Speculations on the Future of Religion

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Chapter 8
Speculations on the Future of Religion
By
Robert C. Clark

Note to reading group participants:

This essay is a rough draft of Chapter 8, the final chapter of a book manuscript. The book is tentatively titled Can Religion Be Saved? Following this cover page is a one-page abstract of the chapter, a table of contents of the whole book manuscript, and then the chapter itself.

Comments and suggestions on the essay are very welcome. Because a few parts of the draft need to be completed, and some copy-editing, additional cites, and re-thinking could be very useful, please do not circulate this draft more widely without consulting me.
Abstract: The attached paper is a draft of the concluding chapter in a book about religion in relation to other social systems (governments, economic markets, and secular social groups and entities). Prior chapters reviewed multiple theories and many empirical studies, as well as social-science scholarship, bearing on the relative advantages and costs of the four types of systems as they attempt to provide multiple kinds of benefits for human individuals and groups. The attached table of contents may give a more concrete sense of those inquires. A general theme that emerged was that the four systems not only have relative advantages and disadvantages that vary by type of benefit or cost, but also by specific context and over time, as there are changes in external factors like social scale and technological developments. Some general trends are identified in the prior chapters.

The final chapter is deliberately cast as a reflective essay. It speculates about the future of religion over the next several centuries (e.g., to the year 2500), and identifies three categories of predictions: virtually complete decline; fluctuating endurance; and morphological evolution. It then considers high-level arguments for and against them. For example:

(1) The virtually complete secularization model seems supported by trends in some advanced economies, e.g., in western Europe and more recently in the US, by reflection on efficiency improvements in the other social systems, and by arguments about the impact of science and reason on religious beliefs. But the better and more comprehensive global demographic evidence indicates a very different pattern of trends. The essay reflects on likely explanations of the conflict between prediction and evidence, ranging from the differential fertility rates of secular and religious groups to theological moves in all dominant world religions that aim to blunt the apparent conflict between reason and religion.

(2) The fluctuating endurance model is supported by some painstaking historical accounts of the development of religions over the centuries. But it is also called into question by historical studies of the evolution of religions over the millennia, and by recent multidisciplinary work on cultural evolution.

(3) The same historical and multidisciplinary work also supports the plausibility of expecting another fairly fundamental evolution in the features of those world religions, or spinoffs from them, that will be successful in the future. To explore this possibility more systematically, the paper first offers ideal-type general descriptions of three prior stages – religion for good personal fortune; religion for public goods; and religion for pro-social norms – and offers thoughts on how the later stages each involved changes along multiple but related dimensions of religion and how those changes were related to changes in the typical external human environment.

Finally, the paper then speculates about a plausibly emerging fourth stage – religion for expanding circles – in which there is more emphatic, widespread, and effective emphasis on norms relating to moral concern for out-groups and future generations, and ties such shifts to mega-changes (like greater globalization and environmental sustainability challenges) in the modern human environment. It then imagines, as a thought experiment, how the seven typical mechanisms of the dominant world religions might be modified in the fourth stage.
Can Religion Be Saved?

Table of chapters  [Attached paper fits as chapter 8.]

1. Introduction: Onward Secular Soldiers?
   [A motivating introductory chapter that introduces the secularization thesis; some failed predictions of religion’s demise; opinions of militant atheists; and the puzzle of continuing substantial religiosity in the global human population, raising questions about why secularization is taking so long.]

2. Elements: Seven Mechanisms of World Religions
   1. Grand belief systems (with a tendency toward God(s) & afterlife)
   2. Little myths (stories, texts, narratives)
   3. Norms with grand consequences
   4. Communities or congregations
   5. Rituals
   6. Religious professionals or specialists
   7. Sacred or holy things

3. Why the Elements Matter: Comparing Social Systems
   [Abstractly compares governments, markets, social groups, and world religions as social systems involved in norm enforcement and many other behaviors affecting social welfare (discussed in lengthy chapter 4). Focus is on relative costs and benefits of the systems in different settings.

   Chapters 2 & 3 present the theoretical core of the book. Chapters 4&5 focus on empirical studies, historical accounts, and other evidence that might help explain findings.]

4. The Bright Side of Religions: Individual and Group Benefits
   1. Health
   2. Happiness (and “meaning”)
   3. Crime control
   4. Cooperation
   6. Other Social Welfare-Enhancing Activities: Complex Products, Public Goods, Redistribution (aka “charity”), and Disaster Relief
   7. Concluding Reflections

5. The Dark Side
   1. Agency costs of religious professionals
   2. Drag on reason
   3. Augmentation of inter-group violence or conflict


7. Church and State: The Quest for Optimal Interaction between Religion and Other Control Systems

8. Speculations on the Future of Religion
Chapter 8

Speculations on the Future of Religion

What will become of religions over the next several hundred years? Will they have a place in the global human social landscape in, say, the year 2500, and if so what will they look like?

The obvious and honest answer to such questions is that we don’t know. But it's fun and easy – and perhaps instructive for us in today’s world -- to list alternative scenarios and argue for each of them. Consider three broad possibilities. (1) Perhaps religions around the world will finally dwindle into undisputed insignificance. Secularism will triumph at last, decisively and globally. (2) Or perhaps religions will continue along as they have in the last few hundred years. Some existing religions will win out over others and gain global share; others will lose. Of course, there will also be upgrades and new models of the received religions. New sects and denominations will arise, making changes that seem really important to their adherents but that may strike an historian as variations on familiar themes. One can also expect to see the now historically familiar wide fluctuations in success rates of religions across societies and over major time periods. Religious participation rates will fall and rise, or rise and fall, over time periods that seem very long relative to other social patterns, and in different patterns across countries. But none of the changes will seem fundamentally different to serious historians who have studied religions over very long time periods. (3) Or perhaps genuinely new religions (or systems “something like” what we now think of as religion) will be created. Or, more realistically, some existing religions will change in truly fundamental and important ways. They will undergo “paradigm shifts,” so to speak. And a few of these significantly evolved new forms of religion will grow as the older forms decline.

These three paths for the future of religion – complete decline, fluctuating endurance, or morphological evolution – can be thought of as a partial list of relatively pure prototypes for thinking about what may well be a messy future.

The rest of this chapter offers reflections on these three scenarios, based upon ideas and theories introduced in earlier parts of the book. More specifically, I think there are at least four different types of considerations that bear importantly upon the plausibility of the three scenarios: the shifting cost-benefit calculus faced over longer time periods by each of the major types of social systems (governments, markets, social groups, and religions), which affects the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the systems; the role of innate psychological dispositions in bringing about and/or sustaining the various social systems, especially though not only religion; the utility of history as a sobriety check; and the possible utility of history as a revealer of long-term possibilities. I will introduce these considerations as my speculations unfold.
1. The End of Faith at Last?

Turn first to predictions that foresee the end of faith in the near future. Such a prediction might be based on an extrapolation of currently widespread secularism in some large regions of the world, such as Western Europe or China, or on the recent rise of “Nones” in the United States.¹ It might also be made as the result of philosophical reasoning about the inevitable triumph of science and reason, when these are thought to be incompatible with religion, or as a result of opinions about the perceived malignant effects of some religions. Admittedly, simple extrapolations and theoretical reasoning of this sort have some virtues. However, in light of the analytical framework laid out in chapter 3 and used throughout this book, as well as the empirical evidence reviewed in chapter 4, a sounder approach may be one that looks at the structural changes in human societies that influence changes in types of social systems. In that framework, the most obvious arguments for or against predictions of religion’s demise would look at the shifting cost-benefit calculus faced by the four major types of social systems in the modern world.

In this spirit, a predictor of the death of religion could argue that other social systems have so evolved that they are now able to provide virtually all of the benefits of religion explored in chapter 4 at lower cost. For example, he could argue that well-functioning governments can provide public goods and control negative externalities more effectively, cheaply, and completely than religions do, and that as more governments become well functioning (because of the rise of genuine democracy and the rule of law, or for other reasons), religions will be crowded out. Similarly, governments and secular nonprofits may get better and more complete in their fulfillment of redistributive tasks, thus obviating a role for religious charities.

As for pro-social norm enforcement, our doomsayer could note that the internet may facilitate the rise of really strong secular social groups that are much bigger in reach than traditional social groups yet very powerful in their installation and operation of social norms and sanctions. Such groups will help make up for any continuing shortfalls of legal systems in terms of their relatively high monitoring and enforcement costs as they enforce rules. And, by the way, legal systems themselves will become more efficient at monitoring and enforcement as they use

¹ See U.S. PUBLIC BECOMING LESS RELIGIOUS: MODEST DROP IN OVERALL RATES OF BELIEF AND PRACTICE, BUT RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED AMERICANS ARE AS OBSERVANT AS BEFORE (Pew Research Center, Nov. 3, 2015). As for data on religious adherents in Europe, see 2017 WORLD ALMANAC AND BOOK OF FACTS at 698; simple math yields the following rounded percentages of the total European population – 85% religious adherents, 13% agnostics, 2% atheists – though the percentages of nonreligious adherents vary greatly by particular country, as indicated by the country-specific entries in the Almanac. In officially atheist China, the nonreligious percentage is unusually high (52.2%, Id. at 762) – but by most independent accounts is shrinking. See, e.g., Liao Yiwu, GOD IS RED: THE SECRET STORY OF HOW CHRISTIANITY SURVIVED AND FLOURISHED IN COMMUNIST CHINA (2011).
new information technology. Religions will not then add any significant value to the already diversified portfolio of norm enforcement systems.

And so on down the line, with respect to other benefits of religions, such as psychological well-being. The latter can now be achieved more cost-effectively, one could argue, with the help of drug companies, mass entertainment, and secular civic associations.

Note also that empirical evidence and factoids can be cited to support these grand views about the directionality of history. For example, as noted earlier in this book, some economists have collected data that seem to support the view that as countries get richer, religion tends to decline, all else being equal.2 Put another way, as better technology and better economic markets provide more and more of the goods and services that people want, there is less reason to turn to religion for satisfaction of wants, including, presumably, those of a psychological or philosophical nature.

By the way, our forecaster of religion’s demise will note, the arguments just sketched out for that prediction do not depend on whether the “religion market” is oppressed or subsidized by the state, versus free and open. He can embrace the basic reasoning and key findings of esteemed scholars who push the notion that genuine separation of church and state has been key to religious vibrancy in recent times and places,3 without thinking for a moment that such separation will prevent the demise of religion. Even a completely open religious market will not result in religious beliefs and practices that resist the ultimate sweep of secularism, if virtually all the benefits of religions are provided by other social systems at a lower actual and perceived cost. Ultimately, the key factor for religion’s long-term future is not the state of the religion market but the scope of the beneficial consequences, and the degree of efficiency, of the other social systems (laws, markets, and secular social groups).

