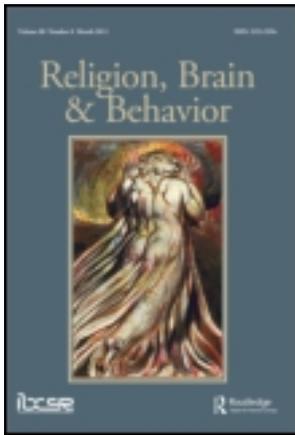


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Religion and empire in the Axial Age

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BOOK SYMPOSIUM: ROBERT BELLAH'S *RELIGION IN HUMAN EVOLUTION*

Religion and the evolution of meaning: is meaning made or perceived?

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Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) is a landmark work of integrative scholarship that has raised the bar for cognitive-evolutionary theories of religion. At the very least, after reading Bellah's book, it should be much harder for proponents of such theories to claim to have "explained religion" without addressing a similarly wide and diverse range of historical instances. At the same time, Bellah's work affirms that our understanding of the many diverse and changing forms of human religiosity can be greatly enhanced by taking into account the basic cognitive capacities on which this kaleidoscopic variety depends. Above all, Bellah's book demonstrates, better than any previous attempt, the importance of deep evolutionary history for human self-understanding.

Perhaps Bellah's most significant contribution is not found in the specific claims of his book – though of course these are important to consider – but in the pattern of evolutionary inquiry that it so wonderfully exemplifies. One of Bellah's central insights is that the "conserved core processes" (pp. 60–66) of the human mind are essential to the emergence and diversification of distinctive capacities and behaviors such as religion. Accordingly, the characteristic evolutionary pattern of conservation and change is evinced in his proposal that the religious capacity for meaning-making is rooted in animal play, and also in his descriptions of the development of religious traditions through processes of sociocultural evolution. He shows that early, pre-axial stages persist as living cores in much the same way that the oldest brain functions persist as the core of higher functions.

Importantly, this form of evolutionary explanation contrasts with those based on the curiously static view that "our modern skulls house a stone age mind" (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997, p. 85), in that it does not regard current patterns of behavior as the product of innate mechanisms that finished evolving long ago. Unlike those who reify the continuing role of our evolutionary past as an unchanging essence or rigid foundation, Bellah views "conserved core processes" as active participants in the continual remaking of humanity within increasingly complex sociocultural settings.

However, despite the many substantial virtues of Bellah's project, I have misgivings about two of its most basic suppositions: the first is his insistence on a sharp contrast between the experience of meaningfulness and everyday life, and the second is his view of meaning as a product of the mind. Although space permits me to present only the barest suggestion of an alternative, I wish to question the view that religious meanings

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are the products of cognitive processes that are essentially different from those involved in ordinary, everyday perception. This view neglects the ways in which our experience of meaning is rooted in active engagement with the environment, and moreover it seems to posit a deep discontinuity between experience and nature that is ultimately at odds with Bellah's otherwise exemplary efforts at evolutionary explanation.

The problem may stem from Bellah's view of religion. In a nutshell, his view is that it is "more than anything else, a way of making sense of the world, of forming an identity in relation to the world" (2011, p. 102). As a dyed-in-the-wool Durkheimian, Bellah's tendency is to elaborate this view in terms of the social structures that religion is often invoked to explain. But the most basic feature of Bellah's theory of religion in evolution is his view of its function: religion is a source of meaning. Thus "making sense," in this usage, is not to clear up some confusion, but rather to supply meaning and, more specifically, to supply the kind of meaning that can invest a person's life, and the sociocultural niche he or she inhabits, with purpose and value. To make meaning is, in Bellah's view, the core function underlying human religiosity, and is therefore the focus of his evolutionary meta-narrative. As Bellah remarks in his preface, "there is a place within [evolution] for meaning and purpose . . . indeed meaning and purpose evolve" (pp. xiii–xiv).

It is important to note that Bellah's view of religion also entails a bold empirical claim about human experience: *everyday life lacks meaning*. That is to say, the activities, customs, and institutions of everyday life are deficient in value and purpose, and these attributes must be supplied by some extrinsic source. This claim posits a deep divide between the meaning-rich experiences of art and religion and the meaning-poor activities of everyday life, and this divide provides Bellah's story with its basic plot. The contrast and tension that he sets up between "ordinary" and "non-ordinary" reality (p. 1) not only channels the basic meaning-making function of religion; it constitutes the driving force of its continual evolution. One could even go so far as to say that, in Bellah's view, the dynamic interaction between worlds of everyday life and worlds of abundant meaning is the basic process that has defined, and continues to define, humanity as the meaning-making species.

There can be no doubt that human life traffics in meaning on a scale that far surpasses any other species. But if meaning-making is distinct from everyday life and its basic concerns, what is its original source and function?

Bellah's view seems to be that meaning is made through *representation*, or the intentional use of signs. He describes the evolution of human meaning-making in terms of three distinctive representational capacities: mimetic, mythic, and symbolic. This crucial aspect of Bellah's evolutionary story closely follows the work of psychologist Merlin Donald (1991, 2001). According to Donald, each of these types of representation constitutes a stage of hominid evolution; all together they form a hierarchical system in which higher levels of representation operate on and thereby "encapsulate" lower levels: in other words, meanings are made from meanings (1991, p. 270). But what is at the bottom of this hierarchy? In Donald's account, the raw material from which meaning made is the perception of events. Is raw perceptual experience, then, devoid of meaning?

Although his exact position on this matter is hard to pinpoint, it seems that Bellah, following Donald, construes meaning primarily in the sense of the semantic properties that signs have within networks of signs. Even the most basic mimetic representations (e.g., gestures) have some minimal "network meaning" (Neville, 1989), and insofar as network meanings are determined by convention, it makes sense to view these

meanings as *made*. However, semantic networks are not just self-referential systems; rather we use them to pick out aspects of the world (events, objects, agents, relations, qualities, etc.), and this selective reference constitutes another dimension of meaning, namely “content meaning” (Neville, 1989). What seems to be missing in Donald’s view of representational systems, and so also in Bellah’s view, is an adequate appreciation of the importance of network meaning for engagement; that is, for bringing different kinds of content meaning into experience. Sophisticated networks of meaning are not simply projected *onto* the world; rather they enable us to pick out complex, distributed, and abstract meanings *in* the world. They are tools for the *perception* of meaning.

The idea that meanings are perceived rather than constructed is highly unorthodox, but it is not without supporters. In ecological psychology (Gibson, 1986; Heft, 2001) meaning in the most basic sense is understood as the affordance of some action or activity, and moreover it is claimed to be the object of perception rather than a product of interpretation. Meaning in this sense is found in all spheres of life and is shared with all other animals. Accordingly, cognition in its most basic and general form is viewed by ecological psychology as the active engagement of the animal with meaningful properties in its environment, the vast majority of which are intimately related to action, e.g., “clime-ability,” “grasp-ability,” etc.

To insist that meanings in this view are species-relative – what is climbable for a monkey is not so for a mouse – or even relative to an individual, is not to say that they are made by the mind. On the contrary, such meanings are evidently grounded in various attributes and capacities of the animal (e.g., body shape and size, motor skills) as well as properties of the environment. The key insight of ecological psychology, now well supported by experimental evidence (see Chemero, 2009), is that perceptual-cognitive systems of humans and other animals are designed for the direct engagement of these meanings from the sensory stimulation flows that arise through interaction with their environment. When it is so attuned, an animal does not need to interpret or otherwise “process” the meanings of its percepts in order to determine their relevance to possible actions, because its percepts are already meaningful in this way (Barrett, 2011).

From this perspective, Bellah’s division between rich experiences of meaning and normal perception is not necessarily unwarranted – after all, humans do seem to have a unique ability to become engrossed in networks of abstract meaning. But the capacity to construct new kinds of network meaning is a cognitive development whose primary value lies not in the opportunity to inhabit another world, but in the way it enhances our capacity of meaning perception. Our peculiar networks of meaning have certainly changed the way we see the world, for better and for worse. However, the sharp division that Bellah sees between worlds of meaning and everyday life – sometimes so sharp as to suggest a kind of solipsism – while perhaps suggestive of a widespread problem, is not a necessary consequence of our enhanced representational capacities.

Moreover, when rendered so sharply, this division raises some serious questions – especially in the beginning of the book, where Bellah draws upon Alfred Schutz to make claims about human experience that seem strongly weighted by the modern experiences of industrialized society. Consider, for instance, the following description of everyday life:

For Schutz the world of daily life is characterized by striving, by working, by anxiety. It is the premier world of functioning, of adapting, of surviving. . . . Among language-using humans, however, the world of daily life is never all there is, and the other realities that human culture gives rise to cannot fail but overlap with the world of daily life, whose relentless utilitarianism can never be absolute. (2011, p. xv)

To question this notion of the “relentless utilitarianism” of everyday life (and the contrast it poses with other, more meaningful “realities”) is not to claim that everyday life is a bowl of cherries. The question is not about the degree of hardship in everyday life but the nature of this hardship. Do humans, in their daily routines, really encounter a “world of mechanical necessity” (p. 9), a world “based on a *fundamental anxiety*,” such that “*nobody can stand to live in it all the time*” (pp. 2–3; emphasis in original)? Also, the question is not whether everyday life can pose profound existential problems, but why such problems seem to be uniquely human.

By relying on the work of Schutz, Bellah makes it seem as if such problems are the side effects of our confinement within socially constructed worlds of meaning: meaning is precarious because it has no grounding outside of these worlds. Even the everyday world, despite its appearance of baseline reality, is a socially constructed world of meanings (pp. 3–4). But if the impoverished world of everyday life is also socially constructed, why not construct a better one? Bellah argues that this is indeed what we are always trying to do, but with only limited success. Religion gives us “another world” of meaning and fulfillment to live in, but because this world is merely “imagined,” we cannot live there for long (p. xvii). So clearly, while *all* worlds of meaning are socially constructed, the worlds of daily life are at least closer to the ground – that is, more tightly constrained by matters of “Darwinian survival” (p. xx).

Bellah’s division between the religious world of meaning and the everyday world of “Darwinian survival” poses a serious problem for evolutionary explanation, as he himself recognizes. How could evolution permit us the luxury of a non-utilitarian world (p. xx)? Bellah’s solution to this problem is ingenious: drawing on the work of Gordan Burghardt and Johan Huizinga, he argues that religious and artistic worlds of meaning can be traced to animal play, the original “alternative reality” (p. 77). While the emergence of animal play can be understood (at least theoretically) within an evolutionary framework, it loosens the chains of evolution’s relentless utilitarianism by providing a sphere of activity that is relatively sheltered from Darwinian selection pressures – a safe enclave for the exploration and development of non-utilitarian meaning. In short, play represents the evolutionary emergence of the capacity to go “off-line,” which in turn has given rise to the meaning-making capacities that distinguish the human species (p. 80).

Granted that play provides a shelter for the exploration of new behaviors and experiences; does it really do all the explanatory work that Bellah requires? What needs clarification is the way in which this sphere is distinguished as a source of enjoyment (different from pleasure, or the satisfaction of desires), and above all as a special source of meaning. Again, it is not clear exactly what senses of meaning are supposed to originate in play, or need to originate there, given the restrictions of Bellah’s framework. But the problem is this: *once separated from everyday life*, it is doubtful that any of the senses of meaning and value that are present within religious and aesthetic experience can emerge *anywhere* in evolutionary history, even in the sheltered space of play. The relaxation of Darwinian constraints permits the exploration of only those dimensions of experience that are already supported by

the animal's cognitive repertoire. This may sound like an overly tight restriction that makes genuine novelty in evolutionary process impossible, but what is really at stake here is the kind of evolutionary continuity that bars the entrance of *sui generis* experience.

The possibility that Bellah's picture of meaning harbors a *sui generis* element is suggested by his curious use of Abraham Maslow's "Being cognition" to describe the "ground zero" of religious experience (p. 12). Maslow's concept of Being or B-cognition is a precursor to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," but while Bellah is familiar with both, he seems to prefer the former because of the sharp distinction that Maslow draws between B-cognition and normal "Deficiency cognition," which, according to Bellah, closely resembles Schutz's concept of everyday life. What makes B-cognition appear *sui generis* is not just the sharp contrast that it presents with everyday life, but also the seemingly unparalleled access that it provides to special qualities or values; B-cognition is a "unitary experience" distinguished by wholeness, harmony, well-being, and fullness. But perhaps most importantly it is an experience of the intrinsic value of some activity, of life, or of reality itself.

Bellah's use of B-cognition as the "ground zero" of religious experience suggests that what really defines the fundamental divide of human life, for him, is not meaning but value. After all, as pointed out above, everyday life is also viewed as a socially constructed world of meaning. What distinguishes the meanings of religion, then, is their grounding in values that are rarely, if ever, found in everyday life. The human capacity of religious meaning-making is therefore the human capacity to have profound experiences of value (Maslow's B-cognition), as this capacity is shaped and interpreted by various forms of representation (p. 12).

Perhaps the deepest flaw of Bellah's theory of religion is the extent to which it rests on the notion that the capacity to experience intrinsic value is distinct from normal cognition. What Maslow referred to as "peak experiences" – experiences of pronounced intrinsic value – do not need to be marked off so sharply from the rest of experience. Csikszentmihalyi, for instance, understands peak experience as an intensification of our conscious involvement in any activity (1991). Accordingly, the *abundance* of value that distinguishes this experience as "autotelic" need not mark off the experience of intrinsic value per se.

In fact the pursuit of evolutionary understanding is arguably incompatible with any sharp partitioning of human experience, including those that mark off its most dramatic peaks of meaning and value. As John Dewey observed in the opening of his classic work, *Art as Experience* (1980), "Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations" (p. 3; emphasis in original). That work was devoted to restoring continuity between "refined and intensified experience...and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience" (p. 3). Because Dewey saw everyday experience as rooted in the most basic interactions between an organism and its environment, he likewise sought to uncover the "germ" of aesthetic experience in the most basic and vital functions. This is the kind of continuity that evolutionary theories of religion should seek, and yet Bellah, though well aware of Dewey's work (2011, pp. 589–90), seems to undermine this continuity by cutting off experiences of meaning and value from everyday life.

In closing, I would like to put these critical remarks into perspective. By focusing so heavily on possible flaws in Bellah's understanding of meaning as

presented in the beginning of his book, it may seem that I am discounting the value of subsequent chapters that describe how human networks of meaning evolved in relation to key sociopolitical developments. On the contrary, I believe these parts can and should be treasured for their many valuable insights. Bellah's "meta-narrative" is not a crude attempt to force religious history onto a procrustean bed of theory – quite the opposite – and consequently it cannot be judged solely by the soundness of his suppositions about meaning. Furthermore, even if these suppositions were changed, it is not clear how Bellah's claims about the development of religious meaning would need to be revised – perhaps in many cases, not very much. Understanding how meaning is perceived rather than made may simply add another dimension, and a few missing chapters, to Bellah's remarkable story.

