RELIGION

in the perspective of

B I G H I S T O R Y

by

Brian Spooner

University of Pennsylvania

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MAJOR POINTS OF PRESENTATION

1. OUR TASK

is to explain why all human societies appear to have had and to continue to have religion, as we recognise it, but that in recent times increasing numbers of people in some parts of the world have begun to find it irrelevant. We need to explain how it became (apparently) part of human nature, why its content and its practice vary so much from one society to another, and why it is fading in the modern world.

2. AS AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

my experience and my perspective are global. Following a religious upbringing in Protestant Christianity, I went on a religious odyssey. As an undergraduate at Oxford my course of study took me first through the religions of ancient Greece and Rome, then Islamic Studies, followed by Comparative Religion. When I ended up in Social Anthropology in the 1960s I acquired a global approach and studied the religions of the small non-literate communities that we know

ethnographically throughout the world--the peoples neglected by historians because they were outside the world's historical civilizations. I learned to classify them as shamanic, communal,

Olympian, and monotheistic, a classification based on the way they understood their relationship with the supernatural world. It was easy to see that the shamanic societies were the smallest, the communal were larger, the Olympian larger still, and the monotheistic the largest. The differences in the structure and content of the religious understanding of each non-literate society were closely related to their differences in size. Societies of the same size had culturally similar religions. After Oxford I lived in Islamic countries for more than a decade, mostly in (Shia) Iran, but also (Sunni) Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was interesting to see the difference between Iran, which is a primarily urban population and Afghanistan and Pakistan which are much less urban. I also lived with Hindus in India, and I have spent time in several other parts of Asia and Africa. I now get emails from students in urban Iran applying to come and study with me, who introduce themselves as atheists.

3. SO BESIDES DIVERSITY WE MUST UNDERSTAND CHANGE.

As anthropology made its way home in the second half of the last century, from the study of what was left of the pre-literate world to India, the Islamic world, Europe and America, we set about the task of making sense of the differences between the religions of the non-literate and those of the more complex literate societies. We began to think historically, in order understand how things came to be what they are today. Some of us have been particularly interested in the Axial Age, explained to us by Karl Jaspers as the period from 800 to 200 BCE that included the lives of Zoroaster, Confucius, Gautama (the Buddha), and Socrates, when all the significant ideas that today's major world religions are built from were first formulated. It was also the period that saw the beginning of scripture. Ever since the emergence of writing in the late 4th millennium, people who could write were more powerful than people who could not. As writing came to be used for administration in the third millennium, administrators became an elite class, who did not want their status to be diluted by the spread of literacy. It soon became clear that if there is only one god, who is more powerful any anyone or anything else, what He says must have a written form. This idea gained ground in the latter part of the Axial Age and Islam became the monotheistic religion *par excellence* with a text, a scripture, the Qur'an, that was uncreate. After WWII when Churches began to lose membership, and other religions, including Islam, were becoming less and less important in daily life, especially in big cities, some began to worry about possible consequences: we wouldn’t know right from wrong. Society without religion was historically unknown. But by the end of the century it had come back in certain parts of many societies, albeit in somewhat different forms.

4. ANALYSIS

Big History has to do with context. All biological species have to adapt to their environment. Evolution is a dynamic not only of competition but of cooperation. Cooperation depends on three basic types of factor:

a) Human Nature:

We are genetically programmed to colllaborate with others to the extent that is practical. Collaboration generates a shared sense of social order, which develops into cultural explanation of everything they want to know about. Since this culture is generated by a dynamic, it changes—not only as a result of their experience, but also as a result of changes in their social size. This collaborative development of explanations of everything relating to their environment is not different from other species--just we are better at it, having developed language, which

facilitates collective learning. As Ken and Lowell will show in more detail, this is a continuity and elaboration of our prehuman past.

b) Society:

Society is an arena of social interaction, which generates not only a culturally distinctive sense of order that allows its members to understand each other and make sense of their lives, but a sense of identity. These factors change in quality according to the size and density of the arena. They changed singificantly with the adoption of writing (which faciltated differentiation of social status, the growth of empires, and the Axial Age), and in unprecedented ways since we began to adopt digital technologies for remote interaction. Human history has been the history of expanding arenas of social interaction and the associated changes in the quality of human social

life. The smaller the society (as in the Palaeolithic and the early ethnographic literature), the main problem is to understand the environment, the greater the unknown, and the more complex the ideas about the supernatural world. The larger the society (as in the modern globalizing world of digitally facilitated remote interaction), we are more interested in our social than our natural environment, and we have a much higher level of awareness and less need for

supernatural explanations.

c) Culture:

Religious studies before Big History have focused on the comparative study of the cultural content (the stories, which Ken will talk about) of each religion. Religion in this form belonged to a particular stage of human history. But the genetic programming that generated it is still with us. What is it generating now? We are heading for a phase of history when our species (which became fully global only some fifteen thousand years ago) will be a global community, with a rate of collective learning and innovation far ahead of anything we currently know, because what it means to be human changes according to the numbers of people we habitually interact with, the size of our arenas of interaction. The quality of human life will be very different. Our sense of social order will be very different, and the genetic programming that generated what we have known as religion up to now, will produce very different results, results that will deal with how

to think about social unknowns, rather than the unknowns of life and death and our situation in the natural world.

5. The Problem of Unevenness.

But there is a new problem. Every part of the world, every society, is at a different stage on the road to this future global community. We (in the West) became aware of this only since the so-called Age of Discovery. They (outside the West) have become aware of it only since the Colonial Period. More recently the political developments in America (Trump), England (Corbyn) and other parts of Europe, parts of the Arab and south-Asian worlds, and now Turkey (Erdogan), have been generated by unevenness in the social development within modern societies. Those who are behind want to hold on to what they know and they react against the changes introduced by those who are further ahead. In this century we are passing through a crucial phase of history while these unevennesses are gradually evened out.