Review Essay[*]

Religion in the Perspective of "Big History"

S. Mark Heim
Andover Newton Theological School

At the pinnacle of his career, the renowned sociologist Robert Bellah did not choose to write a magnum opus refining the influential work of a lifetime, focused particularly on contemporary American society. Nor did he choose to offer an unbuttoned reflection on the future of his discipline or the culture he had so closely studied. Instead, he devoted thirteen years to a project of breathtaking scope, religion in the evolutionary history of the human species, from the primordial soup to the Dalai Lama. He asked where religion had come from, not where it was going. He eventually felt compelled to truncate this story at the "axial age," in the first millennium before the Common Era. This 700-page "fragment" of the original vision (before his recent death, he held out hope for a smaller companion book to round it off) is a work of judicious audacity.[1] It is high tribute to Bellah's intellect and industry that it merits the first modifier no less than the second.

The chronological stopping point may not be part of the original design, but it serves to highlight both the project's uniqueness and its limitations. The axial-age religious breakthroughs lie just this side of literacy, straddling oral and written culture. For a study that aims to take biological evolution as the primary conversation partner, this limitation has the great benefit that Bellah must play most of the time on a turf whose primary data and events are not the subject of traditional historians or textual scholars but of anthropologists, archaeologists, and evolutionary biologists. It forces to the fore Bellah's distinctive intent, which is to address evolution in a direct and not an entirely metaphorical sense. There is no shortage of studies on the "evolution of religion," where this means an account of the changes that took

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

[1] He expressed the hope for a sequel in Robert N. Bellah, "Reply to My Critics," *First Things* 234 (2013) 49.

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place over time amid the various jostling traditions of historical religion (for the most part *starting* from the axial age or just before). Bellah's title, placing religion "in" human evolution, asks something profoundly different: why and, even more, *how* is there such a thing as religion at all in the story of human emergence and development?

The drawbacks are not less dramatic. This limitation assured that Bellah would rule out of consideration those portions of this story that he had hitherto explored and focus almost entirely on those whose data he could take only from the work of other scholars and other fields. The multidisciplinary character of the project is an impressive testimony to his own readiness to be a student and to the possibilities of collaboration in an internet age. Yet it is also true that he chose to look hardest where we know least. Commentators seem torn between admiration at the diligence with which he scoured the precincts of prehistory and skepticism that anything but a Rorschach image can be built on such fragmentary pieces. Bellah has taken umbrage at the suggestion that he was unconstrained by data and has defended his etiological constructions as grounded in the best the relevant fields have to offer. But his reference points are quite often framed as choices among currently contending or inconclusive interpretations. The criticism is not that any single choice has not been thoughtfully derived (a staggering accomplishment on this scale) but that the very nature of this narrative is an exponential multiplication of these uncertainties by each other.

Some historians have advocated a turn to "big history," whose narrative starts with the big bang and whose protagonists are chemicals and microbes as well as human agents. Bellah joins them in telling a very big story indeed, one that begins prior to either humanity or religion. That story stands between an account of religion in the full light of history (the "evolution of religion" I mentioned above) and an entry in the ongoing theoretical argument about the origin of religion, an argument framed analytically as to whether religion is adaptive, maladaptive, or neutral in evolutionary terms (or perhaps may have shifted from one category to another over time). There is an extensive literature in the latter area, running across the fields of neurology, anthropology, and biology (David Sloan Wilson's *Darwin's Cathedral* is noted by Bellah as an admirable entry in this field—a field about which he is, on the whole, unenthusiastic).[2]

Cosmology and physics were once the preferred field for the antireligious (it was Newton's heirs who supposedly dispensed with the need for "that hypothesis"). The New Atheism leans much more heavily on the biological, and an evolutionary perspective on religion figures centrally in the critiques of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. In narrow terms, the claim is that religion is nothing but the pursuit of reproductive advantage under other forms and that everything in religious teaching or practice that ostensibly runs counter to this assumption (altruism,