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The complex origins of religion: the work of Robert Bellah

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Robert Bellah's book *Religion in Evolution* is an unusually broad interdisciplinary attempt at theoretical synthesis. Quite independently of any principled arguments for or against interdisciplinary research, it was justified and perhaps even necessitated by the material itself, which is inherently complex, requiring knowledge of many and varied sources. However, as shown by some of the online comments on Immanent Frame (<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/bellah>) and elsewhere, the outcome, while widely praised, has generated controversy.

We should not be surprised at this. Any truly interdisciplinary attempt at theory has a potential downside: the author's intentions tend to be misinterpreted by

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specialists on all sides. In a long and complex work such as this, it is easy to miss the forest for the trees. Bellah has tried to place the emergence of world religion in a coherent historical framework, which is ambitious enough, and open to controversy on its own level. Bellah has also tried to place religion in a much wider and longer framework, that of evolution, including human evolution. This puts his theory in a rarified class, almost by itself, whereby he also seeks to understand religion as a natural product of the evolving human mind in its co-evolutionary embrace with culture. This is no small project, and this book, 14 years in the writing, is only part of a larger project which is still unfinished. No one can criticize his lack of ambition; Bellah's long-term objective is to explain the deep cognitive origins of culture itself, drawing on the history of religion as a primary source of evidence.

I fully agree with his choice of raw material for such a study. No other aspect of ancient culture is so well documented as the phenomenon, or rather the cluster of phenomena, which we classify as religion. In Bellah's view, religion has played a vital role in generating the virtual worlds that define human culture. This is to say that religious thinking has shaped and been a product of the human imagination for a very long time. His book is thus also an attempt to delve as deeply as possible into the origins of the unique culture-creating forces that make us human.

Religions are perhaps the most historically salient manifestations of those deep imaginative forces. They constitute a very rich set of phenomena, and are the database, as it were, for developing such a theory. But such a database cannot be fully understood without plumbing its roots in cognition and evolution. This inevitably forces any serious theorist to cross the boundaries between disciplines. It pulls the investigation toward cognitive science and biology on the one hand, and social science on the other. This will almost certainly irritate most biologists and social scientists in equal measure: this might be good or bad, depending on your perspective.

The problem is illustrated in Bellah's choice for the definitions of two key terms, "religion" and "evolution." These are loaded words! Bellah defines religion early in the book, showing his roots in Durkheim, as "a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them as a moral community." Fair enough; this appears to be a safe, conservative definition, but it is not entirely clear at this point what he intends to classify as sacred. As Bellah develops his theory with specific examples, it becomes clear that he has really left Durkheim far behind. He does not define religion in opposition to the so-called secular aspects of social life. On the contrary, for Bellah most religions encompass all or many of the features of social life that we label as secular. As Bellah documents beautifully, religions have always been closely linked to the secular triad of power, hierarchy, and class. The catch is that the latter are usually justified with reference to the sacred.

In the ancient world around which much of this book revolves, the sacred touches many aspects of secular life, and the boundary between sacred and secular becomes fuzzy. Bellah shows this in detail in his case histories. In traditional societies, even the most mundane and routine actions had connections to what we choose to call religion. Most languages, including those of Europe before the Enlightenment, did not have or need a folk category corresponding to the modern definition of religion, because there was no so-called secular domain. Seen from this point of view, the line between religious and secular appears to be arbitrarily drawn; largely an accident of the past three centuries of western history, during which it became important for the new self-appointed "secular" elite to draw a qualitative line in the sand between themselves and their predecessors. This idea reflects Bellah's earlier work on the

secular religion at the heart of American culture; the sacred can extend into the secular, and vice versa.

But, despite the overlap, we cannot think clearly without the distinction. Much ink has been spilled on whether religion exists as a natural kind, or exists mainly in folk psychology as a loose but somewhat useful category. To a psychologist, such categories and the inevitable debates over their definitions are all too familiar. It is rather like arguing over the definition of schizophrenia, a phenomenon that also lacks coherence and seems to encompass several different subclasses of phenomena. However, despite this, schizophrenia has proven to be an indispensable category in psychological research. It remains in wide use because it refers to symptoms and syndromes that are easily observed and communicated, albeit still loosely understood. After many experiments with alternative classifications of mental illness, it appears that using other terminology would probably make the discussion even fuzzier.

The same is true for the category "religion." Although imprecise, it survives in the literature because it has proven to be an indispensable term, even when used in the inclusive sense preferred by Bellah, which grants membership in the category to a wide variety of historical phenomena, including, for example, the Confucian tradition in China, much of Greek philosophy, the religions of the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, various tribal societies, and the Abrahamic traditions. In all those cases, religion was closely allied with core secular concerns, such as justifying and enshrining the powers of the ruling class and solidifying a system of government, as well as shaping and determining the processes underlying the maintenance of ritual, practice, and belief. In a word, religion has always served a *governance* function, especially in the realms of practice and belief.

The move that lets Bellah argue this point convincingly is simple, but subtle enough to be easily missed: bait and switch. Despite his apparently solid Durkheimian credentials, he roots his definition of the sacred more in cognitive than in social science. In psychology, the sacred is merely one of many possible alternate realities; that is, something set apart from ordinary reality. This is done by consensus in a mode of shared intentionality. The ability to perceive a distinction between so-called ordinary reality and various alternate realities can be seen especially clearly in the fantasy play of children, during which normal social rules are temporarily suspended. In play, fighting is not true fighting, and eating is not true eating; no one gets beaten up or left to starve, and even social status is temporarily suspended. Play is remarkably egalitarian and safe; the normal hierarchies of power are suspended, and high and low, big and small, old and young members of the group can play together as equals, on a temporary basis. The same principle also applies to the play of most other mammals: the normal functions and rules no longer apply, and the participants are free to behave in ways that are normally unsafe and out of reach. There is a potential for creative invention in play precisely because it is a safe haven; a kind of behavioral sanctuary in which anything, within the cognitive limits of the species, can be imagined and tried out.

The assertion that many aspects of religion find their ultimate cognitive origins in fantasy play is a strong hypothesis. Bellah covers the topic very well, ranging across the classic work of Bruner, Burghardt, Huizinga, Piaget, and Schiller, as well as more recent thinkers in the subject such as Allison Gopnik and Hans Joas. He has concluded, in agreement with DeWaal and many others, that the deep primate predilection for play, especially ritualized play, must have set the stage for the evolution of human culture, and eventually, for the more abstract feats of

imagination that we identify with creative work. Play is at the heart of what he argues is the most ancient aspect of religious practice – ritual. Ritual and expressive action creates, in human society, an interactive cultural domain that I have called Mimetic culture (Donald, 1991, 1998, 2001). It is the elemental creative force in culture, and its emergence enabled human ancestors to invent games, public spectacles, rituals, skills, and, eventually, the performance arts, among other things. It grew naturally out of our human proclivity for fantasy, role-playing, and imagining. In Bellah's theoretical framework, the notion of the sacred grew from this kind of imaginative invention and the alternate realities that it produced. Our inherited, pre-human capacity for temporarily suspending disbelief and entering into an alternate reality set the stage for exploring our evolving powers of imagination.

Bellah's theory may help explain why ritual and religious art are so tenacious, even after conquest. They are society's safe place, and for a species that lives in a virtual world, to lose its safe place in imagination is catastrophic. He does not argue that fantasy play is directly adaptive, or that ritual evolved directly in the Darwinian sense. He is not proposing yet another evolutionary hypothesis about the adaptive value of religion or religious behavior – on the contrary, he has shown little interest in such ideas, even though they have value in their own right. Rather, he tries to map out the origins of religion by tracing the phenomena that usually define it – ritual, practice, narratives, dogma, community, and so on – back to deep causal forces that accommodate the facts of our ontogenesis, phylogenesis, and cultural evolution.

This idea greatly broadens the role of religion in cultural genesis, pushing it far beyond its traditional importance. In essence, this theory implies that religion was at the cutting edge of human thought for most of our history as a species, which is an idea that I strongly support. Mimesis started an imaginative arms race whereby various mimetic expressions and rituals competed for adoption in the public arena. It remains important even in modern culture, though today imaginative play and alternate realities have evolved into, and blended with, a larger system of cognitive governance that has outpaced traditional religion in many parts of the world. As culture has become more and more focused on innovation and creativity, certain categories of play have become big business, and the driving force behind modern cultural transformation. Whether or not we want to classify those driving forces as religious becomes a matter of definition, as discussed above.

“Evolution” is another term that leads to disagreement among academics, and might have contributed to the difficulty some have in understanding what Bellah is after. In biology, evolution is narrowly defined. There is still an argument raging in that field over whether culture can “evolve” in a way that is compatible with the biological definition of the word. Richerson and Boyd (2005) have devoted over a quarter century of their scholarly lives to the task of convincing biologists that such an idea is not absurd, and that culture could have evolved in its own right, perhaps as a variant of niche construction, and played a major role in the biological evolution of modern humans. The same term, evolution, is used more loosely in the social sciences to describe a process of systematic cultural change over time. Bellah uses it in both senses of the term, even though the mechanisms of change are obviously very different. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The history of the term reflects deep and practical differences between disciplines in both substance and method. However, when the term is applied simultaneously to both biological and cultural change, which is necessary in the co-evolutionary framework of contemporary cognitive

theory, both definitions must apply. If we banished the word, we would have to reinvent it, or something very close to it.

Thus, whenever theorists ask whether and how religion evolved, they automatically enter controversial territory, even before proposing a specific hypothesis. Theories of evolution invariably lead to a debate about mechanisms, and many writers have legitimately questioned whether bringing mind, brain, and evolution into social theory has any proven value, especially when trying to explain the details of the complex and ubiquitous social phenomena that constitute religious practices and beliefs. Of course, it does, once one concedes the idea that human intellectual and cultural prowess was the product of brain-culture co-evolution. In such a framework, both sides of the equation must be made to dwell in the same theory, somehow. Bellah has examined the question in considerable depth, and is to be congratulated on the comprehensiveness and balance of his treatment of this issue in chapter 2 in his book. Anyone interested in delving into this topic should give it a careful reading. I know of no better introduction to the challenges facing theorists in this field.

As to Bellah's focus on cognition, it is widely accepted in psychology that human social evolution has been contingent on our evolving cognitive capabilities. These capabilities depend on human brainpower, which differs from the brainpower of other primates, so that they are forever excluded from the exotic intricacies of our cultures. At this point, even though the state of theory in cognitive neuroscience may be limited, and the genetics of mind largely unsolved, it does not make sense to exclude mind and brain from theories of social evolution on a priori grounds.

Of course, it can be argued that religion entails much more than cognition. Religion is typically tinged with intense emotions, including awe, terror, love, and bonding to the group. It also has a major aesthetic aspect, of which Bellah is fully aware. Nevertheless, it is the cognitive aspect of religion that tends to get the most attention. When William James wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he singled out for discussion such cognitive aspects as conversion, mystical visions, awareness of the Unseen, unification of the self, saintliness, belief in magic and the hereafter, and mind-cures. It was no accident that these were all mainstream Anglo-Protestant concerns, typical of the over-intellectualized Victorian era in which he lived. But, almost 90 years later, after a radical shift in attitudes toward religion in the West, Pascal Boyer's book *Religion Explained* (2001) nevertheless zeroed in on many of the same phenomena: belief in the supernatural, gods and spirits, an afterlife, and the search for causes and explanations of significant events. These are all primarily cognitive phenomena. Bellah's cognitive focus is therefore not out of line with current trends in psychology and sociology. On the other hand, his approach places much more weight on practice and less on belief than most of its rivals. He also insists on doing the hard scholarly work, and spelling out the relevant historical detail to document each point in each case, facing the complexity of human culture head on. He resists the tendency, perhaps too common in this field, to generalize loosely from a few observations or experiments or statistics to all religions, at all times and places. He insists on focusing on the detailed interplay of structure and function in specific times and places before drawing general conclusions. This is a welcome development.

While attending to historical detail, Bellah also respects biological theory, and proposes another idea that I found quite interesting. One of his key theoretical moves is his adoption of Kirschner & Gerhardt's (2005) idea of "conserved core processes" in biological evolution. These are radical adaptations that must be conserved in later stages of evolution, especially in "higher," or more complex, organisms. They include

four fundamental sets of genes that specify the basic processes needed for building: (1) simple prokaryotic cells; (2) single-celled eukaryotes (nuclei, organelles, much greater complexity and size); (3) multicellular eukaryotes (all fungi, plants and animals); and (4) body plans (specifying the shapes and proportions of each species). Species cannot be reproduced without these conserved core processes, which constitute much of the genome that we share with other living organisms. In evolution, variations and mutations were adopted or rejected as they related to conserving these core processes.

Bellah proposes that human cognitive evolution also entails conserved core processes, and that religion reflects the latter, rather than simply reflecting adaptive success or failure. Mutations must conserve these core processes or they will fail, while variations that enhance core processes will be likely to succeed. Kirschner & Gerhardt call this phenomenon facilitated variation, and Bellah argues that cultural evolution works in a somewhat similar manner. He means this as an analogy, rather than a literal translation of theory from one domain to another, but it nevertheless presents us with interesting possibilities.

To work this idea through, Bellah has adopted my own model of cognitive-cultural co-evolution as helpful to his mission of tracing the roots of religion. Interestingly, my model (1991, 1998, 2001) was based on very different evidence. It was developed mostly on the basis of research in cognitive science and neuroscience, rather than social science or historical scholarship. It grew primarily from my realization that traditional neuroscience could not explain very much about our uniquely human intellectual and cultural achievements, and that only a co-evolutionary theory that accounted for human culture as well as cognition could succeed in explaining how the capabilities of the modern mind and brain emerged in evolution. The basic progression described in my model is cognitive, but is inseparable from cultural evolution, since cognition has co-evolved interactively with culture over millions of years. The model is descriptive and chronological, starting with a primate Episodic cognitive foundation. That base was leveraged by a radical change in high-level conscious control of the brain's action system, which produced the expressive basis for a Mimetic culture of event re-enactment, skilled rehearsal, and ritual. This kind of culture carried human ancestors through the Lower and Middle Paleolithic, setting the cultural stage for the later evolution of language, and the modern "mythic" cultural forms that narrative skills enabled. Mythic cultures assimilated the mimetic customs and rituals within them, and elaborated them as well. Technological inventions, including writing and mathematical notations, subsequently revolutionized human representational systems, eventually leading to Theoretic culture, which is based on sophisticated thinking skills closely linked to the existence of external (non-biological) memory systems. This is a cascade model: earlier stages are retained and elaborated in later-evolved mental structures so that the modern mind retains all previous gains. The first three levels of representation in this model could be called, in the context of Kirschner & Gerhardt's theory, conserved core processes, without which the human mind could not function at its present capacity.

