After *Evolutionary Religion*

J. L. Schellenberg

I've been asked to say something about how my thinking has evolved since my 2013 book *Evolutionary Religion* (ER). This is largely because I have two new books on religious themes coming out this summer in which I don't just repeat myself! Their titles are *Progressive Atheism* (PA) and *Religion After Science* (RAS). The changes I will cite are changes arising from this new work that affect one or another of the points from ER explained and applied in my comments for the first session, or that in some other way may have a bearing on the ongoing work of this seminar.

(1) A clearer distinction between temporal and developmental matters. In my earlier work, and also in ER, issues about our place in time and our immaturity were sometimes blurred in ways I now take care to avoid. The concept of immaturity is a developmental concept and the concept of an early stage in the life of a species is not. At an early stage, some imaginable species would already have jumped through many developmental hoops; how far we've travelled through time is one thing, how far we've developed in this or that respect is another. Putting the point – and applying it to this seminar – in terms of the notion of 'temporal contextualization' explained in the first session: in the attempt to show that the human future matters for religion, we may well wish to put where we are at present into the broader perspective afforded by evolutionary time, but if we cannot add to this that the species is in some respect still *immature*, temporal contextualization may not greatly aid that attempt.

(2) A more developed understanding of religious immaturity. Of course I think we *can* add that the species is still immature, and this in various respects. As to religious immaturity in particular: my position has, on the basis of recent work, become more definite and, I hope, more clear. Because of the central importance of these results, I'll spend more time on them than on the other points.

In ER I spoke of evaluative and descriptive immaturity. I now regard *all* relevant claims about immaturity as evaluative, and think of the distinction I was gesturing at in ER as a distinction between (what I now call) the immaturity-of-shortcoming and the immaturity-of-potential. Both involve something or someone being subject to the evaluation 'undeveloped,' but when talking about the former we're looking into the past; when talking about the latter, we're looking into the future. The first-year

undergraduate who's distracted from schoolwork by parties and booze, getting less done than might have been expected or hoped, betrays immaturity in the first sense. In terms of post-secondary educational attainment, even the hardest-working first-year undergraduate displays immaturity in the second sense. She hasn't achieved maturity but eventually she will, if she lives on and keeps plugging away, and this whether we're thinking of maturity here in what I call the *standard* way, as the complete or near attainment of a goal (such as an undergraduate degree) or the complete or nearly complete development of the corresponding capacities, or *relatively*, in terms of significant improvements in either of these respects. And it's important to see that the two basic sorts of immaturity, immaturity-as-shortcoming and immaturity-as-potential, can be connected in various ways. One might, for example, need to get rid of the former to retain the latter. This is certainly true of the partying first-year undergraduate, when it comes to her educational prospects.

We can take this distinction between immaturity-as-shortcoming and immaturity-as-potential from the micro to the macro level, and apply it religiously. In RAS, where these moves are most fully developed and most centrally important, I'm not arguing just that human religion is immature but, more generally, that this evaluation applies to what I call the human 'religion project,' in which I include everything we humans have been doing in the religious dimension of life, including in particular everything that can be seen as explicitly or implicitly concerned with satisfying ourselves as whether there is a religiously relevant transcendent reality and (if so) what it is like. The religion project might display either sort of immaturity. We could, for example, have made enough bad moves in our brief religious past to keep us quite undeveloped in the relevant respects. Consider only for how long we've been slowed by sexism, not even able to bring all the resources of humanity to bear on our questions since neglectful of women's actual and possible contributions when seeking to make headway, and also how often we've been corrupted by ideology or misled by cognitive biases only now being recognized. Immaturity-as-shortcoming in the religious part of the intellectual realm seems easy to establish.