Nevertheless, this general form of argument, when used to predict the virtually complete death of religion in the near future, invites some fairly obvious “within-the-model” pushback. At the most general level: Why should we assume that external changes – in technology, transportation, communication, the scale of social units, and so forth – empower and improve the other social systems but not

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2 This is a rough paraphrase of one main finding in a global study by two Harvard faculty members. Rachel M. McCleary & Robert J. Barro, "Religion and Economy," JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES, vol. 20, no.2 (Spring 2006) 49-72. The study (which is subject to a variety of critiques) dealt in part with what they called the impact of economic growth on religion. As they stressed, however, the same data set also supported the idea that some religious beliefs help to increase economic growth rates.

religions? Might not such external changes also lead to improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of religions’ characteristic mechanisms?

For example, consider the booming growth in information technology and use of the internet. It does lead to larger and more global social groups, and perhaps it then expands the potential reach of social norms and informal norm enforcement, as compared to historical patterns. But can’t religions also learn to use such technology? Recall that certain strands of religion underwent a measurable and major revival in the ending decades of the twentieth century in the United States, as entrepreneurial pastors like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Joel Osteen began to make greater and greater use of televangelism (made possible by an earlier mode of new information technology) and mega-churches (made possible by cheaper and more widely available and customary transportation, i.e., cars and SUVs, and changing residential habits). Given this dramatic precedent, is it so hard to suppose that some new religious entrepreneurs will develop popular online churches, services, study groups, or other modes of religious affiliation and participation? If and when they do, those internet-facilitated communities may then have some of the relative advantages of traditional religious communities, with their distinctive cluster of associated group-connecting-and-enhancing features like required regular rituals, frequent rehearsal of key narratives and pro-social norms, and atmospheric signals like religious songs and group prayers that create an aura of the holy or sacred.

Put another way, the end-of-religion forecast needs to develop a convincing set of specific reasons to believe that new developments in information technology (or globalization in its many forms, etc.) will empower other social systems but not religions, or that the empowerment effects will be greatly lower for religions. At this time, it is not obvious that a clear and convincing case has been made. And if we reflect even briefly on historical precedent, such as the failure of so many Enlightenment thinkers’ predictions of religion’s imminent demise,4 we may want to insist on a high burden of proof.

In addition to these “within-the-model” counterarguments of a theoretical sort, an opponent of those who forecast religion’s imminent demise could point out

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4 John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge, GOD IS BACK: HOW THE GLOBAL REVIVAL OF FAITH IS CHANGING THE WORLD (2009) supply a detailed journalistic account of the global upsurge in religion despite a complex history of atheistic thinking and decline in European religious participation rates. A more recent and more systematic study is cited below in note 5.

And, of course, one can cite some of the more dramatic turnarounds of 20th century scholars who once predicted secularism’s inevitable triumph. Compare, e.g., Peter L. Berger, THE HERETICAL IMPERATIVE: CONTEMPORARY POSSIBILITIES OF RELIGIOUS AFFIRMATION (1979) with Peter L. Berger, THE DESECULARIZATION OF THE WORLD: RESURGENT RELIGION AND WORLD POLITICS (1999). But given the salience of new-atheist writings by authors like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett in the wake of 9/11/2001, it seems better to look carefully at demographic data and trends, and then consider and test explanations for them.
some more pragmatic or fact-based difficulties with the prediction. All of these are relevant to the comparative-social-system framework favored in this book.

First, the empirical evidence reviewed in chapter 4, on religion’s bright side, indicates that religion offers measurable benefits of multiple kinds to people, even in our world of highly developed governments, markets, and secular social groups. These data strongly suggest that, for many people, religions add something of value to what other systems provide, and do so at acceptable levels of cost.

Second, and more dramatically, the most comprehensive demographic studies indicate rather clearly that, on a global level, the nonreligious share of the world population – that is, people who are atheists, agnostics, or who do not identify with a particular religious group – has been shrinking over the last decade, and careful statistical analysis of the relevant demographic factors (e.g., differential fertility rates between religious and secular groups, different age distributions, switching rates out of and into religious groups, etc.) support a prediction that this global trend will likely continue until at least 2050. By contrast, Muslims will then make up an even larger percentage share of the global population, while Christians and Hindus will grow significantly and basically retain their percentage shares. Such analyses, especially those that show the relative importance of differential fertility rates, suggest that religions generate a group-level comparative advantage over the long run.

Granted, one can also imagine that this difference won’t continue indefinitely. Perhaps all or most members of most religious groups will eventually become secular. And then the very secular societies with their lower fertility rates will either go very slowly down the demographic drain pipe, or find some alternative way to keep themselves at least somewhat above the population replacement rate. Perhaps. In any event, it is useful to consider other factors cutting against the triumph of secularism, and that thought leads to several other considerations.

Third, the existence of fully well functioning and problem-free governments throughout the world is not exactly an end state that seems right around the corner. Even if we assume that optimal governments could completely displace religions as boosters of redistribution movements and compliance with pro-social norms, the displacement is unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future.

Fourth, even if and when virtually all formal governments become much more developed, corruption-free, and efficient at supplying what people want but

can’t easily obtain in economic markets, the perennial risk of a turn to excessive or exploitative government points toward the wisdom of always maintaining a diversified portfolio of social systems. An ideal world society could have honest, efficient, and democratically responsive governments, highly efficient and competitive economic markets, robust secular civic associations, and a flourishing array of religions that are free and separate from governments. At some level of awareness, many (though certainly not all) people do and will value the risk-reducing virtues of diversification of social systems and a balancing of their powers – that is, the value of “federalism” in a very broad sense. Those “portfolio diversifiers” in our human population will likely continue to promote social systems that are alternatives to, and potential restraints upon, formal governments.

2. The Rock of Ages Endures?

Turn now to the forecaster who expects that religions will endure, albeit with roughly the same kinds of slow motion volatility and changes observed in the long human past. There will be declines and revivals of the major religions. New models and patterns of religion will develop within the old frameworks and perhaps spin off from them. Government regulation, perhaps driven by new ideologies that are as assertively authoritarian as communism often was, may temporarily suppress religion. In other countries, government subsidies may first boost and eventually, in the long run after the agency costs of religious personnel accumulate, weaken religion. But ultimately the pervasive human demand for religion’s distinctive product(s) and the supply of religious models by spiritual entrepreneurs will restore religion in many parts of the world. It will continue to be a major social force.

As suggested by the phrasing of this characterization, a forecaster who believes that religion in some forms will endure is likely to be heavily influenced by two of the considerations I alluded to earlier: the lessons of history, and the role of innate human dispositions. (He or she might also use the comparative social system analysis to support the forecast, of course, though that path, as we just saw, requires many empirical guesses about the impact of future developments on the costs and benefits of the different systems.)

History is indeed a useful sobriety check, and it seems in this case to support the forecast of religion’s fluctuating endurance. From the point of view of a student of human history over many centuries, the fluctuating endurance prediction can easily seem to be the obvious default position to take. On the other hand, history also offers ammunition for those who believe that some forms of social organization that were prevalent in the very long-ago past, such as hunter-gatherer tribes and chiefdoms and empires with kings, have basically faded away from the lives of most humans, and who see no good reason not to include religions in the category of forms that will soon move into that historical junkyard. From this perspective,
which sees that some basic social-structural changes do occur over the very long term, the lessons of history are arguably indeterminate.

So let us turn to the role of innate psychological dispositions – or “instincts,” to use older terminology -- in bringing about and/or sustaining the various social systems, especially religion. For example, as noted in prior parts of the book, scholars from a variety of disciplines, as well as journalists, have emphasized a multitude of claimed dispositions to help explain the distinctive features of religions. Some scholars have tried to put them together into a wider theory about religion’s strong persistence and presence across culture and times.\(^6\) It is useful to list and comment on five of the prominent dispositions, while noting that they are not mutually exclusive.

One memorable view is that there is an “agency detection” module in the brain.\(^7\) It supposedly evolved in the ancestral environment to help us spot predators (or meal opportunities), but it is strong and general enough to make us inclined to posit and believe in supernatural agents. The existence of such a module or instinct seems plausible; a successful hunter-gatherer should be less interested in estimating objective probabilities accurately than in avoiding very costly errors or missing very valuable benefits. Yet one may be understandably reluctant to conclude that the module’s tendency to overgeneralize cannot be controlled by conscious rational beings. In any event, it seems a stretch to think that such an instinct is “the” main impetus for religion, as opposed to a supporting factor.

A second postulated disposition is a supposed need for a sense of “ultimate meaning (or purpose)”\(^8\) or even, perhaps, a more general faith instinct.\(^9\) The origins of such an impulse, in terms explainable by the logic of evolutionary biology, are a bit murky. But perhaps it could be seen as building upon, or at least related to, the next two listed dispositions.

A third and obvious instinct is a fear of death.\(^10\) It makes great sense from the point of view of evolutionary biology, with its emphasis on urges that promote individual survival and reproductive fitness. Assuming that fear of death takes a strong and generalized form, it may make us inclined to posit and believe in an afterlife, a cycle of reincarnation, or some other escape hatch that denies our irrevocable end. A denial reaction of this kind may then alleviate psychological anxiety and give people more courage to go on living and striving and reproducing. That is, it need not reduce efforts to try as hard as possible to keep living in this world as long as possible, but may actually enhance reproductive fitness. A related

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\(^7\) [Add cite.]
\(^8\) Robert Wright, in his book The Evolution of God 444-84 (2009), wrestles with this and similar concepts that emerge from theological musings.
\(^10\) See Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion (1927), which discusses this fear as one of several key variables in his theory about why religions have arisen but will eventually decline.
but quite generalized version of this kind of hypothesis goes beyond fear of death to a much broader need for “compensators”¹¹ – goods and states we really want but cannot have – and the resulting denial-like adjustments we make in our world views to maintain optimism and persistence in the tasks of this world. Put otherwise, certain kinds of irrational optimism may ultimately favor our genes.

A fourth innate disposition – or, perhaps better, a related pair of widely recurring human behaviors -- that have been much studied by social psychologists and should be relevant is our strong tendency to anchor specific beliefs and norms in authority figures and in larger and grander reasons, or belief systems. Such a set of tendencies (e.g., one for anchoring in authority, one for anchoring in group-held or individually plausible reasons) would have made sense as a way of promoting pro-social behavior in small hunter-gatherer tribes subjected to group selection pressures. Assuming such dispositions have a tendency to generalize, they might also have led to more grandiose metaphysical patterns of anchoring when larger groups and societies arose.

A fifth innate disposition used by some scholars to understand religion is our supposed precautionary module, which evolved to help us recoil instinctively against “unclean” (and so unhealthy) things.¹² This instinct leads to often-useful washing and purifying behavior, and in some people it even leads to obsessive-compulsive disorder. Of greater interest for scholars of religion, in most or many people it may also lead to a generalized tendency to engage willingly and repeatedly in rituals, including religious rituals. Such rituals need have no pragmatic or instrumental purpose that is clear or observable to the uninvolved external observer. (Granted, group rituals may have psychologically beneficial consequences, like reinforcement of the participating members’ feelings of solidarity and belonging. They may also increase group loyalty and team spirit in ways that improve the group’s success in relation to other, competing groups. These subtle possibilities are not inconsistent with observers seeing religious rituals as having no obvious practical goal.) But the general explanation-seeking mental module of the participants [discussed above as part of the fourth instinct] will insist on positing a reason, and so a non-falsifiable spiritual explanation will be fashioned in a way that gains acceptance by group members.

