations transforming itself into a new range of species.[69]

Secondly, the invention of writing and other forms of graphic notation involved in the processes of urbanization. Although writing was a consequence and not a cause of urbanization, it was crucial not only in enhancing the capacity to administer the increasingly large populations supported by agricultural technologies, but more importantly in underpinning the new symbolic universes that arose when cultural texts began to be codified in the more fixed medium of writing (rather than the perishable medium of oral

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[67] Christian, "The Return of Universal History", 24 (italics added).

[68] See Christian, *Maps of Time*, 171-175 and 182-184.).

[69] Rappaport, R., *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6.

discourse).[70] As will become clear shortly, this is of central relevance for understanding the transformations of the 1st millennium BCE (not to mention earlier changes in Egypt in Mesopotamia).

A third major example of how changes in the capacity for collective learning spur major cultural changes can be seen in the invention of typography, especially European alphabetic typography in the fifteenth century.[71] Without going into detail, it was the ability for the mass production and dissemination of uniformly repeatable texts – something impossible in chirographic (i.e. manuscript) culture – that underpinned such major events as the Protestant Reformation, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment, something amply demonstrated in works such as Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*.[72] As Walter Ong has similarly demonstrated in his remarkable study of the sixteenth-century educator Peter Ramus, the typographic revolution also had major epistemological consequences on European thought as intellectual debate and collaboration began to take place much more extensively outside of oral discourse.[73] One of the most

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[70] See e.g. Assmann, J., "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age" in *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (ed. R. Bellah & H. Joas; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 366-407; and *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (ET; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1992]). See also Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (ed. D. Godfrey; Toronto: Press Porcépic, 1986 [1950]). As noted in Chapter 1, despite the importance of writing in cultural history, it is important to stress that it was not the cause of urbanization, but its consequence; see Hans J. Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2000 B.C.* (trans. E. Lutzeier & K. J. Northcott; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1983]), esp. 14, 129-164.

[71] I leave aside discussion of typography in China and Korea (Chinse printing techniques in particular predating European ones), suffice it to say that they did not alter forms of culture as drastically or as quickly as the emergence of print in Europe. For an overview of print in the eastern context, see Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing* (trans. L. Cochrane; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1988]), 224-226.

[72] Eisenstein, E., *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[73] Ong, W., *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 [1958]).

important consequences of this was the intensification of the notion of "objective knowledge" because of the way in which writing separates "the knower from the known".[74]

A final example in this brief overview is the new information networks opened up by electric and now digital technologies of communication, which from the early nineteenth century have begun to link the world into a "global nervous system", obliterating the long-standing barriers of time and space marking all previous human epochs. Indeed, the telegraph was so revolutionary because it was the first time in human history that a message could travel faster than a messenger, the consequences of which hardly need spelling out here. This connectivity has intensified at a quite astonishing pace in the last two centuries, especially with the rise of information technology in the twentieth century and the digital revolution we are experiencing in the twenty-first. This is a trajectory charted well in James Gleick's *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood.*[75]

All of these shifts, whilst always in a constant dialectic with other forces and not supreme causal agents in themselves, are clearly involved in the most significant periods of human cultural change. They therefore offer strong support for arguments such as David Christian's that the most profound reorganizations of human society throughout history have resulted from finding new ways to transmit and store information.[76] This is also a good example of Christian's view that only with a truly long-term historical perspective can one begin to see patterns of human history that remain invisible when operating within the more traditional chronological frameworks of western historiography. But given that these issues are crucial for my critique of the Axial Age, I need to expand the discussion in order

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[74] See Ong, W., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982).

[75] Gleick, J., *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011).

[76] References for works in all of the above areas are provided in the supplementary bibliography on communications history, several with brief annotations.

to demonstrate how they can allow scholars to emplot the transformations of the 1st millennium BCE in a manner completely different from Jaspers and Hick.

Recognizing the fundamental role of collective learning in human cultural change entails focusing on a variety of academic fields. I group them here somewhat loosely under the rubric of "communications history", even though the fields of scholarship noted above (and discussed below) are yet to be integrated in any substantive way. Moreover, these perspectives will be very useful when returning to what this all means for an evaluation of the Axial Age as a narrative of human religious history, as some of the major recent contributions to communications history have been offered by scholars closely associated with the new phase of Axial Age scholarship. While the works surveyed here could be split up in many ways, I will focus on three broad groups: 1) evolutionary studies of language and human culture; 2) anthropological studies of modern oral cultures; and 3) historians of early civilization who help to understand the significance of writing in the symbolic universes of large urban societies.

As far as evolutionary studies of language are concerned, the two most important scholars in the present context are Terrence Deacon and Merlin Donald, both of whom explore the trajectory and the consequences of human language development over the full period of hominid evolution. I will consider them in turn. Deacon's major work is *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*, which has provided the benchmark study on the evolution of language and symbolic thought for scholars such as David

215

Christian.[77] By focusing on cognitive and physiological changes that began accumulating roughly with the appearance of *Homo habilis* over 2 million years ago, Deacon argues that the key difference between human and non-human forms of communication is the human capacity for *symbolic* thought – complex and abstract associations that allow the human plane of meaning to extend well beyond the basic communicative capacities of other primates. The arguments and evidence surrounding the preconditions and possible early stages of hominid language are extremely complicated, and I will not go into them here. It is however worth pointing out a few salient features of Deacon's view:

> The first symbolic systems were almost certainly not full-blown languages, to say the least. We would probably not even recognize them as languages if we encountered them today, though we would recognize them as different in striking ways from the communication of other species. In their earliest forms, it is likely that they lacked both the efficiency and the flexibility that we attribute to modern language. Indeed, I think it is far more realistic to assume that the first symbolic systems would have paled in efficiency and flexibility in comparison to the rich and complex endowment of vocal calls and nonverbal, nonsymbolic gestural displays exhibited by many of our primate cousins. The first symbol learners probably still carried on most of their social communication through call-and-display behaviors much like those of modern apes and monkeys. Symbolic communication was likely only a small part of social communication.[78]

Notice that Deacon here suggests that symbolic cognition goes back further than language, a point with major implications for evaluating and explaining the intellectual development of modern humans. To get a better handle on the evolution of language in the context of collective learning, I turn here to Merlin Donald's view on the stages of human cognitive development. This is instructive not only for thinking about the concept of collective learning generally, but also because Donald's framework has been employed as the fundamental evolutionary perspective in Robert Bellah's new treatment of religious history

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[77] Deacon, T., *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997). For Christian's use of Deacon, see *Maps of Time*, 171-175.

[78] Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*, 378.

in *Religion in Human Evolution*, and will thus be extremely useful when addressing the issue of how the 1st millennium BCE might be redescribed in light of contemporary scholarship.[79]

Donald argues that human culture, since its early mammalian origins, has undergone four distinct stages of cognitive development: episodic culture, mimetic culture, mythic culture, and theoretic culture. He begins with what he calls "episodic" culture, drawing examples primarily from nonhuman primates. Speaking of the great apes, he says

> Their behavior, complex as it is, seems unreflective, concrete, and situation bound. Even their uses of signing and their social behavior are immediate, short-term responses to the environment. … the word that seems best to epitomize the cognitive culture of apes (and probably many other mammals as well… ) is the term *episodic*. … Where humans have abstract symbolic representations, apes are bound to the concrete situation or episode; and their social behavior reflects this situational limitation.[80]

Episodic culture provides the cognitive platform of all complex mammalian species, and was apparently still the primary (if not exclusive) cognitive state of the close bipedal ancestors of the hominid genus, the *australopithecines*. With the emergence of *Homo habilis*, and then particularly with *Homo erectus*, a new stage began in hominid cognitive evolution that was critical for the later development of language in *Homo sapiens*. This is the stage that Donald calls "mimetic culture", from Greek *mimesthai*, to imitate. It is worth quoting Donald at some length to explain the importance of mimetic culture, which helps to flesh out the implications of Deacon's claim that symbolic thought began before language:

> The first breakthrough in our cognitive evolution was [not language, as many scholars have argued, but rather] a radical improvement in voluntary motor control that fortuitously provided a new means of representing reality. *Homo erectus*'s great gift to humanity was mimetic skill, a revolutionary improvement in voluntary motor control,

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[79] Donald's two major works are Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (New York: Norton, 2001). Bellah's engagement with Donald begins at p. 117 of *Religion in Human Evolution*. I note also that Bellah frames his narrative with relation to the work of Smail and Christian, calling their works "signs of the time", and agreeing with them that "any distinction between history and prehistory is arbitrary" (xi).

[80] Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, 149. See 124-161.

leading to our uniquely human talent for using the whole body as a subtle communication device. … This talent, [even] without language, could have supported a culture that was much more powerful, in terms of its toolmaking abilities, refinements of skill, and flexible social organization, than any known ape culture.

     For a variety of reasons, mimetic skill logically precedes language, and remains fundamentally independent of truly linguistic modes of representation. It is the basic human thought skill, without which there would not have been the evolutionary opportunity, much later, to evolve language as we know it. Pure mimesis is an intermediate layer of knowledge and culture, and is the first evolutionary link between presymbolic knowledge-systems of animals and the symbolic systems of modern humans. Basically, mimesis is based on a memory system that can rehearse and refine movement voluntarily and systematically, in terms of a coherent conceptual model of the surrounding environment. It … allows any action of the body to be stopped, replayed, and edited, under conscious control.[81]

In the archaeological record, the mimetic stage is most clearly evident in the complex technical procedures used by *Homo habilis* in the creation of early stone tools, and then with the intensification of technical sophistication visible with *Homo erectus*, especially in the industry of Acheulian tools.[82] But more than enhanced technical sophistication, mimetic culture had drastic consequences for the development of symbolic representation in hominid societies:

as in many evolutionary adaptations, mimetic skill would have unforeseen consequences: now hominids had a means of re-presenting reality to themselves and others, by the use of voluntary action. This means that hominids could do much more than rehearse and refine existing movement patterns … and they could re-enact events and scenarios, creating a sort of gestural proto-theatre of everyday life. The body itself became a tool for expression, as in acting or mime; it was just a matter of discovering the social utility of this possibility.

    … Such a culture was based on improved voluntary motor skill, extensive use of imitation for pedagogy, and a much more sophisticated range of voluntary facial and vocal expressions, along with public-action metaphor, the basis of most custom and ritual.[83]

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[81] Donald, M., "Cognitive Evolution and the Definition of Human Nature" (n. d.; lecture given at the University of Arkansas), 15. Paginated transcript available at http://psyc.queensu.ca/faculty/donald/sel-pubs.html (last accessed June 8, 2013). I have utilized this lecture because it provides a handy summary of Donald's more developed argument.

[82] Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, 179f. He notes that "The stone tools of *erectus* required expert fashioning; archaeologists require months of training and pratice to become good at creating Acheulian tools".

[83] Donald, "Cognitive Evolution and the Definition of Human Nature", 16-7. See *Origins of the Modern Mind*, 162-200.

The implications here are important, for if Donald's reading of the evolutionary archive is even broadly correct, then the basis of distinctly human culture – i.e. symbolic representation – begins well before the emergence of modern language. It also means that story, in its rudiments, is a prelinguistic form, and that stories were thus first codified not in linguistic narratives, but in *ritual* – i.e. embodied, socially shared performative representations that helped to constitute "social conventions, a moral order, a sense of the sacred, and a relationship to the cosmos, including beliefs about what lies behind the empirical cosmos".[84]

From this point, Donald discusses the origins of modern language. Against the view of a "language instinct" or a "universal grammar" in human cognitive architecture (as argued by figures such as Stephen Pinker and Noam Chomsky), Donald suggests that the evolutionary development of language stems from "a deep drive for conceptual clarification", and therefore that "*modern humans developed language in response to pressure to improve their conceptual apparatus, not vice versa*".[85] He continues:

> Evolutionary pressures favouring a very powerful representation device like speech would have been much greater once mimetic communication reached a critical degree of complexity; mimesis is inherently an ambiguous way of representing reality, and words are an effective means of disambiguating mimetic messages … [Unlike mimesis,] it employs true symbols and constructs narrative descriptions of reality.
> 
> Spoken language provided humans with a second form of retrievable knowledge and a much more powerful way to format their knowledge. The natural product of language is narrative thought, that is, storytelling. Storytelling had a forerunner in mimetic event-reenactment, but it is very different in the means by which it achieves its goal, and much more flexible in what it can express.[86]

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[84] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 145. Bellah is here discussing the work of Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, who has argued the case for "taking ritual as humanity's basic social act". I am not able to explore further the implications of these perspectives regarding the old question about the priority of "myth or ritual" in the origins of religion; but as Bellah notes, if the views of Deacon and Donald are even broadly correct, then "the argument is at last over. Ritual clearly precedes myth" (135f.).

[85] These comments are stitched together from *A Mind So Rare* (283f.) and *Origins of the Modern Mind* (215).

[86] Donald, "Cognitive Evolution and the Definition of Human Nature", 19. On narrative in the context of evolution, see also the excellent work of Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: University Press, 2009), which came to my attention too late to be incorporated. See the supplementary bibliography.

Donald therefore terms the era after the emergence of language "mythic culture", etymologically from Greek *mythos*, story. He defines it as follows:

> Mythical thought, in our terms, might be regarded as a unified, collectively held system of explanatory and regulatory metaphors. The mind has expanded beyond the episodic perception of events, beyond the mimetic reconstruction of events, to a comprehensive modeling of the entire human universe. Causal explanations, prediction, control—myth constitutes an attempt at all three, and every aspect of life is permeated by myth.[87]

In terms of collective learning, the emergence of language is so significant not just because it greatly increased the repository of technical knowledge in early human cultures, allowing their successful expansion across almost the entire globe (the aspect that most interests scholars such as Christian), but also because the enhanced capacity for the storage of cultural memory enabled by language gave a new inter-generational dynamic to the *construction of identity* in early oral societies.

