

Religion in Evolution

BY LINDA HEUMAN

Robert N. Bellah

**RELIGION IN HUMAN
EVOLUTION**

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In an interview with *Tricycle* almost a decade ago, the sociologist of religion Robert N. Bellah addressed a central problem—perhaps the central problem—facing religious people today. Our modern intellectual inheritance demands a critical approach to received wisdom, yet faith would seem to require the opposite: trust in the reliability and authoritative-ness of tradition. How can we approach the study of religion in a way that is both affirmative and critical? *Tricycle* asked.

Bellah, who is widely regarded as the preeminent figure in his field, agreed that putting our hands over our ears isn't an option for modern religious people; we must critique tradition thoroughly. But there is a third possibility, Bellah suggested. Taking a page from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, Bellah suggested that we can move from an unquestioning acceptance of tradition through a critical investigation and come out the other side to another stage of belief, a "second naïveté." Second naïveté, he said, "accepts the critical process, yet 'in and through criticism' it lets the symbols and narratives embedded in tradition speak again; it listens to what they are saying."

But how do you do *that*?

There is a scene in the film *Howl*—about the obscenity trial of Allen Gins-

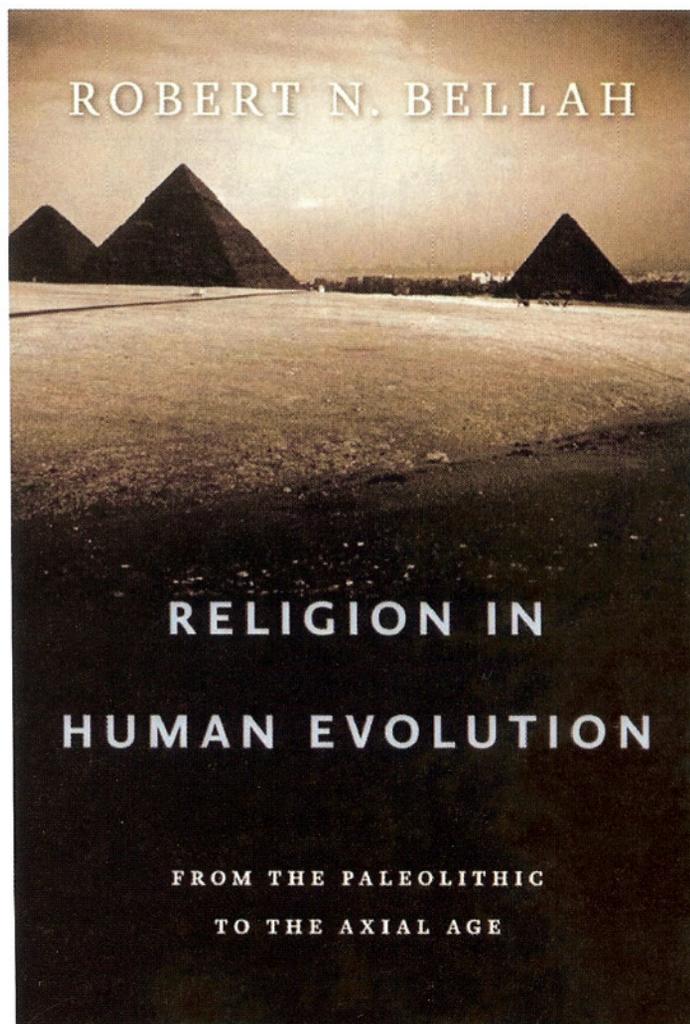
berg's poem—in which the prosecutor turns to literary critic Mark Schorer and asks him to translate what Ginsberg meant when he wrote "angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night." Schorer replies, "Sir, you can't translate poetry into prose. That's why it's poetry."

Just like poetry, symbols and narratives speak their own language. And in an era of rationalism, these types of truth-accounts, especially in the realm of religion, are no longer our native tongue. Symbols and narratives may still be speaking, but for the most part we are meaning-monolingualists.

Maybe you think the prosecutor was simply square. Then consider this. When you learn that the traditional accounts of the Buddha's life don't line up well with the historical facts—or for that matter, when you learn that the scriptures' claims to historical accuracy are false or, at best, rest on shaky ground—do you feel you have lost something? When you take those accounts out of your category marked "facts" and put them into one

marked "stories," did you move them up or down—promote or demote them? Now, what happens if you think of them as "myths"? How do you value them now?

This is just a surface symptom of a profound and very hard-to-see problem with enormous implications for our own self-understanding and for our potential to understand others. For several centuries, there has been a takeover afoot in the realm of human meaning. In modern Western culture—and increasingly globally—a certain type of rational, theoretical knowledge has come to dominate territory that throughout earlier human history was shared with other modes of knowing, other forms of truth. Cultural forms like poetry, music, theater, and art—which are primarily expressions of meaning—have become second-class citizens, pushed to the margins and required—like Ginsberg's poem—to speak



in the dominant language of fact. Guided by the assumptions of the modern mind-set, ritual, symbol, and myth can seem not only inscrutable but superfluous, even worthy of contempt. With this as our condition, it is hard to imagine how a religious person could slam into scientific knowledge and historical fact and come out not just unscathed, but richer for the experience. Ricoeur's second naïveté sounds—frankly—well, naïve.