[2] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 100. See David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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sacrifice, celibacy, spiritual goods) can be reduced to the same (as unknowing strategy or explicit sham). Such arguments revolve around debates over the unit of selection (genes, organisms, groups) or the nature of fitness. "Inclusive fitness" adds the wrinkle that selfishness for our genes need not be selfishness for our bodies, reflected in J. B. S. Haldane's quip that he would be willing to die for two brothers or eight cousins.[3] On this view, various forms of altruism are all simply genetic strategies bred in us to maximize fitness: altruism towards kin who share the same genes; altruism toward one's own group to the extent that this maximizes the fitness of kin as part of the group; and even perhaps the probabilistic risk of "true" altruism, as in the warrior who faces death in battle, or the person who gains religious leadership through dramatic acts of renunciation, where winning the gamble elevates one's reputation and reproductive opportunities, along with those of one's kin. There is an escalating irony in these arguments, to the effect that the only defense against the charge that religion is nothing but a fitness strategy would be proof that its practice is destructive of or irrelevant to all earthly benefit. If religious practice is associated, for instance, with better measures of mental, physical, or social wellness, these data would be just so many nails in the coffin of distinctively religious claims.

Bellah largely sidesteps this "heads you win, tails I lose" formulation of the question. He says he is concerned first to understand what religion is and how it figures in the evolutionary saga. Short of such an account, judgments about its adaptive value are premature. He has said elsewhere that he had two goals for this work. The first was to show that present work in evolutionary biology "by no means requires an absolutely determinist and reductionist view" and that many biologists "recognize the sentience, creativity and participation of organisms in their own evolution as being there from the beginning and believe that genetic mutation is only one part of the story, not its absolute foundation." The second was to argue that religion "involves a quest for comprehensive meaning that has its own internal motivation. It occurs within and interacts with other spheres of society and culture, but what it produces can never be reduced to those environing spheres."[4] He aims to provide an account that is humanistic in rejecting reductionism, but scientific in accepting science's "modern creation myth" as the only metanarrative available to him as a social scientist that will allow him to "describe and compare all the other narratives and metanarratives that compose human history."[5] Religion is based on capacities that are adaptive, and it satisfies needs that those capacities make possible (perhaps even inescapable), but the rewards of religion are defined by its own emergent goals and not simply genetic or organic imperatives.

[3] As quoted in Richard McElreath and Robert Boyd, *Mathematical Models of Social Evolution: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 82.

[4] Bellah, "Reply to My Critics," 54.

[5] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 45.

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Jack Miles, in a recent review, notes that Bellah's book has a structural frame (corresponding to the title "Religion in Human Evolution") that is worked out in the preface, the first two chapters, and the conclusion.[6] It also contains "pictures" set within that frame (corresponding to the book's subtitle, "From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age") given in the other seven chapters that make up the bulk of the work. Three of those chapters treat tribal and archaic religion, while four cover instances of axial-age development in Israel, Greece, China, and India. I agree with Miles that despite the impressive learning and agile synthesis in Bellah's pictures, the more enduring value of this work lies in the frame. Here there is something in scope and originality on a par with Bellah's great progenitor Max Weber and his great contemporary Clifford Geertz. Bellah himself insists that his story must stand or fall on its coherence with particular facts, and this is certainly true. However, as already noted, in a sea of details so vast Bellah will almost certainly be wrong about many. But unless there is a consistent trend to these errors, his interpretation would still remain a powerful hypothesis. Bellah has built his frame in an area where structure is lacking, and it will be the reference point—by contrast or amplification—for explorers there for a long time to come.

To tell his big story, Bellah takes a few key authors as guides for major parts of the journey. The crucial guides in the area of evolutionary biology are Marc Kirschner and Jon Gerhart in their book *The Plausibility of Life: Resolving Darwin's Dilemma*.[7] The authors aim to fill what they see as a glaring gap in contemporary Darwinian thought by providing an account of the production of novelty. They draw upon recent insights into molecular processes and growing understanding of the plasticity of the actual path of physical development followed by an organism in relation to its given genetic endowment. It is here that Bellah finds the balance between freedom and determinism that grounds the rest of his plot.