This notion has concrete implications and predictions. For example, this hypothesis predicts that core structures of traditional Mythic cultures must necessarily be preserved during a shift in the direction of Theoretic culture, because they are mandatory core processes. The cognitive-cultural system could not operate without them. This rule implies that mythic and mimetic modes are not optional.

They must be retained in a way that is compatible with the emergence of any new theoretic cultural shift. Consequently, cultural variants that conserve and strengthen existing traditional cultural systems should facilitate the modernizing process. Variants that are antagonistic to the existing order should cause the shift to fail. In extreme cases, the entire social order might collapse, because the core cognitive processes, while stronger and deeper than the new order, are prevented from functioning normally.

It is conceivable that the seeds of the decline and fall of empires and religions might lie in such structural conflicts, whereby the deeper momentum of ancient cognitive structures eventually defeat those of more recent developments, because of the contradictions inherent in the new structures, or vice-versa, where recent change defeats the core cognitive processes and the whole system collapses. Tracking the old cognitive order, the core processes, is difficult to achieve in modern society, because we are usually blind to our own deepest habits and beliefs. Scholarship aimed at revealing these deep trends should be given priority, because in the context of what Charles Taylor (2007) has called the modern malaise, it may conceivably be a matter of life and death for the survival of western culture. If this principle applies across the board, it would follow that the conservation of earlier mythic and mimetic processes within a predominantly theoretic cultural context is not optional; rather it is a necessity, and a matter of survival.

Bellah hypothesized that modern theoretic cultural institutions started their ascent during the Axial Age. He invested considerable scholarly effort in proving this hypothesis for the civilizations of China and Greece with some success. However, by his own admission, he encountered difficulties in arguing the case for Israel and the Indus Valley, mostly because of the lack of explicit abstract analysis. In Israel, argument and dialectic took the form of allegory and counter-allegory, while in the Indus Valley, the religious culture was sustained for a long time entirely by a unique oral tradition that, while perhaps accurate as a collective trans-generational system for preserving cultural memory, limited the depth of any discussion of principle.

It is debatable whether the Axial shift toward Theoretic culture is consistent enough across the four cultures Bellah reviewed (he deliberately left out Persian religion, due to a lack of documentation) to allow such generalizations to stand. In formulating my theory, I found the case for the birth of Theoretic culture in Greece to be fairly straightforward. Analytic thought appeared in that society, however briefly, in a virtually modern form, especially in the writings of Aristotle and Pythagoras, but also in that of many other authors. Bellah has convinced me that China is another case in which the transition to Theoretic culture can be documented reasonably well, although it seems not to have gone as far as it did in Greece. However, in Israel and India the evidence is less convincing. The only way to support Bellah's claim for a parallel birth of the habit of theoretic thinking in all Axial religions is to broaden the definition of Theoretic culture, defining it mostly in terms of reflection, as Bellah did, rather than in terms of the presence of analytic or paradigmatic thought as we understand it now, as I did. Bellah opted for a primarily meta-cognitive definition of Theoretic culture: in his proposal, once a culture produces evidence of systematic reflection on its values and ideas, by whatever means, it has entered the theoretic domain. This approach seizes upon any evidence of systematic reflection on the fundamental ideas governing a society as sufficient evidence to claim an Axial shift.

This is certainly a different use of the term theoretic than I intended in my original proposal. In its defense, the birth of theoretic thinking must have evolved through several stages, as its algorithms took form, and what we see in the written documents of Israel as well as the transcribed oral tradition in India may well illustrate the earliest phase of this process, where the habits of mythic thinking still predominate, but the trend is actively leaning toward analytic metacognitive reflection. This would be consistent with my theory, but it does require a conceptual shift, because Bellah moves the theoretic threshold to a lower setting, admitting these very early shifts into the class of Theoretic culture. He is not alone in arguing for a more flexible approach. A somewhat similar proposal in principle was made by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew (1998), who argued for an intermediate cognitive-cultural stage located between Mythic and Theoretic, in which literacy plays a small or non-existent role, while other forms of material culture – for example, monumental architecture, art, and perhaps music – play a dominant role in establishing the system by which people in a given culture are put in a position to reflect on their values, practices and beliefs. I set the threshold for classifying a theoretic transition higher than it would be in either of these proposals, but neither suggestion violates my model; rather, they are both attempts to fine-tune it. This is progress; theories should be fine-tuned to accommodate new empirical evidence as it appears.

In conclusion, Robert Bellah has constructed a comprehensive theory of human religious origins that should be the subject of debate for many years to come. He is unusual in the depth of his scholarship, his familiarity with sources in so many fields, and the thoroughness of his research. In this, his book has few equals, and will be a very hard act to follow.

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An “axial” work

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At the outset of *Human Understanding*, Stephen Toulmin (1972) writes:

The problem of human understanding is a twofold one. *Man knows, and he is also conscious that he knows.* We acquire, possess, and make use of our knowledge; but at the same time, we are aware of our own activities as knowers. In consequence, human understanding has developed historically in two complementary ways: it has grown, but at the same time it has deepened, so becoming at once more extensive and more reflective. Looking “outside ourselves” and mastering the problems posed by the world we live in, we have extended our understanding; looking “inwards” and considering how it is that we master those problems, we have deepened it. And throughout the history of thought these twin activities have gone on continuously in parallel.

Religion in Human Evolution is Robert Bellah’s account of how the human species attained the condition Toulmin describes. In Bellah’s telling, religion played an essential and central role in that achievement.

Bellah’s saga plots an ever-expanding set of human capacities that evolves through four cognitive stages, adapted from the work of Merlin Donald: episodic, mimetic, narrative, and theoretic. These are paralleled by four types of religious representation grounded in human cognitive development and derived in part from the work of Jerome Bruner: unitive, enactive, symbolic, and conceptual. Key elements in Bellah’s evolutionary meta-narrative are the development of: (1) mammalian nurturing of their young; (2) the foundation of human family and community; (3) the shift from small egalitarian tribal to larger, more hierarchical communities; (4) a progression from powerful beings, to kings, to gods; and (5) a move from play, to ritual, to religion. The last stage in this process is reflected in the “Axial Age” civilizations of ancient Israel, Greece, China, and India, which are characterized by theoretic cognition and conceptual representation and marked by “renouncers,” who use those capacities – represented as “thinking about thinking” – to promulgate transcendent utopian visions of collective life that challenge conventional social order. Religion is fundamental to the entire program.

Although this schema may sound linear, it is more complex than that. Bellah’s key methodological principle is that “nothing is ever lost.” Each stage of development becomes part of its successor. However theoretic our cognition or conceptual our religious representation, the prior stages remain available to us to be re-appropriated, revived, or recalled. Evolution is a carrier of heritage; it increases human options and capacities for cognition and representation. Whatever humans may become, and whichever traits emerge on our evolutionary path, we are always all that we have been. Human beings are cognitive and cultural palimpsests in the richest and most comprehensive sense. Religion is the exemplar of, and perhaps the key to, this evolutionary process.

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Students of religion have good reason to celebrate *Religion in Human Evolution*. It is a pioneering work of exceptional erudition that integrates multiple academic disciplines and exhibits remarkable respect for and sensitivity to historical and cultural context and diversity. Its accessible tone invites conversation and dialogue. Because of its breadth, range, and openness, this book distinctively illustrates the power and the pleasure of scholarship. It is a work of enduring consequence, a book that matters.

This short commentary addresses aspects of the book's conception of religion and its description of ancient Israel.

Religion

Bellah's understanding of religion builds on the definition of Clifford Geertz, which Bellah paraphrases as follows: "Religion is a system of symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence." Geertz's definition in turn, depends on the Alfred Schutz's idea of "multiple realities." Schutz postulated that the "paramount reality of human experience" is the "world of daily life," which, as Bellah explains, "is characterized by striving, by working, by anxiety. It is the premier world of functioning, adapting, of surviving" (p. xv). Bellah further suggests that, although the "world of daily life" is "a symbolically constructed world, not the world as it actually is... because the world of daily life appears 'natural,' it involves the suspension of disbelief in the world as it appears" (p. xv).

In this conception, the "world of daily life," which Bellah also refers to as "ordinary reality," (p. 7) has an oppressive, "dreadful" character from which humans need respite. "No one can stand to live in the world of daily life all the time..." because it is a "world of lack" and "deficiency," and its efforts to address these may not succeed. "The world of daily life must then be punctuated with periods that are more inherently gratifying: with sleep, with common meals, with activities that are not means to any ends" (p. 9). To escape the world of daily life requires the ability to inhabit a "non-ordinary" reality (p. 7):

Without the capacity for symbolic transcendence, for seeing the realm of daily life in terms of a realm beyond it, without the capacity for "beyonding," as Kenneth Burke put it, one would be trapped in a world of what has been called dreadful immanence... For the world of daily life seen solely as a world of rational response to anxiety and need is a world of mechanical necessity, not radical autonomy. It is through pointing to other realities, through beyonding, that religion and poetry, and science too in its own way, break the dreadful fatalities of this world of appearances. (p. 9)

The idea that religion "points to" or constitutes another "reality" draws attention to ritual or, more precisely, to Geertz's depiction of ritual as a fusion of "the world as lived and the world as imagined... under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms" (p. xvi). Bellah speculates that, in an evolutionary framework, ritual and ultimately religion may derive from play – which is evident in mammalian life – because play represents a "relaxed field" (p. 77) in which action is done for its own sake rather than as a means to an end. It thus disrupts ordinary reality.

The distinction between "ordinary reality" and the "world of religion" evokes, if it does not exactly replicate, a familiar dichotomous construction that pervades the study of religion in various forms. It resonates, for instance, with both Mircea Eliade's (1987) sacred/profane dichotomy and Robin Horton's (1993) notion of "primary

theory” and “secondary theory,” among others. Bellah’s interest in how these postulated realms interact helps us to understand them as analytical points on a continuum rather than as incommensurate rigid conceptual structures. His work cautions us to use the categories gingerly precisely because they can easily overlap. Insofar as action we identify as religion permeates routine daily activities, such as eating, dressing, or doing business, it can be seen behaviorally as part of or even constituting an ordinary reality, particularly for those who know no other. Behaviors we regard as religious, sacraments, for example, are not only expressive but also instrumental within their systems. And if done improperly, they are to no effect. “Worlds” that are analytically distinguishable to us may be inseparable in participants’ experience. Contemporary psychologists sometimes describe the multiple environments in which children live – home, school, peer groups, etc. – as “nested” or correlated environments because their interaction makes it difficult to separate them. Rather, they explore how the environments affect one another, how the correlations among and between them work. Bellah’s careful attention to historical detail and cultural context in both tribal and axial societies models this kind of work for us.

Although Geertz’s definition of religion has intuitive appeal and is reasonably widespread in the study of religion, it remains a focus of inquiry. The full definition, which Bellah cites and paraphrases, is as follows: Religion is “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” Nancy Frankenberry and Hans Penner (1999) have raised questions about Geertz’s treatment of the relation of symbols to concepts, his argument’s inherent functionalism, the capacity of symbols to be both models *of* and models *for* reality, the location of religion in a quality of “mood” or “motivation,” and Geertz’s resort to what they term “the myth of the given.” “In the end,” they suggest, “the power of a symbolic system, on Geertz’s own terms, comes through as more subjective than social. It may produce a transformation in an individual’s *sense of reality*’ (p. 28, italics added) but this is not a claim that symbolic systems produce any transformation in the public world at all” (p. 640). Bellah acknowledges that “the world of daily life” is a “symbolically constructed world, not the world as it actually is,” and his distillation of Geertz’s longer definition seems implicitly to modify some of its stronger claims – for instance, that the symbols “formulate” and “clothe” “conceptions of a general order of existence,” or that the “moods and motivations” “seem uniquely realistic.” Frankenberry’s and Penner’s questions suggest that there yet may be room for more conceptual ground-clearing on Geertz’s definition, and the issues they raise should be part of the conversation about the applicability of Geertz’s definition to Bellah’s project.

Ancient Israel

In his treatment of ancient Israel’s Axial Age breakthrough, Bellah focuses on the emergence of monotheism, Israel’s “great institutional achievement . . . to found a society not on the rule of one man who claimed to unite heaven and earth, but on a covenant between God and a people” (p. 310), and the development of the Torah, which he associates particularly with the alleged discovery of the book of Deuteronomy by King Josiah. His description of the Torah discusses the relationship of two elements of the Israelite heritage: the priesthood and the Deuteronomic school:

But sacrifice in the tabernacle . . . was essential to the Priestly vision as it was the central way in which the people could communicate with its God and remember how near at hand he is . . . P [the Priestly source of the Pentateuch] gave the Torah its final recension . . . But D [the Deuteronomic source of the Pentateuch] got the last word and found its ultimate triumph in rabbinic Judaism. The great rolling rhetoric of Deuteronomy, the Word of God through Moses himself, became the decisive touchstone for the meaning of the Torah, a book that Jews could take anywhere. The land was never forgotten, but many other Near Eastern peoples would disappear once their land was lost, whereas the Jews could survive and prosper wherever they were as long as they had the Book and a community to interpret it (p. 314).

It is possible to contextualize this observation a bit by noting that the redaction of the Pentateuch was at least as important as the development of the text itself in the creation and persistence of Judaism. Working within the framework of Persian imperialism, the Pentateuch's priestly editors made the sacrificial ritual the climax of the Torah's narrative and recast it as a portable exercise carried out in the apolitical, perhaps utopian, space of the desert. They thus detached the cult from both land and king and made ritual into a text that could be heard, read, and interpreted, even if not fully enacted. Preserving reasonably consistent language and imagery, the priestly redaction transformed a religion of cult and sacrifice into a religion of the book and the body, and articulated clear levitical behavioral grounds for Israel's collective life anywhere and everywhere. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and under the political domination of the Persians, it appears that the priestly redactors made a strategic decision to focus on the aspects of life they thought were in their control – the collective behavior of the community – and sidestepped state, king, and land, all of which required political and military power they did not and never would have. Although sacrifice ultimately ended with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, other aspects of the priestly program – festivals, food taboos, kinship regulations, and ethics – persisted as the basis of collective identity. The content of the Torah is as significant as its textual vehicle. The fusion of ritual and narrative, as Bellah notes, was a highly adaptive decision.

