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Prolegomena
for Methodological Reorientation in the History and Evolution of Religions

Some readers of this book may be better served by beginning in chapters other than this "Prolegomena." This introductory portion is nevertheless quite necessary. It has been written to serve as background for my peers in the history of religions field. For more than two decades I have been working mostly along the periphery of this discipline, along the boundary of primitive religions, ethnology, and general anthropology. Swept along by the dynamic of interacting with my subject matter—with religious people, while doing ethnological field work—my phenomenological, historical, and evolutionary categories evolved all the while. Inasmuch as it may not be useful to adopt the entire conceptual machinery of anthropology, I have explored an avenue of mediation between the history of religions and those concerns of anthropologists that might aid our understanding of religious phenomena. I have become convinced that without considering the new harvest of anthropological evolutionary insights, our discipline of history of religions—with its traditional accent on history—will soon lose its relevance within the landscape of modern academy.

Students of Neoplatonism and Augustinian theology may enter into the subject matter of this book more easily by reading first the summary chapter on "Helipolitian Theology" (Chapter 2) in dialogue with the chapters on Plotinus (Chapters 14 and 15). At the same time, this particular combination also may be the easiest entry for anyone else who is philosophically inclined and wishes to grasp the larger picture. In any case, that latter sequence and entry has led me onto my initial path of discovery.
In all likelihood more readers will be prepared, initially, to begin wrangling with the theological profile of ancient Egypt from the point of view of the Hebrew tradition than from the field of Neoplatonic philosophy. This is somewhat unfortunate because, as I now perceive the situation, the theological dependency of Christendom on ancient Egypt is much stronger than its theological link with the Hebrew tradition. All the while, I now also recognize more clearly than before that the religio-political Christian gospel of the "kingdom of heaven" owes some of its sparks to the ancient Hebrew fiery reaction to Egyptian imperialism.

Reorientation in the Phenomenology of Religions

The phenomenon generally referred to as religion has been defined by Western scholars over the years in many dozens of ways. Most of these definitions are still useful to all who take time to immerse themselves in the ontological contexts in which their originators conceived and formulated them. Different aims and methodologies among professionals require different emphases or foci. Different foci support different ontologies, and different ontologies invariably result in different working definitions.

For instance, a historian, philosopher, psychologist, sociologist, anthropologist, or theologian, each begins his or her train of specialized professional thought with a preferred ontological emphasis. Their respective methodologies are applied to help highlight the subject matter they are examining. Moreover, the decision to focus one’s attention on specific types of data implies, by itself, the commitment of an academic discipline to a primary configuration of reality. For example, historians value events that have scored in their linear reckoning of time as their basic data and realities; philosophers evaluate axioms and propositions as fundamental; psychologists traditionally have focused on the “psyche” and have shifted, more recently, to more easily observable “behavior”; sociologists study societal units and their functioning; in a wider angle of view, anthropologists concern themselves with larger societal configurations or cultures; and finally, theologians begin their work with a focus on the nature of God or gods.
The subject matter "religion," in the domains of all these specialized academic disciplines, has been examined by individual scholars with varying degrees of seriousness. But, inasmuch as religion seems peripheral to the ontological focus of such specialized academic disciplines, it easily disappears or is reduced to a mere aspect of other, more central realities. So for instance, viewed from the perspective of philosophy, various types of religious thought tend to be evaluated simply as irrationality. And frequently, in the psychological perspective, religion tends to be reduced to emotionality or to some type of abnormal behavior. For instance, in Freudian psychology a theistic religion may be seen as originating with the amplification or "projection" of the concrete model of a human father. Sociologists of the Dürkheimian persuasion regard gods and totems as "social representations;" that is, as projections or spiritualized expressions of concrete social togetherness. Marxists characterize religion by its role in the class struggle, as a means utilized by capitalists as an opium or tranquilizer in their exploitation of workers.

On the other hand, theologians who are committed to the ontology of a specific theistic tradition will focus first on the reality of their recognized God or gods. They will proceed to measure the gods of other people by that standard. In this manner theologians, like other scholars who either explicitly or implicitly operate on the basis of a presupposed ontology, may explain the wider world of religion, likewise, as epi-phenomenon of their envisioned central reality configuration. Some theological systems have gone so far as to depreciate the category "religion" itself—for instance, the theology of Karl Barth or the so-called philosophies held forth by numerous Hindu gurus. The latter reserve the label religion to designate the weaknesses they find in other people’s outlook and behavior. Meanwhile, Barthian theologians and Hindu gurus classify their own ever-so-religious postures as respectable "non-religious" ontologies or philosophies.

