Just How Special Are Humans?

with Eric Priest, Celia Deane-Drummond, Joseph Henrich, and Mary Meyers, "Introduction to Symposium on 'Just How Special Are Humans?'"; Eric Priest, "Human Uniqueness: Debates in Science and Theology"; Joseph Henrich, "How Culture Made Us Uniquely Human"; Agustín Fuentes, "Distinctively Human? Meaning-Making and World Shaping as Core Processes of the Human Niche"; Cristine Legare, "The Cumulative Quality of Culture Explains Human Uniqueness"; David Reich, "Human Uniqueness from a Biological Point of View"; Alan Mittleman, "'The Mystery of Human Uniqueness': Common Sense, Science, and Judaism"; Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Experiencing the World as the Evolved Image of God: Religion in the Context of Science"; Jennifer A. Herdt, "Responsible Agency: A Human Distinctive?"; Celia Deane-Drummond, "Tracing Distinctive Human Moral Emotions? The Contribution of a Theology of Gratitude"; and John Behr, "Nature Makes an Ascent from the Lower to the Higher: Gregory of Nyssa on Human Distinctiveness."

EXPERIENCING THE WORLD AS THE EVOLVED IMAGE OF GOD: RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF SCIENCE

by Jan-Olav Henriksen

Abstract. Religion must be seen as the result of the learning processes of humanity, as they manifest themselves in human interaction with and experience of reality. Such interaction depends on knowledge that provides the basis for practices of orientation and transformation. Religion as part of human culture provides resources for identifying lasting significance of experience in light of what appears to be ultimate conditions for a good and flourishing life. Thus, it is also possible to understand human distinctiveness as manifest in the dynamic practices in which humans participate, and of which religious practices are part. Therefore, it is not specific attributes that make humans distinct from other species but how they engage these in relation to the various experiential dimensions and ascribe significance to some of these in light of what they understand as ultimate sources of orientation and transformation.

Keywords: culture; love; orientation; practices; religion; transformation

INTRODUCTION

Religion is part of the learning processes of humanity (Habermas 2008, 2019). By making this claim, philosopher Jürgen Habermas makes a claim

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that is both principled and possible to consider from the point of view of empirical science. If he is right, and the point of this article is to suggest that he is, it means that we need to see human evolution as manifesting conditions for what we today call religion. It may also imply that religion cannot be seen as a separate sphere that is distinct from other realms of human reality but is linked to, building on, presupposing and developing elements in the quotidian elements that make up human life (Henriksen 2019).

But how can we understand religion as part of what makes humans distinct from other species? This article will argue that human distinctiveness can be determined through two different but sometimes interrelated features: first, humans can engage the world in various ways that determine the character of experience: humans experience the natural, socio-cultural, inner (psychological), and mystical dimensions of the world. To thematize these experiences, reflect on them and examine them, humans are dependent on language and the semiotic skills on which it depends—in short: on culture. Second, what contributes further to this engagement with the world is that humans can engage the world and interpret these experiences with reference to what they consider *ultimate*, and which points to something beyond the immediate experience of the empirical world of which they are part. Engagement with the world under these conditions is probably specific to humans, and accordingly, the determination of human distinctiveness is connected to the human capacity for religious engagement with the various dimensions of experience mentioned.

This article takes its point of departure in a specific and very generic understanding of religion (Henriksen 2017, 2020). On this basis, it shows that there are elements described by the natural sciences that make it possible to understand the conditions for religious practices and these practices themselves. Against that backdrop, it is possible to reflect on to what extent the religious engagement with and response to reality can also entail theological concerns, that is, concerns that go beyond the mere description of religious practices and their conditions and infer something about how we need to understand religious practices from a normative vantage point. This approach can help us say something distinctively *theological* about human beings and their relationship with and response to reality as they experience it. Thus, it may be helpful for understanding the role of religion in humanity's past, but also of relevance for the understanding of religion's role concerning the future of humanity and other living beings on this planet. In doing so, it builds on and presupposes the work of Wentzel van Huyssteen (2006) and Robert Bellah (2011). Both developed important insights into the role of evolution in understanding the relationship between religion and human uniqueness and made connections that should be acknowledged as significant contributions to the interdisciplinary discourse on the subject.

On Religion as Practices—An Etic Perspective

Theology is the systematic, responsible, critical, constructive reflection on the contents of religion. This point entails that there cannot be any theology without the existence of religion. Accordingly, we need to have some fundamental understanding of religion before we see what it may mean to speak about the distinctive character of humanity from an emic, theological point of view. Making the distinction between religion and theology does not mean they are totally separated. The point is that theology does not come first but is dependent upon already existing practices and experiences connected to what we call religion.