Bellah suggests that the theoretic cognition and conceptual representation that characterize the Axial Age illustrate the capacity of “thinking about thinking.” It is possible to see some of this trait in the Pentateuch, even though its discourse is narrative and ritual rather than philosophical. The theory behind the altar and thus the textualized priestly system is that humans can know themselves – their actions and their motives – and are therefore responsible for self-correction. Because it focuses on conscious, concrete action in maintaining Israel's relationship to God, it emphasizes the power of the human will, both individual and collective. The levitical system – which operates under the charter of the Covenant – thus assumes a capacity of self-reflection and self-awareness, which surely play a role in “thinking about thinking.”

In his final chapter, Bellah observes that the “Axial Age” saw the emergence of utopian visions and “renouncers” who promulgated them in opposition to the power and social structures of their contemporary communities. In that context, he offers the following comparison:

Under the best circumstances . . . Jews were able to establish their own self-governing communities under the protection of the ruling powers . . . When I liken these communities to axial utopias, because within them life was guided by the Torah, however problematic external relations might be, I mean to say they had some similarities to Buddhist and Christian monastic communities, in that in these

communities too the religious life and ordinary life were more closely identified than in most historic societies. (p. 597)

This is a comparison about which we should be cautious because while Christian and Buddhist monasteries were voluntary communities, the Jewish ghettos were largely forced and therefore overdetermined and artificial. The rapidity with which Jews voluntarily left their Torah-centered communities during the Enlightenment and the remarkable extent to which they adopted European forms of culture, politics, religion, and nationalism suggest that many regarded the world of the ghetto as something other, and perhaps less, than utopian. The operative distinction between “ordinary reality” and “non-ordinary reality” acquires a different character in a context of political and social oppression. This also helps explain why some Zionist “utopias” – created in a context of freedom – were not centered on Torah. The non-utopian character of the State of Israel, to which Bellah alludes, may be less ironic than it seems.

To an age that seems able to see religion only in extreme and simplistic terms, *Religion in Human Evolution* supplies an important corrective. It offers a powerful and uniquely informed picture of how natural religion is; how endemic it is to the human species. It also provides a model of how to connect the study of religion to other fields of learning. It will take its place along with the works of Weber and Durkheim as an “axial” work in the study of religion.

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Religion in human evolution: on some generative and selective mechanisms

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Introduction

Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* is presented in the flap text as “a work of extraordinary ambition.” This is certainly true. It is a masterpiece of one man's

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erudition, acumen, and scholarly passion. It is the “harvest of the rich academic life of a leading social theorist,” notes Jürgen Habermas. In my view it is a daring and daunting enterprise and it does something that has been nearly anathema in the recent decades of cultural relativism and anti-evolutionist thought in the human and social sciences: Bellah uses the “e-word,” and he deserves praise for doing so. If the title is to be taken literally, it states that religion in general has played a role in human evolution *in general*. That is a bold claim. “Of course, it will be challenged,” says Charles Taylor. This reviewer will challenge it too, though not for being evolutionary but for not being evolutionary *enough*.

Bellah sets out to present the major developments in the (pre-)history of religion – not in the plural, but in the abstract singular – and that is as rare as it is necessary. With all the dangers of reifying the subject matters referred to by the concept (or abstract term, if you will) of religion, scholars and scientists would be subjecting themselves to intellectual paralysis if they did not dare to trace the trajectories of a social and cultural complex that has been with (or perhaps “in”?) humanity for a *very* long time. If we can talk about the evolution of “society,” of “cooking,” or of “science,” then we can clearly also talk about the evolution of “religion.” That this may run counter to some people’s convictions and sensibilities is a moral argument and not a methodological or theoretical one. What we need is the best possible construction of the analytical object, i.e., “religion,” and careful delineation of the theoretical object. In Bellah’s case this would be the *function* of religion in human evolution. However, the functions of a social and cultural complex are not really that straightforward, and placing it in an evolutionary framework does not simplify matters. It does help, however, that Bellah’s main interest turns out to be the role of religion in human *moral* evolution. Bellah is also careful to point out where he wants to take his readers within that intellectual topography. It helps to point to other guides and their ways of navigating. Two of those mentioned by Bellah are especially important in my view. The first of these is Clifford Geertz (1966/1973), because he says that “religion is sociologically interesting not because it describes the social order but because it shapes it” (p. 119), and his whole approach focuses on the symbolic meaning-dimensions of religion. The second is Merlin Donald, because of his ingenious (hi)story of the evolution of the human “hybrid mind” that has enabled the humans species to enter into a very different kind of development, i.e., *cultural* evolution (Donald, 1991, 2001). So when Bellah says that “I want to understand what religion is and what religion does and then worry about its consequences for the world of daily life” (p. xxii), this involves a wide and complex agenda that is theoretically advanced, involving questions ranging from the philosophy of language to the study of brain plasticity in humans. Before delving further into those evolutionary and theoretical aspects—as I was originally a historian of religions before turning to the cognitive science of culture—I need to offer a critical note on the omission of a religious tradition which in all likelihood must have played an important role in the “Axial Age” scenario.

A historian of religions’ comments on the missing link: Iranian religion

For someone (like myself) who grew up as a student with teachers and mentors who steered clear of anything that resembled “theory,” but who mastered a dozen archaic languages, there was always something obviously attention-grabbing in the notion of an “Axial Age.” Although it was not openly talked about, it was evident to most

students that religious traditions *somehow* seemed to follow certain trajectories – particularly in their apparent increasing complexity of thought. It was also evident that such changes over time were dependent on increasing degrees of literacy. But that was not enough, for although the Egyptians and Assyrians, for example, had literate culture, they did *not* engage that aspect of reflexivity coupled to morality that characterized the ‘Axial Age’. If one accepts this whole hypothesis of the ‘Axial Age’ it has to be reckoned that it is a “moment” (some hundreds of years long) of crucial development in the history of human consciousness in which humans begin to look self-consciously to their own moral universe and practice. Bellah lays it out very carefully, and the general reader may well be satisfied with the materials and arguments he presents, but for scholars of religion in antiquity it is conspicuous that the “Iranian connection” is missing. This may be due to Bellah’s main sources on the Axial Age. One of them is Arnaldo Momigliano who explicitly *did* include the Iranian relation. Here is what he wrote in 1979:

It has become a commonplace, after Karls Jaspers’ “Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte,” the first original book to appear on history in post-war Germany in 1949, to speak of the *Achsenzeit*, the axial age, which included the China of Confucius and Lao-Tse, the India of Buddha, the Iran of Zoroaster, the Palestine of the Prophets, and the Greece of the philosophers, the tragedians and the historians. There is a very real element of truth in that formulation. All these civilizations display literacy, a complex political organization combining central government and local authorities, elaborate town-planning, advanced metal technology, and the practice of international diplomacy. In all these civilizations there is a profound tension between political powers and intellectual movements. Everywhere one notices attempts to introduce greater purity, greater justice, greater perfection and a more universal explanation of things. Now models of reality, either mystically or prophetically or rationally apprehended, are propounded as a criticism of, and alternative to, the prevailing models. We are in the age of criticism – and social criticism transpires even from the involuted imagery of Zoroaster’s Gathas. The personality of the critics is bound to emerge: they are the masters whose thoughts still count today and whose names we remember. (Momigliano, 1979, pp. 8–9)

He then adds a thought-provoking remark: “to the best of our knowledge, they ignored each other” (pp. 8–9). The practice of source reference was, as we may infer, not strongly prevalent in those days. But in the case of the Iranian materials it is puzzling that it is overlooked today, even when more classical historians of religions have pointed to the importance of Iranian influence on subsequent monotheistic traditions (e.g., Boyce, 1979/2001). Thus, one asks: why did the “Iranian connection” disappear? Because Bruce Trigger does not include it? (Trigger, 2003). Trigger is one of Bellah’s important sources, but his work is thematic and comparative in its contents and its organization, and consists of a survey of seven early civilizations for which he (Trigger) finds adequate data. Trigger must have been unable to find adequate data in the Iranian case, and this may explain why there are only scant notes on Persia/Iran or Zarathustra/Zoroaster in both Trigger’s and Bellah’s work. Given the historical facts concerning the geographical expanse and the duration of various Iranian/Persian reigns and dynasties, this is remarkable. It is also regrettable because some of the really important sources for the Axial Age ideas on morality and ethics may lie hidden here. Bellah briefly presents his thoughts on the status of the evidence: “We are left in the uncomfortable position of recognizing a significant Persian impact on three of the four well-documented axial cases while Persia itself remains largely a historical cipher” (p. 271). However, is this all that can be said and

done? There is, in fact, much more available work that might have provided Bellah with copious ideas and references. The field is still alive (see Daryaee, 2012; Skjærvø, 2011; Stausberg, 2008).

These remarks are not meant as a devastating criticism of Bellah's general hypothesis, but they indicate an unfortunate omission of a selection of data that might have proved very interesting for the readership, and which would substantively have corroborated the additional evidence for the Axial Age idea. If anyone else should set out to write about the "Axial Age" hypothesis it would be valuable to have the latest insights from Iranian studies cited above. It is a difficult and a small field, philologically demanding and in many places inconclusive, but that simply means more scholarly challenge and provides no reason for exclusion. On a different note, Bellah regrets that he has left the last 2000 years (!) out of his account. This calls for a volume 2 – on the effective history of the Axial Age – but that one would be truly impossible to write as it would encompass the total cultural history of the literate civilizations.¹

Literacy is undoubtedly involved in the truly interesting question about what prompted those changes and similarities in worldview and ethos in the Axial Age. As a sociologist with historical interests, Bellah mainly looks for socio-historical explanations in the structures and functions of social formations: the tracing of societies from simple to complex.² It would be helpful here to have information on the histories and trajectories of religious ideas in ancient Asia. Archaeology, epigraphy, philology, and history of various specializations all point to the importance of the advent of literacy as a means of cognitive fixation and externalization. But, for a long period, literacy remains just a recording tool. As Bellah notes in his reflections on Mesopotamian culture and the prominence of notions about justice and fairness in the code of Hammurabi, there is not yet the change of "mentalité" which was to become the hallmark of Axial Age thought. That change towards morality and ethics appears to have roots in beliefs about: (1) a varied fate in the afterlife – that is, the idea that conduct in this world has consequences for a continued life in an 'Other world' or for karmic effects in a subsequent existence; and (2) the orders whereby individuals and collectives achieve their proper place in the cosmos. Like varietals in wine, these beliefs may be blended.

There is still the fundamental question of what literacy was applied to as a tool and to what extent such use may be considered a causal factor. On this issue, Bellah cautiously notes that much of Axial Age thought thrives in largely (or completely) oral cultural contexts and only becomes fixed in writing much later. However, there is no doubt that writing as a tool may greatly boost the ability to externalize and thus objectify mental content. In Merlin Donald's view, the "Greek miracle" was that they began to record the thought processes themselves (Donald, 1991, p. 343; 2001, p. 307). In other cultures, much the same practice may have evolved (e.g., in Confucianism or Buddhism), but the evidence from exact dating is less conclusive. However, notwithstanding the importance of complex sociopolitical formations and the functions of literacy, there is still an explanatory void: where do such moral and ethical notions as empathy, justice, and purity come from? Pointing to a "sociological nowhere" does not help.

Going beyond the evidence – to moral psychology

It is my conviction and conjecture that a particular range of moral and religious ideas may emerge independently, without the cultural contact that we know spreads

such concepts. Now, why would or could they do this? One way of explaining the ubiquity of religions, religious representations, and associated moral notions (they often come together) could be with assistance from the evolutionary psychology of religion, as it is presented in the work of Pascal Boyer (2001). Unfortunately, Bellah dismisses the opportunity to include these explanatory resources on page 100 (cf. p. 629, n. 154) as he found them “particularly unhelpful,” partly because of the focus on belief or thought and not on “practice.”³ That is only partly true, as one could think here of Boyer’s notions of superhuman agents with “full strategic knowledge”, who “police” their populations of adherents with distinct moral, that is, behavioral effects (Boyer, 2001, p. 148–160). Boyer’s index contains almost as many references to “morality” as Bellah’s index does – just to confirm that there might have been something relevant for Bellah to exploit. On the other hand, Bellah makes comprehensive use of the evolutionary and developmental psychological work of both Merlin Donald (1991, 2001) and Michael Tomasello (1999, 2009). That is certainly a commendable move, as these two ingenious scholars have provided us with whole new theoretical vistas and conceptual research tools for the naturalistic study of religion. They do not often directly approach morality and ethics, but they do provide us with insights into those workings of the human mind and culture that make morality and ethics possible in the first place.

If we want to try to infer what and how our ancestors thought, then we need to trust the intuition that they were in many ways like us. Inferential analogical reasoning has long been one of the historians’ main interpretive tools, but it is now being explored in “cognitive historiography” on the basis of recent advances in the sciences of the mind (Martin & Sørensen, 2011). So, if we intend to hypothesize about morality and thought in “*illo tempore*” there is good reason to adopt insights from moral psychology as it has recently been reformulated.⁴ Current developments in moral psychology demonstrate how humans have evolved moral dispositions and how the human moral psychological make-up is a biological as well as a cultural phenomenon. Humans have both innate “moral intuitions” as well as learned “moral reflections.” Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph argue that two moral systems seem universal as “individualizing foundations” that support and protect the individual. The first is concerned with harm and care and the second with fairness and justice (Haidt & Joseph, 2007). But as Haidt and Joseph point out, traditional societies have also cared genuinely about gods, ancestors, taboos, pollution, and gender and age rules. In their analysis of traditional moral systems Haidt and Joseph distinguish between three “binding foundations” in morality. The first of these foundations has a basis in coalitional psychology and concerns loyalty towards “in-group” vs “out-group”; the second refers to “authority and respect,” which they presume originated in primate hierarchy; and the third is the “purity and sanctity” foundation, which is based on the uniquely human emotion of disgust (e.g., Kelly, 2011). These three “binding” foundations find strong and powerful expression in religious traditions cross-culturally. Religious traditions are all very much *about* these five foundations of intuitive ethics (Haidt & Joseph, 2007, p. 382). The universality of the dispositions for these five foundations of moral systems finds support in recent experimental developmental psychology (Wynn, 2007). Bellah has copious references to ethics and morality in his index, and the inclusion of a taxonomy like the one operationalized by Haidt and Joseph might have been a revealing analytical tool for comparative considerations. It is a promising field where much more can and needs to be done, in both cross-cultural as well as in cross-disciplinary research, from biology all the way

up to philosophy. (e.g., Churchland, 2011). Moral psychology proves a productive common ground for theorizing about religion.

