



Evolutionary Approaches to Religion and the Problem of Transcendent Meaning

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This article analyzes the concept of religion within the framework of evolutionary biology. It critiques a reductionist view that understands religion primarily in terms of function and the grounding of such an interpretation in principles of chance. Common understandings of the role of chance do not derive from biological evidence; a broader understanding of this element is needed. Likewise, limiting religion to its evolutionarily ascertainable benefits overlooks the fact that these benefits only materialize when there is belief in the transcendent purpose that religion provides. Consequently, the article advocates for the recognition of religion as an emergent cultural phenomenon whose essence can never be fully captured through a purely functional, scientific lens.



Religion is increasingly being empirically studied as the result of cultural evolution and analyzed using the methodology of evolutionary biology. Charles Darwin discussed this possibility as early as 1871 in *The Descent of Man*. However, the debate did not truly build momentum until the early twenty-first century, when several publications espousing a critical view of religion gained popularity. This article attempts to identify the critical stance towards religion that is intrinsic to the evolutionary biology approach in order to assess the strengths and insights that have already been gained from this approach. By differentiating the functional aspects of religion and the question of meaning addressed by religions, the article concludes that while evolutionary biology can critique and understand the functions of religion, it fails to address the more profound, existential aspects that transcend the functional level. Therefore, I argue that the philosophy of religion should not respond to evolutionary theory by pinpointing design elements within evolution or perceiving God as a compassionate part of an otherwise blind trajectory of evolutionary development. Instead, it should focus on highlighting how religion creates meaning that transcends mere worldly functionality. The central argument is that belief in the afterlife creates the observable, evolutionarily expressible functional strengths of religions by providing a sense of meaning that transcends them. I conclude that the academic study of religion requires a transdisciplinary approach that combines functional analysis with a hermeneutic perspective, thus recognizing religion as an emergent phenomenon that engages with transcendence.

Chance as an Argument for a World Void of Meaning

In the early nineteenth century, William Paley presented a compelling argument for the existence of God based on the order of nature, as elaborated in his *Natural Theology*, published in 1802: nature appears so complex and well coordinated that one cannot but conclude it has an intelligent designer. This traditional God argument had such a high degree of plausibility and intuitive persuasiveness that Charles Darwin can be viewed as the first thinker to have “made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist” (Dawkins [1986] 1991, 6). For only since Darwin has it been possible to understand nature solely on the basis of internal laws and processes and without recourse to an external architect. Similarly, Jerry Coyne concludes: “Evolution is the greatest killer of belief that has ever happened on this planet because it showed that some of the best evidence for God, which was the design of animals and plants that so wonderfully matched their environment could be the result of this naturalistic, blind materialistic process of natural selection” (Glasgow Skeptics 2012).

With Richard Dawkins, one can regard the theory of evolution as a refutation of classical arguments for belief in God. However, this alone does not yet explain its ideological impact. For this, further interpretative steps must be taken so that the theory of evolution can be used as evidence against a planned

creation. Those who explain the world in evolutionary terms, like molecular geneticist Jacques Monod (1970), may understand human existence as a stroke of luck in a cosmic lottery. Stephen Gould (1989, 318) affirms that “we owe our existence, as large and reasoning mammals, to our lucky stars.”

Dawkins does not stop at using the theory of evolution to weaken the teleological argument for belief in God, either. Instead, he launches an all-out attack: “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference” (Dawkins 1995, 133). Thus, he states his agenda clearly: empirical analysis can demonstrate that both the belief in God as creator and the fundamental notions of meaning and inherent morality within the universe are false.

This agenda is based on the reductionist conviction that human beings, their beliefs, and ultimately the entire universe can be explained in scientific terms. It goes hand in hand with the debate on reductionism, which is conducted around naturalistic interpretations of humans and their mental characteristics (Becker 2009, 21–26). The dismissal of any inherent meaning in the universe, as derived from evolutionary biology, aligns with an argument that denies humans any unique qualities. This perspective reduces cultural achievements to mere tools for gene propagation and, consequently, functionally deconstructs (religious) notions of meaning.

In this regard, the principle of chance inherent in evolution is so ideologically charged that it contradicts the assertion of the meaningfulness of evolutionary development. Even Monod argued that the combination of a biological natural law process (selection as survival of the fittest) with chance (variation or mutation) necessarily excludes intentional action in the sense of consciously intended control. Anyone who believed in the theory of evolution as a meta-framework for the development of nature would thus be compelled to dismiss God from the origin of species.