Can the precautionary module explain religion? It may be a helpful factor in understanding some features of religion, but it seems quite implausible to see it as the main basis for all seven of the typical elements of world religions discussed in chapter 2. At most it seems to illuminate some aspects of religious rituals. And other theoretical work on rituals indicates that even in that sphere there are important other factors at work. Cautionary instincts cannot be the whole story, even with respect to ritual.

¹² [Add cite.]
More generally, how persuasive is the resort to proffered innate dispositions for those who would forecast religion’s fluctuating endurance into the future? In my view, the essential story line that some key features of religions are based on enduring aspects of human nature is quite plausible, even if some of the specific examples of postulated “dispositions” and their implications can be challenged. But plausibility is not the same as strong proof, and one can wonder about the ways in which even basic instincts can be reshaped or channeled, perhaps in directions that leave little room for religion. In other words, only the future will tell.

3. Cultural Evolution Surprises Again?

The most interesting scenario about religion in the future is suggested by the fourth consideration mentioned at the outset of this chapter -- history as a revealer of long-term possibilities. Over very long stretches of time – millennia, not decades - we can observe occasional major changes, or paradigm shifts, in social systems. This reality is true of the governmental structures that supply legal systems. (Consider the long shift from chiefdoms to empires and kingdoms to nation states with dictators, presidents, or prime ministers.) It is also true, and rather dramatically so, of the major types of religion. The temple religions of Sumeria and other ancient civilizations were fundamentally different in their basic structural features, focus, and practical implications than the Abrahamic faiths that arose and eventually pervaded later kingdoms and states.

Such phenomena raise the possibility that major evolutionary changes can and will occur again. There may well be paradigm shifts in how future “religions” are structured, presented, and implemented, and in what their pragmatic consequences are. And some of the new paradigms may prove to be successful in getting themselves replicated, because they will add something in a cost-effective way to what is being supplied to humans by other kinds of social systems.\(^\text{13}\)

a. Perspective: Three prior stages in the evolution of religions

As background for thinking about the possibility and shape of future evolutions in the basic features of religions, it is helpful to look back at some past major changes in patterns and emphasis. To be sure, any serious scholar of the history of religions will point out that past changes were extremely complicated and varied across societies and time; that many changes were not linear or progressive; and that there are lots of overlaps, so that features we might associate with modern religions can be observed in some early religions (and vice versa), even if there are eventual shifts in the emphases or forms of some religions. Nonetheless, with all

\(^{13}\text{Assuming such a future development takes generations and we are all gone by then, it may have the ironic result of honoring the memory of a fierce critic of religion, Richard Dawkins, by supporting a modified version of his theory of memes.}\)
such qualifications, one can still perceive some larger shifts in prevailing elements and emphasis over very long time frames. Of equal interest, these long-term shifts seem to be related to changes in knowledge and technology, economic arrangements, and the scale of social groups and their degrees and forms of interaction. And despite all the complexity, histories of religion over the ages, together with studies by anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars in other disciplines, do seem to make it plausible to identify some major themes that have been characteristic of dominant religious patterns in different phases of human history. So, at the risk of oversimplifying history – deliberately but, I hope, usefully – I will describe several major stages in the evolution of religions.

This remainder of this chapter offers a high level description of four stages of religion. That is, it attempts to identify typical or salient patterns in what “religion” emphasized – what its beliefs and practices were often like, and, more importantly, what it mainly did for people – in three major eras of human history, before going on to frankly speculative thoughts about a possibly emerging fourth stage. After identifying the dominant or salient objectives of religion in each stage, it attempts to offer a general framework for answering two major questions. First, in what sense, and how, did (or does, or will) “religion” address the dominant objectives? Second, why were there eventual changes in the emphasis or character of religions? Why, for example, did the typical payoffs from religion in the first two stages decline over time, and why did different emphases arise in stage three?

The four stages can be given suggestive labels: religion for good personal fortune, religion for public goods, religion for pro-social norms, and religion for expanding circles. And as a preview or prompt for thinking about why the different stages developed, it should be noted here that each stage involves mutually supportive changes in three dimensions of a religion’s system of grand beliefs: first, conceptions of the divine or transcendent; second, the nature and focus of salient norms; and third, ideas about the ultimate goal or end state of human life, and how norm compliance relates to it. In the case of each stage, the mutually supportive changes along these three dimensions also correlate with important changes in the scale and structure of human societies and their economic and political characteristics – or, to put it more abstractly, changes in the external environment lived in by individual humans.

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14 The descriptions, and my exploration of reasons for the patterns and changes in them, are based on my own attempted synthesis of a very wide of range of scholarship in multiple disciplines. I hasten to acknowledge that virtually all of my particular observations have likely been made better and in more nuanced ways by others, and that many scholars could challenge me for ignoring or bungling themes and findings that are important in their work.

15 For a very roughly analogous account of the evolution of religions, see Ara Norenzayan, Big Gods (2016), which like the themes developed by Robert Wright in his books, links the very long-term move of most humans toward grander conceptions of the divinity to changes in social scale and the like. My analysis adopts this idea but also attempts to focus more explicitly on 2 other dimensions of change: the shifting and relative benefit-to-cost traits of the different social systems as societies increase in scale, and the different types of benefits provided by the different systems.
First Stage: Religion for Good Personal Fortune

Especially though not only in early religions, many particular religious beliefs and practices seem to have been aimed at the prevention or alleviation of personal misfortune or, in the positive variants, the achievement of good fortune. The apparent goal of religion was to handle threats to physical health, to the satisfaction of basic needs such as food, and to mental health, or to increase the prospects of getting mates and having successful children.

Consider the tens of thousands of years during which most humans on the planet were members of fairly small hunter-gatherer tribes and groups. Based on anthropological studies of relatively isolated hunter-gatherer groups that managed to survive into modern times, and on consistency with historical and archeological research, it appears that a sizable amount of the activity in such groups that we might be inclined to classify as “religious” reflected the prevention-or-treatment-of-misfortune theme. Without trying to catalog all such practices, consider three typical variants:

(1) Shamans and witch doctors were consulted to forestall or alleviate physical illness and injury. They attempted to do so by petitioning and appeasing postulated spiritual forces, which were often located in imagined spiritual personalities. The petitioning or appeasement often involved rituals and sacrifice—sometimes done by individuals, and sometimes by groups.

(2) Similarly, rituals and sacrifices to postulated spiritual forces and personalities were often undertaken to alleviate the fear or experience of food shortage, whether that fear be from uncertainty about success in the hunt for game, the presence or absence of food to be collected while foraging, or the outcome of a planting of basic crops. In a similar vein, the rituals might be motivated by fear of a shortage of rain, an excess of flooding or fire or other natural disasters, and other natural disasters.

(3) Finally, other rituals involving postulated spirits—especially, perhaps, those group rituals accompanied by chanting, music, dance, and/or trance—seem to have been aimed at forestalling or alleviating psychological distress (generalized fear or anxiety, alienation or social isolation, or other forms of stress) and promoting a reassuring sense of group membership.

One might place beliefs and rituals aimed at the fear of death in this category, or in an intermediate (but extremely important) zone between categories 2 and 3.

Q1: How does “religion” further the objective?
Turn now to the first major question. In what sense, and how, did “religion” address the participants’ apparent objectives? What explains the long persistence of these religious practices? Several key processes, which build on (innate?) psychological dispositions that have now been studied by psychologists and social psychologists, appear to be at work.

(1) To start with the first type of practice emphasized in this stage of religion: The perceived utility for physical health of shamans and associated rituals may be attributed to the placebo effect, broadly construed. Belief that illness will be avoided or can be cured generates optimism and hope, and much research indicates that these mental states sometimes, though obviously not always, can actually be helpful. But this general point can be usefully unpacked to focus on the particular attributes of religiously based hope.

First, the hope is usually based on an explanatory belief system – an explanation, however vague, of the cause of illness and the ability of a process or spirit to deal with it. Placebos work better when based on an actually held theoretical belief that roughly explains what is going on – whether or not the explanation is objectively valid, or even fully coherent. Obviously, this factor by itself – hope is more forceful when based on a belief system – can be present in many forms, and doesn’t seem to depend on beliefs that are distinctively “religious.”

Second, though, religious beliefs in general, and in particular those about the power of rituals and spirits, have the useful property that they are not easily subject to disproof by observed outcomes. If the healing ritual doesn’t work, explanations can readily be given that preserve the belief system. This aspect of religion – its reliance on beliefs based on a non-falsifiable (and non-verifiable) realm of realities and personalities (spirits and the like) beyond the phenomenal realm – turns out to be a generally effective pragmatic attribute of religion in all four of the stages I will describe. (Granted, this general attribute of religion will strike many devotees of scientific method as a serious flaw, but it seems not to strike ordinary folks that way.) Indeed, our intuitive appreciation of the point is part of the reason that we are inclined to group beliefs supporting early shamanistic practices under the rubric of religion, despite the great differences between those beliefs and the later ones of the dominant world religions.

Third, the belief in a spiritual realm is often further specified as including belief in spiritual personalities. These beliefs play to what some might refer to as humans’ “agency detection module,” that is, our evolved tendency to pay more serious attention to other animals and to people than to inanimate objects and forces. When the explanatory belief also attributes relevant power (e.g., to cause or to remove illness) to the spiritual personality, a particular belief-and-ritual package may also invoke our innate tendency to trust and obey authority figures – or perhaps, in some variants of the package, to appease authority. In general, resort to spiritual personalities, as opposed to mere spiritual “forces,” seems destined to have a stronger effect – here, a generalized placebo effect – on most people.
Fourth, the dual use of authority figures -- an actual human religious professional (the shaman, or healer) together with a non-falsifiable spiritual personality (the spirit who ultimately causes the healing) -- allows the overall attempt to create helpful hope, and therefore a placebo effect, to get a double whammy or boost from the trust-in-authority mental module while simultaneously alleviating the perception of excessive agency costs, which can sometimes be strong enough to lead the whole ritual process to backfire. That is, if the shaman is cast as just acting on his own, as the authority figure with claimed power to cause a cure, and is demanding sizable payments of some sort from the person fearing or experiencing illness, the latter may come to the conclusion that the shaman is a sham, just playing the healing game for the personal benefits, and that the promise of healing is speculative and unreal. The use of a spiritual authority in the background helps to slow down this tendency toward cynical disbelief. It may therefore facilitate more instances of a usefully effective placebo, while unfortunately also allowing greater deadweight agency costs.16

(2) and (3) Consider now two other belief-and-ritual packages that were salient in the first stage: beliefs and practices aimed at addressing the fear or experience of food shortages and other specific disasters affecting basic human needs, or the fear of death, and others aimed at addressing more general anxieties and psychological distress. The general aims (or, if we wish to avoid or not depend entirely on claims of intentional human design, the "culturally-selected-for consequences") of the associated religious beliefs and rituals are twofold: to promote stress reduction and social bonding. [I pause here to emphasize a very basic point: Linguistically, historically, and really, “religion” is significantly about bonding, or tying people together for social good production and mutual benefit.] Social bonding itself then leads to feelings of belonging and less distress, and it also facilitates more effective group action in practical affairs.