Looking at the ethical and moral developments (“evolution”) in the Axial Age there is good reason to posit evolved human moral intuitions as the *generative* mechanisms, because those humans *then* must have had moral intuitions that could be “activated” in the appropriate contexts. The social (economic, political) and cultural (language, symbolization) formations and technologies are then to be considered *selective* mechanisms for the cultural evolution of the moral systems as we know them from the histories of religions and philosophies. Here is where evolutionary anthropologists who work on dual (biology *and* culture) inheritance theory might have been cited, but unfortunately they seem to have escaped Bellah’s attention. Bellah only very briefly mentions the work of Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson (2005). Others in that field, as well as in evolutionary sociology, could contribute in theoretically interesting ways to the understanding of the complexity of evolved biology-and-culture scenarios (e.g., Henrich & McElreath, 2007; Turner & Maryanski, 2008).

Then again, who says that social (economic and political) correlates are the *only* essential correlates, if not causes, for ideas? The formation of ideas in the different Axial Age “milieus” do appear to be cases of normative cognition: that is, cognition not only governed by innate mechanisms but also modulated and calibrated in accordance with social norms and external cultural media (Donald, 2001). Religion is a primary case of such culture-and-cognition complexes (Jensen, 2010).⁵ Especially after the invention of writing it became possible to fix the contents of even complex thought in external “cognitive fixatives.” Here we are returning to Bellah’s constructive use of Merlin Donald’s theories. There is a distinct tendency towards the development of the theoretical level of “hybrid minds” in “the Axial Age.” All the discourse that has survived in external symbolic storage amply proves how human consciousness is what Donald calls a “hybrid system” (Bellah, 2011, p. 364)—that is, “when the human mind began to reflect on the contents of its own representations, to modify and refine them” (Donald, 2001, p. 335). The end result is “deep enculturation,” in which externalization, reflexivity and internalization lead to the reflection and criticism that govern human life in many ways.⁶

From a historical or anthropology of religion perspective, it is an interesting and somewhat overlooked point that some of the older texts, as well as materials from non-literate traditions, express criticism and reflexivity in moral discourse through projection and externalization using voices of superhuman beings or animals. For example, in the old Iranian text Yasna 29 it is the spirit of the cow that complains to the great god Ahura Mazda about how the good must live among the wicked. Such vicarious expressions of human concerns on moral inadequacy have led humans to ponder what Bellah calls “the kinds of lives worth living.”

Humans are unique in the sense that they have evolved so that they cannot avoid engaging in a normative quest for the good life. Isn’t this also one of the main goals of scholarship as well? With this great book, Robert Bellah has made a lot of people think closely about things they never knew they *could* think about and be enriched by. Furthermore, his work is a testimony to the journey the human species has embarked on in its pursuit of increasing self-knowledge. This magnificent volume describes this process as it also adds to it.

Notes

1. Mircea Eliade tried, but even he had to fragment the history of religion (singular) into histories of religions (plural).
2. This stance seems to go against the theoretical perspective quoted from Geertz.
3. It is, further, a misreading of Boyer to credit him for the idea of religion “as explained by a module for supernatural beings” (ibid.).
4. For an overview of the “new moral psychology” see the three volumes edited by Sinnott-Armstrong (2008).
5. The normative cognition hypothesis is a prioritized topic in the Aarhus University MINDLab research stream on cognition and culture: see <http://www.mindlab.au.dk/menu17-en>.
6. This reasoning reverberates of more classical sociology in that it resembles a cognitive science vindication of the position expressed by Berger and Luckmann in 1966. In the present reviewer’s opinion this only attests to the significance of their seminal work.

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Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution*: four theoretical issues

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Introduction

Robert Bellah, with his close focus on details and context at the expense of widely comprehensive portrayals, works against the grain of much contemporary scholarship. Instead he gives us “a large book about a large subject” (Bellah, 2011, p. ix). This is also a book that will no doubt be influential for many years.

Bellah provides a vast amount of detail supporting his portrayal of religion in human evolution. At certain key points, however, he employs some explanatory principles that are either problematic or under-theorized. I focus on four of these: the heritage of Romanticism in his analysis of the human condition; the theory of mind implicit in the work; his treatment of ritual; and the category “religion.”

The heritage of Romanticism

Romanticism continues to mold much of contemporary religious studies, as shown in the defining roles played by “experience fundamentalism” (the treatment of unmediated first-person experience as irreducible and irrefragable), and the “cult of the founder” (the focus on founding figures as *sui generis* religious geniuses). The anti-modernist character of neo-Romantic religion continues to sound the “disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung der Welt*), which made its way into sociology from Schiller via Weber (Lee, 2003). This may be called Romanticism’s myth, and although Bellah does not explicitly express anti-modernist sentiments, he employs many of Romantic anti-modernism’s tropes.

Romanticism’s myth

Romanticism’s myth dichotomizes human existence. Arvidsson explains that it “claimed that humans are either controlled by a calculating, utility-oriented rationality or else are free from rationality in order to live an authentic life in accordance with their own nature. According to the romantic thinkers the computing, instrumental mind, serving the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the scientists, and the politicians drains life of its ‘meaning,’ ‘greatness,’ or ‘spirituality’” (Arvidsson, 1999, p. 329). Modernity’s dysfunctions were – and still are – diagnosed as resulting from instrumental rationality (“calculating, utility-oriented rationality”) and the mechanistic worldview taken to characterize Enlightenment thought. In Romanticism’s mythic vision, modernity is dehumanizing, thus differing from either the past (nostalgia) or the future (utopianism) imagined as organically integrating humans and world (Löwy & Sayre, 2001).

Foundational to Romanticism’s myth is this dualistic metaphysics cum psychology, which carries neo-Platonic evaluations of the mundane world contrasted with the

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world of ideal forms. Bellah evidences this metaphysics when he interprets Schutz's phenomenological claim of "overlapping realities" as the division of human life-experience into the "dreadful" world of daily life, and the higher reality of "symbolic transcendence" (p. 9). In this metaphysics the transcendent realm is the source of meaning for the otherwise grinding ordinariness of daily life, and is accessible via the uniquely human capacity for symbolization. Bellah's interpretation, however, is cloaked as description: "For the world of daily life seen solely as a world of rational response to anxiety and need is a world of mechanical necessity, not radical autonomy. It is through pointing to other realities, through beyonding,¹ that religion and poetry, and science too in its own way, break the dreadful fatalities of this world of appearances" (p. 9). For Bellah, pointing to other realities is necessary since "taking the world of daily life as the paramount reality is dangerous if it is anything more than a methodological assumption" (p. 9).

Romantic theory of mind

As indicated above, in addition to its dualistic metaphysics Romanticism maintains a theory of mind, or psychology. Bellah's treatment of "the unitive experience" as foundational to all religions moves beyond a phenomenology of religious experience to a theory of the development and structure of mind, one rooted in Romantic psychology (see Kirschner, 1996). In this psychology, the individual self arises out of an undifferentiated unitary existence – which it is perhaps not appropriate to call an experience, as it lacks the distinction between self and other, or subject and object (for a critique, see Stern, 1997/2003). Religiously toned feelings of longing, nostalgia, and the like are interpreted as a desire to return to that undifferentiated unity. An alternative for Bellah's "unitive experience" is "the oceanic feeling," which has a proximate source in Freud's work. Masson has summarized the "key features in such experiences" as "feelings of sadness, of the awareness of transience, feelings of world-weariness and of the dream-like nature of existence" (Masson, 1980, p. 33). When universalized, this psychology becomes a powerfully biasing hermeneutic device, validating only those aspects of religious traditions that accord with its presumptions.

This theory of mind grounds the claim that immediate first-person experience – unmediated by concepts or language – is both irreducible and irrefragable. It is supposed that such experience accesses the "higher reality," transcending the mundane world of instrumental rationality. Though Bellah does not explicitly make this epistemological claim, the Romantic theory of mind informs his work. This is evident in one of the two threads that are intertwined throughout Bellah's work: what he identifies as the experiential-expressive, which contrasts with the cultural-linguistic (p. 12). Bellah formulates the experiential-expressive as the idea that "there are some common human experiential potentialities that have recognizable similarities, but are inchoate until given shape by symbolic form" (p. 12).

Further, he claims that

the unitive event, then, is a kind of ground zero with respect to religious representations. It transcends them yet it requires them if it is to be communicable at all. Christian negative theology and the Buddhist teaching of emptiness (*śūnyata*)

attempt to express this paradoxically by speaking of nothingness, the void, silence, or emptiness. (p. 12)

Widely presumed in contemporary neo-Romantic popular religious culture, the conception that all religions are founded on a unitive experience prior to elaboration in language can be traced to the theology of Schleiermacher. B.A. Gerrish summarizes Schleiermacher's view, saying that

the *essence* of "piety", the irreducible element in every religion, must be sought neither in beliefs nor in behaviour but in "feeling", by which he meant the immediate self-consciousness underlying all our knowing and doing. It is "immediate", and so assigned to "feeling", in the sense that the self has not yet made itself the object of its own contemplation. (Gerrish, 1985, p. 135; emphasis in original)

Bellah's conflating of Buddhist emptiness with Christian negative theology exemplifies the way in which presumption of a universal experiential basis for all religions distorts the comparative method. Although the interpretation that Bellah employs appears frequently in modern western representations of Buddhist thought, it results from presuming the Romantic dualist metaphysic and then interpreting it onto emptiness – creating a *petitio principii* fallacy. Emptiness is fundamentally a rejection of any metaphysical claims regarding an absolute, permanent, unchanging essence. Any "experience" of emptiness is only an experience of ordinary daily human existence, not a *via negativa* that reveals some higher reality, or transcendent source of meaning and value.

Thus, Bellah's claim that "in developing a typology of religious representations, we must start with the null category of unitive representation – that is, representations that attempt to point to the unitive event or experience" (p. 13) is based on Romantic theology and theory of mind. The latter equates the pre-linguistic child's experiences,² the Christian mystic's unitive experience (the universal model of religious experience, even if framed differently), and the experiences of humans in the mimetic stage of cultural-cognitive development.³ The claim that a universal experiential potential is the basis of religion as a universal category cannot be demonstrated, but appears only supported by speculation – religion is found everywhere, so there must be a universal basis for it in human nature. Not only does this sound like Eliade's "homo religiosus," but also it is fundamentally circular. That is, assuming religion to be universal leads to correlates that are identified as religious, which then constitute evidence of the universality of religion. Despite Bellah's discussion, the claim of unitive experience as foundational for all religions seems simply dogmatic; a claim that aligns Bellah's work with that of the Perennialists.

Ritual

Discussions of ritual run throughout Bellah's work. Two aspects of his treatment of ritual are of concern – the equation of ritual and play, and the presumptions of functionalism.

Ritual and play

Bellah equates ritual and play on the grounds that both are not instrumental (pp. 76–77). Citing Burghardt's definition of play, Bellah says that "play is something

‘done for its own sake,’ pleasurable in itself, spontaneous and voluntary; it is not a means to an end” (p. 77). Bellah points in particular to Schiller and Huizinga for his representations of play, though they are themselves part of the Romantic creation of childhood as a special time set apart from the instrumental cares and worries of adult life – and, consequently, a time of idyllic innocence and natural spontaneity (nostalgia for Paradise) (Austin, 2003). Isaiah Berlin (1999, p. 113) quotes from Schlegel’s *Lucinde*:

This is how one should live! Here is a little child, naked and unrestrained by convention. It wears no clothes, it bows to no authority, it believes in no conventional directors of its life, and above all it is idle, it has no task to do. Idleness is the last spark that is left to us from the divine paradise from which humanity was once expelled. Freedom, the capacity to throw one’s legs in the air, to do anything one wishes, that is the last privilege that we have in this fearful world, this awful causal treadmill when nature presses upon us with such fearful savagery.

This reflects not only Romantic idealizing of children,⁴ but also the formation of family life in the nineteenth century, when a man’s ability to maintain his wife and children in conditions of unproductive leisure constituted a mark of social status.

However emotionally appealing identifying ritual and play may be, if the following schematic is accurate, then the argument is either trivial or a fallacy:

- Play is not instrumental.
- Ritual is not instrumental.
- Therefore, play and ritual are similar.

It either concludes nothing significant, or is a fallacy of the undistributed middle. Either way this is not enough to equate ritual and play, much less develop a theory of ritual.

Functionalism

Bellah’s fundamental understanding of ritual is functionalist. That is, the social norm is stability, the primary social value is harmony, and ritual functions to preserve or re-establish harmony and stability. Referring to Basso’s studies in Brazil, for example, Bellah notes that she “gives plenty of evidence that life among the Kalapalo, whatever ritual is supposed to do, by no means runs smoothly. If it did, ritual would hardly be necessary” (p. 143). This is classically functionalist: acknowledging the existence of conflict while simultaneously presenting an image of society in which harmony and stability are normal. It is conflict and change that are abnormal, requiring atonement, in this case through ritual.

Discussing rituals of reversal, Bellah both equates play and ritual, and interprets ritual from a functionalist perspective. He notes the common functionalist interpretation of such rituals – “Generally these have been interpreted as ‘letting off steam,’ and so ultimately reinforcing the status quo” – and then goes on to suggest that “to some degree they may allow the expression of real feelings even if under carefully controlled conditions. In these rituals the play element is particularly obvious” (p. 571). This reading of rituals of reversal, however, only makes sense if one presumes a functionalist interpretation. Hardly “carefully controlled conditions” in which “real feelings” may sneak through, rituals of reversal are times in which

otherwise controlled social conflicts are expressed in ways that verge on or step over the line of social violence (see Marriott, 1966/2006). Some rituals of reversal become literally “deadly serious” expressions of social conflict (see, in particular, Ladurie, 1979). Far from being playful, they evidence social contestation, rather than stability and harmony – and look very little like play. Also relevant here are instances of ritualized violence and scapegoating (see Burkert, 1983; Hamerton-Kelly, 1987; Heesterman, 1993).

The Romantic characterization of ritual as activity for its own sake – like play and art – fails to answer the admittedly instrumental question: why is it done? Why engage in an activity that may take months of expensive preparation only to be completed in a few days? Also, presuming that rituals serve social harmony and stability marginalizes rituals that are aggressive or destructive – with the probable categorical consequence of condemning them to the demimonde of magic, religion’s semiotically marked opposite. Whatever else may be said etically, participants always have a notion that the ritual is doing something, or is done for some reason.⁵ While rituals may not be effective in our own instrumental construction of them (rainmaking rituals don’t make rain), there is some kind of instrumental rationality supporting the investment of time and energy.