Robert Bellah is on to that problem.

At the time of the *Tricycle* interview, he was already years into writing a book that would take up Ricoeur's challenge. Reflecting on his motivation for writing it, he said, "My scholarly interest in religion stems from my belief that [it] is the primary way we humans have tried to understand the cosmos and ourselves. Seeing how that understanding has changed over time helps us comprehend where we are now." He called his book in progress a "*Bildungsroman* of the human race." This "coming-of-age story" of humanity's

search for meaning, *Religion in Human Evolution*, was released in 2011. 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.

It is not at all self-evident that a book with the title *Religion in Human Evolution* would be an inviting read for the religiously sensitive. Nor is it, necessarily. Bellah has written a scholarly, critical book. He 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.

The book tops out at more than 750 pages, and at times it can be slow going. Many of Bellah's propositions are controversial. For example, evolutionary theory comes loaded with progress-myth baggage, whether what is evolving are species

(simple to complex), cultures (primitive to advanced), or humans (immature to mature). The author is aware of these connotations, of course, and he makes some pretty fine distinctions to distance himself from them. The best thing, I think, is to bracket one's objections until the end, and let Bellah present his case. It will be worth it.

Bellah sets out ambitiously to answer the question of where religion came from. He focuses on the evolution of capacities in general and more particularly on our multifarious capacities to understand the world and find meaning in it. But because religion is embedded in other dimensions of human experience, the scope of his task quickly escalates from ambitious to dizzying. Bellah at first faces a kind of un-nesting, akin to a Russian *matryoshka* doll: to understand religion, we have to open the question of society; but to understand society, we first have to open the question of biology; but to open biology, we first have to open the question of cos-

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mology. Each single level in turn can be multidimensional: for example, society includes economics, politics, and demographics. Then consider that each dimension changes over time, sending ripples through the others. Bellah tracks these whirling clouds of change against a timeline starting at the Big Bang; he stops just short of the last two millennia—one would imagine, breathless.

Bellah focuses in on breakthrough moments in cultural history—stage-shifts—when new capacities emerged, as when we grew from a primitive stage without language in which we communicated primarily by bodily gestures or basic sounds into a more complex one with language and the capacity to speak, tell stories, and understand our world with a new kind of coherence. (Working from the scheme laid out by the evolutionary psychologist Merlin Donald, Bellah calls these stages “mimetic” and “mythic.”) Bellah’s key interest is the most recent shift, which, he argues, happened nearly simultaneously in various cultures world-

wide about two and a half millennia ago. At that time, what Donald calls “theoretic” culture emerged out of mythic culture. Humans gained the ability to step back and reflect on their myths and their experience in a new way; they began to reflect on thought itself, to critique their social order, and to imagine alternatives—like spiritual transcendence or social utopias. Bellah uses Karl Jasper’s term for this era, the *axial age*, and he paints the axial worlds of Israel, India, Greece, and China in elaborate detail. For each, he illustrates how the convergence of conditions on multiple levels led to an axial breakthrough, unique to that culture and time but eerily akin to axial breakthroughs happening elsewhere.

In Bellah’s view, the nature of evolution as it applies to capacities for human meaning is never “out with the old, in with the new” triumphalism. New modes of understanding always arise in dependence on existing conditions. Theoretic culture arose in dependence on mythic culture, which in turn arose in depen-

dence on mimetic culture. And new capacities don’t supersede the old ones. “Nothing is ever lost” is a Bellah signature refrain. Rather, he insists, when a new capacity arises, it takes its place alongside existing capacities; they work out a new way to interrelate and, to the degree that this succeeds, a new integration. Theoretic culture didn’t get rid of mythic or mimetic cultures; rather, it caused them to be reorganized and repurposed.

Worldviews shift in a similar manner. When Buddhism arose out of India’s Vedic religion, the Buddha didn’t oust the Vedic view entirely. Rather, he kept its key elements, taking conventions such as “dharma,” “samsara” (and liberation from it), and “karma” out of the service of social status and putting them into the service of ethics; that is, he told a new story. The Buddha even maintained the ideal of “being a Brahmin,” but he redefined that status from one of caste to one of moral integrity. The Buddha repurposed ritual to ethical ends in a similar way when, for example, he founded the monastic community.