Religion, defined to serve the needs of this discussion, and stated as briefly as possible, is the response of humankind to so-experienced or so-perceived greater-than-human configurations of reality. This definition is "relational" in that it focuses on the Homo sapiens-religiosus as he or she experiences and relates to the physical as well as socio-cultural environment. A religious person who becomes a historian’s subject matter may or may not perceive the surrounding world in the same way as his or her academic observer. Nevertheless,
religion always belongs to a person’s own perception of the larger world, to his or her ontology. That larger ontology helps categorize one human experience as aggressive, another experience as religious, and still another as egalitarian or social. A passive observer therefore can do no better than to note how another person’s religious behavior varies from his or her ordinary egalitarian or societal behavior, or how it differs from aggressive behavior in that person’s quest for survival.

On the other hand, every person does encounter greater-than-human configurations of reality, religiously. By the very fact that a superior reality configuration is greater, it can never be fully comprehended or explained, neither by a subjective experiencer nor by an objective observer. Nevertheless, with the same humility that a person acknowledges, religiously, one’s relational inferiority toward greater-than-human reality, a historian of religions may note instances of such humble behavior and expressions as religious data.

Some historians of religions may object to this quantified delineation of the subject matter “religion.” They may offer the fact that elves and dwarfs are less-than-human beings, and that meanwhile human responses toward them in ancient times have been classified as religious phenomena. A historian of religions must answer that, indeed, sincere responses to elves and dwarfs are still today religious behavior, as in the case of northern European peasants who, occasionally, still pray for blessings and protection from these unseens. Although, admittedly, the recipients of these prayers nowadays do seem less than human to worldwide historians, they definitely are deemed still greater by those who offer them prayers and gifts—at least for the duration of these ritual presentations.

The duration of how long a person retains his or her religious posture is of no consequence for the basic perspective of this approach. Not even the mightiest among deities is responded to religiously by everyone, or all the time, as if he or she was unquestionably greater. This is to say, that a Homo religiosus in this world practices his or her religion neither one hundred percent nor all the time. Every living Homo religiosus is always more than that. He or she is a Homo ludens and, as such, a bundle of playfulness, oscillating between being a Homo sapiens aggressor and a Homo religiosus engaged in commonsense religious retreats. I am prepared to classify a human response to reality as “religious” whenever there are clear
behavioral indications that the responding person, as far as he or she is concerned, acknowledges and defers to a greater reality.

So for instance, it is possible to observe a person's religious responses even at the mild intensity level of "fascination." Expressions of fascination are religious, because during an initial encounter an object that fascinates, ontologically considered, ipso facto, is not a less-than-human "object." Its effects on the human experiencer are inflicted, at least momentarily, by what looms as being potentially greater. But being only a mild borderline religious response, a state of simple "fascination" is impermanent and may quickly be deflected in one of two opposite directions.

An experience of "fascination" may be pushed, by the defensive ego of an experiencing individual, toward a desire for greater egalitarian "familiarity." It may be pushed beyond that point even toward a desire of gaining experimental control; that is, control over the reality that initially has stimulated fascination. This is the time-worn path over which myriads of predators' fascinations have deteriorated, under analysis, into curiosities and have been thereby reduced to the status of victims.

But then in the other direction, whenever confronted by a tenaciously fascinating reality configuration, an experiencer's ego may as well retreat further. A retreating ego may allow itself to be transported into an even more intense mode of religious experience or retreat. Inasmuch as a gradation of intensity is involved, the entire range of ontology, experiences and responses from total "control" to total "surrender," can be plotted quantitatively along a graduated scale that indicates degrees of experiential intensity.

The Teeter-Totter Scale

Any subject matter, which human minds are capable to submit to academic scrutiny, must be capable of delimitation. Thus, "religion" as a subject matter of study must be identifiable not only in terms of its content but also in contrast to whatever is not religion. That is to say, such general designations of religion as a "life-style" or as a "way of life," although they may be broad enough to embrace all religious behavior, do not delimit it sufficiently. To conceptualize a contrast between what is and what is not religion, it is necessary to begin with the simplest and most concrete ontology imaginable: a
threefold ranking of creatures or entities relative to one another and as belonging within the larger food chain or environmental process.

