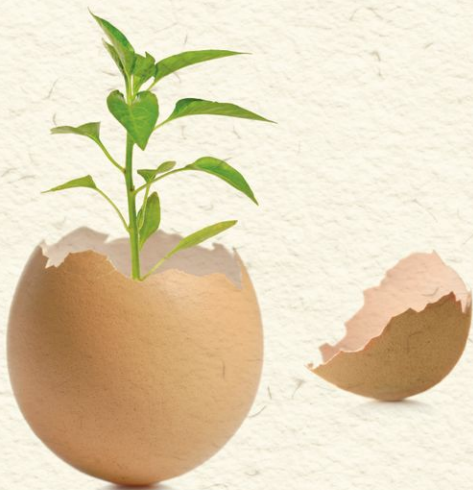


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# Evolutionary Religion



**J. L. SCHELLENBERG**

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J. L. SCHELLENBERG

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*For Regina*

## *Note to the Reader*

If you ever feel, while reading, that something needs a deeper treatment, it could be that it receives such treatment—at the end of the book. There, among the notes, you will find occasional comments that take a bit further what is being discussed in the text. They were left out of the text to avoid disrupting the flow.

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## Acknowledgments

Most of the people who helped me with this book are dead. I have in mind Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, William James, and ever so many others. Fortunately this fact is compatible with there being very many who have helped me among the living. I want to tender my thanks to them all.

First on the list is my wife, the artist Regina Coupar. She came last last time. So now she knows she is, for me, both first and last. She also comes first in the book since it is dedicated to her. Regina bought me a couple of great works on Darwin at a time when I was just starting to make some vital evolutionary connections. After hearing and responding to multiple versions of my ideas from a bracingly unconventional perspective, she was still willing to read the final final draft and give me many additional useful thoughts. A member of my family who got to know her back in the late nineties, shortly after she came into my life, said to me: “You are a very fortunate man.” That was—and is—the truth.

My cousin, Maggie Redekop, Professor Emerita in the Department of English at the University of Toronto, read the prior-to-penultimate draft and sent me a great many very helpful comments which I appreciated all the more since they afforded me the perspective of someone quite happily *not* a philosopher! I am very grateful to her for doing so, and also for stimulating follow-up conversations.

Much discussion in a variety of settings with my good friends Paul Draper and Dan Howard-Snyder has, I think, brought our views in the philosophy of religion closer together. In any case, I’m grateful to both for always being willing to help me think things through. To Dan I owe special thanks for his extensive and very useful comments on the penultimate version of the book, at a time when he was up to his ears in work—some of it already helpful to me in other ways.

I’ve also learned much, while preparing this book, from several symposia on my recent trilogy held at meetings of the Canadian Philosophical Association in Montreal and at meetings of the American Philosophical Association in Minneapolis and Seattle. Jason Marsh and John Thorp organized the former and Dan Howard-Snyder the latter. I am very grateful to them, to the audience

members, and of course to all the commentators, who (in addition to Dan and Jason) included: Paul Draper, Jack MacIntosh, Steve Wykstra, Terence Cuneo, Andrew Chignell, Wes Morriston, Andrew Dole, Jeanine Diller, Tom Crisp, and Terry Penelhum.

Looking back over the last few years, thinking about who else has—perhaps without knowing it—helped me try to write this very different sort of book, I remember Richard Swinburne, Ingolf Dalferth, Steve Maitzen, Don Wiebe, Ivan Khan, Yiftach Fehige, John Cottingham, Robert Audi, and Bob Adams. My thanks to each of them.

Finally, let me express my gratitude to all of the talented and very professional people at Oxford University Press who helped put this book together, including especially Peter Momtchiloff. The comments of an anonymous reviewer for Oxford University Press are also much appreciated.

My sincerest gratitude to everyone. To anyone whom I may have left out inadvertently: you have both my gratitude and my apologies.

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## Prologue: Deep Time Religion

I'm an analytical philosopher. Readers don't always react with enthusiasm to such a confession, and recently I was told why. Apparently there's a commodity considered valuable in literature called "narrative tension," a.k.a. suspense. But analytical philosophers, given their penchant for directness and precision, don't have much use for suspense. A detective novel written by a good philosopher would begin: "In this novel I shall show that the butler did it."

