

MARCEL HÉNAFF

*Three Crucial Aspects of Religion
in Human Evolution: Shamanism,
Sacrifice and Exogamic Alliance**

BY THE FIRST pages of his book Robert Bellah [RB] has already convinced his readers that he will ask the right questions and will do so with the scientific rigor implied by the very title of his book and by his earlier works. He is not the first author to consider the question of religions from the broad and demanding perspective of their role in the evolution of the human species, but he is probably the first to do so with as great a scope and as much originality and care in properly weighing every important data and every potential objection to his approach.

Although RB refers to the definitions provided by E. Durkheim and C. Geertz, he does not base on a preexisting concept of religion his attempt to situate the religious phenomenon within the global framework of human evolution. He tries above all to identify in the emergence and development of the human animal all the elements that can constitute conditions or constituents of the religious phenomenon. It can be objected that identifying these elements requires the use of criteria regarding this phenomenon, and that these criteria must be disclosed. Yet it is remarkable that, unlike most historians of religions, RB does not begin with such concepts as the sacred, divinity, or an invisible world. He chooses as his starting point – a very original one indeed – sets of bodily expressions and practices not usually associated with religion, such as rhythm, dance, and above all play. The latter appears so important to him that most of Chapter 2 is dedicated to it, and it is also emphasized in the conclusion (“Play is central for my argument about religious evolution,” 89). He views the kind of play he discusses – whose concept is based mostly on G. M. Burghardt’s *The Genesis of Animal Play*,

* 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).

(Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005) and A. Gopnik's *The Philosophical Baby* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009) as well as on Huizinga's classic *Homo Ludens* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1955 [1938]) – as the strongest expression of the human ability to distance oneself from functional living and to develop forms of activity (such as rituals) and complex representations that go beyond “ordinary reality”. RB takes care to avoid calling this process spiritual or transcendent, and he excludes any term that could suggest that he has reached a conclusion before conducting the demonstration. His consistency is remarkable throughout the book. RB is generally interested in the process of hominization, including its aesthetic and moral elements. His attempt to identify constituents of a specifically religious dimension is always based on transformations described by paleontologists.

Allow me to mention, however, that with a few notable exceptions RB's references only include relatively recent publications in English. Although these publications are excellent and demonstrate the vitality and quality of the research conducted in Anglo-American universities, it is regrettable that major contributions in German, French, and Italian are either ignored or only cursorily mentioned. Regarding Greece, while RB's book does not ignore such innovative researchers from the French classicist school as J.-P. Vernant, M. Detienne, P. Vidal-Naquet, and others, it underestimates their decisive contributions, even though English translations of these writings exist. The same can be said of Vedic India, although RB does point to Charles Malamoud's book (*Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, Oxford U Press: 2000), which presents an illuminating reading of the role of sacrifice and the status of debt. With respect to prehistoric religion, E. Anati, A. Leroi-Gourhan, and J. Cauvin's works are ignored, although they are universally viewed as crucial references.

Although paleontologists rarely consider the questions raised by historians of religion, they have no objections to a rigorous use of their work. The same is not always true of anthropologists, close relatives of the latter and jealous guardians of the specificity of their own knowledge. Such suspicion can be compared to the attitude historians sometimes display toward philosophers: a reluctance regarding any attempt at generalizations, or, more trivially, a resistance to the use of a terminology that implies overly broad categories. For example, RB chooses to designate societies without state organization as “tribal”. Anthropologists avoid this term, which applies to some societies but not others, in the same way that such terms as clan, lineage, and segment are relevant only to some types of organization and cannot be generalized. But what term

should we use? We must acknowledge that since the term “primitive” has been banned, no other term has prevailed. The same argument could be made with respect to the term “archaic”. It is clear that in his table of the transformations of the models of social organization RB deliberately avoids the famous tri-partition – among savages, barbarians, and civilized – inherited from 19th century worldviews. RB’s distribution – among tribal, archaic, and modern societies – is meant to be descriptive; it tolerates all sorts of nuances and intersections. But it may also be at risk of presupposing what it tries to escape: the teleological hypothesis, which the theory of evolution has so successfully dismissed, as shown in Darwin, and even more so in S. Jay Gould’s recent synthesis. I will return to this question at the end of this presentation.