Kirschner and Gerhart's book is a highly nuanced argument by eminent insiders (Kirschner is chair of the Department of Systems Biology at Harvard Medical School, and Gerhart a professor of Cell and Developmental Biology at Berkeley), whose attitude toward the standard account of evolutionary theory is "yes, but. . . ." The "dilemma" that they address is exactly the one stressed by critics of evolutionary theory: the insufficiency of random mutation and natural selection for producing the complex interdependent biological developments we see over the time spans allowed. The solution they offer edges close to what has long been anathema within the standard model: the idea that organisms individually or collectively can in some measure direct or enhance ("bias" is a word they use) the random process of genetic mutation and natural selection so as to bend the curve toward viable change. There

[6] Jack Miles, "Review Essay on Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age,* and Robert Bellah and Hans Joas, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*," *JAAR* 81 (2013) 852–64.

[7] Marc Kirschner and John Gerhart, *The Plausibility of Life: Resolving Darwin's Dilemma* (illustrated by John Norton; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).

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may not be an intelligent designer, but there are organisms that are active agents in their own evolution. Here we are talking about something far below the level of mind or culture, but Bellah will take these ideas to that plane.

The two key concepts in the book are "conserved core processes" and "facilitated variation." Kirschner and Gerhart (hereafter KG) note that evolutionary history is marked by a small number of sudden "leaps," in which complex suites of changes come together in systems, which systems then endure basically intact for extraordinarily long periods within a wide proliferation of different species. Such systems are what they call "conserved core processes." For instance, a suite of new features was involved in what they call the "invention"[8] of the eukaryotic cell, changes stunning in their scope and number. And this process was conserved intact not only in countless subsequent variants, but within the next great leap to multicellular organisms. A new suite of features emerged, but within them the processes of the eukaryotic cell were retained and, to some extent, retasked.

"Facilitated variation" is a more difficult concept to grasp crisply. When the authors summarize it they do so in a list of twelve points, each of which is challenging in its own right.[9] Organisms, and especially their conserved core processes, are, we might say, adapted for adaptability. There is what they call "weak linkage"[10] between the various modular processes, which allows them to be recombined (since we are working not just with a set of individual Lego blocks but also with established modules of them, whose relations can be changed by regulatory genes and their expression). Also, the regulatory expression of the existing genetic makeup allows for considerable variation in the phenotype (the actual bodily form of the organism as it grows from embryo to maturity). In response to their environment, core processes in an organism may stabilize at different points on the spectrum of their physiological potentials, or their links and interactions with other core processes may be recombined. Without any change in its genetic makeup, an organism may stabilize in a different place in its "range," and that change in set point may be inherited. This assertion fits with the discovery of various forms of epigenetic inheritance (the existence of forms of heritable variation above and beyond the specifically genetic). The net effect of this capacity is to amplify the amount of phenotypical change possible for a given genetic change that does occur.

To put it more bluntly, the organism organizes itself (for instance in the development from embryo to adult) so as to produce physiological variation without a need for genetic mutation. And if such variation proves useful it can be replicated in the developmental processes of succeeding organisms. This "displacement of range," a marginal change in response to the environment, can then be ratified or enhanced by any genetic mutation that comes along to move in the same direction. The organism "acts" to make the most of mutations that will support adaptations

[8] As quoted in Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 62.

[9] See Kirschner and Gerhart, *Plausibility of Life*, 220–23.

[10] See, e.g., ibid., 111.

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already being made within the scope of its existing genetic complement and to dampen the effect of those that will not.

