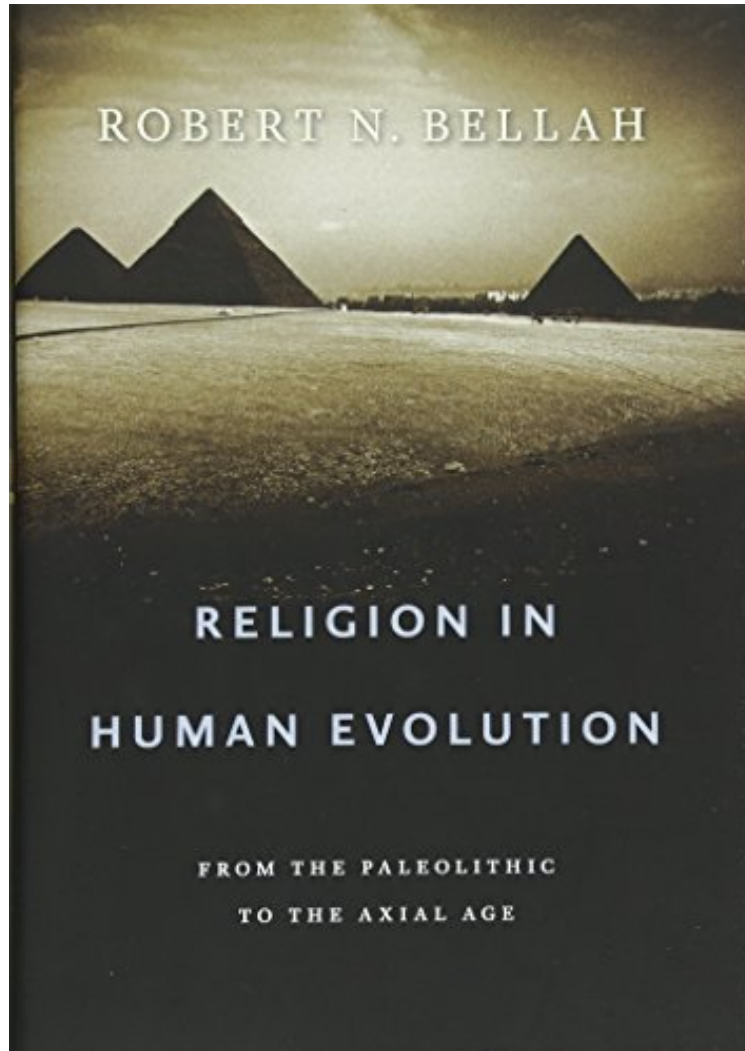


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Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age

Robert N. Bellah

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Robert N. Bellah : Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age:

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everything experienced so far by all of humanity... this book is a glimpse of the UNIVERSE touching a little bit from everything that is relevant in the HUMANITY'S VOYAGE of growth and of becoming...HUMAN. Rigorous, wide, scientific, humanistic and with a touch of EPIC6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. meticulously constructed work by a true subject matter expertBy Greg Smith (aka sowhatfaith)Religion in Human Evolution is a meticulously constructed academic tome (700+ pages) that effectively explores Bellah's understanding of how religion developed within the larger framework of human evolution from the paleolithic to the axial age. The account of religious beginnings and formation is interdisciplinary and comparative, displaying the author's incredible knowledge of the subject matter. Finally, the extended treatment of four axial cases (Israel, Greece, China, and India) provides a solid summary of recent scholarship while also displaying the author's humility (e.g., his appraisal of his own limited knowledge about ancient India prior to his research for this book - p. 481).

Religion in Human Evolution is a work of extraordinary ambition a wide-ranging, nuanced probing of our biological past to discover the kinds of lives that human beings have most often imagined were worth living. It offers what is frequently seen as a forbidden theory of the origin of religion that goes deep into evolution, especially but not exclusively cultural evolution. How did our early ancestors transcend the quotidian demands of everyday existence to embrace an alternative reality that called into question the very meaning of their daily struggle? Robert Bellah, one of the leading sociologists of our time, identifies a range of cultural capacities, such as communal dancing, storytelling, and theorizing, whose emergence made this religious development possible. Deploying the latest findings in biology, cognitive science, and evolutionary psychology, he traces the expansion of these cultural capacities from the Paleolithic to the Axial Age (roughly, the first millennium BCE), when individuals and groups in the Old World challenged the norms and beliefs of class societies ruled by kings and aristocracies. These religious prophets and renouncers never succeeded in founding their alternative utopias, but they left a heritage of criticism that would not be quenched. Bellah's treatment of the four great civilizations of the Axial Age in ancient Israel, Greece, China, and India shows all existing religions, both prophetic and mystic, to be rooted in the evolutionary story he tells. Religion in Human Evolution answers the call for a critical history of religion grounded in the full range of human constraints and possibilities.