What about immaturity-as-potential? This could represent our condition in relation to religion even if our relevant past behaviour were in every way excellent (shortly, however, we'll see how immaturity-as-shortcoming in fact appears in a supporting role). Immediately the two additional distinctions suggested by our micro-level example come into play. For the notions of potential-related maturity and immaturity can be conceived in terms of relevant religious *capacities* or religious *goals*, and applied in the *standard* way or *relatively*. Let's say – in a more abbreviated way than before – that the fundamental

goal of the religion project is achieving religious understanding. And when it comes to capacities, let's think of the capacities needed to make progress toward this goal, whatever they may be. Are there still moves left to make before the species has reached or come close to religious understanding, moves we can make and that will get us all the way there or at least allow us to make significant improvements? In other words, is the religion project, in respect of goals or the needed capacities, either in the standard way or relatively immature?

Initially, it seems right to say that in relation to the mentioned goal the religion project is at any rate relatively immature, and that in respect of the mentioned capacities it is immature in the standard way. The goal of religious understanding is still a ways off – here think only of what the cognitive science of religion (CSR) is telling us about how we've been locked into familiar modes of thought involving gods or God by our evolutionarily-based attraction to the thought of supernatural agency. And even if it is too much for humans ever to reach, so that we cannot speak realistically of having the high potential entailed by standard immaturity, we can at least expect to make a lot more headway toward this goal by dealing with our shortcomings (here we see how immaturity-as-shortcoming can support a judgment of immaturity-as-potential) and by harvesting all the results of a still-unfolding set of cultural revolutions which will enable fuller contact with, and fuller engagement with, unfamiliar ideas. In this light we can see that we are still, at the very least, at a relatively early stage, developmentally, in our religious life. More precisely, we can say that the religion project is relatively immature in the goal-oriented way.

As for our relevant religious capacities: so long as we suppose that *Homo sapiens* will sometime and in some way cease to exist, there has to be an upper limit to these capacities, which therefore will at some point be reached if we survive and keep working to develop them. But if we are *a young species* that is *held back by various deficiencies* and *just starting on promising new paths of capacity enlargement*, then it can hardly be supposed that we are close to that point yet. And all three propositions in the antecedent of that conditional are true. The first comes with the scientific picture I am asking theology to apply; the second comes from reflection on all the progress that could be made simply by addressing our past shortcomings, which become apparent with a bit of digging in virtually any department of human religious and intellectual life; and the third comes into view when we consider that those cultural revolutions mentioned above, which likely have just begun, will make their contribution in part precisely by expanding our relevant capacities. We are thus, when considered from the macro level perspective, still at an early stage in the development of our capacities for religious

understanding. More precisely, we can say that the human religion project is standardly immature in the capacity-oriented way.

As it happens (and this may at first seem surprising), from this result we can get to an even more valuable result, namely, that the religion project is also standardly immature in the *goal*-oriented way. For whenever the limits of our capacities, however modest, are reached, and no further development is humanly possible, one of two things has got to be true: (i) the ambitions of religion have been realized through effective contact with a triply transcendent reality whose soteriological benefits – the third form of transcendence – have become evident to all good-faith inquirers, or (ii) this has not occurred. If the former, then the proper conclusion of the inquiry is that there is indeed a triply transcendent reality. If the latter, then the proper conclusion is that there is no such reality – a transcendent reality of some other sort might of course still exist in these circumstances, but there'd be no *religiously relevant* transcendent reality, no *triply* transcendent reality. After all, we'd need something new in the way of capacities if an effective contact with the divine were subsequently to be established. Thus, one way or the other, the inquiry and our religion project is concluded – the relevant truth about the transcendent has been discovered – whenever our capacities for religious inquiry are exhausted. Thus, so long as we survive and do everything we can, it will happen. Maybe it would take a really really long time, but it has got to happen.

In RAS I show how we can bring these various facts about religious immaturity together into a single compendious 'framework' idea about making progress in the human religion project, which I will here state as follows: Since the human religion project is standardly immature in the goal-oriented sense, we should expect to work toward the relevant goal in stages, by increasing our *relative* maturity, and it is by working to overcome the project's present immaturity-as-shortcoming that we best proceed at the *current* stage.