In standard Darwinian theory, organisms receive a phenotype completely determined by the genes they inherit, and any variation in the phenotype depends on change in the genes. KG emphasize that the organism can adjust its phenotype to some extent without genetic change and thereby interact with the random appearance of mutations in such a way as to create a bias toward positive novelty. Alongside being naturally selected for success or failure on the basis of which genes they carry, organisms are being selected for the developmental "tweaks" they give to their own physiological characteristics. There is a margin of heritable change that does not wait for mutation. This "facilitation" loads the dice as to the genetic variations the organisms are "looking for" and prepares them to make the most of what they get.[11] On the issue of freedom and determinism, Bellah finds here the window he wants. We may be "embedded in a . . . deep biological . . . history," but that history "does not determine us, because organisms from the very beginning, and increasingly with each new capacity, have influenced their own fate."[12]

I take this time with KG because they constitute the substantive link between Bellah's argument and evolutionary science. "Conserved core processes" are one of his ruling themes. KG acknowledge that the key core processes, crucial to the function of facilitated variation, are not so easily explained as arising themselves as normal products of that variation. They involve another degree of novelty and what the authors call "radical retooling" of genetic inheritance.[13] This is no doubt where intelligent design proponents will focus. But the conceptual link crucial for this book is that conserved core processes are, in Bellah's terms, emergent. They constitute new capacities and new relations with the environment, and they exercise a certain amount of independent influence on how the organism will adapt and change. When Bellah's story shifts from the biological to the cultural, the continuity he sees is that various forms of culture are also emergent core processes that undergird facilitated variation in the appearance and evolution of religion. Just as biological core processes and developmental phenotypical variation are something to which genes have to adapt if they are to be "selected" by the organism, culture becomes something to which humans have to adapt biologically.

In the move from biology to human prehistory, Bellah has two other guides. The first of these is Terrence Deacon, an evolutionary anthropologist and neuroscientist, who develops the coevolution of biology and culture in an "emergentist" account of the evolution of religion, which Bellah largely adopts. An emergent phenomenon, like human consciousness, is not reducible to prior forms. Religion is an emergent practice, whose goods are in some measure intrinsic to it. This fits with Bellah's

[11] For a summary of KG's arguments as set forth here, see Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 60–66.

[12] Ibid., 83.

[13] "Old genes of prokaryotes were radically retooled for different but not totally unrelated purposes in eukaryotes" (Kirschner and Gerhart, *Plausibility of Life*, 258).

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desire to treat religion more as a practice than a proposition. For Deacon, a developing symbolic capacity in humans fosters three elements that constitute a kind of spirituality. The first is a capacity to create narrative or autobiographical memory, a basis for the kind of individual and social identity religion constitutes. The second is a capacity to distinguish between "the visible world of real objects and living beings" and a "world of symbols" related by meanings and grammar.[14] This is the root of "dualisms" between a hidden and manifest reality, the root of the metaphorical and analogical use of language so central in religion. The third is the development of "complex emotions." In addition to the basic emotions shared with other mammals, the first two elements make possible distinctive emotional states such as awe, piety, self-transcendence, and perhaps moral intuitions.[15] Bellah agrees with Deacon that this emergent spirituality is probably a more primordial form of religion than theism, but he argues that by virtue of the extended postnatal nurture given to human infants there is a deep human inclination to see the world in personal terms. This is reflected in religion, so that religion is often associated with the personal—God and gods. Science, though a more recent arrival, is, like religion, an emergent sphere—a practice, with goods intrinsic to itself, drawing on some of the same capacities (i.e., the distinction between a hidden and manifest reality, a complex emotion of awe).

The second guide, whose importance cannot be overemphasized, is Merlin Donald. Donald sees a factor in evolution that is unique to our species: "deep enculturation."[16] He calls it deep because the human adaptation to culture has actually biologically restructured our minds. It is in Donald's scheme of the evolution of culture that Bellah finds his analogues for conserved biological processes (he finds a similar analogy in the developmental stages of human infants). From a baseline of episodic culture shared with higher mammals (characterized by an episodic memory—the ability to liken a current situation intermittently to one recalled from the past—and a deep experiential immersion in the present), Donald distinguishes three stages of human culture: mimetic, mythic, and theoretic.[17] This likewise provides the context for understanding the axial age, which is defined as the rise of theoretic culture. At each of these stages, there is a new emergent cultural "conserved process" that entwines with the others, rewiring but not displacing them.