Hunter-Gatherers and Shamanism

It is difficult to approach the question of “prehistoric religions” without an in-depth discussion of the *shamanistic* phenomenon. RB does so only cursorily (164-65). This is not to say that we should view shamanism as a religion or proto-religion, as do many authors (such as M. Eliade over fifty years ago), but that the ritual practices associated with what is called shamanism are almost universally observed in hunter-gatherers and still stubbornly preserved in agricultural populations, at least for a time, in the figure of the sorcerer (or any other positive or negative figure such as the mage, the healer, the seer, etc.). RB is right to remind us – as did many anthropologists before him – that the hunter-gatherer societies that could still be observed in recent times are not fossilized stone-age societies. Just like any other societies they have undergone enormous changes. Some important features of hunter-gatherer societies, however, have remained unchanged, because they are associated with subsistence activities and above all with the relationships that bond humans to other beings (plants, minerals, and animals). A pattern can be identified. But before discussing this, we must recall that shamanism is above all an activity of communication and mediation between a member of a social group and the invisible beings that surround the group. The extremely widespread character of this function across societies – despite considerable variation – should encourage us to take it very seriously. The shaman’s privileged relationship with the invisible world should also trigger the interest of any theoretician of religions. It is thus surprising to see how little consideration RB gives to shamanism. Neither does he discuss the importance of

decorated caves (among the best known are Lascaux, Altamira, and Vallon Pont d'Arc, going back as far as 15,000 to 31,000 BCE). We now better understand that these caves were probably places of worship, mostly dedicated to initiation rituals. J. Clottes and D. Lewis-Williams (*The Shamans of Prehistory*, New York, Abrams Publ., 1998) went very far – probably too far, in fact – in their effort at interpretation based on this hypothesis. The rituals and playful forms RB discusses almost certainly developed in the context of shamanistic activities (on this topic R. Hamayon, the leading scholar on the Buriat from Siberia, wrote a remarkable text: “*Le jeu plaît aux esprits*” [Spirits love to play], reprinted in her recent book, *Jouer*, Paris, La Découverte, 2012).

We should also approach the broader question of the relationship hunter-gatherer societies had and still have with their environment (I deliberately avoid the term nature). No one described and theorized this question better than Philippe Descola, professor of anthropology at the Collège de France, in his *Par delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005 (*Beyond Nature and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012). Descola's profound insight is that what we call nature has no meaning in the experience and language of hunter-gatherer or hunter-gardener populations. Descola shows that for them the world is populated with various beings who, while remaining invisible to humans, are nevertheless endowed with humanlike abilities to think, speak, and develop social organizations. Just like us these beings have rules, prohibitions, kinship systems, etc. They are identical to humans, but with a different appearance. These beings can be called “spirits”, or “genies”, or some other term; they are fellow creatures, most often invisible but not necessarily “powerful beings”, as RB claims, taking up the term Ellen B. Basso used with respect to the Kalapalo from Brazil. In this world relationships among humans and non-humans are equalitarian and characterized by respect. The agro-pastoral world, however, is no longer characterized by these continual and horizontal exchanges. Among pastors, for example, herds are passed down from father to son. Upon their death parents become the protecting figures who pass down the inheritance. They are part of a hierarchal order. The relationship becomes vertical within a cosmology structured between top and bottom. Filiation prevails over alliance. What is observed in agro-pastoral societies is not the same spirits with different appearances, but a world that has begun to form a hierarchy between two symmetrical levels: the invisible and visible worlds, in which the former reflects the latter. This is the world

of analogy, embodied in the kingdoms and states RB call archaic. As for the concept of *nature* as we understand it, it derives from the Galilean revolution and opens the way to a new ontology of the relationships between humans and non-humans: all beings have the same physical substance, but different interiorities – the exact opposite of the ontological model of the hunter-gatherers. Non-humans are no longer animated; they are instead measurable things. Modern physics has arisen. Nature stands before us as an object of knowledge and technical mastery.