I thought it interesting that it was a philosopher who told the joke. Forgotten is what remedy, if any, he prescribed for philosophers addressing a wider audience, one including non-philosophers. But we may not need a remedy here. For what I intend to show is not unrelated to story and suspense. You've already noticed that the book is about evolution and religion. One way of introducing my take on this subject is to say that the story of evolution and religion, as most of us have heard it, is at best a story *half told* which we have been treating as the whole story. I want us to get started on the rest of the story.

So sit back, relax . . . and expect to be drawn to the edge of your seat in suspense!

\* \* \*

At least since Darwin, religion and evolution have tended to be at odds. Often they have resembled nothing so much as schoolchildren glaring at each other across the room, shoving or tripping one another in the hall. Although evolutionists have had great hopes of stimulating positive developments in fields as various as medicine and education, in matters religious even the most optimistic and conciliatory among them hope for little more than that evolution and religion may learn to sit side by side quietly without kicking each other under the table.

No doubt the very public and acrimonious debates we've seen over biological evolution are part of the reason for this adversarial relationship. According to the Darwinian theory of evolution through natural selection, those organisms best adjusted to their environment survive and pass on their traits, and over truly enormous periods of time this natural process leads to a complex accumulation of adaptive changes in their populations mimicking intelligent design. Naturally enough, this result has been taken by many as competing with the idea of real Divine design.

But these battles over biology are deeply intertwined with a broader struggle over how we should design *ourselves*. Enter another—though related—form of evolution called “cultural evolution” (the term refers to changes in our species over time generated by cultural factors.) Though cultural evolution, like biological, concerns what does happen, it is often because of what someone thinks *should* happen—going to the moon, giving women the vote, putting an end to war—that it occurs. And there are plenty of writers who quite apart from Darwinian loyalties on matters biological would like to see religion trimmed from human culture, delighting in the exposure of everything antiquated or bloated or grotesque that lurks in its shadows. They think of religion as an aberration in the human experiment, unworthy of “humanity come of age.” Not surprisingly, science they regard as representing the way forward. The well known author and journalist Christopher Hitchens speaks for such an orientation when, in his book *God is not Great*, he writes that religion belongs to “the infancy of our species.”

On some days, it's not hard to sympathize with this point of view. Much ignobility has been sponsored by unthinking religious conviction. But seeking a wider vantage point, and aiming only for understanding, what we will find, I suggest, is a mistake built on an oversight. The mistake is the supposition that cultural evolution of a sort we should approve, gaining speed with the discovery of natural evolution, must roll over religion rather than redeeming it—must savage it rather than saving it. And the oversight, which I shall be combating at some length in this book, is ironically our collective failure to take note of our place in time as the evolutionary sciences understand it and to recognize that the elevated point to which evolution has brought us on our planet still marks no more than the very beginning of intelligent life. (I put readers on notice that I will be taking “intelligence” very broadly in this book, including within the range of the term

anything properly called emotional intelligence as well as any similarly sensitive capacity.)

Evolutionary time is of an extent almost beyond fathoming—that's why scientists call it "deep." The Harvard biologist and paleontologist, Stephen Jay Gould, put it this way: "an abstract, intellectual understanding of deep time comes easily enough—I know how many zeroes to place after the 10 when I mean billions. Getting it into the gut is another matter." Because of the efforts of scientists like Gould, we've been starting to internalize Darwin's idea of natural selection occurring over many millions of years. But the truly enormous periods of time required for something like *Homo sapiens* to be evolutionarily produced still give many members of that limited species a stomach ache.

And that's just the deep past. What about the deep future? Here we've been especially slow to get all the relevant zeroes into the gut—so slow as to have hardly begun the digestion process. It is especially this slowness, as we'll see, that allows for certain unnoticed chapters in the story of evolution and religion. Here's another way of putting the point: we've so far experienced no more than "half a revolution" in our thinking about time—the revolution involving our discovery and slow comprehension of the deep past. To deal adequately with certain subjects including religion we need to be able to do better. We need to be able to convert our mental clocks easily to scientific time both past and future. But this aspect of scientific literacy is not yet widely discernible among us.