Significantly, there were considerations quite early on that offered a way out of this fatal conclusion for the monotheistic faith. A prominent thought leader was the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who also saw evolution as a spiritual path, namely, the development of the spirit, which has universal love (and thus ultimately God) as its goal. Teilhard de Chardin (1956, 293) wrote: “The universe fulfilling itself in a synthesis of centres in perfect conformity with the laws of union. God, the Centre of centres. In this final vision culminates Christian dogma. And so exactly, so perfectly does this coincide with the Omega Point that I would never have dared to consider or rationally formulate the hypothesis if, in my consciousness as a believer, I had not found not only its speculative model but also its living reality.”

Teilhard de Chardin thus linked the horizontal way of thinking of the natural sciences, which characterized an inner-worldly development, with the vertical view

of the neo-scholasticism of the time, which focused on an otherworldly meaning in an immutable God. He thus propagated a cooperative model of theology and natural sciences in order to understand reality. His model was, as he himself acknowledges in the preceding quote, a speculative idea imbued with a profound spirituality deeply influenced by Christianity (Del Rossi 2021). Nevertheless, his synthesis met with resistance in the Catholic Church because it positively embraced the idea of development, which was frowned upon at the time.

Teilhard de Chardin's system only works if chance is viewed as not quite as blind as it is by Dawkins, Gould, and Monod. Accordingly, biologist and theologian Ulrich Lüke (2016, 112–16) points out that the empirically described chance is open to interpretation. Chance does indeed play a constructive role in the evolutionary process, allowing a mutation to appear as an element of innovation. From this perspective, mutation should not be considered evidence of a lack of planning or aimlessness. Instead, it can be viewed as a regulatory factor in the process of achieving goals through trial and error.

Lüke illustrates this using the example of the lottery, which is centrally based on chance when the numbers are drawn but nevertheless pursues a clear overarching goal, not least the ability of the lottery company to earn a profit. Therefore, the incorporation of chance does not justify excluding a plan and purpose from the overall process, and it certainly does not, Lüke continues, lead to the inevitable exclusion of a comprehensive planner and goal setter. In order to draw this conclusion, humans would have to overlook the process as a whole and position themselves outside of it, which is fundamentally impossible for them as a part of evolution.

Martin Rhonheimer (2016, 26–33) underlines Lüke's argument by pointing to the results of evolutionary research within *evo devo* (evolutionary developmental biology). This field of research focuses on the question of which regulatory processes are effective in the formation of tissues and organs: it is less chance that is decisive here than the ability to self-organize.

Rhonheimer therefore interprets chance as facilitating the ability of nature's inherent potential to unfold. This development shows a direction and thus a goal: biology presents a picture of nature full of organizational structures, meaningful connections, and creative potential. Hence, Rhonheimer's interpretation is strong and certainly worthy of further discussion. It is merely employed here to illustrate that the reductionist interpretation of the theory of evolution is by no means necessarily based on biological findings.

Indeed, it is possible to come to a religious interpretation: the dynamics described in biology obviously create a realm of possibilities for essential human traits that also prove to be non-naturalizable. These include freedom of will, morality, and creativity (Becker 2018). These characteristics empower individuals to shape the world within the confines of their scope of activity. As a result, the question of what it all means becomes particularly virulent for

them. In this understanding, the theory of evolution no longer appears to be the antithesis of a religious interpretation of the world but an integral part of it: the static world order of Hellenism, a hallmark of the Middle Ages, has now been abandoned in favor of a belief in the power of history and change.

In this line of reasoning, it is no longer necessary to identify an element of design or even a person behind the design when describing evolutionary processes in the natural sciences, as is repeatedly attempted. Such approaches usually fail because they run counter to both the empirical data and the internal logic of evolutionary theory. For instance, theologian Rope Kojonen's effort to ascribe greater explanatory power to the combination of evolutionary approaches with the design paradigm than to evolutionary theory alone (Kojonen 2021) has already been convincingly critiqued on these two grounds (Dilley et al. 2023). One has to state that the order of biology provides no grounds for believing in a purposeful creator.

That is precisely why the question remains: How can one determine that evolution is not a blind process but rather one progressing towards a higher value? After all, the theory of evolution does not imply any form of moral judgment. Consequently, biology does not recognize a linear progression towards a specific, qualitatively superior goal.

