

God in Cosmic History: Where Science & History Meet Religion,
by Ted Peters (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2017).
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“In Ted Peters’s *God in Cosmic History: Where Science and History Meet Religion*, one of America’s top contemporary theologians insightfully connects our new scientific story of the universe to the long human quest for God. Such a delicate task is one that few writers are qualified to carry out in a manner that is both fully respectful of the natural sciences and also deeply rooted in religious wisdom. Ted Peters is the embodiment of such skill. His book should have wide appeal to readers of many backgrounds. Strongly recommended.”

—John F. Haught
Georgetown University

GOD IN
COSMIC HISTORY

Author Acknowledgments

Thinking about Cosmic History is like sitting on a pile of ping pong balls. The more I sit on it, the more balls (each ball representing a good idea) zip away in unpredictable directions. When I reach out to pull one back into the pile, another zips out in a different direction. It might never be the case that I will get all those ping pong balls to sit quietly in a single unified pile.

Others in my professional life have helped me chase those unruly balls and bring them back into order. My colleagues at Dominican University who are engaged in the Big History program—Harlan Stelmach, Scott Sinclair, Lindsey Dean, Michael Morrissey, and Cynthia Taylor—prompted me to both appreciate Big History and explore the deficit in the point of view big historians bring to their craft. It was while team-teaching a course with Lindsey Dean on the Axial Age that the vision of this book appeared before my inner eyes. I thank Robert John Russell at the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, for his critical review of my fundamental ideas. I'm grateful to other colleagues for their critical review of selected sections: Judith Berling, Daren Erisman, and Rita Sherma.

Robert Bellah and Eric Voegelin have now passed away, but my engagement with their writings and in person has persuaded me to take the Axial Period in Cosmic History very seriously.

I wish finally to thank Rick Warner, President of the World History Association, for writing the foreword and, of course, for affirming the value of melding Big History with World History in light of Cosmic History.

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GOD IN
COSMIC HISTORY

Where Science & History Meet Religion

TED PETERS

Forward by Rick Warner



Created by the publishing team of Anselm Academic.

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Dedication

I dedicate this volume to today's grandchildren,
who will become the next generation of Cosmic History's
beloved children: Kayla, Jessica, Jacqueline, David, Maddie
Lulu, Nina, Lydia, Jack, Will, Reynold, and Alice Rose.

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Foreword

In recent decades, an increase in connections between distant parts of the world has hastened the process of globalization. Thanks in part to rapidly improving communication and transportation systems, our planet has grown smaller. Parallel to the increasing economic, cultural, and environmental interactions, our interest in distinct peoples and their histories has grown significantly. In the academic world, courses and research in what is now called “the new World History” have grown at a rapid pace.

A growing group of world historians has turned to *Big History*, a movement developed by historian David Christian and others over the past twenty-five years. Big History describes the past in its largest spatial and temporal limits, from the big bang some 13.8 billion years ago to the future. Human history is understood not only within a global context, as in World History, but within a galactic—or cosmic—context. The big story reveals a pattern of increasing complexity in the universe. Given its broad context, Big History is by nature interdisciplinary, with strong involvement from the natural sciences.

Big historians describe their story as a modern cosmology, from the cosmogony of the big bang down to the present environmental context. Like many other origin stories, Big History does not offer a completely comprehensible answer to the questions, “What is on the outside of the universe?” or, “What happened before the big bang?” Science also has its limitations.

Science has played an important role in shaping the modern mind, and yet some people doubt a number of science’s claims, sometimes raising objections on the basis of religious beliefs; witness, for example, religious-based objections to the theory of evolution and the idea that climate change is anthropogenic or caused by humans. Such debates set up an apparent dichotomy of religion versus science. It appears that science and religion are at war. This book, *God in Cosmic History*, will dig beneath the apparent dichotomy to uncover what is underneath.

Science does not actually preclude the “question of God.” Through Cosmic History this question can be asked and made more complex, interesting, and fruitful. With this book, theology has joined physics, geology, chemistry, biology, and other disciplines in the quiver of the big historian to open up intellectual spaces for fresh interpretations of history.

