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The Prospect of Human Spiritual Unity Through the Cosmic Story

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The Prospect of Human Spiritual Unity Through the Cosmic Story

The unity of humankind's religious history is obvious, once one sees it. We have, however, been assiduously trained not to see it. Even more strongly, we have been pressured not to think it; and not to feel it. Yet today it beckons our minds...

-Wilfred Cantwell Smith

Introduction

Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have noted that, "we seem to be moving beyond any religious expression so far known to the human into a meta-religious age that seems to be a new comprehensive context for all religions." That "new comprehensive context" is of course now known as Big History -- a.k.a. the Evolutionary Epic, Universe Story, or New Cosmic Story—the astonishing contemporary synthesis of modern sciences that tells a coherent story of the evolution of the universe from the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago to the present.

Yet with the notable exception of the writings of Berry and Swimme themselves, leading Big History texts like David Christian's *Maps of Time*, Fred Spier's *Big History and the Global Future of Humanity*, Cynthia Brown's *Big History*, and the college textbook, *Between Nothing and Everything*, by Christian, Brown and Craig Benjamin, are committed to a thoroughgoing materialism in which the history of human religiosity is the history of a delusion and in which the perennial human yearning for self-transcendence is an evolutionary dead end.

Only Big Historians can decide whether their narrative should assign religion – humanity's ceaseless symbolic attempts to relate itself to the ultimate conditions of its existence¹-- a less marginal role. But to me science's new Cosmic Story offers our still-young species an opportunity to see its religious past, in all its sublimity and horror, as radically unfinished and still evolving toward a nobler form. The pace of this evolution will depend crucially upon our advance toward what celebrated Harvard scientist recently hailed as "the greatest goal of all time: the unity of the human race."² Here are six Big History-inspired reminders of the very real foundations of our dreams for unity and spiritual maturity.

1. The Cosmological Sense in Which We are One

It was 1931 when the Belgian Catholic priest and astronomer Georges Lemaitre theorized that our universe had begun in an ancient explosion from an infinitesimal point, and 1964 when Penzias and Wilson detected the Microwave Background Radiation that crucially verified Lemaitre's theory. In the past 50 years Big Bang cosmology has become global scientific orthodoxy. Even Pope Francis embraces it.

Mysteries remain of course. That all the matter and energy in a universe that stretches 93 billion light years across and contains perhaps 200 billion galaxies each

with 100 billion stars was once condensed in a point much smaller than an atom, is, I'm told, counterintuitive even for astrophysicists. If there was no time or space before the Big Bang, where exactly was that explosive little nano-particle? What caused the Bang? We have no idea. Says mathematician D. Berlinsky, "the Big Bang singularity does not represent a *physical* concept because it cannot be accommodated by a physical theory. It is a point at which physical theories give way." How did the Bang's initial radiation spread far faster than the speed of light (the universe's official speed limit)? And why after countless quintillions of particles and anti-particles annihilated each other with perfect symmetry for the first 300,000 years did a few particles manage to elude their heretofore fixed fate, thus allowing matter to bootstrap itself into existence? We don't know.

Yet despite the Bang's mysterious edges, the evidence for it is massive. The Earth itself and all that lives upon it, including ourselves, are its grandchildren. Every last one of the elements that make up our flesh and blood, hair and teeth, muscle and bone, hearts and lungs, eyes and skin have been fashioned in the star-explosions that followed in its wake. This is the cosmological sense in which we are one: physically we are all children of the Big Bang.

2. The Terrestrial Sense in Which We are One

Astronaut William Anders' famous picture of the Earth as seen from the surface of moon (*Time*, January, 1969) is worth a thousand words. Big Historian Fred Spier recalls the moment when as a young Dutch boy he first saw this image on a black-and-white television screen and soon thereafter on the cover of TIME. In tones familiar to any student of mystical experience, Spier recalls: "While looking at this picture, I experienced a shock that I had never felt before and never have experienced since. Within a second, it changed my perspective of Earth beyond recognition. I tore the picture out carefully, stuck it onto the wall of my room and looked at it for years. I still have this picture and treasure it greatly."

