



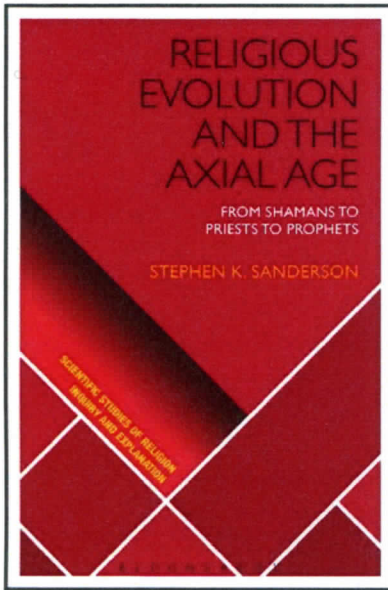
# Religious Evolution and the Axial Age

## From Shamans to Priests to Prophets

**Stephen K. Sanderson**

"This is a major contribution to the evolutionary study of religion. Sanderson masterfully engages both the rich historical scholarship on religion and the contemporary theoretical work on the evolution of religion, offering a novel and insightful analysis. The evolutionary study of religion is fortunate to have a scholar of such breadth, proficiency, and dedication wrestle with the most pressing questions in the field." *Richard Sosis, James Barnett Professor of Humanistic Anthropology, University of Connecticut, USA*

"Sanderson makes an important contribution to the question of diversity, arguing that religions are essentially biosocial adaptations to changing environments. This bold new theory deserves serious attention from, and systematic testing by, a wide range of scholars and scientists." *Harvey Whitehouse, Director of the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford, UK*



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*Religious Evolution and the Axial Age* describes and explains the evolution of religion over the past ten millennia. It shows that an overall evolutionary sequence can be observed, running from the spirit and shaman dominated religions of small-scale societies, to the archaic religions of the ancient civilizations, and then to the salvation religions of the Axial Age.

Stephen K. Sanderson draws on ideas from new cognitive and evolutionary psychological theories, as well as comparative religion, anthropology, history, and sociology. He argues that religion is a biological adaptation that evolved in order to solve a number of human problems, especially those concerned with existential anxiety and ontological insecurity.

Much of the focus of the book is on the Axial Age, the period in the second half of the first millennium BCE that marked the greatest religious transformation in world history. The book demonstrates that, as a result of massive increases in the scale and scope of war and large-scale urbanization, the problems of existential anxiety and ontological insecurity became particularly acute. These changes evoked new religious needs, especially for salvation and release from suffering. As a result entirely new religions—Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—arose to help people cope with the demands of the new historical era.

**Stephen K. Sanderson** is Research Associate at the Institute for Research on World-Systems at the University of California, Riverside, USA. He is the author of numerous books, most recently *Modern Societies: A Comparative Perspective* (2015) and *Human Nature and the Evolution of Society* (2014).

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

This is not a book of advocacy, but a work of science. I seek to understand religion from an objective point of view rather than to promote or criticize it. My overriding goal is to find answers to two fundamental questions: Why are people religious wherever we find them (with a few recent exceptions in advanced industrial societies), and how and why has religion changed over long-term historical time? I write the book for scholars and scholars-to-be in comparative religion, the history of religions, the anthropology and sociology of religion, and the new cognitive and evolutionary psychology of religion. The book might also be of interest to a general audience, although such readers will have to work around the technical statistical analyses in a few chapters. (The analyses are not really that complicated as statistical analyses go, and there are not that many of them.)

I wrote both my MA thesis and PhD dissertation on religious topics in the early 1970s, but since that time I have engaged in scholarly work on religion only in the past dozen years. In the intervening time I wrote extensively on long-term social evolution and then turned my attention to Darwinian topics associated with evolutionary psychology and related approaches. Until twelve years ago my only scholarly knowledge of religion was by way of the sociology and anthropology of religion. I had never paid any attention at all to work in religious studies, and I still regard myself as an interloper in that field. But I wanted to write this book in order to bring together my knowledge of social evolution and of Darwinian approaches to social behavior. I decided it was time to write about the religious dimension of long-term social evolution to accompany my earlier writings on social evolution's technological, economic, and political dimensions.