Rick Warner
Wabash College
President, World History Association, 2016–2018

PART ONE

Cosmic History and the Origin of All Things

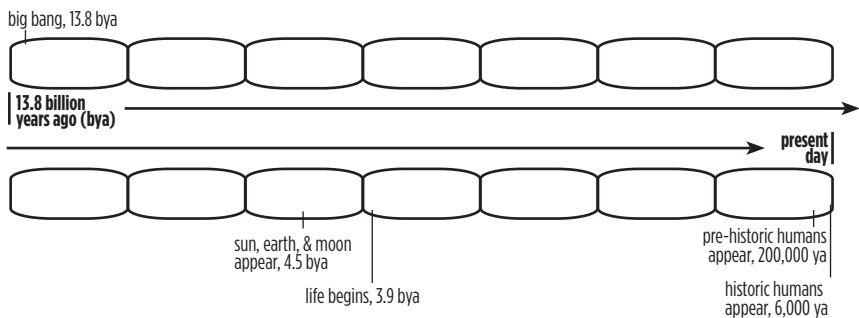
A set of questions orient this book: Is God the author of cosmic history? Does history author itself? Might there be a co-authorship? Before tackling these questions, a more basic question must be addressed: does a strictly scientific account of natural history and human history require that we raise the question of God? Cosmic historians answer this question affirmatively for two reasons. First, throughout most of human history our ancestors believed in divine reality, and this belief significantly influenced the course of events that the historian chronicles. Second, cosmic historians are convinced that a strictly scientific interpretation of either nature or humanity cannot on its own render a full account of reality. The method of scientific research is deliberately narrow; it stipulates that no supranatural or non-natural explanations can be considered. It is necessary, then, to go beyond what science presupposes to ask about a more comprehensive and inclusive reality, to ask about ultimate reality.

The chapters that follow will tell the story of cosmic history as big historians tell it. Subsequent chapters will turn to the conceptual set or worldview out of which the big historian tells this story. This book will look at both the story and the story-teller. Critical consciousness will permit the cosmic historian to find the question of God hidden beneath the story as the big historian tells it.

Why Is History Getting Bigger?

Some things make me feel small. I feel small when I stand next to a professional basketball center, who may rise to more than seven feet tall. I feel small when the media showers attention on celebrities, on rock stars whose success makes me envious. I feel small when a television news show reports on congressional gridlock in Washington, because national officials seem to possess so much economic and political power compared to my marginal and fragile status. I feel small when astronomers tell me that the Milky Way's uncountable stars may number from two hundred to four hundred billion, and that beyond the Milky Way are another one hundred seventy billion galaxies. I feel small because I am small, and the world is very big.

Through the efforts of big historians, history has gotten bigger too. Big historians are no longer satisfied with World History, with merely tracing five or six thousand years of recorded human history. Rather, historians now want to place human history within a larger context, namely, nature's history. Nature's history is big. It goes back perhaps 13.82 billion years, according to a recent scientific calculation.¹ Compared to nature's cosmic history, recorded human history is about the size of a minnow compared to the ocean, or a penny compared to the national debt.



Cosmic History begins with the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago. Earth has existed for 4.5 billion years. Note what a small fraction of cosmic time is human time.

1. On March 21, 2013 the Planck space telescope team released the highest precision map yet of the cosmic microwave background, revealing that the universe is a little older than previous estimates: 13.82 billion years. Mark Peplow, "Planck Snaps Infant Universe," *Nature* 495, no. 7442 (March 28, 2013): 417–18, at 417.

The human soul hungers to be valued. People thirst for meaning. No matter how big the cosmic story becomes, each of us wants to be a valued character in that story. Can big historians or world historians assist in the human quest for a meaningful role in the cosmic story?

History Is Contingent

No matter how big or how small, what makes history historical is contingency. Events are contingent. This means that, prior to an event, what will happen is unpredictable. Looking backward after the event, one realizes that it could have happened differently. Suppose a person plans to purchase a new computer. The buyer weighs the merits and costs of both a PC and an Apple. In advance, no one can predict which will get purchased. Following the purchase of the PC, one may look backward and say, "It could've been the Apple."

Some events in nature are predictable. One can safely predict that the planet Earth will complete an orbit of the sun over the next 365.256 days. Other events in nature are contingent. One cannot accurately predict the weather one month from now; too many of the factors that contribute to meteorological events are contingent. Similarly, future events in human history are contingent, because no one can predict which decisions will be made by human beings with free will. Both natural history and human history include contingent events.