Without going into the almost endless debate about the question about what religion is (for recent contributions, see J. Smith (1998), C. Smith (2017), Tweed (2008), Riesebrodt (2012), Nongbri (2013)), I will suggest the following that should be possible to accept from various theoretical points of view: Religions represent a set of human practices by which we respond to and interact with reality—as we see and understand it, and these practices presuppose some relation to what humans consider as ultimate; that is, points of orientation and values that contribute significance and coherence to their various experiences.

This approach represents a pragmatic understanding of religion that interprets religion from the point of view of how it expresses itself in human activities guided by specific concerns. It follows from this understanding that religion is a cluster of practices that serve different aims. The contents of these practices are different, though: Some of them are based on learning processes that have resulted in what we may call wisdom, that is, knowledge about how to live and live well (Zackariasson, 2002), others about how to manifest community in various rituals (Durkheim 1975). Moreover, some practices and rituals may enhance emotional and embodied responses that enable participants to experience other modes of being in the world than those they usually have in ordinary life experience.

Accordingly, experiences and practices play together in the development of what we call religion—and both these features are central to culturally constituted learning processes. Some of these experiences are constitutive of religious practices, and others are consecutive in relation to them insofar as they emerge on the basis of previous experiences, and in relation to specific practices or rituals. Moreover, other experiences seem to consolidate or confirm the wisdom established by others. Some religious practices mediate or transmit past experiences considered to be significant for the community or the individual. Moreover, some experiences on which religious traditions build may not be of the kind to which everybody has access: shamanistic traditions exemplify that religious traditions may have special figures with access to what is not ordinary experience, and consequently, these figures are ascribed specific powers or authority (or both).

If we understand religions along these lines, they result from learning processes that are developed in response to various experiences and challenges that humanity has faced over a long period. The contents of these processes are manifested and "stored" in different practices. We can make an analytical distinction between the three types of such practices in religion: These practices provide resources that orient, transform, and legitimize human life and agency (cf. Henriksen 2017; Tweed 2008). They do this by providing and mediating symbolic resources for a specific community. These three dimensions (orientation, transformation, legitimation) must be understood as closely connected and can only be analytically distinguished from each other. Against this backdrop, religious practices can be understood as follows.

Humans constantly need *orientation* due to the dynamic features and conditions on which their lives depend. The experience of something unfamiliar, the need to cope with specific challenges, and making decisions all require orientation. Humans also need to orient themselves by simply finding out in what type of context they find themselves. Furthermore, orientation contributes to discernment and to making people aware of what is more worthy of attention than something else, and so on, and thus, a normative and evaluation dimension is also implied in orientation. It creates the background against which something appears more significant than other things.

The role of religion can be understood against this backdrop: Religion provides important, symbolically mediated resources for orientation by mediating knowledge and values. Thus, religion becomes part of the human culture as this culture expresses itself in interaction with the social as well as the biological elements shaping human life. It mediates insights about what matters, and what matters may have consequences for practice, for what people do (Dalferth 2003; Kaufmann 1993; Stegmaier 2008)

As an orientational practice, religion is mediated through different types of storytelling, symbols, rituals, and cooperation, but also through different reflective practices. Thereby, religion may give significance to the everyday in ways that transcend it without leaving it behind. An important element in that context is that religion refers to some kind of ultimacy beyond the experiential realm. To practice religion is, therefore, to engage in the processes of interpreting experience by using religious symbols and acting according to the significance that religious signs and symbols provide with reference to the ultimate.

Moreover, the approach suggested here integrates different features of religion into the broader system of orientation humans employ to convert the world's chaos into order. It implies that religions contribute to resources of orientation that make humans feel more at home in the world and find their place in it, and thus religions contribute to the interpretation of human experiences. Religions, then, may shape a

horizon of significance from where one engages in the world in meaningful ways—what sociologists call *mindscapes* (Zarubavel 1999).

The orientational element in religions also means that resources mediated by such practices contribute to how people experience belonging and identity. Hence, such practices may enhance the experiences of belonging, as well as underscore the role community's role for the individuals who participate in it. The learning processes that orientation presuppose and entail cannot be understood apart from this participation—a point that is also emphasized in how evolutionary biology's understanding of communal learning (see below).

From a pragmatic angle, religions do not only prescribe how to act but also offer different resources to the individual and the community for both social and personal *transformation*. That requires the capacity to imagine that which is not (see Fuentes, this issue). In a contemporary context, this point is most obvious in how many religions focus on conversion and salvation—a transformation from one state to another. But in a wider perspective, transformative elements are present in rituals about entering a different status or place in society (liminal situations, van Gennep 1908; Turner 1967), entering trance, or overcoming various types of that which William James called *wrongness* (James 1908). Also here, the relationship with the ultimate comes to expression, as James expresses when he writes that "we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers" (James 1908, 508).