Spier's feelings are hardly unique. In fact they are legion. The Dalai Lama tells of the same life-changing effect this image had on him and I expect many readers can relate. Our Earth is much younger than the vast Universe beyond it. Formed about 4.5 billion years ago, it was, at first, hotter than hell and dead as doornail. But after some 800 million more years bacterial life that eventually led to us mysteriously arose in the ancient oceans. As far as we know, life's occurrence and evolutionary efflorescence happened *here and only here*. Of the 110 billion human beings that have *ever* been alive, all have lived on this very tiny island-speck of matter in the unthinkable vast cosmic sea. All Sapiens have lived in the same, small home. If the Big Bang was our distant grandparent, the Earth is our common mother. We are Earth-beings down to our marrow. This is the terrestrial sense in which we are one.

3. The Biological Sense in Which We Are One

Life arose in the Earth's oceans about 3.5 billion years ago in the form of bacteria. Spier observes that the emergence of life required processes that could absorb enough energy to reach levels of greater complexity, but that such a feat would have required a far greater output of energy than any existing material process could muster – which means that at this point, scientifically speaking, the whole hubbub should have said “to hell with it” and remained lifeless. But it didn't. “The inescapable conclusion,” writes atheist-materialist Spier, “is that during its emergence, life must have evolved an in-built drive that was strong enough to keep itself alive. *It is unknown to me what the biological mechanism for this drive would consist of*” [my emphasis]. Kudos to Spier for his frankness.

But when life did emerge, its basic credentials were *unvarying*. As Spier makes clear, if we define life as any process containing within itself a hereditary program for defining and directing molecular mechanisms to extract/consume matter and energy from the environment to maintain itself and reproduce itself, all such programs are managed by DNA and RNA molecules, the incomprehensibly awesome “genetic material” that directs in detail the cellular growth of every kind of life from viruses to slugs to butterflies to redwoods to sharks.

DNA's omnipresence means either 1) that life arose only once, or 2) that it arose more than once, but all the other ways were destroyed and only one survived. Either way, as D. Christian notes, “all organisms living today, from humans to bananas, to sea squirts and amoebae, are descended from the same (bacterial) ancestor.”

More than 3 billion years later, a mere 7 million years ago, genetic copying errors and/or eliminative environmental pressures began to produce a divergence between what we now call chimpanzees and what we now recognize as the beginning of the hominid line that led (some 6 million years later) to *Homo sapiens*. Chimps are our closest nonhuman relative as our DNA differ by only 1.5%. Another way to say this is that the chimpanzee and human genomes are 98.5% identical. Our genetic proximity to chimpanzees dramatically underscores humanity's far greater genetic proximity to *each other*. Brown University biologist Kenneth Miller provides the numbers: “The human genome contains 3164.7 million chemical nucleotide bases and that on the order of 99.9% of those nucleotide bases are the same in all people.”

This is the biological sense in which we are one.

I've kept points 1-3 brief because they are now quite commonplace. They are tremendously important but, alone, they would not constitute sufficient grounds for a fresh consideration of the idea of an emerging spiritual unity of humankind. But when joined to the news from contemporary Anthropology – the subject of the next section, the ground becomes far firmer.

4. The Psychological Sense in Which We are One: Cultural Universals

Harvard's influential Steven Pinker has written that, "the new sciences of human nature [i.e., neuroscience, cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology and genomics]...expose the *psychological unity of our species* beneath the superficial differences of physical appearance and parochial culture" (italics mine). Anyone not wide-eyed over the italicized words is just not paying attention. For if Pinker is right, a hundred years of anthropological hostility to the idea of a universal human nature is over. Indeed, anthropologists have now confirmed beyond reasonable doubt the existence of a wide array of behaviors that characterizes *every Homo sapiens culture known to history and ethnography*. Yet as recently as 1982 a noted anthropologist could write that "during the hundred years of their existence, academic anthropologists have not discovered a single, universally valid truth concerning either human culture or human society," and not long before that time a ranking academic panel declared cultural universals – which would be evidence for a universal human nature -- to be "no more likely than bird-shit in a cuckoo clock." How did we get from these statements to Pinker's confident claim about the psychological unity of our species?