This book is the opus magnum of the greatest living sociologist of religion. Nobody since Max Weber has produced such an erudite and systematic comparative world history of religion in its earlier phases. Robert Bellah opens new vistas for the interdisciplinary study of religion and for global inter-religious dialogue. (Hans Joas, The University of Chicago and the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg) This is an extraordinarily rich book based on wide-ranging scholarship. It contains not just a host of individual studies, but is informed with a coherent and powerful theoretical structure. There is nothing like it in existence. Of course, it will be challenged. But it will bring the debate a great step forward, even for its detractors. And it will enable other scholars to build on its insights in further studies of religion past and present. (Charles Taylor, author of A Secular Age and Dilemmas and Connections) Robert Bellah's Religion in Human Evolution is the most important systematic and historical treatment of religion since Hegel, Durkheim, and Weber. It is a page-turner of a bildungsroman of the human spirit on a truly global scale, and should be on every educated person's bookshelves. Bellah breathes new life into critical universal history by making ancient China and India indispensable parts of a grand narrative of human religious evolution. The generosity and breadth of his empathy and curiosity in humanity is on full display on every page. One will never see human history and our contemporary world the same after reading this magnificent book. (Yang Xiao, Kenyon College) This great book is the intellectual harvest of the rich academic life of a leading social theorist who has assimilated a vast range of biological, anthropological, and historical literature in the pursuit of a breathtaking project. Robert Bellah first searches for the roots of ritual and myth in the natural evolution of our species and then follows with the social evolution of religion up to the Axial Age. In the second part of his book, he succeeds in a unique comparison of the origins of the handful of surviving world-religions, including Greek philosophy. In this field I do not know of an equally ambitious and comprehensive study. (Jürgen Habermas) Religion in Human Evolution is a work of remarkable ambition and breadth. The wealth of reference which Robert Bellah calls upon in support of his argument is breath-taking, as is the daring of the argument itself. A marvellously stimulating book. (John Banville, novelist) Bellah's reexamination of his own classic theory of religious evolution provides a treasure-chest of rich detail and sociological insight. The evolutionary story is not linear but full of twists and variations. The human capacity for religion begins in the earliest ritual gatherings involving emotion, music and dance, producing collective effervescence and shared narratives that give meaning to the utilitarian world. But ritual entwines with power and stratification, as chiefs vie with each other over the sheer length, expense, and impressiveness of ritual. Archaic kingdoms take a sinister turn with terroristic rituals such as human sacrifices exalting the power of god and ruler simultaneously. As societies become more complex and rulers acquire organization that relies more on administration and taxation than on sheer impressiveness and terror, religions move towards the axial breakthrough into more abstract, universal and self-reflexive concepts, elevating the religious sphere above worldly goods and power. Above all, the religions of the