All living beings on earth survive by feeding on lesser, conquerable things. For comfort they socialize with potential equals, to procreate offspring and provide nurture. And at some point in the larger hierarchy or "food chain"—by means of which organisms on earth are woven into a single fabric of life—everything and everyone eventually surrenders to greater realities. Thus, a fully conscious creature not only moves about to survive between earth and sky, but also discovers itself as caught up in threefold proportional ontology. This ontology includes the entire known dimension of a creature's realm of experiences (see Figure 1). Categories such as the greater Food Chain, Environment, or the Fabric of Life have all been recognized in recent anthropological literature, rather "religiously," as greater-than-human realities.

Of course, in the case of a superior species whose members are capable of doing a lot of mental reflection, such superiority as humankind recognizes in itself, consideration of one's finitude within an objectified almighty Food Chain or Environment does not necessarily also lead to a subjective religious awareness of one's own finitude. Aggressive nonreligious "wrestling" with modern larger reality configurations tends to be at least as serious as, in earlier mythological contexts, human bouts with gods, angels, devils,

**So-perceived configurations of reality**

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<th>less-than-human realities</th>
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**Experiences and responses**

control experimentation hypothesis rearrangement analysis arity fascination awe fear, surrender trembling

**Figure 1.** Human experiences of, and responses to, so-perceived configurations of reality.
demons, or dragons. Ontologically our scientific quests are no better grounded than were the struggles of our antecedents in earlier culture strata.

The multitude of causes in nature that together determine our lives and eventually will do us in can be approached in opposing ways. They can be accepted religiously as divinities, and after analyzing these deities into smaller quanta, they can be ignored or hidden under heaps of abstract philosophical principles and symbols; that is, under the indigestible excrement of analytic aggression and digestion. If all of Nature together appears threatening and hostile, then a composite of many lesser natural forces, or even a chaotic array of such, may to a playful analytic mind seem less intimidating. The human penchant for analysis makes it possible to kill, dissect, digest, or disperse larger ontological threats. It also enables us to think and dispose of threatening entities in the abstract, as lesser epistemological “problems” rather than entities. This general need for physical as well as mental victory underlies all human endeavors, theologies, philosophies, and sciences alike.

Systematic theologies accomplish such human victories with the abstract treatment of their respective God or gods. It is obvious that large gods are more fearsome than smaller ones. It is obvious, too, that gods of whatever size, who are systematically analyzed into sacred aspects or attributes become less frightening than those who still loom over humankind as virile and whole personages.

Accordingly, our scale of experiential intensities is threefold. From left to right it plots human responses to so-perceived reality configurations of increasing size or greatness. And thereby it measures degrees of religiosity, or intensities of religious experience. Human behavior toward less-than-human realities not only is different from religious behavior, it differs also from behavior directed toward potential equals at the midpoint of the scale.

Less-than-Human Realities

Lesser realities can be manipulated, experimented with, conquered and controlled. The quest for food, aggression and progress, the sciences, technology and the arts, all score heavily as involvements in this dimension of so-conceived realities.
The first step in the scientific approach, analysis, initially breaks down targeted reality configurations into smaller, manageable portions. Only less-than-human realities subsequently can be reassembled hypothetically, can so be experimented with, and can be manipulated and controlled. When potential equals are targeted to become food or scientific subject matter, they will either put up a fight or submit only smaller or unessential portions of themselves for analysis or experimental modification. For example, I personally have never permitted a surgeon to operate beyond a clearly defined trouble spot, such as the vicinity of a hernia. What I have surrendered was never my complete self.

Moreover, there is nothing particularly new or modern about our celebrated “scientific” experimental method. It is the same method by which all creatures with alimentary canals happen to survive. It is also the same method by which many an ancient greater-than-human or potentially equal configuration of reality—such as a formidable animal, a god, or a fellow humanoid—has been confronted, captured, killed, or eaten. All latter-day mental, physical, or chemical analyses have been anticipated as concrete prototypes at the animal level. They have been anticipated by the basic activities of claws, teeth, and digestive juices, as well as by the mental-analytic reflections that early hominids have applied during their still simple tasks of hunting, tool making, butchering, and eating. Latter-day scientific analysis by hominid hunters—the breakdown of reality configurations into lesser portions—represents essentially no more than an intellectual elaboration on such simple and primitive activities as tearing, biting, chewing, and digesting. All rational creatures in the animal kingdom are still caught up in these same basic activities.