It may seem obvious to rank the biological "kingdoms" in a hierarchy where humans are placed above animals, animals are placed above fungi, plants, and bacteria, and all of these are placed above inanimate nature. However, if this suggests a higher qualitative value, it cannot be inferred from biology alone. Biology describes the way in which a particular species has occupied an ecological niche; it also analyzes the sometimes complex processes of niche construction by which some organisms modify their ecological niches to fit them better. The value that can be attributed within this biological view remains at a functional level, namely, how long a species is able to maintain or shape its niche. Similarly, it is challenging to establish qualitative differences in biology because biology is characterized by fluid transitions. This makes it difficult to prove the unique, precious qualities of humans in nature (Priest 2023, 386–89).

It should therefore come as little surprise that human dignity is currently a topic of discussion within the philosophical domain and is—in its classical form—in some cases presented as an outdated concept (Sorgner 2010). If evolutionism frames the concept of humans in strict biological terms alone, then no sense of dignity can be established or sustained. The biological approach, like any natural science, is focused on the functional analysis of processes. As a result, it is unable to fully grasp dignity defined in contrast to function.

Biology has had great success investigating the specific fitness benefits of cooperative behavior and how such behavior can be generated by natural selection. While this research provides insights into the evolution of morality, specific human concepts—especially that of love, which inherently involves a

non-functional aspect—also cannot be fully grasped within a purely biological viewpoint. There seems to remain a gap between a naturalistic interpretation of biology and an understanding of (human) morality, love, and dignity.

Nevertheless, even a strict naturalistic biological description of evolution presents a criterion that can be used for further considerations. The complexity of the nervous system, for example, varies between species; it is also apparent that complexity tends to increase in the evolutionary process (Laland 2017). This does not substantiate Teilhard de Chardin's idea of an overall line of development of the universe, because we have only minimal temporal insight into a tiny part of the history of the universe. Nevertheless, the increase in biological complexity presents a potential starting point for incorporating perspectives on meaning, ethics, and irreducible human dignity. Even if "complexity" does not imply any value from a naturalistic perspective, it can be argued from a philosophical and theological standpoint that dignity increases in line with complexity.

No decisive argument can be drawn from this, especially not one that could claim to better explain the biological data. However, this idea undermines the reductive-biological criticism of religion: if religious beliefs are dismissed on the grounds that the perspective of meaning cannot be derived biologically, then this constitutes a circular argument. This is why Dawkins and other proponents of a biologistic-functional interpretation of religion attempt to demonstrate that faith itself can be assimilated into the evolutionary paradigm, thus implying that it holds no intrinsic value of its own. The purpose of creating meaning can, therefore, be defined in purely functional terms; religions are regarded as nothing more than evolutionary tools that serve the success of human genetic propagation.

The Evolutionary Perspective on Religion

As a well-known proponent of this argument, Daniel Dennett aims to break down religion into its worldly utility in *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Dennett builds on the preliminary work of Pascal Boyer (2001, 33), who describes the reasoning behind this proposition as follows: "What it means is that, at all times and all the time, indefinitely many variants of religious notions were and are created inside individual minds. Not all these variants are equally successful in cultural transmission. What we call a cultural phenomenon is the result of a selection that is taking place all the time and everywhere."

Boyer thus makes it clear that religion (like all cultural phenomena) is subject to the same selection principles as biological characteristics. Accordingly, religion can be analyzed and resolved using the functional explanation of evolutionary biology. Boyer denies that religions offer an answer to the question of meaning. For him, the answer to the question of human religiosity is inherent to the way our cognitive systems work.

He makes this assertion plausible by attempting to trace the starting point of a religious interpretation of the world. Since there is no specific moment when religion first appeared in the world, he assumes a slow process of development. This idea can certainly be substantiated theologically, as the slow development of the monotheistic faith can be traced in the Jewish holy scriptures themselves (Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2023). Religious convictions did not emerge in individual, separable areas but changed the interpretation of the world as a whole. Boyer (2001, 17) is thus looking for a phenomenon that does not address a single “inference system” (by which Boyer means human senses and the processing of sensory data in the brain) but all (or at least most) inference systems.

Apparently, evolution has configured human cognitive systems in a manner that results in situationally appropriate behavior. One consequence of this, Boyer suggests, is that humans tend to assume there is a living agent behind unfathomable actions. This evolutionary trait leads us to instinctively assume the presence of an active agent as a driving force behind any situation or event whose cause is unclear to us. A rustling sound in the forest is initially ascribed to a living creature to ensure that the presence of a prey animal or an enemy is not overlooked. If it turns out that wind caused the sound, then no one is hurt, and no potential source of sustenance is lost. Religion comes about through nothing other than the fact that we transfer this principle of constantly seeking an agent behind any action to the concept of the universe as a whole. This transfer lies in the logic of the process because the universe on a large scale is just as unfathomable to us as the rustling in the forest on a small scale.

