


While this issue of the *JAAR* was in press, word reached us that Robert N. Bellah had died on July 30 at the age of 86. A full obituary will appear in the December issue—which features a roundtable, as it happens, on the sociology of religion to which Bellah will be a contributor. In the review that follows, of what must now be the eminent sociologist’s last major work, I mention my discovery in 1967 of his exploratory 1964 article, “Religious Evolution.” It may have been in that year as well and cannot have been later than 1969 that I learned from him, in a talk he delivered at Harvard’s Sanders Theater, of the existence of the then newly organized (in 1964) American Academy of Religion. His high hopes for the new organization were clear and his enthusiasm contagious: I went home and signed on. Bob Bellah was a friend of the AAR from the very start.

—Jack Miles

Religion in Human Evolution, From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age. By Robert N. Bellah. Belknap Press, 2011. 746 pages. \$39.95.

The Axial Age and Its Consequences. Edited by Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas. Belknap Press, 2012. 548 pages. \$39.95.

In 1964, sociologist Robert N. Bellah published a programmatic article, much discussed at the time and reprinted in 2006 as the lead essay in *The Robert Bellah Reader*. The essay was entitled “Religious Evolution,” and it began with a stunningly concise and schematic, four-or-five-phase overview of the entirety of world religious history. To recall this seminal essay of half a century ago, its roots reaching even further back, into Bellah’s postdoctoral studies, is to recall for how very long this scholar has been an influential figure not just in the social science of religion but well beyond it. I can still recall the excitement, the sense of suddenly broadened horizons, that I felt as I read it for the first time as a graduate student in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Harvard University. My subject then was the Hebrew Bible; my teachers were of the famous Albright School. A

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foundational text for us was W.F. Albright's *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. Bellah's early vision, polycentric and global even then, was not confined, as Albright's was, to the Ancient Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East. And yet more exciting for me than that difference, then and now, was his very use of the word *evolution*. James Watson had published *The Double Helix* during the same academic year, 1967–1968, when I began at Harvard and first read Bellah. What did the discovery of DNA portend for religion's already charged relationship to Darwinian theory? Did this brilliant young sociologist, then still in his late thirties, have some preliminary answers? Could he address my vague sense in 1968 that an unbridgeable gulf lay between the intellectual world that had produced *From the Stone Age to Christianity* and the one that had produced *The Double Helix*?

In fact, the 1964 essay did not engage biology but spoke of evolution only as a broad approach within sociology, long out of fashion, to be sure, but Bellah thought it ripe for a duly qualified revival. The 2011 work—Hans Joas calls it on the book jacket “the *magnum opus* of the greatest living sociologist of religion”—goes vastly farther in engaging biology than the 1964 article did. The first subsection in its virtual title chapter, “Religion and Evolution,” is entitled “What Happened After the Big Bang?” The subtitle of the work as a whole might almost be *From the Big Bang to the Sixth Extinction*. Though Bellah does not engage *ex professo* the many biologists and ethologists who since E.O. Wilson's 1975 *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* have sought to “biologize” sociology, his work is undeniably a rival synthesis to theirs. Its writing bespeaks full awareness of how the climate for all social science, including the socio-scientific study of religion, has been changed by contemporary biology.

Religion in Human Evolution, From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age—633 pages of exposition in ten chapters, plus 137 pages of notes—may be divided into the title section and the subtitle section, or the frame and the picture. The title or frame section, comprising 182 pages, consists of the substantial preface; Chapter 1, “Religion and Reality”; Chapter 2, “Religion and Evolution”; and the equally substantial “Conclusion.” The subtitle or picture section, comprising 424 pages, consists of Chapters 3–9:

- (3) Tribal Religion: The Production of Meaning
- (4) From Tribal to Archaic Religion: Meaning and Power
- (5) Archaic Religion: God and King
- (6) The Axial Age I: Introduction and Ancient Israel
- (7) The Axial Age II: Ancient Greece
- (8) The Axial Age III: China in the Late First Millennium BCE
- (9) The Axial Age IV: Ancient India