The very existence of the cosmos is contingent. The cosmos is an event, a very large and important event, to be sure. Yet, looking backward, it is possible to see that the cosmos in which we happily live might never have come into existence. There could be nothing instead of something. That we live today in this cosmos is itself contingent. Events that occur within the history of this cosmos are also contingent, both natural and human events. Therefore, one significant definition of *history* is the chronicle and interpretation of past contingent events.

What Is History?

The term *history* in this book will have four slightly different yet overlapping meanings. First, history is what happened. The term *history* can refer to events that took place in the past, regardless of whether anyone was there to record them. Known past events become data for the historian to chronicle and interpret. To say that something is "history" usually means that it belongs to the past. To know what happened in the past is to gain historical knowledge.

Second, history is also an academic discipline that chronicles and interprets past contingent events. "History is at one and the same time happening and

consciousness of this happening, history and knowledge of history,” writes philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969).²

Historians tell about the past in the form of a narrative, a story. In the German language, the same word is used for both history and story (*Geschichte*). In English the two terms are connected by spelling: *story* and *history*. Because of the role of interpretation, no historian will tell a story exactly like another historian. A Yankee historian in the northern United States, for example, will tell the story of the “Civil War.” A southern historian will tell the story of the “War between the States.” There was only one war, but two different histories. Aware of the important role that interpretation plays, big historian Fred Spier remarks, “All historical accounts are reconstructions of some sort.”³ According to this second meaning, history is what historians do. Historians chronicle and interpret events.

Third, to be historical is to be finite. In this third use, *history*—sometimes called *historicity*—is the recognition that human beings are finite rather than infinite, temporal rather than eternal, mortal rather than immortal. To admit that one is a historical being is to say, in effect, that one expects to die. This understanding of one’s own historicity stands out in sharp relief against the discovery of eternal reality during the axial breakthrough. The axial breakthrough will be discussed later.

The fourth meaning of *history*—or, more specifically, *effective history*—refers to the influence of the past on one’s consciousness today. In this case, effective history is what happens now within one’s psyche. The past influences each of us in our consciousness. We are not continually aware of this influence, however, because the past is present in one’s self-understanding at the level of pre-understanding. A pre-understanding is a structure already present in our mind that enables us to filter, shape, grasp, admit, and integrate a new experience into our understanding. The pre-understanding makes interpretation possible. And every new experience involves interpretation. Effective history lurks in our pre-understanding just waiting to give shape to any new experience.

The primary means by which the past influences the human psyche today is through language. Each person inherits one or more languages. The English language is about eight centuries old, and it passes on the influence of Greek, Latin, and German going back more than a thousand years prior to that. When an English speaker formulates a sentence, a long list of meanings and connotations accompany each word in that sentence. Every time people speak, they say far more than they had consciously intended to say. This is due to the influence of effective history inside our consciousness. When we understand what someone has just said, we draw upon more than two thousand years of co-meaning.

2. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge, 1953, 2010), 234.

3. Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 2.

To say, “God bless you!” following someone’s sneeze, for example, carries twenty centuries of meaning. In biblical times, it was thought that evil entities—called elemental spirits or *archontes* in the Greek language—floated aimlessly in the air just waiting to get inside a person. Once inside, these elemental spirits would do damage, precipitate disease, or cause insanity. By quickly saying, “God bless you,” one prays aloud that the divine spirit will protect the sneezing person from the elemental spirits. Even though most people today don’t know or don’t think about the original reason for “God bless you,” all these ancient meanings are co-present whenever they utter this phrase.

In grasping effective history, one must recognize that *the said* is always dependent on *the unsaid*. In French, *parole* is dependent on *langue*. In German, *das Gesagte* is dependent on *das Ungesagte*. Each sentence a person utters is what gets said. The said draws simultaneously on a gigantic library of co-meanings shelved in the unsaid. No one can control or even manage the unsaid. Virtually every time people speak they say more than they intend to say. In this way, effective history lives on today within the mind of an individual and within his or her culture at the preconscious level.⁴

One can sharply contrast the first and fourth meanings of *history*. According to the first meaning, *history* refers to past events that are now completed, objective, dead, and factual. According to the fourth meaning, *history* is ongoing, subjective, alive, and creative. Whether we realize it or not, our consciousness is drenched in history.