Sociobiology does not stop here, because Boyer’s question remains as to why this religious explanatory model has prevailed in culture. What are the fitness-maximizing factors of religion? After all, religions have gone beyond the mere intuition of a transcendent agent to develop complex belief systems, explanatory models, and institutions. This is where Dennett’s work starts, as he compiles existing studies and data to trace the evolution of religious ideas and systems over millennia.

Dennett sees developmental steps in animism, superstition, and ancestral beliefs. All these religious phenomena are characterized by the fact that a mental agent with a certain level of control is attributed to a physical process. Ultimately, humans began to see an agent behind the universe itself; by endowing this agent with omnipotence, they created the concept of a monotheistic God. Each individual step in this process can be linked to specific aspects of utility. For example, ancestral worship, like many early religious rites, would aid in decision-making; ritual hypnosis ceremonies supported the human psyche, thereby facilitating healing processes. Dennett refers to supporting studies for each step. For example, James McClenon (2002) studied the healing power of rituals across various cultures.

Hence, Dennett sees sufficient evidence to attribute evolutionary value to folk religion. The next major step towards organized religion is also understandable from a utilitarian standpoint; for instance, organized religion facilitates identification and trust among its members, which in turn enhances group fitness. Additionally, the concept of being chosen instills a sense of purpose and confidence. He summarizes: “Religion gradually became more ‘artful’ or sophisticated, more elaborate, more of a production. Not necessarily better in any absolute sense, but better able to respond to increasingly complicated demands from populations that were biologically pretty much the same as their distant ancestors but culturally enlarged, both equipped and encumbered” (Dennett 2006, 153).

Dennett’s question concerning the usefulness of religion in contemporary society is now being addressed and pursued in many areas of research. Rüdiger Vaas and Michael Blume use statistics to show that religious people actually do have more children and are thus more effective at perpetuating their lineage than atheists (Vaas and Blume 2009, 65–106; cf. Fieder and Huber 2021, 314–316; Blume 2009). Like Dennett, Vaas and Blume contrast their position with Boyer’s assertion that religious belief has no intrinsic functional value. According to their study, children are more likely to be perceived positively and cherished in religious groupings. This has a direct impact on the individuals involved and gives them access to a better, broader network of support services. Vaas and Blume therefore argue that religions offer a genuine selection advantage and are not merely a by-product of other inference systems, as Boyer claims. The approaches presented here are thus not identical, and sometimes even contradictory, despite a common ideological thrust.

Boyer substantiates his assertion that religions are “parasitic” vis-à-vis other human phenomena by viewing their merits as being independent of them: ideas of morality, for example, exist independently of religion; they can only be readily associated with religious beliefs. The human mind often attributes effects to an agent even when there is no connection to religion. Consequently, Boyer does not believe that the key to religious ideas is that they produce something new; rather, they connect existing human “inference systems.” People would be just as moral, communicative, and socially interactive without religion; religion merely makes use of the associated inference systems. Boyer concludes: “We do not need to assume that there is a special way of functioning that occurs only when processing religious thoughts” (Boyer 2001, 311).

This is Boyer’s attempt to explain why religions have appeared in all cultures, although no clear functional reason or time for their emergence can be given. He could argue against Dennett that some of the phenomena presented are not religious in the narrower sense at all or were developed independently of religious content. Humans still talk to plants today, though rarely in the context of our religious beliefs. We use rituals even without any type of religious reference, and yet they still have a stabilizing, supporting effect. Arguing against

the thesis that there is an express reason for the emergence of religious systems, Boyer (2001, 31–32) states that “most origin scenarios suffer from similar flaws. If religion is reassuring, why does it create much of the anxiety it cures? If it explains the world, why does it do it with such baroque complication? . . . Why is it so closely connected to morality, whereas it cannot really create morality?”

Ultimately, Boyer declares religion obsolete. Modern individuals, one must conclude, no longer require religious interpretation because they see through the underlying mechanisms, recognize the parasitic nature of religion, and can achieve the same effects and functions attributed to religion without having to invent a level of transcendence.

Boyer thus plays to contemporary ideas of secularization and secularism, according to which religion may be practiced as a private matter but has no social value or may even pose a threat if religious rationale is traded for general moral reasoning. Richard Dawkins’s aggressive work *The God Delusion* also falls into this category. Dawkins ([2006] 2016, 346) likewise considers religion to be a by-product, but one that leads to arbitrariness and irrationality: “Christianity, just as much as Islam, teaches children that unquestioned faith is a virtue.” Even if religions have positive individual functions, a negative overall balance must be drawn for the present day.

