

British Cosmic Idealism: Evolutionary Christianity

1. Welcome to this next video lecture in the co-evolution of religion and technology. As we have seen in recent video lectures, the industrial revolution, together with Darwin's theory of evolution, shook traditional Christianity to its core. The civic public sphere became increasingly secularized. Scientific progress left less and less room for the spiritual. Materialism, determinism even atheism were no longer synonyms for nihilism. Objective meaning and purpose were replaced by algorithmic mechanisms. The world already modeled on a pocket watch by Deism, no longer needed a God even to design and manufacture the mechanism. Science argued that our world now evolved over time through random chance and "natural" selection, that is, the survival of the fittest in a competition for scarce resources. Understanding of the economy similarly shifted from the household to a competitive marketplace where utility and efficiency, not meaning and purpose determined what sold and who survived.
2. We saw how subjective approaches, both first person transcendental idealism and a second person intersubjective romanticism fought back against the objectification and mechanization of life. Passion was more important than impartiality, value more important than fact, creativity more important than mechanism. However subjectivity was increasingly privatized and domesticated, politically neutered, epistemologically dismissed.
3. We also saw how American evangelicalism responded by offering a "can-do" pragmatic idealism oriented towards the life of the individual. Faith, not only in God but in ourselves could overcome any adversity. The sick could be cured by a healthy attitude. Material setbacks with positive thinking. Will power could resist any temptation. The spiritual sacred could vanquish the material demonic.
4. In Britain, philosophers of religion would take a more theoretical approach. The Gifford Lectures founded in 1890, would be a principal forum for philosophers and theologians to present metaphysical alternatives to the materialist mechanistic paradigm spreading from physics and chemistry, into biology and psychology. They would argue that teleology was still fundamental to the understanding of life and consciousness. Biological mechanisms were organic functions, parts within larger wholes, means towards the ends of the organism within which they existed and operated. Psychology still required a study

of intentionality not just biochemistry. Human behavior still required an appeal to motive and choice, not simply to genetics and conditioning.

5. The design argument had assumed a static universe. God was not constantly upgrading his design. But Darwin demonstrated that the design was dynamic. New species are ever emerging and old species continually adapting to compete over time.
6. German transcendental idealism had already made the turn from being to becoming. Logic too was no longer static, but dialectical, with concepts only fully understandable in terms of their opposites, leading to a "higher" synthesis embracing the polarity of both. Matter developed into consciousness, consciousness into self-consciousness, self-consciousness into self-knowledge, and self-knowledge into absolute knowledge, reality itself coming to know itself fully and completely. God lie not at the beginning but at the end of logic's teleology. Humanity was coming to recognize that the reality itself, once its logic was fully developed, was the divinity it had always worshipped, the sacred with which it had always sought to reconnect.
7. For British idealism however, ultimate reality was not to be distilled to reason alone, but was to embrace all the transcendentals. Ultimate reality, sacred reality, was not simply a thought or a principle but an experience. Reason itself, however dynamic, was but a partial, ultimately still imperfect expression of a broader and deeper reality—life, mature, complete, in its full flourishing
8. Thus British idealism modelled reality not on logic but on life, and not on life as the object of scientific study but on life as lived and experienced in the first person. As an organism, British idealism argued that any thing is better understood not by a clearer more distinct understanding of its definition, that is, how it differs from everything else, but rather in terms of how it subsists in and contributes to the larger wholes of which it is but a part. British idealism was a holistic approach to reality, whose dynamism was fueled not by opposition and competition but by complementarity and cooperation. It sought to encompass industrial mechanism and capitalist competition within a broader context of life and love. Science was to be in the service of life, industrial production in the pursuit of human flourishing.
9. If British idealism spatial logic was organic, everything as parts within wholes, its temporal logic was developmental, from primitive to mature. Just as everything was

better understood organically, within the context of the whole to which it belonged and served, so too everything was better understood developmentally as stages of growth towards final maturation. That is everything was an entelechy, a process of becoming whose telos, or goal, lie nascent within it, steering every stage of its growth. Before the discovery of the gene, how seeds and animals “knew” how to develop into replicas of their parents was still a scientific mystery. Researchers were learning ever more of the mechanisms at work, but as to why just the right mechanisms would emerge in just the right organisms at just the right time, still seemed to rely on the purposes they would ultimately serve in the organism’s mature form.