To write this book I had to start almost from scratch to gain even a descriptive knowledge of religion. So I dug into the literature, and I have found the process extremely rewarding. Not only have I learned many very interesting things, especially about the world religions, but I can honestly say that I have probably learned more in preparing this book than in preparing any previous book of mine.



I acknowledge my former graduate student Wesley Roberts for his collaboration in writing the section of Chapter 6 devoted to identifying some of the necessary causes of religious evolution. This work began as his MA thesis in sociology. I am grateful to Candace Alcorta for reading the entire manuscript in first draft and offering a number of useful suggestions for revision. I am also grateful to Radek Kundt for his suggestion to include a more detailed discussion of theories of sociocultural evolution, which I believe has improved the book immeasurably. However, I am not sure that the expanded discussion will be exactly what he expected. In order to gain a fuller understanding of pagan religions, Benson Saler recommended that I consult Yehezkel Kaufmann's book *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, and this proved to be a very useful recommendation indeed. I was very pleased when Richard Sosis showed enthusiasm for some of the ideas in this book when I first presented them at a conference on religious evolution in Hawaii in 2007. When I had a hundred pages written my epistolary colleague Randall Collins read them and offered an insightful critique. When I gave a talk on by-product and adaptationist theories of religion at the University of California at Riverside in 2006, my colleague Jonathan Turner hated it and thought that I had gone off the deep end. However, when he read the same hundred pages that Collins read, he softened somewhat and conceded that some of the ideas were interesting. But mostly this book won't convince him of much; he also has his own new book on the same subject which is written along almost entirely different lines. My former graduate student Kristopher Proctor suggested that I summarize my theoretical argument for the Axial Age transition as a flow diagram and gave me a preliminary version of it. Colin Adreon finalized that diagram and the two others. I am very pleased that Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe wanted this book for their series on scientific explanations of religion, which looks like a very good series to be in. I know it will help me reach a large part of my intended audience.

Some of the ideas contained in this book were presented as talks at the University of California at Riverside (2006, 2007); the University of California at Santa Barbara (2011); the University of Helsinki (2007); the conference *The Evolution of Religion* (Makaha, Hawaii, 2007); and annual meetings of the American Sociological Association (Philadelphia 2005, Boston 2008), the European Sociological Association (Glasgow, Scotland 2007), the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (Williamsburg, VA 2007, Kyoto, Japan 2008), and the International Society for Human Ethology (Bologna, Italy 2008). Portions

of Chapter 6 are based on Stephen K. Sanderson and Wesley W. Roberts, "The evolutionary forms of the religious life: A cross-cultural, quantitative study." *American Anthropologist*, 110, 454–66, 2008. Portions of Chapter 5 draw on material in Stephen K. Sanderson, "Adaptation, evolution, and religion." *Religion*, 38, 141–56, 2008.

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## Prologue

The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of work on religion from a cognitive psychological and evolutionary perspective. The leading scholars have come from a variety of disciplines, mostly comparative religion, anthropology, cognitive science, and evolutionary psychology. Some have worked in at least two of these fields at the same time, and clearly the work is highly interdisciplinary. International conferences have been organized in which leading scholars have met to discuss their work. Hundreds of papers have been published, dozens of scholarly books<sup>1</sup> and popular books have also appeared,<sup>2</sup> and new journals have been founded.<sup>3</sup> Work is ongoing and vigorous, and there has been a great deal of productive debate.