Vaas and Blume’s approach runs counter to this assertion insofar as their aim is to demonstrate the tangible benefits of religion based on empirical data. They draw on a wide field and long tradition of psychological research focusing on religion as a coping mechanism and other effects of religiosity on individuals, providing deep insights into the value of specific beliefs and different religious traditions.

As meta-analyses show, religion does have a stabilizing and supporting function (Garssen, Visser, and Pool 2021). Vaas and Blume argue that because religion reinforces moral behavior and encourages religious people to live healthier lives overall, they are less likely to take drugs and, as a result, suffer less depression. Religion offers comfort, protection, meaning, and order, all factors that truly do make life easier. All these characteristics of religion are conducive to having a wealth of children and therefore offer a genuine benefit that leads to the spread of religion and thus to its evolutionary success.

The functions and roles mentioned here are all well suited to religions. They are not only empirically validated by Vaas and Blume but also align with the self-conception of religions. After all, what religion does not claim to offer structure, support morality, and stabilize society? A study by Martin Lang et al. (2019) analyzing the social impact of organized religion in fifteen different communities shows that the latter is indeed the case across cultures. For Margaret Boone Rappaport and Christopher J. Corbally (2020, XI), this finding is so clear that they flatly deny that institutions that prove to be socially harmful are religions. Instead, they primarily have a non-religious interest that is geared towards economic gain or political power, for instance.

While this discussion is beyond the scope of this article, it can be said that the problem lies not in uncovering the socio-biological functions of religions. On the contrary, these analyses are helpful for the understanding and self-reflection of religions and societies. Apart from the reductive approaches discussed so far, a wide field of non-reductive research has developed to date. Many studies offer valuable insights without taking a position on how they should be interpreted (Szocik and Van Eyghen 2021). The problem lies instead in reducing religion to its functions. “Much of the empirical data outlined in this book may argue that God exists inside, not outside, the brain, that God did not create brains, but they created him” (Vaas and Blume 2009, 206), Vaas and Blume conclude based on their findings. However, to deduce from the existence of practical advantages that the phenomenon was invented solely because of them does not follow from the data itself.

It is more likely to be the other way around. The reflective criticism of religion must find an explanation for why so many people are religious across generations and cultures, even if there is no such thing as God or nirvana. A simple shrug of the shoulders will not suffice here, particularly from an evolutionary biology perspective, which teaches that only that which proves itself will prevail. Typically, religions demand significant effort and are therefore costly in evolutionary terms. For this reason, anyone who dismisses them as nonsensical, thereby attesting to a world-distorting view, must provide substantial alternative reasons to justify their ability to prevail over the ages.

Interpreting them as “parasitic” would eliminate this problem but would be challenging from an empirical perspective. Here, too, it is not only the data cited by Vaas and Blume that needs to be explained but also the high level of effort this parasitic phenomenon generates and demands. Therefore, the strategy that remains is to ascribe to religion a functional value obtained by creating the illusion of transcendence.

This strategy can be persuasive as a critique of religion only if it simultaneously asserts that such value no longer exists today, meaning the functional benefits have become counterproductive. Indeed, this is precisely what Richard Dawkins argues. The reasons for this shift in the cost-benefit ratio would require a separate explanation. The allusion to the “modern” context is evident and should be either explicitly stated or at least implicitly understood: it revolves around the conviction that contemporary humanity no longer requires religion, having outgrown its need for the consolation it provides. The assertion that religion currently does more harm than good represents a typically modern viewpoint that is nevertheless likely incapable of garnering majority support globally.

Herein lies the circular reasoning that underpins the use of evolutionary biology in critiquing religion: only those who believe they can fully explain the world in functional terms (i.e., have a reductionist worldview) can judge the veracity of beliefs based solely on their functional value. This is precisely the

position of Dawkins when he asserts that only the natural sciences are qualified to assess issues of dogma. He claims the answer to religious questions should be “strictly scientific” (Dawkins [2006] 2016, 83).

Absent a reductionist interpretation, relying on the functional aspects of religion diminishes the cogency of the argument against religious belief *per se*. Corinna Klodt (2021, 226) is correct when she emphasizes that “the evolutionary genesis of a phenomenon and its truth . . . must be methodically distinguished.” The approaches discussed thus far overlook the dimension of religious experience. This is remarkable for a stance that claims empirical evidence as its basis, and—unsurprisingly—it aligns with reductionist reasoning in the philosophy of mind. The self-experience of humans as free agents is also ignored in this context, and Thomas Metzinger (2009, 130) notably discredits any recourse to it as one of the two “silliest arguments.”

