

Sociobiology and Post-Axial Religion

Many historians of religion hold that a great transformation in religious thought and practice occurred around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. (roughly, between 800 and 200). This is the period Karl Jaspers (1953) called the "axial age" (cf. Schwartz 1975). It saw the appearance of the Upanishads and the Vedas, of Zarathustra, of the Hebrew prophets and the Greek philosophers and historians. All the traditions commonly known as the "great world religions" either originated in the axial age, were radically transformed then, or centrally incorporated axial-age ideas.

Two new ideas are crucial. One is that of the individual soul as sharply distinct from, set over against, the social group. The other is that of a being or state of being that *radically* transcends this world both in being and in value: in comparison to it the goods of this world are worthless; false lures, to be spurned. The decisive, urgent issue is now: How is the individual soul to achieve the right relation to the radically transcendent? This right relation—"salvation" or "liberation" becomes the central religious goal.

If these historians are right, then the crucial distinction to be made in interpreting religion is (as John Hick [1989] formulates it) "the distinction between pre-axial religion, centrally (but not solely) concerned with the preservation of cosmic order, and post-axial religion, centrally (but not solely) concerned with the quest for salvation or liberation" (22). Hick elaborates:

Pre-axial religion ... 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 ... 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. (23.)

the first of the passages I have quoted from Hick hints, faint premonitions of axial-age themes occur in "archaic" (i.e., pre-axial) religion, and archaic themes continue in the "great world religions"—co-existing more or less uneasily with the themes clustered around the dominant concern with salvation or liberation. Both hints will turn out to be important for our discussion. But in the traditions marked by the axial-age transformation, the pre-eminence of the newer themes is clear—at least in their "official" creeds and precepts.

Although *historians* of religion have come to emphasize the axial-age transformation, it seems that no notice of it is taken in theories of religion advanced by anthropologists, sociologists, or sociobiologists. Max Weber appears to be a partial exception. But others, in their treatments of the origins and functions of religion, typically assume a smooth continuity between archaic religion and the "great traditions," such that what holds for one holds for the other. Differences between

archaic and modern religions are attributed to the impact of secular developments, not to changes in the character of religion itself.

Interestingly, this observation seems to hold true on both sides of the great social-sciences divide—for those who would assimilate the social sciences to the humanities as well as for those who would model them on the natural sciences; for those seek to “interpret” religion as for those who want to “explain” it; for those who are after *Verstehen* as for those who aim for *Erklärung*; for Peter Winch or Clifford Geertz as for Emile Durkheim, Marvin Harris, or E. O. Wilson.

On the face of it, the axial-age developments would seem to pose a severe challenge for the “explainers.” For they have generally explained the origin and continuing existence of religious belief and practice by pointing to their functions in maintaining social cohesion and promoting this-worldly welfare. (If not for everyone, then for the privileged groups that run the system; if not now, then for most of the past.) Such explanations work pretty well for pre-axial religion, but seem to break down when one tries to apply them to the distinctive features of postaxial religion.

It may be that the “interpreters”—those who look for “meanings” rather than “causes”—would have less difficulty in accommodating the axial-age transition. I’m not sure. I suspect that when someone like Geertz says that religion enables us to make sense of the world and our place in it, someone like the Buddha would reply that the point is not to understand this web of illusions but to escape from our entanglement in it. There’s no “making sense” of it, in any general way. A special, limited *sort* of understanding may be called for, but only as a means.

However, I cannot pursue that question here. I will be concentrating on causal/functional explanations of religion. In particular, I will be concentrating on the sorts of explanation sociobiologists might offer, though I think most of what I say should hold for other causal/functional explanations as well.

“Religion,” according to E. O. Wilson (1976), is “above all the process by which individuals are persuaded to subordinate their immediate self-interest to the interests of the group” (176). Actually, it need not be only *immediate* self-interest that is subordinated. *Sometimes* it is, and indeed sometimes the individual’s long-term (this-worldly) interests coincide with the group’s. But sometimes more radical self-sacrifice is called for and evoked.

Note also that this idea, that the subordination of individual to group is the key to understanding the workings of religion, is far from unique to Wilson. It is common to a wide range of theorists who see no need to take account of genetics or of the particularities of humankind’s evolutionary history. It is central in Durkheim, as he is usually interpreted.

It also runs up squarely against both of the two crucial new developments of the Axial Age: the new stress on the individual over against the group, and the idea of a transcendent good to which all this-worldly goods (individual and social alike) should be radically subordinated—if not outright renounced. How is a theory like Wilson’s, or any of the causal/functional genre, to explain the emergence of such

ideas and motives? How could acting on them enhance anyone’s Darwinian fitness?