The transformative element enhances religious engagement and motivates attempts to change the present situation through different practices that are only meaningful if humans can communicate and express themselves in language. It also expresses itself in the development of a given tradition and its practices. Furthermore, identifying the transformative dimension suggests that it is hardly appropriate to describe religions simply as worldviews. It is so because there is more implied here than simply how one understands the world. The transformative element has both social and personal relevance, but the transformative dimension can also be identified in struggles to achieve more insight into personal life and capabilities. In a religious tradition, such insight is conveyed by communicating wisdom or employing different techniques related to yoga, healing, and meditation.

Moreover, we can identify a focus on *social* transformation in the altering of ritual and other religious practices, concerns for change based on ethical teachings, and religiously motivated struggles for justice and against oppression. In any case, the transformative dimension of religion is also primarily to be understood as a practical matter. Religious symbols and practices are thus intertwined with other social transformation practices.

The above suggests that the features of *doctrine* and *belief* may be understood as connected to the reflective practices that aim at legitimizing,

justifying, and explaining specific types of religious practices of orientation and transformation. "Doctrine" must be understood broadly as the type of reflection or construction of knowledge necessary to uphold the meaning of the other practices (of orientation and transformation). Sometimes it is necessary to do so over against, or in relation to, alternative practices aiming at similar goals. Such reflective practices may also entail criticism of existing practices and thereby contribute to their transformation. Reflection on doctrine, therefore, is related to practices of orientation and transformation. Put more strongly: the development of doctrine and religious reasoning is *constituted* by their relation to practices of orientation and transformation. It follows that Doctrines cannot be considered independent from practices or as the constitutive element in religions, as is often suggested by specific types of theological reasoning.

One cannot avoid using doctrine understood in the above sense to legitimize the use of religious resources for orientation and transformation. To do so is nevertheless not the same as making the legitimation aspect of doctrine the main component of religion. Reflective practices that develop legitimation aim at justifying and regulating practices—a point that also makes it understandable how a rigid understanding of religious orthodoxy occasionally has been perceived as related to power and discipline—a point we shall see later on as mirrored in the human need to make cultural knowledge and symbols stable. From a historical point of view, the focus on doctrine and "correct faith" came into focus increasingly as religious alternatives presented themselves and contributed to the dissolution of a Durkheimian society where the community based itself on shared religious practices—and is, to a large extent, a relatively late phenomenon in the history of humankind.

Kevin Schilbrack summarizes the above points in a succinct way in the following quote:

> Granted, one might participate in a practice and not know why it works. In fact, one might participate in a practice and not even wonder why it works. Practitioners typically develop an explicit justification only when a practice fails or is challenged. Justifying one's practices is then a second-order form of discourse and reflection. But […] people have beliefs insofar as they take something as true, and they take something as true as soon as they act in any purposive way. Therefore, even in cases in which a religious community has not developed an explicit ontological account that justifies its practices, identifying practices by their ontology is still appropriate. This is so because agents have a pre-reflective understanding of the world in which they operate. It is precisely this pre-reflective engagement with the world that one seeks to make reflective when one's practices fail or are challenged. We might be able to find a religion that had not developed an explicit ontological justification for a given practice, but we will not find one that does not have even a pre-reflective understanding of the world, an understanding of the world that makes that practice intelligible. For this reason; we can define religion as normative practices that at least implicitly make ontological

claims in terms of which the practical norms are authorized. (Schilbrack 2014, 128–29)

We can deepen the above understanding of religion as practices by looking further into a more sociological analysis of religion that corresponds to the one suggested above. It might also help us better understand what role reflective practices play in religion and in what ways they are necessary—thus also paving the way for a better understanding of the role of theology, more specifically.

It is when situations occur in which one is challenged to thematize one's practices or notions about the world that religious reflection becomes central. However, we do not have much evidence from before our era of how this type of practice was developed into what we may call theology—the systematic and methodical discussion of various religious options or opinions.

Sociologist Christian Smith sees religions as consisting in part of "a complex of culturally prescribed practices." According to him, then, such practices "are culturally meaningful behaviors that are intentionally repeated over time" (Smith 2017, 25). These elements – meaning, behavior, intentionality, and repetition—constitute what can count as genuine practice. It is important to note that he, accordingly, sees religion as not being expressed or manifest in *one* specific practice but consisting of several practices. He writes,

> Religions are formed from networks of practices grouped together into complexes. A single practice does not make a religion. One does not simply burn some incense or read the passage of a text and thereby have a religion. Religions are composed of conglomerations of interrelated practices, sometimes so many that it takes a lifetime to learn to perform them well. Each of the practices has its own meaning, and each usually adds extra meaning to the others in the larger complex of practices to which they belong. (Smith 2017, 26)

The complexity issue should not be underestimated: combining individual and self-explanatory practices can enrich each other's meaning, for example, in religious worship: "The combined meaning is more than the sum of its parts. Complexes of religious practices, which are part of even the simplest of religions, thus generate synergies and experiences that individual practices alone do not" (Smith 2019, 26). Thus, these practices contribute to the development and maintenance of human culture.