Yet for all its vitality and transformative potential, forms of cultural memory that were only mimetic and oral were subject to rigid constraints. Donald explains:

> Early humans, like their predecessors, depended on their natural or biological memory capacities. Thus, even though language and mimetic expression allowed humans to accumulate a considerable degree of collective knowledge shared in culture, the actual physical storage of that knowledge depended ultimately on the internal memory capacities of the individual members of a society. Thought was carried out entirely inside the head; whatever was heard or seen had to be remembered and rehearsed orally or visualized in imagination.[88]

At this stage Donald's evolutionary trajectory can be integrated with the work of anthropologists and other scholars of oral cultures, something that I believe illustrates Christian's point about the potential for new forms of intellectual cross-fertilization. Let me

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[87] Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, 214.

[88] Donald, "Cognitive Evolution and the Definition of Human Nature", 21; see also Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 33-77 ("Some Psychodynamics of Orality").

stress that this is important if the original formulation of the Axial Age is to be challenged, because it forces us to rethink the nature of the differences traditionally posited between large urban societies and small-scale oral societies.

One of the most important theorists to approach this question from the perspective of the history of technology was British anthropologist Jack Goody, whose work on literacy in traditional societies in the 1960s was foundational in bringing about a paradigm shift from older, pejorative views of non-urban culture, to views that were more sensitive to the material factors underpinning cultural difference.[89] Goody's fundamental premise was that European social and anthropological thought had been structured by a set of pervasive, ethnocentric, and empirically dubious binary categories for the description and comparison of cultures, which he lists as follows:[90]

primitive — advanced
savage — domesticated
traditional — modern
'cold' — 'hot' [cf. Lévi-Strauss]
closed  —  open [cf. Popper]
developing — developed
pre-logical  — logical [cf. Lévy-Bruhl]
mythopoeic —  logico-empirical

Goody argues three things about these categories: (a) that these binaries reduce to little more than ethnocentric "us and them" dichotomies, something many other theorists of modernity have pointed out; (b) that this dichotomous treatment is inadequate for dealing with the complexity of human development and cultural difference; and (c) that scholars have almost invariably proposed no *reasons* for the differences between such societies. He therefore suggests that instead of these "somewhat vague" dichotomies, almost all aspects of cultural difference implied in such categories can instead be related to "changes in the

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[89] Several of Goody's works are listed in the supplementary bibliography.

[90] Goody, J., *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 146f.

mode of communication, especially writing".[91] Goody was also emphatic that he was not suggesting a monocausal theory of change, nor a deterministic account where technological shifts always have the same result and conscious agency has no role; and he was clear that such a perspective could not operate with a "Great Divide" theory between "oral" and "literate" forms of culture, and must instead operate with a carefully nuanced awareness of the ever-shifting technological landscapes in which cultural activity plays out.[92]

Such perspectives have gained increasing traction since the 1960s. With regard to oral cultures, one of the scholars to have built on Goody's insights most productively is the historian of technology, Walter Ong. Ong had already made a major contribution to communications history with his work on sixteenth-century educational reformer Peter Ramus and the way in which typographic technologies revolutionized European thinking even at the most fundamental epistemological levels (as noted above). This work had strongly influenced Goody, and in turn Goody's work on traditional societies allowed Ong to write one of the most important treatments of the issue, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. By adopting the approach Goody had advocated, Ong attempted to plot out the characteristics typical of "primary oral" thought, i.e. thought in cultures where even the very concept of visual language does not exist.

Without surveying Ong's entire list, which includes features such as the "formulaic" composition of important knowledge in oral societies (whether technical or other knowledge), the most important feature in the context of the present discussion is what Ong and Goody call the *homeostatic dynamic* of cultural ideation that plays out in a purely oral context:

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[91] *Ibid.*, 16.

[92] See *ibid.*, 46ff.

> By contrast with literate societies, oral societies can be characterized as homeostatic. That is to say, oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.
>
> The forces governing homeostasis can be sensed by reflection on the condition of words in primary oral setting … The meaning of each word is controlled by what Goody and Watt call "direct semantic ratification", that is, by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now. Words acquire their meaning only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but also includes gestures, vocal inflections, facial expressions, and the entire human existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs.[93]

Goody and Watt argue that this homeostatic dynamic is particularly visible when observing the reproduction of genealogies in oral cultures. They document a case from the Gonja people of Ghana. Records made in the early twentieth century show that Gonja tradition presented Ndewura Jakpa as the founder of the Gonja. Ndewura Jakpa was said to have had seven sons, each of whom was ruler of one of the seven territorial divisions of Gonja territory.[94] But sixty years later, when the traditions were recorded again by another generation of anthropologists, the territorial boundaries of the Gonja had been reconfigured into five divisions. In the later genealogies, the story of Ndewura Jakpa was now told with him having only five sons. For Goody and Watt, this is a telling example of the way that

> genealogies often serve the same function that Malinowski claimed for myth; they act as "charters" of present social institutions rather than as faithful historical records of times past. They can do this more consistently because they operate within an oral rather than a written tradition and thus tend to be automatically adjusted to existing social relations … a similar process takes place with regard to other cultural elements as well, to myths, for example, and to sacred lore in general. Deities and other supernatural agencies which have served their purpose can be quietly dropped from

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[93] See *Orality and Literacy*, 33-77 ("Some Psychodynamics of Orality"), here 46. Ong cites Goody and Watt's important article, "The Consequences of Literacy", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 304-345. The formulaic nature of oral narrative was first explored by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who analysed modern oral cultures in the Balkans in light of a growing scholarly interest in the oral composition of the Homeric epics; see Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 16-30 for a good intellectual history of the topic. See the supplementary bibliography for the relevant works of Lord and Parry.

[94] I leave to the side here reflection on the political and ethical dimensions of colonialism and the production of knowledge, suffice it to say that I use the present examples with an awareness of the difficult nature of the question.

the contemporary pantheon; and as the society changes, myths too are forgotten, attributed to other personages, or transformed in their meaning. … The [Gonja] have their genealogies, others their sacred tales about the origin of the world and the way in which man acquired his culture. But all their conceptualisations of the past cannot help being governed by the concerns of the present, merely because there is no body of chronologically ordered statements to which reference can be made. The [Gonja] do not recognise any contradiction between what they say now and what they said fifty years ago, since no enduring records exist for them to set beside their present views. … the elements in the cultural heritage which cease to have a contemporary relevance tend to be soon forgotten or transformed; and as the individuals of each generation acquire their vocabulary, their genealogies, and their myths, they are unaware that various words, proper-names and stories have dropped out, or that others have changed their meanings or been replaced.[95]

While orally based thought could be discussed in more detail, the above is a useful outline of some of its important features. And whilst all of these insights are admittedly based on contemporaneously documented oral cultures (rather than the ancient ones which are claimed to have been similar), they remain persuasive at a general level because of the way in which they keep attention *on the dynamics of knowledge when it cannot be given the permanence of written language*. We have no direct evidence for the vanished symbolic world of pre-graphic humanity, but this model is far more defensible than the old binary models of cultural comparison.

In a move of major importance for the discursive reconfiguration advocated by Goody, Ong uses these perspectives to redescribe the designations of "prelogical", "irrational", and "savage" simply as "oral". And in my view, almost every feature of oral thought that has been denigrated in European scholarship – especially its alleged "irrationality", its lack of "abstract" thinking, and its "total immersion in the present" – can instead be seen as what intelligent human thought looks like when embodied only in small societies that do not have recourse to externalized systems of memory.

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[95] Goody and Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy", 310-311.

With these considerations in mind, we are well placed to return to the fourth and final stage in Donald's evolutionary scheme, which he calls "theoretic culture". Theoretic culture is based on the most important change in the human capacity for communication since the emergence of language, namely *the externalization of memory*. Donald explains the importance of this shift in evolutionary terms:

> External memory is a critical feature of modern human cognition, if we are trying to build an evolutionary bridge from Neolithic to modern cognitive capacities or a structural bridge from mythic to theoretic culture. The brain may not have changed recently in its genetic makeup, but its link to an accumulating external memory network affords it cognitive powers that would not have been possible in isolation. This is more than a metaphor; each time the brain carries out an operation in concert with the external symbolic storage system, it becomes part of a network.[96]

Although cultural memory had become increasingly encoded in ritual and mimetic behaviour; although perishable forms of graphic representation certainly existed amongst oral cultures (lines in the dirt, notches on wood); and although language served as a powerful and malleable vehicle for the transmission of human thought; *the most important technology for the externalization of memory was writing*. While writing developed very gradually at first, initially not prompting any major cognitive changes, its long-term effects were enormous:

> [Symbolic technologies] liberate consciousness from the limitations of the brain's biological memory systems. … Because of the limitations of biological memory, conscious thought was enormously difficult when contained entirely inside the brain box. External storage changed this and gave thinkers new strategic options.[97]

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[96] Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, 312; see 269-360.

[97] Donald, *A Mind So Rare*, 306

Donald and others have described this shift in terms of *distributed cognition*.[98] As will become clear shortly, the first major consequences of the move from the mythic to the theoretic stage are effectively located in the cultural transformations which Jaspers described as the Axial Age. But to stay at the more general level for now, the theoretic stage can also be integrated with the work of other scholars, this time in ways that highlight the impact of writing on cultural change.

A great deal of ink has been spent on the invention and impact of writing, but I want to focus on the work of Jan Assmann, who is not only one of the most important theorists on the topic, but has also been a key contributor to the new phase of Axial Age scholarship. Assmann begins by making the cogent distinction between *writing systems* and *writing cultures*. A writing system is a form of graphic notation: it can be ideographic, logographic, syllabic, alphabetic, etc. Aside from Mesoamerican graphism, all other major scripts throughout history have stemmed either from the scripts of the ancient Near East or the scripts of ancient China.[99]

The first development involved in the invention of writing was what Assmann calls "sectorial literacy" (closely corresponding to Eric Havelock's earlier notion of "craft literacy"), in which a small social group is trained in the skill of graphic notation for practical purposes.[100] In this stage, writing is used exclusively in the sectors of cultural activity for whose needs it had been invented. In virtually all instances, these sectors were initially economic and administrative, and Assmann cautions that "We must not forget that

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[98] See Renfrew, *Prehistory*, 119f. For an interesting take on the issues in the context of the contemporary computer revolution, see also Andy Clarke, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[99] On the history of scripts, see the indispensible compendium *The World's Writing Systems* (ed. P. Daniels and W. Bright; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). On the cultural history of writing, see the sweeping work of Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing*.

[100] See Havelock, E., *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), noted in the supplementary bibliography.

writing was invented to record the non-mnemophilic, the contingent data in economy and administration, which no human memory can keep for a long period of time".[101] Bearing in mind Ong and Goody's insights on the dynamics of oral thought, the fact that writing was first used for these purposes is of little surprise.

Graphic representation was soon extended into other fields of cultural practice, especially relating to political, funerary, and other cultic activity. These form the base of the shift from sectorial literacy to what Assmann calls "cultural literacy". This occurs

> when writing penetrates into the central core of a culture that we (Aleida Assmann and myself) call "cultural memory". This is a question not of a *system* of writing but a *culture* of writing. What matters here is not whether we are dealing with an alphabetic (consonantic or vocalized) alphabet or with a syllabic, logographic, or ideographic script, [a point on which many earlier communications historians, such as McLuhan and Havelock, have placed misguided emphasis]. What matters is whether or not writing is used for the composition, transmission, and circulation of "cultural texts".[102]

The first place this discernibly occurred was the end of the third millennium BCE when the sagas of the Gilgamesh story were first collected into a continuous epic.[103] Egypt was not far behind in its production of what Assmann calls "the world's first truly literate texts", i.e. those not initially composed in conditions of orality.[104] By the term "cultural memory" Assmann means

> that form of collective memory that enables a society to transmit its central patterns of orientation in time, space, and divine and human worlds to future generations and by doing so to continue its identity over the sequence of generations. Cultural memory provides a kind of *connective structure* in both the social and temporal dimensions.
> … With the literatization of significant parts of cultural memory and the production of cultural texts that are *conceptually* literate (requiring writing already for

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[101] Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age", 384.

[102] *Ibid.*, 383. Aleida Assmann's work, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [1999]) provides the modern European complement to J. Assmann's *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization.*

[103] See also Jeffery Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

[104] Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age", 383.

composition and addressing a reader), a writing culture changes from sectorial to cultural literacy. Only at this point do the techniques of writing and reading affect the connective structure of a society.[105]

Thinking about this temporal reconfiguration of cultural memory along with the insights about the homeostatic nature of oral thought is again in line with the analytic shifts advocated by Ong and Goody. Assmann sums this up elsewhere by saying:

> Writing is a technology that makes cultural creations possible that would otherwise never exist, and that preserves cultural creations in memory, making accessible to later recourse what would otherwise be forgotten and have vanished. Writing, in short, is a factor of cultural creativity and cultural memory.[106]

Obviously this had major consequences in relation to the emergence of textualized historical and political records that began appearing as literate traditions took root in various urban societies. Not only did this bestow new temporal horizons on cultures who could engage in different forms of dialogue with their inherited traditions, but the permanence of writing also lent an increasingly authoritative aura to knowledge presented in permanent visual format (recalling, of course, that writing only emerged in agricultural societies with centralized forms of political authority).

But aside from enhanced administrative methods enabled by the invention of writing, the reconfiguration of the *connective structures* of cultural memory had especially important consequences in the realm of religion, particularly with the emergence of the textually-based "axial" or "world" religions". However I will discuss this shortly when summarizing how these perspectives entail a redescription of the 1st millennium BCE.

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[105] *Ibid.*, 383f., 385. Assmann is explicitly building upon the earlier work of Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (trans. L. Coser; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1941]). See also Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (21-33) for another discussion of Halbwachs.

[106] Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age", 380.

