The Spirit in Creation and New Creation

Science and Theology in Western and Orthodox Realms

Edited by

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I am neither a theologian, nor a natural scientist working on evolution. I am a social scientist, specifically a sociologist of religion working on the interrelations between religion and globalization. As such, without claiming any expertise, my contribution to this particular interdisciplinary conversation can only be that of offering some speculative reflections on a few aspects of the interrelations between religion and socio-cultural development from the perspective of the contemporary global present.

But first I would like to introduce some methodological and disciplinary observations. Social scientists have been conspicuously absent from the recent acrimonious debates as well as from the more fruitful interdisciplinary conversations between natural scientists and theologians concerning cosmology, cosmogony, evolution, and creation, that is, the origin, nature, history, and meaning of the universe, its relation to the planet earth, geological history, biological evolution, and the role, place, and meaning of humanity in the whole scheme.¹ What is unquestionable is that today everybody, natural scientists as well as ordinary people, tends to view the history of the universe, the history of the solar system, the history of the earth, the history of the species, and human history as part and parcel of one single intrinsically related developmental process. In this sense, all methodological and cognitive distinctions notwithstanding, one can observe a clear convergence of natural science with theology.² After all, Christian theology has always viewed the mystery of creation, the mystery of human salvation, and the mystery of eschatology at the end of times as episodes of a single story. What is remarkable is that natural scientists themselves have adopted increasingly the form of narrative story-telling as they explain the unfolding of the universe in time and space.

This unification of cosmic, biological, and human “history” is the more remarkable if one considers the radical dichotomous methodological and disciplinary separation between the natural sciences and the humanities, particularly the one that emerged between the so-called Natur- and Geistwissenschaften during the German Positivismusstreit at the turn of the 20th century, that became institutionalized within the modern research university. Ironically, natural scientists feel increasingly comfortable telling evolutionary stories of the universe and of the human species, at the very same moment when postmodern debates within philosophy, history, and the social sciences have injected strong methodological suspicions upon all grand narratives, seemingly discrediting in the process all the philosophies of history derived from the Enlightenment.

But one gets the impression that the reticence of social scientists, other than socio-biologists, evolutionary cognitive psychologists, and physical anthropologists, to join natural scientists and theologians in contemporary contentious debates concerning creation, evolution, and the place of humanity in the whole process is not so much due to postmodern skepticism but rather to justifiable longstanding suspicions towards theological and natural scientist explanations of social developments. The reticence of the social sciences to develop theories of socio-cultural evolution has been in many ways affected not only by the misuse of “Social Darwinism” and theories of “the survival of the fittest” in ideological class struggles at home, in Western colonial and civilizing projects, and in the development of racial theories of Aryan superiority that culminated in the Holocaust, but by the justified discred of “evolutionism” within anthropology and sociology in the 20th century.

Talcott Parsons, the most influential North American sociologist of the 20th century, began his classical work The Structure of Social Action somewhat ironically with the question “Who now reads Spencer?” His verdict was that both Spencer and his god, Evolution, were dead.³ Not only the tone of the question but the response was ironic considering that Parsons himself thirty years later attempted to resurrect evolutionary think-

ing within the social sciences when he entertained his ambitious project of developing a “protonaturalist” theory of evolution which would show the fundamental continuity between general organic evolution and socio-cultural evolution. Yet the life of the renewed evolutionary trend within sociology in the 1960’s was even shorter and more circumscribed.

If the skepticism concerning the Spencerian version of social evolution was due, as Parsons indicates, to Spencer’s extreme individualism, with its tendency to apply the principle of “survival of the fittest” not to the entire species but to individual and racial groups, the problem with Parsons’ evolutionism was his inclination to apply it to particular societies. In Parsons' theory, “adaptation” through “differentiation” serves as the guiding principle of socio-cultural evolution, while what he calls “evolutionary universals” are stage-marks which serve to arrange societies within a developmental hierarchy. By selecting as the four evolutionary universals of modernity a bureaucratic administration, a complex market economy, a universalistic legal system, and a democratic polity, Parsons is able to construct the whole evolutionary movement as culminating in American society which shows the evolutionary future to all other societies. Moreover, Parsons is not merely content with reconstructing empirical trends. Implicitly at least he claims to be able to ascertain the “directional” logic of history, placing him in a position to judge which socio-historical developments are normal and which societies will need to change in the prescribed direction in order to adapt successfully and remain in the evolutionary struggle.

