

The Study of Religion and *The Dawn of Everything*

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ABSTRACT

The publication of David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* in 2021 ignited interest in anarchist legacies across the sciences. Here, Graeber and Wengrow's attempt to reframe popular historical conceptions of political and economic progress is addressed in relation to religious studies. Drawing from a range of theoretical perspectives and concerns, the four commentaries explore some of the ways in which Graeber and Wengrow's ideas can enrich the study of religion.

KEYWORDS

Religion; Pluriverse; the State; History; Anarchism

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Introduction

Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* takes on the West's entwined and taken-for-granted histories of the state and of capital. Just as Freud insisted that the libido had to be sacrificed on the altar of civilization, so following Rousseau and Hobbes, freedom had to be sacrificed on the altars of order, population density and societal complexity. If early humans lived in egalitarian, mobile bands of hunter gatherers, that early freedom evaporated as soon as they became farmers and urbanites, obligated stage by historical stage first to chiefs, monarchs and priests, then to politicians and bureaucrats (and today to debt and the algorithm). It is precisely these origin myths, these linear just-so-stories for which inequality is natural and inevitable, that Graeber and Wengrow seek to unravel.

Graeber and Wengrow are heirs to a long tradition of anarchist scholarship in the social and human sciences from Peter Kropotkin to Pierre Clastres among many others. Rejecting the kind of uncritical, popular and 'big' historiography of Jared Diamond, Francis Fukuyama, Yuval Noah Harari and Steven Pinker, they argue that human history is testament to all kinds of self-conscious experimentation in social, economic, political and indeed religious forms. The archaeological and anthropological record furnishes them with examples wherein peoples 'have moved back and forth fluidly between different social arrangements, assembling and dismantling hierarchies on a regular basis' (2021: 115), and they call this process of social assembly and disassembly, 'playing games' (ibid). The problem, as they see it, is that somehow humanity got stuck: 'why', they ask, 'after millennia of constructing and disassembling forms of hierarchy, did *Homo sapiens* ... allow permanent and intractable systems of inequality to take root?' (2021: 119).

The book has already been reviewed extensively by anthropologists including a bad-tempered piece in the pages of *Anthropology Today* by (2022) by Arjun Appadurai, and Brian Fagan and Nadia Durrani's extremely detailed assessment in *Reviews in Anthropology* (2021). Its reception among archaeologists has also been mixed, for example the highlighting of some of Graeber and Wengrow's more tendentious claims about Minoan Crete, notably their suggestion that 'pretty much all the available evidence ... suggests a system of female political rule – effectively a theocracy ... governed by a college of priestesses' (2021: 438) which ignores a complex and ambiguous evidence base. *The Dawn of Everything* has also been reviewed in *The Guardian*, (23/10/21), *The Wall Street Journal* (10/12/21), *The New York Review of Books* (16/12/21), the *Washington Examiner* (30/12/21) and the *Fortean Times* (September 2022) by luminaries including Kwame Anthony Appiah, David Priestland and Varadarajan Tunku, and it has also been reviewed by the anarcho-primitivist philosopher John Zerzan and the anarchist anthropologist Chris Knight. These reviews have also been mixed, focusing on the speculative nature of some of Graeber and Wengrow's claims and the suggestion that they themselves are engaged in their own anarchist myth making and big historiography. What follows derives from a roundtable organised by Paul-François Tremlett for BASR 2022 that brought together Graham Harvey, David G. Robertson and Carole M. Cusack for a lively and critical engagement with *The Dawn of Everything* and its significance for religious studies.

Religion in the Pluriverse (Graham Harvey)

Without friction there can be no productive movement (Tsing, 2004) – although not all frictions are universally positive or beneficial. In *The Dawn of Everything* Graeber and Wengrow (2021) survey frictions including but not limited to those between hierarchy and democracy, domination and equality, colonialism and indigeneity, cities and neighbourhoods. Much of this is relevant to the study of religions as well as to Graeber and Wengrow's contributions to rethinking history and anthropology. It is not only the subject matter of academic disciplines but also the practice of scholarship that involves frictions. My contribution to these reflections inspired by *The Dawn of Everything* entails a short summary of what most interests me in Graeber and Wengrow's book, followed by a few thoughts about synergies with trends in the study of religion(s), including a note about the problematic lack of textbooks that escape the world religions paradigm. A quotation from Richard King leads me to use my favourite one-liner from Bruno Latour as an invitation to consider approaches to religion as defined in modernity. This leads me to consider the impact of the Westphalian constitution of States, religion and politics on the disciplining of religion(s) and of the study of religion(s).

Graeber and Wengrow's challenge to their own disciplines involves inviting or inciting readers to imagine that the more egalitarian societies they find everywhere and everywhen are the norm rather than exceptions. They demonstrate, for example, that although authoritarian rulers and social systems are commonplace throughout human evolution, so too are large communities committed to what can be encapsulated as "mutual aid". They argue that resistance to hierarchies has proved productive and that cities have been and can be decentralised and democratic. Rather than being 'random bumps on a road that leads inexorably to states and empires' (2021, 524), they contend that more egalitarian societies and movements challenge the dominant myth of progress and encourage optimism about increasing freedoms.