Theorizing religion

More than three and a half decades ago, G.S. Kirk (1974/2009) very effectively demonstrated that no single “monolithic” theory could explain all myths. Rather, different kinds of myths need different theories. In contrast, Bellah attempts to treat religion as a natural kind, rather than as socially constructed. However, like myth, “religion” encompasses many different kinds of things, and therefore no single theory can explain all religions. As a constructed category, any use of it involves either implicit or explicit judgments regarding its boundaries. Because these judgments are themselves socially informed, they are necessarily value judgments.

That religion is a socially constructed category is evidenced by the role of social, economic, and political factors in identifying what counts as religion. Chidester’s (1996) study of religion in southern Africa demonstrates repeatedly that the attribution of religion to a particular indigenous population depended not on objectively identifiable practices or beliefs, but on whether a group resisted or complied with the demands of colonial powers. The resistant were judged to lack any religion, and being therefore less than fully human could be suppressed by whatever means. However, once compliant, that same group was suddenly discovered to have religion. Their practices and beliefs had not changed. Rather, the independent variable was the social/economic/political context, while the attribution of religion was the dependent variable.

While including some phenomena, any definitional boundary or demarcation simultaneously excludes other phenomena, and it is this act of exclusion that is of greater theoretical concern. Even the fuzziest of boundaries and loosest of family similarities both include and exclude.

There are the hoary examples of marginal or problematic phenomena familiar to everyone such as Marxism or the cult of Elvis. While of some interest, what is actually more problematic is the relationship between categories, such as

“religion,” “shamanism,” and “magic.” Why should discussions of shamanism, which commonly include possession cults, exclude Pentecostalism or the Society of Friends? Is it because, as recognized forms of Christianity, they are safely within the category of religion, and therefore not in the category of shamanistic possession cults? Or might not the transubstantiation of the Eucharist be categorized as a form of magic? If these shifts of categorization seem unsavory, this simply reveals the values embedded within the process of categorization.

What else are we to do, if we don't use the category of religion to study these things? This objection is at times supported by the argument that comparison is a necessary and unavoidable method. That epistemological issue does not, however, support the continued use of “religion” as a monolithic category, as if it identifies a natural kind. A destructive hermeneutic circle is created when various traditions are all labeled “Religion” in order to compare them. Such categorization presumes some kind of fundamental similarities, without acknowledging the basis upon which the categorization is being made. The solution is to formulate an explicit theory about the terms of the comparison being made. Such a theoretical claim – a thesis, not a question – should then clarify not only the terms of the comparison (what are the relevant aspects and why it may be of interest to compare them), but also establish whether the terms are meaningfully comparable (everything can be compared to anything else, but not meaningfully).⁶ Citing Thomas McCarthy, Bellah claims that the universal and the particular exist in relation to one another (p. 606). Only in a conceptual–metaphysical sense is this true. Since particulars exist objectively,⁷ and universals only exist as inter-subjective constructs, the relation between them is not one of parity. One must start from the particulars, and then, knowing the theoretical purpose of making a comparison, draw meaningful generalizations – thus avoiding imposing preconceived notions of universal characteristics onto the terms of the comparison.

Conclusion

Bellah appears primarily concerned with religion as a source of values and meaning in human life. Thus, despite its extensive discussions of science, evolution, social organization, and historical epochs, this is fundamentally a religious study, an instance of what has been called “the religious study of religion” (Gill, 1994). What makes Bellah's effort distinct is his affirmative commitment to religious pluralism, rather than to any one religion.

An epistemological point that Bellah attributes to Wilfred Smith deserves repeating:

religions don't differ so much in giving different answers to the same questions as in asking different questions. But if we think the other traditions are answering our questions, then it is only a matter of circular logic that those traditions will turn out to answer those questions less well than our own, which was, after all, designed to answer those questions. (Bellah, 2011, p. 605)

We need to know, however, not only what our questions are, but also the how, why, and so what that constitute the theory and method of our inquiries.

Notes

1. Bellah borrows the terms from Kenneth Burke.
2. Vestiges of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood."
3. In the nineteenth century such a list of equivalencies would have included women, who were then conceptualized as more emotional and less rational than men, making them closer to children and primitives.
4. Such idealizations were also applied to "primitives."
5. Even when, as in *śrauta* rituals, the point seems to simply be to follow the rules, evidencing thereby that one is "free from worldly attachment. The ritual is *adr̥stār̥tha*, without visible purpose or meaning other than the realization of its perfect order, be it only for the duration of the ritual and within the narrow compass of the ritual enclosure" (Heesterman, 1985, p. 3).
6. "There is nothing easier than the making of patterns; from planaria to babies, it is done with little apparent difficulty. But the 'how' and the 'why' and, above all, the 'so what' remain refractory" (Smith, 2000, p. 4).
7. The word "objective" here should be taken in the philosophic sense of mutually accessible as an object.

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Religion and empire in the Axial Age

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Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) is a difficult and sometimes exasperating book. Nevertheless, it yields a richly rewarding experience for those patient readers who work their way through its 700 pages. The central question of the book asks: what role did religion play in human social evolution? The starting point for approaching this question is what has been called the "U-shaped curve of despotism" in human evolution (p. 178) – from highly inegalitarian great apes (whose social arrangements, presumably, also characterized direct human ancestors) to egalitarian small-scale societies of hunter-gatherers, and then to large-scale hierarchical societies with their great inequities in the distribution of power, status, and wealth.

In his discussion of the despotic U-curve, Bellah relies on Christopher Boehm's *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (1999). Bellah gives a sympathetic and accurate account of this important book (one of many strengths of *Religion in Human Evolution* is the author's ability to range across a very broad spectrum of social and natural disciplines). The main message of Boehm's book is that equality does not simply happen because hunter-gatherers are poor and cannot accumulate much wealth. On the contrary, Boehm argues that equality requires active maintenance. People living in small-scale societies possess numerous norms and institutions designed to control "upstarts," those individuals who attempt to dominate others in order to control an unfair share of resources. The sanctions deployed against upstarts range from gossip and ridicule to ostracism and ultimately assassination. As Bellah explains, Boehm does a very good job describing how this system of escalating sanctions works in small-scale societies, although "he is perhaps less good at what I think is equally necessary, that is, the strong pull of social solidarity, especially as expressed in ritual, that rewards renunciation of dominance with a sense of full social acceptance" (p. 177). This sounds like an interesting idea, although it is not further developed in Bellah's book.

Given such fierce preference for equality, how did it happen that humans allowed inequality to develop? Small-scale societies of hunter-gatherers were integrated by face-to-face sociality. Such a diffuse, non-centralized social organization was well suited to maintaining an egalitarian ethos. However, the invention of agriculture c. 10,000 years ago enabled the evolution of large-scale societies. Once the size of cooperating groups increased beyond 100–200 people, even gigantic human brains were overwhelmed by the computational demands of face-to-face sociality (Dunbar & Shultz, 2007). The solution that social evolution found was hierarchical organization, with large human groups integrated by chains of command. A member of a hierarchically organized group needs to have face-to-face interactions with only a few individuals: a superior and several subordinates. The group size grows by adding additional hierarchical levels; a process that has no physical limit. The great

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downside of hierarchical organization, however, is that it inevitably leads to inequality. Thus, the side-effect of selection for greater societal size was the U-turn in the evolution of egalitarianism (Turchin, 2011).

More specifically, Bellah proposes the following scenario:

An increasing agricultural surplus allows larger groups to form – groups beyond the face-to-face bands of hunter-gatherers – and the age-old techniques of dealing with upstarts are harder to apply in such larger-scale societies. But the opening wedge for a successful upstart is most often militarization. . . . In a situation of endemic warfare, the successful warrior emanates a sense of mana or charisma, and can use it to establish a following. . . . It is when the outstanding warrior can mobilize a band of followers that he can challenge the old egalitarianism and, as a successful upstart, free the disposition to dominate from the controls previously placed on it. (p. 261)

I think this is just about right, but I would add that the primary selection pressure for the evolution of large-scale societies is endemic warfare itself (as the French military proverb goes, “God is on the side of big battalions”). Additionally, the state of endemic warfare selects for more effective (which means centralized) military organizations. Under such conditions, the emergence of centralized hierarchies becomes virtually inevitable. In other words, large-scale warfare and large-scale sociality co-evolve. As Charles Tilly famously remarked, “War made state and states made war” (Tilly, 1975).

However, while highly effective on the battlefield, a centralized military hierarchy has drawbacks as a general way of organizing societies. A society cannot really be held together by force alone. Furthermore, great inequities resulting from rapacious military chiefs and their retinues alienate large segments of the population. As a result, early despotic chiefdoms and archaic states were very fragile, and frequently did not outlast their founders.

At this point Bellah makes a very useful distinction between *dominance* (or despotism) and *hierarchy*, with hierarchy defined as “legitimate authority” (p. 178). In order to ensure a greater degree of permanence, large-scale societies needed to make the transition from domination by military chiefs to “a new form of authority, of legitimate hierarchy. . . which involves a new relation between gods and humans, a new way of organizing society, one that finds a significant place for the disposition to nurture as well as the disposition to dominate” (p. 261). In other words, the central argument in Bellah’s book is that reconciling the tension between the need for hierarchy and the need for legitimacy and equity was a major driver in the evolution of religion. A large stride in this direction was made during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE), and making this argument constitutes the core of *Religion in Human Evolution*.

The historical trajectories of agrarian human societies, thus, went through two phases that Bellah calls “archaic” and “axial” (these should not be taken as fixed “stages” of social development). The archaic phase was characterized by an enormous fusion of power in the person of the ruler (p. 207). Archaic states invariably involved some sort of divine kingship and usually practiced human sacrifice on a massive scale, both factors which indicate extreme inequality. During this phase we also observe the appearance of “gods,” who are distinguished from other powerful supernatural beings in that they are worshipped (p. 189). “Worship” suggests that the relationship between humans and supernatural beings also became much more unequal during this phase of human evolution.

The archaic states (and chiefdoms) persisted through several millennia (first chiefdoms appeared in the Middle East roughly 7.5 thousand years ago, and the first archaic states date from c. 5,000 years ago). The typical pattern was that of recurrent rise and collapse, or cycling between less and more complex forms of social organization: chiefdoms/complex chiefdoms and complex chiefdoms/archaic states (Anderson, 1996; Chase-Dunn & Hall, 1997). Then something happened during the first millennium BCE that resulted in the rise of qualitatively new forms of social organization – the larger and more durable axial empires employed new ways of legitimating political power. One aspect of this change was the first appearance of a universally egalitarian ethic, which was largely due to the emergence of “prophet-like figures who, at great peril to themselves, held the existing power structures to a moral standard that they clearly did not meet” (p. 573).

Bellah connects these developments to the “legitimation crisis of the early state” (an idea due to Jürgen Habermas), which became especially acute in the Axial Age (p. 574). Bellah calls these prophet-like figures who passed harsh judgments on existing social and political conditions “renouncers.” Examples include the Buddha, Hebrew prophets, Plato and Aristotle, and the Daoists (pp. 574–575). It is important to note that these renouncers were not isolated voices, and enjoyed a certain degree of social support: “It seems apparent that some degree of unease about the state of the world must have been relatively widespread, even among the elite” (p. 575).

Why did the legitimation crisis of the early state become particularly acute during the Axial Age (middle of the first millennium BCE)? Bellah does not provide a clear answer. In his discussion of Ancient Israel he appeals to the destabilizing social consequences of considerable economic growth during the eighth century BCE (p. 301). More frequently, however, he invokes military rather than economic factors. For example, he suggests that the widespread use of iron was “more important in increasing the efficiency of warfare than in transforming the means of production” (p. 269).

I believe that the latter emphasis is the correct one. There can be little doubt that iron weapons and armor revolutionized warfare in the Middle East and elsewhere. But an even more important development, as I have argued elsewhere (Turchin, 2009), was the invention of mounted warfare by Iranian pastoralists c. 1000 BCE. Putting together horse riding with sophisticated and powerful compound bows that shot iron-tipped arrows created a “weapon of mass destruction” that enabled the nomads to put an enormous amount of pressure on the neighboring agrarian societies.

Bellah notes that “all axial cases except China experienced Persian pressure at critical moments in their development” (p. 270). I believe that this is a very important point, but it does not go far enough. First, most authorities (e.g., Eisenstadt, 1986) consider Achaemenid Persia to be one of the most important Axial Age civilizations, which leads to the question: who influenced Persia? Second, there is another common factor shared by all axial cases including Persia and China – they all experienced pressure from the mounted archers who originated from the Great Eurasian Steppe (Turchin, 2009). This pattern was noted by Karl Jaspers (1953).

Such steppe influences took a variety of forms. The Medes and Persians themselves were Iranian groups that moved into the Middle East from the steppe. Persians, again, constantly fought against the Scythians/Saka, while the Chinese had a similar relationship with the Hunnu (Xiongnu). The Iranian nomads raided deep into the Near East, with the Scythians reaching as far south as Egypt. In the west the

Kimmerians attacked the Greek cities of Anatolia, such as Ephesos, and destroyed several smaller cities (for example, Magnesia and Sinope). Robert Drews (2004) recently argued that the development of heavy infantry (hoplites) was a response to these invasions of mounted archers. Finally, the first axial states, such as the Median-Persian Empire and later Hellenistic empires, served as conduits of steppe influences, because they used mounted warfare against their neighbors (such as North India,¹ a point also made by Bellah, p. 528).

As new forms of warfare diffused out from the Eurasian steppe, they dramatically increased the role of warfare as a force of cultural group selection. More intense selection for large size resulted in the early and recurrent pattern of imperial development in the steppe-frontier belt stretching from Anatolia to North China. This belt, which Victor Lieberman (2008) called the Exposed Zone of Eurasia (that is, exposed to influences from the Great Steppe), also encompasses all regions with major axial developments. If Bellah's argument is correct, and I think it is, it was the new scale of larger empires, whose rulers had even more resources to aggrandize themselves, that precipitated the legitimation crisis of the early axial state. The new regime of cultural selection favored the evolution of new forms of legitimating political power, which were needed to prevent these huge axial empires from splitting apart. Additionally, as I have argued elsewhere (Turchin, 2009), a key axial innovation was the universalistic nature of religion, which allowed axial empires to integrate ethnically diverse populations on a very large scale.