Practices cannot exist without cultural patterns and traditions shared by communities. They "are never random, idiosyncratic, or arbitrary. If they were, then they could not be meaningful." Moreover, they are mostly *social activities,* dependent upon "communities of memory engaged in carrying on particular traditions" (Smith 2019, 26–27). Traditions are of significance because they legitimize the practices and provide a point

of reference in the past that gives authority to the present. However, this communal dimension does not exclude the possibility of individuals developing their own religious practices, but there are based on and stand in some continuation with those of the community.

Practices depend on beliefs in order to be culturally meaningful. However, Smith underscores how "meaning is more than beliefs, but it always depends upon some beliefs." Accordingly, "to initiate some religious practice, some people at some time must hold some beliefs." Such beliefs are also related to the purpose of the practices. However, religious practitioners may not "authentically believe in the premises and cultural meanings behind the practices they perform." It is sufficient "that the practice itself is institutionalized in a complex of repeated actions that are culturally meaningful in religious terms, that is, oriented toward gaining access to superhuman powers." Hence, Smith can maintain that for religious practices to be meaningful, it is not required that they are constituted by the "cognitive assent of the people engaged in them at any given time but from a variety of institutional sources, including historical traditions, sacred texts, and explanations by religious specialists. Practices cannot be reduced to the beliefs of the people who enact them" (Smith 2019, 32, cf. 41).

Similar to my own suggestions above, Smith's approach to religion as clusters of practices allows him to avoid the idea that beliefs come first and practices follow. Beliefs are not more fundamental than practices (Smith 2019, 44). Instead, one has to recognize the mutual influence that practices and beliefs have on each other. In his view, although religion also requires cognitive activity, it is "embodied practices oriented toward superhuman powers [that] define the core of religion" (Smith 2019, 45). The dynamic character of religions is linked to how the practices rooted in traditions and culture interact and are changing over time and due to context:

> Clusters of religious practices are always diverse, converging, and diverging. The boundaries of religious traditions are porous, the premises and practices themselves often contain glitches and unanswerable questions, and the human cultures prescribing and persons performing the practices are by nature creative. A realistic concept of religious traditions, therefore, must grasp that their temporal continuities are relative, so religious cultures and institutions are always located somewhere in the middle range of a spectrum between the extremes of absolute flux and permanent changelessness. (Smith 2019, 48)

This quote underscores how new experiences engage humans in learning processes that develop religious practices further. Therefore, understanding religions and religious practices as static entities is misleading.

A final note on religion from a philosophical point of view must be added before we look into how other sciences may shed further light on the understanding of religion developed here. That concerns the above-

suggested element of religion as relating to the ultimate. How are we to understand the role of ultimacy in religion?

Robert C. Neville defines religion as "the human engagement of ultimacy." Such engagement "requires harmonizing semiotic cultural systems, aesthetic achievements, social institutions with their own dynamics, and psychological structures, along with intentional relations with what is ultimate. All these things can be present, but not harmonized so that something ultimate is engaged" (Neville 2018, 31). Two main elements in this definition are worth a comment. First, religion as engagement with *ultimacy* is understood in such a way that this ultimate reality is qualified as existing independently of humans and their agency. Religions provide humans with a relationship to significance and meaning in a way that suggests that there is no going beyond these factors (which is why they are ultimate). Thus, ultimate elements provide human life and practices with a meaning beyond individual life and its contingencies. They are not easily exchangeable because if they were, they would not be considered worth engaging as ultimates. Second, the relationship with the ultimate orients and directs agency in the lifeworld of the religiously practicing person and the community.

Furthermore, Neville can speak about how the human engagement of ultimacy is "expressed in cognitive articulations, existential responses to ultimacy that give ultimate definition to the individual, and patterns of life and ritual in the face of ultimacy" (Neville 2018, 19). Thereby, he qualifies further how practices of orientation and transformation—which are at the basis of all human learning practices and engagements with reality— take on a religious character insofar as some relationship with the ultimate comes into play in such practices. Since humans live under different conditions and with different cultural patterns and social institutions, the ways in which engagement of ultimacy happens will vary.

What is it then, that allows something to be considered religious or have religious significance? Neville holds that various semiotic components "are religious insofar as they help articulate how the world achieves an actual identity that has the value of actualizing the possibilities it does" (Neville 2018, 33). Thus, it becomes possible to appreciate what good the world holds and the origin of this goodness for which experiences of the world offer the possibility. This origin or source of goodness is worshipped in religious practices (Neville 2018). Accordingly, we can assess the quality of religious engagement with reality on the basis of what it helps us achieve. The quality is dependent on "how well it orients all the important domains of life with regard to the ways its sacred canopy facilitates engagement with ultimate realities" (Neville 2018, 49–50).