The Crucial Question of Sacrifice

It is surprising that a book that proposes to reconstruct the genealogy of the religious phenomenon from an evolutionary perspective does not specifically take into account the phenomenon of sacrifice, which plays a major role in the evolution of religious forms (assuming that an agreement on this concept can be reached). RB first discusses sacrifice with respect to the case of Hawaiian chiefdoms, mentioning the existence of human sacrifices performed during certain very solemn ceremonies that concern the “king”. This sacrifice appears to be a sign of royal power. It would be helpful to know why. Sacrifice is mentioned again in the cases of Israel, Greece, and above all India, the quintessential land of sacrificial rituals. One wonders why RB does not try to understand this major fact in the movement of the transformations he analyzes. He observes and describes, but he does not attempt to formulate a hypothesis related to human evolution. True, the facts appear so disparate and the theories so contradictory that it is difficult to construct a general hypothesis. Among the hypotheses most frequently discussed is R. Girard's. RB mentions it, but he does not dwell on it – with good reason. Girard's explanation of sacrifice as the ritual killing of a scapegoat to control the violence endemic to the group does not begin to match the data observed (unless any type massacre or lynching is abusively called a sacrifice). Girard's entire construction is based on an ethnography that is ill-documented or used selectively to support his thesis. Hubert and Mauss' much earlier writing is a highly valuable tool, and it can show researchers how to describe a ritual, such as the Vedic sacrifice. But their rigorous essay does not provide a way to understand the phenomenon of sacrifice in general, its emergence, and its undermining during what has been called after K. Jaspers the “Axial age” (between the 8th and 3rd centuries BCE).

It so happens that the best way to approach the problem is precisely the one that RB presents in the first chapters of his book: situate it within the perspective of evolution – yet he does not attempt to do so. Anthropologists and historians of religions observed that the animal sacrificed is always a *domesticated* animal. This observation is most often made without drawing the necessary conclusions. Yet they are crucial: this means that sacrifice begins with the domestication of plants and animals. A second observation can be made: animal sacrifices tend to disappear in the great monotheistic religions. Regarding the first point, let us note that animal sacrifice does not exist in hunter-gatherer or hunter-gardener societies. This has been extensively verified in those societies observed in the past century and a half. We can understand this better if we recall that these societies have an equalitarian relationship with the other beings in the world around them. These beings are not superior to humans so much as they are different from them. Hunting is not a sacrifice, because it consists in taking after a negotiation: every sacrificial ritual amounts to an *offering* to the deities (Girard insists on denying this against all evidence, in order to support his thesis). We need to understand what offering means. One of the main rituals observed in humans is gift exchange (which RB barely broaches). The domestication of plants and animals amounts to the exercise of a power over the reproduction of plant or animal life. By granting themselves this capability humans take from the spirits a new power that until now did not belong to them. They must therefore return symbolically that which they have taken. The practice of immolation makes this return irreversible. Furthermore, the animals sacrificed were domesticated to produce meat. When it becomes part of the life of the group the animal becomes akin to a relative. A paradox emerges: how can we eat a being that is now close to us, a quasi-relative, without risking cannibalism? Immolation transfers the animal into the invisible world where its new life will begin, turning it into some *other*, a somehow “divine” being, thus making it alien enough for its flesh to be consumed as that of a non-relative (this allows an entirely different approach to the question of human sacrifice). These practices later came to appear barbaric, as shown by the prophetic movement in Israel, and more generally by the entire spiritual movement of the “Axial age”.

We sense that the question of sacrifice should be crucial to RB’s approach. If conducted with precision and through a comparative perspective such an inquiry can provide us with a very fertile approach to the religious phenomenon in human evolution: no other question better manifests a connection among the physical forms of subsistence, the

representations of life, and the symbolisms of exchange between humans and non-humans. Above all, the question of sacrifice involves the radical transformation from the oldest ritual form to the increasingly internalized forms of belief. We now understand that sacrifice emerged mainly as an instrument of symbolic management of the world and its forces (this is particularly clear in the case of Vedic India). The metamorphoses of sacrifice (which took on an increasingly metaphorical form) illuminate powerfully the evolution of the religious phenomenon from the perspective of human evolution, because sacrifice is inseparable from the relationship we have developed with the animal world and more generally with the world around us. This relationship is inseparable from technical action, but also from the production of exact forms of knowledge, and finally from the development of a theoretical reflection that gradually moved away from symbolic forms. Such an inquiry should provide RB's great project with additional and even decisive arguments. The same demonstration could be conducted with respect to the forms of *prayer*, at first highly ritualized, and later increasingly internalized (on this topic M. Mauss wrote – but did not publish – a remarkable text early in his career (1909); translation *On Prayer*, Berghahn Books, 2003).