breakthrough become ethicized, turning against cruelty and inequality and creating the ideals that eventually will become those of more just and humane societies. Bellah deftly examines the major historical texts and weighs contemporary scholarship in presenting his encompassing vision. (Randall Collins, author of *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*) In this magisterial effort, eminent sociologist of religion Bellah attempts nothing less than to show the ways that the evolution of certain capacities among humans provided the foundation for religion...[Readers] will be rewarded with a wealth of sparkling insights into the history of religion. (Publishers Weekly 2011-08-08) Bellah's book is an interesting departure from the traditional separation of science and religion. He maintains that the evolving worldviews sought to unify rather than to divide people. Poignantly, it is upon these principles that both Western and Eastern modern societies are now based. What strikes the reader most powerfully is how the author connects cultural development and religion in an evolutionary context. He suggests that cultural evolution can be seen in mimetic, mythical, and theoretical contexts. (Brian Renvall Library Journal 2011-08-01) Religion in Human Evolution is not like so many other "science and religion" books, which tend to explain away belief as a smudge on a brain scan or an accident of early hominid social organization. It is, instead, a bold attempt to understand religion as part of the biggest big picture--life, the universe, and everything...One need not believe in intelligent design to look for embryonic traces of human behavior on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder. [Bellah's] attempt to do just that, with the help of recent research in zoology and anthropology, results in a menagerie of case studies that provide the book's real innovation. Not only the chimps and monkeys evoked by the word "evolution" in the title, but wolves and birds and iguanas all pass through these pages. Within such a sundry cast, Bellah searches for a commonality that may give some indication of where and when the uniquely human activity of religion was born. What he finds is as intriguing as it is unexpected...Bellah is less concerned with whether religion is right or wrong, good or bad, perfume or mustard gas, than with understanding what it is and where it comes from, and in following the path toward that understanding, wherever it may lead...In a perfect world, the endless curiosity on display throughout Religion in Human Evolution would set the tone for all discussions of religion in the public square. (Peter Manseau Bookforum 2011-09-01) Ever since Darwin, the theory of evolution has been considered the deadly enemy of religious belief; the creation of Adam and Eve and the process of natural selection simply do not go together. In Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age, the sociologist Robert Bellah offers a new, unexpected way of reconciling these opposites, using evolutionary psychology to argue that the invention of religious belief played a crucial role in the development of modern human beings. (Barnes and Noble 2011-09-14) Of Bellah's brilliance there can be no doubt. The sheer amount this man knows about religion is otherworldly... Bellah stands in the tradition of such stalwarts of the sociological imagination as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Only one word is appropriate to characterize this book's subject as well as its substance, and that is "magisterial." (Alan Wolfe New York Times Book 2011-10-02) An audacious project...Religion in Human Evolution is no simple effort to "reconcile" religious belief with scientific understanding, but something far more interesting and ambitious. It seeks to take both religion and evolution seriously on their own terms, and to locate us within the stories they tell about the human condition in a way informed by the best emerging research on both terrains...The result is a grand narrative written in full understanding of the failures and limitations of recent grand narratives. Religion in Human Evolution is a magnum opus founded on careful research and immersed in the "reflective judgment" of one of our best thinkers and writers...This is a big book, full of big ideas that demand sustained attention and disciplined thought. But in my view it repays a reader's effort in full...For over half a century, Robert N. Bellah has set his extraordinary mind out on the frontiers of human knowledge and has written back to make that knowledge accessible to the educated reader. This remarkable book finds him nearing the close of a long and fruitful life, and generously giving it back to us in love. (Richard L. Wood Commonweal 2011-10-21) Religion in Human Evolution is a near-exhaustive examination of the biological and cultural origins of religion...Bellah gleefully plunges into the past, from the Big Bang to the first millennium B.C. in Israel, Greece, China, and India. For him, cosmology, cosmogony, mythology, ontogeny, and phylogeny all belong in the same chapter, or in some cases, the same paragraph, right alongside Hegel, Dawkins, and an astounding array of writers, scientists, sociologists, and philosophers. Although the tome stops short in the first millennium (leaving the last few thousand years for other scholars, or a future volume), its overall narrative does not feel incomplete. Expect to spend a long time reading this book--and expect to see the world differently when you finish. (Benjamin Soloway The Daily 2011-09-18) One might best see this work as an attempt to do for the 21st century what the great sociologist of religion Max Weber did for the 20th in treating Judaism, China and India. (PHEME Perkins America 2011-10-17) You can't accuse Robert Bellah of thinking small. The University of California, Berkeley, sociologist set out to cover "from the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age" and he does. (The Axial Age ran from about 800 BC to 200 BC when the first major religions got going.) The result is a deeply thoughtful discussion of how evolution and religion went hand in hand, each influencing the other, from humanity's earliest days. It's like a chat with a great thinker who takes one engaging tangent after another. (Leigh Dayton The Australian 2011-11-26) Religion in Human Evolution is an immensely ambitious book on a topic only a scholar of Robert Bellah's stature could dare to tackle. It attempts no less than to explain human biological as well as cultural evolution in one sweep, beginning with early hominids and ending with the "axial age." Bellah engages evolutionary biology as well as cognitive psychology