Most of this work is about religion in general—about why humans everywhere have it. Much less attention has been devoted to the questions of why there are so many different types of religion and how and why religion has evolved over historical time. In the present book I apply some of the new theoretical ideas to suggest answers to these questions. My focus is on long-term religious evolution, with a special emphasis on the great religious transformation known as the Axial Age, the period between about 600 BCE and 1 CE when the major world religions were beginning to emerge. These religions had several new features of considerable importance, but two were especially critical: transcendence and salvation. A new kind of god was born, one that was outside the universe and who brought it into existence—a transcendent god. Transcendent gods were not all the same. In the Near East there was just one of these gods—One True God—who was considered omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. This was the case in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. In Hinduism things were somewhat more complicated. People claimed to worship different gods, but most often they thought these gods were more or less the same god with different names. India also gave birth to Buddhism, which was officially godless, but everyday Buddhists nonetheless began to worship the Buddha as a kind of god. In China, Daoism was officially based on a kind of “divine essence,” as was true as well of elite Hinduism and Buddhism, but ordinary Daoists constructed

a personal god. Confucianism was not exactly a religion, but people eventually started praying to Confucius just as Buddhists started worshiping the Buddha. What did the new gods do that was so special? The answer is, they were salvation gods. People worshiped them and appealed to them for salvation from the misery and suffering that had arisen on earth as a result of a series of dramatic social, economic, and political changes.

Before these religions were born, ancient states and civilizations had religions that have been called archaic, pagan, or state religions. There were usually pantheons of highly anthropomorphic gods who oversaw specialized spheres of nature and human life, such as agriculture, war, love, or fertility. Large temples and statues were built to worship the gods, primarily by political and economic elites. These kinds of religions emerged at least 5,000 years ago, although there were earlier versions in some places. Prior to this time, in small-scale societies whose members made a living by hunting and gathering or some sort of simple agriculture, people sometimes imagined certain kinds of gods, but these were not on the same scale as the pagan gods. Some acted in the world, but most did not. After creating the world they often withdrew and took no interest in human affairs, in which case people didn't bother to worship them. More important in these kinds of societies were various types of lesser spirits, such as the spirits of people's dead ancestors. Ancestral spirits were mostly conceived in positive terms, but one had to pay them proper respect so they would not be offended. Offended ancestral spirits could do harm. There were also purely evil spirits, such as ghosts, demons, or witches, which people had to be particularly careful about.

The religions of pagan antiquity and the Axial Age had formal practitioners—priests—who usually monopolized religious doctrines and interpreted them for lay audiences. But the earliest religions were focused on religious specialists known as shamans, who performed rituals in which they sought to heal people who suffered from various illnesses (often thought to be the result of the actions of evil spirits or of giving offense to spirits that were normally relatively benign). Shamans also played an important role in finding game animals and making sure they were plentiful. This type of religion was once found throughout most of the world and may have existed as long as 30,000 years ago.

And so over the past ten or eleven millennia we observe a kind of overall evolutionary sequence running from the spirit- and shaman-dominated religions of small-scale societies to the archaic or pagan religions of the ancient

civilizations and then to the salvation religions of the Axial Age. In order to understand this sequence, especially the last phase of it, I draw on ideas from the new cognitive and evolutionary psychological theories, in combination with a theory of long-term sociocultural evolution. The reigning theory in the cognitive psychological realm is that the brain is primed for religion, but only as a side effect or by-product of other cognitive features of the brain. One of these features is agency detection: people are hard-wired to see agents—other people, animals—acting everywhere. But some events have no obvious agency in that there is no directly observable intentional agent. A person becomes sick, for example, but it is not clear why. Or a village is suddenly flooded and devastated, but why? In these cases people project their intuitions about human agency onto supernatural agents—invisible beings or forces whose actions must be inferred from their effects. The brain is religious—religion is natural—but only in an indirect way.

But not everyone agrees that religion is just a by-product of other brain activity. The alternative to the by-product theory is the view that religious beliefs and rituals evolved because they promoted Darwinian fitness: survival and reproductive success. The brain has something like a “religion module” that is more than simply a module for detecting agency. In this view, which is the one adopted in this book, religion is an evolutionary adaptation. Those who hold this adaptationist perspective may agree that religious cognitions originated as by-products of cognitions for agency detection, but they contend that at some point in the brain’s evolution religious cognitions became detached from cognitions for agency detection to have significance in their own right—to stand on their own.