Hominization: Exogamic Alliance and Reciprocity

RB identifies an entire set of processes that testify to the process of hominization in an original way: play, rituals, symbolisms, and construction of the family. On the latter point he does not fulfill our expectations. He is aware that the concept of family as we understand it today emerged only recently in the history of our species. This does not contradict the observation that the conjugal couple – which is not the same thing – is, on the contrary, as old as *homo sapiens*. Anthropologists generally prefer to speak of kinship. This is precisely the level on which one of the most important processes of hominization is situated: the universal phenomenon of exogamy, *i.e.* the obligation to find a wife in a group other than one's own consanguineous group (parents and children; brothers and sisters, or certain types of cousins), even if on a different level one remains within the endogamous framework of one's tribe or caste. This exogamic requirement is inseparable from a prohibition just as universal in humans: the prohibition of incest (which can be transgressed only for reasons that involve and confirm its reason for being). The first anthropologist who identified all the

consequences this requirement has on an understanding of kinship systems was C. Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Traviston, 1969 [1949].

We must now ask the following question: why does the exogamic requirement, which is the very reason for being of the prohibition of incest, clearly constitute the decisive phase in hominization? And why is it impossible for a theory of religion that situates religion in human evolution to ignore this? The exogamic requirement amounts to the obligation for any human group to enter an alliance with another natural (consanguineous) group and therefore to coexist with others in the mode of the *alliance*, that is, following an implicit pact to unite the closeness of the self with the otherness of the other. The exogamic alliance has a dual functioning. First, it continually transforms the natural phenomenon of sexual reproduction among humans into the cultural phenomenon of the social institution – a process that in this form (alliance) is found in no other animal society, even though in apes sexual avoidance can be observed among consanguineous relatives. Second, the exogamic alliance defines the relationships among different groups as primarily relationships of reciprocity, and therefore of gift/counter-gift. It has been observed that a group that has received a wife *must* give one in return. This means that the prohibition of incest with respect to the women of the group is primarily a positive rule of reciprocation: one must give after having received. The requirement of otherness is inseparable from the requirement of reciprocity. From this, human society as an institution arises. Lévi-Strauss's insight can even be extended: this shift from nature to culture is also a shift from private to public, from life among one's own to life with others. We now see how reciprocity, gift, and alliance are articulated together. The emergence of monotheisms gives rise to the new figure of a deity as the unilateral giver, the master of grace. This is associated with a new form of debt and the emergence of the concept of salvation – a vast history that cannot be discussed here. At least the generative core can now be grasped.

Closing Remarks

The reader now understands that the main purpose of these remarks on Robert Bellah's book was to propose a few contributions to this remarkable endeavor. I do not mean to undermine it, but to suggest complements – sometimes indispensable – on a few crucial points. This implicit criticism detracts nothing from the admiration that this

pioneering and stimulating work deserves. I have mostly kept to questions of concern to anthropologists. Many other questions would be worthy of a debate. They will most likely be discussed by the many researchers rightly fascinated by the question of the religious phenomenon as a central fact of human experience and evolution.

I will close with an epistemological question already mentioned in my introduction: one could think that in situating the religious phenomenon within human evolution Robert Bellah, runs the risk of repackaging the old teleological perspective of the systematic world-views that characterized the 19th century. This is clearly not the case. All along his book he takes care to adhere to documented facts and to the conclusions presented by the most scrupulous researchers. On a more general level, however, without taking up any teleological hypotheses, we must acknowledge that cultures have actually changed and that everywhere we can observe transformations in certain directions and not in others. This irreversibility – which remains disquieting in the realm of cultures and for human history in general – is now indisputable in the field of physics with respect to the future of the universe. Time's arrow follows random bifurcations, but it never turns back.