for the framing of his argument. This is a courageous move of transcending conventional disciplinary boundaries, for which he should be applauded...With *Religion in Human Evolution* Robert Bellah has given us a marvelous book written with the wisdom of age as well as youthful enthusiasm. Having discovered the importance of play in human evolution rather late in the writing process, Bellah nevertheless must have internalized it much earlier. All these rich chapters on ancient Israel, Greece, China, and India convey a certain playfulness and intellectual joy, which carry his narrative often beyond the needs of his argument, but stimulate and enrich the reader immensely. (Martin Riesebrodt *The Immanent Frame* 2011-12-05) This book could really be regarded as Robert Bellah's "State of the Species" address, after a life of scholarship and reflection. It is about everything: the nature of knowledge and meaning, and the history of our deepest yearnings and practices, as expressed in our religions. Posterity will decide whether he has succeeded, but the effort is magnificent in its own right. We all speak of doing difficult, disciplined, interdisciplinary thinking. Well, folks, this is what it looks like, down on the ground. (Merlin Donald *The Immanent Frame* 2011-12-05) Robert Bellah's magnum opus does far more than just satisfy. It provides a transformative and thrillingly interdisciplinary account of the evolution of religion itself...So expert and simultaneously readable is *Religion in Human Evolution*--a model of academic writing--that it effectively banishes the paltry efforts of Daniel Dennett and Pascal Boyer and Robert Wright. (Scott Stephens Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Religion and Ethics blog 2012-02-10) Bellah's reexamination of his own classic theory of religious evolution provides a treasure-chest of rich detail and sociological insight. The evolutionary story is not linear but full of twists and variations. The human capacity for religion begins in the earliest ritual gatherings involving emotion, music and dance, producing collective effervescence and shared narratives that give meaning to the utilitarian world. But ritual entwines with power and stratification, as chiefs vie with each other over the sheer length, expense, and impressiveness of ritual. Archaic kingdoms take a sinister turn with terroristic rituals such as human sacrifices exalting the power of god and ruler simultaneously. As societies become more complex and rulers acquire organization that relies more on administration and taxation than on sheer impressiveness and terror, religions move towards the axial breakthrough into more abstract, universal and self-reflexive concepts, elevating the religious sphere above worldly goods and power. Above all, the religions of the breakthrough become ethicized, turning against cruelty and inequality and creating the ideals that eventually will become those of more just and humane societies. Bellah deftly examines the major historical texts and weighs contemporary scholarship in presenting his encompassing vision. (Randall Collins, University of Pennsylvania) The new magnum opus of a great contemporary sociologist...Bellah is one of those rare social scientists who not only studies the origins of our religions but who also participates in an active Christian congregation in his University of California neighborhood. Because he appropriates so wide a range of contemporary evolutionary sciences, in the 600 pages of this book a reader is likely to experience a great depth of gratitude for our debts as humans to our ancient lineages--to all the beings who are responsible for the explosion of our fellow species on our earth...If we read this book, adherents of every modern religion--especially Jews, Christians, and Muslims--will find vast new reasons for gratitude for our ancestors human and extra-human. We meet in these pages eloquent summaries of how the evolution of the human mind may be the greatest mystery of all. (Donald Shriver *Tikkun* 2012-04-30) Insightful and magisterial, it is the crowning achievement of a brilliant scholar who is sympathetic to religion and deeply attuned to the problems of modernity...[Bellah] draws on scientific explanations and historical facts to present and support a new multistranded theory of religion, one that places the human pursuit of meaning squarely in the context of our social history, which in turn rests in the context of our biological and cosmological evolution. (Linda Heuman *Tricycle* 2012-06-01) *Religion in Human Evolution* is an immense work; it would merit description as the achievement of a lifetime, were it not actually Bellah's second such achievement...What does it amount to? Quite a lot, actually: effectively, a history of the world up to about 2,000 years ago. The book has a James Michener-esque scope, proceeding effectively from the Big Bang forward. The only comparisons I can come up with are Hegel's magisterial but fragmentary notes for his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religions*, or Weber's monumental works on the *Sociology of World Religions* (which got through China and India and ancient Israel, but no further). Bellah is definitely playing major league sociology...Both in the scale of its ambition, and in the degree to which that ambition is realized, this is a book that will outlast its critics...Each moment in his account invites further reflection, deeper immersion in the realities under study, a richer, more empathetic comprehension of what it is like to be these people. For all these reasons, I hope that future work in evolutionary theory and religion will learn from Bellah's example. (Charles Mathewes *American Interest* 2012-07-01) About the Author Robert N. Bellah was Elliott Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, at the University of California, Berkeley.