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*Humans and their Hierarchies: Cosmological and Sociological**

For Robert Bellah, religion is a realm of non-mundane experience and representation which has evolved since the origins of life on our planet and the supreme achievement of the species *homo sapiens*. The history of religion has been explored in more conventional ways by countless scholars over the centuries, but even those attempting to write from the outside, *i.e.* without allegiance to one particular religious tradition, have sometimes failed to realize the modern bias inherent in the term. Religion has been a central object of attention for the social sciences since their inception, but even anthropology, the discipline which should be most alert to the dangers of ethnocentricity, has struggled to escape from this trap. No one has done more than Robert Bellah to stretch the concept of religion in the sociological analysis of contemporary societies. This monumental book, written over thirteen years but encapsulating the fruits of a rich scholarly life and reaching all the way back to the author's bachelor dissertation on Apache kinship systems, extends the stretching in the most comprehensive manner imaginable.

Bellah is a self-proclaimed follower of Émile Durkheim, though in this book he pays more emphasis to notions of collective effervescence through ritual than to the dichotomy between sacred and profane. He also approves of Clifford Geertz's approach to religion as a symbolic cultural system. Bellah's originality lies in the way he moves from these familiar definitions not to the standard works in the field of "history of religions" but instead to the remote origins and consolidation of religion in epochs of "prehistory" where few humanities and social science scholars dare to venture. "We did not come from nowhere", Bellah insists. If religion is the key to the uniqueness of our species and

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

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evolution is the only "metanarrative" available to educated persons nowadays, then it is high time to take seriously the task of explaining religion and religious change in an evolutionary framework. Bellah begins the task in Chapter One by setting out an original typology of modes of representation, starting with more or less mystical *unitive* experiences (which do not have to be restricted to individuals) and continuing through the *enactive* and the *symbolic* before culminating in the *conceptual* representations. The later modes subsume the earlier ones and never eliminate them entirely from the human religious repertoire.

To begin with, in Chapter Two, which contains the core of Bellah's theoretical arguments, biology has to yield centre stage to cosmology. Before turning to the origins of life and the splendid resilience of bacteria, Bellah devotes quite a few pages to outlining present scientific knowledge concerning the origins of our universe. Thereafter, weaving threads between studies of grooming, parental care (nurture), and empathy as they have (probably) evolved in our species, but not in splendid isolation from our primate relatives, he argues that Darwinian theories of fitness, as influentially propounded by Richard Dawkins, are inadequate. The pure theory of gene-based selection with variation has to be modified to recognize the role of the organism and "conserved core processes". (Surprisingly, he does not enter into debates over group selection.) Recent studies of animal social play are linked to the seminal work of Johan Huizinga: ritual, myth and ultimately religion as we have come to know it all descend from play. At secondary and tertiary levels, many aspects of play undoubtedly have consequences for selection, but Bellah insists that there is a primary level which is free from such considerations, where practices (a term he borrows from MacIntyre) are worked out and performed in "relaxed fields" for their own sake. It becomes clear in this chapter that, while Bellah's notion of religion is extremely broad, he is also interested in something other than religion *per se*. He elaborates a second fourfold typology, adapted from Merlin Donald, to specify the evolution of "culture" along the path: episodic > mimetic > mythic > theoretic. Humans share less and less with their animal relatives as they progress along this trajectory. Progress here means increasing complexity but the term has no evaluative connotations; in any case, the earlier forms of culture never disappear.

Having set out his evolutionary framework, in the following chapters Bellah outlines religious ideas and practices and other social institutions in a range of unrelated human societies, which are introduced in a loosely evolutionist sequence. He does not attempt to show which

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particular drivers operated in each instance, but focuses on how relations of (secular) power were reflected in people's ideas about other levels of reality. The cases range from "tribal societies" (*e.g.* Myers on the egalitarian Pintupi Aborigines of central Australia and Firth on the lightly ranked lineages of the Polynesians of Tikopia) to more differentiated "early states" which have broken the link to kinship. (Bellah begs to differ with Marshall Sahlins with respect to Hawai'i, arguing that ritualized terror had come to form the basis of a patrimonial state before the fateful arrival of Captain Cook.) The relationship between kings and Gods changed gradually in line with the need to give "political power a moral meaning" (p. 264), from early forms of divine kingship in which the ruler lacked the resources to buttress his aspirations to the well-documented, class-divided "archaic states" of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China (Chapter 5). These pushed Eric Voegelin's "mythospeculation" (Jan Assmann's "explicit theology") to the limit, and prepared the ground for the four "axial" civilizations of Eurasia: Hebrew, Greek, Indian and Chinese. Each of these accomplished "theory" in its own distinctive fashion, which Bellah documents in detail; these four chapters comprise roughly half of his text (chapters 6-9).