How might religious beliefs and rituals help achieve this social bonding and more effective group action? As in the case of religious rituals addressed to physical health concerns, we can point to the importance of explanatory beliefs (even if they are not objective or falsifiable), the importance of authority figures, and the boosting role of non-falsifiable spiritual personalities. But in this context we can also adduce two additional factors. First, group rituals invoke the power of social facilitation tendencies. We tend to believe and do as our group does, and religious rituals seem to leverage this tendency much more regularly and intensively than do many secular professionals.

16 One should note that religious systems, even very basic ones like those in stage one, often evolve mechanisms that attempt to control agency costs. These control mechanisms have also evolved in later stages, and continue to change. Their rate of success or failure is a large subject of separate inquiry. For example, one take on the Roman Catholic celibacy requirement for priests and nuns is that it was (perhaps not consciously) adopted as a form of “costly signaling” that increased the laity’s confidence in the clergy and encouraged members to keep participating and contributing. But the requirement eventually had serious negative effects on recruitment and retention of religious professionals.
group rituals. Second, group rituals themselves (sometimes, depending of the type of ritual) can have stress-reducing effects. That is, they can promote a sense of consolation and comfort -- and this effect seems especially true of religious rituals. It is also possible that the distinctive musical, chanting, and recital styles, and even the movement practices, of religious rituals make a difference.\(^\text{17}\)

**Q2: Why was there a relative decline of religion as preventer and alleviator of personal misfortune, and promoter of good fortune?**

The role of religion as a system perceived to be very useful for the prevention and alleviation of personal misfortune has declined greatly over time. Granted, there are still sects, such as scientology, in which it is a dominant theme. And more notably, even some religious traditions that still have many millions of practitioners, such as Chinese folk religion,\(^\text{18}\) appear to give it a significant role. But in many of the major world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), this role persists in reduced form, and to most participants in them it would seem odd to think of their religion as being mainly about this role. Why has this relative decline occurred?

Relative decline in an emphasis of religion can occur for two main sorts of reasons. Other social systems may have begun to supply the particular benefits in a superior or more cost-effective way. Or religions may have begun to emphasize the production of other kinds of benefits, as to which they have at least some comparative advantages compared to other suppliers. Both patterns seem well illustrated by the long arc of human history.

The long decline of stage one religion illustrates these general points. Over time, more scientific or at least more practical medical knowledge developed, so that less effective shamanistic practices were outcompeted. Improved practical knowledge about irrigation systems, pest control, seed selection, and harvesting and storage technologies tended to reduce the perceived need for and role of religious rituals aimed at warding off agricultural disaster. Eventually, even strong competitors for dealing with broader and less specific psychological distress – modern psychiatry and psychopharmacology – arose. More generally, there has been growth and improvement in pragmatic knowledge addressing many (though certainly not all) of the misfortunes addressed so intensely by stage one religious beliefs and practices. As indicated, we can see this long slow process as reflecting competition from other social systems supplying their solutions to the problems.

This particular competitive game is not over, of course. Though faith healing is far less prominent than in earlier times, many people still turn or stick to religion

\(^\text{17}\) Nicholas Wade’s book on The Faith Instinct, cited supra note 8, offers an analogous portrayal of religious ritual.

\(^\text{18}\) The 2017 World Almanac and Books of Facts, at 698, puts the 2015 number of Chinese folk religionists at nearly 454 million people, or 6.2% of the global population.
because it provides consolation, stress reduction, a sense of belonging, and “meaning.” That is, religion’s role in promoting both physical and mental health may still be significant. And certain kinds of personal misfortune – most notably, eventual death – can be postponed by use of new pragmatic knowledge but not avoided, and religions continue to address the anxiety that can accompany realization of this fact. Freud’s overall analysis of religion may be critiqued as too limited and biased, but in his discussion of the fear of death he was on to something of continuing significance. (Interestingly, some recent empirical research indicates that religiously observant persons increase their charitable giving as they age, especially if their religion emphasizes the value of good works in raising their chances of a good afterlife situation. This empirical pattern is consistent with the idea that religious beliefs do influence people, though it also suggests that they engage in a subconscious balancing of probabilities – the likelihood of dying soon versus the likelihood that the religious beliefs are valid – and their associated perceived costs and benefits.)

But however one assesses each of the specific aspects of this account, my general theme, important here and in thinking about changes to and from other stages of emphasis in religions, is the most critical one: the existence and quality of competition from other suppliers of benefits is an important factor affecting the eventual shape and emphases of religions.

Two comments are worth noting. First, this general claim, as it has just been formulated, may seem obvious. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, it is often ignored or slighted in theoretical attempts to explain religion and its evolution. Second, the general claim is a significantly broadened version of a supply-side analysis of the religion market. Traditional supply-side analysis, which focuses on the degree to which different religious options and products are generated to satisfy the preferences of potential members, is vividly memorable for its support of the view that an open and competitive marketplace for religions, which market is neither subsidized nor burdened nor tilted by the state, can lead to religious vibrancy and diversity rather than religious decline and massive secularism. That is, a society that meets both the negative condition of separation between church and state, and the positive condition of having a good and diverse supply of insightful religious

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19 The empirical literature supporting or qualifying this statement is surprisingly vast. See, e.g., Harold G. Koenig, Dana E. King, & Verna Benner Carson, HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND HEALTH (2d ed. 2012). Some relatively recent typical studies include Shanshan Li, Meir J. Stampfer, David R. Williams, & Tyler J. VanderWeele, “Association of Religious Service Attendance With Mortality Among Women,” JAMA INTERN MED., vol. 176(6) (2016) 777-785 (frequent attendance at religious services was associated with significantly lower risk of all-cause, cardiovascular, and cancer mortality among women); Tyler J. VanderWeele, Shanshan Li, Alexander C. Tsai, & Ichiro Kawachi, “Association Between Religious Service Attendance and Lower Suicide Rates Among US Women,” JAMA PSYCHIATRY doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.1243. Published online June 29, 2016 (in the studied cohort, frequent religious service attendance was associated with a significantly lower rate of suicide).

entrepreneurs, is most likely to possess a robust and diverse mix of religious groups. This view has obvious and important relevance for public policy debates. Nevertheless, for understanding long term changes, it is important to keep in mind that competition occurs not only among religions, but also between religions and other social systems (e.g., professions like those of doctors and agriculturalists that build bodies of tested practical knowledge, governments, market–based institutions, civic associations, and social groups) that supply some of the benefits offered by religions. If we really like competitive markets, we might be inclined not only to promote separation of church and state, and the ensuing competition among religions, but also competition among kinds of social systems.

**Second Stage: Religion for Public Goods**

Let’s leave the hunter-gatherer world and enter the world of agriculture, city-states and empires, and temple gods.

Starting with Uruk about 5000 years ago, perhaps, the city-states of Sumer began to be established in the area of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Apparently these were some of the first urban areas to be settled, and they lasted for a very long time; Sumerian civilization persisted for over 3,000 years. The cities and their population density, very high in comparison to earlier modes of human association, were made possible by agriculture and the more abundant and less uncertain food production it enabled. The cities became desirable, and not just possible, in part because they were at or near elaborate man-made or man-shaped irrigation systems that could be shared by many farmers.

Irrigation systems can be great for many people, but there are inherent problems. Who will build and maintain them, and who will pay for them? Who will share in their benefits? How can participants control over-usage of the system, whether by some or all users? How can they control usage by persons who haven’t contributed to the system? In a small-scale society such as a tribe or village, these collective action and free rider problems can be addressed by social norms and social sanctions, perhaps interpreted and applied by a group of known and respected tribal elders, and these norms can readily build on and reinforce evolved innate dispositions toward generalized reciprocity. But in a large urban population, such as one based at an important hub in a major river valley that supports large-scale agriculture, these old mechanisms may cease to be enough, and political authority or power of some sort may be needed to solve the problems of producing public goods. Often (though not always), with improved production technology comes greater social scale, and with greater scale comes limits on the effectiveness of social norms.

In this setting, it appears that religious practices arose that helped to validate political authority and carry out the solution of collective action problems. As

21 [Verify and add cite.]
scholars of religion\textsuperscript{22} have noted and explained, early civilizations centered in city-states and empires and based on agriculture, tended to feature religions with temple gods (who were different in power and personalities from the old ancestral and other spirits of tribes), sacrifices and tributes (a/k/a taxes) to them, and religious authority figures who either possessed political authority or were linked to, and helped justify, the political authorities. In various ways, the religions in agriculturally developed city states helped justify and implement systems of mandatory participation in irrigation system maintenance or payment for it, as well as religious norms against cheating the system or stealing from others. More generally, the emphasis of religions in this era shifted toward production of public goods.

While I have no intention here of trying to review the vast scholarly literature related to the second stage, exposure to that literature quickly suggests that my broad generalizations in the preceding paragraph cry out for some comments that elaborate and qualify them.

First, a fuller account of second-stage religions would quickly broaden the public goods analysis to cover military defense, roads, canals, drinking water and sewer systems, and other collective goods that were not obviously going to be supplied voluntarily by the peoples in larger scale social units where informal social sanctions had lost some of their mojo.

Second, and related, other ancient civilizations had rough similarities to Sumerian religion, even if the emphasis was on other kinds of collective goods. Examples range from Egypt during the reign of pharaohs to the Aztec and Mayan civilizations at a much later time in the Americas. These rough similarities – not just the curious physical similarities among Sumerian ziggurats, Egyptian pyramids, and the stepped pyramids of Mesoamerican Mayan civilization, but the similarities among pantheons of gods, priestly bureaucracies, types of sacrifices, and the apparent resulting legitimatization of political authorities that compelled contribution to production of public goods (as well as to the enrichment of the ruling class) – suggest that the idea of a distinctive second stage of religion is quite plausible.

Third, more recent anthropological work based on in-depth field observation of surviving cultures that resemble ancient civilizations in terms of social scale, dependence on agriculture, and other features of their economic development, support the religion-for-public-goods account of temple religions. A fine example, noted in chapter 4, is the study of the water temple system of Bali.\textsuperscript{23} Such

\textsuperscript{22} E.g., Rodney Stark, \textit{Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief} (paperback ed., 2008), Chapter 2, “Temple Religions of Ancient Civilizations, at 64-112. [Add cites to other authors?]

anthropological fieldwork is important because it complements the portrait of second-stage religion suggested to scholars such as Rodney Stark by the historical research, which for ancient civilizations is inevitably based on incomplete and contestable evidence.

Fourth, it should be realized that even earlier social structures that tended to appear before the rise of Middle Eastern city-states, such as interconnected tribes governed in part by chiefdom-type governance systems, also enlisted religion in the production of some public goods. A vivid case study of this phenomenon, also noted in chapter 4, is Roy Rappaport’s pigs-for-the-ancestors study, which illustrates how religious beliefs and rituals were used to support widespread participation in efforts to reduce recurring threats to agricultural productivity. And even today, production of public goods is a minor theme of what some or most religions do. My point in describing “stages” of religion is, as should be obvious, not to assert clean breaks and pure paradigm shifts. It is about significant changes in the relative emphasis and the prevailing or prototypical “shape” of religions.