There are synergies between trends within the study of religion(s) and Graeber and Wengrow's effort to refocus history and anthropology. We can apply their emerging model, for example, to the way in which the 'world religions paradigm' emphasised hierarchies while misguidedly marginalising lived realities. In contrast, by turning to 'vernacular' or 'lived religion' we are enabled to engage with what people actually do when they do something that they or we (scholars of religion) can label 'religion'. As Leonard Primiano (1995) pointed out: lived or vernacular religion is the only kind there is. Attending to the 'ordinary' doing of religion might, for example, consider the drinking of tea as well as of eucharistic wine – or, in some cases, avoiding either or both – and will privilege the reception of texts and teachings over putative authorial or elite intentions. Alongside this encouragement of focused ethnographic approaches, perhaps Graeber and Wengrow's work will aid the discovery or recovery of 'religion' as another resistant form of mutual aid.

This is all well and good but scholars interested in religion(s) continue struggling to ween students, differently disciplined colleagues, the media and lawyers off approaches that privilege 'official' or 'authoritative' presentations of religion(s). Our textbooks typically still start with divinities, founders, texts and transcendence. They establish foundations on which it is hard to build a more critical knowledge and understanding. Again, not all frictions are positive or beneficial. But Graeber and

Wengrow's work chimes with the ambitions of colleagues like Richard King who argues that

there is a vitally important role for the comparative study of religion in the modern academy as the primary scholarly location for the exercise of a truly comparative humanities – that is, an informed, multivocal, and critical reflection on what it is to be human and what it might be to be modern (King, 2017: 18).

I suspect that other disciplines might compete to be that 'primary scholarly location' – and that social sciences might claim to be field-leaders in the project of reflecting on humanity and modernity. Nonetheless, King's point should rally scholars of religion to pursue the role he envisages for us.

That said, perhaps the study of religion has been too modern – especially when faced with structures that label some religious people as 'extremists' for not being modern enough. Despite Bruno Latour's famous assertion that 'we have never been modern' (1993) he continued to write about 'Moderns' to indicate that considerable efforts are expanded in trying to be(come) modern. In this case, 'modern' is not a neutral temporal marker but a reference to a project with globalising imperial ambitions. It is a shorthand for what John Law called the 'one-world world' (2015) and Isabel Stengers called the 'world-destroying machine' (2018: 86). It typically includes a construction of 'what it is to be human' that seeks to impose a mesh of dualisms on the messy reality of the 'pluriverse' (a world in which many worlds are possible, not all of which are sustainable or just) (Marcos, 1996; De la Cadena and Mario Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2020).

A key moment in the evolution of modernity – and, in particular, of the constitution of religion in modernity – was encapsulated in the processes, texts and dissemination of the Peace of Westphalia (1648). This is not to ignore the force of Gurinder Bhabra's (2007) argument against defining modernity as a Eurocentric change in the world, or her eloquent evocation of the 'connected histories' within which modernity (and colonialism, postcolonialism and much more) evolved and evolves. Rather, the Peace of Westphalia provides one key moment, connected with many others, in which modernity's 'religion' emerged and began to define how religions should be done. Briefly put, religion has been constrained as an increasingly interiorised private pursuit to fit the purposes of modern Nation States. This 'religion' is meant to be severed from politics, citizenship and other public domains.

It is this flavour of religion that is central to the world religions paradigm and a problematic irritant when it infects the more critical project of engaging with 'lived religion'. That is to say, many religious people have not signed up to the Westphalian project but have continued to demonstrate loyalties to transnational communities for whom, for example, things as seemingly simple as dress codes and food codes are not purely private and individual matters. Terms like 'extremism' and 'radicalisation' can be applied not only to those who commit acts of violence without the sanction of Nation State institutions, but also to those for whom participation in religious communities may be more than 'licensed insanity' (Bowker, 1987) or at least 'licensed impracticality' or a hobby (Harvey, 2015).

More is involved here than adding another friction between divergent social and political orders to those collected by Graeber and Wengrow. It is not only the subject

matter of the study of religions ('religion' perhaps) but also our scholarly practice that deserves scrutiny for its fit with or challenge to one-world modernity. It is not only religious people who are required to sign up (even without knowing it) to the privatising of religion, we scholars of religion have too often accepted our marginalisation from politics. Chris Hartney's assertion regarding the study of 'indigenous religions' is relevant more widely within the study of religion field:

we are committing a seriously political and mythic act by claiming that, through the term 'religion,' we can examine only the non-political aspects of indigenous systems. To do so is to remain trapped in the myth of being modern (Hartney, 2017: 224).

Graeber and Wengrow push history and anthropology towards more participative and constructive critical engagement with processes that limit or expand democracy, so the study of religions can contribute importantly to a more informed, multivocal, and critical reflection on what religion might be in a world in which many worlds are possible.

Religion, History and the Coloniality of Being (David G. Robertson)

The Dawn of Everything is, obviously, not a book about religion. That said, it came as a surprise to find that there wasn't very much religion in it at all, given that it concerns pre-modern societies which are still too-often presented in popular histories as being saturated with spirituality, living in sacred harmony with rainforests, passing down rituals unchanged through generations without number, a primordial childlike Eden preserved as though in amber. But that does not mean that it is not therefore useful reading for scholars of religion. Reading it makes it clear that archaeology is facing some of the same issues as Religious Studies – specifically, that progress made over the past three or four decades have not made it to the public consciousness, nor in most cases to our colleagues in other disciplines. In both cases, we find instead the persistence of a teleological myth which serves to justify the colonial order by presenting Western modernity as the inevitable endpoint of history. In this short response, I want to unpack those similarities a little further, and suggest that *The Dawn of Everything* might serve as a model for a new critical, even anarchist, history of religions that exposes, rather than mystifies, the socio-political order that Sylvia Wynter calls 'the coloniality of being' (2003).