By "theory" Bellah means something akin to Momiglano's use of "criticism", Eisenstadt's "reflexivity" and Elkana's "second-order thinking". European intellectuals have a habit of positing a "cognitive breakthrough" in their own recent history: in the Enlightenment, in a slightly earlier scientific revolution, or earlier still in the Renaissance. But in the last half-century, following Jaspers, the theoreticians of the Axial Age have pushed the "big ditch" (Gellner) all the way back to the middle centuries of the first Millennium BCE. Before embarking on his four detailed cases, Bellah summarises this literature and clarifies his own position. (These pages, the opening section of Chapter Six, were first published as a contribution to this journal in 2005.) While subscribing to this current, Bellah is concerned to play down notions of institutional rupture, breakdown or breakthrough. Instead he emphasizes continuities, the very gradual evolution of both ideas and institutions. This is cumulative in a way that biological evolution is not, and the vocabulary of fitness would therefore be inappropriate in these chapters. Instead Bellah tells his readers repeatedly that "nothing is lost". In the case of China, where the doctrine of *Tian Ming* (divine mandate) was a "moral explosion" when it was first introduced by the Zhou kings, the transition from the archaic to the axial was particularly seamless.

Robert Bellah is a sophisticated humanist who has gone to great lengths to understand the biologists. He explores many nooks and

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crannies of other branches of scholarship as well, quoting generously from primary textual sources, and dating them as judiciously as the evidence allows. He draws also on non-textual analyses from archaeology and cosmology, together with a vast secondary literature in the social and human sciences that no other author could begin to synthesize. It follows that no single reviewer can do justice to this extraordinary book. Further empirical research may lead to modifications of components of the edifice Bellah constructs. For example, he notes that Michael Tomasello's on-going work on "shared consciousness" among our primate relatives runs against Donald's account of a uniquely human cultural evolution. However, at the end of the day Bellah's account is not open to refutation by piecemeal conventional science. While he supports his arguments throughout in the unhurried, transparent prose of a scientist, in a revealing section towards the end of Chapter Two he makes it plain that, in addition to Geertz, Huizinga, and Alfred Schutz, his humanistic take on evolution rests ultimately on the insights of Martin Buber and Blaise Pascal. At such moments we enter a different register.

What is the importance of this book for my own field, social anthropology? Small disciplines in the shallow history of our fragmented social sciences evidently do not evolve in the cumulative way that Bellah proposes for religion in the course of "big history". In our neck of the woods, careers often seem to require vigorous rejection of the conventional science of the previous generation, whatever that might be. The upshot is that old approaches have a habit of returning, just as Akhenaten's cognitive revolution in Egypt returned centuries later in Israel. Bellah has no time for the recent revival of intellectualist approaches by cognitive anthropologists who follow evolutionary psychologists in positing a meme for the "explanation" of religion (Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran). He considers this to be as reductionist as the work of Dawkins himself. He is equally dismissive of Talal Asad's emphasis on the power of religious discourse. Partly on personal grounds – he is candid about his loyalties – he is much more sympathetic to Geertz, asserting on the basis of one little-known paper that his late friend was, deep down, very interested in the challenge posed by the evolutionists. This may be true, but it is somewhat disingenuous as far as the recent history of socio-cultural anthropology is concerned. The Geertzian interpretivist approach was central to the abandonment of earlier aspirations to comparative science among socio-cultural anthropologists. It hastened the shift towards an exaggerated relativism and emphasis on the subjectivism of ethnography. Some leading departments of

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anthropology fragmented as a result. Even where the traditional four-field approach is still formally in place (*i.e.* cultural anthropology, physical anthropology, archaeology and linguistics), the majority of US cultural anthropologists reject the evolutionism of their colleagues. The results are as visible in the study of religion as in any other field. There is no dearth of sophisticated theorizing and we have many excellent studies of contemporary religious movements. The larger religions all have their specialist communities ("anthropology of Islam", "anthropology of Christianity" etc.). But rather a lot has gone missing in the course of these developments. This book is therefore a wake-up call for anthropologists disillusioned with the reductionisms of scientism and deep relativism alike, for all those interested in understanding religious phenomena in relation to what Bellah terms "the elementary facts of human life".

More specifically, this study will familiarize anthropologists of religion with the term "axial" and perhaps lead to its definitive incorporation into our textbook periodization. Bellah offers clear answers to old puzzles, such as that concerning the priority of ritual and myth (for him the sequence has to be ritual > myth > language). Some will quibble over the vocabulary he uses. I think he is right to retain and stretch the key terms religion, ritual and play, but I wish he had been able to find better terms than "tribal", "archaic", and "chiefdom", which have by now themselves come to seem rather archaic. This conservatism should not blind anthropological readers to the subtleties of the analyses which Bellah offers in the chapters structured by these terms (with which he does occasionally confess discomfort). Other questions are more vexed. Bellah is fully aware of the dangers of using recent and contemporary human and animal populations as proxies for the human and animal populations of the Paleolithic – but he goes ahead and does so anyway, without doing enough to convince the reader why the Pintupi might be the best approximation we can get. The spatial juxtapositions are also problematic: can the Gods of the Tikopia really be considered alongside those of Homer's epics? Some will have similar reservations about the analogies made by Bellah in his early chapters between anatomically early humans and child socialization as investigated by Piaget, Bruner and others. In addition to society and state, Bellah uses the familiar terms "culture", "civilization", and "culture area" without adequately defining them and probing their problematic relations to each other. Inevitably, his coverage of some themes reaches further than others: for example, given the centrality of divine kingship to his argument, it is surprising that the works of Frazer, Evans-Pritchard and other

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Africanists are unmentioned; Africa is certainly under-represented in Bellah's rich illustrations.