(3) How the immaturity framework enables intellectual progress on religion. In RAS I argue that after explaining and demonstrating our religious immaturity – which I seek to do in the first half – we can fruitfully work within the framework thus provided for discussion about religion, generating a host of interesting new results. In the second half of RAS I argue that these include a new way of conducting the science-religion debate, an important new form of religious agnosticism, a new argument against naturalistic

belief, the possibility of agnostic religion (a form of religion satisfying the conditions for evolutionary religion discussed in ER),[1] and a new religious humanism.

I can't go into all of these topics here, but let me offer one illustration of what I'm driving at in RAS, taken from what I say about the first of them. In "Atheism, the Computer Model," a 2017 article in *Nautilus* (http://nautil.us/issue/45/power/atheism-the-computer-model), Michael Fitzgerald reports on the latest data-driven studies of how societies become supernaturalist, fall away from supernaturalism, and return to it when the going isn't good. The article concludes with the thoughts of Boston University's Wesley Wildman, who ventures the view that supernaturalism isn't likely to disappear, since people have "a basic propensity – a biological imperative – toward a desire to ascribe actions to an agent, a being, even one we cannot see." As Wildman puts it: "Every generation is born supernaturalists." Here we have an example of work being done in *science and religion*, a field of study that since the 1960s has been exploring relations between the two areas of human life joined by its name, especially those that appear to have a bearing on religion's intellectual value. In the *Nautilus* example, the influence of thinking in CSR, now often treated as included in science and religion, is apparent. Many think of CSR as providing broad support for the idea that the tendency for humans to believe in gods who are agents, who *do* things, is no evolutionary accident. Your survival is aided by noticing when agents who can hurt or help are in your vicinity. And, especially in an age before science, gods would easily have been added to the list of live possibilities. If god-related mental and social behaviour sticks around, perhaps because it ends up being adaptive in ways not imagined by those who first thought of gods, related propensities can be passed along evolutionarily and show up on busy modern city streets or even in the brains of sophisticated scientists.

It's not hard to see how these facts – if indeed they are facts; CSR is still a quite youthful science – could be used to try to debunk certain religious ideas, whose advocates usually take them to have a more recent provenance! Eager to accommodate such findings within their own perspective, believers have sometimes responded by arguing that they come with the fingerprints of a personal divine reality who wants to ensure that there will be a way to be noticed. And so the science and religion discussion finds its usual grooves and carries on. But here's another example, or potential example, of work on

---

[1] It might be good to mention here that I am now more broadminded on the question of what might count as evolutionary religion. Whereas in ER I assumed that the *one* form of religion that satisfies the conditions for evolutionary religion would need to be found, I now accept that there might be various ways of satisfying them – and so various forms of religion suited to human immaturity.

science and religion that might lead in a different direction. Let's start with the science. In their contribution to a book of essays published by Cambridge University Press in 2006 on biocultural co-constructivism, brain scientists Thad A. Polk and J. Paul Hamilton point out that reading, writing, and arithmetic are "recent in evolutionary time," are "not shared with other species," and don't "develop without instruction," and yet there is evidence – for example, their selective impairment through brain damage – that these functions reflect distinct "anatomic modules in the human brain." This, they argue, shows that cultural evolution can result in new brain developments, and so we're not stuck with what biology has made innate. (Of course more general cognitive and neural mechanisms that *are* innate will presumably be required for such later developments, as they acknowledge.) "Apparently, the brain can reshape its modular architecture in response to the most important demands of its culture."[2]

I don't know whether these scientific results will hold up under the pressure of future study. But suppose they do. Suppose they're at least as reliable as those of CSR. Then we might wonder – and here's the application to the religion project – whether in an analogous way (and no doubt aided by reading, writing, and arithmetic) new brain modules involving more subtle thinking both about *causation* and about *supernatural* causation could be built on the cruder innate base suggested by our first example of work on science and religion. Might the right cultural changes associated with growing religious maturity, perhaps over much time, enable this to happen? If so, we might agree with Wildman but go further than he seems prepared to do: supernaturalism may indeed not disappear; but instead of constantly recurring in primarily agential forms, it may after much additional cultural activity become much more sophisticated and discriminating, moving on from basic agency to other forms a transcendent reality might take, including ones as alien to *H. sapiens* today as the facts and figures of arithmetic once were.