And yet religion is not simply a product of how the brain evolved, otherwise all religions would look essentially the same, and obviously they don’t. Here is where we must see religion as a product of sociocultural as well as biological evolution. As the socioecological context of human life has changed, new human needs, including new religious needs, have arisen. New types of religious belief and ritual evolved as a means of meeting these new needs. Religion is therefore most properly called a *biosocial* phenomenon, or one in which human religious predispositions interact with a wide range of socioecological conditions to generate the many diverse features of religion that we observe throughout the world and in the long span of human history.

The first three chapters of the book are largely descriptive. Chapter 1 is a breezy overview of the nature of religion and seeks to avoid the endless and

often arcane debates over how to define religion or whether it can be defined at all. Numerous illustrations of a variety of beliefs, ritual practices, and religious specialists are given. Chapter 2 begins the discussion of religious evolution by examining two well-known conceptual typologies, those formulated by the anthropologist Anthony Wallace and the sociologist Robert Bellah. After discussing the religions of small-scale band and tribal societies, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the pagan religions of the ancient world, focusing in particular on the religions of the Aztecs of ancient Mesoamerica and those of ancient Hawaii, Mesopotamia, and Rome. Chapter 3 continues the descriptive analysis of religious evolution by way of a lengthy and detailed discussion of the Axial Age religions of the ancient Near East, South Asia, and East Asia.

Chapters 4 through 7 constitute the theoretical part of the book. Chapters 4 and 5 ask the questions: Why is there religion? Why, wherever we look in human societies and throughout history, do we find people expressing religious beliefs that they enact in religious rituals? In Chapter 4 I take up and critique several of the most important theories of religion that the social sciences have produced. I start with the classical theories of Durkheim and Marx. Rejecting these theories, I then turn to the rational choice or exchange approach to religion developed by Rodney Stark and his colleagues and students. This is one of the most influential and important theoretical approaches in the contemporary sociology of religion. For the rational choice theorists, religion is primarily about obtaining rewards, especially otherworldly rewards, that are difficult or impossible to obtain by ordinary means. People engage in exchange relations with supernatural agents in order to obtain these rewards. Next I discuss the ontological security argument presented by such thinkers as Malinowski, Norris and Inglehart, Kirkpatrick, and Giddens. They contend that religion's main importance is as a means of coping with existential anxiety—a source of comfort and security in an insecure and uncertain world. I round out the chapter by beginning the discussion of the new cognitive and evolutionary psychological theories. One of these, as noted previously, conceptualizes religion as a by-product of other features of the brain, in particular cognitive modules for agency detection. Chapter 5 then turns to the main alternative to the by-product approach, the evolutionary adaptationist theories of, *inter alia*, Richard Sosis and Candace Alcorta, Joseph Bulbulia, Michael Winkelman, and James McClenon. This type of theory, which converges in some important ways with the ontological security and rational choice theories, is the one favored in this book and several lines of evidence are offered in support of it.



Chapter 6 begins the theoretical discussion of the sociocultural side of religious evolution by critically analyzing two different types of theories of sociocultural evolution. It then demonstrates, in a preliminary way, the usefulness of one of these theories by way of reporting the results of an empirical analysis of a wide range of nonindustrial societies devoted to identifying some of the sociohistorical conditions that have been prerequisites or necessary causes of religious evolution over the long term. Chapter 7 then connects the ontological security and evolutionary adaptationist lines of thinking discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 with the theory of sociocultural evolution used in Chapter 6 to explain the greatest of all religious transformations, the emergence of the religions of the Axial Age. The basic argument is that the Axial Age was a time of dramatic economic and political changes that disturbed people's lives in such a way as to lead to the disruption of social attachments and thus high levels of existential anxiety and ontological insecurity. The new Axial Age religions, with their transcendent gods and doctrines of salvation and release from misery and suffering, arose to restore people's sense of security. As such, they were biosocial adaptations to people's radically changed circumstances.

Chapter 8 concludes the book by asking three central questions: If religions evolve, do they also progress? If religion is an evolutionary adaptation, why are there atheists? What is the future of religion? The chapter also provides a forceful critique of the so-called New Atheists, who see religion as an irrational and evil institution that society would be much better without and should attempt to eradicate.