More fundamentally, what are the deeper implications of asserting an evolutionist approach with regard to a domain where, on Bellah's own account, functional adaptations cannot be the primary consideration? Is it not inconsistent to illustrate this approach piecemeal via ethnographic and historical cases, when the author wishes to stress cumulative processes? Does *everything* in human history persist and return, as Bellah argues, not without a tinge of mysticism? Akhenaten's big idea may have resurfaced, but surely some things do disappear, and the cataclysm on Easter Island destroyed a society completely. The most serious casualty, insufficiently recognized by Bellah because of his idealist emphasis on culture, cognition and the rise of theory, is the social egalitarianism of the Paleolithic. Wherever we look among our animal relatives, domination prevails (it is usually patriarchal, although alpha male chimpanzees have their counterparts among alpha female bonobos). Wherever we look in post-Neolithic societies, we find dominance hierarchies which reflect the intensification of agriculture. How is one to account for the extraordinary U-curve which allowed for an extended epoch in which equality and sympathy for one's fellow humans were the bedrock of social life? Bellah's answer is that the equality of hunter-gathers is best understood as a form of domination by the collectivity, amply reflected in the cosmology of this era. In fact, evidence suggests that avoidance strategies are at least equally important. No one doubts that social and cosmological hierarchies thereafter are correlated with the intensification of agriculture. Anthropologists have shown that some hunter-gatherer groups have significant elements of hierarchy, especially with the development of technologies of storage. Bellah pays little attention to economic and technological dimensions, though these might have offered him an alternative narrative to that of the passage from tribal to archaic. He takes it for granted that the expansion of trade and markets dissolves social bonds, although some anthropologists and historians have questioned this assumption in recent decades. While noting changes in metalworking techniques, he omits to mention the crucial importance of the plough in Eurasia. It is consistent with his focus on "theory" that only technologies of communication receive close attention from Bellah, since even non-alphabetical forms of writing introduce new resources of "external memory". He thus notes the significance of "itinerant intellectuals" in legitimating the social hierarchies which accompanied the expansion of polities and their correspondingly hierarchical cosmologies.

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I had hoped that Bellah would return to the themes of power and equality in the extensive Conclusion to this book, but he does not. He does not engage with the prevalent liberal assumption that industrialization in the last two centuries has brought about a rupture with the hierarchies of the agrarian era by enabling unparalleled social as well as geographical mobility. True, that would have taken him far outside the time frame of this book. Yet Robert Bellah is at the same time deeply concerned about the world today, including the ecological sustainability of our planet. He particularly wants to be read in the context of our current "culture wars" between diverse representatives of science on the one side and religion on the other. He is unsympathetic not only toward Dawkins' militant scientism but also toward those he terms "religious naturalists", who see our earth and universe in terms of religious awe. Bellah refuses this wishy-washy mixing and argues instead for a robust pluralism. Because we inhabit a world of multiple realities (he is uncomfortable with all attempts to prioritise the material or the everyday), we need the multiple resources of science *and* religion (not to mention philosophy, art and music) if we are to begin to make sense of our place in it. This intellectual pluralism is supplemented in the Conclusion by a strong argument for civilizational pluralism, which he distinguishes carefully from relativism. His criticisms of religious intolerance and Eurocentrism (including the Weberian notion of rationalization, based in ascetic Protestantism) are salutary for ecumenical discourse. Yet, with reference to his central theme of how religion connects with power and hierarchy, one could have expected the author to draw out further conclusions for the contemporary world.

The transition to agrarian hierarchy, which was eventually complemented by novel universalist standards of sacrality in the Axial Age, instigated everywhere by the intellectual as "moral upstart", was preceded by an even more remarkable transition in which humans proved themselves capable of creating uniquely egalitarian societies. Might we dream of a return to this primitive communism (a designation eschewed by Bellah)? The anti-hierarchical impetus of industrial society proved to be spurious. All the available measures indicate that inequality is increasing dramatically in the globalized world economy of the early twenty-first century. The *Gini* coefficients conceal not just social conflict and suffering but unprecedented environmental destruction. Robert Bellah does not believe that he is living through a world-historical turning-point at the beginning of the twenty-first century, comparable to that of the Axial Age – and that is

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surely the problem. The "big history" question today is whether humans are capable of reaching a new level of universal theory, religion in an even more expansive sense, beyond civilizational pluralism, which would enable them to recover the vigorous egalitarianism of the Paleolithic in today's incomparably more complex, crowded conditions. If avoidance was the most basic strategy for our ancestors during the millennia when the total human population amounted to a few hundred thousand, in this century the key must surely lie in what Bellah at his most Durkheimian calls "the strong pull of social solidarity" (p. 177). Let us hope that in his next book he will be concrete about what this implies for the relationship between religion and power in a world of seven billion.

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