A final point to note is that while Donald defends his view that the externalization stage entailed a genuine shift in cognitive operations, he is also clear that unlike the mimetic and mythic layers that structure human life, the theoretic stage has by no means been a universal development over the last seven thousand years. It is not a genetic development, but rather a development related to power and the capacity for resource acquisition:

> Theoretic culture is dominated by a relatively small elite with highly developed literacy-dependent cognitive skills, and its principal instruments of control, such as codified laws, economic and bureaucratic management, and reflective scientific and cultural institutions, are external to the individual memory system. This type of representation has gradually emerged as the governing level of representation in some modern societies. Although it dominates science, engineering, education, government, and the management of the economy, it includes only a minority of humanity, and even in that minority, its influence is somewhat tenuous.[107]

This is yet another approach that allows us to redescribe the "critical" traditions of European thought not as inherently "superior" to "primitive" cultures, but as being enabled by vast networks of externalized knowledge resources.

Recall that the discussion was moved to Donald specifically in response to the question posed by David Christian and Colin Renfrew about how one can account for the startling pace of change in human history over the past 60,000 years in spite of the fact that our basic cognitive architecture has remained almost unchanged over that period. Thus, if we are looking for a paradigm for explaining historical change and cultural difference that does not rely on *Geist*, then the arguments of people such as Christian, Donald, Goody and Assmann surely provide one of the most compelling candidates: a multifaceted focus on the dynamics of communication and cultural memory in the long-term perspective.

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[107] Donald, M., "An Evolutionary Approach to Culture: Implications for the Study of the Axial Age" in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (ed. R. Bellah & H. Joas; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 47-76, here 67. See also Chapter 1 above regarding Donald's view that we are "hybrid minds" (n. 104).

This has been a long excursus, and much more could be said. But to get things back on track, I now want to be explicit about how the developments that described in this chapter problematize virtually all of the major assumptions on which the Jasperian version of the Axial Age is predicated. I will approach this by focusing on the tropes identified in the last chapter, but it is first necessary to address several other problems that suggest themselves from the foregoing discussion.

An initial problem is something not yet mentioned, but which has been raised by a number of other scholars, Assmann being one of them. This is the *synchronicity* of the axial shifts in Jaspers' original view, all of which he held to have occurred in the period 800-200 BCE. This is problematic primarily because it excludes Egypt from the sphere of axiality, even though Assmann convincingly demonstrates that Egyptian religious thought displayed the kind of "transcendence" that was supposed to characterize axial cultures vis-à-vis pre-axial ones.[108] Moreover, Jaspers also included Zoroaster within the axial frame, whereas modern scholarship now places him in the second millennium BCE, and there is by no means consensus that such a figure even existed at all.[109] This consideration leads Assmann to state that "My impression is that time matters too much in the theoretical debates on the Axial Age", even though some contemporary scholars continue to dwell on it.[110]

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[108] See e.g. Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age", 395ff.

[109] This point was made to me in firm fashion by Bruce Lincoln upon asking his opinion about the issues: "[I] have never paid the slightest attention to discussions of the scholarly myth/fantasy of some 'Axial Age.' In brief, the chronology posited for it is demonstrably wrong, since Zarathustra – if 'he' existed at all – was five centuries or more before the time said theories assign to him, in a misguided attempt to bring him into conjunction with Moses and Buddha, thereby construing 'evidence' for a Big Pattern and a Big Story. Why Jaspers & Co. want to do this is beyond me and it's never seemed important enough to probe the question. I'm content simply to ignore a trend that strikes me as foolish, even if relatively influential." (Personal communication, November 11, 2012. Reproduced with permission.)

[110] Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age", 375.

But the synchronicity issue is little more than a technicality compared to most of the other problems with the Axial Age construct. One of the most over-arching of these is *the category of "man"* that structures Jaspers' discourse, for he called the Axial Age the point at which "Man, as we know him today, came into being". This can be problematized from two angles. Firstly, the new evolutionary paradigm of history has made clear that there is no such thing as a "stable" human nature, either biologically or cognitively. As Smail notes, the human body is "the product of an unbroken genealogy that extends back far beyond the earliest hominins. Where, in this genealogy, is there ever a moment when we can point to the 'natural' human body?".[111] Smail elsewhere says that "Darwinian natural selection, after all, has a fundamentally *anti*-essentialist epistemology. That is the whole point. Species, according to Darwin, are not fixed entities with natural essences imbued by the creator".[112] Clearly this is a view that echoes Foucault's claim about "the death of man".

Using Donald's insights, one can extend this question to human cognitive capacities and ask when "truly human" thought began. Jaspers and many others have lauded the "critical" thought of axial cultures over the "world-accepting" thought of cultures that did not undergo the shift. But as Donald and Assmann help us to see, the cultural shifts of the 1st millennium BCE are completely related to the new technologies of externalized memory that were made possible by the invention of writing. Whilst these were integral for other processes of urbanization, Assmann makes clear that one of the most important consequences of writing was the way in which it altered the connective structures of cultural memory in societies where it occurred, giving them new temporal horizons for understanding the past, thus completely altering their relationship to the inherited traditions that constituted their identities. And as Donald has made clear, the cultural shifts associated

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[111] Smail & Shyrock, *Deep History*, 68.

[112] Smail, *Deep History and the Brain*, 124.

with the theoretic stage of human cognitive history are by no means universal or an anthropological necessity. They are what happens when human cognition can be performed in vast externalized networks of information, and when cultural ideation takes place within urban contexts rather than the very different existential situation of small-scale foraging societies. Thus, if Jaspers wanted to say that the 1st millennium BCE was the point at which the human relationship to the past began to be radically restructured through the use of external memory systems, and that this has been characteristic of much of the world since that time, then that would be one thing. But it is untenable to simply say that this was the point at which "authentic" humanity began to flourish.

Moreover, the political and ideological nature of the category of "man" has been systematically exposed by feminist and post-structuralist criticism. In much of the western tradition, "man" was simply a shorthand for the white, educated, modern, self-reflexive, heterosexual European male, and this kind of "man" was held to be the fullest representation of what it was to be human.[113] It has therefore been against this standard that non-Europe and non-urban cultures have historically been regarded as "inferior" to European thought and culture.

Jaspers was explicitly trying to move beyond this kind of Hegelian Eurocentrism – but just as he only managed a pluralized version of the metanarrative of *Geist*, so he only achieves a pluralized version of "man", who he construes as the "self-reflexive" thinker with historical agency. It is a view of humanity which still posits a sharp dividing line between cultures that engage in the expansive critical reflection enabled by traditions of literacy, and cultures whose traditions are structured more heavily by orally-constituted forms of thought. This point has also been made by Johann Arnason, who has drawn

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[113] For a treatment of this issue in relation to both post-structuralist critique as well as the European study of religion, see Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, esp. 275-316.

attention to the fact that Jaspers' "most condensed statement" of the Axial Age – i.e. the view that "man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations", experiencing "absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and the lucidity of transcendence" – is remarkably similar to Jaspers' own version of existential philosophy.[114] It is for this reason that Assmann has argued that

> The theory of the Axial Age is the creation of philosophers and sociologists, not of historians and philologists on whose research the theory is based. It is an answer to the question for the roots of modernity … [and] is not so much about "man as we know him" and his/her first appearance in time, but about "man as we want him to be" and the utopian goal of a universal civilized community.[115]

In addition to these issues, we can now return to the tropes reproduced by Hick and Jaspers and be clear about why they are untenable in light of the intellectual changes that have been described. The first trope I will address is the view of non-civilizational culture as living in a *Hobbesian dystopia*, which in Hobbes' classic formulation meant that primitive life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short".[116] As noted in the previous chapter, this is of particular importance for Jaspers' narrative, because of the way in which the Axial Age is seen to be *the birth of ethics* (cf. the affinity of this view with the fact that the "world" religions were formerly considered to be the "ethical" religions). This is also important in Hick's argument, because he spends a great deal of time establishing that the "ethical criterion" of his pluralistic hypothesis is that a society may be "judged by its moral fruits". This allows Hick to rank the post-axial religions as "higher" than non-axial religions.

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[114] Arnason, J., "The Axial Age and Its Interpreters: Reopening a Debate" in *Axial Civilizations and World History* (ed. J. Arnason, B. Wittrock, & S. Eisenstadt; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 19-49, here 31f. The Jaspers citation is from *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 2.

[115] Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age", 366 and 401.

[116] See above, ch. 4, n. 64.

It goes without saying that there are a number of problems with this view. Firstly, the lessons from communications history, especially regarding oral cultures, should make us alert that just *because a culture's ethical or moral views were never systematically codified in written texts, this does not mean that they did not exist.* Moreover, in recent anthropological studies it has been well acknowledged that non-urban cultures are *not* marked by unethical opportunism, but rather richly collaborative social networks that always includes ideas about proper behaviour and social responsibilities – the cornerstone of ethics – which become codified at multiple levels across a society's collective representations (especially in myths and rituals). Indeed, the intensely collaborative nature of our species has been widely recognized as constituting one of our key evolutionary advantages.[117] This advantage was accelerated with the emergence of language, which via the mechanism of narrative began to codify social obligations into the fabric of communal thought, eventually leading to the ethical prescriptions that were written down in the early textual religions. "Ethics" is therefore part of a universal pattern of human sociality, and not the preserve of the world's major religions.

Secondly, the lack of ethics before civilization was also tied to the notion that the political state was a necessary institution for the cultivation of morality, and that it was the prime force in cleansing humanity of its animalistic barbarism to produce "rational man". This view was never primarily grounded in empirical observation, and was rather a product of the discursive strategies of European imperialism employed in the justification of global political expansion. Whether it was the advancement of *Geist* or the spread of "civilization", viewing non-European others as devoid of ethical awareness was a key part of legitimating attempts at worldwide political hegemony.

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[117] See most recently Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: Liveright, 2012).

This leads the two other closely related tropes of *allochronism* and *primitive stasis*. As noted, the allochronic tendency highlighted by Johannes Fabian was a constitutive part of European anthropology from its inception. In what Fabian called "the denial of coevalness", anthropologists systematically removed themselves from their ethnographic accounts and presented the peoples under study as relics of a bygone age, even though the anthropologist's contact with such cultures implied an important degree of contemporaneity. This is related to the idea of primitive stasis because of the way that it assumes the "unchanging" nature of all small-scale, oral, non-urban cultures. Like Tylor and Lubbock's view, the primitive was taken to be a fossilized representation of stone age humanity. This was also tied to the pervasive notion that the true agents of history were urban, civilized societies, who were the only ones able to break out of the biological cycles of "mere nature" and take control of their fate. This denial of historical agency was another essential element in justifying the aggressive advance of European culture throughout the world, not to mention the justification it provided for slavery and other forms of economic and social subordination.

Before explaining the problem with these ideas, it is important to note that they do contain at least some degree of validity. It is first necessary to bear in mind that while the view of the primitive as static is, to contemporary eyes, a gross oversimplification, scholars in the nineteenth century had extremely little evidence to go on, and nothing in the way of genetic analysis or absolute chronometry in which to ground their speculations. Whilst they could hypothetically have made more favourable judgements about the moral and ethical qualities of anthropologically documented peoples, it is unrealistic to seriously expect that they should have done so.

Also, it would be bad scholarship not to recognize that Tylor was at least somewhat correct when he equated Australian Aboriginal culture with the conditions of stone age

humanity. They appear not to have developed any form of sedentary agriculture (even if they did have well established and highly effective traditions of ecological management),[118] nor did they develop any of the complex technologies that were constitutive of the shift to the highly populated urban societies that arose in worldzones at the centre of important trade networks. Moreover, are not contemporary scholars also doing a similar thing to Tylor when they use contemporary oral cultures to speculate about the lifeways of paleolithic humanity? I will address that shortly.

Notwithstanding these important concessions, the view of non-urban cultures as static is untenable in the new frame of human history. The rapid spread of human societies in the period since the African migration, and the intensity of the process of cultural differentiation across the world – which was infinitely greater than the slow pace of change even in early hominid culture – attest to the dynamic vitality of orally-constituted cultures. Even though oral thought is well documented as being necessarily "conservative" due to the limitations imposed by biological memory capacities and small populations, *oral cultures changed*. Smail laments that "Paleohistorians do daily battle with the assumption that human prehistory is marked by long periods of behavioral fixity and cultural stasis, not variety and change", noting that this tendency continued well into the latter part of the twentieth century in most textbooks on "the history of civilization".[119] Smail says elsewhere that

> When the past is simply a repository of the "natural," it is not a historical past: it is instead a mythical or cosmological past, providing yet another mirror in which humanity can search for its own reflection. Such an understanding of the past has no room for contingency, no room for change, and no way to understand the path-dependent nature of variation within systems.[120]

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[118] See e.g. Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People* (Chatswood, N.S.W.: Reed, 1995); and Stephen Pyne, *World Fire: The Culture of Fire on Earth* (2nd ed.; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 9-44.

[119] See Smail, *Deep History and the Brain*, 34, 99; and Smail & Shyrock, *Deep History*, 13.

[120] Smail & Shyrock, *Deep History*, 12.