This explains the near-magic of studying history. When one studies history, one grows in self-understanding. With definitions two and three in mind, to chronicle and interpret past events is to grow in understanding one’s own historicity. To study the past is to study one’s self. This is not actually magic, but almost.

World History within Big History

Working from within the first meaning of *history*, note that nature has its own history apart from human history. Nature’s history was not predetermined. Natural events were and are contingent. Just like human beings making decisions as expressions of free will, nature had its own history of contingent events and unpredictable developments before humanity arrived on the scene.

Human beings are fully embedded in nature. In addition to being fully natural, we have inherited from nature the indisputable thrust toward

4. The fourth meaning of *history* is a hermeneutical concept developed by philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Gadamer refers to it as *Wirkungsgeschichte*, usually translated as *effective history*. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1965) and Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

unpredictability, creativity, and newness. Even without the appearance of *Homo sapiens*, nature would be historical and creative. With *Homo sapiens* on the scene, the speed of creativity in the cosmos only increases. Cosmic and terrestrial history can be understood only backward, only by chronicling *past* contingent happenings. This signifies that the eyes of human beings should also be open toward the future, a future that will differ from the past. This also signifies that the moment has come to place human history within Cosmic History.

Imagine a set of Russian nesting dolls, sometimes called *matryoshka dolls*. Each doll of increasing size fits within a still larger doll, so that, when assembled, the entire set looks like a single doll. Now imagine that your life story—which is itself a history—is the smallest doll. Your life story fits within a larger history, namely, the history of your family or families. This family history, in turn, fits within a larger history of your nation, your ethnicity, or your religious tradition. This larger history fits within a more inclusive world history, the history all people on planet Earth.

The Russian doll analogy suggests that World History should fit within a still larger history. What is *World History*? “Put simply, World History is macro-history. It is transregional, transnational, and transcultural,” says the World History Association.⁵ World History is big, to be sure. But can we find a nest for World History that is yet bigger?

Yes, say the big historians. They propose to fit World History into a still larger Russian doll, namely, Big History. Harvard sociobiologist E. O. Wilson formulates the challenge: “History makes no sense without prehistory, and prehistory makes no sense without biology.”⁶ Big historians have taken up the challenge and are placing human history within biological history and placing all of this within the physical history of the cosmos.

What Is Big History?

“Big History seeks to understand the integrated history of the Cosmos, Earth, Life, and Humanity, using the best available empirical evidence and scholarly methods.”⁷ Ken Gilbert of the International Big History Association builds the biggest nest conceivable. “The cosmos itself, beginning with the Big Bang, has now come to be seen, not as an inert or static backdrop for the planet, but an ever-changing manifestation in which everything is essentially historical

5. World History Association, “What Is World History?,” <http://www.thewha.org/about-wha/what-is-world-history/>.

6. Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: Norton, 2012), 287.

7. International Big History Association, “What Is Big History?,” <http://www.ibhnet.org/>. This definition derives in part from the work of Walter Alvarez, who has been teaching Big History at the University of California at Berkeley since 2006. See <http://eps.berkeley.edu/people/walter-alvarez/>.

and developmental.”⁸ What in this book is termed *Cosmic History* corresponds roughly, though not exhaustively, to this understanding of Big History.

Cosmic History—the subject matter of this book—shares with Big History two important ideas: first, that human interaction with the natural world counts as history; and, second, that the scope of history goes all the way back to the origin of the cosmos, to the big bang. There are, however, three items that this book’s version of Cosmic History adds that we don’t find in either World History or Big History: first, raising the question of human meaning through remembering the past and expecting the future; second, tracing the differentiation of human consciousness; and third, raising the question of God while analyzing how the historian tries to reconstruct the historical story.

Cosmic History will borrow the skills of the theologian to interrogate history. *Theology* is reflection on faith in God. Theology is to religion what botany is to a four-leaf clover. One can find theologians circulating among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. Here we will ask, might a theologian’s analysis of history illuminate dimensions of reality missed by other historians?

The History of the Future

Can we connect the future to Cosmic History? Yes, by applying two concepts, *futurum*, and *adventus*. Both are Latin terms for the future. The first, *futurum*, projects a future as an extension of the past. In the case of Cosmic History, some scientists forecast a future in which the entire universe will wind down like a clock and simply drop off into permanent sleep. Called *heat-death*, this permanent sleep consists of an unending state of equilibrium in which nothing happens. This forecast relies on physical *futurum*, the future of nature’s history as natural scientists forecast it.