Fifth, and related, even in later phases of religious evolution, which saw the eventual emergence of the still-dominant major religions in the post-Axial-Age environment in much of the world, religion was often linked to political authority. That linkage has decoupled in relatively recent times in some traditions and cultures, though that pattern of decline is hardly complete. But, as before, the larger analytical point is about the salient and prototypical emphases of major religions. As will be discussed shortly, these emphases changed again in the third stage.

Q1: How did religions further the objective?

As with stage one, we begin reflection on stage two religions by asking why there was a religious component to such early governments. What did “religion” add? The answers lie in the distinctive attributes of the same mechanisms that did the work in stage one: religious beliefs and religious rituals.

As in stage one, stage two religions anchored norms – now, norms requiring contribution toward public good production (irrigation, defense, etc.) and avoidance of free-riding – in explanatory beliefs. The beliefs themselves had an other-worldly or non-phenomenal character, which gave them grandeur and robustness (because of their hard-to-falsify character). The beliefs often invoked spiritual personalities, thus triggering dispositions to trust and obey authorities. And the dual use of human and spiritual authorities leveraged this disposition; it also mitigated the risk of resistance to high agency costs. In addition, when sacrifices to temple gods involved group rituals, as they frequently did, the psychological power of group facilitation boosted commitment to the relevant norms; the invocation of spiritual beliefs and personalities helped to enforce regular participation in the rituals; and

the repetitive services themselves helped to internalize and “prime” fidelity to the norms.

An additional factor was the relative absence of good, convincing, and popularly accessible secular theories that could justify the power and perquisites enjoyed by political authorities. Perhaps only with the development and widespread acceptance of democratic models of the legitimacy of political authorities could political authorities hope to survive for very long without backup from religious beliefs and rituals. Even throughout much of stage three, which is discussed below, many governments have relied on the religious backup for legitimacy.

Q2: Why was there eventually a relative decline of religion as promoter of the production of public goods?

As my remarks about democratic theory suggest, in the very long run, the stage two emphasis of religions as bolsterers of political authority declined because of competition from relatively effective and convincing alternative belief systems for legitimating such authority. As movements in the Muslim world for basing legal systems on Sharia remind us, however, this competitive game is not over.

But many centuries before this competitive process could begin in earnest and have any serious effect in some societies, religions changed their prototypical emphasis for reasons falling into another broad category. They simply began growing their other business divisions, so to speak, by giving larger emphasis to the production of other goods – most importantly, the making and enforcing of pro-social norms. They did this because changes in the human environment had made those goods more needed and valuable, and because religions had some comparative advantages over the other social control systems with which they competed. And this observation leads us to stage three.

Third Stage: Religion for Pro-Social Norms

Let us now leave the world of multiple temple gods obsessed with sacrificial offerings, and enter the so-called Axial Age (or Axial Period), in which religion as many of us know it began to be shaped and produced in earnest. The changes launched in that formative period eventually developed into the features that characterize the still-prevalent major religious traditions in our world.

In the mid-twentieth century, the German-Swiss philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote an eventually influential book\(^\text{25}\) that grandly (and grandiosely) reflected on roughly analogous design changes that occurred in the prevailing religious systems

\(^{25}\) Originally published in German in 1949; the first English translation appeared as Karl Jaspers, THE ORIGIN AND GOAL OF HISTORY (1953). (Aside: Imagine trying to persuade a top-tier university press to publish a book with such a title nowadays.)
and/or philosophies of human life in societies stretching across much of Eurasia—e.g., Greece, Israel, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, and China—during the first millennium BCE (or from about 800 to 200 BCE, in some portrayals). He called this period the "Axial Age," a label that indicates a turning period in human history. Subsequent scholars have commented at length on this period of transformation, and in doing so have both clarified and debated the key features and actual time points in the period.

For purposes of my high-level analysis, two features of the Axial Age should be emphasized.

First, there were roughly simultaneous changes along several dimensions of the major religious traditions: (a) changes in the grand belief systems, (b) changes in the character of norms most emphasized, (c) changes in ideas about the ultimate goal of human life, and (d) reshaped beliefs about the connections between norm compliance and that goal. Thus, there was a seismic shift toward (or emphasis of, in the case of Judaism) an even grander conception or the divine or transcendental—e.g., from a tribe-protecting strong god, or a powerful sky god who demanded temple sacrifices and legitimized the king, toward a supreme or even sole god. In addition, there was a greater normative emphasis on pro-social norms of various kinds, such as respect for the person and property of others and faithful adherence to the duties of status or contract. Moreover, there was a grander conception of the ultimately desired human state, such as a good eternal afterlife or a state of nirvana. And there were new or reinforced ideas about how compliance with key norms would relate to the desired human state.

Second, these connected changes in religion or prevailing philosophy all seem to have been responsive to challenges and opportunities presented by major changes in the typical human environment or situation. That is, depending on the particular society, they seem to have been related to one or more of the following:

- social groups of much larger scale than in prior times;
- city-states with much more diverse ethnicities and linguistic and cultural groups living in proximity; and


For a contemporary multidisciplinary account of changes in conceptions of the divinity that were related to changes in social scale and greater emphasis on pro-social norms, see Ara Norenzayan, A.F. Shariff, W.M. Gervais, A.K. Willard, R.A. McNamara, E. Slingerland, and J. Henrich [hereinafter, Norenzayan et al.], "The cultural evolution of prosocial religions," Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 39 (2016) 1-65: doi:10.1017/S0140525X14001345, e1. These scholars do not single out an Axial Age, but seem to favor a more gradual evolutionary story; nor do they focus sharply on different patterns of normative emphasis in temple religions and the later-dominant world religions. My guess is that a team composed more heavily of divinity school scholars familiar with scriptures (and how dramatically their emphases differ in different eras), historians of ancient cultures, and in-the-field anthropologists, might have been more accepting of a distinct Axial Period.
greatly increased trade across diverse groups and city states, which trade was facilitated by improvements in transportation and the invention of coinage, i.e., money.

Whether by accident, design, imitation, cultural selection, or (as is likely) some combinations of these processes, the new religious models seem to have been shaped in a way that could help such societies function more effectively.

To illustrate these points, let’s review some of the salient shifts in several parts of the world.

In Persia, site of modern-day Iran, Zoroastrianism became a formal and widely practiced religion around 500 BCE, and eventually became the national or even the state religion of later Persian empires. The nominal founder, Zoroaster, probably lived much earlier, in the second millennium BCE, and made the crucial, indeed brilliant, philosophical move of simplifying the pantheon of multiple gods into two principals, Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord or Supreme Being, and Angra Mainyu, the Destructive Principle or bad god (whom Christians in later times could see as roughly analogous to Satan). By the Axial period, there were numerous Zoroastrians who believed Ahura Mazda to be the one, universal, transcendent, and supreme god, who would ultimately triumph over Angra Mainyu. On the normative side, the religion stressed that individuals had free will, and that active participation in good deeds during one’s lifetime was necessary to ensure happiness and avoid chaos. After death, the individual’s soul would be reunited with its guardian spirit. When Ahura Mazda eventually triumphs over the evil Angra Mainyu, the universe will undergo a grand renovation, time will end, and the souls of the dead will be reunited in Ahura Mazda (a scenario that later Christians might see as roughly analogous to the second coming described in the Book of Revelations). Though Zoroastrianism was later superseded in its regions of influence by other religions, notably Islam, and now has only a modest number of followers (perhaps several hundred thousand persons, depending on the estimating source), it was a major religious tradition for centuries. For my purposes, the key point is that this religion, which grew toward prominence in a large part of the Middle East during the Axial period, was a system which, in addition to recognizably religious rituals, communities, and leaders, had a widely accepted, very grand belief system about the divine, the ultimate fate of humans, the importance of good deeds, and the connection between norm compliance and one’s ultimate fate.

Moving westward to Israel, one sees another example of the basic pattern, which in some respects is a cleaner and more robust illustration of its features. Although the nomadic Hebrew tribes that entered Canaan in the latter centuries of the second millennium BCE were thought to have brought monotheistic ideas along, since monotheism was said to be have been revealed to Abraham (around 1800 BCE, perhaps) and reaffirmed emphatically to Moses on Mount Sinai (around 1250 BCE), there were important changes in institutional arrangements and emphasis during the early Axial period. A kingdom uniting the tribes was formed and
governed by David and then Solomon, a temple in Jerusalem became a national center, a hereditary priesthood ran it and managed the sacrifices, and even though external forces led to a split-up into two kingdoms, a Hebrew identity, a rabbinical class, and a biblical canon were firmly established. Of equal or greater interest to Axial Age scholars, the prophets who spoke out during this period strongly opposed the lingering polytheistic patterns, such as participation in the fertility cult of Baal, that apparently attracted many ordinary Hebrews, despite their notional monotheism. Anyone who has read the books of Elijah, Amos, and Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible should appreciate the claim that the holy rhetoric was ramped up to an ear-splitting volume: these prophets were very serious about getting people to embrace the one-god idea completely. Similarly, the pro-social norms about avoidance of harm to the person, property, sexual commitments, or contractual rights of others in the community – no killing, stealing, lying, interfering with marriage, etc. – were rehearsed with vigor.

Moving east of Persia to India, “the land of the spirit” as it is sometimes called, one can see a dazzling efflorescence of Axial Age-type developments, which have interestingly different design features, or characteristic “colors,” from those in the Middle East. Around 500 to 300 BCE, truly important revisions to the old orthodox Vedism of the Hindus were made, and the important offspring religions of Buddhism and Jainism were founded and grew.

Within Hinduism, the Upanishads, the last part of the vast collection of sacred scriptures comprising the Veda, were composed. They urged a path of life that might result in liberation, or escape from the cycle of birth and rebirth in the ordinary world, into a higher state of being. (That is, the postulated consequences of norm compliance were portrayed in grander terms.) Of even greater practical significance, the two classic Indian epics were composed during this period. The Mahabharata was composed over a period starting around 400 BCE, and it contains the unforgettable Bhagavad Gita, a 700-verse scripture in which the prince Arjuna and his charioteer guide Krishna, who turns out to be an avatar of the great god Vishnu, converse on important philosophical and theological issues. In brief, the dialogue drives home the transcendent importance of doing one’s status-dependent duty towards one’s social group, in this case by going into a just war even when one doesn’t want to do so. Even today, the Gita is widely rehearsed and revered in India. In the 1990’s, for example, it was the basis for the leading or most-watched television series in that vast country, and one can watch documentary films showing graphically how crowds of Hindu children watched the show with utter fascination and absolute attention. The other classic Hindu epic, the Ramayana, was perhaps composed around 300 BCE, and similarly dramatizes the transcendent importance of fulfilling one’s status-dependent duty, in this case by behaving as the perfect wife during a truly difficult series of mishaps and struggles. This epic also continues to be of enormous cultural significance even in modern times. It also led to a massively watched television series in the 1990’s, and most Indians probably know the story line cold.
Stepping back, the key point for our reflections is that the Axial Age in India led to an increased emphasis on compliance with norms that, if followed by all members of the social group, would presumably lead to a stronger and better society. Interestingly, the emphasis in the Hindu epics seems more on pro-social norms about how to behave, given one’s status or position in a society, as opposed to the emphasis on pro-social norms about not harming the person or violating the property or sexual rights of other group members, which norms were more emphasized in the Zoroastrian and Hebrew contexts and may reflect societies in which individually initiated contracting to obtain property and personal rights was a larger feature of the economic landscape and interpersonal relationships. That is, the Middle Eastern societies seem to have been more like open “markets,” construed broadly, and so in need of pro-social norms with a somewhat different tonality.