These latter seven chapters expand just the first two phases of “Religious Evolution” as Bellah sketched it in 1964. That early article's “primitive religion” appears here as Chapters 3–4. The article's “archaic religion” appears here divided into two severely unequal parts. Chapter 5, archaic religion proper, covers “Ancient Egypt,” “Ancient Mesopotamia,” and “Shang and Western Zhou China.” Chapters 6–9 cover at impressive length four civilizations in whose religious life Bellah reconstructs a breakthrough to the conceptual in religion that marks the

four as pivotal or “axial” and justifies their grouping. The choice of these four as axial examples determines in turn the choice of the three civilizations covered in Chapter 5 as pre-axial or archaic. The archaic Indus Valley civilization, which influenced axial India as much as Mesopotamia and Egypt influenced axial Israel and Greece or as Shang and Western Zhou China influenced China, is excluded because evidence about it is too scanty. Zoroastrian Persia is excluded because the key texts cannot be confidently dated to the mid-first millennium BCE.

For this reviewer, the larger, “picture” portion of the book, though impressive, is finally derivative. It is the smaller, “frame” portion that is deeply original, for all its acknowledged indebtedness. It is the frame that may prove truly seminal in the years ahead for the study of religion in its relationship to evolution, “the only shared metanarrative among educated people of all cultures that we have” (600). Specialists in the study of each of societies that Bellah studies in moving from tribal to archaic and then to axial religion will, I venture to predict, find much to admire but a good deal to critique in his treatment of their specialties. I will attempt no such critique here but instead concentrate my comments on what I have called the frame chapters.

The 1964 article, I should note, proceeded through three further phases in “religious evolution”—namely, “historic religion” (roughly the several world religions as taught today in a conventional textbook); “early modern religion” (essentially the Protestant Reformation); and “modern religion” (the Enlightenment and after). Those later phases are all omitted from this book, lending it a somewhat truncated character for the lay reader or beginning student, though this large and demanding work is not intended for that readership.

Saying that, I do not mean to suggest that its style is forbidding. On the contrary, Bellah has the great strength as a learned writer of being able to convey the excitement of learning itself. His questions, his sense of compelling quest, even his irritations all become part of his work without ever narcissistically narrowing it. As between “gladly wolde he lerne” and “gladly teche,” Bellah remains in his late eighties a glad learner. His procedure in a work that synthesizes research about a good dozen distinct societies, to whose study the author is often a newcomer, not to mention as many academic fields in addition to sociology, is to depend on a few well-chosen and always generously acknowledged specialists, allowing them to shape by proxy one or another of his successive presentations.

To single out one among innumerable examples of this procedure, he devotes perhaps half of a trenchant subsection on “Religious Naturalism” to the respectful and appreciative presentation of a single article, “The Sacred Emergence of Nature,” by Ursula Goodenough and Terrence W. Deacon in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*. Of that work as a whole, however, he writes, “I was almost completely disappointed” (629, n. 156).

The gladdest learner faces no greater challenge than finding the right teacher, and the backstory of Bellah’s search for teachers would surely be an interesting study in itself. I would be remiss, however, if I did not add that as the above example may suggest, he does sort goats from sheep without apology: those from whom he will learn from those for whom, at this late date, he will not.

Some may find the footnotes in which *en passant* he discharges at least part of this task a bit peremptory. I myself find their candor equivalent to a kind of truth in labeling.

Bellah's accessible style and engaging presence on the page duly conceded, his book inevitably bumps up against a general cultural expectation that a work purporting to deal with religion in general will include Christianity and Islam, the two religions that today account for perhaps half of the world's population. Bellah takes due note of the counter-intuitive omission of this pair from *Religion in Human Evolution*, but he has good reason to proceed as he does. The inner logic of his work has required that the story of religion in general should begin at its true beginning in earliest pre-history and that it should continue until those elements are in place that will become the basic repertory of historic and modern religion in all its major theaters. That point reached, he has completed what this reader, at least, sees as the great errand of [in] this book—namely, to connect the evolutionary past of the human species by coherent steps to the earliest, fully recorded instances of conceptual religion.