The host of insights generated in the new evolutionary paradigms of history therefore completely undermine the myth of prehistoric stasis. Furthermore, when scholars today use examples of oral cultures to speculate about the possible conditions of pre-urbanized human culture, they do so with important caveats that explicitly deny any exact comparison between contemporary oral cultures and paleolithic ones. A representative caveat can be seen in Robert Bellah's comment about the Walbiri nation, an indigenous Australian society that he uses as an example of Donald's "mythic" (i.e. oral) stage of consciousness:

> I am not claiming that the Walbiri represent the ancient, unchanging, "true" Aboriginal tradition – everything we know about Aboriginal culture suggests that it was, like all other cultures, always open to continuous change – but rather that the Walbiri and other central desert tribes probably tell us most about what the continent-wide Aboriginal culture was like 200 years ago, on the verge of contact.[121]

The problem of primitive stasis is also closely related to the *developmental evolutionary hierarchy* that was implied by the Eurocentric ideology of progress, in which Europe was treated as the apex of humanity. In other words, the real problem with Tylor's view of Aboriginal culture as representative of paleolithic humanity is the metanarrative in which it was framed. Again, there is no denying the significant differences between small-scale oral cultures and more complex agricultural and industrial societies. But in the new evolutionary paradigm of human history, the unilinear narrative of progress has been replaced with a non-teleological approach, one that accounts for historical change with a much firmer focus on the material factors underpinning human cultural diversity and does not take any kind of cultural formation to be "normative humanity" (cf. again the "death of man" issue). Therefore, in this view European exceptionalism is seen as a fanciful myth, because all of Europe's recent

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[121] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 146.

achievements are the result of a deep history of global inter-cultural collaboration, rather than because there was anything inherently "superior" about European culture.[122]

Even though Jaspers explicitly denied both the stages of development suggested by Hegel and the European triumphalism of the progress narrative, his division between historical and non-historical peoples nevertheless operates with a clear developmental hierarchy of human cultures. In this hierarchy, civilizational cultures with "spiritualized" traditions of "critical" thought rank as the highest representative of what it is to be human, whereas cultures without writing are explicitly denied historical agency. The Axial Age is a still a Hegelian narrative, and has only been pluralized with regard to other major civilizational cultures. This remains the case with Hick.

The final trope that needs to be problematized is the view that orally based thought was *irrational.* This is closely correlated with the view that historical agency began with the emergence of civilization, and is closely tied with the view that only in civilizational cultures did the "modern" traditions of critical thought and spiritual reflection begin. Put bluntly, this is another gross oversimplification that has resulted from the textocentric biases that underpin the entire history of modern European thought. Using the insights of figures such as Donald, Ong, Assmann, and Eisenstein (and the many others listed in the supplementary bibliography), a very different perspective can be taken on the differences between orally-constituted cultural traditions and cultural tradition based on the use of written documents. This perspective pertains to all of the problems so far discussed, and could be framed roughly as follows.

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[122] On this issue, see Jack Goldstone, *Why Europe? The Rise of the West in World History, 1500-1850* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

The cultural memory of orally based cultures is subject to firm biological constraints. Thought cannot be contained outside the body, except in limited degree in collective embodied traditions, in the mnemonics of place, and in the small vocabularies of languages unsupported by external media (which were typically no larger than a few thousand words and subject to the dynamics of homeostasis as described by Ong and Goody).[123] This means that what is learned has to be remembered assiduously, encoded as well as possible in collective, mnemophilic forms such as narrative, song, and ritual. This accounts (a) for the conservative nature of orally-constituted thought and the tight controls typically imposed on innovation; (b) for the apparent historical horizon in oral cultures of only several generations, before which point the past is conceptualized as a primordial realm; and (c) for the perceived lack of traditions of criticism, a lack which has historically provided the cornerstone for the view that they were not rational. Moreover, the perishability of purely verbal language means that historians have *no access whatsoever* to any preliterate forms of thought that may have offered strident critiques of existing social orders or posed revolutionary ideas about the nature of the cosmos.[124] Again, the rapid cultural differentiation of human groups suggests that far from unchanging, orally-constituted symbolic universes were regularly subjected to revision. This is further suggested by the fact that humans have had the same cognitive architecture for at least 60,000 years, if not considerably longer, and have thus had very similar capacities for symbolic imagination during that period.

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[123] On the mnemonics of place, see e.g. Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996). See further *Senses of Place* (ed. S. Feld & K. Basso; Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996). See also Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 148 (citing Fred Meyers on the Australian Pintupi people). On the role played by ritual in cultural mnemonics, see also *ibid.*, 132 (citing Donald on mimetic culture); J. Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity.*

[124] In this connection, I note the fascinating volume *Becoming Human: Innovation in Prehistoric and Spiritual Culture* (ed. C. Renfrew & A. Morely; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Therefore, the major differences between "world religions" and "primitive" religions – i.e. between orally-constituted thought and cultural traditions supported by written language – *is based most fundamentally on the different media through which the construction and maintainance of their cultural identity could play out.* The externalization of memory enabled by writing revolutionized the human relationship to the past in societies where it occurred, and was the fundamental precondition for the forms of "critical" thought that have been so valorized in the history of European scholarship. Moreover, writing only occurred in urbanized agricultural societies, which entailed entirely different existential pressures from smaller oral societies and therefore produced different kinds of philosophical thought, further accounting for the "world rejecting" character of the world religions vis-à-vis the different character of cultural traditions from smaller oral societies.

Assmann has demonstrated the impact of writing on the connective structures of cultural memory in the first civilizations where it emerged, which helps to account for the "historical" and "critical" character of the axial cultures, who were in conversation with past traditions in a way impossible where such traditions were not preserved in writing. Thus, *contra* the traditional view that the rise of the world religions coincides with "the birth of the individual" or "the discovery of transcendence", Assmann instead suggests with more nuance that

> writing is a technology that restructures not only thought but also, under certain cultural circumstances, the whole network of relations between human beings, man and society, man and cosmos, man and god, and god and cosmos.[125]

Ong has convincingly uncovered the unconscious epistemological biases inherent in highly textualized social world, which further helps to understand why orally-based thought has been so consistently denigrated in the European imagination; and in doing so, he has

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[125] Assmann, "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age", 395.

suggested much more nuanced ways of articulating the differences between orally-constituted thought and thought that employs external memory systems. Eisenstein helps us to realize just how fundamental technologies of communication were in the development of European modernity – it was not some "genius" inherent in the "European spirit" that brought about the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, but the enhanced informational networks enabled by the invention of typography. And using the insights of Donald and Christian, we can see all of these changes as part of the long-term patterns of collective learning that have been the evolutionary hallmark of *Homo sapiens*.

These insights allow the argument that the thought of literate cultures is not "more rational" than the thought of oral cultures, nor was it more ethical, nor was it more authentically religious, as Jaspers, Hick, and many others have argued. This is a naïve and oversimplified view when the above factors are taken into consideration. Rather, the differences between small-scale oral cultures and urbanized literate cultures should be viewed in relation to the fact that literate cultures had access to increasingly massive archives of accumulated knowledge to which they could devote their intellectual and spiritual energies, and that this in turn shaped their thoughts about the world.

In other words, the 1st millennium BCE is *not* the flourishing of "true" humanity, and it is not the singular "axis" of world history – it is simply one of many flashpoints in the fascinating dialectic between distributed cognition and cultural memory, a process that has been going on for millions of years. Donald provides a fascinating redescription of the 1st millennium BCE in line with these different perspectives:

> The Axial Age was, above all, a period when … Humanity, or rather, *that part of humanity confronted with the need to solve the problems of an increasingly urban and literate society*, was experimenting with novel ways to view the human world. For some time, these societies had been trying to cope with a new way of life that was different from anything that had come before. The old visions and worldviews were apparently not adequate to the task of carrying people through these new times. Perhaps old ideas failed to make societies cohere as they had in the past, in simpler tribal structures.

> Perhaps they failed in the important task of keeping the peace or establishing an enduring social order. These stresses all present cognitive challenges to the basic assumptions that people make when they live in a community and share resources.[126]

Even though one could frame the issues in a different way from that of Donald, this way of viewing the 1st millennium BCE effectively unstitches the idealist version Axial Age. Jaspers obviously made many legitimate sociological observations about the similarities between the religious traditions that took root in the 1st millennium BCE. But *the narrative in which he emplotted those events* was predicated on a transcendental spark of consciousness that awoke humanity and set it on the path of history – and virtually all of the assumptions that sustain this view are indefensible in the context modern historical scholarship. On the one hand, it takes textual cultures as the fullest representation of what it is to be human; on the other hand, it is based on views about non-textual cultures that have their root in the racially grounded categories of nineteenth-century thought. Not only are such assumptions counter to the pluralistic ethos that animated Hick and Jaspers, but they are in most cases demonstrably false.

This is why a different way of emplotting the changes of the Axial Age is required that does not rely on a *deus ex machina* "breakthrough" into "reflexive" consciousness and historical agency. I believe that a plausible alternative paradigm is provided by the one developed in this chapter. Having now made this argument, I turn in the Conclusion to what all of this means for evaluating Hick's pluralist theory of religions, and what it means for the premises of theological pluralism in general vis-à-vis the critical standards of contemporary scholarship.

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[126] Donald, "An Evolutionary Approach to Culture", 74 (italics added).

## Don't Say All Religions Are Equal Unless You Really Mean It:
## Theological Pluralism and the Academic Study of Religion

As has been stressed throughout this dissertation, Jaspers and Hick were scholars who advocated the highest standards of critical scholarship. Even though their arguments were primarily philosophical, they were also intended to be persuasive at a broad historical level. Hick declared his attempt to "take full account of the data and theories of the human sciences", thus inviting critique from non-theological perspectives, and Jaspers likewise attempted to ground his reading of the 1st millennium BCE within the fullest frame of scientific and historical knowledge available in the mid-twentieth century.

Yet importantly, as highly intelligent scholars who were well aware that new information was continually coming to light, both acknowledged the potential need to revise their arguments. Jaspers stated that:

> I should like to maintain an awareness of the dependence of our cognition upon current standpoints, methods, and facts and, thereby, of the particularity of all cognition; [and] I should like to hold the question open and leave room for possible new starting-points in the search for knowledge, which we cannot imagine in advance.[1]

Hick makes a similar concession in the preface of *An Interpretation of Religion*, the first sentence of which is particularly revealing in light of the foregoing chapters:

> In concentrating on the 'great world religions' I have given primal religion less attention than I ought to have. However the aim has not been to produce something complete or definitive, but to make a preliminary exploration of a range of problems that are only now entering the purview of western philosophy of religion, and to suggest a possible approach to them. Those who find this approach inadequate or misleading will I hope feel under obligation to propose another, so that the various options can be progressively clarified and their merits considered.[2]

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[1] Jaspers, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, 18.

[2] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, xiii.

In my view, the analysis of this dissertation makes clear that the arguments of Jaspers and Hick are indeed "inadequate" readings of human history, and that changes in the state of knowledge have unquestionably necessitated the "new starting points" of which Jaspers spoke (particularly with regard to the notion of an "axial" dividing line in history). It should also be clear by now that this study has largely been an attempt to take up Hick's challenge of suggesting alternative explanatory approaches to religious history should his own argument be found wanting, something evident particularly in the extended discussion of Chapter 5. This was undertaken not just as a matter of good academic practice – i.e. because the rejection of any argument should always include an attempt to suggest alternative approaches to the question at hand – but also because, in the present case, suggesting ways of re-narrativizing the 1st millennium BCE has the potential to bring together many strands of contemporary scholarship and help move the academic study of religion in promising new directions, both at a research level and in the classroom.

I will expand on this claim shortly. But first, as a way of summarizing the results of this study, it is important to provide a final statement about the problems inherent in the "great traditions" model of theological pluralism represented by figures such as Jaspers and Hick. Recalling Hick's comment, cited numerous times in this work, that a contemporary philosopher of religion must today take account of "the experience and thought of the whole human race", the unavoidable conclusion is that his theory is deficient in this regard. This is because by focusing so heavily on the post-axial "great world religions" Hick makes normative a certain form of religion – one that arose in the context of urbanization and empire, and, moreover, one underpinned by the technology of writing – thereby making this the measuring stick of "authentic" religion. Again, while the "great traditions" may represent a majority of human beings in recent millennia, they represent a tiny minority of the ideational communities that have existed throughout the long stretch of human history.

Moreover, beyond the way that these issues conflict with his self-imposed methodological parameters, Hick's focus on the post-axial traditions – and particularly his arguments for their superiority – also conflict at a fundamental level with his intention to move beyond Eurocentric paradigms for the treatment of religious history. As was made clear in Chapters 3 and 4, behind Hick's seemingly positive focus on the "great" traditions lies a wide-ranging (and largely unarticulated) set of assumptions about non-urban cultures that are not only empirically dubious, but which are also the legacy of the racialized structures of European discourse. This is, of course, true for the world religions paradigm at large. These assumptions therefore remain intimately tied to the logic that sustained the ideology of European exceptionalism that Hick and Jaspers were trying to overcome. Even though Hick attempted to diffuse any negative implications with regard to "archaic" and "pre-literate" traditions, stressing that he attached "no religious stigma" to them, I demonstrated that the logic of his argument clearly suggests otherwise, and that this is, unfortunately, a superficial concession that has not penetrated his thinking in any meaningful way. As such, Hick's concession that he gave "primal religion less attention that he ought" can now be seen as a rather drastic understatement of a problem that, when scrutinized properly, undermines his whole argument.[3]

However another claim I have been making throughout this work is that Hick was certainly not racist himself, and that he only argued the way he did because of his inherited discourses – i.e. because of the historically constituted assumptions of the world religions paradigm and other European traditions of historical and anthropological thought. The fact that the negative implications of these assumptions remained invisible to Hick (and indeed to most of his contemporaries) is thus a perfect illustration of the way that discourse functions as analysed by scholars such as Foucault. I also suggested in Chapter 1 that when

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[3] On the term "primal" religion, see above, ch. 4, n. 80.

the pluralist paradigm began to crystalize across parts of western culture in the period after the 1960s, it was suffused with a highly-charged liberal, democratic sensibility that I called "the affective sentiment of pluralism", something reflected in the pluralist emphasis on non-triumphalist theological discourses that prioritize experience over doctrine in the question of religious diversity.

Another example that supports these considerations is the fact that, as borne out by Hick's autobiography, the impetus for his argument came directly from his encounter with people from *other major religious traditions*. Whereas Huston Smith had experienced first-hand the religion of an indigenous culture, and thus counted "primal" religions in the same category as the major textual religions from the 1970s onwards, Hick never had such an immediate encounter.

In my view, these factors explain why someone like Hick – who actively opposed racism in both word and deed – was able to consider the argument of *An Interpretation of Religion* an egalitarian reading of history, despite the fact that it clearly perpetuates many of the Eurocentric assumptions that he was trying to move beyond. The same applies to Jaspers, Cantwell Smith, and many other liberal religionists.