Thus, Bellah's argument suggests that the large scale and greater durability of axial (and post-axial) empires was due in no small part to the religious innovations of the Axial Age. Bellah considers India an exception to this rule: "After the collapse of the Mauryan dynasty, however, India remained divided throughout most of its subsequent history" (p. 544). However, this is not what the historical record tells us (see Table 4 in Turchin, 2009). It is true that most (five out of nine) of South Asian mega-empires were ruled by dynasties of Central Asian origin, but this is not very different from the historical pattern of imperial unifications in China (see Table 1 in Turchin, 2009).

To conclude, Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* is one of those big books that is sure to leave a significant legacy. Bellah's argument, which connects the rise of axial religions to the tensions engendered by the legitimation crisis of the early state, needs to be closely investigated by specialists on various axial civilizations. The huge lacuna of Achaemenid Persia and the role Zoroastrianism played in the development of that civilization needs to be filled. Many puzzles remain to be explored: for example, the precocious "proto-axial" developments in Ancient Egypt that seemingly led nowhere. In the final analysis, one may disagree with Bellah on some, or even many issues, but the most important contribution of the book is that it suggests many productive directions for future research.

One implication of Bellah's argument, which he does not develop in the book, is that the "U-shaped curve of despotism" is actually a misnomer. The peak of inequality in human societies was apparently reached during the phase of archaic and early axial states. The hallmarks of this truly despotic phase of human evolution were the unprecedented divinization of rulers, massive amounts of human sacrifice, and the worship of anthropomorphic supernatural beings (gods). Viewed from this perspective, the Axial Age introduced another trend reversal in the evolution of egalitarianism. The post-axial phase has been characterized by three related trends. First, rulers have been increasingly constrained to act in ways which promote public good, rather than their own interests (most recently, as a result of the introduction of democratic

forms of governance). Second, structural forms of human inequality have been gradually disappearing: most notably, the abolition of human sacrifice, slavery, and distinctions in the legal status (e.g., between nobles and commoners, although some would argue that our track record in reducing economic inequality has not been as impressive). Third, gods evolved from anthropomorphic to transcendental supernatural beings, and some religions/ideologies even dispensed with gods altogether. Thus, it was not simply a U-turn, but rather a zig followed by a zag. I propose that we call this pattern the *Z-curve of egalitarianism* in human evolution.

Note

1. I should note that the role of Eurasian steppe influences on North India is very complex and not completely understood. Direct influences include the movements of such pastoralist groups as the Aryans and later the Saka. Indirect influences include the already mentioned Persians and later the Turks, who, although ultimately of Steppe origins, impinged on India as rulers of agrarian empires.

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RESPONSE

Religion in human evolution revisited: response to commentators

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I must begin by thanking Richard Sosis for organizing this symposium, and the six commentators for participating in it. Whatever they thought of my book, I know

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what a chore it is to read a 700-page book and write a commentary, so I very much appreciate the work the commentators had to do. Originally I thought I would write a thematic response rather than respond to each commentator in turn, yet, reading the six papers, one might wonder if they were dealing with the same book. Since each commentator has his own view of what the book is about, I must deal with all six serially. I will start with Merlin Donald, who, not surprisingly, since I depend so much on his work, understands my book extremely well. I should disclose that from the beginning he responded generously to my questions by email, that we met during a conference on “The Axial Age and Its Consequences” at the University of Erfurt in 2008, and that I consider him a friend. Other than a brief email exchange with Nathaniel Barrett before my book was published, I have had no connection with any of the other commentators.

Donald begins by raising the issue of definition, noting that in most of the societies I describe in this book the religious and the secular are deeply interrelated. I wholly agree with him on this point. In most pre-modern societies, religion and culture are so closely related that any effort to understand their religion will lead into a description of virtually their entire culture, which is what happens in my book. Noting some of the problems with defining religion, Donald says that such a debate reminds him of similar debates in psychology, such as whether “schizophrenia” describes one thing or several, and seems quite fuzzy, yet after experimenting with other terms this one in the end seems to be most useful and its alternatives even fuzzier. This modest conception of what a definition can do appeals to me. In fact I use two definitions, Geertz’s and Durkheim’s, and never quite reconcile them. Rather, in the end I would be tempted to follow Weber in *The Sociology of Religion* (1920), in which he writes that he will not define religion at the beginning but only at the end of the book, after the reader knows from his examples what he means by the term. But at the end he doesn’t define religion either. Surely for me it is my examples that carry my definition; the definitions early on are only to get things started.

Having called into question my definition of religion, though in the end accepting my line of thought, Donald then questions the notion of evolution and asks whether biological and cultural evolution, though continuous with each other, involve different mechanisms. I think they do, since cultural evolution is Lamarckian, involving “the inheritance of acquired characteristics,” while biological evolution has to rely on the natural selection of biologically inherited variations. Nonetheless, as Turchin also sees, I would argue that natural selection is as unrelenting at the cultural level as at the biological, though at neither level does this make relaxed selection, cooperation, and creativity impossible.

I am particularly happy that Donald links Kirschner’s and Gerhardt’s idea of biological “conserved core processes” to his own developmental scheme of cultural capacities: episodic, mimetic, mythic and theoretic, and that he sees the first three levels also as conserved core processes, each containing and reorganizing what went before, but not abandoning the earlier achievements. He then raises some interesting questions as to whether a theoretic culture can leave these conserved core processes behind without undermining its own survival: a question that moves beyond the scope of this book into the interesting issue of the viability of modernity, to which I will devote my next book.

Donald finally raises a serious question about my treatment of the Axial Age, which refers to the four societies of ancient Greece, Israel, China, and India. Did they all really reach the level of what he means by theoretic? Since ancient Greece is

his type case he has no problem there, and my book has convinced him that ancient China also attained the theoretic level, though less thoroughly than Greece, but he doubts that ancient Israel or India made that transition. This is a question that will be a focus of continuing debate. In rejecting the Eurocentric idea of “the miracle that was Greece,” are we overlooking some unique achievements? However, Donald is willing to accept my treatment of all four cases if we relax the criteria for what is theoretic to something like the capacity to reflect on the fundamental principles of one’s society. I am happy to accept his relaxed criterion. At several points in his commentary, some of which I have alluded to, Donald makes my case better than I have. For that and for much else I am very grateful to him.

William Green’s generous commentary raises several points to which I would like to respond. In discussing the contrast I draw, following Alfred Schitz, between the world of daily life and the world of religion, he finds a parallel to what he calls “Mircea Eliade’s sacred/profane dichotomy.” Of course the sacred/profane dichotomy has deep roots and no one in the twentieth century “invented” it. It was, however, Émile Durkheim who, in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1911), introduced the term into religious studies, not Eliade. Green raises the question of definition, citing Frankenberg’s and Penner’s questioning of Geertz’s definition. As I have already noted, I think getting hung up on definitions is a huge waste of time. I have not found Frankenberg’s and Penner’s discussion helpful, nor have I ever seen any empirical work that depended on it, though I could be wrong. In natural science the exemplary experiment is what sets a new direction in research, not a definition. It was Durkheim’s actual study of religion among the Australian Aborigines, and Weber’s studies of the social ethic of the world religions that, as examples, determined much of the subsequent work in the sociology of religion, including mine. What I mean by religion is exemplified by the 12 case studies in my book, and I think they will be what influences students of my work, not my two unreconciled definitions.

Green has gently but firmly corrected my discussion of the redaction of the Pentateuch by arguing that the fact that the Priestly version was the final one had more substantive importance than I gave it. I am happy to accept his correction. He also gives more importance than Donald does to my argument for the theoretic dimension of ancient Judaism, expressing a belief that “thinking about thinking” can, after all, be found there.

I am happy to find in Peter Turchin’s paper something not to be found so clearly in any of the other five commentaries – a recognition of the political dimension of my book. Although there is no citation of Turchin’s work in my book, I have long admired it and the only reason it isn’t cited is because empirically it almost all deals with periods later than those my book covers. Turchin is right to emphasize the importance of my treatment of equality, particularly the fact that hunter/gatherer equality is not simply a product of a simple economy, but is in fact actively produced in what Christopher Boehm (1999) calls “reverse hierarchy,” and that despotism, characteristic of primate bands dominated by an alpha male, reappears only after the rise of agriculture, increase of population, and a surplus worth fighting over, thus leading to militarization, class formation, and, especially at the beginning, ruthless despotism. Turchin wants to modify Boehm’s idea of a U-shaped curve of despotism, arguing that the high point of despotism is in the early state and that by the Axial Age any kind of stability and continuity required a degree of hierarchical legitimacy that moderated despotism to some degree. Nonetheless, I argue, all class societies are

based on injustice, and it is the legitimation crisis of the Axial Age (Habermas's idea) that lies behind the criticism of inequality and the demand for justice characteristic of all the axial religions. The degree to which injustice, or even terror, has been modified since the advent of the early state has varied, and I leave the idea of a lasting turn toward equality as an open question. I could add one point that Turchin does not make: my whole treatment of social class in history is at least quasi-Marxist.

Turchin's emphasis on militarization, which is even stronger than mine, and his insistence on the importance of pressures from the steppe nomads on the axial societies (something Jaspers himself found important), gave me much food for thought. I will rethink these matters for consideration in my next book. As to the surprising absence of Persia among the axial cases, which Turchin and others have mentioned, I will return to that issue in my response to Jensen's commentary. I am especially grateful to Turchin for underlining my concern with power as essential to my book; something most reviewers have chosen to overlook.

After beginning with an appreciation of the idea of conserved core processes that to some extent echoes Donald's understanding of that idea, Barrett raises questions about two of my most basic assumptions: "the first is his insistence on a sharp contrast between the experience of meaningfulness and everyday life, and the second is his view of meaning as a product of the mind." If these really were two of my basic assumptions then Barrett would certainly be right to criticize them. Since I don't I hold either of them, I must try to understand why Barrett thinks I do.

I will start with the first assumption – that Barrett attributes to me the idea that the world of everyday life is without an experience of meaningfulness. It would seem that he believes I attribute the experience of meaningfulness only to the religious sphere, perhaps interpreting Geertz's reference to religion as providing "conceptions of a general order of existence" as implying that meaning is found only in religion. In fact, I cannot imagine any human activity in any sphere as lacking an experience of meaning. I never say the world of everyday life is without meaning. I say that "for Schutz the world of daily life is characterized by striving, by working, by anxiety. It is the premier world of functioning, of adapting, of surviving" (Bellah, 2011, p. xv). But I surely don't think working and surviving are without meaning. I cite Schutz (1967, pp. 208–9) as saying of common sense, which is the way of perceiving the world in daily life:

What distinguishes common sense as a mode of "seeing" is, as Schutz has pointed out, a simple acceptance of the world, its objects, and its processes as being just what they seem to be – what is sometimes called naïve realism – and the pragmatic motive, the wish to act upon that world so as to bend it to one's practical purposes, to master it, or so far as that proves impossible, to adjust to it.

Accepting the world as it is and acting on it so as to bend it to one's purpose or adjust to it would seem to me to involve a great deal of meaning making. If we look around us, "relentless utilitarianism" seems to give meaning to a lot of our contemporaries.

I don't have enough background to fully understand Barrett's distinction between "network meaning" and "content meaning," but I surely agree with him that: (1) meaning arises from engagement, that it is in the first instance perceived, or, as Jerome Bruner puts it, enacted; (2) that the construction of meaning systems is a second order process relative to our most fundamental, bodily, engagement with the

world; and (3) that this is true in every sphere, including both the world of daily life and the world of religion. I would think that that would be obvious from my description of play and ritual.

Perhaps it is the harsher aspects of the world of daily life and the anxiety that they produce that lead Barrett to think that I find it meaningless. Actually, I am only recounting the reality of much of animal and human life – what Darwin called “the struggle for existence.” It seems like wishful thinking to me to ignore selection pressure as a major focus of any kind of life. In most species the majority of organisms never reach maturity. I recently saw a nature documentary on sea turtles in the Caribbean. Once a year they come ashore for mating and lay eggs deep in the sand. Nature has arranged it so that the eggs all hatch at more or less the same time. The newborn baby turtles dig out of the sand and then, following the bright whiteness of the crashing waves, rush with all their might to the sea. Because there are so many of them and the predators have no way of knowing when they will hatch, most of them make it to the water, escaping most of the aerial predators, only to meet a host of marine predators in the water. Marine biologists estimate that only one in a thousand will return the next year to lay eggs again. Hunter-gatherer life is not that grim, but most early human skeletons that archaeologists have uncovered are young – anyone over 40 would be rare indeed – and many have died a violent death. If one looks at the life of peasants who have supplied most of the world’s population since the invention of agriculture, one will find how close to the abyss they live; how any major weather fluctuation can lead to many deaths. Tolstoy’s description of Russian peasants in their dirt-floored huts with only a couple of coats so that the family has to take turns in going outside in the winter for it would be all too easy to freeze without protective covering, shows how, even in the nineteenth century, the life of peasants was utterly precarious. Unfortunately, for much of the world’s population, today things are not that much better. Even among the wealthier populations, think of how much anxiety we live with! Think of 17-year-olds applying to college. Neither Schutz, nor Geertz, nor I say that is all there is in the world of daily life, but rather that none of us escapes selection pressure as long as we live. Meaning is not absent here, and the world of daily life often overlaps with other worlds, but the idea of a “sharp contrast” between the world of daily life and the experience of meaningfulness is one I never entertained. Perhaps because Barrett is so much younger than I am he doesn’t feel experientially the second law of thermodynamics – that our bodies, our houses, and our societies are all falling apart around us, and that we have to spend a lot of our time keeping them from falling apart altogether.

In his discussion of my use of Maslow’s idea of B-cognition, Barrett makes a distinction between meaning and value that comes from a conceptual scheme I am not using. I tend to think of meaning and value as two aspects of a single process. But again, Barrett’s point is that both Maslow and I (following Maslow) make a sharp distinction between “peak experiences” and other utilitarian experiences. He contrasts this with Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow, which can arise in any activity. But in fact, Maslow does not see B-cognition as primarily or even necessarily religious, and finds that it often arises in the midst of the world of daily life. He finds such experiences in ballet dancing, for instance, or in sports, or even in sex. What he is getting at is something closer to Alison Gopnik’s idea of “lantern consciousness,” as opposed to Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow, which she would call “spotlight consciousness,” but these are not two radically different kinds of experience, and each of them can arise in the world of daily life. If the world of daily life is

quintessentially the world of working, what about when working is playing, as it is right now for me as I write this?

As to Barrett's second problematic assumption of mine, namely that I view meaning as a product of the mind, it seems to me, unless I missed something, that he has much less to say about it. In any case, if he means "only in the mind," I surely do not hold that assumption, as I will make clear in my response to Jensen below.