In the 1880's anthropology's founder, Edwin Tylor, entertained the idea of a "psychic unity of mankind," but his hypothesis faded as newly minted anthropologists trekked to the far corners of the earth to record the facts in all their particularity.

When in 1896 Columbia hired Franz Boas to develop its anthropology program, a "universal human nature" was still a live hypothesis but also, in Boas' mind, a dangerously subvertible one. Too easily could a nation claim that it alone had advanced human nature to a superior degree. By the end of World War I, Boas, all too aware of the pathological extremes to which nationalism could lead and not wanting his new science of anthropology abetting it, adopted cultural relativism. Never mind that it contradicted his transcultural condemnation of racism.

Boas' profoundly influential students, M. Mead and R. Benedict, read the burgeoning ethnological data as indicating a plasticity of human behavior so extreme as to suggest there was no such thing as human nature and that humans everywhere were products of incommensurable cultural wholes, each with its own unique and appropriate ethoi. By the second half of the 20th century, anthropology's commitment to cultural relativism was firmly in place.

Enter Donald Brown, emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. A self-described Boasian relativist by training, Brown remembers how he once wagered that he could find an exception to colleague's heretical claim that some human sexual practices were universals. Brown tried and failed. After making – and losing – a similar second bet, Brown got curious about how long the list of human universals really was.

When he re-studied the literature, he found that human universals, which he defines as "those features of culture, society, language, behavior and mind that, so far as the record has been examined, are found among all peoples known to ethnography and history," had actually been a persistent though fugitive theme throughout the past century. *The Blank Slate*, Steven Pinker's 2002 case for the reality of human nature, which Pinker defines as "an endowment of cognitive and emotional faculties that is

universal to healthy members of *Homo sapiens*,” dedicates an entire appendix to Brown’s 1991 list of some 350 cultural universals, adding to it some 56 new universals that have since surfaced.

The list is rich. All I can do here is to try to make an impression on the reader’s mind by a representative sampling of the many universals Brown and Pinker cite:

Members of every *Homo sapiens* culture known to history and ethnography adorn their bodies, style their hair, and like sweets.

They engage in gift-giving and hospitality; they experience empathy and feel affection.

Many human facial expressions are universal and elicit the same emotional responses everywhere.

Members of every *Homo sapiens* culture known to history and ethnography use language as their principal medium of communication and all languages have the same deep architecture, built of the same basic units and arranged according to implicit rules of grammar.

They have poetry and use metaphor, and apply aesthetic standards.

They reckon time, distinguish past, present and future, and strive to predict the future, including the weather.

Every *Homo sapiens* culture known to history and ethnography uses logic, makes binary cognitive distinctions and thinks in causal terms.

It has concepts of polar extremes, parts and wholes, opposites and equivalents, and distinguishes between normal and abnormal mental states.

Every *Homo sapiens* culture known to history and ethnography distinguishes inner from outer body, public from private, flora from fauna; it regulates sex, avoids incest, and has standards of sexual modesty.

Every *Homo sapiens* culture known to history and ethnography distinguishes right from wrong and recognizes reciprocity, responsibility and intention. They are all aware of the possibility of cheating and lying, and they all strive to protect themselves from same.

And so on for some 300 other universals.

