For the sake of a more inclusive discussion, however, I will attempt here to articulate a not-incompatible theory of religious origins perhaps more accessible to a broader audience. What follows hinges not only on the model of moral, believing animals developed earlier, but also (as did the account of human morality in chapter 2) on the centrality of the problem of human transcendent self-consciousness in a finite, non-self-interpreting world, perhaps best expressed in Reinhold Niebuhr’s 1938–40 Gifford Lectures. Niebuhr was the leading American liberal Protestant theologian of the mid–twentieth century, yet his thinking on this point fundamentally followed that of the 1901–2 Gifford Lectures by the non-theist William James.  

First, moral, believing, narrating animals—as opposed to both rational, acquisitive, exchanging animals and genetically adaptive and governed animals—are the kind of creatures about whom it is not odd to think that they would develop beliefs, symbols, and practices about the reality of a superempirical order that makes claims to organize and guide human life. As moral animals, humans are inescapably interested in and guided by normative cultural orders that specify what is good, right, true, beautiful, worthy, noble, and just in life, and what is not. To be a human person, to possess an identity, to act with agency requires locating one’s life within a larger moral order by which to know who one is and how one ought to live. Human individuals and groups, therefore, must look beyond themselves for sources of moral order that are understood as not established by their own desires, decisions, or preferences but instead believed to exist apart from them, providing standards by which their desires, decisions, and preferences can themselves be judged. As believing animals, human faith in superempirical

orders that make claims to organize and guide human life is not categorically different from the fundamental and continual acts of presupposing and believing in all of the other assumptions and ideas that make the living of life even possible. The standard distinction between faith and fact is a false dichotomy. What we take as facts are always dependent on and meaningful in terms of worldviews that ultimately rest on empirically unverifiable belief commitments and suppositions. So humans being religious—that is, believing in and living their lives with reference to the superempirical orders that define religion—is epistemologically more in continuity with the living of ordinary human life as a whole than not. It is typically believers in certain modern, Enlightenment narratives that construct reality in ways that obfuscate the faith-based character of human existence who insist on the (erroneous) faith/fact distinction. Finally, as narrating animals who experience life as lived through time and who seek to make meaning of life and self through life-constituting and orienting narratives of many sorts, the superempirical orders of religion provide humans with compelling narratives linking cosmic, historical, and personal significance for individuals and communities across time. Humans most typically know about their superempirical orders through religious traditions passed on through time in narrative form. The enlightenment of Buddha; the revelation to Mohamed; the Exodus from Egypt and ascent to Mount Sinai; the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; the works of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva; the creation and ordering of the world by the Shinto Kami, Izanagi-no-mikoto and Izanami-no-mikoto, and so on are narrative employments of truth and worth that derive from superempirical orders. In sum, the human condition and the character of religion quite naturally fit, cohere, complement, and reinforce each other.

Yet this anthropologically referenced account still only so far suggests that it is plausible that the kind of animals I have described humans to be could very well be religious in the terms I have described religion to be. I have, however, not yet suggested why humans would or should work out their moral, believing, narrating character in specifically religious terms. Do we have good reason to think that religion would “show up” in the world that I have in this book described? Again, provisionally setting aside a theistic account answering this question, how might we explain the specific need or interest or desire of moral, believing animals to

procreate and want it for pleasure. This suggests—and to be clear, only suggests—the possibility that the persistent, recurrent, and widespread human desire to know about, communicate with, and worship or make sacrifices to gods or a God suggests that an object of that desire exists—which, perhaps through the “implantation” or otherwise building-in of that desire—itself generates the felt human desire in question. See Robert Holyer, "The Argument from Desire," Faith and Philosophy 5, no. 1 (1988): 61–71.

30. As shown by the 2001 Gifford Lectures of Stanley Hauerwas, published in With the Grain of the Universe (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2001).
inhabit orders that are not only moral but also superempirical in their sources of the moral?

The short answer to that question, I suggest, is that self, life, history, and the world are not self-interpreting in meaning. In order to make sense of the meaning of self, life, history, and the world, one has to get outside of them, to “transcend” them, and interpret them within horizons and frameworks of perspective derived from beyond the object of interpretation. I have already argued the point with regard to the human self. Individual humans are not self-generating, self-defining, self-understanding creatures. Individual humans only, always, and can ever enjoy life, identity, and significance by locating themselves within stories and cultural orders outside and beyond themselves, in terms of which their lives have place and purpose. This is an elementary sociological insight. But the same is true for life, history, and the world. They are not self-interpreting. They need a transcendent horizon or framework of understanding derived from above and beyond themselves to be given significance.