Sociobiologists have developed two principal theoretical tools for explaining apparently self-sacrificial or “altruistic” behavior, *i.e.* behavior that reduces, or risks reducing, the number of descendants an organism will have. One hinges on the idea of “inclusive fitness:” what counts is not the number of direct descendants you have, but the number of copies of your genes that appear in subsequent generations, whether in descendants of yours or of your relatives’. Under certain circumstances an organism’s inclusive fitness can be enhanced if it foregoes reproduction in favor of facilitating the reproductive success of close kin, with which it has a large proportion of its genes in common.

The other theoretical tool, used to explain risk-taking and expenditure of effort on behalf of non-relatives, is the idea misleadingly labeled “reciprocal altruism.” It makes sense for me to do such things on your behalf, when the benefit to you is greater than the cost to me, if I can expect you to reciprocate when the situation is reversed.

These ideas have been applied with considerable success in the explanation of animal behavior. Attempts to use them to explain *human* behavior are highly controversial, to say the least. I will not rehearse the controversy here, not even briefly. I do not myself think that the project is hopeless or outrageous, even when it comes to explaining pre-axial religion. But on the face of it, the methods in the sociobiologists’ repertoire do not seem at all promising as a means of explaining the distinctive characteristics of post-axial religion. The biological benefits of world-renunciation are hard to see. Celibacy, so often taken to be requisite for a really serious pursuit of the religious life, enhances no one’s inclusive fitness, whether it is undertaken as part of a monastic withdrawal from the world or as a condition of more effective service to humanity. (Note that the ideal of celibacy does not appear in the period when people lived in small groups of close relatives, who might have been the beneficiaries.) Missionaries go forth to minister in remote lands to people with whom they share very few genes. “Reciprocal altruism” fails, too. The post-axial ideal is either to withdraw from society, or to devote oneself to others’ benefit with no thought of return.

How might a sociobiologist go about trying to explain these apparent unexplainables? A natural strategy would be to focus on those phenomena in archaic religion that look like small precursors of the distinctive post-axial ones, and ask how the latter could have developed from the former. Transcendence of a *sort* appears in pre-axial religion, though not *radical* transcendence. There are “holy ones,” more powerful than we and (usually) better and wiser than we, though they are not infinite or perfect. There are “other worlds,” accessible only to special people (shamans) and by special means, though they are still fundamentally parts of the same cosmos we inhabit. Austerities are frequently practiced for particular purposes, and sometimes for the more general purpose of developing the ability to deal with hardships and hazards when they come.

So the great themes of the axial age do not appear altogether *de novo*, but seem rather to be radicalizations and hyperextensions of earlier ones. Biologists have a technical term, *hypertrophy*, for "the extreme development of a pre-existing structure" (Wilson 1978, 218). Wilson makes extensive use of this concept in *On Human Nature*, as does sociologist Joseph Lopreato (1984) in his discussion of "ascetic altruism." (This is the nearest thing I have found to an extended discussion, by a sociobiology-friendly author, of our problem.)

There is an obvious pitfall here, and I am not sure either Wilson or Lopreato altogether avoids it. That is the danger of supposing one has explained a phenomenon when in fact one has only labeled it. Labeling a phenomenon can be a step *toward* explaining it, in that it can highlight analogies with phenomena for which explanations are available. (The peacock's tail or the Irish Elk's hypertrophic antlers, perhaps.) But this gives merely a pointer toward a strategy for developing an explanation. There is still a lot of work to be done before we can say we *have* one.

Moreover, it is one thing to explain the *origin* of a hypertrophic organ or behavior pattern, and quite another to explain its maintenance in a population over time. If it is maladaptive, it will be selected against and will tend to disappear from the population (unless the population dies out first). If a hypertrophic organ or trait no longer serves the function served by that from which it developed, then one of three conditions must be met if it is to be sustained. It might acquire new functions, making it adaptive in its own right. It might be causally linked with other traits, themselves sufficiently advantageous to outweigh its harmful effects. Or it might be limited to a relatively small proportion of the population (being carried by a recessive gene, for instance).

We are asking whether the characteristic features of post-axial religion might be explained as hypertrophic outgrowths of biologically adaptive features of archaic religion. Are any of the three conditions met? Surely not the first: world-renunciation and a focus on radically transcendent values are not themselves biologically adaptive.