To acquire it, one needs to think hard about the fact that the perhaps 200,000-year history of *H. sapiens* is wedged between three and a half billion years of evolutionary development on one side—life's past—and another billion on the other—life's potential future. Consider especially the second figure. A billion years is a period of time ridiculously longer than the 50,000 years of thinking and feeling that, on a generous estimate, our species has put into religion so far. What *developments* in religiously-relevant thought and feeling might Earth see in so much time?

Even if we restrict ourselves to the possible future of our own species, the numbers are staggering. *H. sapiens*, though manifesting its religious inclinations and symbolic powers a bit earlier, has at most 6,000 years of organized and systematic religious inquiry to its credit. This is also the age of the longest-lived of those traditions we regard as the venerable Great World Religions. The average lifespan of

hominid or—following an emerging terminological preference in science—*hominin* species (the 20 or so known species on our branch of the evolutionary tree) is roughly 800,000 years. So we might realistically hope that members of *H. sapiens* will endure and continue putting their big brains to work for at least another 600,000 years. And 6,000 years between 200,000 on one side and 600,000 on the other surely counts as a very modest beginning! Suppose we take an individual human life of eighty years to represent the 800,000 years our species may last. We would then have to be regarded as being something like a twenty-year-old who only started thinking about religion some six months ago. Of course someone is bound to observe that our species may not make it past twenty-one. But this doesn't prevent its experience with religion so far from being properly regarded, in scientific terms, as extremely brief, or its immaturity from grounding a rather far-reaching religious skepticism.

As these thoughts suggest, my own analysis of the relationship between evolution and religion, like that of Hitchens, refers to the infancy of the species, but I believe I see things rather differently than he does. Hitchens seems to have in mind the distant past—*that's* where religion should have stayed—whereas in my sense of the word, which is science's, we are still very much *living through* the infancy of our species. "In the beginning" begins the biblical book of Genesis. But anyone who really makes the shift from human to scientific timescales will see that we are still in the beginning. We've never left it. The beginning is now. And precisely in this scientific idea of our infancy, I want to suggest, there lies hidden a means of altogether transforming our usual picture of evolution and religion as adversaries.

I don't mean only—as might be expected—that however sharp one's critique of current religious beliefs, one can't rule out the possibility of profound religious insights in the future. This is part of what I want to emphasize but decidedly not the whole. No, the consequences of the deep future for religion are far more interesting than that, exposing also a new way of thinking about religion in the present. The key is to notice an intriguing question about evolution and religion that has not yet been raised in the religion debates: *Is there a form of religion appropriate to our place in evolutionary time?* More precisely: Is there a religious way of life that is made admirable or desirable by the features of *our* moment in evolutionary time as distinct from others? The idea here is that if indeed we are at the

beginning of intelligent doings on our planet instead of at the end, then we ought to consider whether there are any religious behaviors—perhaps ones somewhat different from those to which we’ve grown accustomed—that might *fit* such a beginning.

Only from an evolutionary stance involving careful reflection on deep time, with the latter conception taken from where it now sits tightly bunched at the junction of past and present and unrolled into the far future—only from here can this question even be seen. And my point is that only when it *is* seen can we start to think about religion in fully evolutionary terms. Although what will emerge when we do is initially a new form of forward-looking evolutionary skepticism or doubt applicable both to religious and to irreligious beliefs (which must now appear premature, quite *inappropriate* to our place in time), close on its heels will come a new answer to the cultural difficulties religion faces and, with it, the possibility of a new form of religion deeply rooted in evolutionary thought.

The book is divided into four pairs of chapters. The first pair offers more on the science of deep time, and the second pair draws out its skeptical consequences. (Chapter 3 is perhaps the most difficult in the book and I won’t mind if, after sampling it, you skip over to Chapter 4 with its religious application of skeptical ideas.) The third pair of chapters—which begins the second half of the book—explains how this science and skepticism have the surprising effect just mentioned of opening up new space for religious thinking, and how the possibility of a new form of religion or religiousness, properly called *evolutionary religion*, is suggested. The last pair of chapters defends my view on this positive and liberating turn of events against some basic objections and also shows how one might reason in support of the idea that the new religiousness I have outlined is indeed appropriate to our place in time. Because I have been much inspired by the life and work of Charles Darwin during the time of writing, he will be appearing, in one role or another, in most of my chapters.