When we turn to human history, however, what we observe is a spirit of defiance, rejection of fatalism, resistance to *futurum*. Voices rise up above the din of events that cry out for more than what historicity alone can deliver. These voices cry out for judgment against the existing social order, while anticipating a future social order that is cured of its evils, healed of its wounds, perfected in its delivery of fulfillment. Why did Zoroaster in ancient Persia dream of paradise? Why did Chinese Buddhists look forward to the Pure Land? Why did disciples of Plato appeal to an eternal standard of justice and an ideal republic? Why did the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 11) envision a “peaceable kingdom” where a lion will lie down with a lamb and a human baby can walk among wild animals without fear? Why does the New Testament promise an everlasting kingdom of God? The

8. Ken Gilbert, “The Universal Breakthroughs of Big History: Developing a Unified Theory,” in *Teaching and Researching Big History: Exploring a New Scholarly Field*, ed. Leonid Grinin, David Baker, Esther Quaedackers, and Audrey Korotayev (Volgograd, Russia: Uchitel, 2014), 122–46, at 128–29.

future presupposed in all these visions is *adventus*, the advent of a new reality that transforms the present reality. *Adventus* goes beyond what *futurum* can deliver; it promises redemption, healing, renewal. Anticipations of both *futurum* and *adventus* can be found in our chronicles of the human gaze at history. Anticipations of *adventus* precipitate human self-understanding according to the third meaning of *history* mentioned above: human beings are temporal but they look forward to what is eternal. The context of remembering the past and anticipating a future conditioned by eternity gives our historical life meaning, ultimate meaning.

Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Consciousness

Recall the first two meanings of *history* mentioned above: history is what happened plus history is the chronicle and interpretation of what happened. History is both what happened and the story of what happened. Among the contingent events to be chronicled are jumps in human consciousness. Human consciousness has not always been what we today presume it to be. What goes on within the human mind has changed over time. This change cannot be described as a gradual evolution. Rather, the history of human consciousness is punctuated with leaps in cognition, leaps in knowingness, and leaps in self-awareness.

In order to map the temporal terrain, we will divide the history of human consciousness into three eras: premodern, modern, and postmodern. The first era, the premodern, is subdivided into three periods: spoken language, written language, and the Axial Period. Today's concept of history, which depends on writing, was born in the premodern era, just prior to the Axial Age. The modern era, which is characterized principally by critical consciousness, is divided into two periods: the rational and the relativistic. The rational period watched the triumph of science and technology, whereas the relativistic period redefined history as the collection of multiple culturally specific perspectives. The emerging postmodern era has not yet arrived; it would be premature to subdivide it into periods. There are, however, three distinguishable side-by-side themes in the postmodern mind: quantum contingency, holism, and deconstruction.

You the reader may feel that a bucket of jig saw puzzle pieces has just been dumped on you. Shortly these puzzle pieces will get picked up and put in place. In the meantime, here is the take-away point: each period within each era represents a threshold crossing for consciousness, a leap from more compact thinking to more differentiated thinking. The type of consciousness of one period is seldom if ever lost; rather, each new period adds something without deleting what had come before.

One leap that will draw special attention in this book, *God in Cosmic History*, is the axial leap, which took place in some city-states during the first millennium before the common era. Some scholars refer to this as the *axial*

breakthrough. The breakthrough insight is that ephemeral physical history (intra-cosmic history) is distinguishable from a transcendent eternal (supra-cosmic) reality. What people experience in the physical world is material, temporal, changeable, and subject to death. The reality that transcends earthly experience is spiritual, eternal, unchangeable, and life-giving. The former is called *history* according to its third meaning, whereas the latter is thought by axial experiencers to be the ultimate reality, which transcends history. Our axial ancestors drilled deep into the interior of the human psyche and asked, can we find ultimate reality within the human soul? Can we find a window open to the infinite while housed within finite human thinking? Can we envision an end or goal to history that will judge and renew the tragedy and injustice that has befallen the creatures within history? Does eternal life promise more than temporal death?