With respect to the other dimension of the Axial-period changes – conceptions of the divine or transcendent – the shifts in Hinduism also show a move toward grander conceptions. While dating the beginning and describing the essence of the four major branches or denominations of traditional Hinduism – Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Smartism, and Shaktism -- is a tricky and contestable process, one can at least see a core feature of Vaishnavism, the portrayal of the god Vishnu as the Supreme God rather than one of the multiple supernatural deities encountered in the Rig Veda, in the Mahabharata. True, the shift required a lot of theological finagling, such as seeing other classic deities as manifestations or aspects of Vishnu or as not being really real, but the move toward a supreme and unified divinity is fairly apparent, and seems to reflect a felt need for a grander, more coherent, and less contestable source of moral authority. (Somewhat analogously, Shaivism came to portray Shiva as the Supreme God, and Shaktism gave the prize to a female variant of the divine (Shakti), while the liberal and politically sensitive Smarta tradition developed a kind of Trinitarian conception of God that saw all the major Hindu deities as forms or expressions of the one Brahman, which is a kind of divine immanent essence or supreme spirit.)

Even more dramatic changes occurred in the formation during this period of Buddhism and Jainism, and may reflect an intuitive sense of need for adjustments to tensions brought about by large social changes, such as increases in the scale and number of city-states and their difficult but important interactions (both positive and negative). Buddhism was founded by Siddartha Gautama (later called the “Buddha,” or Enlightened One), who is thought to have lived from around 563 to 483 BCE. It appealed at first to merchants in urban centers and spread on the fringes of Indian civilization, where interactions among city-states and their residents, and with non-Indian merchants and polities, were increasingly important but more fraught with difficulty. The teachings attributable to the Buddha in many Buddhist scriptures show a grasp and basic acceptance of Hindu metaphysical assumptions, even though these assumptions are rarely elaborated and sometimes even seem to be de-emphasized. But the Buddha’s sermons also launched a very distinctive normative emphasis as well as a distinctive variation on the theme of the ideal ultimate goal of human life. Cultivated detachment from the natural but selfish
impulses of greed, anger, and status-seeking was urged, as was compassion for others. And the desired end state was liberation, or nirvana of an indescribably sublime form. (Granted, when the eventually dominant Mahayana tradition of Buddhism was developed and spread throughout Asia, the portrayals of that ultimate good state became more vivid, concrete, and appealing to mass-market participants; indeed, they began to resemble some Christian descriptions of heaven.)

Jaspers and some followers also tried to find analogous changes in key moral-philosophical developments during the Axial period on the geographic ends of the Axis – Greece in the West and China in the East. This extension of the grand analysis is more contestable. For my purposes, taking a position on the extension is not important; it is more useful to simply note two fairly plausible additional hypotheses suggested indirectly by the Axial Age literature -- that Greek philosophy gained wider exposure and longer life when it was incorporated into the Christian tradition with its far greater mass market appeal; and that Confucian and Taoist ideas had a similar though different extension of life and reach when they were blended with Chinese folk religion or the Mahayana version of Buddhism that eventually migrated into China and grew rapidly.

Now consider a mild irony. Two massively important historical developments – the formation (and eventual worldwide spread) of Christianity and Islam came after the shifts just described and are therefore assigned by some scholars to the “post-Axial period.” Yet their core features – a supreme divinity, an intense emphasis on pro-social norms, and a very grand conception of the desired ultimate human afterlife and its connection to norm compliance – are paradigmatic examples of the features most defining of the supposed Axial Age. Some scholars therefore balk at the very idea of an Axial Period – How can you call it an Age or Period when it took so long? And shouldn’t we just describe evolutionary changes as gradual and erratic across centuries and regions? But however one chooses to label or timestamp the supposed Axial Age, the emergence of these two major religions is properly seen as a continuation and development of Stage Three, albeit with some new normative emphases and theological adjustments.

A Fourth Stage? Religion for Expanding Circles

Will there be a distinctive fourth stage in the evolution of religion? For humans, the modern world is now radically different from the world of one or two thousand years ago, when basic features of the currently dominant world religions were shaped and began to be widely adopted. Given that religions have evolved in paradigmatic ways in the past, apparently in response to major changes in the typical environment lived in by humans, it is not unthinkable that new versions of religion with very distinctive emphases and traits will be constructed and adopted in the near or mid-term future. Perhaps they are already evolving out of the existing traditions.
What might such a new world religion ("NWR") look like? One can imagine numerous possibilities. But to facilitate a more specific reflection I will focus on one model that seems especially appealing. I call it “religion for expanding circles,” because its most obviously distinctive feature will be a much greater relative emphasis on norms requiring genuine moral concern (a/k/a “compassion”) for persons in other groups (including persons in other nations and in “out-groups” of all kinds) and for persons who will live in the future. Put in more conventional terms, these NWRs will try to promote overall human welfare by enhancing international cooperation and the sustainable use of natural resources. For easy reference, I will sometimes refer to these as norms aimed at “MECGs”, or “modern-era expanding circle goods.”

The rest of this deliberately speculative reflection is organized around three questions. First, how has the human situation or environment changed so as to suggest that norms strongly promoting modern-era expanding circle goods may be increasingly valuable in furthering overall human welfare? Put another way, what new problems and opportunities have been created by changes in technology, economic arrangements, and patterns of interaction? Second, why might religious norms promoting MECGs be able to add value to what is already being attempted by formal governments and secular advocacy groups or incidentally facilitated by newly evolved economic markets? That is, why might the other main social systems not be complete and exclusive solutions? Third, what might a New World Religion that responds to these opportunities look like? To speculate a tad more methodically about this most interesting of questions, I reflect on how an NWR might alter or re-shape the seven distinctive mechanisms of the currently dominant world religions that were identified in chapter 2. In practice, there will likely be much room for creatively imaginative moral entrepreneurs who try to shape NWRs, and open and competitive markets for religion will be crucial to their success.

New problems and opportunities for social systems

In the last few hundred years, has the human situation changed in fundamental ways? Yes, and many of the most dramatic changes in the human environment are aspects of globalization. For example, in recent times, with the rise of the internet, mobile devices, and social media, communication among humans everywhere has become increasingly quick, cheap, extensive, and easy. Much of the communication is among family members, friends, and co-workers, but dissemination of ideas and opinions around the world is easier and occurs more frequently than ever. Similarly, there has been an ever-increasing amount and proportion of trade in both goods and services that is done across borders. This globalization of trade, like the globalization of communication, has been made possible by technological advances. New information technology fosters globalization of communication about potential cross-border sales or business opportunities. Cheaper or more efficient methods of producing and transporting goods, aided by the easier communication, have fostered greater international trade. And IT has also facilitated the location of some kinds of services in parts of the
world where labor costs are low. And finally, more efficient communication and transportation has arguably facilitated greater movement of people across borders and around the world. The people in cross-border motion include a broad set: students, tourists, workers, agents of politics and businesses, soldiers and immigrants both legal and illegal. Each of these megatrends – globalization of communication, more international trade in goods and services, and more movement of people around the world – is aided by technological advances and seems very likely to continue.

Each of the megatrends also offers potential benefits for overall human welfare. Easier international trade can result in the production of different kinds of goods and services being located where production is most efficient. In theory, at least, this process could make everyone better off (or some better off, and no one worse off). Greater global communication can spread useful ideas among more people, and can also facilitate international trade. And, again in principle though not always in practice, more movement of people around the world could lead to greater interaction among groups in ways that foster mutual understanding and beneficial cultural exchange, help reduce the incidence of war and conflict, and spread useful insights and practices. In the very long run, such movement and interaction might also lead to blending of gene pools in ways that ultimately result in healthier and better humans.

So yes, globalization has a truly bright side. Major benefits are identifiable and possible, and they do occur to some extent. But there are major problems too, and whether and how they can be mitigated are serious, nagging, and ongoing questions. More specifically, globalization is associated with at least three main categories of problems.

First, it tends to create serious disruption or transition costs for some groups of people. Most obviously, it can harm workers who lose their jobs because of outsourcing to locales with cheaper labor, if those workers don’t have good alternatives and substantial transition assistance.

Second, precisely because it amplifies and spreads more efficient technologies for producing and distributing goods, globalization greatly hastens the use of fixed natural resources (e.g., oil and gas, forests, fish-filled waters) and the production of byproducts like pollution and climate change. That is, it can create serious negative externalities like depletion of natural resources and harm to the environment and other species. In a world without social control systems that are truly effective at correcting or limiting these harms, globalization leads more rapidly and completely to “unsustainable” development and serious harm to the welfare of future generations of people.

Third, because more globalization involves a larger number and a larger proportion of potential dealings between people who are in different groups – in different nations, with different ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions -- the
biologically natural and culturally reinforced tendency of humans to have a very strong in-group bias gets seriously in the way of attempts to achieve cooperation across groups that is aimed at reducing the negative externalities. Put differently, our innate disposition toward what some evolutionary psychologists label "team spirit," and other researchers politely call "parochial altruism," has benefits but also a very dark side.\textsuperscript{27} Individuals may try very hard, even at a net cost to themselves, to help other members of their own group, or at least to arrive at win-win contracts and understandings with them. But they are naturally inclined to care little or not at all for the well-being of persons in other groups. Moreover, they are more likely to interpret or forecast the behavior of out-group members in a negative way, or even to demonize them, while interpreting their own behavior and tendencies in a self-serving way.\textsuperscript{28} All such inclinations mean that it is far from certain or likely that the different groups in our globalizing world will arrive on their own at win-win understandings about how to deal with disruption costs or how to deal with unsustainable practices that harm future generations.

\textit{The likelihood of incomplete solutions from other social systems}

As the existence of international organizations like the UN and advocacy groups pushing sustainability policies in many parts of the world suggests, the other social systems are already engaged in trying to promote modern-era expanding circle goods. So why, one might ask, is there any need for new world religions that are more heavily focused on achieving these purposes? Is there any reason to think that they could add value, perhaps by having comparative advantages in certain relevant respects? To reflect on these questions, we should first look at the limits of other systems in this new moral arena.

Purely economic markets have become much more global, of course, and they can be very robust and efficient. But by their nature economic markets tend to ignore or not deal effectively with the production of public goods and the control of negative externalities. Thus, on their own they are not so good at dealing with the second type of expanding circle good, promotion of the welfare of future generations. Other systems must be called upon to address the tendency toward unsustainable use of resources. As for the first type of MECG, moral concern for out-group members, international economic markets may help by alleviating in-group versus out-group problems. Why? Such markets lead to increased interaction among members of different groups, and increased interaction, especially if it is personalized, may lead to tolerance, acceptance, and better attitudes. But one can doubt how significantly positive this process can be in a world where so much of international trade is relatively depersonalized, at least from the standpoint of the vast masses of ultimate buyers and producers of international goods. And as e-commerce increases, the depersonalization, with its consequent support of natural


\textsuperscript{28} See id. at 90-91 and studies cited therein.
instincts toward parochial altruism and aggressive team spirit, may simply get worse.