Be that as it may, however, I am not trying to rescue the pluralist argument. I am simply attempting to understand a contradiction that struck me as intriguing early in my research, and it is hoped that the results of this curiosity have generated productive insights into an important strand of contemporary religious discourse. Indeed, far from wishing to rescue Hick, it is surely the case that the great traditions model of pluralism – including the Axial Age narrative – is totally irredeemable in the context of modern scholarship (albeit not for the reasons surveyed in Chapter 2), and that it can only be regarded as the relic of an intellectual era before evolutionary and postcolonial questions had properly begun to impose themselves on the agenda of studying long-term religious history.

So then, what's the moral of the story? Although a somewhat playful question, my suggestion would be that if one treats the example of Hick as a cautionary tale about not getting so easily swept up in warm and fuzzy pluralistic constructs like the Axial Age without more thorough critical scrutiny (a lesson that many scholars today would still do well to heed), then the moral is as follows: don't say all religions are equal unless you really mean it.

This deliberately provocative answer, however, obviously begs the question of what it actually means to say that "all religions are equal". While I have no intention of approaching this question philosophically or theologically, reflecting on it is a useful way of springboarding from my appraisal of Hick into some of the wider methodological issues that have been broached in this dissertation.

Consider again the example of Huston Smith. As noted, Smith's form of pluralism was somewhat different from Hick's. Although the original 1958 edition of *The Religions of Man* was structured by an Axial Age/world religions logic, by the time a new edition appeared in 1990 as *The World's Religions*, the work also included a chapter on "primal" religions. To repeat a portion of the comment cited in Chapter 4, Smith said:

> I knew I had to do that because the religions I had dealt with in the first edition were all part of the field we call "historical religions," which have sacred text and histories recorded in writing. But these religions are only the tip of the iceberg. They are only about four thousand years old, whereas the primal, tribal, oral religions can be traced back archeologically into the twilight zone of prehistory, perhaps forty or fifty thousand years ago. To omit them from the first edition of my book was inexcusable, and I am glad I will not go to my grave with that mistake uncorrected. The added chapter honors the primal religions as fully equal to the historical ones.[4]

The claim that such religions are "fully equal" is certainly a more encompassing position than Hick's original theory (even if Hick might now agree with Smith). However, even this

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[4] Smith, *A Seat At The Table*, 4. See also *The World's Religions* (x, xi) for similar statements.

expanded pluralism remains problematic in relation to several critical issues in the academic study of religion, particularly those sketched out in Chapter 1 concerning theological essentialism and the notion of an irreducible, *sui generis* sacred. This is important to note given the wide salience of the pluralist mood across contemporary culture, especially because H. Smith's more expanded form of pluralism seems to represent the position of a growing number of people in the twenty-first century.[5]

To recap the critique of essentialism, Russell McCutcheon and others have argued that the claim that "religion" is somehow a unique, *sui generis* domain of existence is a rhetorical strategy that was primarily deployed in response to the perceived threat of "reductionist" explanations of religion (a strategy still prevalent today). The claim was made famously by Friedrich Schleiermacher in response to Kant and the Enlightenment, and received influential rearticulation a century later by Schleiermacher's disciple, Rudolf Otto, who stressed throughout *Das Heilige* that the Holy was a totally *sui generis* phenomenon. This served as the de facto motto of the phenomenological tradition represented by figures such as Gerhardus van der Leeuw, Wilhelm B. Kristensen, and of course Mircea Eliade, whose perspective was the dominant one in the field of religious studies in the second half of the twentieth century.

However, because the claim had this reactionary character, its proponents rarely attempted to defend it from a rigorous historical perspective. Instead, they simply *assumed* the ontological reality of the sacred as an *a priori* fact, usually relying as evidence on the notion that certain "experiences" are somehow "unmistakably" religious. The question of a metanarrative of religious history did at least receive some attention in the days of Tiele and

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[5] I note Jacob Olupona's comment about "the very sacred spiritual traditions of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and wherever indigenous people inhabit the earth" (Olupona, J., "Preface" in *Beyond Primitivism*, xiv). To me this seems like a good representation of many contemporary religious liberals, given that the postcolonial agenda has asserted itself in a general enough way to render the "great traditions" model of pluralism somewhat unpalatable, even for those not familiar with critical academic debates.

Otto, although this is because they subscribed to various forms of the Hegelian paradigm of world history at a time when the classification of religions was made against the background of the developmental progress narrative (which posited a move from animist religion to ethical religion, culminating in Protestant Christianity). As discussed in Chapter 3, this diachronic view of religious history was replaced in the mid-twentieth-century with a synchronic view whereby religion did not "develop", but was instead universal across time and space. Because of this assertion of universality, the question of providing a plausible historical account largely fell off the agenda. Correspondingly, the emphasis of synchronically oriented essentialists began to shift away from speculating about the origins of religion (typically a "reductive" exercise, in their view) to focusing on the "living world religions". Aside from the other discursive currents already described, this is another factor that led Huston Smith to his earlier view that primal religion was "unimportant" (a view, let us not forget, even praised at one point by Wilfred Cantwell Smith).[6] And even after H. Smith's turn towards oral cultures in the 1970s, he then simply agreed with Eliade that "If God does not evolve, neither, it seems, does *homo religiosus*, not in any important respect".[7]

In other words, within the essentialist tradition (particularly since the synchronic view became dominant) there have been few attempts to historically justify claims about the *sui generis* nature of the beliefs and practices that modern westerners call "religious". This problem has become all the more pressing today given the substantial changes in our understanding of the deep evolutionary history of humanity, as suggested by the discussion of Donald and others in Chapter 5 (a discussion which, I might add, barely scratched the surface of literature now available on the topic). Despite this, however, the academic study of religion has remained largely structured around the premise that religion *is* a unique

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[6] See above, ch. 3, p. 146.

[7] Smith, H., *The World's Religions*, 368.

domain of human life, and that it should be treated differently from how scholars treat other forms of human behaviour. When demonstrating this assertion, critics usually point not only to the early influence of Eliade and others on the formation of the discipline, but also to the overwhelming prevalence since that time of descriptive, phenomenological approaches in the field of religious studies at both a pedagogical level and in the professional associations of the field. As they argue, this is still broadly the case even in the twenty-first century.[8]

However Eliade himself, it must be noted before continuing, is an important exception to the general lack of historical focus amongst synchronic essentialists. While his most widely read works, *The Sacred and the Profane* and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, are based upon his command of a vast set of data concerning the history of religions, they are ahistorical in their presentation and seek to demonstrate the universality of the sacred, not its historical development. But in his three-volume *History of Religious Ideas*, Eliade offered an impressively detailed presentation of religious history spanning from the depths of the paleolithic until the Reformation.[9] This makes his claims about the universality of the sacred more complex.

Given that a major problem with most essentialist arguments has been a neglect to seriously engage the question of the evolutionary origins of religion, the first chapter of *A History of Religious Ideas* is particularly interesting. Entitled "In the Beginning…: Magico-

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[8] See e.g. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*; Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*; and Bruce Lincoln, "The (Un)disipline of Religious Studies" in *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 131-136. J. Z. Smith also notes a 1961 announcement from scholars in the History of Religions field at the University of Chicago that "It is the contention of the discipline of the History of Religions that a valid case can be made for the interpretation of transcendence as transcendence." Smith elsewhere notes in a similar connection that "I find the language of transcendence distressingly vague" (both quotations from *On Teaching Religion*, respectively: "Are Theological Studies and Religious Studies Compatible?" [76]; and "'Religion' and 'Religious Studies': No Difference at All" [84]).

[9] Eliade, M., *A History of Religious Ideas* (3 vols; trans. W. R. Trask [1-2]; A. Hiltebeitel & D. Apostolos-Cappadona [3]; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978-1985). Eliade indicated that he planned a final volume on the "archaic and traditional religions of America, Africa, and Oceania", though it never appeared (3: xi). See the bibliography for full references.

Religious Behavior of the Paleanthropians", Eliade states that ever since the domestication of fire around half a million years ago – which for him marks "the definitive separation of the Paleanthropians from their zoological predecessors" – humans have had some form of religion:

> The first technological discoveries – the transformation of stone into instruments for attack and defense, the mastery over fire – not only insured the survival and development of the human species; they also produced a universe of mythico-religious values and fed the creative imagination.[10]

Yet despite this nuanced consideration of material factors at play in the development of human cognition, Eliade's view remained ultimately ahistorical. This is made clear at the outset of volume 1, where he summarized his perspective by saying: "In short, the 'sacred' is an element in the structure of consciousness, and not a stage in the history of consciousness".[11] In many respects, this represents the ultimate statement of the view that religion is a human universal – the manifestation of an unchanging, atemporal, Platonic reality that is qualitatively distinct from the "profane" level of existence.

Therefore despite Eliade's incorporation of an extremely wide set of data, both cross-culturally and cross-temporally, his key assumptions nevertheless remain in fundamental tension with contemporary social-scientific scholarship and contemporary theoretical paradigms.[12] This tension has only become greater in recent decades as scholarship on the evolutionary origins of *Homo sapiens* has continued to problematize the notion of human exceptionalism, particularly with regard to the lack of any clear point at which "the human"

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[10] Eliade, M., *A History of Religious Ideas*, 1: 4. Eliade is also clear about degree of speculation entailed by the paucity of evidence from the period, see esp. 5-8.

[11] *Ibid.*, xiii. It is also worth noting (as scholars like McCutcheon complain) that Eliade never defined "the sacred" throughout his entire career, with the closest being his circular definition that it is "the opposite of the profane" (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 10; see McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 51f.). It is little wonder that J. Z. Smith finds this kind of talk "distressingly vague".

[12] McCutcheon provides a detailed demonstration of this claim in *Manufacturing Religion*.

emerges on the evolutionary stage (e.g.: do "humans" begin with language, or with fire?). And given that Eliade's position also reflects the general pluralist claim that all religions are responses to a "transcendent" reality, and that this is "universal" across humanity – a view widely held both inside and outside the academy – then again, recognizing this tension is particularly important.

All of this again comes back to the question of methods for the study of religion in a non-theological context. As the foregoing chapters make clear, I fall squarely on the side of McCutcheon and others who argue that "religion" is a label used by contemporary westerners to conceptually group together a set of ordinary human behaviours, and that correspondingly these behaviours do not require a qualitatively unique mode of understanding. To me this is the unavoidable implication of contemporary scholarship – not simply with regard to the natural and human sciences, but also in light of the new standard of critical awareness regarding our inherited modes of inquiry.

In other words, for anybody concerned to reconcile their views about religious history with the current scope of knowledge – admittedly something in which not all people are interested, but a standard to which all professional scholars should be held – then the only way to see "all religions as equal" (i.e. to posit no qualitative hierarchy between the cultural traditions that make up the "religions" of the world) is surely to see them all as discursively constructed socio-symbolic systems whose *similarities* can be accounted for by the fact of humanity's common cognitive architecture (and therefore our common capacities for symbolic representation), and whose *differences* can be accounted for by the complicated dynamics of the formation of cultural identity over time. This way of looking at the question does not require the existence of something "extra" beyond the normal pressures imposed on human behaviour and cognition. Correspondingly, "religion" needs to be treated like any other set of human behaviours, a commitment which entails the

development of complex theoretical paradigms that move well beyond claims about the nature of reality contained within most cultural traditions – and indeed beyond Hick's or Eliade's non-reductive essentialism.

However, when surveying religious studies as an academic field (to say nothing of the wider public discourse on religion), it is clear that this perspective remains significantly marginal.[13] Perhaps this is because to follow through on the implications of this perspective would, in many cases, radically undermine the central assumptions in most people's self-understanding, particularly when those views are based upon the idea that there is a "transcendent" dimension of human life.[14] In this sense, I feel that McCutcheon is on the mark when he argues that the discourse on *sui generis* religion is motivated ultimately by "the politics of nostalgia" in a world of rapid change.

While I accept that this is a loaded evaluation of the situation, it is not offered as a definitive assertion; it is simply offered as summation of the position I have come to over the course of this study. But as noted above, my aim here is to remain focused on methodological issues, not philosophical ones; so exploring this claim further would take things in an inappropriate direction. As such, I want to close the discussion by reflecting on some of the methodological directions that I think are implied by the analysis of this dissertation, both at a research level (i.e. the level of knowledge produced by professional academics in books, articles, and the like), as well as in pedagogical contexts.

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[13] As Michael Stausberg notes, most contemporary theories of religion come from outside the discipline itself ("Prospects in Theories of Religion", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 [2010]: 223-238).

[14] Jacques Monod captures something of what I mean when he says that the implications of modern knowledge "[subvert] every one of the mythical or philosophical ontongenies upon which the animist traditions, from the Australian aborigines to the dialectical materialists, has based morality, values, rights, duties, prohibitions." (Monod, J., *Chance and Necessity* [London: Fontana, 1974], 160; cited in Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 48.) As Monod rightly suggests here, the implications also have the potential undermine worldviews that are not "religious" in the normal sense of term – another example of which I would contend being certain contemporary liberal discourses that employ the notion of a universal "human nature" as the basis of ethical and moral judgement.