The experience of how the application of evolutionary theory to the study of socio-cultural development has been contaminated ideologically again and again by methodological “individualism,” by methodological “racism,” by methodological “nationalism,” indeed by the dominant social ideology of the time, offers a serious warning to any attempt to revive social evolutionism. Even those social scientists who may share the secularist bias of the radical neo-Darwinists concerning religion tend to be put off by cultural Darwinism, once they realize that the new neo-Darwinian evolu-

4. T. Parsons, Evolutionary Universals in Society, in American Sociological Review 29/3, 1964. This paper and a shortly revived evolutionary trend within sociology emerged out of a seminar on social evolution which Talcott Parsons held in the Spring of 1963 at Harvard University along with Robert Bellah and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt.


1. Its natural evolutionary development as a species,
2. The history of human socio-cultural development that culminates in the contemporary phase of globalization, and
3. The radical moral and religious predicament we face as humans at a time when thanks to our cognitive scientific and technological achievements we have, on the one hand, the power to annihilate ourselves, to destroy our environment, or to usher into a new and uncharted phase of human evolution through demiurgic genetic and/or neurological intervention. Yet, on the other hand, we also have the serious responsibility to be receptive to the spirit of creation, to partake and be open to the process of unification and divinization of humanity, and to become intelligent collaborators in the unfinished work of creation.

1. From Natural-Biological to Socio-Cultural-Historical Evolution

Without further elaboration, in this presentation I am simply going to assume as a basic postulate that once the process of biological hominization was completed, socio-cultural evolution took over the reins from natural biological evolution, in the sense that the dynamic of developmental
change has been primarily socio-cultural rather than biological; that humanity, while remaining a single human species, became irremediably plural, religiously and culturally. In this respect, in the strict sense of the term humanity has no common history, but multiple histories that converge into our age of globalization. Only now, from the perspective of the global present can we begin the task of constructing and writing the first global histories of humanity.

Much less can one speak of a single human religious evolution. We could at best attempt a narrative analytical history of world religion as a kind of collective biography of the human species, the kind which Robert Bellah is pursuing with his ambitious project on “religious evolution.” But such a project is no longer conceivable as a positivist history written from an external objective third-person perspective, but rather as a collective narrative written from the reflexive perspective of the contemporary global human present. As such, any narrative reconstruction that takes the form “we religious and secular humans” will necessarily have a plurality of authors and possibly a cacophony of voices and there is no guarantee that it may ever coalesce into a coherent narrative. The following narrative reconstruction is a modest and self-conscious contribution towards such a collective autobiography.

2. The Three Phases of Human Globalization

From the hermeneutic perspective of the global present, one can arbitrarily distinguish three axial turning points in the global history of humanity or three phases of human globalization:

(a) The original process of homization, through the socio-cultural construction of language, kinship, and religion, reveals both the tremendous cultural diversity and the transcultural universality of structures which are clearly anchored in human biological, i.e. animal nature, and are thus a continuation of natural evolution. But this evolution undergoes a qualitative jump via the externalization of cognitive processes, i.e. “mind,” outside of the brain through language and other cultural institutions and via the externalization of motor sensory processes outside the body through technology.

(b) Without any attempt to reconstruct the complex process of development of human consciousness, or the development from “primitive” to “archaic” societies and on to “ancient” civilizations, following Merlin Donald, one can analytically summarize such a development as the passage from “mimetic” to “mythical” to “theoretic” mind. From such a developmental perspective one can also assert that the “Axial Age” constitutes a second turning point in the global history of humanity. It was so named by Karl Jaspers to signal the striking fact in world history that cosmological worldviews and world religions, based on some notion of “transcendence,” emerged at approximately the same time, 600 to 200 BCE, throughout Eurasia. These worldviews still serve as the foundations of the plural human civilizations which have remained influential globally till the present. This concept of axiality also sets the pluralistic thesis of the simultaneous historical origins of all Eurasian civilizations in contrast to the Eurocentric (i.e. Christocentric) fixation on Jerusalem and Athens. The concept of “axiality” is also central for contemporary formulations of the theory of multiple modernities in contradistinction to Western-centric theories of secular modernity.

We can assume that before the emergence of human language proper hominids shared a phase of mimetic evolution in which biological-genetic evolution and socio-cultural developments were combined and in which forms of collective mimetic communication, proto-arts and rituals, began to emerge as socio-cultural learning processes.

In a certain sense, one could argue that the successive waves of migration of Homo sapiens out of Africa some 50,000 years ago and the subsequent settlements throughout the globe constitute the genuine point of departure of the modern process of globalization. But these migrations had no subjective dimension of reflexive consciousness and can only now be reconstructed objectively thanks to advances in DNA and other scientific technologies.