It follows that an excessive glorification of teeth, even of advanced humanoid scientific “brain-tipped teeth,” sooner or later will leave us marooned in a world littered by our own chewed-dry cut reduced to excrements. Termites that have reduced their woody residences to sawdust, by their natural method of physical analysis, are forced to move on. Where will humanoids with their mentally advanced termite skills hope to move? To some other planet? Or to some nirvana or heaven—after all! Or, perchance, to that other more progressive place of eternal purging and analysis by fire—after all that!
Potential Equals

At the middle of the spectrum of experiences and responses, potential equals do share, communicate, or compete with one another. Social cooperation and humanistic learning together thrive best when focused on this balance point for potential equality. They thrive in accordance with the Golden Rule.

Inasmuch as one recognizes that a *Homo sapiens* and a *Homo religiosus* taken together add up to a *Homo ludens*, the metaphor of contemplating a teeter-totter plank seems somewhat appropriate. This metaphor even brings out the fact that all along the biological and social playground dynamic has enticed our minds to extract the subject matter “religion,” as well as all commentary presented in this book, from the plethora of ordinary life, space, and time.

Encounters with potential equals, around the middle of the spectrum, can be studied as oscillations from that point toward either end of the scale. In the course of a day, between rising, eating, and falling asleep, and certainly during the course of a year, all living creatures on earth do oscillate from one extremity on this scale to the other. Inasmuch as hominids on that teeter-totter plank apply their intellect in their quest for nourishment and survival, analytically, they are indeed *Hominis sapientes*. But they are also *Hominis religiosi* when they move in the other direction and when they retreat from aggression. In fact, they are involved around the middle and toward both sides of the spectrum, most of the time. Over the course of a lifetime, experiential positions are finalized and come to rest, willingly or unwillingly, at the extreme point of surrender at the right end of the spectrum. Willingly or unwillingly, every creature’s existential teeter-totter balances the totality of aggressive behavior, religiously in the end, by virtue of that creature’s inherent weakness and mortality.

A measure of humane balance is necessary for coexistence even in science laboratories and in technological workshops. Experiences of “fascination,” mild religious experiences, are cultivated there to entice newcomers into the cults of business, management, technology, scientific experimentation, as well as militarism. However, such mild religious experiences are appreciated only up to a point. No sooner has an excess of fascination been sensed by masters who preside over modern organizations of science, industrial production, and conquest,
than all available didactic knowhow is being mobilized to bring a fascinating subject matter within range of “familiarity.” Fascination is thus eclipsed, and the targeted familiarized subject matter is further reduced by systematic “analysis” to the status of “objects.” Less-than-human objects can be subjected to hypothetical rearrangement, experimentation, and thereafter to full human control. A creature who intermittently has been a *Homo religiosus* on retreat becomes hungry again, namely, a full-fledged *Homo sapiens-necans*. Of course, not only innocent inferior species are victimized and endangered by the wide swing of human pendulums and teeter-totters. The human species as a whole, with all its lofty visions of egalitarian coexistence and self-realization, has put itself in jeopardy by its collective imbalances as well.

**Greater-than-Human Realities**

In turn, by so-conceived greater-than-human configurations of reality a human being is fascinated, awed, scared, experimented with or dealt with in some other fashion, tranquilized, and eventually done in. Moving toward the right along the experience-response spectrum, mild religious “fascination” registers more intensely when it is upgraded to a state of “awe.” Enraptured in a state of awe the human being, as a *Homo religiosus*, rests poised at a temporary happy equilibrium. The human creature stands frozen perhaps, after the manner of the prophet Muhammad when he saw the angel Gabriel appear to him everywhere along the horizon. He could move “neither backwards nor forwards.” In a similar manner, the three disciples of Jesus, who accompanied their master to his mountain of transfiguration, insisted on prolonging such a state of awe and happy equilibrium.¹

Much of religious ceremonialism aims at achieving, and stabilizing, the level of temporarily feasible bliss, as close as possible to the point of “awe” on our scale. All the fine and not-so-fine arts of humankind, at various points in history, have attempted to concretize and stabilize some such fleeting whiffs, or sounds, or glimpses of

paradise. The music of Bach, Händel, and Mozart among others, along with pipe organs in European cathedrals, orchestras, and large brass choirs, or painters like Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Dürer, have accomplished this feat to some degree for this writer.