Again, in this I am directly following Reinhold Niebuhr, who emphasizes the tension inherent in the paradoxical human experience of simultaneous finitude as material animals and transcendence in self-consciousness:

The human spirit has the special capacity of standing continuously outside itself in terms of indefinite regression. Consciousness is a capacity for surveying the world and determining action from a governing center. Self-consciousness represents a further degree of transcendence in which the self makes itself its own object in such a way that the ego is finally always subject and not object. . . . The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.31


The transcendence inherent in this human self-consciousness creates conditions that for meaning require interpretive frameworks or perspectives that transcend the object of interpretation and the interpreter himself:

Implicit in the human situation of freedom and in man’s capacity to transcend himself and his world is his inability to construct a world of meaning without finding a source and key to the structure of meaning which transcends the world beyond his own capacity to transcend it. . . . The problem is not solved without the introduction of a principle of meaning which transcends the world of meaning to be interpreted. . . . If the effort is made to comprehend the meaning of the world through the principle of natural causation alone, the world is conceived in terms of a mechanistic coherence which has no place for the freedom which reveals itself in human consciousness. . . . Furthermore a mind which transcends itself cannot legitimately make itself the ultimate principle of interpretation by which it explains the relation of mind to the world.

In this way, history itself can have no meaning except through interpretative understandings that come not from within but beyond history, which are always acquired through believed-in presuppositions of one kind or another:

It is . . . impossible to interpret history at all without a principle of interpretation which history as such does not yield. The various principles of interpretation current in modern culture . . . are all principles of historical interpretation introduced by faith. They claim to be conclusions about the nature of history at which men arrive after a “scientific” analysis of the course of events; but there can be no such analysis of the course of events which does not make use of some presuppositions of faith, as the principle of analysis and interpretation.

The life of the individual human self, too, needs a framework of interpretation or understanding that comes from beyond, yet is related to and through, empirical history:

The meaning of life transcends the meaning of history. . . . History, however meaningful, cannot give life its full meaning. Each individual transcends and is involved in the historical process. Insofar as he is involved in history,
the disclosure of life’s meaning must come to him in history. Insofar as he
transcends history, the source of life’s meaning must transcend history.\textsuperscript{33}

This situation inherent in the tension and paradox of finite yet self-
conscious humanity thus leads humans naturally, according to Niebuhr,
toward nonempirical orders of religion as transcendent interpretive prin-
ciples of significance for humans searching to understand the meaning of
themselves, life, history, the world, and the cosmos: “The fact of self-
transcendence leads inevitably to the search for a God who transcends the
world.”\textsuperscript{34} Thus, Niebuhr claims, “history cannot find its meaning except
in the disclosure of a divine sovereignty, which both governs and trans-
scends it.”\textsuperscript{35} For these reasons “this essential homelessness of the human
spirit is the ground of all religion; for the self which stands outside itself
and the world cannot find the meaning of life in itself or the world.”

This account of religious origins—though constructed from an an-
thropological and not a theological point of view—is entirely compatible
and complementary with the theistic account of religious origins offered
above. At the same time, it does not necessarily depend on that theistic
account for plausibility. If Hauerwas is right, as I believe he is, the atheist
William James would have been entirely satisfied with my interpretation
of Niebuhr’s theory for an account of religious origins.\textsuperscript{36}

Finally, all of this re-raises the more basic question of how and why
humans in fact are not only finite, material animals but also self-
conscious, transcendent animals. Here I simply repeat the same answer I
gave in chapter 2. Perhaps it is because of the relatively large brains our
species have acquired through long evolutionary development, which are
neurologically capable of depths and complexities of self-consciousness
unavailable to smaller brained animals. Or perhaps it is because humans
are uniquely created “in the image” of a personal, conscious, self-
conscious, and transcendent God. Or perhaps it is both. The reader’s own
metanarrative and most deeply embraced moral order will provide the
answer for him or her. I likewise myself know what I believe to be true.

Conclusion

This chapter has not tried to say everything that might be said about
religion. Its goal has been rather more modest. I have tried to offer a
sociologically useful definition of religion. I have attempted to explain how
that definition may help us better understand religious persistence and
secularization, religious influences in life and the lack thereof, and the
character of belief and “unbelief.” I have sought to engage the theoretical
question of religious origins, arguing in particular that neither sociobiol-
ogical nor rational choice theories of religious origins can succeed in per-
suasively accounting for the sources, persistence, and prevalence of reli-
gion. Instead, I have proposed an account of religious origins based on
the human experience of self-consciousness and transcendence giving rise
to the need for interpretations of meaning that have sources above and
beyond that which is interpreted. I have suggested that this account is at
once entirely congenial with, yet not necessarily dependent on, a theistic
account of religious origins. In all of this I have attempted to work out
of the framework of the moral, believing account of the human animal
developed in earlier chapters.

Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964 [1948]), 36.
quote below comes from p. 14.
36. Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe. A more fully developed account,
however, would have to explore historical variations in the inwardness of self-
consciousness, suggested, for example, by Taylor, Sources of the Self.