7. See R. Bellah, Religious Evolution, in Beyond Belief (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), for an early formulation of the ambitious project on which Bellah has now been working for several decades.


Any theory of “religious” evolution needs to make some distinction between the dyadic analytical categories sacred/profane, transcendent/immanent, and religious/secular. We have a tendency today to use those dyadic categories as if they were synonymous and interchangeable, when in fact they correspond to historically distinctive, somewhat overlapping but not synonymous or equivalent social systems of classification. The sacred tends to be immanent in pre-axial societies, transcendence is not necessarily religious in some axial civilizations, and much contemporary secular reality (the nation, citizenship, the person, inalienable rights to life and freedom) far from being profane, actually attains a sacred character in our modern secular age.

Sacred and profane, following Emile Durkheim, should be viewed as a general dichotomous classificatory scheme of all reality, characteristic of all pre-axial cultures, encompassing within one single order what later will be distinguished as three separate realms: the cosmic, the social, and the moral. All reality, gods and spirits, nature and cosmic forces, humans and other animal species, and the political, social, and moral orders are integrated into a single order of things according precisely to the dichotomous classificatory system of sacred and profane. The entire system, moreover, is an immanent “this worldly” one, if one is allowed to use anachronistically another dichotomous category that will only emerge precisely with the so-called “axial” revolutions.

What defines “axiality” is precisely the emergence of “transcendence,” of an order, principle, or being, beyond this worldly reality, which now can serve as a transcendent principle to evaluate, regulate, and possibly transform this worldly reality. As in the case of the Platonic world of “ideas,” or the Confucian reformulation of the Chinese tao, transcendence is not necessarily “religious,” in the strict or modern sense of the term, nor does all “religion” need to become transcendent, if we are allowed once again to use anachronistically another dichotomous classificatory category, “religious/secular,” that will first emerge within Medieval Christendom and will later expand into a central dynamic of secular modernity.

All axial breakthroughs introduce some form of transcendental path, individual and collective, of salvation, redemption, or moral perfection. In some cases, as in Buddhism, this transcendental path may entail a radical devaluation and rejection of all reality and a flight from this world, as analyzed by Max Weber. In the case of the radical transcendent monotheism introduced by the prophets in Ancient Israel, the axial revolution entails a desacralization of all cosmic, natural, and social reality, of all creatures, gods, and idols for the sake of the exclusive sacralization of Yahweh, the transcendent creator God.

Following Robert Bellah, one can view the various axial prophets, critics, or teachers as either radical world “renouncers” or radical world “denouncers.”

Though not all axial paths entail some kind of refashioning or transformation of the world or the social order, as Charles Taylor has pointed out, all of them entail some refashioning of “the self,” who is now “called” to live (or precisely to deny herself) according to some transcendent norm “beyond ordinary human flourishing.”

In this respect, axiality constitutes also the point of departure of the process of disembodiment of “self” from society and cosmos which culminates in modern individualism.

Transcendence serves also to anchor the ethical and logical universalism which permeates all axial worldviews. In this respect, it was in and through the axial breakthroughs that the subjective dimension of imagining a single humanity sharing the same global space (the earth) and the same global time (history) was first anticipated. Yet, these imaginary, and thus utopian or eschatological anticipations of the contemporary phase of globalization, while serving as preconditions for the civilizational expansion of the world religions, lacked a structural, i.e. objective and material global base. Until very recently, the civilizational oikoumené of all world religions had very clear territorial limits, set by the very world regimes in which those religions were civilizational and thus territorially embedded and by the geographically circumscribed limitations of the existing means of communication. The Bishop of Rome may have always claimed to speak urbi et orbi, to the city and to the globe. But in fact this became a reality first in the 20th century.

(c) The contemporary final phase of globalization is the one in which the subjective conditions of reflexive universal human consciousness and the objective conditions of a modern global civilization based on the world capitalist system, the international political system, and the modern scientific and technological revolutions have become aligned. In a sense the contemporary phase of globalization is a continuation of the series of world-historical processes initiated by the age of discoveries and the European global colonial expansion. But there is a qualitative break in so far as contemporary processes of globalization cannot be understood simply anymore as the global expansion of Western modernization, but need to

be recognized as a new dynamic of pluralization of multiple modernities which are in many ways related to the pluralization of civilizations which emerged out of the axial age.

From the perspective of religious evolution, what constitutes the truly novel aspect of the present global condition is precisely the fact that all religions can be reconstituted for the first time as de-territorialized global imagined communities, detached from the civilizational settings in which they have been traditionally embedded. Paraphrasing Arjun Appadurai’s image of “modernity at large,” one could say that the world religions, through the linking of electronic mass media and mass migration, are being reconstituted as de-territorialized global religions “at large.” What is characteristically novel of the present global condition is the emerging disassociation of world religions, civilizational identities, and geopolitical territories. Each world religion is being constituted on the global level through similar interrelated processes of particularistic differentiation, universalistic claims, and mutual recognition.