Religion, Money and the State

A central theme of *The Dawn of Everything*, and indeed Graeber's work as a whole, is that money, debt and property are not by-products of modernity, but rather an essential part of how modernity is constituted:

this obsession with property rights as the basis of society, and as a foundation of social power, is a peculiarly Western phenomenon – indeed, if 'the West' has any real meaning, it would probably refer to that legal and intellectual tradition which conceives society in those terms (2021: 362).

Graeber and Wengrow's argument should be read, I suspect, as part of a growing wave of historical and political writings is the growing weight of evidence that the capitalist-liberal project has reached an impasse – or perhaps its endpoint. Adam

Curtis' magnum opus, *Can't Get You Out of my Head* (2021), tells a similar story, albeit on a much narrower historical scale. The evidence is there in the reversal of living standards and breaking of the post-War social contract, the breakdown of the liberal-democratic political order (including the eclipsing of US and UK hegemony), the increasing instability of the colonial knowledge order through the democratisation of subaltern voices through new forms of media, and above all, the climate crisis, which is both the product of and the assassin of capitalism. The public and the political class in Europe and the US know the system is failing, but can no longer think without it, or past it, around it. As Graeber and Wengrow put it, 'we came to be trapped in such tight conceptual shackles that we can no longer even imagine the possibility of reinventing ourselves' (2021: 9). Even Francis Fukuyama has had to admit that this 'history' thing might not be done with us quite yet (2018).

Graeber and Wengrow are concerned primarily with the development of the liberal state; but as Timothy Fitzgerald (2007; 2011), Sylvia Wynter (2003) and others have argued, the state is part of a larger order which is constituted through classifications including race, gender and the religion/secular binary. Religion is, as much as capitalism and hierarchical states, also part of the matrix of modernity that we read back into the past and view as an inevitable part of groups' development. Isn't this exactly what is meant whenever we (still) talk about 'the developing world'? The rise of capitalist liberal societies goes together with a worldview in which there is a strict and legally protected separation between a secular realm of politics and property and a private realm of revealed, transcendent religions. Indeed, as I have recently argued, religion acts as a sort of 'pressure valve' through which certain forms of knowledge can be accommodated within liberal modernity, so long as they do not challenge political power (Robertson, 2022).

Religion is, then, a principal component of the coloniality of being. It was therefore surprising how little religion was a part of *The Dawn of Everything*. Surprising, yes, but not perhaps a problem – the fact that such a history can be written is itself an indication of how limited and culturally specific the category is. Perhaps when we are not telling the just-so story of the modern liberal capitalist state, the secular/religious dichotomy becomes less necessary.

One striking example was their description of Olmec society (1500-1000 BCE) in which ball games formed the central hub around which the society revolved (2021: 383-386). The moral order derives from the game, and the head of state and other functionaries are (or at least are portrayed as) sportspersons, rather than nobility or priests, and ball games were the manner in which disputes were settled. Their cities were built around ball-courts, even after they had lost their practical purpose and become ceremonial and symbolic, just like our churches have. Even their creation narrative and their epic stories like the *Popul Vuh* centre on ball games. A functionalist analysis, à la Durkheim, famously interprets sport as functionally equivalent to religion, but here we are not invited to find the religion supposedly underlying their society. Those functions which political theologians see as the origin of political structures here originate in *sport*. Clearly, this is an opportunity for new ways of thinking about the sorts of phenomena we think of as religion, and their relationship to the state.

Either way, when religion did appear in the book, it was treated in a disappointingly unsophisticated manner, and presented without critique. Shamans pop up a number

of times in the context of the Americas, and the authors refer to Karl Jasper's 'Axial Age', describing it as "the period that saw the birth of all today's world religions" (2021: 450). They do at least have the presence of mind to call out the fascistic tendencies of Eliade's distinction between 'historical' and 'traditional' societies – even if the book's title was drawn from his work. In one section they state that 'the native word for "ritual" in most Northwest Coast languages actually translates as "fraud" or "illusion"' (2021: 201) – which immediately led me to wonder, in what sense is it the word for ritual? Why 'religionise' it, and contribute to de-historicising a category that belongs rightly only to European modernity?

This is a reminder that we have made little headway in communicating the progress made in the study of religion over the last thirty-odd years to scholars in other disciplines. It is imperative that we break out of our disciplinary box and replace the still-dominant History of Religions model with something more properly critical and historical. Reading the work of scholars in other fields is part of that – not only will it tell us the mistakes they are making, but it might show us that the challenges they are facing are similar to ours. Importantly, it might show us how they are dealing with them.

A New History of 'Religion'

As Alex Henley recently wrote, getting the critical study of religion into the mainstream of social science has proved inordinately difficult – let alone getting it into popular discourse on religion (Henley, 2022) (as an aside, wait until the ideologues getting triggered about critical race and critical gender find out there's something called 'critical religion'). Members of NAASR (the North American Association for the Study of Religion) have instigated an impressive program of creating texts aimed at undergraduates that apply the critical perspective to material that teachers are already teaching, such as *Religion in 50 Terms* (key terms), *Fieldnotes in the Critical Study of Religion* ('classic' theorists), and the ...*In 5 Minutes* series (specific traditions). These texts, along with the podcasts produced by the Religious Studies Project, have done much towards ensuring that the next generation of scholars of religion – and, maybe, some from other social sciences – have internalised the critique that seemed so revolutionary when it emerged in the late 1980s and early 90s. But getting these ideas to the public has proven far more difficult. The reasons are complex, but include the combative and soundbite-driven media sphere of the past quarter century, the centrality of religion in identity politics, the entanglement of religious institutions in multiple levels of governance (including funding bodies), and in part, the still-pervasive idea that 'religious talk' is something that only religious people can or should engage in.

