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*From Relaxed Fields to Renouncers**

THIS BOOK IS REMARKABLE, not only because of its impressive scope across time, space, and themes, but also because of its distinctive epistemological approach to sociology and profound ethical concern about history. With a grand theory of evolution as primary metanarrative, Robert N. Bellah re-embeds religion into the "deep history" of life and the universe, thereby opening a way to surpassing the often presumed opposition between freedom and nature, and between humans and animals in modern social theories. The extremely extended horizon of thought and deep insight into life presented by this book compel any serious reader to rethink how and why one does research on religion, and what will be the fate of human civilization. The book is impeccably scientific, but it is, as Bellah himself admits, far from being a "disinterested observation". It is above all written with the *heart*.

If the objective of the book is ambitious and even somewhat utopian, the result is admirable. In over 770 pages, Bellah proposes a meaningful evolutionary order for analysing the beginning and becoming of religion from the "big bang" to the axial age (mid-first millennium BCE). The book is divided into nine chapters with a preface and a conclusion, implicitly but logically organized into three main parts. In the first part composed of chapters 1 and 2, Bellah outlines his theoretical framework from both ontogenetic and phylogenetic perspectives, clarifying how and when religion is formed in early human evolution. Then three chapters explore the transition from tribal to archaic religion. Finally, four chapters are contributed to the axial age, each one devoted to an ancient civilization: Israel, Greece, China, and India.

Before telling the big story, a discussion on what religion is opens chapter 1, where Bellah renews the Durkheimian definition of religion through Alfred Schutz and Clifford Geertz's phenomenological

* 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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approach, viewing religion as a system of beliefs and practices laid out by symbols for building a non-ordinary reality. Thus the question is no longer the source of sacred moral authority, but how religion creates its non-ordinary reality (other world), and how this reality interacts with the multiple realities of the world of daily life. The key to answering these questions is "religious representation", of which Bellah offers a fourfold typology – unitive, enactive, symbolic, and conceptual – with the inspiration drawn, mainly but not exclusively, from developmental psychology. These four modes of representation are, of course, hierarchized stages of human development, in terms of the complexity of its capacity. But all of them contribute to the formation and functioning of religion, and necessarily coexist in the most sophisticated form of the latter.

Chapter 2 offers the core argument that makes the title of the whole book tenable. Based on a subtle reading of the literature of scientific cosmology and biology, Bellah reminds us of the "indisputable truth" that we are "part of the universe" and we have a "kinship with all life". But, more to the point, he sheds entirely new light on the origin of religion. Situating religion in the broadest context of evolution – according to him "a process that includes everything from single-cell organisms to contemporary human society and culture" (p. 44) –, Bellah argues that some mammalian features are fundamental to the emergence of religion, among which the most important are parental care and play. Parental care is elemental to the development of empathy and ethics, while play, as the form of life can only occur in a "relaxed field" out of the struggle for existence, is the root of ritual. Comparably speaking, play is more crucial, being the source of shared intention and attention that are basic to human cooperation. Following Johan Huizinga's idea, Bellah considers play as the primeval model of many other practices of non-daily life, to which he comes back with great detail in the Conclusion.

The following three chapters (3, 4, and 5) deal with ritual and myth in both tribal and archaic societies, illustrated by a wide range of case studies based on archaeological and ethnographic evidence selected from different continents and civilizations. Two basic clues run through Bellah's description and analysis. The first is the evolutionary stages of human culture and cognition proposed by Merlin Donald: episodic, mimetic, mythic, and theoretic, which have some evident resonance with Bellah's typology of religious representation. The second, which seems to me more substantial, is the evolution of the paradigm of power. If egalitarianism is more or less universal among early small-scale tribal societies, the chiefdom is the form of organization intermediate between the tribal and the archaic. At first dominance is justified by kinship or,

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more precisely, the metaphor of the mother-child relationship, which Bellah calls "the disposition to nurture". Later, when class takes precedence over kinship and political power is centralized, the unique relation and even identification between king and gods is established, thereby giving political power a new moral meaning. Thus the archaic society takes form, accompanied by the appearance of early civilization and state in the full sense of the term.