This provides the decisive discrepancy: religions derive their self-conception not from tangible, practical benefits in life, but first from religious experience and second from a perspective of meaning that elevates humans above inner-worldly entanglements. When reductionism’s critique of religion confines religion to its worldly utility, thereby absolutizing biological observations, it fails to fully appreciate religion in its self-conception, since religious narratives aim to transcend worldly considerations of utility.

From Functional Analysis to the Question of Meaning

The alternative to a reductionist interpretation of evolution is to identify qualitatively new phenomena in its course. In this sense, Volkhard Krech (2021, 32) characterizes evolution as a process that “generates and increases complexity through differentiation.” From the perspective of biology, the outcomes of evolution seem “random,” given that evolution lacks a predetermined goal (and attributing intentionality to it constitutes a categorical error). However, these outcomes are observably accompanied by the emergence of novel, qualitatively distinct characteristics. Krech describes this process as emergence. Because they are emergent, “none of the evolutionarily differentiated levels can be reduced to another” (Krech 2021, 16).

Krech (2021, 15) sees religion as an area of society that becomes a “distinct sub-area in the differentiation process of social evolution, which depends on certain aspects of its environment, but follows its own standards in the formation of structure and information.” Contrary to the reductionist position, Krech can thus ascribe religion a genuine intrinsic value.

By starting from “different emerging levels of the structure of order,” Krech (2021, 16) describes a more complex reality than previous reductionist systems. He compares religion with language, both of which can be appropriated, but not produced, by humans. “Not only did individuals not invent religion . . . , they—as individuals—cannot even significantly alter or transform it. This would

require social processes,” explains Krech (2021, 17), “which are not simply the sum of many individuals but are based on emergent structures.” Consequently, his approach dismisses the notion of comprehensively understanding and explaining religion solely through functional analysis.

The function Krech ascribes to religions also differs from the previously outlined approaches. He does not see it as primarily providing specific advantages to the individual or society but as the pursuit, determination, and delimitation of the transcendent. This gives rise to a way of handling contingency as a secondary effect, emerging from engagement with transcendence.

Krech thus addresses a flaw in reductionist arguments: the functions of religion only manifest if one believes in the existence of a transcendent sphere. Ergo, I can only benefit from the advantages of a religious worldview if I am convinced of its truth. That is to say, first there is faith, then there is function. It is not the functional benefits that inspire a religious worldview but rather the compelling nature of the religious response to the experience of contingency. Therefore, religion extends beyond mere worldly functionality, finding its essence in how it relates to transcendence.

Krech’s emergent reconstruction of the origins of religion can give more consideration to social dynamics. “Religious semantics and processes of reflection on the one hand, and social and societal structural developments on the other, are mutually influential,” explains Krech (2021, 82). In emergent logic, these processes, like culture as a whole, receive their own unique quality, which cannot be resolved at the level of the individual.

These reflections align with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s approach, wherein the emergence of new qualities is understood as a cosmic narrative of salvation. The emergence of human mental attributes, such as creativity and freedom, is thus viewed as part of a cosmic evolution that transforms inanimate matter into an increasingly divine likeness. The concept of love as an endpoint of history, as proposed by Teilhard de Chardin, is currently a topic of discussion. David Poister (2022, 368) refers to this as a “Christian call to love,” interpreting it as both a part and a realization of evolutionary progress.

In Teilhard de Chardin’s model, cosmic history is perceived as a fusion of “horizontal” progression, documented through evolutionary theory, and the “vertical” emergence of new qualitative attributes. This development is fluid, and the emergence of religion lacks any specific moment of origin. “The evolution of religion has to be embedded in human, or perhaps hominin, cultural evolution,” Hansjörg Hemminger (2020, 23) stresses. Lluís Oviedo (2020, 6) adds: “Religion . . . is not seen as something new, *sui generis*, but more as a continuity with previously existing forms.”

It is therefore impossible to specify precisely when each characteristic is formed and to what degree. Some animals also have an understanding of aspects of freedom, creativity, and even love. “Emergence” therefore only denotes the

presence of new qualities and does not causally explain their origination. The criticism repeatedly voiced in the debate that acknowledging emergence also implies admitting a lack of knowledge is indeed valid (Mutschler 2014, chapter 4).