I suggest that the success of *The Dawn of Everything* and other recent 'new history' bestsellers such as Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads* offer a way to sidestep some of those barriers. We need to produce a new history of religion, a popular grand history to consolidate that paradigm shift in the consciousness of the public. That would mean rising to Graeber and Wengrow's challenge to write a different kind of history:

A truly radical account, perhaps, would retell human history from the perspective of the times and places in between. In that sense ... for the most part, we are telling the same old story; but we are at least trying to see what happens when we drop the teleological habit of thought, which makes us scour the ancient world

for embryonic versions of our modern nation states. We are considering, instead, the possibility that – when looking at those times and places usually taken to mark “the birth of the state” – we may in fact be seeing how very different kinds of power crystallize (2021: 382).

It would need to drop our teleological theories – the Axial Age, secularisation, privatisation, new religions – and the quest to find religion in the pre-modern and non-industrial world. Instead, it would present a history of how *the category* ‘religion’ emerged out of the matrix of European power and became seen as universal through the colonial project. In other words, a Big History that tells the story not without religions as historical entities, but without religion as a universal category of human societies.

I have been thinking about how such a volume might be approached for some time now. It would, fundamentally, be a history of how we got to the point of seeing religion as a fundamental category of human existence. It would revolve around two key moments – the establishment of ‘religion’ in the wake of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, and the establishment of ‘religi~~o~~n~~s~~’ (plural) during the colonial period. Where I have stalled is on how to deal with everything before that – but *The Dawn of Everything* might offer a solution. If we start with that moment of colonial encounter, when the framework of liberal capitalism (including private property, religion, gender, class) was applied to all those people who were managing just fine without it, we can then consider the different kinds of organisation they had, and how their practices and worldviews were made to fit our framework, with more or less success.

As was the case with *The Dawn of Everything*, most of the research has been done already, but it needs brought together, presented in its totality, with specialist terminology consolidated and simplified, and stripped of the internecine debates. And it needs to be presented without apology or qualification. The task is not to offer a polite corrective or alternative perspective to our academic colleagues, but to present a brand-new story – just as exciting as the old one, but which no-one has ever heard, and which has a great deal to say about the multiple crises we find ourselves living through today.

The Mask of Political Practice

Let’s turn this inward. What if we scholars approached religion as Graeber and Wengrow approach the state? I don’t think it would be so hard – in fact, the point is so similar that we can take passages from *The Dawn of Everything* and swap the word ‘religion’ for the ‘the state’ without significantly changing the meaning. For example:

[RELIGION] is “not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is... Where we once assumed “civilization” and “[RELIGION]” to be conjoined entities that came down to us as a historical package (take it or leave it, forever), what history now demonstrates is that these terms actually refer to complex amalgams of elements which have entirely different origins and which are currently in the process of drifting apart. Seen this way, to rethink the basic premises of social evolution is to rethink the very idea of [RELIGION] itself ... (2021: 431)

Because here's the thing – the anarchist study of religion already exists. It's the critical study of religion. Anarchism today is typically understood as a rejection of all forms of hierarchical power, and this is exactly what the critical project, in all its forms, seeks to do – to uncover hidden dynamics of coercion, and so challenge the hegemony that facilitates their unchallenged continuation.

A recent tweet from Russell McCutcheon put something into pithy words that I have discussed with colleagues many times over the last few years. If religion is not a universal, cross-cultural category, then what use is the academic study of religion, once we have made that case? For McCutcheon, and myself, it is because 'the so-called study of religion is the study of techniques used to universalize, essentialized, denaturalize, de-historicize, etc., and thus to authenticate and authorize in a competitive economy of power and identity'.¹ I don't have a horse in the 'religion' race, but I can think of no better example with which to unpack the relationship between the individual and the society they live in. That is to say, Religious Studies has an important contribution to make, even without 'religion'.

The seeming permanence, immutability and unassailability of 'religion', 'civilisation', 'the state' are masks of the political practice which I've referred to as 'the coloniality of being'. The critical project has led us to the point where, as Graeber and Wengrow put it,

what once appeared unassailable axioms, the stable points around which our self-knowledge is organized, are scattering like mice. What is the purpose of all this new knowledge, if not to reshape our conceptions of who we are and what we might yet become? (2021: 525).

Reshaping those conceptions is exactly why we need an anarchist study of religions. The field needs to let go of some of our assumptions in order to discover what we might yet become.