I'm not interested in settling this particular issue here, but I do want to draw attention to the fact that we wouldn't even see its pertinence, in relation to science and religion, if we hadn't started to think of work on religion as a *developmental* phenomenon and as *developmentally immature* in something like the way being recommended both in ER and

---

[2] Thad A. Polk and J. Paul Hamilton, "Reading, writing, and arithmetic in the brain: neural specialization for acquired function," in Patricia Ann Reuter-Lorenz, Frank Rösler, Paul Baltes, eds. *Lifespan Development and the Brain: The Perspective of Biocultural Co-Constructivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Quotations are taken from pp. 186, 196.

in RAS. New insights become possible when we do. For some of these we may one day be indebted to the work of entities like the God Seminar.

(4) How the immaturity idea subsumes and extends my work on atheism. The broadest idea of human maturing processes is of course going to be multifaceted, including not just *religious* aspects but potentially many others as well. This point is relevant to PA, which operates largely in the realm of *moral* evolution and progress. For some time now I've been aware of the fact that the 'hiddenness' argument for traditional atheism I developed in the earliest stage of my career would probably have left many of our forebears, who had somewhat different moral sensibilities, cold. The argument that a perfectly loving being would make it possible for us to love it back, and thus would not be so hidden as to prevent many of us from even believing that it exists, might not have been that impressive for people of the past who spent less time thinking about relational sensitivity, and who moreover tended to regard God as male or masculine and to think of a certain fatherly 'distance' as perfectly fine. But at the same time, the fact that moral sensibilities have evolved and many of us today think and feel differently in these respects means that the hiddenness argument can *today* be experienced as very forceful. Aware of this, I was led to consider whether a more general result might be in the offing here. Perhaps the moral maturing and progress that, however intermittently and falteringly, appears to have occurred over relatively recent segments of the past requires us to 'update' our conception of the goodness of a personal God in such a fashion that, in *various* ways, new arguments for atheism become possible. In PA I argue that this is indeed the case. For example, in addition to the hiddenness argument we can now have the argument that a perfectly good God would reflect all that we today see as valuable in *nonviolence*, and so would be motivated to create – if at all – a world rather different from the violence-filled world we inhabit.

An application to the work of this seminar that I would take away from what I've said here (along with what I said under (3) above) is that, when considering the human future, or God and the human future, the idea of human immaturity as developed under (2) above, applied religiously and perhaps in many other ways too, may provide a framework both for understanding what progress would amount to in these areas and for *making* progress.

(5) Ultimacy, transcendence, or transmundanity? Finally, I want to comment on how my thinking about what we might broadly call the idea of a 'religious reality' has evolved. In ER, I defended the usefulness, in the context of immature human religion, of the concept of triple ultimacy (the concept of a metaphysically, axiologically, and

soteriologically ultimate reality). On my present view, this idea reflects one way in which evolutionary religion might be realized. Moreover, it has a natural appeal within the context of philosophy, which seeks to get to the very bottom of things and so may be expected to find candidates for ultimacy more interesting than, say, ideas positing that there is something in some way transcendent. But here an important general point is already suggested: how restrictive or how liberal we are in relation to what counts as a religious reality may be expected to vary with the *purposes* we bring to religious discussion. If one's purpose is, say, to explore philosophically useful insights or accommodate our most powerful religious experiences, triple ultimacy may prove attractive. But what if one wants to identify the parameters for religious discussion, period (not just the philosophical parts of it), or show the continuing importance of religious discussion in the context of our present cultural debates construed quite broadly (not just philosophical debates)? Then other conceptualizations may beckon.