This should not be surprising, and the lack of precision may even be necessary. As long as concepts of causality are shaped by science, it will be a struggle to fully grasp the emerging characteristics of culture and the (human) mind. The only scientifically relevant finding is the one mentioned in the second point, which states that emergent properties require a certain degree of complexity in their basis. Based on this, complexity is the link between the horizontal and vertical axes.

The precise timing of the emergence of religion cannot be pinpointed for another reason: religion is actually in a reciprocal relationship of influence and condition with culture; it is simply not independent of the cultural context in which it exists. Thus, the emergence of religion was not a single event but is an ongoing, dynamic process. This results in novel, independent qualities that can only be understood in holistic terms (Hemminger 2021, 208).

Religion thus continually emerges and, in the process, acquires an independent status. By distinguishing between the immanent and the transcendent, it addresses a distinct field of its own. It is thus not self-sufficient but self-referential and autonomous (Krech 2021, 41). In this context, Liane Gabora (2018, 38) describes an autopoietic process, which she sees as present in the emergence of culture and life in general. Based on the empirical data, it can be argued that a reductionist interpretation of evolutionary mechanisms falls short not only in the realm of religion but also in the emergence of life itself.

If religion in this sense is described as autopoietic, i.e., as an emergent, self-sustaining system, focus must shift to its own logic. In its discourses and actions, religion refers primarily, though not exclusively, to itself. Attempting to comprehend religion solely through the analysis of other areas of society (such as a stabilizing factor of governance) or its impact on the individual results in an oversimplification and misses its essence. This oversimplification invalidates every explanation that relies solely on functional aspects of religion. It is not possible to interpret religion functionally because to do so would ignore its very essence.

Belief in Transcendence as a “Living Option”

Understanding religion, therefore, hinges on taking its self-conception seriously and analyzing it primarily through its own rationality. At the meta-level, which concerns not a specific religion but the fundamental phenomenon, it is crucial to inquire into the nature of religion as a whole. The sociological determination that Krech follows sees the separation of immanence and transcendence at the forefront of all religious beliefs and systems. Religion, therefore, serves the purpose of providing meaning by anchoring it in a transcendent reality (Bertocci and Rohlf 2021).

At the level of experience, the initial question arises as to the nature of experiences that can evoke and lend plausibility to a religious interpretation of meaning. To this end, Martin Dürnberger (2017, 60–66) presents considerations that shed light on the fundamental grammar of religious experiences. Dürnberger contrasts two types of experiences that interact to elicit a religious response. On the one hand, there is the “recurrence of a *malum* [evil] . . . , which is categorically not meant to be and which absolutely affects us in its not-being-meant-to-be” (Dürnberger 2017, 60). The *malum* may manifest in the form of guilt and suffering, both of which are characterized by an uncontrollability (*Unverfügbarkeit*) and inability to be entirely transformed for the better. On the other hand, Dürnberger sees the experience of a *bonum* (good) that cannot be diminished or rendered negative.

When both *malum* and *bonum* are experienced in this profound way, they defy operationalization and transcend existing modes of action and thought. Dürnberger (2017, 65) explains that the “mutually inextricable and simultaneous nature of both experiences that cannot be resolved by reason . . . sparks [the question] of what life and the world as a whole are and can be about, in which both are present and both are threateningly possible: irreparable evil and irrevocable good.”

Dürnberger points out that the essence of experiences leading to meaningful responses resides in what humans categorize as “good” and “bad.” These experiences of good and bad do not inherently make people religious, as they are a characteristic of every human life. But they force us to interpret them in a meaningful way.

The process of interpreting meaning is shaped by both the concrete individual experiences and the interpretative framework offered within the social context. An intense and intractable experience, such as a serious accident, can evoke religious beliefs even in someone with an atheistic background, just as a person raised in a religious environment might adopt religious responses without undergoing such an intense experience. However, no interpretation emerges entirely out of the blue, as at the very least, a certain capacity for language must be present. Thus, tradition(s), community, and institutions are essential for the formation of beliefs. They offer the plausibility structure within which the individual can embrace and cultivate personal beliefs. In a religious context, this justifies the significance of community, church (or other religious institutions), liturgy, sacraments, rites, and prayer practices.

If every person must necessarily interpret their current experiences in a meaningful way (Routledge 2018), it can be said that everyone has a relationship to transcendence. However, this does not necessarily entail the “ultimate” form of religious transcendence; it can manifest in “weaker” forms. The difference likely lies in the extent to which the two types of experiences identified by Dürnberger are recognized as uncontrollable.