Evolved Conditions for Religion against the Backdrop of the Above

What does the above understanding of religion entail for the understanding of the distinctiveness of humanity? Agustín Fuentes has pointed to how "humans are among the most significant forces affecting ecosystems and all other life on this planet" and that the "extensive and distinctive capacities for meaning-making and world-shaping (or better put, niche construction)" are among the significant capacities on the basis of which we have transformed and continue to transform the planet (Fuentes 2023).

Niche construction, which plays a significant role in Fuentes' understanding of what it means to be human, cannot be understood apart from the need for orientation and transformation. However, I argue that the ability to orient oneself and imagine possibilities for transformation for the purpose of niche construction may be significantly enhanced when humans relate to the ultimate, as the ultimate provides perspectives and understandings that go well beyond immediate needs and concerns.

The fundamental features of orientation and transformation, which have been suggested as crucial to religious practices, are closely linked to the evolved human "human capacity to move between the reality of 'what is' and the possibilities of 'what could be,' socially, psychologically and technologically" (Fuentes 2023). Thus, the transformative powers, which presently are not only positive, given climate change and the Anthropocene condition of the planet, signify a distinctive evolutionary context for the genus *Homo* (humans), argues Fuentes. Hence, "The human capacity to imagine, to be creative, to hope and dream, to infuse the world with meaning(s), and to cast our aspiration far and wide, limited neither by personal experience nor material reality, has enabled our lineage to develop a distinctively human niche that has proven remarkably successful, in an evolutionary sense" (Fuentes 2023). Thus, the transformative powers and our ability to orient ourselves from real and imagined contexts should not be underestimated. Moreover, they can be seen as closely connected to religious imagery and conceptions about the ultimate.

Although Fuentes considers our ability to imagine other realities and infuse the world with meanings as part of an argument for human distinctiveness, this does not imply that we are separate from the world or its processes. Although we, as *hominins*, belong to a distinctive hominoid lineage of which we are the sole remaining representative, we are not separate from the rest of life: "Humans are deeply and substantially linked to all other life" (Fuentes, this issue).

This point notwithstanding, we cannot ignore the fact that due to their capacities for consideration of "what could be," humans have also been able to develop practices that set them apart from the rest of nature or which have contributed to our oblivion with regard to how deeply

connected we are with it. Overemphasis on the ultimate not present in immediate experience, or the establishment of representations that focuses on what can be without any connection to the present, might have caused religions to be complicit in or contribute to such oblivion. Our imagination of what could be may lose connection to the physical and social world in which we find ourselves and the problems we need to deal with there—especially with regard to the human relationship with the rest of nature. We see traces of this in the present when religious groups spiritualize climate change in ways that prevent them from engaging adequately with the reality in which it takes place (cf. Veldman 2019).

Fuentes argues that there is always more to human experience than the mere material dimension. This chimes with the initial claim made earlier that religion engages various dimensions of reality: not only the physical or material, but also the socio-cultural, the psychological, and the spiritual or mystical. All these realms contribute to human meaning-making and are dependent on practices of such meaning-making as well. When Fuentes argues that "Perceptions, ideologies, linguistic articulations, semiotic landscapes all matter in any serious understanding of what makes us human" (2023), he is therefore also arguing for a non-reductive approach to the understanding of humanity that allows for the role of other dimensions in the evolution of humanity – and religion is related to, and plays a role, in all these dimensions. Moreover, it is impossible to understand the distinctive character of the human niche (or niches) if we ignore these different realms of experience and their role in human meaning-making. Meaning-making is nevertheless not something that should be understood as arbitrary but is always linked to how humans have understood, engaged with, and responded to the possibilities they have perceived in the various life conditions in which they have found themselves.

The previous section of this article emphasized the communal character of religious practices. Such practices presuppose that the human niche is both spatial and social, and accordingly, includes the ability to establish and modify perceptual and conceptual contexts. According to Fuentes, "the structural and social relationships are perceived and expressed via behavioral, symbolic and material aspects of the human experience" (Fuentes 2023). He goes on, writing:

> These human niches are the context for the lived experience of humans and their communities, where they share "kinship" and social and ecological histories, and where they create and participate in shared knowledge, social and structural security, and development across the lifespan. It is demonstrably a hyper-complex socio-cognitive, cultural niche with distinctive assemblages of features and characteristics relative to other animals' niches. (Fuentes 2023)

Religious practices seem to have been part of the construction of this complex niche from early on in human history (Fuentes 2019, 2023). However, this would not have been the case unless specific experiences opened up practices that made religious belief and reasoning possible. Myths and other narratives contribute to the development of such reasoning. On the other hand, such modes of reasoning presuppose the ability to conceptualize, reflect, and communicate. Against this backdrop, human distinctiveness can be defined in a way that places religion in the area of what makes humans different from other animals. Fuentes claims that "while it is clear that many other animals have complex societies, and cultures, … it is critical to place human societies, and *human culture*, in an appropriate context" (Fuentes 2023). Accordingly, the socio-cultural realm of experience may be crucial to understand human distinctiveness, although we also need to add that this realm also contributes the means for getting access to and shaping our engagement with the "inner, psychological" realm as well as understanding what we can call mystical or spiritual experiences. Hence, to define culture as socially transmitted information between individuals or groups in ways that contribute to transformation in behavior and/or patterns of tradition is insufficient when it comes to encompassing many critical processes and structures of *human culture*.