Nevertheless, human attempts at structuring and fixing experiential modes of awe, inevitably, have compromised the religious pacifity and quality of these same experiences. Artistically mediated ecstasies compare to pure religious ones as canned edibles compare to fresh food. No denigration is here intended. Canned rations certainly are preferable for human nourishment than the alternative of starvation.

Leaning then, from the point of “awe,” still farther toward passive experience, “fear and trembling” become definitive modes. In religions where the ontological mysterium tremendum has been avoided, as for instance in much of Buddhism, this point of fear and trembling might better be designated as a state of transitional “tranquility.” Had this book been written primarily for Buddhist monks, the right half of our teeter-totter spectrum could have been marked off, as well, with the eight steps from the Buddha’s Eightfold or Middle Path. For discourse with less devout philosophical schools, methods for “knowing oneself”—that is, ritualized introspection and self-criticism—may as well serve the purpose of selfless retreat, for balance and tranquility. All the while, even in the philosophical exercise of introspection the human self is contrasted with some greater-than-human standard of truth.

The endpoint to which all life on earth moves, in a variety of ever-changing combinations of aggressive and retreat responses, is ultimate surrender in death. In the course of every organism’s life, death is prefigured by cycles of fatigue, a need for rest, and falling asleep. Ritualized or organized religious paths often do recommend to their followers “submission” or “surrender” as a fact already accomplished in its essentials during life, or else at least as something soon to be perfected. Nevertheless, all of humankind’s organized religious paths in one form or other do differentiate certain “degrees” of surrender, or levels of seeing and knowing. They carefully distinguish between temporary and less intense surrenders—or states of awareness—on the one hand, and the intensity of surrendering one’s ego unreservedly with the finality of death, on the other. So for instance, the baptism of Christians means initiation into preliminary dying and rising with Christ (Romans 6:3–4), whereas for Buddhists the nirvanic experience of moksha is the prefiguration of pari-nirvana.
Religious responses are gestures and patterns of retreat behavior, always evoked implicitly by the experienced presence of greater-than-human realities. Such retreat behavior affects modes of conscious activity as well as mere tremors of emotion. It delimits the scope of perception as well as the range of subject matter deemed safe for objective thinking, for killing, eating, or for scientific manipulation. On the other hand, the acknowledged presence of greater realities enables an aggressor who finds himself “in over his head” to retreat honorably. This means one is able, religiously, to explain one’s retreat behavior as something “reasonable.” In communication with others, who also express their “will to live” by way of retreat, the desire to escape from greater-than-human dangers will always seem reasonable. Thus religious behavior, in this context, may be understood as the business of making honorable and rational retreats from greater-than-human odds.

Therefore, ranging from “fascination,” which is the mildest form of religious experience, to mystic “surrender” in death, which constitutes the most intense, religion does extend over half of the spectrum of possible human experiences, that is, over half of the available range of ontological involvements. The opposite half on that spectrum is defined by modes of aggression.

Social balance among potential equals, near the middle of the spectrum, may be allegorized as a bird in flight; aggressiveness is represented by one wing, and religious retreat by the other. During flight the two wings must balance each other’s movements, and they must compensate for each other’s adjustments during gliding.

The fact that most so-conceived greater-than-human configurations of reality have been encountered, traditionally, as personal deities also is a very rational happenstance. A Homo sapiens who defines his own existence in terms of intelligent personhood cannot help—upon prolonged reflection on the puzzle of his own finitude and upon being caught up in a biological food chain—but postulate the superiority of some external greater intelligence or personage. He recognizes personality status in anything that reveals itself effectively as greater—at least up to the level of, and a little beyond, his own ego and personality awareness. To deny one’s own finitude in relation to the forementioned threefold proportionality, that is, to deny the common sense need of thriving near the middle of one’s experiential spectrum—somewhere between the extreme points of “eating” and of “being devoured”—would be tantamount to insisting in relation to
others on divine status for oneself. A reflective mind cannot escape this query. If the ontological substratum that has given birth to me as self-reflective ego is not personal, if that ground of being is not personal, then what is this "I"? Then, what does it mean to be a person? And then, what is human dignity?

Although I attribute the religious discovery of personal attributes among so-encountered greater-than-human configurations of reality to keen human intelligence, I must insist on one more point in this regard. "Reason" or "reasonableness" transcends the narrow limits of mere analytic reasoning.