What about governments? In principle, governments are all about production of public goods, control of negative externalities, and welfare-enhancing redistribution, so a world government could pass laws designed to promote the MECGs. But getting there would be a long, expensive, and troubled process that is unlikely to succeed for many generations. A democratically elected world government that is genuinely effective, non-corrupt, and widely perceived as legitimate is not exactly around the corner. To be sure, nation states are already members of a variety of international organizations, and many states sign on to a wide variety of international agreements and arrangements, some of which are directly aimed at fostering positive international relations and promoting sustainability, the two MECGs. But in practice, it is hard to negotiate really good (much less “optimal”) international agreements, hard to maintain or enforce them, and hard to deal with nations that are non-players. Reflection on this impasse suggests a possible solution, or, more realistically, an additional path toward alleviation of the problems. A very widespread boost in psychologically internalized moral commitments to the two expanding circle goods -- more concern for all, including out-group members, and for future generations -- could greatly help international arrangements. In addition, such widespread moral commitments might increase trust among the players, since trust tends to accompany genuine moral concern for others, and trust is a key helper in negotiating and complying with good win-win agreements. And since religions are significantly about shaping moral commitments, religions that effectively and heavily focus on the MECGs could play a useful role.

Turn now to secular social groups. As observers of one key aspect of globalization, the internet, have observed, social groups of unprecedented scale and geographical reach are now possible and do occur. This phenomenon suggests a great modern-day revival in the role of social norms and enforcement of them by informal social groups, and an increase in the role of nongovernmental policy or advocacy groups of many kinds. After centuries of relative decline as against the other social systems, social groups and social norms seem to have made a comeback; the nonprofit or independent sector is stronger and more important than ever; and so forth.

Unfortunately, many of the large social groupings facilitated by the Internet and social media tend to be very specialized in their focus and areas of concern. These groups often seem to illustrate dramatically the idea that birds of a feather flock together. Like-minded people predominate on the discussion blogs, and the

ensuing chatter enters an echo chamber that ratchets up the volume and solidifies already existing opinions and attitudes. Instead of leading predominantly to a much larger and more inclusive social group that softens out-group biases, the globalization of cheap communication seems often to lead to a greater number of special groups with hardened and stronger views. Out-group biases may be amplified, rather than reduced, as militants of many kinds find their global comrades and reinforce one another. The mobile world has spawned many more moral tribes, with sharper and harder edges.

To be sure, the landscape is not all bleak. Some social groups and organizations facilitated by globalizing communication systems are oriented precisely toward promoting one or both MECGs. In this vein, we could see the new world religions as special forms of social groups that are much more intently focused than received religious traditions on the achievement of modern-era expanding circle goods. The inquiry then turns (as it does below) to why and how the mechanisms characteristic of dominant world religions might help them achieve their new goals, using new media as well as old devices.

Intermission: Some reflections on the normative premises

Before proceeding further into the question about what a new world religion might look like and why it could add value to other social systems in the quest for expanding circle goods, it may be useful to reflect a bit more on why we might consider them “goods,” and why we might want social systems to produce them.

Let’s proceed with the MECGs in reverse order, and go back to the future, so to speak. Why would we ever want to think that an expansion of the circle of moral concern to include issues of relevance to future generations of humans is a move we should make? Why should we care about what happens to people after we die? Granted, if people feel committed to and concerned about future generations, they are more likely to agree at the margins on international agreements and changes in current policy and practice that may make life better for those future generations; and a “moral” feeling or commitment will make this tendency even stronger and more consequential. But this observation raises the more fundamental, and difficult, point: Why would or should living people care about future generations?

We could start with the simple observation that most people care very much about their children and grandchildren -- that is, their observed and personalized descendants -- and have a vague though less intense affection for later descendants. But that reality by itself doesn’t get us all the way to understanding a generalized concern for future generations. Science may help, as well as economic and public choice-type analyses of the benefits of collective action. From the viewpoint of evolutionary biology, people are naturally and innately inclined to survive and reproduce (that is, to propagate their genes). Much evidence indicates that the inclination is very strong. It is arguably not implausible or incoherent to then say that in some basic sense replication into the future is a person’s ultimate “goal,” and
to hypothesize that at some level of consciousness or psychological awareness people “sense” this to be their goal or, at least, an important goal. A further step is to then note that cultural and social practices can sharpen this sense of an ultimate goal, make it more explicitly conscious, and even strengthen it in ways that increase feelings of “meaning” and personal satisfaction. At this point the more intellectual reasoning of economists and public choice theorists can come into play, and show people why achieving their personalized ultimate goal may depend heavily on cooperating with other persons to further their quite similar ultimate goals as well. Normative conclusions about the merit of sustainable use of resources can then be drawn.

There are at least two sorts of roadblocks on the way to reaching this end stage, though. Many phases of the complex process of cultural shaping and policy reasoning that I just sketched can go awry, resulting in no or weak concern for future generations. Moreover, from a biological standpoint, we human animals are geared not only toward the ultimate goal of replication, but are also infused with numerous more proximate goals. We experience hunger, lust, anger, strivings for approval and social dominance, and so forth, and then try to satisfy these impulses. The chaotic process of doing so can easily crowd out an appreciation of the supposed ultimate goal. If that ultimate goal, insofar as it implies actually doing something significant for future generations, is to have real impact on current behavior, cultural reinforcement is needed. An explicit and widely adopted norm could make a difference.

Now consider the premises behind the other proposed expanding circle good. Why might greater moral concern for all persons, and a clear, explicit, and often-rehearsed inclusion of out-group members in that concern, facilitate win-win changes that increase overall human welfare? Is such moral concern needed? As a logical or abstractly analytical matter, it may seem, a “purely self-interested group” of persons (such as a nation state, represented by a political agent faithful to its welfare alone) could rationally agree to a contract or arrangement about international trade with another rational and purely self-interested group, and the contract could specify the permissible or targeted levels and types of trade in ways that are adjudged most likely to increase the welfare of both groups, and perhaps also to maximize the increase in total welfare. Why not? Don’t the parties have more than adequate incentives as rational self-interested groups to identify the terms of such a win-win contract and then assent to it?

In theory, the answer may be yes, depending on the nature and complexity of all the assumptions used in one’s theoretical reasoning. But in practice it is hard to reach such Pareto-superior agreements when group representatives have no nontrivial feeling of moral concern for the other group or its members, because such representatives will tend to interpret and/or forecast the behavior of the other group in a negative way, while interpreting their own group’s tendencies in a self-serving way. I would draw a rough analogy to experimental game studies that suggest it is very useful for many humans to have evolved a “generalized”
reciprocity instinct. Why might that be? One plausible reason is that sticking too closely to a narrow tit-for-tat strategy of reciprocating leads to high error costs, given that people do tend to interpret the traits and behavior of others, as well as observable facts, in erroneous or self-serving ways. As a result, a narrow strategy of reciprocating leads to arrangements that break down more often than is optimal for the welfare of either party. It can also lead to more conflict and mutual injury.

Put another way, I am assuming that, as with contracts in general, the specific reach and content of most or many international agreements will be shaped in part by emotions and values, and not only by explicitly reasoned cost-benefit calculations made by the negotiators of each side and the demands they make for the sole benefit of their group’s members. If you don’t care about the “other,” you are more likely to bungle the negotiation.

The problem becomes even more difficult when we consider the forces that affect the formal representatives of government who are asked to work out international agreements. Suppose many individual representatives of negotiating nation states actually do have serious moral concern for members of other nation states, as well as a serious personal commitment to future generations. Will that solve the fundamental problem? Probably not, if the representatives are directly or indirectly accountable to an electorate (or other source of political power) that does not share such serious moral concern. The representatives may listen to their consciences, but they will also listen to their demos, intently. If serious moral concern for MECGs is not widespread among the people of both nations, the ultimate deal may be quite sup-optimal, or even a colossal failure.

If we accept these premises, the next inquiry becomes critical. How might a new world religion meaningfully increase the range and power of moral concerns? What would such a religion look like?

**Imagining the new world religions**

To guide this exercise, recall first from chapter 2 the seven bundled elements that characterize the currently dominant world religions: (1) “big myths,” or grand belief systems about the nature and destiny of the universe and of humans; (2) “little myths,” or canonical stories and scriptures that encapsulate beliefs and norms in vivid and oft-rehearsed ways; (3) pro-social (as well as ritualistic and self-enhancing) norms with grand consequences, such as quality of state in a postulated afterlife; (4) communities or congregations; (5) rituals; (6) religious professionals; and (7) sacred or holy things. Now imagine how some or all of them might be modified to further the achievement of modern-era expanding circle goods.

As for element (3), we’ve already discussed a shift in emphasized norms that may definitively tag the NWRs. I should note that current world religions do contain texts and teachings that already seem to urge these expanding-circle norms, and that there are already theologians and divinity students who promote them. The
shift envisaged in my speculation, like the shift that occurred in stage three when the currently dominant world religions took their recognizable shapes, is a dramatic shift in prioritization and relative emphasis of certain norms. Tying the new norms to “grand consequences” in a way that resonates strongly with millions of potential members of an NWR will require enormous creativity on the part of new moral entrepreneurs, who will need to reshape basic theology, most likely starting with old traditions.

On a whimsical level, one can easily imagine new afterlife stories. For example, if you ignore your duty to help promote the MECGs, your spirit will spend eternity in a miserable, distantly future shadow world that has been shaped by the collective behavior of seven billion other spirits who exactly match your degree of noncompliance with duty. An exactly opposite parallel fate results if you have fulfilled your duty: an ideal world, filled with lotus blossoms, clear water, beautiful songs, and delightful, enlightened neighbors and friends. It is also logically possible that a compelling account of grand consequences for compliance with new norms may be developed without appeal to an “afterlife” of any traditional sort.

But more seriously, exactly how a story line about “grand consequences” for fulfillment of the newly prioritized expanding circle duties could be developed in a way that actually captures the sensibilities of modern-world persons, and also ties in credibly to a newly adjusted view of overall theology and new canonical narratives (elements 1 and 2), is a major challenge for any would-be moral entrepreneur. Meeting the challenge will demand enormous creativity and marketing savvy. Yet past world history does suggest that the creative talents may emerge.

It is perhaps easier to imagine an NWR making suitable and effective adjustments to elements 4, 5, and 6 – communities, rituals, and religious professionals. So let’s fantasize about how a New World Religion committed to modern-era expanding circle goods might construct its religious congregation and rituals.

**New Moral Communities? The MOORS Solution**

Taking a cue from the higher education community’s recent online forays, one strategy that a new world religion could pursue is the development and adoption of what I will call MOORS, that is, “Massive Open Online Rituals and Services.” To be both effective in traditional ways while also promoting expanding circle goods, MOORS would have distinctive features. I will suggest eight such features.