This leap in human self-understanding may be termed a *differentiation in human consciousness*. This differentiation in human consciousness took place during the premodern Axial Period in three regions: China, India, and the Mesopotamian-Mediterranean region. The breakthrough erupted into the grand religious traditions we now know as Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Prior to crossing the axial threshold, human consciousness combined three dimensions of reality into a compact conceptual arrangement: self, society, and cosmos. The subsequent axial mind was shocked by its insight into a transcendent reality that reordered self, society, and cosmos. In fact, this axial shock made intra-cosmic history appear alienated or estranged from ultimate reality. The ordering of self and society, according to axial experiencers, is grounded in a supra-cosmic order that transcends the mundane. This supra-cosmic order becomes the ideal for which humans strive and by which humans judge themselves when missing the mark.

In this axial perspective three salient features appear. First, ultimate reality is mysterious, divine, and supra-cosmic. Second, a transcendent model of a just and peaceful social order judges the historical social order as deficient, estranged, and self-destructive. Third, a deepened sense of the individual self produces an inner soul with immediate access to the transcendent mystery and to the vision of a just society. The value of the self is discovered in its immediate relationship to the ultimate. Axial consciousness is much more differentiated than the pre-axial consciousness that preceded it in history.

Philosopher Charles Taylor astutely describes the axial leap in thinking as “dis-embedding.” The compact human consciousness we inherited from our pre-axial forbearers is thoroughly embedded in the ordinary world. For hunter-gatherers and early farmers, the goal of human striving was species survival at minimum and human flourishing at maximum. The axial breakthrough to transcendence during the premodern city-state period designates, first, “going beyond the human world or the cosmos.” But, second, “it can mean the discovery or

invention of a new standpoint from which the existing order in the cosmos or society can be criticized or denounced.”⁹ Post-axial thinkers live simultaneously in two realms, so to speak, the mundane and the transcendent.

The axial insight inherited by modern Europe and North America comes in two forms, the rational form from Greece and the prophetic form from Israel. As rational, the breakthrough insight is that all of physical nature and human nature is grounded in a divine structure of reason. As prophetic, the breakthrough is the realization that God’s order of justice is not the historical order of this world. To grasp the divine mind is to think rationally, and to grasp the divine will is to render judgment against the status quo. God’s future will drastically alter what has been the case in history. God promises transformation, redemption, and salvation, according to adherents to the various biblical traditions. Axial reasoning regarding nature and axial prophecy regarding future change contributed decisively to the rise of modern science. In the paragraphs that follow, we will trace the crossing of this threshold.

Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Consciousness

| ERAS | PERIODS | TYPES OF CONSCIOUSNESS |
|-----------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| Premodern 200,000 years ago | 1. spoken language 2. written language | compact |
| | 3. axial | differentiated |
| Modern 1650 CE to present | 1. rational (1650–present) 2. relativistic (1800–present) | critical |
| Post-Modern 1900 CE to present | 1. quest for meaning of quantum contingency (1920–present) 2. quest for holism (1920–present) 3. quest for deconstructionist relativity (1970–present) | post-critical |

Another leap, the leap to the modern Western world, is also given special attention in the pages to follow. Key to this leap is critical consciousness. This leap feels like a liberation of the present era from the precedents of the past. Modern thinking takes many forms: objectifying what had been subjective,

9. Charles Taylor, “What Was the Axial Revolution?,” in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, ed. Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 30–46, at 30.

scientizing what had been personal, secularizing what had been sacred, naturalizing what had been enchanted, democratizing what had been authoritarian. At the heart of this critical consciousness is the ability to hold two contradictory thoughts together while bracketing out preference or commitment. This is important: critical consciousness includes the capacity to hold together two opposing thoughts and consider their relative merits before making a judgment. Modern people are particularly good at this. This entire book is an exercise in critical thinking.

Within the modern era, two periods appear. The first period extends the rational insight of the axial breakthrough in Greece, namely, the insight that reality both seen and unseen obeys the laws of reason. This commitment to reason is responsible for the rocket-like launch of modern science. The launch of science was followed quickly by the concept of historical or cultural relativity, however. The key doctrine of relativity is that people in different historical or cultural contexts interpret things differently. All people interpret contextually. The meaning of the *said* is dependent on the *unsaid* specific to the speaker's cultural context. The shift from reason to relativity did not mark a departure from rational science, only an augment. Both reason and relativity in the modern era share critical consciousness.