***The Dawn of Everything* and "Big History": General Theories, Particular Facts, and Revisiting Evidence (Carole M. Cusack)**

After the death of Mircea Eliade in 1986 the academic field of Religious Studies splintered across multiple fault-lines, including: tensions between theological (faith-based, internal) perspectives and secular (critical, external) perspectives; intellectual struggles between positivist (accepting the validity of historical and contemporary textual and other sources) and deconstructivist (sceptical about the validity of evidence and certain methodological frameworks) approaches to the study of religions; and the relative value of broad narratives and specific instances in establishing credibility as a scholarly authority. This article discusses David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) in light of the emergence of 'Global History' and 'Big History' and the possibilities for reshaping the academic study of religion that these perspectives offer. This approach harnesses current research trends to craft new narratives through the reassessment of evidence. *The Dawn of Everything* does not address religion directly, yet its revisionist view of colonial encounters between Christian Europeans and Indigenous cultures, for example, is a

¹ <https://twitter.com/McCutcheonSays/status/1611473918207971330>

powerful inversion of common assumptions, revealing Indigenous agency and European Christian co-option of Indigenous worldviews. The full impact of this rethinking, in tandem with new perspectives from within Religious Studies, could transform the study of religion in the twenty-first century.

American anthropologist, anarchist, and activist David Graeber (1961–2020) and English archaeologist David Wengrow (b. 1952) worked on *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) for more than a decade. Their purpose was to thoroughly overturn two views of human history that dominate much academic thinking and writing. First, that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), which places hunter-gatherers in small groups living a prelapsarian existence destroyed by the Neolithic Revolution (agriculture, urbanisation, and literacy, which all resulted in forms of regulation). Second, the view of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) that prehistoric human existence was characterised by fear and ignorance, “the life of man [was] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes, 2002 [1651]: 96). Graeber and Wengrow aver that their dismissal of tired storylines that treated non-Western humans as childish and inferior results in a more accurate, more *interesting* narrative of human *equality* that restores Indigenous peoples’ dignity in colonial encounters, and posits past social systems as worthy in themselves, rather than as steps toward a known *telos*, where the West is now (Hawkins, 2011). This implies, though it is not explicitly stated as an aim, the rethinking of the ‘superiority’ of Christianity (a concomitant of White colonialism), and its relegation to the status of human cultural product (a crucial step in the academic study of religion).

The Dawn of Everything has been reviewed positively (see Deresiewicz 2021; Priestland 2021 as a representative sample), though some have taken issue with its ‘big picture’ approach and foregrounding of what is perceived to be a political agenda. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, argued that Graeber and Wengrow presented false binary choices and misrepresented some of their sources, and David A. Bell rejected their argument that the Enlightenment was influenced by (if not heavily dependent on) Indigenous thinkers, in particular Kandiaronk (c. 1649–1701), Chief of the Wendat in the territory between Lakes Huron and Michigan, whom they identify as the original of Adario in Baron de Lahontan’s *Dialogues* (Anthony, 2022). Lahontan is credited with creating the ‘noble savage’, but Susan Pinette argues that his depiction is nuanced and openly rejects the perspective of the Jesuit missionaries, saying that ‘Adario concludes by arguing that Christianity only seems universal to the Europeans because they have been raised with it, “[t]here is nothing more natural to the Christians than to believe in the Holy Scriptures because since their childhood they have heard so much about them”’ (Pinette, 2006: 46). Pinette’s view of Lahontan’s portrayal of Adario is congruent with Graeber and Wengrow’s interpretation, though she does not identify Kandiaronk as the original of Adario.

For the purposes of this essay, it is sufficient to point out that Graeber and Wengrow, while separating their work from that of ‘big picture’ popularisers like Steven Pinker, Yuval Noah Harari, and Jared Diamond (on grounds of commitment to accurate data and critically robust methods), are definitely post-postmodern academics. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924–1998) defined the postmodern condition as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]: xxiv). During the dominance of postmodernism in the humanities and social sciences, large scale research was dismissed (unless it was of the deconstructive variety, intent on overturning previous

scholarly orthodoxies and methodologies), and sceptical, 'anti-essentialist' work was praised (Josephson Storm, 2021). Postmodernism's domination was never total; certain disciplines and methodologies resisted strongly. For example, feminist scholar Linda Hutcheon critiqued the postmodern negation of agency, noting that '[p]ostmodernism has not theorized agency; it has no strategies of real resistance that would correspond to feminist ones. It cannot. This is the price to pay for that incredulity toward metanarrative' (Hutcheon, 1994: 191). This feminist critique of postmodernism, echoed by critical realist leftists and thinkers (notably Jürgen Habermas) who noted its self-contradictions, is congruent with Graeber and Wengrove's own stance (Aylesworth, 2021 [2015]).

Religious Studies from Eliade to the Present: Deconstruction, Dissolution, Negation
Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) dominated the academic field of Religious Studies, and the University of Chicago (at which he was employed for three decades, from 1956 when he delivered the Haskell Lectures at the invitation of Joachim Wach, whose chair he assumed in 1958), was until his death a leading centre for the study of religion. After Eliade died, many in Religious Studies were swift to reject his legacy. The critique focused on two issues, both broadly *ad hominem*: first, that his involvement in the fascist Iron Guard/Legion of the Archangel Michael, founded in 1927 by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (1899–1938) tainted his intellectual legacy irretrievably (Rennie, 1996: 143–178); and second, that the model of religion that he propounded was essentialist and covertly theological, despite the fact that he 'explicitly state[d] his own inability to believe in ... a [personal] God' (Rennie, 2013: 274). Both reasons for disavowal were selective: Martin Heidegger continues to be cited and admired despite his membership of the Nazi Party; Paul de Man 'was a Nazi collaborator, embezzler, bigamist, serial deadbeat, and fugitive from justice in Belgium' (Gordon, 2014); and jurist Carl Schmitt collaborated with Nazism and is a critic of 'liberalism, parliamentary democracy, and liberal cosmopolitanism' (Vinx, 2019). Having official fascist political affiliations has been insufficient to banish many twentieth century scholars (to use the language of contemporary 'cancel culture'), so the question of theological commitment comes to the fore in the case of Eliade's posthumous reputation.