10. Thus British idealism embraced evolution in developmental terms, not as a product of random change in a competition for resources, but as a stage in the organic growth and cooperative symbiosis of reality evolving as an organic whole in its own right—a perspective that would return with the rise of the environmental movement a century later as the “Gaia Hypothesis”
11. Even with evolution, God’s hand could still be found in the beauty of nature, now not as a static mechanism however intricate, or even as a beautiful and sublime nature frozen in time, but as a growing, dynamic ecosystem, ripening to full maturity. Reality was alive, and, like all living organisms, it was best understood not in its original conception but in its full bloom, not in its source, but in its mature flourishing. Humanity was the goal of evolution as a whole-- humanity in its full flourishing across all domains of human life, cognitive and moral, aesthetic and religious. As the early Christian theologian, Irenaeus of Lyons had put it, God’s glory lies in humanity fully alive.
12. The danger of such a perfectionist cosmic teleology however will lie in how to understand the less technological societies and the less educated individuals within one’s own society. Are they by contrast to be understood and treated as “underdeveloped,” expressions of a more adolescent, even childish humanity in relationship to their technological betters? And how protect against an ultimately self-serving paternalism in relationship to them? The great industrial powers of the late nineteenth century were also the great colonial empires. Britain itself for example governed a full quarter of the human population and the world’s land mass, in 1900.

13. One can see this danger play out in the new attention Christian theologians began to pay to the history of religion as a global human phenomenon. Rather than the traditional categories of faith vs idolatry or truth vs error, religious belief and practice throughout human history and across human cultures came to be understood developmentally as well: Hunter gatherer religion was not demonic or simply false but primitive and childlike, a world enchanted by spirits and ghosts, its rituals, magic; its beliefs, superstitions; its morality, taboos. Neolithic and bronze age Cosmotheism on the other hand was more adolescent: a polytheism populated by larger than life parental surrogates offering nurturance and protection, but also meting out punishment for rebellious disobedience. It was only in monotheism, that humanity had reached religious maturity, with the ethical monotheism of modern Protestantism, its final, fully adult culmination. To think for yourself, to decide for yourself, to understand your working life as a religious calling and ultimately, to raise a family of your own, thereby renewing the cycle of life—this was religious belief and practice fully mature. The Protestant work ethic, with its rational optimization of rational virtue and aesthetic happiness represented the penultimate stage of full autonomous spiritual flourishing, to be followed after death by eternal rest in a celestial paradise where all truth, all goodness, all beauty is assumed into a flourishing divine organic whole, God, finally, all in all.
14. Now there was disagreement among the idealists on whether personal individuality would survive such assimilation into the divine. Is the final goal of creation a dissolution into the creator, like a river flowing out into the sea, or would God and humanity remain distinct, the ultimate *telos* not an individual but a society of individuals; under God's governance, but still with rights of their own deserving God's ongoing respect as well. Those who held out for personal immortality called themselves "personalists" as opposed to the more mystical "monists" In other words, is reality, once fully developed, a single autonomous individual or a society of fully developed flourishing individuals?
15. In the more mundane spheres of politics and the economy this developmental approach to reason and desire, feeling and religion also legitimated industrial colonialism. Now European kingdoms had founded colonies in Africa, Asia and the New World as soon as they had been "discovered." But the mass production and mass consumption of goods generated by industrial capitalism exponentially expanded the demand for raw materials

and unskilled labor. And the invention of steam locomotives and steamships made the transportation of such cargo and people exponentially faster, cheaper and safer.

Nineteenth century industrial colonialism involved exponentially more intensive, and extensive, resource extraction, approaching minerals, land and labor as raw material for the homeland. There was thus economic and political as well as moral and religion incentive for industrial Europeans to see themselves as called, even destined, to civilize and evangelize, educate and govern the primitive native populations of its colonies overseas. Colonial administrators and captains of industry could both rest assured that what was in their own best interest was also, providentially, in the best interest of the natives over whom they ruled.

16. But does more civilized mean more moral? Does technological progress correlate with spiritual maturity? In tracing the co-evolution of religion and technology we have been exploring how each catalyzes and informs the other, but I have not framed either in *developmental* terms such as progress. For the trajectory of even technological evolution is not deterministic, nor an improvement across every measure, but more opportunistic, invention as much the catalyst as the product of necessity. These lectures have tracked religious and technological evolution, not religious and technological development.
17. Indeed the metrics for evaluating technological and religious improvements are totally different. Technological progress lies in transcending past limitations, enhancing our power and control of our world, natural and social. Religious progress on the other hand is measured by how immersive and transformative its beliefs and practices are in connecting us to what we hold sacred. Enjoying more power, consuming more goods can distance us as much or more than immerse us in greater meaning and larger purpose. We can perform material marvels that would amaze a hunter-gatherer shaman or a medieval mystic, but that hardly means that we are more spiritually or even morally mature.
18. Indeed the worry today among philosophers and theologians is precisely the contrary. The heady optimism in the progress of humanity across all measures and all dimensions of meaning and value characteristic of the late nineteenth century will be shattered irreparably by the demonic apocalypse of the first world war. And the overweening confidence of the “developed world” that it knows best what is for the best for the rest of

humanity will be burst by the waves of protest and wars of liberation of the colonized from their colonizers after the second.

19. But before we study the great disenchantment of industrial society, I want to first trace the idealist response to industrialization in the other two great imperial powers of the late nineteenth century, France and Germany.