



RELIGION AFTER SCIENCE

*The Cultural Consequences of
Religious Immaturity*

J.L. SCHELLENBERG

Religion After Science

In this provocative work, J.L. Schellenberg addresses those who, influenced by science, take a negative view of religion, thinking of it as outmoded if not decadent. He promotes the view that transcendently oriented religion is developmentally immature, showing the consilience of scientific thinking about deep time with his view. From this unique perspective, he responds to a number of influential cultural factors commonly thought to spell ill for religion, showing the changes – changes favorable to religion – that are now called for in how we understand them and their proper impact. Finally, he provides a defense for a new and attractive religious humanism that benefits from, rather than being hindered by, religious immaturity. In Schellenberg's view, religion can and should become a human project as monumental as science.

J. L. Schellenberg is Professor of Philosophy at Mount Saint Vincent University. His work was honored by a special issue of the Cambridge journal *Religious Studies* in 2013.

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For Regina

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Prologue: The 10,000-Year Test	1
1 Development and the Divine	7
2 The End Is Not Near	19
3 Big Ambitions	27
4 A Poor Record	38
5 Verdict: Immature, Not Doomed	51
6 A New Path for Science and Religion	66
7 The New Agnosticism	81
8 Naturalism Tamed	91
9 Agnostic Religion?	102
10 The New Humanism	116
Epilogue: The Religion Project	128
<i>Notes</i>	131
<i>Index</i>	141

Acknowledgments

This book draws on what I've learned over the years in other writing projects, so I really ought to be thanking again everyone who helped me with them. Consider it done. It also draws, in a few places, on those past projects themselves. A version of [Chapter 2](#) appeared as an article in the online magazine *Aeon*. And [Chapters 4](#) and [6](#) contain material reprinted from "The Retrospective Mode" and "The Prospective Mode," respectively, in my book *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Cornell University Press, 2007). This material is used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press. I am grateful to Cornell for allowing me to reuse this material.

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I owe the phrase '10,000-year test' to Philip Clayton, who used it while discussing my ideas in a talk at a Claremont conference back in 2011. I instantly liked it, and he instantly said yes when I asked whether I might use it myself, giving to it my own meaning(s). I thanked him then, and I thank him again now.

Above all, I thank my wife, Regina, to whom this book is dedicated with the greatest affection. I have the usual reasons for gratitude afforded by Regina's excellent ear and insightful comments on my ideas, as well as her abiding love and support. I also have the unusual reason that comes

from her physical absence for two weeks in July of 2017, when she was traveling on the other side of the country with a daughter's family. It was then, to distract myself from missing her (it's a big country!), that I resolved to put together a book I'd been thinking about. I gave all my attention to this project. And a solid first draft was complete when she returned. Thanks, Regina!

Prologue: The 10,000-Year Test

Until little more than 200 years ago, almost everyone who contemplated the history of humanity went back only a few thousand years in time. People who entertained thoughts about the future regarded the end of the human story as nearer than the beginning. Those doing science or philosophy or commenting on religion imagined such activities to be nearing – or to have crossed – the finish line. Then came the discovery of deep geological time and evolution ... And virtually nothing changed.

As it happens, we human beings are not very good at bringing what we've learned about big temporal facts into conversation with our personal and cultural concerns. Sure, having taken a science class or two, we can rattle off geological eras taking us millions of years into the past: Cenozoic, Mesozoic, and Paleozoic. And although we haven't thought about it a lot, we'll nod knowingly when told that life on Earth, maybe including human life, has millions of years left to go – that much of the story of evolution is not yet written. But most of us haven't managed to make our everyday, lived understanding of human identity and human activity *line up* with these temporal facts. Even scientists have trouble with this.

Now, it's not as though one can immediately infer anything of interest about the status of cultural activities such as philosophy, science, and religion from the depth of the future and the shallowness of our past. It's more a matter of how an old orientation, grounded in a radically mistaken picture of time, has managed to persist and is restricting our imaginations, preventing us from even considering some pretty important and also quite live possibilities about the scale of successful inquiry and the modesty of our present attainments. In particular, it's a matter of us

still being closed to some pretty important *developmental* possibilities that, 150 years after Darwin, should be wide open and familiar.

This shortcoming is more evident in some areas than in others. In this book I aim to help us correct it in an area where it seems to me especially glaring and egregious, that of human religion. The book explores and defends, in relation to a robust idea of religious transcendence, a developmental approach comfortable with temporal immensities (Chapters 1–5), setting out the often remarkable consequences of the conclusions this approach supports (Chapters 6–10). As compared with my previous work on related topics, it probes deeper on development and developmental immaturity, applying the results more widely. And with this distinctive developmental alternative in hand, it uncovers new results on the possibility of a religious humanism and in relation to the science and religion debate. In the rest of this prologue I want to warm us up for the exertions to come with a little test – call it the *10,000-year test*.