A long-awaited major synthesis by a prominent and highly networked scholar like Robert N. Bellah often enough arrives in academe by stages. The arrival of *Religion in Human Evolution* began at least as early as 2005 when Bellah published "What Is Axial about the Axial Age?" in *European Journal of Sociology* 46 (69–89). The new book's more proximate arrival continued in a conference on "The Axial Age and Its Consequences for Subsequent History and the Present" held at the University of Erfurt in 2008, where the Axial Age chapters from the work then still in progress were distributed to the participants. The revised proceedings of that conference have since been published, a year after the publication of Bellah's book itself, as *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, edited by Bellah and Joas. In the interim, extensive public discussion of the work has been mounted at the 2012 meeting of the American Academy of Religion and at "The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere" (www.ssrc.org/programs/the-immanent-frame-blog), a blog under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council. I mention the size and warmth of this reception deliberately to counter my own intuition that the deeper originality of Bellah's synthesis is to be found in the frame that he places around the Axial Age rather than in the Axial Age itself. Clearly, many if not most of Bellah's readers are more deeply engaged by his treatment of the Axial picture itself. More about this below.

Continuity and coherence in a presentation of the evidence he has gathered are thus the initial target rather than evolutionary etiology. He writes in a crucial paragraph in his preface (xxii) that

. . . in this book the search is not to find the ways in which religion is adaptive, and thus a good thing, or maladaptive, and thus a bad thing, or even something that developed in a spandrel, a kind of empty evolutionary space, and is neutral with respect to adaptation. I want to understand what religion is and what religion does and then worry about its consequences for the world of daily life. The consequences are

enormously important, and the question of whether they are adaptive or not cannot finally be avoided. But adaptations can be found for almost any phenomenon—biologists call them just-so stories. They are not the place to start; the reality of life in the religious mode is where I will begin.

This paragraph, crucial to the frame of the book, is as important in what it concedes as in what it asserts. The fact that biologists disparage certain alleged adaptations as just-so stories does not mean that biologists disparage adaptation as an explanatory category. The question of whether the consequences of religion for daily life are or are not adaptive certainly is unavoidable. The options in answering it—religion as adaptive, religion as maladaptive, and religion as neutral—are certainly a plausible taxonomy at the outset. Equally plausible is the question of whether religion was once adaptive but has become maladaptive in a changed environment. *Religion in Human Evolution* does not answer these crucial questions. What does it do? In effect, as it seems to this reader, Bellah submits this large, synthetic work as an elaborate demonstration in practice of all that must be included in a determination of “what religion is and what religion does” before the adaptivity questions can be responsibly addressed.

In this emphasis on practice, including his own academic practice, rather than on belief or pre-emptive academic theory as well as in his related, detailed, multi-cultural observation and description, Bellah reveals himself to be indebted—as he repeatedly confesses himself to be—to the symbolic anthropology of his colleague and exact contemporary Clifford Geertz. In this vein, he lingers meditatively in a few pages of his preface (xvi–xviii) over the epigraph to Geertz’s enormously seminal essay “Religion as a Cultural System”:

Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular. . . . Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or not—is what we mean by having a religion. (George Santayana, *Reason in Religion*.)

In the first instance, then, there is no escaping the particulars, and so it is that, as noted already, Chapter 2, “Religion and Human Evolution,” begins after just a few preliminaries with an exceptionally detailed subsection entitled “What Happened After the Big Bang.” The titles of the subsequent subsections of this chapter boldly trace the trajectory that Bellah will follow and the methodology that he will employ as he moves from the Big Bang to the Paleolithic and then on to the increasingly “personal” realms of the Archaic and the Axial Age:

Early Life on Earth
 Conserved Core Processes
 The Evolution of New Capacities
 Play
 Homo Sapiens
 Play and Ritual
 Religious Naturalism
 Why Is Religion So Often Concerned with the Personal?

Within this trajectory, a critical nexus is made at the point where the word *play* first appears. Play precedes religion in the pre-history of the species because play precedes fully human intelligence itself in that history and so also, of course, precedes fully human ethics. Bellah borrows heavily and openly from Gordon Burghardt's *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (MIT Press, 2005). Pre-humanoid mammals play; and play, ritualistic in even those earlier mammals, remains ritualistic in *Homo* even as *Homo sapiens*. Ritual will remain central to the *practice* of religion, even after the rise of theology and other theory-making activities as those new capacities emerge. It is in this way, through the notion of play, that Bellah situates religion, to cite his title again, *in* evolution. A crucial degree of continuity is documented between pre-religious and religious behavior, and this continuity sets the stage for the adaptivity question. The latter question is not finally addressed in this book, as noted, but to have set the stage for it in this way is to have accomplished a great deal indeed.