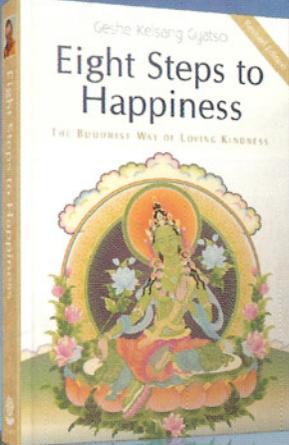


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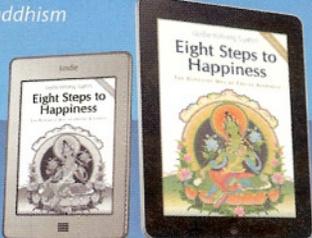
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Bellah can at times seem to be giving a long-winded answer without a question. Throughout the book, you have the sense that there is a lion of a moral imperative lurking in the shadows. Occasional rustlings sound, as when he writes, "Technological advance at high speed combined with moral blindness about what we are doing to the world's societies and to the biosphere is a recipe for rapid extinction. The burden of proof lies on anyone who would say it is not so." From time to time, a paw extends visibly from the bushes, then retreats. Bellah states, "Modernity is on trial," but continues, "I cannot in this book give an account of that trial. All I can do is call up some very important witnesses." Once, the lion roars. "Some have suggested that we are in the midst of a second axial age, but if we are, there should be a new cultural form emerging. Maybe I am blind, but I don't see it. What I think we have is a crisis of incoherence and a need to integrate in new ways the dimensions we have had since the axial age."

The "need to integrate" is clearly the answer (hence deep and wide history); the "crisis of incoherence" must be the question. But then, in what way have we stopped making sense?

It takes a little reading between the lines, but a sense of the problem begins to emerge. Theory has spun loose from our other modes of knowing. (It is worth noting that theory itself is not the problem for Bellah—nor is science. Bellah isn't anti-reason. The problem is in the *spinning loose*.) "Once disengaged theory becomes possible, then theory can take another turn: it can abandon any moral stance at all and look simply at what will be useful, what can make the powerful and exploitative even more so." This abandoning of a moral stance in turn sets a stage: "Theory in the sense of disengaged knowing, inquiry for the sake of understanding, with or without moral evaluation... has given humans the power to destroy their environment and themselves." When theory gone rogue also becomes the only kind of meaning-making that counts, then we are radically, deeply, and dangerously dislocated.

Since theory is the source of trouble here, the crisis of incoherence is not going to be solved by coming up with a new

theory, any more than alcoholism could be cured by inventing a new kind of drink. But more than that, this is actually not a problem on the order of theory, not a problem of the type that could be corrected with more knowledge: new facts, or a convincing argument. It is a problem in self-understanding. The correction needed is on the order of self-transformation. And that requires a *therapeutic* process—which is the domain of *narrative*, of *story*.

"Narrative is at the heart of our identity," as Bellah understands it. "The self is a telling." Personal and social identity reside not in our theories about the world but in our stories. Bellah knows well the difference between theory and narrative, and the types of power each hold. He is well aware that mythic sensibility is still operating within us (remember, "nothing is ever lost"). But Bellah is working within the conventions of his profession. Theory is the only authoritative discourse available to him as a social scientist. So he does something tricky, and herein lies brilliance. Using theory, Bellah tells a new story about theory and, by doing so, shows a way to Ricoeur's second naiveté.

Employing the tools of history and science, Bellah simultaneously undermines our unexamined confidence in the absolute authority of reason and increases our confidence in other kinds of truth. By putting the rise of theoretic culture in the context of earlier periods of cultural history, he exposes both the historical contingency of rational knowing and its indebtedness to, and grounding in, its genealogical predecessors. Then he demonstrates that even in an individual, the ability to think abstractly comes only after enactive and symbolic knowledge give us something to think abstractly about; in this view of human development, we are first embodied knowers, then storytellers, and only then analytic thinkers. Reason comes not first but last—it is the newest member of an established team, not the captain but a co-player.

Having reorganized our different ways of knowing meaning under the metanarrative of evolution and history, the past, our traditions, "speak again." *And we start to be able to hear them.* With this, one recognizes that the book doesn't just *say* a lot of things; it *does* something.

It doesn't just *tell* us how we came to be; it *shows* us who we are.

We start to be able to enter into these axial worlds, and we resonate with the character of each as though seeing it from the inside. Indeed, Bellah admits, "In the course of writing this book, which is a history of histories, and a story of stories, I have become involved with many of the stories I recount to the point of at least partial conversion." Upon leaving the axial worlds, we return home and see our own world anew—we understand in a different way what it means to have religion, a belief system, or a worldview. Having a religion is not like carrying around a map of true or false propositions that we hold up against reality. Rather, meaning systems are embodied and contingent: what we can think or believe is utterly bounded by what we can say and do—and what we can think, say, and do all shape each other. And further, all these possibilities are shaped by our biology, society, and culture.

This shift in self-understanding has implications beyond a newfound respect for the myths, symbols, and rituals of our own tradition. As long as we misunderstand the nature of our own religion, we will also fail to understand the nature of the religions of others. If we imagine *our* religion to be a set of stand-alone theories, we will imagine *theirs* to be just theories too. And, of course, our theories will be the right ones; theirs, the wrong ones. But if we can pull off this shift of perspective—accomplished not just by learning a new idea but having a new insight—"that we are all in this, with our theories, yes, but with our practices and stories, together," a new kind of capacity unfolds to understand the world and find meaning in it. Not a breakthrough on the order of the axial, perhaps, but at the very least, new hope for finding commonalities, and accommodating and perhaps even appreciating differences. Maybe we will even discover a new understanding of what sameness and difference could mean. Bellah would seem to be right: religion is, indeed, in evolution. ▼

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