Yet, Eliade's suspected theological orientation similarly is insufficient for cancellation, given, many deconstructive critics have championed other scholars who were overtly religious partisans, such as Presbyterian minister Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who argued that 'the question of What is religion? Is, due to the huge diversity both within and between religions, an illegitimate question, and one which must be dropped before one can study religions' (Kunin, 2003: 131). Oxford Indologist Gavin Flood, in *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (1999), approvingly discussed George M. Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (1997), Alistair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1985), and John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990), which may mean that he favours a more 'inclusive' Religious Studies, in which faith-based scholarship take an equal position with non-confessional studies (Flood, 1999). However, these conservative Christian scholars do not regard their work as part of a panoply of equal viewpoints, but rather are interested in the relativist academy as a back door through which to argue for the restoration of 'theology as *the* metanarrative' (Hedley, 2000: 272). We see here an alliance with the Christian colonialists critiqued by Graeber and Wengrow, those missionaries who were intent upon the destruction of Indigenous religion (which they

regarded as at best deluded and at worst demonic) (Cusack, 2013). In fact, Eliade signed the Marburg Declaration (1960), 'a statement ...concerning the "nature" of the History of Religions, which was to be pursued in a historical empiricist manner that relied on the ideals of objective scholarship' (Jensen, 1990: 389), which indicates that he thought himself to be engaged in secular, not theological, academic research.

Social scientists are often quick to note confessional scholars' investment in faith rather than religion studied as a human social phenomenon, but those who seek to delegitimize the term 'religion' or to do away with it entirely have found much to like in positions such as Cantwell Smith's (Hanegraaff 2016). Flood is a key scholar here, as the disavowal of Eliade is deeply entangled with the rejection of phenomenology as an appropriate method in the study of religion. Phenomenology, it was claimed, favoured empathy with religious insiders, proposed that unbiased apprehension of religious phenomena was a valid aim, and led to theologically-tinged outcomes. Flood instead proposed a situated study of religion that:

firstly entails the recognition of the centrality of narrative in any research programme, and secondly, that all research programmes are dialogical, constructed in interaction between self and 'data' or subjects of research ...language and its reference systems...an ethic of practice which reflexively recognizes the contextual nature of research and its implicit values and is sensitive to the power relationships in any epistemology (Flood, 1999: 15).

This project sounds plausible and reasonable, but as part of broader change in Humanities academia – involving multiple 'turns', linguistic, material, affective, spatial and posthuman, to name but a few – combined to produce antirealist epistemologies, and deconstructive 'critical' scholarship, and a marked preference for cultural relativism within the Humanities generally and Religious Studies in particular, which had profound negative consequences (Josephson Storm 2021). To make an explicit link with Graeber and Wengrow, they are not engaged with phenomenology per se (its role in religious studies being peculiar if not unique), but their accordance of credibility to the critique offered by Kandiaronk (Adario) in Lahontan's *Dialogues*, insists upon the validity of this portrayal as real Indigenous rejection of European colonialism (which is not dissimilar from Ninian Smart's phenomenological commitment to refraining from critique until 'walking a mile in another's moccasins' [Hedges 2016]).

The Dawn of Everything, Big History and the Return of the Real

Graeber and Wengrove's *The Dawn of Everything* is part of an academic project that over the past two decades has sought to move history from being only about texts, integrating archaeology and ranging beyond the horizon of humanity, in acknowledgement that 'the appropriate time-scale for the study of history may be the whole of time' (Christian, 1991: 223). David Christian, the originator of 'Big History', argued that large-scale historical ideas (world history, global history, and so on) arose because certain historians believed 'that the discipline of history ... failed to find an adequate balance between the opposing demands of detail and generality' (Christian, 1991: 223). Christian's initiative was not welcomed by all, in part because he employed the language of 'creation myth' (Christian, 2004: 1–14), but it was embraced by many as it argued that historians can contribute to what Edward Wilson calls 'consilience',

the unity of knowledge (Warrington, 2005: 17). It is clear that ‘big history’ is a metanarrative of sorts, and that in the 1990s history was already moving away from the postmodernism-influenced positions that Religious Studies was just becoming imbricated with. Interestingly, historians including Paul Turnbull acknowledged that some relativist colleagues feared ‘big history’ meant the return of the metanarrative via evolutionary biology, and invoked older models of scholarship, in particular the *longue durée* of the Annales School, as a genealogy of historical thought and praxis to be emulated (Turnbull, 2015).

Graeber and Wengrow do not address religion directly, and in the two pages when they discuss Eliade towards the end of *The Dawn of Everything*, they take pains to reject his postulation of a primordial cyclical time (the *illo tempore*), and the ‘fall’ into linear time being in part due to the emergence and growing dominance of Judeo-Christian thought. They conclude that it is extremely unlikely that ‘most of history’s great discoveries ... were made by people who didn’t believe in discovery or history’ (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 498). This would seem to pit their thesis against the Eliadean view of religious studies; yet, their emphasis on re-examining the evidence and using a political lens directed toward equality is compatible with the revitalisation of phenomenology that has been building since the publication of James L. Cox’s *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion* (2006), and also with the re-evaluation of European-influenced American postmodernist scholarship. Cox has long opined that the methods of phenomenology are rational and effective, and I have argued elsewhere that they are compatible with the method of the physical sciences, which involves observation, hypothesis formation, and repeatable experiment to test the findings (Cusack, 2011).