At a research level, one of the most immediate requirements within the critical sector of religious studies is to provide a comprehensive deconstruction of the Axial Age paradigm. Many other discursive components of the history of western scholarship on religion have received thorough genealogical treatment, including the world religions paradigm, the trope of "experience", the discourse on *sui generis* religion, and indeed the category of "religion" itself, to name only a few. Tim Murphy has even mapped out a comprehensive genealogy of the discipline of religious studies which stretches from Hegel to the twenty-first century, allowing one to see better how the aforementioned discursive components fit together. Many other works complement this perspective, notably those of Tomoko Masuzawa, Brent Nongbri, J. Z. Smith, and Bruce Lincoln. Yet while these studies are all extremely important, the Axial Age has not featured in any of the literature.[15]

In my view, Chapter 4 represents the necessary starting point of this endeavour by focusing on Jaspers' original formulation of the Axial Age construct. But a more thorough treatment needs to trace how the concept has been developed in the alternative trajectory first established by Schmuel Eisenstadt, which is now represented in Robert Bellah's new work, *Religion in Human Evolution* (and its companion volume, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*). As demonstrated through the engagement with Donald and Assmann, two of Bellah's key interlocutors, the framework that he has established for the evolutionary treatment of cultural history – even if one would contest certain elements of it – presents a rich opportunity for productive redescriptions of periods such as the 1st millennium BCE. Conversely, however, as suggested in Chapter 1, the fact that the discourse remains

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[15] I have discovered a few disparate pieces which challenge the logic of the Axial Age paradigm, e.g. Antony Black, "The 'Axial Period': What Was It and What Does It Signify?", *The Review of Politics* 70 (2008): 23-39; and John Boy & John Torpey, "Inventing the Axial Age: the Origins and Uses of a Historical Concept", *Theory and Society* 42 (2013): 241–259. However, while both are interesting essays (the latter especially providing a thorough intellectual history of the concept and a good recognition of the problems), neither are engaged with the "method and theory" sector of religious studies, which in my view is the discursive site best equipped to deconstruct the original Jasperian paradigm.

structured around the concept of an "axial" age represents a significant problem that has not been sufficiently addressed, and shows that several of Jaspers' original assumptions still linger in the background.[16]

A similar assessment of Bellah's work was also suggested by J. Z. Smith at the 2011 American Academy of Religion meeting, where he discussed *Religion in Human Evolution* at a public forum in uncommonly praiseworthy terms, even calling it one of the most "complex, comprehensive, and provocative" achievements in the contemporary study of religion.[17] But Smith also expressed a number of concerns, particularly with regard to the continued use of the Axial Age paradigm and the typology of religions that it implies. Although he could only broach the issue quickly given the format, he did at least suggest the need for establishing better taxonomic criteria by which to group religious traditions, ones that:

> [organize] the data more comprehensively than appeals to such ahistorical elements as "critical spirit," "theoretic culture," and the like. This latter observation holds not only for Mesopotamia, but even more urgently with respect to non-writing, traditional cultures.[18]

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[16] It is also important to stress that the Jasperian version of the Axial Age has contemporary currency beyond academic debates. The most prominent example is Karen Armstrong's *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2006), which effectively argues that "compassion" first arose properly in the Axial Age. The work was even published in German with the title *Die Achsenzeit: Vom Ursprung der Weltreligionen* (Berlin: Siedler, 2006). Another work aimed at a non-specialist audience (published by the same house) is Stephen S. Hall, *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2010), whose blurb declares that Hall "gives us a dramatic history of wisdom, from its sudden emergence in four different locations (Greece, China, Israel, and India)". See 23f. for Hall's brief mention that Jaspers lies at the base of his thinking about the period.

[17] Indeed, Smith said that: "This new work is superlative in its range and readings of data and theoretical proposals; in the boldness and fruitfulness of its connections and comparisons"; and also that "Bellah has attained that rarest of academic achievements, his work is a damned good read!". He went on to say that "it will take much more than the past month's reading and re-readings to take its measure fully. I have read enough to know that such an effort, on our part, is both required and fully justified … we must all be grateful for Bellah's unimaginable labours on behalf of all students of religion." Smith, J. Z., "Conversation with Robert Bellah on *Religion in Human Evolution*", AAR Annual Meeting, San Francisco, November 20, 2011. I was present at the session, although I have cited the text from a copy that was (thankfully!) scanned and put online (http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/12/21/a-damned-good-read/); last accessed June 3, 2013. See Chapter 1 above for my evaluation of Bellah's work vis-à-vis other recent evolutionary studies of religion (n. 85).

[18] *Ibid.*

Smith's comments align well with the results of this dissertation – for as I have attempted to demonstrate, there is nothing "axial" about the 1st millennium BCE when viewed within the larger context of human history.[19] As such, Bellah's typology of "tribal", "archaic", and "axial" religions remains deeply unsatisfying. Although he does, *prima facie*, emphatically repudiate any notion of a hierarchy between these groups, his tripartite classification nevertheless fails to capitalize on the potential redescriptions that his wider framework allows.[20] Moreover, a close reading of *Religion in Human Evolution* reveals that Bellah still views the 1st millennium BCE as an "axial" dividing line in history in a manner that is surely at odds with the implications of his analysis.[21] This represents the major lacuna in the contemporary Axial Age debate: namely, a lack of proper critical engagement with the central categories by which the paradigm is structured, particularly the way in which these categories might be analysed from postcolonial and other post-structuralist perspectives.[22] Were this to be undertaken, I am convinced that new ways of discussing religious and cultural history would emerge that are more in line with other fields of contemporary scholarship.

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[19] Another comment in Smith's address that aligns with the concerns of this dissertation is his statement: "I must confess that, early on, I was troubled by Jaspers' lack of a convincing causal formulation … As Jaspers described it, the 'Age' appeared to be more of a miracle than an event."

[20] A statement representative of Bellah's disavowal of any hierarchy is: "religious evolution does not mean a progression from worse to better. We have not gone from 'primitive religion' that tribal peoples have had to 'higher religions' that people like us have had" (*Religion in Human Evolution*, xxii-xxiii).

[21] One particular comment that sounds uncomfortably close to Jaspers is: "The cultural effervescence of this period led to new developments in religion and ethics but also in the understanding of the natural world, the origins of science. For these reasons we call this period axial" (xix). Bellah elsewhere describes "the primary concern of this book" as being "the transition from archaic to axial" (255). This position is rendered more explicable if one notes that Bellah's original view of religious history, offered in his widely read 1964 essay "Religious Evolution", was effectively a summary of the Jasperian narrative. In the essay, he even pronounced that with the Axial Age "it is for the first time possible to conceive of man as such" ("Religious Evolution" in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). For a useful reading of the differences between Bellah's early essay and his recent *Religion in Human Evolution*, see José Casanova, "Religion, the Axial Age, and Secular Modernity in Bellah's Theory of Religious Evolution" in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, 191-221 (see 193-198).

[22] I note again in this connection Jack Tsonis, "Review: *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*" in the *Alternative Religion and Spirituality Review* 3 (2012): 262-267. See above, ch. 1, n. 86 (see also the following note of Chapter 1 for the critical asides that have been made from within the Axial Age debate itself).

Proposing alternative terms of classification is, admittedly, a much more difficult task than pointing out the need to do so. Throughout this work I have employed categories such as "small-scale oral cultures" and "large urban societies" in order to draw attention to specific differences that were salient in the context of the issues being explored; yet these categories are hardly sufficient to group together all ideational communities throughout history, nor would they necessarily be appropriate if one set about comparing cultural traditions with different analytical interests.[23]

But what they do suggest, I think, is that at the very least scholars should move away from classifying cultural traditions according to such criteria as *self-reflexive thought* ("axial" religions), *universality* ("world" religions), *development* ("primal" religions), and, for that matter, *place* ("indigenous" traditions).[24] This is particularly the case for any treatment such as Bellah's that attempts to understand modern human cultural practice within a deep evolutionary context, but the lesson could be well applied across the board. As Smith emphasized at the AAR, any long-term approach should be one "in which

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[23] It is not possible to discuss the complex methodological and theoretical dimensions of comparison, although I note as one of the most insightful discussions on this topic J. Z. Smith's "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion" in *Relating Religion*, 160-178. See also the useful essays in the volume *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (ed. C. Patton & B. Ray; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). The title echoes another of J. Z. Smith's seminal pieces, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells" (in *Imagining Religion*, 19-35), which set the agenda for the contributions and is reproduced as a prologue.

[24] I have several reservations about the term "indigenous". Chief among them is that using "indigeneity" as a comparative criterion does not imply fruitful ways of grouping other traditions that are not deemed to fit this category – it is too ad hoc and does not allow for any systematic reconstruction of other of categories by which cultural traditions are classified. For example, there is no discernable way to alter the category of a "world" religion by using the same logic from which "primal" was shifted to "indigenous". The latter term is well entrenched in public discourse, and does have value in certain academic and political contexts; but as an analytic category deployed in the interests of comparison, it does not seem to be particularly helpful. It could also be argued that the label somewhat clumsily brings together a very wide variety of cultural groups, many of whom have long histories of migration and conflict, and are thus often not "indigenous" to a place in the somewhat simplistic way that is implied at present. All of these comments are made, I must add, having considered James Cox's rigorous attempt at justifying the category. While his approach is extremely well thought out, and productive in many respects, I am still not convinced that "indigenous" is the best label for the social and cultural groups he is talking about (see *From Primitive to Indigenous*, 53-74). The main problem, in my view, is that scholars pushing for the discursive inclusion of indigenous traditions (such as Cox and Olupona) are focused almost exclusively on *contemporary* cultural groups. Were there a more thoroughgoing attempt to devise categories in light of the fuller scope of human history, then I believe more dynamic language would emerge.

'microdistinctions' prevail (as opposed to 'quantum leaps,' 'revolutions' and the like)". In the case of Bellah's narrative, a new model needs to be established that categorizes human cultural groups using a far more differentiated and theoretically robust set of primary taxa than "tribal", "archaic" and "axial". While the former two, tribal and archaic, do at least have some utility as qualifiers in more complicated descriptions (archaic especially), the notion of "axiality" has no place whatsoever in high level academic scholarship on religion, and its continued usage is almost something of an embarrassment.

Instead, the tentative categories employed in this work attempt to direct comparative focus towards the relation between material circumstances and the construction of cultural identity. Expanding this approach would not simply be a matter of devising new labels to smoothly replace old categories; rather, it would entail developing a complex theoretical vocabulary with which scholars could more adequately deal with and represent the "microdistinctions" in cultural difference to which Smith rightly directs us.

Making a further case for this approach is not possible here, as it would require detailed discussion of both a wide range of material and a complicated set of methodological proposals. Perhaps beginning any act of broadscale cultural comparison by first thinking in terms of whether a group's cultural identity is maintained orally or supported by externalized forms of memory provides a useful starting point; perhaps not. In the end, it depends on the questions one brings to the data and the story one wants to tell.

Yet Smith also related his concerns with the Axial Age scheme of classification to the equally important realm of pedagogy, so looking at these issues is a good way of transitioning to my final comments. Speaking of his long experience in teaching an introductory college course that serves as a survey of religions in western civilization, Smith stressed that "One prerequisite for any teacher of such a course is some sort of typology of

religions that both enables and grows out of comparative interests". Given the above problems (which for him also include issues regarding the classification of Mesopotamian religions), he concludes that "For me, this has been a sufficient reason to exclude the notion of an 'Axial Age' on pragmatic as well as pedagogical grounds".

Smith has laid out alternative pedagogical strategies in numerous publications, many of which have recently been collected in the edited volume, *On Teaching Religion*. Without being able to go into detail, one particularly relevant piece is "Basic Problems in the Study of Religion", in which a syllabus is reproduced for a course of the same name. Most interesting to me is Smith's use of categories similar to the ones suggested above – e.g. the Gilgamesh epic is presented as an "Introduction to religion of an archaic, urban, agricultural culture"; the Ainu bear festival is treated as an example of an "archaic hunting culture"; and the Tempasuk Dusuns of Borneo are introduced under the heading "archaic agricultural materials, Tuber and paleo-Asiatic rice culture". Moreover, Smith also directs sustained focus throughout the unit to the methodological question addressed in week 1: "what is a text?", a question reframed in the final sessions by asking "what is a tradition?".[25]

The need for restructuring the academic study of religion at a wider level has also been discussed by scholars such as Russell McCutcheon, Richard King, Tim Fitzgerald, and Tim Murphy. Different interests aside, their proposals all centre around the claim that religious studies needs to be substantively reconfigured at an institutional level as a form of social-scientific cultural studies. McCutcheon, for example, argues that first-year introductory units should dispense with the "Introduction to World Religions" model, and move towards an "Introduction to Studying Religion" approach.[26] The former unit is the

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[25] The syllabus is reproduced in "Basic Problems in the Study of Religion", *On Teaching Religion*, 24-26. Another useful essay on syllabi and course structure is "The Introductory Course: Less is Better" (11-19).

[26] McCutcheon, R., *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2007). A similar example is Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

hallmark of the non-theoretical, descriptive approach that has been broadly dominant since the 1950s, and typically offers a basic "history and beliefs" survey of several major traditions. The latter unit, by contrast, still presents students with a wide range of material that would be covered in a normal survey of "world religions" (though perhaps including more small-scale oral cultures), but it also includes a tightly integrated theoretical component that introduces students to the methodological operations by which scholars organize their data. Such an approach is deliberately intended to problematize many of the common assumptions about "religion" with which students enter the classroom, assumptions which are pervasive throughout wider public realm.[27]

Recalling the description/redescription debate discussed in Chapter 2, and in light of the fact that McCutcheon is interested in treating religion as normal aspect of human social behaviour, the introductory unit he proposes (and indeed teaches) does not aim

> simply to reproduce the classification scheme, value system, and hence socio-political world of one's informants (i.e., the so-called religious people themselves), but to bring a new language to bear, a language capable of redescribing the indigenous accounts of extraordinariness, privilege, and authority as being ordinary rhetorical efforts to make that extraordinariness, privilege, and authority possible.[28]

At a wider disciplinary level, rejecting the notion that religion is a *sui generis* domain of life also means that scholars have a responsibility to

> [develop] interdisciplinary connections with their colleagues in the social sciences, [investigate] the theoretical basis for their scholarly interests, and [communicate] to their undergraduate and graduate students the situated, polymethodic, and polytheoretical nature of scholarly discourses.[29]

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[27] As James Lewis notes: "A lifelong exposure to popular media has tended to implant crude, negative stereotypes about unfamiliar cultures in the minds of most American students … World religions courses provide one of the few institutionalized avenues through which these negative images can be overcome, although this potential is seldom realized in practice" ("Images of Traditional African Religions", 312).