In the context of evolution, 10,000 years is not a lot of time. Even in the context of hominin evolution it's not. Mammal species – and hominins, of course, are mammals – survive on average for a million years or so. Some previous hominin species have endured for more than a million years. Take *Homo erectus*, for example. Our own species, *Homo sapiens*, has been around for about 300,000 years so far. Suppose we make it to the million-year mark – a result that's certainly not inevitable but, especially given the unique power of our technologies, hardly inconceivable either. Then the next 10,000 years amounts to only a small fraction, a mere 1/70th, of the time remaining for cultural and perhaps biological evolution to keep on changing us, what we do, and also what we *can* do.

Think of those points as evolutionary parameters for the 10,000-year test. Meditate on them a bit. Then, to begin the test itself, consider several topics of human inquiry, divided into the following four categories. Please do your best, for now, to ignore the *labels* associated with inquiry in these regions of thought that are likely to pop into your head:

- (1) The individual and communal behaviors that best contribute to a productive peace and social harmony.
- (2) What most fundamentally belongs to the natural world or nature, and how, at bottom, nature is structured.
- (3) What is most fundamentally real, how we ought to live, and how we can know anything about such things, if we can.
- (4) Whether there is or isn't something beyond nature that in a positive way matters for us, and, if so, what it is like.

Once you've carefully considered points (1)–(4), my test invites you to ask yourself the following question: *For which of these four categories is it most likely that at least 10,000 years of further inquiry will be needed?* A possible shortcut here is this: Ask yourself which of the associated forms of inquiry is most ambitious.

OK, time's up. Which of the four is most likely to require another 10,000 years? I expect you won't find it easy to say. (1) is just about us and thus narrower than (2), which concerns all of nature. But depending on what you say about (4), what you need to know about (1) might also go deeper than nature. (3) seems to set us a task that could hardly be finished before we had results on (1) and (2). But at the same time the identification of *any* of these inquiries as properly completed might presuppose that we'd handled the last part of (3). (4) seems unlikely to be dealt with before work on the first part of (3) is at least well underway, and it might also require us to have advanced pretty far with (2). Particular ways in which there could be a reality beyond nature may come to mind when thinking about (4), but without further information than work on (2) affords – and given that we ourselves are part of nature – we could hardly rule out lots of possibilities, needing at some point to be taken into account, that no one has yet thought of. By the same token, realities beyond nature might matter for us positively in ways we can't now imagine.

The right response to the test's first question, it appears, is this: *It's not at all obvious* which of the four is most likely to require another 10,000 years of inquiry, and in fact any of the four might call for that much more work.

Let's suppose this is true and move on to part two of the test. It involves a question that I think you'll find it much easier to handle: *For which of the four categories are people most inclined to behave as though there is no need for a single further year of inquiry, let alone 10,000 – that is, to treat inquiry as already complete?*

It's all right if at this point we allow those labels I earlier asked you to ignore back into our thoughts and into the discussion: they are, respectively, political inquiry (maybe with a dash of ethics), scientific inquiry, philosophical inquiry, and religious inquiry. And I expect you'll agree that the right answer to our new question has obviously got to be (4), whose associated area of inquiry is religious. People can see how complicated matters are in (1)–(3), at least when they see that (1) is about more than just which political party is best. But when it comes to (4), they've got it all figured out! Or so most suppose. For almost everyone is either a

convinced believer in the existence of a transcendent reality – a reality beyond nature – that’s in some way good for human life or a convinced denier of the same. And almost all convinced believers think they know just what this transcendent reality is like and what is the mode of ‘positive mattering’ to be associated with it, if any is. Many are certain, for example, that it’s a person (or Person) who created the world and loves us. Some will add that this Person became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth and did various things in the ancient Middle East that exhibited its friendliness.

Now, the disparity that has opened up here, the gap between how much extra inquiry we can see (4) may well require, when thinking carefully and as much as possible impartially, and how much inquiry most of us are prepared to give it, is an interesting one. I think it calls for some inquiry of its own. Let’s gather together everything we humans have been doing in the religious dimension of life, including in particular everything that can be seen as explicitly or implicitly concerned with satisfying ourselves about the topics of (4) above, under this label: *the religion project*. The special inquiry I’ve just mentioned should address at least the following questions. Have we maybe been going about the religion project the wrong way, with presuppositions and prejudices rather than careful thinking and definite results? It sure looks as though most of us have been assuming that the religion project has already reached maturity. But is our species instead still quite religiously *immature* – and kept in this condition in part, ironically, by the prevalent assumption of maturity? And what would be the consequences for our culture’s engagement with religion and religious possibilities if that were so?

This book explores these questions. By the end of it, I hope to have convinced every truth-loving observer who grapples with these matters alongside me that the religion project is indeed immature and should be given more time – another 10,000 years or more, if need be. (And with that our 10,000-year test morphs into a test of *religion* that’s 10,000 years long.)

I’m especially concerned to address those who take a negative view of religion, often at least in part on the basis of scientific considerations. In the late nineteenth century, the theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher addressed a book to what he called religion’s “cultured despisers.” The number of religion’s cultured despisers has only grown since then, and this book in its own way addresses them, along with others among the so-called Nones (people who place a checkmark by ‘None’ when asked to state their religion). Many people think that