> The patterns and processes that characterize human behavior and society include many components that are measurably different in scale, impact, structure, and causality from those in most other species' use of social traditions and in what we can call their *culture*. For humans, our lived experiences include massive extra-somatic material creation, manipulation and use (tools, weapons, clothes, buildings, towns, etc.) and extensive ratcheting of processes and productions, both technological and cognitive/social. (Fuentes 2023)

In addition to what Fuentes mentions here, the actual construction of religious sites, buildings, and other material manifestations of the religious realm contribute to the experience of the sacred and point beyond the present immediate reality and toward instances of ultimacy. Thus, religion is never something merely in the mind of believers but is manifest in material forms that reinforce both the belief and the experiences of the sacred, as well as becoming integrated into and making possible specific practices of orientation. Religious sites provide powerful means for communal orientation and are part of a community's meaning-making.

Furthermore, reflective practices made possible by language provide the means for expanding and strengthening cultural processes, including those based on accumulation, innovation, and creation of ideologies, histories, and beliefs. Thus, a feedback process in which beliefs strengthen the capacities for imagination and release the ability to detect new possibilities is manifest. This process, in turn, leads to new practices that enhance,

strengthen, and alter belief. Thus, the feedback processes are part of the generic transmission of knowledge. However, specific worldviews (ideologies), narratives, and beliefs are also, in a more specified sense, essential to religion and are crucial in the practices that refer the individual and the community to what they may consider ultimate. Thus, teaching, which is important in human culture generally for disseminating knowledge (Fuentes 2019; Henrich 2015; Laland 2017; Stout and Hecht 2017; Tomasello 2014), takes on a special role in religion. It is also part of human distinctiveness insofar as such teachings refers to and engage what humans consider ultimate.

Fuentes has emphasized the role of belief for niche construction in several of his recent writings. However, his notion of belief is generic and encompasses more than religious beliefs (beliefs with reference to the ultimate). For him, "To believe is to develop mental representations to see and feel and know something that is not immediately present to the senses, and then to invest, wholly and authentically, in that something so that it becomes one's reality" (Fuentes 2019). By believing, something becomes real for human experience. He argues that "[t]he human capacity for belief is possible, sharable and demonstrable via the human processes of meaning-making" (Fuentes 2019). Moreover, when humans start communicating about their world, they relate to it in terms of that which cannot be seen, as well, insofar as attempts to explain what happens entail imagining the unseen. Fuentes claims that such a belief in the unseen "forms the basis of our ability to develop a *distinctive* human culture, which in turn creates augments and diversifies our dynamic and complex niche construction processes" (Fuentes 2019). Thus, his analysis points in the direction of religion as involved in specific human practices.

Culture and sociality are not specific to humans. Other species also demonstrate high levels of cooperation and can develop cultures and tools for specific purposes. Thus, if we are to determine what is distinctive about humans, we need to specify further in what ways human culture must be understood based on the capacity to develop beliefs and imaginations that are socially transmitted. These can be mediated over generations via symbols and language that require social learning practices that emerge from and is dependent upon cooperation and which are transferred in narratives, symbols, and the development of sites and material objects with a designated meaning. The more humans become engaged in the processes for orientation and transformation enabled by symbols and culture, the more their experiential world expands. As the learning processes in human evolution go on, the need for shared practices of orientation increases: "The cultural products we depend on, the tools, technologies and know-how, aren't primarily the products of individual brain power [...]. We are a cultural species. Not merely a species who is capable of social learning (a species with culture), but a creature that over hundreds of thousands or

even millions of years of culture-gene coevolution, has become addicted to acquiring large bodies of accumulated knowledge, practices, heuristics, skills, emotions and motivations for our survival" (Henrich 2023).

Joseph Henrich, therefore, suggests that human culture and its features are crucial for understanding human distinctiveness. He argues that "The key to understanding the origins of human uniqueness is to avoid focusing on specific attributes, like language, tools, cooperation or rationality; but, instead to examine the underlying cultural and genetic evolutionary processes that produced these attributes" (Henrich 2023). He goes on, writing about the cumulative cultural evolution:

> Cumulative cultural evolution is a process in which each generation selectively acquires a body of non-genetic information from the prior generation, augments it through a gradual process of recombination, variation, and filtering, and then bequeaths a larger and more adaptive body of information to the next generation. Over time, this process produces adaptive repertoires more complex and sophisticated than any individual could figure out in their lifetime. Much of these processes occur outside of conscious awareness and variously harness, suppress or exploit innate aspects of human cognition. When necessary, this process can over-ride many of our instincts. (Henrich 2023)

Henrich emphasizes, as do many religious traditions, the role of the community for the individual. In his view, the collective efforts of humanity lead to the development of what he calls our collective brains. It is "our collective brains and the power of cumulative cultural evolution that distinguishes us from other species. Notably, generating cumulative cultural evolution doesn't hinge on any qualitatively different abilities, but merely on tuning the developmental dials that influence our social learning and sociality" (Henrich 2023).