[14] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 102, quoting Terrence W. Deacon and Tyrone Cashman, "The Role of Symbolic Capacity in the Origins of Religion," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 3 (2009) 490–517, at 503.

[15] See especially Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 100–104. Deacon's relevant work can be found in Ursula Goodenough and Terrence W. Deacon, "The Sacred Emergence of Nature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (ed. Philip Clayton; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 853–871, and Deacon and Cashman, "Symbolic Capacity.

[16] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 126.

[17] On Donald's stages see ibid., 118; and Merlin Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

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It is a key feature of Bellah's vision that each of these processes retains vitality in human life. For instance, he speculates that some of the most powerful religious moments of unitive experience may, in fact, be expressions of that immediacy and full presence to the moment characteristic of awareness in episodic culture, wider and earlier than the human. Certain kinds of meditation may seek contact with this awareness, underneath all the mental "traffic" later cultural processes have imposed.

Some time around two million years ago, mimetic culture began to emerge. In evolutionary terms, this can be correlated with the appearance of *Homo erectus*. Humans learn to share attention and to communicate through bodily enactment. An infant returns the mother's gaze and then later can look where the parent is looking. "Mimetic action," as Bellah summarizes it, "involves using one's body to represent oneself and others in some kind of event."[18] Rhythm and dance are crucial examples of this, as is acquiring a skill through attentive focus on one who is attentively demonstrating or miming that skill. This is a fast track for learning, with dramatic effects in human culture. Bellah emphasizes that it precedes language. It coincides with a shift in the size of human groups. The largest group size for apes (stand-ins for episodic culture) is fifty. Early hunter-gatherer bands had grown up to 150. Physical grooming by apes of each other was the primary means of solidifying relations within the group, and the logistics of this practice set practical limits. But mimetic activities like dance, vocalization, and ritual lifted that lower ceiling on group size. Language would do so even more dramatically, though Donald insists that language " 'piggybacks' on culture" and not the other way around.[19] Mimesis is something more than grooming but less than language. Other higher mammals are social, but profoundly "locked each in their own consciousness."[20] Humans, once mimetic culture arises, can "share the contents of other minds."[21]

Some time around 200,000–100,000 years ago (roughly at the appearance of *Homo sapiens*), mythic culture began to emerge. Language was essential to this change. How could language come to people whose brains were not organized for language? The answer is ritual. The key development in language is sign-to-sign connections. Ritual repeats over and over the same set of actions with the same set of referents, rendering individual details automatic and minimally conscious, while emotional intensity helps shift attention from concrete to abstract. Ritual gave rise to language and language to myth. It became possible to construct a story or a narrative understanding of the world that is in tension with the one before us in immediate consciousness. Mythic culture is an oral culture, where the relations between signs become a world of their own, with narrative as the great example of this.

This is essentially Bellah's account of prehistory. He reviews three tribal cultures (from Australia, North America, and South America) to see in the concrete what

[18] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 128.

[19] As quoted in ibid., 131.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid. For Bellah's adaptation of Donald's theory of mimetic culture, see especially ibid., 120–31.