The concept of transcendence can be examined from a sociological perspective, as illustrated by Thomas Luckmann's distinction between various forms of transcendence (Knoblauch 2009, 56–69). Luckmann contends that transcendence is not inherently associated with a deity or a future existence beyond the confines of space and time. Luckmann approaches transcendence from the perspective of human experience, thus differentiating between great transcendence, which refers to an overarching experience that goes beyond the ordinary; intermediate transcendence, which includes experiences with other people; and small transcendence, in which the individual encounters the boundaries of space and time. In light of Luckmann's distinction, even the body culture that pervades modern society, from tattoos to asceticism and wellness culture can be considered to relate to transcendence, albeit in the “small” sense. Here, “the individual himself becomes the central subject of religious expression” explains Robert Gugutzer (2012, 288).

Thus, the transformation of modern society has not brought about a decrease in religiosity but rather a shift from great transcendence to small transcendence. The search for meaning evoked by the experience of good and bad no longer necessarily results in a longing for God (or another ultimate being). Hubert Knoblauch therefore extends the concept of religiosity and integrates not only body culture but also football, Zen meditation, and horoscopes. He thus marks a transformation of religion that—according to the theory of secularization and individualization—is grounded in personal experience.

The sociological findings shed light on the interweaving of long-term cultural dynamics with specific individual experiences as well as the role of the social environment and (religious) institutions. This reinforces the approach of emergence, which views religion as a phenomenon intricately intertwined with cultural evolution. It suggests that religion did not emerge just once in history, only to then evolve and adapt based on purely functional criteria. Instead, it posits that religion is in a perpetual state of flux, influenced by both cultural shifts and individual experiences. Religious belief thus represents an individual's culturally influenced response to a specific kind of experience. According to the working definition of religion employed in this context, those who exhibit religious responses are aligning themselves with a transcendent horizon in a “great” sense. This alignment invariably alters their personal belief system, worldview, and concrete actions. Ultimately, the scale of the meaning's horizon—whether narrow or broad—significantly influences how one perceives their experiences and actions.

This begs the crucial question: What transformations occur in a person's life and outlook when they are religious, when they believe in an entity that exists beyond, above, within, and around the world, transcending both space and time? The individual is therefore faced with the fundamental question of an afterlife and a perspective of meaning that transcends current events and an individual's personal life plan.

If proponents of the reductive approaches discussed in the second step argue that belief in the afterlife is no longer beneficial, they are likely operating within a horizon of experience that is commonly found in contemporary societies. These religious skeptics may still experience the good and bad in life, but they will not experience these events with the same intense, unavailable quality that Martin Dürnberger described as being the foundation of religious answers. Now, both are controllable by them. They believe they can independently create positive outcomes and avoid negative ones. This belief underpins the globally prevalent optimism towards progress, which proposes that humanity's minor and major challenges can be resolved by developing innovative technology (Becker and Wormstädt 2023, 11–15). It is founded on the triumph of the natural sciences and the technologies they have produced over several centuries.

The outcome is a worldview that highly values and adopts the lens of scientific-functional analysis to interpret the world. Consequently, reductionism represents the peak of a modern, widespread belief that humanity can gain control over the world. The message of the afterlife stands in stark contrast to this view, as it does not align with such a functional orientation. Belief in the beyond challenges every form of inner-worldly one-sidedness, performance-driven mentality, and insatiable greed. It brings into perspective the relative significance of humanity and its worldly role, subordinating them to a higher value. The message of the afterlife in Christianity (like in all other religions) implies that a person's essence extends beyond their worldly accomplishments. Individuals do not have to be able to do and create everything, nor must they experience everything within their own lifetimes, as this world does not hold the ultimate authority. The afterlife expands humankind's vision, overcoming the inherent limitations of the functionally oriented, inner-worldly perspective.

Therefore, the religious-philosophical answer to reductive explanations of religion is the reference to its relationship with transcendence: all functions of religion that can be described through the lens of evolutionary analysis are based on the belief in a reality that transcends this-worldly entanglements and thus precisely this functionality. Any reductive interpretation of religion, which relies only on functionality, fails to capture its essence and therefore cannot be used as a compelling argument for or against faith. On the other hand, theological approaches, which ignore evolutionary insights, are similarly ignorant. Knowledge of the functionality of faith is important for understanding the development and value of culture and any religious concept. I thus propose the concept of emergence as a model for transdisciplinary research that is able to do justice to both the empirical data and those aspects of culture and religion that extend beyond.

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