The social dimension is relevant also for another reason: it creates the chances for maintaining stability. Such stability cannot be established by the individual on her own—it requires the shared human capacity for storing and transmitting knowledge and insights into what counts as culturally significant. "Our sophisticated and powerful brains may be necessary, but they are not sufficient to explain the variation and complexity of human culture. Humans are unique not only because we have brains designed to acquire and transmit culture. We are also unique because we have built systems to store and create culture" (Legare 2023). Against this backdrop, it becomes understandable why humans have an extended adolescent period—we do not possess all the skills needed to participate in our niche from birth (cf. M. Konner, 2011). Such knowledge "is critical for a species that inhabits highly diverse cultural ecologies and ecosystems, and that must acquire complex and specialized systems of knowledge to survive and thrive" (Henrich 2023). This is also why religious elements are a vital part of upbringing and learning in many cultures—they provide

the means for a child to orient and understand herself within the context of practices and experiences in the society of which she is part.

A final point: The social dimension, as well as the need for relative cultural stability (which we also can see in the religiously based concern for maintaining practices and doctrines relatively stable), make it possible to understand how religion is also interwoven with evolved features that characterize human culture: the preferences they might have for similar others, the valuing of conformity, consensus, prestige, and normativity (cf. Henrich 2023) All these reinforce cultural acquisition and transmission, and they are at work in how religion manifests itself in human culture.

Theological Consequences and Considerations—Some Emic Perspectives

The above analysis of religion and its conditions offers a basis for understanding how human practices and religion may be seen as closely related and interwoven. "There is no single trait or characteristic that adequately captures the notion of human uniqueness. However, there is also no point in denying that we human beings do share an identifiable and peculiar set of capacities and propensities that clearly distinguishes us from other animals on this planet" (van Huyssteen 2006, 288). Furthermore, given the initial suggestion about seeing religion as part of humanity's learning processes, the wisdom that religions steward may be seen as emerging from the type of practices I have described or from experiences that have led to the development of the practices we need for orientation and transformation. The outcome of these practices is distinctively religious in their content insofar as they relate orientation, transformation, and reflection to the ultimate. As a consequence, we can identify the distinctively human in our ability to orient ourselves and enter into practices of transformation based on culturally mediated and transferred conceptions of the ultimate. Thus, it is also possible to understand human distinctiveness as manifest in the dynamic and constantly developing practices in which they participate. Other species have other practices, but these are linked to niches in which no similar ultimacy is involved. Hence, not specific attributes as such make humans distinct from other species but how we engage these attributes in relation to the various experiential dimensions in which the world is accessible to us.

An obvious consequence of the above is that the relationship between theology and science can be described as one in which science describes and explains the world in which we live on empirical terms, whereas theology represents attempts to orient us in this world and suggests where, when, and how it needs to undergo transformations. The learning processes humans have undergone and in which they continue to participate have resulted in the potential wisdom on which such orientation and trans-

formation can take place. The relationship between theology and science is between (potential) wisdom based on accessible knowledge on the one hand and empirical knowledge on the other hand. Thus, the development and learning processes that lead to wisdom may be identified as part of human distinctiveness. Wisdom is not only based on knowledge about what is the case, but also about knowing how to orient oneself on the basis of what is, and assess when transformations are needed.

Moreover, these learning processes also entail that theology does not build on isolated revelatory instances but on the interaction and learning that emerge from various sources and experiences that develop continuously. God does not reveal Godself only in specific, extraordinary experiences but also in the relationship between specific historical events (and the concomitant experiences of these) on the one hand and the engagement of wisdom traditions in relation to these, on the other hand. This is notable, for example, in the history of Jesus, which cannot be understood apart from the traditions in which he participated, and which he used, developed and applied in new ways during his ministry.

As we know that the understanding of who God is have developed in the course of human history, it is likely to assume that it will continue to do so as long as human communities continue to have experiences that they use theological resources for interpreting. God continues to reveal Godself in the course of the development of all that is on the planet, insofar as all that happens is part of the reality that humans experience and take part in.