In this respect, as Roland Robertson has emphasized, universal particularism and particular universalism are intrinsically interrelated and inherent to processes of globalization. Each “world religion” claims its universal right to be unique and different, thus its particularism, while at the same time presenting itself globally as a universal path for all of humanity. Global denominationalism emerges through a process of mutual recognition of the particular and universal claims. What is at stake, ultimately, is the recognition of the irremediable plurality of universalisms and the multiplicity of modernities, namely, that every universalism and every modernity is particularistic. One could say that we are moving from a condition of competing particularist universalisms to a new condition of global denominational contextualism.

3. Unfinished Creation and the Dilemmas of Intelligent Design

At the very same moment in which humanity becomes practically aware of its unity as a species and reflexively aware of sharing the same global his-
torical present, it is being forced to look simultaneously back into its past and forward into its future. It must both come to terms with its natural evolutionary development and with the complex dynamics of its socio-cultural development and at the same time contemplate its uncertain and radically contingent futures. The old moral and religious traditions appear at first to be woefully inadequate to confront the radically new challenges derived from the ever accelerating pace of techno-scientific developments. Yet, without a serious reflection upon its socio-cultural evolution, humanity may not find the moral resources needed to confront its radically new scientific and technological challenges. As Robert Bellah has pointed out:

If, as I believe, we human beings are at least to some extent in charge of our own evolution, we are in a highly demanding situation. . . . Even if we can speak of societies with normatively lower and higher levels of social learning capacity, we can never assume that there is anything inevitable about attaining the higher levels. If we are going to talk about levels at all, as I am prepared to do, we must expect to find regress as well as progress and face the possibility that the human project may end in complete failure.  

Nuclear disaster has been ominously one of humanity’s potential futures since the use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. A halt to nuclear proliferation appears geopolitically more out of control than ever. To this global apprehension one must add the increasing awareness that ecological disaster at a planetary scale has become an even more realistic threat due to global warming and the relentless exploitation of our natural environment. But, in principle at least, both catastrophes could be averted if global humanity finds the right combination of reflexive solidaristic consciousness, moral and political resolve, scientific-technological creativity, and a greater recognition of our irremediable cultural (and religious) diversity in order to make what appear to be the more intelligent and rational choices. Pragmatically, of course, we also know how difficult it is for individuals and groups to forge their own particularistic self-interest for the sake of the common good, even when collective survival is at stake.

The ongoing sacralization of humanity which is part and parcel of the process of globalization is not enough. Perhaps nothing short of a new

re-sacralization of nature and of the earth will be sufficient if we are to change our ways in order to face responsibly the impending ecological crisis. In this context, new Gaia and greener creationist theologies are going to be needed. But until now the Judeo-Christian tradition with its anthropocentric calling to subdue and master the earth and all living creatures has been more part of the problem than of the solution. All of humanity will need to draw on the religious resources of all the non-Western religious traditions if we are to develop a more reverential attitude towards animate nature. The Gaia principle should teach us that there is no such a thing as inanimate nature, that the spirit of creation dwells everywhere.

But perhaps the more difficult dilemma, in the long term, is going to be how we as a species learn to use morally, creatively, responsibly, and self-limitedly the tremendous demiurgic powers unleashed by the new breakthroughs in biogenetics and by the new cognitive sciences of the brain/mind. The tragic paradox of the new and vociferous scientific materialist neo-Darwinism could be revealed in the humanist temptation or hubris to abandon the monotonous insistence on a blind, random, merciless, and meaningless process of natural selection for the sake of a model of rational scientific “intelligent design” at the moment when humans or “transhumans” can assume the role of creator’s apprentice.

The no less ironic paradox of the creationist or “intelligent design” paradigm, by contrast, would be revealed in the loss of faith in the spirit of creation and the loss of hope in the promise of human theosis, at the very moment when humans could actually become active participants and collaborators in the process of unfinished creation and in a new emerging phase of human evolution.

But the greatest paradox of all, and possibly the greatest threat to our living environment and to any promise of human redemption within a renewed creation, could be revealed if “intelligent design” were to become the poignant metaphor of a new anthropomorphic post-Darwinian deism replacing the old post-Newtonian deist metaphor of the watchmaker. Man could again be tempted to eat of the tree of knowledge beyond good and evil.