To confront less-than-human things analytically and to manipulate them scientifically can be deemed a reasonable undertaking, provided the things to be controlled are indeed less-than-human. Our short-term survival depends on the success of such "rational" pursuits. However, being confronted by greater-than-human beings, and responding with fascination, awe, fear, tranquility, or surrender, may be equally realistic and rational. For instance, running in fear from a dangerous predator may be the most rational thing a person can do under certain circumstances. And moreover, to surrender and face death with poetry on one's lips may be the most rational behavior under slightly more severe conditions. Religious behavior is irrational only when it is expressed in relation to less-than-human things or idols, or toward equals.

All the while, meeting potential equals and discovering ways to coexist with equals in accordance with the Golden Rule count among the most rational lessons a human mind can learn. Acts of idolizing fellow human beings, from the perspective of the Golden Rule, are religious irrationalities; and acts of manipulating fellow human beings, from that same vantage point, are aggressive or scientific irrationalities. Either extremity threatens balance and humane survival.

Human rationality cannot be evaluated by either the presence or the absence of analytic hunger, greed, or cunning; nor can it be judged by the presence or absence of momentary happiness or mystic bliss. The acid test for human intelligence, in the end, always will be the degree of realistic balance achieved in relation to one's own private threefold ontology, that is, in full awareness of all factors and options that make for balance. Thus, a narrow analytic or scientific application of human reason, at the neglect of greater reality configurations and contexts, will always boomerang and result in
foolish self-destruction as soon as the larger context begins to reassert itself.

Religion and Culture

Religious responses, or religious retreat behavior, generally speaking, always are the behavior of individuals. If I coerce someone to retreat as I do, I do not act religiously toward that person but aggressively. However, if that person retreats by way of imitating my example, both of us act religiously. Managed or culturally organized retreat behavior therefore never is completely religious for all involved.

A similar ambiguity exists at the culture building or aggression side of the continuum. A soldier, for example, who obeys a commanding officer to attack an enemy position acts aggressively toward the enemy; he or she acts religiously toward the commander and toward the entire superior chain of command. Each superior in that chain acts religiously toward his or her respective superior and aggressively toward his or her inferiors—unless he or she decides to disobey an order and suffer the consequences. In that case the subsequent sufferings of punishment tend to absorb into themselves all the religious behavior that otherwise would have been evoked down the line, all the way to the soldier and the enemy.

Then, reaching for another analogy farther back in time, latter-day cultural struggles may be regarded as having been prefigured already in a primitive hunter’s simple quest for food. His aggressive scavenging, hunting, killing, and eating are followed inevitably by religious retreat behavior, by inactivity occasionally associated with remorse and fasting, and by other restrictions imposed on him during his quest and consumption of food. Such restrictions usually are explained by primitive hunters religiously, as having been imposed on them by some greater-than-human hunter deity. In the modern atheistic idiom, the effect that such greater-than-human obstacles have had on the human soul continues to register as conscience; that is, “con-science” in the sense of being con or contra to progress-oriented science.

Inasmuch as religious retreats generally do imply a confession of weakness, the political enforcement of religious behavior among groups of people may evoke embarrassment or even shame. It
eventually also may generate resentment at being bullied. Or it may evoke defensive-aggressive reactions. If left to themselves, people ordinarily do engage in religious retreat behavior together, and they do think religious thoughts naturally and voluntarily. They ordinarily do so within the safe context of mutuality. They withdraw and retreat together for comfort and encouragement. They share religious retreat behavior with other people who happen to be on a similar path of retreat.

In shared states of weakness lies comfort, and also the potential and the strength for a joint comeback. Together, religious folk tend to acknowledge and submit to benevolent greater-than-human realities that in some way endorse, sustain, or at least tolerate their survival.

Every surviving individual lives by balancing his or her life, embedded in collective modes of cultural aggression and religious retreat. Likewise, every social group, every culture and civilization, survives by achieving a similar balance—by cultivating a balance somewhere between states of predatorial aggression and mystic surrender.

Collective imbalances in the direction of either extreme, aggression or retreat, sooner or later will result in reactionary movements in the opposite direction that, in turn, tend to overshoot their points of balance. Aggressive military campaigns and penitential religious pilgrimages therefore tend to alternate in the ebb and flow of tribes and nations. A necessity for balance determines the fate of all strata of society, even in situations where at one or the other behavioral extreme, control or surrender, an elite stretches its theatrical high wires to perform upon.