Jason Ananda Josephson-Storm’s *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (2021) is an exercise that merits comparison with *The Dawn of Everything*, in that it is a new history, or genealogy, of the theories that have been so influential for the last three to four decades in the academic study of religion. Josephson Storm’s careful returning to the theoretical texts of European thinkers, in the original languages wherever possible, and his revealing of the misunderstandings that (in the main) Anglophone Americans have made in applying these methods emphasising both relativism and anti-realism (Dummett, 1982) is a *tour de force*, and one that is all the more powerful because the author (to an extent) recants his personal involvement in deconstructive and negative scholarship. Josephson Storm’s study demands a new beginning for religious studies, one in which the return to empirical data and thick description exhibits respect for the human actors being studied, in contemporary and historical cases, and a commitment to drawing from this data an accurate, but above all ethical and egalitarian, picture of religious actors, traditions, and encounters (Josephson Storm, 2021). This aim is unambiguously in harmony with Graeber and Wengrow’s project.

Conclusion

In *The Dawn of Everying*, David Graeber and David Wengrow sought to re-evaluate human social arrangements with strict attention to the broadest and most accurate research that could be adduced, inspired by a desire for egalitarianism and a powerful ennui resulting from the dominant historical narratives of human development (firstly, that pre-modern humans were either brutish and ignorant, or prelapsarian innocents,

and second, that social and political arrangements were in the main driven by authoritarianism and top-down power structures, with participatory democratic and anarcho-syndicalist arrangements emerging only in the context of the Enlightenment). Their revisiting of data identified a vast array of human cultural and political groups that gave the lie to these simplistic images and revealed agency and originality in peoples usually discounted in political philosophy (chiefly Indigenous conversation partners of European colonialists, especially in the Americas (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021; Pinette, 2006).

The applicability of Graeber and Wengrow's research to twenty-first century Religious Studies is by and large in their determination to investigate 'big history' and to bring together disparate and little-known (but academically excellent) research that slips through the cracks of popular big picture authors. As they do not address religion directly (though there are substantial discussions of ritual, in terms of human actions and the environments constructed intentionally for such performances), it is necessary to find synchronicities with work being done in contemporary Religious Studies that seeks to move beyond the self-contradictory *impasse* of postmodernist and postmodern-influenced scholarship, approaches that have prevailed in the field since the death of Eliade in 1986. In this endeavour, Josephson Storm's *Metamodernism* stands out as an enormously learned, rigorously argued attempt to set a new path for the study of religion in the twenty-first century. His proposal takes into account the positives that can be salvaged from decades of a deconstructive (and destructive) research agenda, and builds a new philosophical framework that acknowledges the legitimacy of realist epistemology and urges the careful and extensive revisiting of reliable and extensive evidence, so as to move the discipline forward.

What Does an Anarchist Religious Studies Look Like? (Paul-François Tremlett)

I have put the question in the present tense because, to riff off Graeber's *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), fragments of an anarchist religious studies already exist. These fragments can be found hiding in plain sight in approaches to religions that focus on questions of power and marginalised forms of knowledge and experience, as well as in the renegade Durkheimian tradition of anthropology and sociology (Riley 2005) with its interest in ritual and the sacred. Indeed, central here is the suggestion that Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) offers fertile ground for an anarchist religious studies. Both of these fragments can be found in *The Dawn of Everything*.

Chapter three of *The Dawn of Everything* is titled 'Unfreezing the Ice-Age' which, with its implicit nod to the potential of water to move back and forth between solid and liquid states, zooms in on a 'forgotten' (2021: 107) corner of early twentieth century anthropology, particularly the writings of Marcel Mauss, Robert Lowie and Claude Lévi-Strauss and their attention to seasonal, morphological transformations or oscillations in the structures of certain anthropological societies (but see also Leach 2004).² This 'seasonal dualism' (2021: 111) characterised diverse cultures including

² This is not to say that Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss have been forgotten, but rather that the literature on seasonal variation and morphological flexibility has.

Nambikwara, Inuit, Kwakiutl, Cheyenne and Lakota, and Graeber and Wengrow use these examples to read the archaeological record of the Ice Age to suggest that

our remote ancestors ... shifted back and forth between alternative social arrangements, building monuments and then closing them down again, allowing the rise of authoritarian structures during certain times of year then dismantling them – all, it would seem, on the understanding that no particular social order was ever fixed or immutable. The same individual could experience life in what looks to us sometimes like a band, sometimes a tribe, and sometimes like something with at least some of the characteristics we now identify with states. With such institutional flexibility comes the capacity to step outside the boundaries of any given structure and reflect; to ... make and unmake ... political worlds (ibid).

Thus, archaeological sites in the Czech Republic in Dolní Věstonice, in Turkey at Göbekli Tepe and indeed in Stonehenge in Britain – which all include evidence of monumental architectures side by side with an absence of evidence for sedentary agriculture – are taken, among others, to point to comparable ‘oscillating patterns of life’ (2021: 105) and the ‘double morphology’ (2021: 105) documented by Mauss, Lowie and Lévi-Strauss.