Anthropology’s rediscovery of a transcultural human nature means that the question of human spiritual unity has become freshly salient. If human beings share:

- the same cosmic background (point 1)
- the same Earth-origins (point 2)
- a genetic code that differs minutely across the species (point 3)
- a universal linguistic deep-grammar (Chomsky’s “universal grammar” not noted above),
- and a psychic unity as demonstrated by these many cultural universals (point 4),

it would be scientifically irresponsible to ignore the hypothesis that within the diversity of global religious life there are also important invariants.

5. The Unity-Within-Diversity of Humanity's Religious History

Rational people can argue over religion's significance, but no one disputes its ubiquity. When Freud called religion a universal obsessional neurosis, he at least got the universality part right. And when no less a scientist than E. O. Wilson tells us that "*the predisposition to religious belief is the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and probably an ineradicable part of human nature*" [my emphasis], there is little point in denying that as a species we still are, as we apparently have always been, *Homo religiosus*. Since the advent of Sapiens, religion has taken on no fewer than 100,000 forms (Wallace 1966, in Wilson 1974, 176). 90% of the world's current population engages in spiritual or religious practice of some sort (Koenig 2002 in Walsh 2011, 586), and there are as many as 9900 distinct forms of religion still extant (Barret 2001 in Lester 2002). Human beings are surely natural creatures, but they are just as surely prone to experience/interpret the natural world as having a transcendent dimension or aspect.

The big question among the world's well-informed interpreters of the history of human religiosity is whether or not the universally pointed-to transcendent dimension is really there. *Naturalistic* interpreters of religion say no. For them religion has always and everywhere been humanity's fantastic response to the psychological and social pressures of life. Faced with pain, bewilderment and death, not to mention the task of achieving moral solidarity among their groups, human beings, in a desperate attempt to cope, have always invented higher Powers and projected them into the cosmos via beliefs and rituals. According to the naturalistic interpreters, human religiosity is at best a psychologically and socially useful fiction, at worst a dangerous psychopathology to evolve beyond.

But *religious* interpreters of religion hold out for a yes. While acknowledging the validity of many points of the naturalistic view, religious interpreters claim that the latter fails spectacularly to account persuasively for the vast, insistent and continuing throb of significantly meaningful human religious experience across the globe. As William James cautioned long ago, there is much religious experience – peak experiences of flow or unity, sensings of a transcendence that can profoundly reorient or transform an individual's life, unsought intimations of postmortem continuity, and so on – that is not convincingly reduced to psychosocial coping mechanisms or explained away by brain chemistry. In his otherwise naturalistic scorched earth critique of religion, *The End of Faith*, even neuroscientist Sam Harris emphasizes that religions "attest to a range of spiritual experiences that are real... and entirely worthy of our investigation; experiences of meaningfulness, selflessness, and heightened emotion" that "...surpass our narrow identities as "selves" and escape our current understanding of the mind and brain" (Harris, 2004, 39).

Confronting the profound mystery of Sapiens' potential for 'spiritual' experience, *religious* interpreters of religion point out that it is possible that humanity really does live within a single 'transcendental milieu' and that humanity's never-

ending symbolizations of it as God, Dharma, Tao, Great Spirit and countless others, are but conditioned human responses to a transcategorical Real that no set of constructs can exhaust. In this view, the unity-within-diversity of religions is the transcendental milieu itself; human responses to it vary because it can't be known as it is in itself but only as experienced and interpreted through the mind's neuronal, psychic and cultural-linguistic conditions.³

Neither the naturalistic interpretation of religion (which doubts the existence of of a suprahuman milieu) nor the religious interpretation of religion (which affirms its possibility) has been able to drive the other from the field of rational consideration. Full intellectual honesty at this point seems to require accepting the universe as *religiously ambiguous*. Yet what this means existentially (and not merely cognitively) is that the naturalistic interpretation requires a risky leap of faith no less than the religious interpretation. The risk in living out the religious option is fooling ourselves with wishful thinking. The risk in living out the naturalistic option is prematurely closing our accounts with an important dimension of reality – a move William James famously warned against.