Jeppe Jensen has written an interesting commentary with a very favorable introduction and conclusion, but the bulk of his remarks focus on what I left out of my book. That is fair enough, though in a book already 700 pages long, making it even longer would be a problem. Nonetheless, any book can be criticized for omitting things that are critical to its argument. Several of the commentators have raised the issue of the absence of Persia among the axial societies I describe. I claimed that this was due to the absence of data. Jensen cites Arnaldo Momigliano as one who recognized the importance of Persia and Zoroastrianism in the Axial Age, but I cite the same book he does (note 12 to chapter 6 of my book) as remarking on the extreme paucity of information about ancient Persia. What we have is mainly the *Avesta*, a text that was compiled in the Sassanian Dynasty in the mid-first millennium CE. Some of it is very old, with parallels to Vedic Sanskrit, but much of the text is hard to date, and what comes from Zoroaster or even from the period in which Zoroaster lived is unknown. For me, any context for the practice of Zoroastrianism as a religion, or any sense of how it was institutionalized in the Achaemenid Empire was missing from this account, and therefore we lack any substantial picture comparable to those of the other axial cases. Jensen cites "much available work" on Persia that I don't cite, mentioning works by Daryaee (2012), Skjaervo (2011), and Stausberg (2008). Unfortunately, two of these were published after my book had gone to press, and in 2008 I was working on my last axial chapter, Ancient India, and had no time to go back and revisit Persia.

However, maybe there are no data that would produce a usable picture of an axial Persia, but maybe there never even was an axial Persia. After all, the axial cases that we know of were all in small, peripheral states struggling for survival; in competition with each other so that intellectuals could travel between them. In no case was there an axial breakthrough in the middle of a large empire. Maybe Achaemenid Persia was just the kind of steppe nomad state that Turchin describes. As far as I am concerned, the case remains open and I will be very happy to read an account of an axial Persia comparable to my chapters on ancient Greece, Israel, China, and India, if there ever is one.

If Persia is Jensen's chief example of what I left out empirically, he focuses on evolutionary psychology as what I left out theoretically, noting the important exception of Merlin Donald. He points out a mistake I made about Boyer, which I regret, when I credited him with a notion of "a module for supernatural beings." The crux of the concept is that for him, as for other evolutionary psychologists, religion exists exclusively in the mind. Whether religion is a module, a template, a concept or some other "cognitive process," it is still entirely in the mind, and its study is, to use a pejorative term from the old counterculture, a "head trip."¹ It is a matter of beliefs, more specifically of "templates" and "concepts," of which "supernatural agents" are some combination. In the end, for Boyer, there are no specific religious templates or concepts. Religion consists of "many cognitive processes," some of which are "*parasitic* on moral intuitions" (Boyer, 2001, p. 191, original emphasis). In contrast to Boyer's head trip, Donald's scheme not only stresses practice from the time of the

emergence of the mimetic capacity, but also external memory, without which neither the mythic nor the theoretic capacities would be possible. Donald requires a world. Boyer lacks one. There are two major deficiencies in Boyer's book (*Religion Explained*) that are fatal from my point of view, and are why I found it "particularly unhelpful." They are: (1) the absence of empirical religion – there is no description from his point of view of a single religious system, and instead what we have at most are sentences taken out of context that are claimed to be religious; and (2) the absence of history. Boyer's book is a fairly long exposition of his theories, but it contains nothing about religion, and no exemplar of the study of religion that anyone else could actually follow. I am not faulting Jensen for pointing out what is missing from my book, and maybe some of the other things that he cites that I haven't read would help me. However, I have read enough of one genre of evolutionary psychology to be pretty sure I will not find help there.

I saved for last the one entirely negative commentary, perhaps bringing my Response to something of a crescendo. I am very grateful to Richard Payne for laying his cards on the table and showing why my book has little merit. I believe in intellectual argument, and even, as long as it is civil, conflict. We don't move ahead by telling each other how good we are, but by giving the stiffest opposition to anything new that we feel is required.

Payne's strategy is that of a heresy hunter. He finds a number of my views to be heretical, and his method is to search them out and refute them. He characterizes my heresies for convenience with scare words, of which the chief are "Romanticism," "functionalism," and, scariest of all, "religion." Whether or not this is a useful method in trying to understand a book, I have my doubts. However, by clearly defining my heresies he gives me the chance to argue for my innocence. Fortunately, the penalty for academic heresy is not what it used to be in the good old days of the Inquisition.

Payne starts out with a bang by identifying me with Romanticism: something he claims to understand with a certainty that startles me. The first definition he offers for Romanticism in contemporary religious studies is "experience fundamentalism," by which he means "irreducible and irrefragable" first-person experience. As a Durkheimian sociologist I can't imagine any individual experience that isn't influenced by social situation, cultural heritage, and so forth. Indeed, I have spent much of my life fighting the idea of the radically isolated individual as the deepest truth of the human condition. So I must plead "not guilty" to the charge of being an "experience fundamentalist," nor do I see how a reader of my book could think I was.

The second aspect of Romanticism he charges me with is following the "cult of the founder." I do take founders seriously if the traditions they inaugurate do, but in three cases out of four I clearly deflate the founders. Moses, I argue, is the invention of "Deuteronomists" half a millennium after he is supposed to have lived. That "Moses," however unhistorical, has had a great influence on the thinking of Jews, Christians, and Muslims I really don't think either Payne or I would want to deny. With respect to Gautama the Buddha and to Confucius, I deconstruct the idea that they are the authors of all or even perhaps of any of the texts that have been attributed to them, so I describe those texts as layered, socially constructed by generations of followers, and containing deep meaning, but not to be taken as historical in the way they appear in their traditions. The texts we know as "Plato" are probably also layered even beyond what the scholars recognize as inauthentic.

Nonetheless, I do think there is a greater likelihood than in the other axial cases that he was a historical individual with ideas pretty close to what we attribute to him, and if we aren't so sure what those ideas are, it is at least as much Plato's fault (or intent?) as any fault of ours.

The third Romanticist charge is anti-modernist sentiments, which Payne admits I don't "explicitly express," but which go with the Romantic territory. He apparently doesn't know that during my entire life I have been committed to the Modern Project (my next book is called *The Modern Project in the Light of Human Evolution*), by which I mean the Enlightenment ideals of the eighteenth century: democracy (actually they were more likely to say republicanism), the radical equality of all human beings, including economic equality, human rights, freedom of expression, and so forth. I can hardly think of one principle of the original modern project with which I would disagree, or which I haven't spent much of my life fighting for. On the other hand, modernity is also marked by imperialism, colonialism, genocide (of Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, Congolese, etc.), the greatest wars in human history, the Holocaust, and the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, just to get started. Since all of these actions violate the Modern Project one can denounce them utterly without abandoning that project. But I should also say that Payne has a very tight and tendentious definition of Romanticism, which is, as all such movements are, far more plural than he admits, and with some aspects of which, with no treason toward Enlightenment ideals, I do feel sympathy.

As to dichotomizing human existence, I have already dealt with this charge in my response to Barrett and need not repeat what I said there, except to add that although I think the modern project is contested, I would never say that modernity as such is "dehumanizing," agreeing with Charles Taylor as I do that some of the highest ideals of the axial traditions have come closer to realization in modern times than ever before, although there are now also aspects of modernity that threaten them. Payne wants to cast me as a Manichean, whereas it is he who is in love with radical dichotomies.

As to the "Romantic Theory of Mind," I have never affirmed it and have resisted all efforts to see mysticism as the "deep structure" of all religions. That child development does move from some kind of mother-child symbiosis to increasing degrees of social and cultural differentiation seems to me the common finding of social psychology, but one that does not privilege individual experience (after all, from the moment of birth the infant is in a social situation) over what Lindbeck calls the cultural-linguistic milieu. In my book I am completely even-handed in this and it is a careless reading that would see me as any different.

Further, neither I nor those on whom I rely – Maslow, Csikszentmihalyi, Gopnik – believe that B-cognition, or flow, or lantern consciousness "accesses 'higher reality.'" Such experience is what it is; any claim to higher knowledge is a linguistic extrapolation that has no cognitive justification in the "experience" itself, as I have made very clear in my treatment of the unitive event. And if the unitive event is "ground zero," it is so because it has no content. What I mean by religion is based on enactive, symbolic, and theoretic consciousness as much as any alleged unitive event. Indeed, I argue that without a sociocultural interpretation the ground-zero event is absolutely meaningless, and might as well be forgotten. Only someone who didn't read my book carefully could think that my whole idea of religion rests on unitive events alone. I think a lot of religious people have never even had one.

I understand that Payne is a Buddhist specialist, but I have spent a good part of my life studying Mahayana Buddhism in Japan. His assertion that Buddhist emptiness is simply a cognitive “rejection of any metaphysical claims regarding the absolute, permanent, unchanging essence” seems to me to be far too narrow. Far from being simply a matter of metaphysics, I think Buddhist emptiness is part of practice; a perception of the emptiness of all things. It is surely part of daily life, but daily life lived in a particular way, as a form of practice. Nor is Japanese Mahayana lacking a *via negativa*. In studying eighteenth-century Japanese religion I often came across the terms *muga* and *nushin*, “no self” and “no mind.” In the frequent use of the word *mu*, Japanese Buddhism is quite aware of the negative. Early in my life I wrote an article about Ienaga Saburo, whose small book, *The Development of the Logic of Negation in the History of Japanese Thought*, is a veritable history of the *via negativa* in Japan (Bellah, 2003).

In short, I think some kind of unitive event is a common human possibility – far more common than we usually think if we confine it to advanced mystics. It is often found in some relation to religious practice, but neither unitive events nor any of the many other common aspects of religion are my starting points. If I have to start somewhere, it is with our relationship to a “general order of existence,” as Geertz puts it. This inevitably means that my understanding of religion is “fuzzy,” that the boundaries with rock concerts, football games, and political rallies are unclear. I disavow metaphysical dichotomies.

On to ritual. Payne’s assertion that I equate play and ritual is wrong. Play is common in animals and universal among humans, but in what society is play equated with ritual, or where do I say that it is? I suggest play as a possible pre-linguistic mammalian capacity from which ritual may have developed. No more and no less.

I am sorry that Payne sees childhood, insofar as it is a time of limited instrumental cares, as a Romantic myth. Work by biological anthropologists like Sarah Hrdy, whom I quote in my book, finds that parental care, which relieves selection pressures from infants, is likely to be about 200 million years old, and therefore couldn’t have been invented by Romanticism. Nor could animal and human play, whose history is very deep. Also, Payne’s quotation from Schlegel defining play as sheer freedom does not at all represent what is most important about play – it is a realm of norms, in which there are things you can and can’t do. Furthermore, it is egalitarian, and one of the earliest forms of egalitarianism. The stronger or older animal plays under handicap, otherwise play with smaller, weaker animals is impossible. It is certainly the normative aspect of play, and even its egalitarianism, that makes it a possible source of ritual, rather than any abstract freedom.

Next charge: “Bellah’s fundamental understanding of ritual is functionalist.” “Functionalism” or “functionalist” are scare words that postmoderns like to throw around. No one can understand any human action without asking about its function. This is as true in biology as in sociology. If there is a crime involved in functionalism, it is the idea that everything is positively functional, “eufunctional,” and never “dysfunctional.” But even Talcott Parsons, who embodied the very idea of functionalism, was not guilty of that charge. He was always as interested in the dysfunctional as in the functional. Societies do break down, and it is not foolish today to speak of “failed states.” Therefore, to attack functionalism as such is just childish, but not endearingly childish.

Payne claims that the functions I attribute to ritual are “harmony and stability.” The correct Durkheimian word is solidarity. As in late Stalinist Poland? No group of social animals can survive without solidarity. No student of animal or human behavior can do without this term. However, in reading me as always finding ritual as favoring solidarity, even finding it in rituals of reversal, where, amazingly, it is indeed sometimes achieved, he stops reading my book at chapter 3. Among other things, functionalism always raises the question of functional for whom? In chapter 4 I begin to deal with the early state, which I define as a secondary formation that sets itself off from the society as a whole such that what is functional for the state may not be functional for society. What do I say about rituals of human sacrifice? That they are intended to strike terror in the hearts of common people, for whom they are in no way “functional.” My whole treatment of class society is unrelentingly critical. It is one of the criteria of an axial religion that it affirms, directly or indirectly, human equality, and deeply criticizes a society in which the rich and the powerful trample on the heads of the poor and lowly. To be blind to that is surely not to have read the book carefully.

So finally “theorizing religion.” At last Payne reveals what has really been apparent all along: he is a radical nominalist. No wonder he is negative towards a work by a moderate realist. It is the term “religion” that is the real villain, a term that unites disparate entities into a false unity. That I treat religion “as a natural kind, rather than as social constructed,” is incomprehensible to me. I see sociocultural evolution as continuous with biological evolution, and therefore “socially constructed” cannot be an antithesis to “natural.” “Social construction” is the way nature works at the sociocultural level. The problem is not with nature versus culture, but with words. Are words to be used only to indicate individuals or can they be used for classes as well? We find near the end of the paper, in a criticism of a passage by Thomas McCarthy that I quote, that it is a mistake to think as McCarthy does, that “the universal and the particular exist in relation to one another,” because “since particulars exist objectively, and universals only exist as inter-subjective constructs, the relation between them is not one of parity.” Payne is resolving one of the oldest and most intractable of philosophical debates by fiat. That has often been tried but has never worked.

Radical nominalism is the postmodern move par excellence. It reduces everything to particles. General argument is ruled out and so grand theory and meta-narrative are taboo. Perhaps it is because the field of religion has been given to grand theory (Thomas, Calvin) and meta-narrative (the Bible, Dante, Milton) that there is a particularly strong recoil here. To claim that the very name of your discipline, the subject you are paid to teach, doesn’t exist is surely an extreme move. There are a few, very few – you need to look hard to find them – sociologists who claim that “society” doesn’t exist. I know of no economists who claim that the economy doesn’t exist or political scientists who think the polity doesn’t exist. Fortunately for Payne, the hermetic quality of academic disciplines means that most people in the university don’t know that religion doesn’t exist. Otherwise the whole field might get the axe.

But one final charge: “Bellah appears primarily concerned with religion as a source of values and meaning in human life.” As opposed to what? This makes me an instance of “the religious study of religion.” Again, as opposed to what? The anti-religious study of religion? The value-neutral study of religion? One thing you will not find in my book: that religion is always a good thing. I used to begin my course on the sociology of religion by saying to the students that religion is responsible for

some of the noblest things humans have ever done and some of the worst. If you don't see that in my book than you haven't read it.

Note

1. On the danger of head trips in thinking about human consciousness, see Noë (2009). Noë argues that consciousness requires not only a brain, but also a body and a world.

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