The imaginative affordances of the ‘carnival parade of political forms’ (2021: 119), are vital to Graeber and Wengrow’s overall argument, although they also acknowledge that ‘much here is speculation. There are any number of other interpretations that could be placed on the evidence’ (2021: 104). Nevertheless, Graeber and Wengrow want their readers to reflect on the variety of cultures that the archaeological record makes available in order to mobilise an anarchist portrait of the Other as an anarcho-social scientist experimenting with social forms. It’s almost as if readers are being encouraged to reconstruct and reinhabit the ‘essence of our humanity ... [as] self-conscious political actors’ (2021: 86) by imagining themselves as Ice-Age philosophers reflecting on the ‘ancient rhythmic oscillations of social structure’ (2021: 120) although, when E. B. Tylor (1903) piloted more or less the same methodology in the late nineteenth century to explain the origins of religion he was called out for it, with Evans-Pritchard memorably describing it as an example of the ‘if I were a horse’ fallacy (Evans-Pritchard, 1990: 24) (it is worth noting that the logic of this imaginative operation is uncontroversial, namely that the cognitive architectures of modern humans and Ice-Age humans are the same).

Graeber and Wengrow connect these imaginative affordances to ritual and in particular to what they describe as moments of ‘chaos, effervescence, liminality or creative play, out of which new social forms can come into the world’ (2021: 116-7). In an extended footnote (2021: 545-46), they note how Durkheim’s conception of ‘effervescence’ is simultaneously an energy for law and solidarity as well as one for breakdown and *anomie*, meaning that ‘rituals are simultaneously moments where social structure is manifested and moments of “anti-structure” in which new social forms can pop up’ (2021: 546). Elsewhere, Graeber and other anarchist scholars have attended to the transformation of Durkheim’s conception of the sacred in the hands of the *Collège de sociologie* and figures such as Roger Caillois and Georges Bataille who claimed that ‘it was only by reclaiming the principle of the sacred ... embodied in popular festivals that effective revolutionary action would be possible’ (Graeber, 2007:

395) and that the sacred was a 'centrifugal force' that lies at the centre of social groups, with political action consisting of activating and unleashing this force to effect change (Grindon, 2007: 97).

Chapter four of *The Dawn of Everything* is titled 'Free People, the Origin of Cultures and the Advent of Private Property', and Graeber and Wengrow sketch an answer to their guiding question, namely 'how did we get stuck ... in such a way that certain individuals or groups were able to claim permanent power over others: men over women; elders over youth; and eventually, priestly castes, warrior aristocracies and rulers' over everyone else? (2021: 121). Graeber and Wengrow argue that in hunter-gatherer societies there is a 'formal similarity between the notion of private property and the notion of the sacred. Both are, essentially, structures of exclusion' (2021: 158-9). According to them, this is evident in restrictions surrounding access to ritual objects and knowledge, which is central to Durkheim's definition of the sacred as 'things set apart and forbidden' (Durkheim 1915: 62). Importantly, they contend that these rules and prohibitions were pivotal not just to the emergence of private property but also to the development of police and other formal powers (2021: 502). But Graeber and Wengrow also make the point that the rules of ownership embedded in relations with sacred things in hunter gatherer and indigenous societies include the element of care, an element which is entirely absent from the concept of private property in Roman Law, which they say underpins Western modernity. In short, the sacred is linked to power, knowledge and experience with the important caveat that the tensions between them are culturally and historically articulated.

I want to conclude by making some observations about these two fragments of an already existing anarchist religious studies. I am going to call the first fragment 'compositional' and the second, 'ontological'. The compositional fragment is an approach to religions that attends to processes of composition or assembly on the one hand, and processes of de-composition or disintegration, on the other. Compositional approaches address processes of emergence, and the asymmetrical interactions that lead to certain 'liquids' becoming 'solids' and vice versa, and at its heart lies ritual as the script that authorises the rule and brings things together, and simultaneously as the improvised performance that conjures an alternative imaginary of social life into view and which sometimes have the power to decompose older forms. Durkheim's theory of the origins of religion described a process whereby a totemic community emerged through the circulation of effervescent affects and energies, connecting bodies and objects to generate a shared field of social practice. This is a compositional theory and the fact that it is Emile Durkheim who stands in the midst of this anarchist fragment is ironic given the frequency with which his work has been linked, methodologically and intellectually, to conservative notions of social and moral order.

The ontological fragment deals in marginalised forms of life, knowledge and experience. At its heart is the representation of subjugated voices, the critical analysis of the processes by which certain forms of knowledge and experience are universalised while others are marginalised. Examples of this kind of religious studies can be found as much in Friedrich Engels's writings on Thomas Münzer (Engels, 1967) as Viveiros de Castro's work on the Amazon (2014), and its trajectory is always to question and deconstruct what we think we know and entails more than a little ontological politics.

Finally, a word on 'anarchist' and my use of it in relation to religious studies. In common with the records of archaeology and anthropology that inspired Wengrow and Graeber, we should be inspired by the record of religious studies which testifies to the diversity of religious lives and ways of being in the world. An anarchist religious studies is not tied to a violent, revolutionary programme of political and economic change. Rather, it suggests a critical approach to the canon, a reading against the grain, an embodied exploration of other forms and ways of life, and a conviction that the intellectual labour of religious studies should be committed to social justice and the deepening of democracy.

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