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mythic culture might have looked like. Of course he means that he uses modern anthropological studies of such groups as the basis for a "thought experiment" as to what was true thousands of years ago. Each serves to illustrate how cultures, "even today, can be organized primarily through narrative, rather than theory, and how ritual, and its inescapably musical base, continues to provide primary meaning."[22] Just as conserved core biological processes are (naturally) conserved, with new capacities layered on top, so too the various types of culture are conserved. Not only do the episodic, the mimetic, and the mythic dimensions continue to play major roles in contemporary culture and religion; contemporary peoples like the Navajo demonstrate that a culture still primarily organized in terms of ritual and myth can live alongside those that are not. Far from concluding that they belong to a "lower" stage, Bellah says "we must treat them as equals from whom we have much to learn."[23]

Indeed, Chapter 4, "From Tribal to Archaic Religion," and Chapter 5, "Archaic Religion: God and King," testify to the resourcefulness of mythic culture, in describing how it negotiated the transition from the smaller, more egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers within which it developed to the much larger and stratified societies that followed. Power and politics now move to the center of the discussion. Societies much larger than had ever existed stretched the limits of what existing myth and ritual could maintain. Stability required "forms of solidarity that were based on more than tribal festivity . . . or warrior force."[24] "The solution that every archaic society of which we have adequate knowledge found was a new conception of kingship and divinity that moved beyond old ideas of ranked lineages and powerful beings."[25] These are states where kings act like gods and gods act like kings. On the one hand, this brings centralized military power, class stratification, economic exploitation, forced labor, and massive "public" works. On the other, it makes possible productive agriculture, internal peace, long-range trade, and the beginnings of a leisure class or elite that can give attention to architecture, art, and literature. Bellah traces the way that both ritual and myth were reshaped to enable and reflect these developments, particularly in those archaic societies that would be most immediately tributary to later axial ones. For instance, ritual, which had been a collective phenomenon, became specialized, with the ritual role of the king and/or priest taking on special salience. If ritual in mimetic and mythic culture was the seedbed of new levels of communication and shared external memory, ritual in archaic society (while still conserving those features) became an enactment of distinctions between social groups.

In his chapter on archaic religion, Bellah focuses on those societies that were closely antecedent to the four independent axial-age emergents (Greece, Israel,

[22] Ibid., 174.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 262.
[25] Ibid.

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India, and China). Since too little is yet known of archaic Indus Valley culture, this leaves him with Mesopotamia and Egypt (tributary to Israel and Greece) and Shang and Western Zhou China (precursors to axial-age China). In a sense, the 350 pages in this chapter and the four that follow (one each on the axial emergents) can stand alone as an account of the contexts and trajectories of the distinct axial "breakthroughs," the most detailed pictures within Bellah's evolutionary frame. Though this is the largest part of the book, I have the least to say about it. These chapters were distributed to some scholars in advance of the book's publication and were the focus of a conference in 2008 (producing an edited volume, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*).[26] Bellah presents a nuanced account of each of his four cases and their internal complexity while still tracing through them the red thread of his interpretive scheme. Just as each of the axial societies had its own immediate archaic predecessors, so we in the West have Greece and Rome as our immediate axial progenitors. Bellah emphasizes that this is no longer a reason to privilege these two over the Indian and Chinese cases (though I would note that in his book Greece and Israel come first in the narrative and still leave an impression of setting the mold). In his candid running commentary on his own work, Bellah makes clear that his big story aims to avoid being a triumphal one, either in pointing toward one true religion or any "higher" culture.

The axial age is marked by the emergence of Donald's "theoretic culture," a new conserved core cultural process that comes to complement mythic culture as a means for comprehensive modeling of the human world. The great axial-age movements stand at this point of transition, where writing systems join oral culture, external memory media grow in importance alongside the wet storage in our brains, and theory construction—thinking about thinking, a kind of tinkering with our own mental software—emerges beside narrative reasoning. Archaic society and religion are far from being simple or illogical (astronomy, for instance, can be taken to extraordinary levels), but second-order thinking multiplies the alternatives to be considered. Bellah maintains that an idea of transcendence, often seen as a hallmark of the axial age, is a breakthrough that comes when, in the midst of a clash between first-order alternatives, the hypothesis arises of an alternative above them or beyond them. Theoretic culture brings a critical edge—an antiritualism and a demythologization—to bear on the pillars of existing culture, in the service of a search for "a more universal answer to the question of meaning."[27]

With this summary in hand, we can look at Bellah's big story again to bring out a central theme not mentioned so far. Bellah himself says that only as he neared completion of the book did he discover that play was one of the key integrative concepts for his whole project. Following Johan Huizinga, he says, "I have found

[26] Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

[27] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 175.