These four punctuations in the history of human consciousness are marked by significant leaps: the leap to spoken language, to written language, to the axial insight, and to the cultural acceptance of critical consciousness. These leaps are now part of human history. These past leaps live on in the effective history all modern people share in their library of the *unsaid*.

What about the future? Modern Western and even global culture is witnessing restlessness with modern critical consciousness. Spiritual prophets are pining for the emergence of a post-modern and post-critical holism, in some cases even a retrieval of mystical awareness. The modern human psyche seeks an integration of the self with the other, an integration of science with the arts, an integration of technology with meaning, an integration of society with morality. Could postmodern consciousness deliver this integration?

Modern people who are hungry for postmodernity miss the loss of premodern embedded consciousness and frequently bypass language for non-linguistic yoga or meditation in order to retrieve immediate consciousness. The modern removal from embeddedness in the world by critical consciousness leaves a cold feeling, a yearning to become reintegrated. The pursuit of immediate consciousness becomes identified with a quest for holism. What we see here among our postmodern peers is an already differentiated critical consciousness yearning to de-differentiate. The new holism is not here yet, even though it appears on the Christmas list of today's disgruntled moderns.

Holistic reintegration is only one item on the postmodernist's wish list. There are three postmodern quests: (1) seeking for re-integrated wholeness, (2) discerning the import of the rediscovery of contingency in quantum physics,

and (3) deconstructing the modern mind by expanding the role of contextual relativity. Of these three postmodern quests, only quantum contingency is discussed in this text.

The interpretation of history in this book, *God in Cosmic History*, is influenced principally by the work of three scholars: sociologist Robert Bellah (1927–2013), philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901–1985), and theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965). According to Bellah, human history is grounded in natural history. “History goes all the way back and any distinction between history and prehistory is arbitrary. That means that biological history—that is, evolution—is part of the human story all the way through.”¹⁰ The effective history of the concept of evolution will be given extensive attention in the chapters to come.

According to Voegelin, human consciousness has differentiated over the millennia, and this differentiation is essential to history itself. Prior to the axial breakthrough, our ancestors did not enjoy a rich and complex interior life. A new depth of soul appeared during the Axial Period; and this new insight made civilization ready for the appearance of the modern world. “Consciousness differentiates in a process called history; and in the process of history [humanity] discovers reality to be engaged in a movement toward the Beyond of its present structure. A cosmos that moves from its divine Beginning toward a divine Beyond of itself is mysterious indeed.”¹¹ Key to the differentiation of consciousness is awareness of a powerful transcendent reality that promises a future different from the past. Historical consciousness requires more than merely the chronicle of past contingent events; it also requires reliance upon a transcendent ground combined with anticipation of newness in the future.

Systematic theologian Paul Tillich, more poignantly than Bellah or Voegelin, interrogates history to locate the question of God. He locates God in the human search for ultimate reality. “God is the answer to the question implied in [human] finitude; [*God*] is the name for that which concerns [humanity] ultimately.”¹² Like a prospector, wherever the dimension of ultimacy sparkles, people will dig for the divine gold.

Asking the God Question

Is Cosmic History a story that tells itself? Is God the author of the cosmic story? These are the questions that orient this book.

10. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution from the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), xi.

11. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 5 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956–1987), 4:19.

12. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963), 1:211, italics added.

Within history the question of God arises in two modes. First, history as the chronicle of events includes some events wherein answers to the question of God were proposed. Pre-axial religious worldviews included gods and goddesses within the cosmos as foragers, farmers, and early citizens perceived them, and formulated their worldview in mythical and narrative symbolism. Post-axial religious traditions—Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and others—also belong within any account of world history. Because our ancestors asked the question of God, this question becomes a topic for historical study. “The human idea of God has a history,” observes religious scholar Karen Armstrong, “since it has always meant something slightly different to each group of people who have used it at various points of time.”¹³

The historian of religion may wish to report and examine traditional claims regarding divine reality, to rethink these claims, so to speak. This study will rethink the question of God as it arose during the Axial Period approximately 2500 years ago. We will give special attention to the purported axial breakthrough, because the ultimate reality reported by axial seers and sages is transcendent, beyond the cosmos and beyond the history of the cosmos. It is also more real than the cosmos.