Aggressive heroes provoke regressive and gentle saints; pious folk stimulate haughty scoffers; and scoffers in turn provoke humble pious folk into becoming first defensively proud—and later aggressively proud. Aggressive grand domesticators drive sensitive people to a point where they identify with doves; stubborn martyrs suffer in hope of shaming their killers into repentance.\(^2\) And finally, kings on horseback have at one point in the history of Near Eastern civilization generated a political climate, of popular disdain, that even a poor man

\(^2\) *Grand domestication* refers to the era in human evolution that follows simple “domestication.” See the section on “Reorientation in the History and Evolution of Religion,” later in this chapter.
on a donkey could be acclaimed the next and better eternal King of kings.

Religious soteriologies—gospels of salvation—are initially always predicament-specific. They are invoked in response to specific socio-cultural imbalances. Religious gospels are designed to neutralize specific aggressive excesses; they exist to balance specific cultural emphases or sins.

Religion and culture together, up to this point, have been delineated behavioristically, as opposites, and in terms of directional movement toward one or the other extreme. A closer look at socio-political dynamics is now called for. Deliberations in this book categorically place "retreat" in opposition to "aggression." The essential behavior that builds and supports culture is aggression; its outer limit is conquest, killing, and imposition of absolute "control." In contrast, the essential religious behavior is marked by retreat that at its extreme limit culminates in the total surrender of egos.

In the course of a person's struggle for survival, full religious retreat is compromised in the form of "structured retreat"—analysis and hypothetical rearrangement are imported from the aggression side to impose rational communicational structure on greater-than-human reality. Structured retreat behavior may be compromised further by folding it over onto the general realm of aggression, thus establishing the subcategory of "justified aggression." Aggressive behavior, for the sake of cultural balance and survival, must derive its justification from structured retreat at the other side; whereas, inversely, structured retreat was obliged to obtain its tools and skills of organization and communication from the aggressive side. And finally, the category of justified aggression may be compromised further by unchecked aggressive behavior.

As to our definitions of Culture and Religion, and their interrelatedness, the matter may be summarized as follows: Culture is anchored first in its realm of Aggression, then is fortified by its own subregion of Justified Aggression, and contemporaneously is inspired in dialogue or tension with its most remote dimension, Structured Retreat. Religion is complementary to Culture and anchored first in its realm of Retreat; it is conceptualized and communicated in its subregion of Structured Retreat, and finally is organized or institutionalized in culture, more or less aggressively, in the dimension of Justified Aggression. (This is illustrated in Figure 2.)
Figure 2. Religious experiences and responses in relation to "culture" building and organized "religion."

An emphasis on Justified Aggression, however, which is no longer anchored in Pure Retreat and Structured Retreat, ceases to be religious. By the same token, Pure Retreat behavior by itself contributes nothing tangible to Culture as such.

Religious retreat behavior and culturally aggressive behavior are expressed by all living beings. However, among higher and rational animals there is copresent a heightened sense of self-awareness, namely, an awareness of one’s own habits of analytic aggression (science) as well as of one’s own habits of religious retreat (conscience). Aggressions or progressions on one side, and religious retreats on the other, therefore interplay with one another as checks and balances. Near the midpoint of the existential scale, delineated in Figures 1 and 2, all these realms and subrealms may contribute together, as checks and balances, to a favorable balance for societal survival, supported by rites that embody the Golden Rule. There, in the vicinity of that egalitarian point of balance, amidst culture and religion, equals do share, compete, coexist, and multiply.
Reorientation in the
History and Evolution of Religions

The process of "evolution," as it has been refined by anthropological theories during past decades, no longer means what it meant in the nineteenth century: progress from lower to higher levels of existence. Modern anthropological evolutionists, nevertheless, may recognize a gradual increase in the complexity of human cultures over the long haul, to the extent that archaeological data support their conclusions.

Inasmuch as in this chapter we already have carefully delineated the reciprocal relationship between "culture" and "religion," there exists no longer a need for holding evolutionary thinking in the history of religions hostage to the old ghosts of our progress-oriented founding fathers. Religion defined as retreat behavior never can mean "progress." Religion may entail not only physical retreat behavior in environment and space, but include retreat nostalgia and remembrance rites in the dimension of time. There is not a single religious founder, recorded in the annals of our discipline, who has not in some way returned his followers to an earlier simpler relationship with greater-than-human reality. These founders did so in the hope of persuading not only their immediate followers, but whole cultures and nations unto a return path as well.