And so at the end of PA, where I explore how traditional atheists could, if seized by a real love of the truth, spearhead a new and much more effective human attempt at religious investigation, I argue that not just investigation of ultimistic ideas or ideas of transcendence but even various more modest ideas of a *transmundane* reality assumed to have axiological appeal and soteriological relevance will be needed. What's the difference between transcendence and transmundanity? A transcendent reality would in some way go beyond – be more than or other than – the world of nature explored by science. A transmundane reality would in a similar fashion transcend the mundane. By the *mundane* is here meant the world of the ordinary: of ordinary human experiences, common to us all, of eating, drinking, working for a living, sleeping, and so on. And it's clear, on these construals, that although anything transcendent would itself be transmundane, something can be transmundane without being transcendent. Take profound aesthetic appreciation, for example, or deep wisdom.

If we were not so liberal as to include as religiously relevant even the notion of vital transmundanity, we'd have a hard time including in our religious investigations – as we should –what some people in the Netherlands known as 'ietsers' have recently been talking about. People who are asked whether they hold conventional religious beliefs will often reply: "No, but there must be *something*." In the Netherlands, this minimalist belief in 'something' has been given a name: *ietsisme* – 'somethingism.' Since 2005 when it was first included in the leading dictionary of the Dutch language, the word has more and more been taken up into other languages, including English, where it appears as 'ietsism.' And advocates of ietsism are called ietsers. To make the central idea of 'somethingism' a little less vague, it helps to notice that what ietsers have in mind is

something *more*. This rather swiftly leads to the question: More than what? Moving cautiously, I think we should answer "more than the mundane."

So where our purpose is to identify the agenda for future religious discussion, I think room should be made for the concepts of, not just ultimacy and transcendence, but also transmundanity. In RAS, however, my purpose is different. There my aim is to defend what I call robust, transcendently-oriented religion against its cultured detractors. We are rather far from done with such religion yet. Certainly no reason for going with transmundanity instead of transcendence that presupposed we *are* done with it would be a good reason. That is why between the covers of RAS the religion project, and so also religious ideas, are construed somewhat more narrowly. There I explicate and defend the importance of *triple transcendence* in our future cultural discussions. As I say in RAS: "If you want to take what I have to say about the immaturity of the religion project as being about just the part of the religion project that is concerned with transcendence – which is to say virtually all of it so far – that's fine by me." But even this is less restricted than triple ultimacy. Triple ultimacy looms large in ER, but not in RAS.

What lesson, if any, may be found for this seminar in these changes? One might be that when thinking of an alternative to the traditional conception of God, one could go with *either* triple ultimacy (as suggested in my comments for the first session) *or* triple transcendence – and which one selects may properly depend on the *purpose(s)* one would assign to continuing talk about God. (I think it would be odd in pretty much any context to use the religious word 'God' for something that's *not* either triply transcendent or [more specifically] triply ultimate. Perhaps human usage of the term will evolve in that direction, but the first stages of that evolution might be expected to involve more modest changes.) So what purposes might be assigned, by the God Seminar or its descendants? One natural possibility would involve the aim to see – for the sake of curiosity or in hope of religious enlightenment or both – whether there's anything real in *some more general category* to which our old idea of God belonged. The traditional idea of a personal deity that has been so influential in human religion thus far, and also in Christianity, belongs to *both* of the more general categories I've introduced: both triple ultimacy and triple transcendence. Noticing this, someone might naturally wonder whether, even if the old idea of God has to go, *something else* from one of these categories can survive scrutiny. And this would provide a purpose for continuing talk about God, and also a rationale for applying that label 'God' to the broader category rather than to any particular way of instantiating it.

But where to start? I myself am inclined to emphasize how natural it would be to start with other notions of ultimacy, under the umbrella of triple ultimacy. Only if no other form of ultimacy survives scrutiny, someone might say, should we move to the broader category and investigate whether there is some non-ultimate and yet transcendent reality that can serve in a religious role. Here we see how, even when open to a wider religious discussion than is suggested in ER, one might still, for certain purposes, endorse a focus on its notion of triple ultimacy.