[28] McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion*, 146.

[29] McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 210.

In a similar vein, Richard King has suggested that:

> 'religious studies' might avoid some of the problems traditionally associated with its methodology by redefining itself as a specific form of 'cultural studies'. Such an approach constitutes, I would argue, a reconceptualization of the notion of 'religion' in such a way that it no longer remains bound to the peculiar orientations of Christian theological speculation.[30]

King naturally does not deny the legitimacy of theological approaches and their need for representation in intellectual discourse; but as with McCutcheon, the primary issue is that the historical relationship between the discipline of religious studies and the broadly apologetic agenda of the phenomenology of religion has meant that a field of study located within secular, public universities is still heavily structured by a host of implicit theological assumptions. The contest, in other words, is one of discursive and disciplinary boundaries. As Tim Fitzgerald has said in this connection: "[my] argument is not antitheological. It is an argument against theology masquerading as something else".[31]

The other area to which King rightly draws attention is the lingering heritage of Eurocentrism in the paradigms that still dominate religious studies. In his lengthy discussion of how critical scholarship at large might continue to move "Beyond Orientalism", King argues that:

> The introduction of a variety of indigenous epistemic traditions is, in my view, the single most important step that postcolonial studies can take if it is to look beyond the Eurocentric foundations of its theories and contest the epistemic violence of the colonial encounter … The task of creating space for recovering indigenous perspectives and practices in a postcolonial age has barely begun.[32]

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[30] King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 53. King's comments about the Christian theological heritage of the discipline apply more to UK religious studies departments, out of which they grew and to which they are still often attached. The equivalent heritage in the US comes from Eliade and the phenomenological school. For a detailed elaboration of these issues that likewise ends with a call for religious studies to become a form of cultural studies, see Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.

[31] Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 20.

[32] King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 199, 60. This is obviously one of the major concerns also animating Cox's important recent work on small-scale cultures in the study of religion.

As noted above, I remain unpersuaded about the utility of "indigenous" as a serious category of classification; but if this were rephrased as a call for greater empirical and methodological consideration of epistemic traditions in groups whose socio-symbolic universes are constituted without recourse to externalized forms of cultural memory (especially groups that have been politically marginalized over the course of European history), then I would certainly agree with King. Indeed, if we are concerned (in Rabinow's words, which King cites) to "anthropologize the West" and "to show how exotic its constitution of reality has been" – that is, to rigorously historicize our own standards of judgement and forms of cultural practice – then juxtaposing the dynamics of knowledge and identity in oral cultures with those dynamics in cultures that employ externalized memory systems is clearly an approach that can make an important contribution to the task set by J. Z. Smith three decades ago:

> the historian of religion, like the anthropologist, will continue to gain insight from the study of materials and cultures which, at first glance, appear uncommon or remote. For there is extraordinary cognitive power in what Victor Shklovsky termed "defamiliarization" – making the familiar seem strange *in order to enhance our perception of the familiar.* The success of any historian of religion's work depends upon a judgment as to whether this enhancement has taken place.[33]

However the strongest challenge to the colonial heritage of religious studies has been offered, perhaps unsurprisingly, by Tim Murphy, whose words forcefully sum up the practical implications of the above discussion, and indeed of this whole dissertation:

> If [the genealogical reading in *The Politics of Spirit*] is correct, a radical revision of the entire basis of Religious Studies will be necessary: from the textbooks we use, the language by which our field is put into effect, the way in which we taxonomize our job categories, award positions, organize our departments, and the way in which – and most definitely *the institutions in which* – we train the professionals who assume those positions … [A] revolution in our thinking in Religious Studies is necessary if it is going to be intellectually viable and if it is going to extricate itself from its role in re/producing colonialist representations.[34]

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[33] Smith, J. Z., *Imagining Religion*, xiii. Emphasis in original.

[34] Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit*, 42. Emphasis in original.

Although many people would contest Murphy's view, it is nevertheless a good assessment of the scope of the challenges facing those in the academy committed to pursuing the postcolonial agenda at a serious level. While there is a growing "postcolonial sensibility" across much of western culture, particularly as minority groups continue to assert their political rights ever more visibly thanks to global media channels, the deeply embedded nature of these discursive and institutional structures has been made clear throughout this work. This again represents a core challenge for scholars working to push the academic study of religion into more theoretically nuanced and intellectually justifiable terrain.

Ultimately, however, these issues are part of a debate that is much wider than the main argument advanced in this dissertation regarding the problematic contradictions in John Hick's theory of religion. That theory, as I hope to have shown, has value only as an item of intellectual history, not as a viable explanation of cultural difference. But regardless of the stance one takes on the methodological, pedagogical and philosophical implications of this situation, or the counter-arguments that one might offer, the most basic lesson that seems to come through from all of this is that we always have a duty to pay attention to our subtext.

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Voegelin, Eric.  *Order and History.*  5 vols.  Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956-1987.

Wallerstein, Immanuel.  *The Modern World System.*  4 vols.  2nd ed.  Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011 [1974].

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Weber, Max.  *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology.*  2 vols.  Ed. G. Roth & C. Wittich.  Multiple translators.  New York: Bedminster Press, 1968)

White, Hayden.  *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe.*  Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

White, Hayden.  "Interpretation in History."  Pages 51-80 in *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism.*  Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Wiebe, Donald.  *The Politics of Religious Studies: the Continuing Conflict with Theology and the Academy.*  New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.

Wilson, Edward O.  *The Social Conquest of Earth.*  New York: Liveright, 2012.

Wittrock, Björn.  "The Axial Age in Global History: Cultural Crystallizations and Societal Transformations."  Pages 102-125 in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences.*  Ed. R. Bellah & H. Joas.  Cambridge, MA: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

Wolf, Eric.  *Europe and the People without History.*  2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997 [1982].`

Woodward, David.  "Cartography and the Renaissance: Continuity and Change."  Pages 3-25 in vol. 3.1 of *The History of Cartography*. Full details of the series are provided in the supplementary bibliography.

Young, Katherine K.  "World Religions: A Category in the Making?"  Pages 111-130 in *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality.*  Ed. M. Despland & G. Vollée.  Ontario:  Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1992.

# A Note on the Supplementary Bibliography

This supplementary bibliography provides references for topics discussed under the rubric of "communications history" in Chapter 5 (see pp. 211-229 above). The discussion of communications history was undertaken primarily with reference to David Christian's proposal that the rapidity of cultural change in *Homo sapiens*, compared with all other species on earth, is due to the powerful capacity for "collective learning" inherent in modern human language. As suggested, this has important implications for debates about the cultural transformations of the 1st millennium BCE. However, as noted in the chapter, there is yet to be any sustained theoretical integration of the various fields of scholarship that were addressed in the discussion, even though they clearly have the potential to inform each other if brought together with the same set of questions in mind. Although Christian maps out collective learning well at the broad scale, there has been little explicit integration by big historians with studies of more tightly focused historical periods. The reverse also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, with the plethora of important microstudies on communications history rarely brought in concert with an evolutionary perspective (admittedly something that has only become possible in recent decades).

As such, in lieu of any authoritative bibliography to which the reader might be directed, this supplementary list of references is intended to begin mapping out a set of connections between areas of scholarship often not considered in the same context. I stress that the list is not exhaustive, and instead represents works that have informed my basic perspective over the course of researching this dissertation, but which were not cited in the main text. I largely omit journals and journal articles for the sake of space. I also stress that this is not a bibliography on the wider area called "the cultural history of technology", of which communications history (i.e. the history of communications technologies) is only a subset.

The items below include both historical material and works of media theory. Given that this supplement is intended to serve as a useful guide to a range of disparate literature, many of the items are annotated to indicate their point of relevance, particularly those not discussed in the main text. A small number of the items appear in the main bibliography, but they are reproduced here for the sake of completeness.

# Supplementary Bibliography on Communications History

Anderson, Benedict.  *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism.* Revised ed.  London: Verso, 2006 [1983].

    *— Anderson's landmark study highlights the role of the printing press in the political configurations of modern Europe.*

Assmann, Jan.  "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age."  Pages 366-407 in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences.*  Ed. R. Bellah & H. Joas.  Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Assmann, Jan.  *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [German original 1992].

Assmann, Aleida.  *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [German original 1999].

Basso, Keith.  *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

Basso, K. & Feld, S. (ed.)  *Senses of Place.*  Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996.

Bellah, Robert.  *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age.* Cambridge, MA: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

Blanton, Ward.  *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

    *— A study of nineteenth-century biblical scholarship informed by a sophisticated use of media theory.*

Boyarin, Jonathan. (ed.)  *The Ethnography of Reading.*  Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

    *— An excellent set of essays about reading practices, working on the premise that "writing, the subject of much innovative scholarship in recent years, is only one half of what we call literacy."*

Boyd, Brian.  *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction.*  Cambridge, MA: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

    *— An extremely useful supplement to Merlin Donald and the role of narrative in modern human thought. To my knowledge, Boyd's study is the current benchmark for evolutionary treatments of expressive art. This work came to my attention too late to be incorporated into the argument.*

Briggs, A. & Burke, P.  *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet.*
  Cambridge: Polity, 2009.

   – *One of the most comprehensive treatments of the social history of communications technologies, which synthesizes a range of the perspectives cited in this supplementary bibliography. Its focus, however, is entirely European. Comparable studies of other periods or cultures would be welcome.*

Carpenter, Kenneth. (ed.)  *Books and Society in History.*  New York: R. R. Bowker, 1983.

Carr, David.  *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature.*  New York:
  Oxford University Press, 2005.

   – *Highly useful survey of textuality in antiquity, from the ancient Near East to the Hellenistic period. A good complement to Jan Assmann's work.*

Carter, J. & Muir, P. (ed.)  *Printing and the Mind of Man: The Impact of Print on Five Centuries of
  Western Civilization.*  London: Cassell & Co.: 1967.

   – *A descriptive catalogue of items displayed at the 1963 International Printing Machinery and Allied Trades Exhibition in London, which contained works printed from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. It is particularly useful for its discussion of works in the first two centuries after Gutenberg, and its synoptic, chronological treatment makes it a handy reference work for early modern intellectual history.*

Cavello, C. & Chartier, R. (ed.)  *A History of Reading in the West.*  Amherst: University of
  Massachusetts Press, 1999.

Chartier, Roger.  *The Order of Books.*  Trans. L Cochrane.  Stanford: Stanford University
  Press, 1994 [1992].

   – *Chartier heads the newest generation of French book historians, in the line of Henri-Jean Martin. This work explores the systems of regulation and classification developed to organize and manage the ever-burgeoning knowledge of the post-Gutenberg era. A useful complement to D. F. McKenzie (see below).*

Christian, David.  *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History.*  Berkeley: University of
  California Press, 2004.

Christian, David.  "The Return of Universal History."  *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 6-27.

Clanchy, M. T.  *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307.*  Revised ed.  Oxford:
  Blackwell, 1993 [1979].

   – *Important study of the slow introduction of written documents in the medieval period, particularly in England. Provides essential background context for understanding the explosion of print technology in the fifteenth century. Useful in combination with the works of Brian Stock and Malcolm Parkes (see below).*

Clarke, Andy.  *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension.*  New York:
  Oxford University Press, 2011.

Daniels, P. & Bright, W. (ed.)  *The World's Writing Systems*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

    *– An unrivalled handbook for the history of writing. Excellent complement to flesh out Henri-Jean Martin's narrative of the cultural history of writing.*

Darnton, Robert.  *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the* Encyclopédie *1775-1800*.  Cambridge, MA: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979.

    *– Darton is one of the leading scholars on the history of the book and the social history of ideas. This is his landmark work. A good complement to Eisenstein.*

Darnton, Robert.  *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775-1800*.  Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

Darnton, Robert.  *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future*.  New York: Public Affairs, 2010.

Davis, Eric.  *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*.  New York: Harmony, 1998.

Deacon, Terrance.  *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*.  New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997.

Debray, Régis.  *Transmitting Culture*.  Trans. E. Rauth.  New York: Columbia University Press, 2000 [1997].

    *– An interesting work of media theory that advocates for the notion of "mediology" as a "an original sector of research", one "dedicated to the facts of cultural transmission as an object of study in its own right". Debray's proposals are certainly stimulating, but not always convincing.*

Derrida, Jacques.  *Of Grammatology*.  Trans. G. Spivak.  Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974 [1967].

    *– Although obfuscating from any perspective, Derrida's classic work of literary theory takes on greater practical meaning when utilized (in concert with other works here listed) as a work of media theory. Derrida was influenced by Leroi-Gourhan, even though the debt is not particularly explicit (see e.g. 83-86).*

Dean, Carolyn.  *A Culture of Stone: Inca Perspectives on Rock*.  Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

    *– A good supplement to Keith Basso's work on the mnemonics of place and the relationship between cultural identity and external-but-non-written forms of cultural memory.*

Delano Smith, Catherine.  "Why Theory in the History of Cartography?"  *Imago Mundi* 48 (1996): 198-203.

Diamond, Jared.  *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*.  New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999.

Donald, Merlin.  *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition.*  Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Donald, Merlin.  *A Mind So Rare.*  New York: Norton, 2001.

Donald, Merlin.  "Cognitive Evolution and the Definition of Human Nature."  Lecture given at the University of Arkansas.  No date.  Transcript available at http://psyc.queensu.ca/faculty/donald/sel-pubs.html [last accessed June 8, 2013].

Eliot, S. & Rose, J. (ed.)  *A Companion to the History of the Book.*  West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

  – *Excellent survey of a wide field. An essential reference work.*

Eisenstadt, Schmuel.  "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics." *European Journal of Science* 23 (1982): 294-314.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth.  "Clio and Chronos: an Essay on the Making and Breaking of History-Book Time."  *History and Theory* 6 (1966): 36-64.