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ritual and religion emerging from play."[28] We saw in the discussion of Kirschner and Gerhart how Bellah sought space for novelty in the biological substratum of life. Play is the key concept with which he picks up an analogous question at the cultural level. Bellah makes use of Alfred Schutz's treatment of multiple realities in addition to our prosaic one. What Schutz calls daily life is the waking world of humans going about their utilitarian business, which includes those activities patently necessary for survival and fitness. The disposition with which one goes about daily life includes an underlying anxiety about success (death being the possible result of failure in these activities) and a complete acceptance of the world as it appears as the only reference point for these activities.[29] Yet, as Bellah argues, it is an empirical fact about this daily life that "*nobody can stand to live in it all the time*."[30] We spend a third of our lives asleep, where sleep and dreams are both alternative realities. We spend time listening to music, playing games, and watching entertainment, activities whose appeal is precisely that they are not part of "daily life" as first defined. These are activities whose goods are internal to themselves.[31] Bellah characterizes such activities as a kind of "relaxed field"[32] where we are "offline"[33] from the demands of survival. They are alternative realities into which we say we escape and which may be thought to be less real (as in fictional or imaginary). We seek to "punctuate" our lives with activities that are "inherently gratifying,"[34] though they appear to contribute nothing to our success in daily life. Bellah suggests that the notion that "the world of daily life is uniquely real is itself a fiction that is maintained only with effort."[35]

Play is something we share with other mammals, where Bellah notes it also has implicit rules, in that one does not hurt another, such that players "handicap" their own superior speed or power in order to produce a good game. The long, helpless infancy of the human young is a prodigal allocation of time to play. Bellah quotes Alison Gopnik, who notes that, contrary to earlier theories, "it's not, as scientists used to think, that children can't tell the difference between the real world and the imaginary world. It's just that they don't see any particular reason for preferring to live in the real one."[36] We might say that a certain Peter Pan propensity not to mature, to maintain elements of the childlike and the adolescent, is precisely part

[28] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 112.

[29] See for example ibid., 2–3; Alfred Schutz, "Multiple Realities," in *The Problem of Social Reality* (vol. 1 of *Collected Papers*; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967) 207–59.

[30] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 3 [italics in original].

[31] See especially ibid., 2–3.

[32] See especially ibid., 77–78; Bellah borrows the phrase from Gordon Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) 77–78.

[33] On Bellah's use of the term "offline," see especially *Religion in Human Evolution*, xx.

[34] Ibid., 9

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 90. See Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us about Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) 71.

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of the formula for creativity and learning hit upon in human development. Miles sums this up nicely with a quote from Arthur Koestler on the astronomer Johannes Kepler as "one of those eternal adolescents through whom the race matures."[37]

Ritual and myth are similar to play in that they constitute alternative realities. The world and its objects might be other than they appear to us. There may be other worlds unlike the one that does appear to us. Religion, like modern science, is founded on an incipient doubt about the way the world prosaically presents itself to us. Bellah argues that doubt about the world as it appears is as fundamental to religion as belief in other realms; the two go together. The "relaxed field" of human play, like dreaming, allows us to inhabit alternative worlds. Ritual, in effect, constitutes an alternative world, one sufficiently symbolic to give birth to language and myth. And language, as the external data bank for human culture, paved the way for a new level of conceived alternative realities. The religious innovation of the axial age was to make this doubt about the apparent world theoretical for the first time.