As this summary makes clear, I will in the book be offering my own candidate for the status of “a form of religion deeply rooted in evolutionary thought” and my own answer to the unstudied question raised above: a form of religion living on imagination rather than belief that could be right for us and open the door to positive cultural evolution even if other forms of religion are wrong. My candidate idea aims to be both grand in conception and morally attractive while



retaining better prospects for long-term survival among inquiring minds than most of what's on our minds today.

But I want to emphasize that my interest is much less in publicizing a new form of religion than in getting us to think seriously about the idea of evolutionary religion in the first place and note its potential importance—considering how evolution and religion can be deeply harmonized by asking what sort of faith might be appropriate to our place in time. Some philosophers have interpreted the ideas I'll be outlining in the final chapters of the book as presupposing the aim to start a new religious movement, perhaps one more able to satisfy my existential needs than others I have loved and left in the past! But this is a misinterpretation. The term “evolutionary religion” refers not to some specific religious form of life that I am looking to defend and for which I am seeking converts but rather to an *object of inquiry* or a possible type of thing: a form of religion we all might assess positively given a fuller evolutionary picture, and, in particular, one that is admirable or desirable given the specific features of the place we occupy in time—a very early one. Could there be such a thing? What might it look like? Might investigation of the first two questions lead to an interesting new way of dealing with problems of religion in modern culture? These are the matters that most deeply provoke my interest. Of course I presently hold that the answer to each question is Yes and intend to explain why. But my main aim is to get us thinking about such questions. We have not thought about religion in a temporalist way before—“temporalism” is my name for the position that emphasizes our place in time and the importance of bending our thought accordingly—and I believe much may be illuminated if we do. It is this that excites me. But I do not pretend to bring all of this illumination in the present volume. And my ideas about skeptical-imaginative religion are intended as a first word not the last.

I have developed similar views before in three books, a trilogy, aimed at philosophers and written over the past decade. But not until recently did I see clearly the evolutionary framework that was, as it were, waiting to receive all my results. In this book I seek to hammer it out and make my case anew, putting it forward as a proposal to the wider intellectual community and indeed to all who are interested in whether religion can or ought to survive. The ongoing debates over science and religion tend to presuppose that it is *old* time religion that

must appear in our future, if any does. By thinking in the right ways about *deep* time possibilities of faith, I hope we will come to recognize this idea for the ungrounded prejudice in favor of a familiar past that it really is, and to see the idea of evolutionary religion as one whose time has come.

## Half a Revolution

Our brains are built to deal with events on radically different *timescales* from those that characterize evolutionary change. We are equipped to appreciate processes that take seconds, minutes, years or, at most, decades to complete. Darwinism is a theory of processes so slow that they take between thousands and millions of decades to complete. . . . It requires effort of the imagination to escape from the prison of familiar timescale.

Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*

I live on the South Shore of Nova Scotia in a big old house overlooking the ocean. It was built by a local sea captain in 1883—just a year after Charles Darwin died. In the woods back of the house where I walk nearly every day are scattered many large granite boulders known as glacial erratics. They are the farewell gifts of an ice sheet that was slowly departing the region, gouging lakes as it went, about 10,000 years before my house went up. Walking by a particularly impressive chunk of granite tall as myself, trailing a hand across its rough crystalline surface, I often marvel over how incredibly long it has lain (more or less) right there!

This information and such experiences are mine courtesy of the decidedly unflashy but revolutionary science of geology, to which the flashier sciences traceable to Darwin owe a great deal. And geology tells me more. It tells me that 10,000 years is as nothing compared to the long ages that have passed since my favorite rock was first formed through the cooling of magma at a time of intense plate tectonic activity some 400 million years ago. (Its crystals bear mute testimony to this event.) It tells me, too, that these are only moments in a much larger story stretching back billions of years. In that time, continents have traveled the globe, crunched into each other, and fallen apart.