It is harder to say about the second. There may be some sort of causal linkage between the post-axial ideals and adaptive traits, but I have been unable to think of what it might be. In any case, given the radical demands of a life centered on transcendental ideals, it would seem they would have to be effectively buffered in some way if they are not to overwhelm the adaptive properties with which they are correlated. That is, if it *is* indirectly advantageous in some ways to espouse transcendental ideals, this can work only if they are not in fact allowed to direct many people's lives.

This brings us to the third possibility, *i.e.* that the trait is confined to a small proportion of the population. Here is a more promising line of thought for someone trying to develop a sociobiological explanation of the survival of the great religious traditions. For despite their official ideologies, it is clear that most of their adherents, most of the time, do *not* direct their lives by the axial ideals. How many Christians take the Sermon on the Mount as their guide to daily life? The official ideals are post-

axial, but the traditions survive and flourish by serving the old preaxial functions.

But how can people live with the discrepancy? How is it rationalized? Often, it isn't; it's just ignored. Or it may be papered over with remarkably tame "interpretations" of demanding precepts. ("Loving the Lord with all your heart and soul and strength," for instance, might be taken just to mean not being *unduly* attached to worldly goods, *i.e.* not more so than the next person.)

But also, historically, two types of doctrine have repeatedly appeared in the great traditions, each of which has the effect of greatly easing the tension between ideal and practice.

One is that the ideal of world renunciation and the quest for Enlightenment are not for all members of the community, but only for a relative few. This approach is especially feasible where belief in reincarnation is general. For then the ideal of Enlightenment can be held out as the goal for everyone—*ultimately*; but not necessarily in this life. For most people, at any given time, the task of the religious life is to be a good citizen and family member, and provide sustenance for those who are now pursuing the monastic life. That way one prepares oneself to be reincarnated as a monk, in a position to seek Nirvana. Lacking a doctrine of reincarnation, Catholicism achieves a somewhat similar effect with the doctrine of Purgatory.

A classical Hindu tradition is especially interesting here. According to that tradition, the right time for a Brahmin to withdraw to the forest in quest of *moksha* is *after* he has seen his grandchildren through the perils of childhood. A sociobiologist could point out that withdrawing from the world *then* has no effect on his reproductive fitness. A particularly tough-minded sociobiologist might add that he even enhances it a bit by reducing the burden on his family: the eremite consumes little, and providing that little is a communal rather than a family responsibility. (Of course, transcendental aspirations cannot always be so neatly tamed and channeled: at times there has been a problem with young men impatiently setting out to seek liberation *now*.)

Another way of reconciling post-axial ideals with pre-axial practice is provided by the doctrine of salvation by *grace*. This too appears at several times and places within the great traditions. For example, sixteenth-century Jesuit missionaries in Japan discovered a Buddhist sect, founded three centuries earlier by Shinran, flourishing there. Its members had repudiated monasticism and clerical celibacy; taught that salvation is the gift of Amida, received by faith; held that citizenship and family life were the spheres for the religious life; and in general sounded amazingly like Lutherans (Jaspers 1953, 21; cf. Bouquet 1953, 203ff.).

It is an interesting question, how such ideas can arise within a tradition centered on the quest for the transcendent. Believers' accounts of their experience suggest that the idea of salvation by grace sometimes comes from a sense that one was launched on the quest, or delivered to the goal, by an impetus other than one's own effort. Sometimes it seems to come as the resolution of an unbearable tension between the felt absoluteness of the demand and the quester's hopeless inadequacy

to meet it. Perhaps the former is true of the Apostle Paul, and the latter of Martin Luther. Perhaps Luther's experience would have been impossible in the absence of Paul's interpretation of his.

But however the idea of salvation by grace arises, where it is present it enables a community to uphold the primacy of salvation as the religious goal, but then to define the day-to-day religious life in ways that differ little in the crucial respects from those characteristic of pre-axial religion.

So the axial transformation may not be such a great problem for naturalistic theories of religion after all. If they fail to explain how it is that the great axial-age themes have arisen, and dominated the lives of *some*, that is a lacuna in them. But it is not a crippling gap, any more than not knowing the causes of lethal mutations cripples Darwinian theory in general. A Darwinian theory of religion would predict that, where ideals like world-renunciation arise within a community, *either* that community will perish (like the Shakers, with their precept of universal celibacy), *or* most of its members will somehow be insulated from fitness-reducing effects on their behavior. And that prediction seems to hold up rather well.

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