  – *Eisenstein's "working hypothesis" is that "all views of history have been fundamentally shaped by the way records are duplicated, knowledge transmitted, and information restored and retrieved". This work thus serves as a useful complement to the work of Assmann.*

Eisenstein, Elizabeth.  *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth.  "An Unacknowledged Revolution Revisited."  *The American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 87-105.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth.  "How to Acknowledge a Revolution: A Reply."  *The American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 126-128.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth.  *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe.*  2nd ed.  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 [1983].

  – *An abridged and illustrated edition of* The Printing Press as an Agent of Change. *This would be useful in an undergraduate or other introductory context.*

Fabian, Johannes.  *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object.*  2nd ed.  New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983].

  – *In his critique of the allochronic tendency of anthropological discourse, Fabian offered a politicized theoretical expansion of Walter Ong's analysis of the role of "visualism" in modern European thought.*

Febvre, L. & Martin, H–J.  *The Coming of the Book: the Impact of Print 1450–1800.*  Trans. D. Gerard.  London: Verso, 1997 [1958].

Foley, John Miles. (ed.)  *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord.*  Columbus: Slavica Press, 1981.

Gamble, Harry.  *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts.*  New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Gleick, James.  *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood.*  London: Fourth Estate, 2011.

Goldschmidt, E.  *Medieval Texts and their First Appearance in Print.*  London: Oxford University Press, 1943.

Goody, J. & Watt, I.  "The Consequences of Literacy."  *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 304-345.

Goody, Jack. (ed.)  *Literacy in Traditional Societies.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Goody, Jack.  *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa.*  London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Goody, Jack.  "Alphabets and Writing."  Pages 106-26 in *The World of Human Communication.*  Ed. R. Williams.  London: Thames and Hudson, 1981.

Goody, Jack.  *The Domestication of the Savage Mind.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Goody, Jack.  *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Goody, Jack.  *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Goody, Jack.  "The Anthropologist and the Tape Recorder."  The *Minpaku Anthropology Newsletter* 1 (1996): 2-4.

Graham, William.  *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religions.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

    *– Excellent study for understanding the interaction between oral and written communication, especially in religious contexts. Graham insists upon the deeply oral nature of all ancient interaction with sacred texts. A multicultural focus, although he mainly considers Islam and Christianity.*

Gronbeck, B., Farrell, T. & Soukup, P. (ed.)  *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought.*  Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991.

– *A good companion to and expansion of Ong's work, particularly from the theoretical perspective.*

Halbwachs, Maurice.  *On Collective Memory.*  Trans. L. Coser.  Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1941].

Harman, Graham.  *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics.*  Melbourne: re.press, 2009.

– *A useful survey of Bruno Latour's wide-ranging work, which is important in the context of media/network theory.*

Harley, J. B.  *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography.*  Ed. P. Laxton.. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

– *Important work for understanding the theoretical issues surrounding cartographic history and practice. See also Catherine Delano Smith above.*

Harris, William.  *Ancient Literary.*  Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

– *An older benchmark still useful for its references, although theoretically outdated in comparison with Johnson & Parker (ed.),* Ancient Literacies *(see below).*

Hartley, John.  //*the_uses_of_digital_ literacy*//  St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.

– *Provides a good update of Richard Hoggart's pioneering study of literacy and popular culture, with a focus on the new era of multimedia.*

Havelock, Eric.  *Preface to Plato.*  Cambridge, MA: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963.

– *Groundbreaking theoretical application of anthropological/folkloric insights to classical studies. Influenced Ong, Goody, and others.*

Hoggart, Richard.  *The Uses of Literacy.*  London: Chatto & Windus, 1957.

– *Seminal study of literacy and modern popular culture. See John Hartley above.*

Hooker, J. T. (ed.)  *Reading the Past: Ancient Writing from Cuneiform to the Alphabet.*  New York: Barnes & Noble (for the Trustees of the British Museum) 1990.

– *Good introduction to the ancient writing systems of the Near East. Lacks information on early Chinese writing. See Daniels & Bright (ed.) above fore a more comprehensive treatment.*

Horton, Robin.  *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

– *A good complement to other anthropological works with a theoretical focus on the dynamics of oral thought, such as Ong and Goody.*

Hublin, J-J. & Richards, M. (ed.)  *The Evolution of Hominin Diets: Integrating Approaches to the Study of Paleolithic Subsistence.*  New York: Springer, 2009.

    *– Invaluable new collection regarding the dietary (and thus social) practices of the evolutionary ancestors of* Homo sapiens.

Hughes, Thomas.  *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society.*  Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

    *– Crucial background context for the spread of the telegraph and later electronic-based forms of communication.*

Innis, Harold.  *Empire and Communications.*  Ed. D. Godfrey.  Toronto: Press Porcépic, 1986 [1950].

Innis, Harold.  *The Bias of Communication.*  Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951.

    *– Far-sighted early theoretical study of the role of the medium on not just the form but the content of information. Direct influence on McLuhan, amongst many others. Complements Innis' historical study in* Empire and Communications.

Iverson, Kelly.  "Orality and the Gospels: A Survey of Recent Research."  *Currents in Biblical Research* 8 (2009): 71-106.

    *– A handy survey of the wide-ranging use of theories of oral transmission and oral performativity in biblical studies. See also Werner Kelber's similar overview below.*

Jaffee, Martin S.  *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE.*  Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Johns, Adrian.  *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making.*  Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Johnson, William.  "Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity."  *American Journal of Philology* 121 (2000): 593-627.

Johnson, W. & Parker, H. (ed.)  *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome.*  Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

    *– Excellent series of essays on more sophisticated ways to think about the concept of "literacy" in the ancient world. Serves as a much needed update of W. V. Harris'* Ancient Literacy *(see below).*

Kaplan, Robert.  *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero.*  London: Penguin, 1999.

    *– Kaplan's study of zero highlights the radically expanded potential of mathematics when supplemented by technologies of externalization. An extremely readable global overview.*

Kelly, Kevin.  *What Technology Wants*.  New York: Viking, 2010.

— *Interesting theoretical reflections on technology. Useful for broad thinking about the relationship between humans and what they make.*

Kelber, Werner.  "Orality and Biblical Studies: A Review Essay."  *Review of Biblical Literature* 12 (2007).  Available online via http://www.bookreviews.org.

— *Important survey of major works in biblical studies on questions of orality and literacy. See also the similar review of Kelly Iverson.*

Kittler, Friedrich.  *Gramaphone, Film, Typwriter*.  Trans. G. Winthrop-Young & M. Wutz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999 [1986].

— *Dense but stimulating work of media theory. Treats the period at which the printed word began to give way to other forms of electronically-based culture.*

Lanham, Richard.  *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*.  Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

— *Surveys the impact of electronic forms of communication on twentieth-century culture and politics.*

Leroi-Gourhan, Andre.  *Gesture and Speech*.  Trans. A. B. Berger.  Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993 [1964].

— *Important for its evolutionary perspective on the connections between communication, embodiment, and materiality. Not often cited in Anglophone scholarship, but see Derrida above.*

Levinson, Paul.  *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium*.  London: Routledge, 1999.

Lewis, P. & Booth, J.  *The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial, and Community Radio*. London: Macmillan, 1989.

— *A good treatment of an important but generally neglected topic in the modern history of communications technologies.*

Livi-Bacci, Massimo.  *A Concise History of World Population*.  Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992.

Lord, Albert B.  *The Singer of Tales*.  2ⁿᵈ ed.  Ed. S. Mitchell & G. Nagy.  Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960].

Marks, Robert.  *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative*.  Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

Marrou, Henri-Irénée.  *A History of Education in Antiquity*.  Trans G. Lamb.  New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956 [1948].

Martin, Henri-Jean.  *The History and Power of Writing.*  Trans. L. Cochrane.  Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1988].

– *A good complement to Daniels & Bright (ed.) above. Solid global survey.*

Mauss, Marcel.  *Techniques, Technology, and Civilisation.*  Ed. N. Schlesinger.  New York: Berhahan Books, 2006.

– *An Important collection of Mauss' writings on technology, which lie behind Andre Leroi-Gourhan's more expansive evolutionary treatment. Also contains pieces from Durkheim and Hubert, as well as an excellent editorial introduction on Mauss and the study of techniques in the French social sciences.*

McClellan, J. & Dorn, H.  *Science and Technology in World History: An Introduction.*  Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

– *A big-history style survey. Useful particularly in the undergraduate context.*

McKenzie, D. F.  *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

– *Important work of media theory. A useful complement to Roger Chartier (see above).*

McLuhan, Marshall.  *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man.*  London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

– *The original media guru, although sometimes he seems completely mad. This work is a non-linear "mosaic" of various historical musings on the impact of print on human consciousness.*

McLuhan, Marshall.  *Understanding Media: Extension of Man.*  New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

– *This work secured McLuhan's widespread reputation. It introduced the phrase "global village" as well as his aphorism "the medium is the message".*

McLuhan, M. & Fiore, Q.  *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects.*  New York: Penguin, 1967.

– *An experimental format. Apparently (not explicitly) designed to explore the epistemological dissonance of the information overload of the electronic mediasphere. Stimulating on account of its novelty, but only if one already understands what McLuhan was getting at.*

McNeill, William.  *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community.*  Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963.

Misa, Thomas.  *Leonardo to the Internet: Technology and Culture from the Renaissance to the Present Day.*  Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

– *A handy, more widely focused counterpart to Briggs and Burke's social history of the media (see above), providing deeper context for the role of communications technologies in cultural change.*

Miller, D. & Horst, H.  *Digital Anthropology.*  London: Berg, 2012.

– *Important new work of theory on digital technologies and shifting forms of cultural practice. The first major work in what will no doubt become a growing field in coming decades.*

Mumford, Lewis.  *Technics and Civilization.*  2<sup>nd</sup> ed. with new introduction.  New York: Harbinger, 1963 [1934].

  – *A classic study in the cultural history of technology.*

Niditch, Susan.  *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature.*  Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996.

Nissen, Hans J.  *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2000 B.C.*  Trans. E. Lutzeier & K. J. Northcott.  Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1983].

Olsen, David.  *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading.*  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Olsen, D. & Cole, M. (ed.)  *Technology, Literacy, and the Evolution of Society: Implications of the Work of Jack Goody.*  London: Psychology Press, 2006.

Ong, Walter.  *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History.*  New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967.

  – *Useful discussion of how the epistemological primacy of aural knowledge engenders a different mode of experiencing the world. In this work Ong blends communications history with Salvation history in one of the more explicit manifestations of his Jesuit commitments.*

Ong, Walter. *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason.*  2<sup>nd</sup> ed.  Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 [1958].

Ong, Walter.  *Ramus and Talon Inventory: A short-title inventory of the published works of Peter Ramus (1515-1572) and of Omer Talon (ca. 1510-1562) in their original and in their variously altered forms, with related material.*  Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.

  – *Conjointly published with* Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue. *Provides a meticulously documented catalogue and analysis of the diffusion of Ramist texts. The dedication reads: "For Herbert Marshall McLuhan, who started all this".*

Ong, Walter.  "Ramist Method and the Commercial Mind."  *Studies in the Renaissance* 8 (1961): 155-172.

  – *A good example of the intersection between communications history and other forms of social history.*

Ong, Walter.  *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.*  London: Routledge, 1982.

Ong, Walter.  "Orality, Literacy, and Medieval Textualization."  *New Literary History* 16 (1984): 1-12.

Parkes, Malcolm. *Pause and Effect: A History of Punctuation in the West.* Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992.

– *Fascinating study of the evolution of written language in the west, from antiquity to the early post-Gutenberg era. Serves as an excellent frame for the works of Stock, Clanchy, and Eisenstein.*

Parry, Milman. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry.* Ed. A. Parry. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971.

Rosenthal, Raymond. (ed.) *McLuhan: Pro & Con.* Baltimore: Penguin, 1968.

Rosenzweig, Roy. *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past in the Digital Age.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

– *Excellent historiographical essays on the transforming nature of writing, recording, and accessing history in the age of digital communications.*

Rüegg, W. & de Rider-Symoens, H. (ed.) *A History of the University in Europe.* 4 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-2011.

– *A detailed multivolume history of the institutional centres of learning of Europe from the twelfth century onwards. An important reference work for the social history of European scholarship.*

Ruppel, Aloys. *Johannes Gutenberg: Sein Leben und sein Werk.* Berlin: Verlag Gebr. Mann, 1939.

– *Authoritative and detailed treatment of Gutenberg.*

Ryan, Johnny. *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future.* London: Reaktion, 2010.

– *Good history of the emergence of the internet, an essential topic for cutting-edge theories of collective learning.*

Sher, Richard. *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors & Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, & America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

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Staudenmeier, John.  *Technology's Storytellers: Reweaving the Human Fabric.*  2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989 [1985].

    *– An informative study of "the history of technology" as a coherent intellectual discipline.*

Stock, Brian.  *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries.*  Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

    *– Explores the influence of literacy on eleventh and twelfth-century life and thought. Argues that Medieval literacy did not simply supersede oral discourse but created a new type of interdependence between the oral and the written. Important in complicating the "great divide" theory of orality and literacy. Useful particularly in combination with M. T Clanchy and Malcolm Parkes.*

Stock, Brian.  *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past.*  Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

    *– Links Medieval studies to contemporary theory on orality and literacy.*

Taylor, Mark. C.  *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture.*  Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

    *– Useful study of the networked nature of contemporary society. Important context for reflections on collective learning and cultural change.*

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    *– Useful study of orality, literacy and culture in classical Greece. Informed by figures such as Goody. Complements the work of Havelock, Lord, Innis, et al.*

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    *– A remarkable study of social insects, which provides an expansive, evolutionary frame of reference for understanding sociality and collective learning in human societies.*

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Yates, Frances. *The Art of Memory.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.

   *– A useful complement to Ong's work on the transition from aural to visual economies of knowledge in early modern Europe.*