If two key elements in religion are doubt about the existing "daily world" and the imagination of alternative worlds, the "play" of a comprehensively constructed meaning system is a kind of integration of the two. The religious meanings we call axial include a distinction between our daily world and a world organized on different principles, or one where life is lived in recognition of the way things actually are in distinction from how they appear. A connection is drawn from the imagined alternative world and spiritual practices associated with it to "in world" ethical behavior or resistance to existing social structures and norms. Rather than only being a way to adapt to the world as it is, religion is a seed for changing it.

Religion is an emergent cultural core process, which in part incorporates or retasks an earlier one, play. In fact, Bellah sees play as the common root of religion, philosophy, art, and science. From root to branch here, the common theme is that it turns out to be functional to have spheres of life that are not themselves functional in a narrow sense. Evolutionary theorists would take it as an axiom that so much energy would not be put into these activities if they did not benefit the organism. Time "offline" must somehow be healthy for one's performance "online" in the only game that counts, the survival and reproduction game. But if we are as serious about coevolution as Donald and Bellah, we must note that it is culture that has made play "online" behavior, for those who fail to play are culturally estranged and biologically frustrated. Deprivation of meaning and play is no less destructive than deprivation of sleep. Let us suppose, from a functionalist approach, that the value of games is that they produce a relaxation response beneficial to the organism. But the only games that succeed in producing this (or that produce it best) are those with inherent rewards in their own terms. Games have their own logic, to which players must bend if they are to "use" games for other purposes.

[37] Miles, "Review Essay," 862.

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It may be that meaning-making is a form of play and that the realm of religious meaning is in this sense a game, one that must be played on its own terms. But, at least since the axial age, it is a game with the capacity to turn the tables on daily life and to question its monopoly on reality. A set of practices "played" within a horizon of comprehensive meaning may be a kind of game that creatures with our biological and cultural capacities cannot do without, a game that requires linkages with the prior core cultural processes of myth and mimesis rather than their amputation.

Bellah is strongly critical of simple adaptive explanations of religion (for instance, the idea that belief in a supernatural enforcer discouraged cheating in hunter-gatherer societies and so enhanced fitness) that do not begin to take account of the layered complexity he has described. He is more sympathetic to a new religious naturalism, which cultivates and respects some of the same analysis he utilizes. But he has a strong caution as well for the assumption common among its advocates that such an approach can dispense with the "spooky stuff" of religion, which relates to a childhood or adolescence that can be outgrown. The mimetic and the mythic, like our extended developmental infancies, are with us to stay, and for equally deep-seated reasons. They can be reorganized but not excised.

Bellah's book ends before the emergence of virtually all we know as religion (later Hinduism, Buddhism, rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on). But it can be seen as a brief for those conserved core processes that are part of the living reality of these religions, often obscured both by the effects of theoretic culture and uncertainty within religious traditions about their place. It is an argument not just to respect those past cultural forms, but to honor their living reality as processes in our own religion.

This consistent emphasis, and Bellah's repeated resistance to any triumphal reading of his history, invites a question: despite all his disclaimers, is this book a master narrative of theoretic culture, committing an act of liberal Protestant theology? In one sense it is, as he would contend that the core process of theoretic culture, with its critical and scientific facets, must be conserved in future species of human religion just as the mimetic and mythic have been. And that is the charter imperative of liberal theology. On the other hand, there is no simple succession or hierarchy in these processes or the way they must be related. On Bellah's evolutionary timescale, we might locate the brief recent flash of postmodernist thought as renegotiating precisely the triumphal assertion of theoretic culture's necessary dominance over its past.

Above all, Bellah's work is a welcome intervention in the evolution wars. If sustained, his argument will change the landscape. He moves beyond the simple assertion that we are wired to seek "sub-theoretic" religious experiences and that both this wiring and the experiences will endure. He asserts that the search for religious meaning is no biological or cultural remnant. It is an emergent human need that is part and parcel of the capacities produced by our most recent evolutionary leap and must be addressed on its own terms. It belongs to the cultural environment that defines what fitness is and what genes are selected for.

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