In the first mode, the cosmic historian will chronicle human answers to the God question. “Human experience of transcendence has been a fact of life,” says Armstrong; therefore, it should be included among the topics historians chronicle.¹⁴ As Rick Warner mentioned in this book’s foreword, many world historians do chronicle past answers to the God question. Big historians to date, however, have sidelined this component of human history.

In the second mode, the cosmic historian will pursue the God question by interrogating history. The cosmic historian will give history a cross-examination, so to speak. Such a cross-examination could only come from contemporary critical consciousness, from our willingness to question assumptions and draw out implications.

As we have just hinted, one of the reasons for selecting the Axial Period for special attention is that sages and seers in diverse parts of the world at that time claimed to have experienced transcendent reality, an ultimate reality that many of them termed *God*. Nothing short of ultimate reality counts as divine in the axial and post-axial spiritual quest. “Only if God is ultimate reality,” writes Tillich, “only then can [God] be the object of surrender, obedience, and assent. Faith in anything which has only preliminary reality is idolatrous.”¹⁵ Treating something less than ultimate as if it were ultimate is idolatry, says Tillich. The

13. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), xx.

14. *Ibid.*, xxi.

15. Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 59.

cosmic historian must interrogate history to identify the dimension of ultimacy and the practice of idolatry.

Neither the big historian nor the world historian routinely asks the question of ultimacy, even though world historians are more likely to chronicle those who did ask the question of ultimacy in the past. The self-appointed missions of world historians and big historians differ in another orientation. World History is a product of the second period within modernity, relativism. What concerns the world historian is understanding different cultures in different contexts.

Big History, in contrast, returns to the earlier period within the Enlightenment, the rationalist period. Big History considers itself scientific. Because big historians think of themselves as scientific, the history they construct usually focuses on energy flows, natural processes, and the way nature has influenced human political or social organization. Like other scientists, the scholarly method of big historians is tacitly materialistic and naturalistic. *Materialism* is the assumption that our reality is made up of matter and energy—that is, the only reality to be investigated is material reality. *Naturalism* is the assumption that all reality is natural, only natural. No supernatural or *supranatural*¹⁶ dimension to reality exists or, if it does exist, it does not count in scientific measurements. The compass big historians follow points toward secularism, naturalism, materialism, and scientism. Like other scientists, big historians look at what is physical, not what is metaphysical.

In order to ask the question of God, therefore, one must supplement what big historians and world historians presuppose. This book will pose supra-cosmic questions that most big historians and world historians refrain from asking. Posing supra-cosmic questions makes the cosmos itself look different, even more magnificent and more awe-inspiring.

Review Questions

1. What is World History? Big History? Cosmic History?
2. Compare and contrast the four meanings of *history*.
3. Why should we ask the God question within the context of Cosmic History?
4. Compare and contrast premodern, modern, and postmodern consciousness.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you provide examples of effective history from your own experience?
2. Do you use the word *contingency* very often? What does it refer to?

16. To be *supranatural* is to be above nature. This is a more accurate term than “supernatural,” which could mean natural plus.

3. If the course of all events would be determined in advance and nothing would be contingent, would we still have history?
4. The Cosmic Historian should ask the question of God for two reasons. Which of these two reasons do you believe is the most important?

Additional Resources

Print Sources

Christian, David, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin. *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2014.

This is the single most important text to date in the field of Big History. In the opening pages we learn what the big historians think about Big History. Notice how the concept of Big History begins with the big bang story of origin and then compares it with mythical stories of origin told by our ancestors. The central point of the concept of Big History is to nest human history within nature's history. Big bang cosmology is the biggest nest scientists can think of.

Dunn, Ross E., and Laura J. Mitchell. *Panorama: A World History*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2015.

Familiarize yourself with the field of World History by looking at this volume, a leading textbook. Do you think it should stand alone or should it find a nest within the larger Big History project?

Web Sources

History.com, <http://www.history.com/shows/big-history>.

This site provides information about sixteen videos on Big History topics available from iTunes and provides a free study guide for each.

International Big History Association, <http://www.ibhanet.org/>.

This site provides information about the field of Big History by big historians.

World History Association, <http://www.thewha.org/>.

This association, founded in 1982, promotes historical studies that focus on human community as a whole.