6 Our Emerging Moral/Spiritual Unity

Evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright has recently argued that humanity is moving erratically but steadily toward an expansion of its moral compass, indeed, toward a moral universalism in theory and in practice. More and more of us, he says, are placing others of us within the circle of their moral consideration and thereby affirming the equal moral status of all human beings. “Time has drawn us toward the commonsensical-sounding yet elusive moral truth that people everywhere are people, just like us.” Might we be during an evolutionary uptick in *Homo sapiens*' moral quotient?

We ask this outlandishly hopeful question because improbable emergences of somethings-out-of-their-own-absences – even if they require eons-- *are precisely what Big History has taught us to expect!*

- From the Big Bang itself (the greatest of all material somethings-out-of-nothings) ,
- to the *de novo* emergence of matter from pure radiation,
- to the *de novo* appearance of oligonucleotides without which life would not have been possible⁴
- to the emergence of life out of its own absence,
- to the apparently sudden emergences of protein folds, major groups of viruses, principal lineages of prokaryotic archaea and bacteria, eukaryotic supergroups and animal phyla⁵
- to the emergence of human consciousness,

- and finally to an entirely new *dimension* of evolution – cultural evolution -- made possible by emergence of human consciousness,

Big History teaches us that the universe is not a static cosmos but a continuous and irreversible *cosmogensis*,⁶ a recurrent and partially lawless birthing of the radically new.⁷ One of Big History’s biggest learning outcomes is that “nothing transcends Nature like Nature herself.”⁸

Religions have heretofore been humanity’s primary vehicles for answering the great value-questions: Why be good? And how? Whether our old religions will continue to help us on this road, or whether their tendency toward literal renderings of cultural symbols will ultimately subvert their ethical teachings (and thus their relevance), is a debated issue. But with or without the help of the old religions, insists complexity theorist Stuart Kaufmann in his aptly titled *Reinventing the Sacred*, “the task of finding a common spiritual, ethical and moral space to span the globe could not be more urgent.”

Big Historians should understand that the origin story they are telling *necessarily* provides its hearers with the germ of a moral outlook. And the very logic of Big History requires that its moral outlook – whatever it is –be species-wide. *The notion of an emergent moral unity thus appears to be a necessary condition for any Big History that isn’t frankly nihilistic.* We call on Big Historians to be explicit about their role in creating the kind of global ethical-spiritual space that scientists like Kaufmann have called for.

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Endnotes

¹ This is Robert Bellah's definition of religion.

² E.O. Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, p.174.

³ Since the mid-20th century many notable attempts have been made articulate a unity-within-diversity perspective on humankind's religious history. Among them: Aldous Huxley in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945); Arnold Toynbee in *A Study of History* (1954); Carl Jung *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1965); Alan Watts in *Behold the Spirit* (1971) and *The Supreme Identity* (1973), John Dunne in *The Way of All the Earth* (1972); Frithjof Schuon in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1975) and other books; Huston Smith, in *Forgotten Truth* (1976); Patrick Burke's little classic *The Fragile Universe* (1979); Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *Faith and Belief* (1979), *Towards a World Theology* (1981), and other books; Ken Wilber in *No Boundary* (1979) and other books; Paul Knitter in *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985); N. Ross Reat and Edmund Perry in the unjustly neglected *A World Theology: The Spiritual Unity of Humankind* (1991), Karen Armstrong in *The Great Transformation* (New York: Knopf, 2006) and other works, Loyal Rue in *Religion is not About God* (2007), a naturalistic account that never stops flirting with religious realism; John Hick in *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (2004), *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (2006), and other works; and John Haught in *The New Cosmic Story: An Inside Look* (2018).

⁴ (Joyce 1999, 49-78. In Gesteland 1999. In Berlinsky 2009, 202).

⁵ (Koonin 2007. In Berlinsky 2009, 193),

⁶Swimme, 1992, 223

⁷Kaufmann 2009.

⁸ Rue, 2000).