1. **Global congregations.** Members of the NWR from around the world would participate in the online service, concurrently.
(2) **Active individual participation.** Each NWR member would recite prayers and sing hymns and hear and respond to sermons about the MECGs while online, and his or her voice would be fed into an overall sound feed. The services would be led, and the sermons provided, by NWR religious leaders. (More on this feature below.)

(3) **Vivid virtual co-presence.** Each NWR member would hear the resulting overall sound (or the overall sounds from a particular language group of members) and see visual images of other participating members. After meaningful exposure, the visual images would shift, perhaps systematically or perhaps randomly, so that over the course of the service, and even more so over the course of a year of services, each member would be in the repeated online presence of, and be vividly exposed to the images and sound of, other members from many cultures. The point of these first three features is, of course, to promote the psychological sense of a global community of shared mutual concern – a “religio” or tying together of members in a global community.

(4) **Minyan-like physical groups.** In addition, each participant in the MOORS would also be in the physical presence of a minimum number of co-participants. Such presence would be a requirement of membership, subject perhaps to exceptions for hardship cases and for persons with special needs and problems. This requirement might be thought of as an NWR version of the brilliantly conceived Jewish requirement of a minyan for certain prayers and services.

Why would such a requirement be important for a MOORS that could already involve the virtual presence of thousands or even millions of co-participants? Because the practice would tend to give each participant a greater sense of group support, solace, and comfort. It would also provide opportunities for meaningful personal interactions outside of the services proper. More generally, like other regular involvements in real groups with physical presence, it would likely reinforce continued participation. (Granted, one might explore variations, such as smallish online discussion groups in which MOORS participants get to know one another by name and many personal attributes, together with a practice of very occasional physical get-togethers of the discussion group members. The intensity of involvement by some demographic groups in online social media groups suggests that such alternative strategies to achieve dual-track involvement in big and small groups might work.)

Several considerations suggest that this hypothesis about the importance of small groups is plausible. Note first that there was a very high dropout rate in most of the early-generation MOOCS, or massive open online courses. This phenomenon may be significantly related to the lack of physical group presence and the resulting meaningful interpersonal interactions and reinforcement of continued participation that often accompany it. The very high dropout rates may also be related to the lack of a credible pre-commitment requirement – such as a sizable and non-refundable tuition fee – the absence of which invites sampling and half-hearted forays into
online courses. (An ideal MOORS could deal with this problem, and not only the problem of potentially limp group-level reinforcement in the virtual space, as well; see feature (5) below. And please note that I’m not predicting that designers of newer MOOCS for higher education won’t find better ways to address the high dropout problem.)

In addition, the history of mega-churches suggests that a minyan-like requirement of physical presence with a small group may be very useful. The very successful mega-churches have often featured small-group breakout sessions to go along with the mass group assemblies and services that provide some but not all of the psychological rewards that reinforce continued participation. It seems clear that the religious leaders who developed such successful dual-track strategies had good insights into human behavior, and used it to develop sticky community rituals appealing to the suburban-based and car-driving public of modern economies. An obvious next move, now that internet participation and the technical and aesthetic quality of social media participation has been ratcheted up dramatically, is for some religious leaders to translate the dual-track strategy to the new technologically created online environment in which humans spend more and more of their limited time.

(5) Moral obligation and credible commitment strategies. A religious entrepreneur who has studied and reflected on inherited religious rituals in the more (and the less!) successful traditions and movements within the major world religions will likely conclude that, to be successful, a MOORS program should entail participation that is both regular, e.g., once a week, and required, that is, participation should a moral obligation or condition of group membership. In addition to looking at history for its apparent lessons, she will also want to review the developed academic literature on the benefits of “costly signaling” devices and “credible commitments,”30 as well as the writings of economists and sociologists who have tried to explain “why strict religions are strong,”31 or, at least, why they experience much more rapid growth than staid and liberal denominations. These sources indicate that the mechanics of membership can matter a lot. She might then conclude that all participants in the MOORS will be strongly and repeatedly urged to contribute financially to the operation of the program in accordance with their means. Or she might develop and enforce a norm that, absent a demonstrated good excuse, participants who do not participate with sufficient regularity will be barred

from continued access to the MOORS. Or, borrowing from the duty of Muslims to visit Mecca during their lifetimes if they can, she might announce a soft moral obligation on the part of participants to attend a global physical convention of MOORS participants where experience with MOORS and ideas about how they could be better are widely shared. Or she might require that, as a condition of initial entry into a MOORS event, a new participant must first make a public statement of spiritual interest and commitment. Or, borrowing from a brilliant feature of the LDS church and certain other religious movements, as well as empirical findings in the psychological literature on persuasion, she might develop and enforce a norm to the effect that each MOORS participant should try to persuade a few friends or family members also to participate. Or she might try a combination of these and/or other cost-imposing commitment devices. The general point is that a widespread sense of moral obligation to participate is critical for the MOORS program’s success. Generating that sensibility will require creativity and insight, but there are good precedents that can be borrowed and modified.

(6) Religious leaders. As in all larger scale religious congregations, there will need to be recognized and accepted religious professionals, and/or congregation members who hold accepted positions of leadership and responsibility, at least for a term. Someone must proclaim, or lead the process of adopting and getting accepted and occasionally modified, the ideas, narratives, texts, moral lessons, hymns, prayers, and ceremonial procedures that infuse and define the MOORS. Granted, the very enormity of this task is reason to think that any successful new world religion will likely evolve from, or spring away from, an existing tradition (or several traditions, in combination). Starting an entirely new religious model from scratch has an extremely low probability of success. But, even in an offspring-type NWR, the newer rituals that help define it will have to be shaped, established, and altered over time. And someone will have to maintain and manage the online system. Someone will have to make sure that the online services happen, and that the “producers and directors”, as well as the speakers and musicians and prayer leaders, are well selected and do a good job. In a large group, all of this implies a need for leaders who can devote considerable effort to the task, and it suggests that full-time professionals might be a useful variant (subject to control of their “agency costs”). In the case of a new world religion’s MOORS program, the leadership challenge will be far greater, since a main goal is have services that simultaneously involve

32 See, e.g., Robert B. Cialdini, INFLUENCE: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSUASION (1984). The author’s second of six principles in this classic, best-selling book on the psychology of marketing and persuasion is labeled “commitment and consistency,” but the supporting research literature also indicates that would-be persuaders or proselytizers are apt to become more committed to their sales pitches over time for the simple reason that they are more likely to make arguments that seem convincing to themselves. Thus, an adolescent Mormon who, in accord with his religious duty to proselytize, tries to convince some non-Mormons to convert may succeed only rarely in the stated objective, but will almost certainly deepen his own commitment to the faith. A similar phenomenon is observable among members of the Jehovah’s witnesses. (An analogous phenomenon is observable in fund-raising: the alumnus or alumna who makes a serious support-the-school pitch at a Reunion dinner is likely to increase his or her own gifts proportionately more than the audience does. Wise deans intuit this phenomenon and ask the wealthier alums to make the pitches.)
members from different nations, cultures, and language groups. This goal suggests that the key religious leaders will need to be a new-era “college of cardinals”, so to speak – a defined group of leaders who represent each of the multiple nations and groups of people who participate in the MOORS, and who participate actively, perhaps on a rotating basis and in a visible way, in the management and production of the MOORS.

(7) Norm rehearsal (or “priming”). One feature of a successful MOORS that is obvious but worth mentioning, because it might need significant evolutions from traditional practice, is that it would allude to and frequently rehearse the NWR’s norms, especially the modern-era expanding circle norms. This could take the form of sermon-type narratives that embody and celebrate those norms, as well as allusions to them in the main hymns. The norm of moral concern for persons in other groups would be naturally reinforced by the images and sounds of virtually co-present members in other societies. For the norm of concern for future generations, the rehearsal might even take the form, not of a verbal sermon, but a video narrative. For example, the video might portray a dark gloomy world and the bleak misery of our collective descendants that will result from excessive climate change, followed by a resurrection-type transformation toward a bright future world of happy descendants foretold by the NWR’s prophet if the members do their duty, and also try to persuade others to help.

(8) A sense of the holy. A final near-obvious feature of a successful MOORS program is that the services would be enveloped with a widespread feeling that they are somehow very special – that they are “sacred” or “holy” events. Religious scholars who have closely observed or studied collective religious rituals, especially those in cultures other than their own, have often been fascinated by this phenomenon, and have been inclined to treat it as an essential feature of religion. Clear, pragmatic, and testable explanations of how the sense of the sacred is brought about are more elusive. The likely candidate explanations might focus on the attributes of dress, music, prayers, pacing, and scripted procedures that seem to characterize religious rituals in many traditions. But regardless of vagueness in our social-scientific understanding of how a sense of the sacred is brought about, the

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33 E.g., Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912; multiple later Eng. trans.), which essentially defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things – by which he meant things set apart and forbidden – which beliefs and practices unite in a single moral community, e.g., a church, those who adhere to them. In his view sacred things were collective ideals or moral forces that had hypostasized; they were made up of ideas and sentiments awakened in us by the spectacle of society, not by sensations coming from the physical world. Other early theorists of the sacred or holy were more likely to emphasize a strong and widespread human tendency to apprehend something “beyond” or “underlying” the phenomenal world in which scientific principles of cause and effect apply; their writings seemed to cast doubt on (and were perhaps a response to) the Enlightenment view that science and reason would eventually lead to the virtual end of religion. See, e.g., Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (1917; 1st Eng. trans. 1923); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957; Eng. trans. by W. R. Trask).
phenomenon seems very real, and new-world religious leaders are likely to build on their intuitive knowledge of traditional practices to achieve it again.

**The Highest Climb: Evolved Versions of the Grand Beliefs?**

At the outset of this speculative exercise about possible new world religions, I noted but moved quickly over the first two elements of the traditionally dominant world religions: grand belief systems and canonical narratives, i.e., big myths and little myths. As I suggested earlier, it is not difficult, given the lessons of history, to imagine that a new evangelist or Mohammad or Joseph Smith, or perhaps a less grand but charismatic innovator within an existing tradition, could create or inspire new canonical narratives that would both appeal to a wide audience and stress the importance of modern-era expanding circle goods.

But what about God? Or, more generally and abstractly, what are the grand belief systems that are most likely to characterize NWRs? To be effective and successful, will a new world religion that develops or springs away from the Christian or Islamic traditions have to replace “God”, or the now familiar humanized but all powerful and loving yet unverifiable spiritual being, with something more believable to the rational modern mind? If so, what would that successor vision or set of beliefs be? Could they be expressed in a way that avoids the relentlessly abstract ideas and reasoning of moral philosophers and their consequent unsuitability for the mass market of people upon whom any NWR will depend for genuine growth and success? And if a New World Religion develops from the Hindu or Buddhist traditions, for example by evolving and adjusting the old concept of an immanent and pervasive Atman or basic divine principle that is what humans are really trying to get at when they imagine deistic personalities, might it have an easier time? I suspect that, one way or another, a new model can be developed that catches on.

**Summary and Conclusions**

[To be supplied.]