Another common misconception about "evolution" must be dispelled at the outset. The evolutionary eras suggested here are not successive stretches of time where each has been replaced, progressively, by a next; rather, they are accumulated strata. All may be visualized together as interfused strata representing overlapping time sequences. For example, hunter-gatherer cultures and religions are still with us and in some parts of the world still are alive and exposed to sunlight. I myself have lived and participated in all the evolutionary culture strata mentioned in this book. While doing so I became existentially involved in the aggressiveness, the sins, the guilt, and the atonement retreats of people whose struggles for existence have left them stranded in more specialized cultures and religiosity than my own happens to be. The general evolutionary eras given here and illustrated in Figure 3 can be harmonized with most current anthropological theories on evolution. They are presented here tentatively.
ca. 2,500,000 years ago: gathering, scavenging, hunting

c. 12,000 years ago: domestication

ca. 5,000 years ago: grand domestication

ca. 3,000 years ago: religions of universal salvation—

c. 300 years ago: democratic revolts—

Figure 3. Eras in the Evolution of Cultures and Religions

Gathering, Scavenging, Hunting

The span of time in humanoid evolution identified here with the activities of gathering, scavenging, and hunting may be estimated in excess of 2 million years, as having begun with the manufacture of stone tools. In isolated regions of our globe this culture stratum survives to this very day. Subsistence in this culture depends on the ability to forage and on the ability and the courage to kill animals. Hunters and gatherers interfere at the ends of their victims’ life cycles. They inflict that end and assume full control over their victims’ remains by way of consuming them.

With an increase in intelligence, driven by the desire to have better weapons, there also increased the possibility for discerning responsibility, guilt, and suitable paths of justification. Hunting is trickery par excellence. Hunter gods therefore were mostly greater-than-humanoid hunters who, accordingly, appeared mostly in the form of predators. Some hunters paid share offerings from the carcasses of victims they killed. For their sins of killing, primitive hunters developed and performed religious retreat rituals—primarily to alleviate feelings of guilt. They atoned for their trespasses.

Domestication

The cultures of domesticators are marked by the activity of taking control over entire life cycles of plants and animals, from fertilization to consumption. They claimed ownership of seeds, plants, and livestock, and they paid their gods with sacrifices in kind—often
whole specimens of animals and sheaves. Creator gods vouched and bestowed titles to these properties. Domesticators also claimed ownership to dwellings and land; they roamed as less than nomadic hunters and built more permanent houses, especially where agriculture had become their primary basis for subsistence.

In tropical areas the earliest practice of horticulture was probably dominated by women while the men continued to specialize on hunting. Success in horticulture produced for these people an increase in population; this, in turn, gave the men fewer animals to hunt and subsequently saddled them with an identity crisis. Secret warrior societies, and cults of headhunting and cannibalism, were some of the men’s religio-cultural adaptations to that ego crisis. Subsequent aristocratic warrior societies and priesthoods, together, have drawn much of their ethos and mythos from this crisis of readjustment among men—the transition from hunting to domestication.

On prairie lands where hunters gradually adapted to shadowing remnant herds, where they claimed and guarded these herds as their own, the men remained the chief providers. Women in these situations rose in status only with great difficulty. This adaptation was typical on the semiarid prairies of northern Africa, the Near East, and Central Asia. On the other hand, cultures that came to practice a mixture of gardening, animal husbandry, and simple mechanized cultivation with draft animals were able to distribute labor and gender roles more evenly.

Grand Domestication

The grand domestication phase in human evolution is important for understanding this book. Egypt has been a grand domestication system par excellence. The Hebrew “Exodus” tradition defined itself as a reaction against it. Greek philosophers, who also reacted to the problems of grand domestication, have themselves drawn much basic ontology from Egyptian grand domestication religion. Subsequently Christendom, from the moment of its conception, has inherited the Hebrew reaction against Egyptian grand domestication; but it also has taken up into itself some of Egypt’s own ontology and theological structures.

Grand domestication began wherever ambitious domesticators, very often men of a herder tradition, have pushed beyond the limit of merely controlling the life cycles of plants and animals. They