Thus, what Christian theology understands as revelation history (Pannenberg 1961) is closely linked to human experience and learning processes. In turn, it also sheds light on human distinctiveness and how humans relate to the ultimate in ways that shed light on central features in human life. An obvious topic here is how humans have learned about the role of love in shaping individuals and communities. Love is a central feature of human existence. From a Christian perspective, God is understood as love, and consequently, Christian practices of orientation and transformation are centered around love as a significant feature of human life and community. The central topic of love, in turn, makes it possible to interpret how the human designation of being created in the image of God is related to desire and vulnerability.

Without going into a full analysis of love, it is possible to say that love plays a central role in how humans develop in all the abovementioned realms of experience: love has biological and physical, social and cultural, as well as psychological dimensions. Love may also manifest itself in mystical experiences, of which there are many examples (see Astley 2020). When Jewish and Christian theology identifies humans as images of God, it manifests the basis on which human life can and should take place: as beings that mirror and represent God as the ultimate source of love.

The experience of love as a central feature for the goodness and well-being of humans constitutes the fundamental backdrop for understanding God—as the ultimate—as love, as well. It is this relationship between what is empirically possible to experience as good—love—and God as the ultimate source of love from whom all the created world emerges—including humans—that allow humans to develop a specific self-understanding that can guide agency, the shaping of community, and where the emphasis needs to be for human learning processes over time.

Humans need not orient themselves from love—but human experience entails that this is a profound resource for developing—and thus transforming the qualities of human life. Love is the basis for human morality, and it has implications for shaping human communities: both the insistence on justice and taking care of the vulnerable, the need to orient desires in ways that safeguard others as well as being able to live authentically with one's own needs, and the topics of grace and compassion, may be seen as connected to the fundamental role of love. Without love, these elements of the human community lose a vital motivational resource for orientation and transformation. Moreover, love is crucial for how we deal with vulnerability and express our desires. Hence, it is possible to argue for the need (but not the necessity) to orient oneself from love as ultimate, and this is why belief in God matters pragmatically and experientially.

Moreover, it is part of theological wisdom that humans need not be determined by the past. Love, as manifested in the transformative practice of forgiveness, is an obvious example of this fact. Furthermore, forgiveness makes new chances for fellowship or community possible. However, the practice of forgiveness requires wisdom insofar as it should not always and unconditionally be practiced—its role in establishing justice and overcoming evil without condoning is crucial. Thus, wisdom practices are related to how they serve the qualities of the community.

Theology contributes to developing human subjectivity (self-relation by means of symbols, Dalferth 1994) with specific content and orientation, especially in the notion of humans as created in the image of God. To be created in God's image means to represent God's love in creation without being God ourselves. Thus, humans do this by practicing love. Consequently, *sin* is to be understood as destroying the community with others and with God. Moreover, this illustrates how religious reflection can be seen as a self-enhancing practice: the more we reflect by the means that religion gives access to, the more we can engage the world in its various modes, and the more we can develop our understanding, emotions, perceptions, and curiosity.

Because such development of personal identity and subjectivity is mediated by symbols that are accessible only through the cultural means of symbols and language, it is not surprising that religions emphasize the role of narratives, and it is therefore that, for example, the Jewish and Christian religions emphasize the *word*. Humans have learned through the course of

cultural evolution about the power of language to shape the world and our experiences. This may explain its central role in religion, as well.

Furthermore, in the present situation in which life on Earth is threatened by climate change, the theological understanding of the world as created by God can be articulated in ways that point toward the relationality and dependence among everything that exists. This way of thematizing existence and conditions may be crucial for facing contemporary challenges, but it cannot be done unless the practices needed for transformation are mediated in a community that can see beyond the immediate present, as this, for example, is symbolically articulated in elements of theology and religion. Jürgen Habermas (2008) has pointed out how religion offers vital resources for criticizing a focus only on short-term goals for human development. When Dalferth (2003) writes about religion and God as "[t]he reality of the possible," he points in a similar direction—toward that which is not, but which we may relate to in order to make the world better. Stanley Hauerwas articulates a Christian awareness of the same when he writes, "God is the constant possibility of transformation pressing on *every* occasion, even those that are lost for the lack of human response" (Hauerwas 2010, 195). Hence, theology's task is to open up to new and better ways in which reality can be experienced and by which it can, accordingly, contribute to a better future.

Against the backdrop of the above, religion and theology are not primarily about the outcome of learning processes of the past. They are about employing wisdom resources that may prove vital for facing the future. Hence, what we know about human learning processes in the past may encourage theology to enter into future learning processes by asking how we can experience God as love at work in what is happening today. A viable answer to that question cannot entail separating theology from the insights of other sciences: "Embodied human existence has emerged as crucial for defining human uniqueness in the sciences as well as for the *imago Dei* in theology. To think of the 'image of God' as having emerged from nature by natural evolutionary processes emphasizes our vital connection with nature precisely by focusing on our species specificity" (van Huyssteen 2006, 322). That point may be of vital relevance for how we face future challenges for all life on this planet.

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