The appeal to ethical standards of legitimacy for kingship raises the curtain on the axial age. In Chapter 6 before studying ancient Israel, Bellah first introduces the concept of the axial age. To a significant extent, he shares the visions of Arnaldo Momigliano, S. N. Eisenstadt, or Karl Jaspers on the axial age, which centred on the naissance of criticism, reflexivity, or conscience of being as a whole. At the same time, Bellah proposes a focus on the cultural content of the axial age, by resorting to Merlin Donald's typology of cultures that has been introduced in Chapter 3: for Bellah, what makes the axial age axial is the emergence of theoretic culture. It does not mean that such a culture replaced earlier mythic and mimetic ones. Rather, it comes into dialogue with the latter and reorganizes them in new conditions. However, theory in the axial age goes beyond the level of craft specialization that characterises mythic culture, giving birth to the idea of myth as "a story that is not true".

Theoretic culture remodels the relations between god, king, and people, by abstract reflections on cosmos, society, and self. As shown by Bellah in chapters 6-9, with both subtlety and deepness, in each of the four axial civilizations some critical events occur: religio-intellectual movements rise; moral universalism comes forth; and the mythic unity of gods and kings is broken. In Israel, God became the only real king of the chosen people, much higher than any "king of flesh and blood"; it was outside the world but provided the ultimate reference for judging everything in the world. In Greece, where the mimetic and mythic inheritance is huge, Socrates, Plato, and a number of other thinkers, elaborated one of the most sophisticated theoretical cultures on philosophy and public life, while at the same time keeping the old Olympian myth and ritual pattern alive. In China, Confucianism developed an ethic based at least partly on universal values, thereby offering a resource for interpreting divine justice and criticizing current politics and society. Finally in India, Buddha ethicized the world by a full conscience of its imperfection. His teaching made the Dharma available to all people, regardless of status or ethnicity, so as to create a post-Vedic virtue.

The above sketch is by no means capable of completely reflecting the richness of the book that is a veritable mine of facts and ideas. The

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key point of Bellah's position is to demonstrate that we are not alone and purely self-determinated; it is only in the evolutionary relations with nature, history, and culture that we can expect to see some possibilities and limits for the improvement of morality. Bellah's message is clear. First, our freedom "is embedded in a cosmological and biological matrix that influences everything we do" (p. 83). Second, "nothing is ever lost" (p. 267), and "what survived would be reborn again and again" (p. 398). Third, "what survived depended very much on organization" (p. 398).

All these insights are certainly not only about our past, but also about our present and future. In Bellah's theory of evolution, the historicity consists neither in linear progress nor in the repetition or modulation of past events. For him, history is rather the synergic effects of recompositions on all levels of the cumulative past. But the fundamental historical shifts take place only when a new cultural form breaks through. From this point of view, the epochal particularity of modernity is essentially negated: Bellah sees the modern era as a problematic phase in continuity with the axial age, rather than the advent of a second axial age. Consequently, what is needed to resolve the current crisis of incoherence is not to carry forward modernity as it is, but to "integrate in new ways the dimensions we have had since the axial age" (xix).

If an axial return is necessary for reopening the way of moral advance, the remaining question is how to make it possible. It is surely not the issue of the book, but Bellah does provide some hints. In the introduction of the section on the axial civilizations, he points out that the dynamism of the axial traditions lies in the "repeated efforts to recover the initial insights, to realize the so far unrealized possibilities" (p. 282) in spite of failures. Then in the Conclusion, he categorizes axial figures such as Buddhist monks, Hebrew prophets, Chinese Confucians, and Greek thinkers as "renouncers": they all looked at and criticized worldly realities from the outside. May we also consider the "renouncers" as the ideal personalities for contemporary intellectuals, even though they should have a larger social space for public criticism than in ancient societies? Do "looking for friends in history" and tracing universalistic ethical insights in different civilisations also constitute ways to renounce this world? I think Bellah himself would agree with me that the answer is yes. If it is the case, there would not be much difficulty in understanding why the "practical intent" of the book matters, which is to "make just a bit more likely the actualization of Kant's dream of a world civil society" (p. 606).

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