In the first paragraph of his tenth and final chapter, entitled simply "Conclusion," which is also a part of what I understand to be the frame of the work as a whole, Bellah writes with wonderfully instructive candor:

Pascal in one of his fragments says something that applies to this book: "The last thing one discovers when writing a work is what one should put first." After having written Chapters 1 through 9, and in the course of completely rewriting chapter 2, "Religion and Evolution," I discovered the importance of play among mammals and the extraordinary way in which play in animals provided the background for play, ritual, and culture among humans. So play, though discovered last, did get in quite early in this book, but then is largely ignored through the whole trek from tribal to axial religions. Play was there all the time, just below the surface, though I didn't point it out. Because, having been at work for thirteen years, I can't imagine rewriting the whole book to give adequate attention to play, I will here in the Conclusion try briefly to make up for that deficiency by discussing the importance of play and those things that endanger play in human life. (567)

For Bellah, play, more primal than meaning, has become the core practice through which mankind relates to the world. In this regard, his new book constitutes a distinct revision of Geertz. If I may be so rash as to single out a single sperm-meets-egg moment in a work that represents a convergence from so many

starting points, it would be the moment on p. 96, within the “Play and Ritual” subsection of Chapter 2, where Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* is juxtaposed to Johann Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: The Play-Element in Culture*. Bellah writes at that point:

Geertz defined religion as providing a model of “a general order of existence,” not far from Huizinga’s “sacred order of things,” and several other cultural systems have, over evolutionary time, developed out of that originally global and undifferentiated way of thinking, notably art, science, and philosophy, all of which are concerned in their different ways with the general order of existence and so possibly in competition with each other and with religion.

Yes, Geertz and Huizinga do coincide at the point indicated, but how different the emphasis in each and how striking that Bellah’s emphasis now seems to fall squarely where Huizinga would have it fall.

In this paragraph, too, Bellah sees the historic and early modern religions competing in modernity with other, later-emerging cultural systems. At any given moment, he implies, the religions may seem to be superseded, and where this process will end is not the proper subject matter of this book. But what will not be superseded, Bellah at least strongly suggests, is that core practice from which religion and its competitors alike have emerged—namely, play.

This centralization of play in the genesis of religion implicitly marginalizes belief, not by any means to deny belief all importance but certainly to subvert the contemporary definition of the adherents or practitioners of a religion as “believers” *tout court*. It is tantalizing to contemplate what a full re-write of the seven “picture” chapters of *Religion in Human Evolution* would have looked like had Bellah had time and energy to systematically re-write them, looking at every point for survivals and cultural re-inscriptions or re-encodings of play. (I think here, for example, of E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* and wonder what analogues a writer of Bellah’s resourcefulness might unearth given another thirteen years.)

As things stand, the schema that Bellah follows within these seven chapters is “enactive, symbolic, conceptual.” The terminology is his, but he thanks Merlin Donald (*Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* [Harvard University Press, 1993]) and Jerome Bruner (*Studies in Cognitive Growth* [Wiley, 1966]) for cognate terminologies that have influenced his thinking. One reads little or nothing about play in these chapters, least of all in the conceptual, “axial” chapters. As a result, these chapters relate rather loosely to the chapters that I have called their frame. One might almost think that religion in the Axial Age had left play behind for good.

But Bellah knows that this is not so. He includes in his “Conclusion” a substantial and compensatory pair of subsections—“Axial-Age Utopias” and “Axial-Age Utopias and Play”—that prove as much. Moreover, he opens his book with an epigraph from G.W.F. Hegel:

Those moments which the spirit appears to have outgrown still belong to it in the depths of its present. Just as it has passed through all its moments in history, so also must it pass through them again in the present. (*Reason in History*)

The Hegel who speaks here is emblematic of the phenomenon, proper most especially to evolutionary psychology, of “conserved core processes,” which Bellah treats in the third subsection of “Religion in Evolution” as listed above, but which is highly relevant to the latency of play even amid the solemnities and inchoate abstractions of the Axial Age. This point bears stressing lest Bellah, or Karl Jaspers himself for that matter, be seen as merely relocating a Christian, dispensationalist, before-and-after division of all time from Christmas Day in the year one to some mystic moment in the seventh or sixth century BCE. The pre-Axial in Bellah’s thought lives on through the post-Axial not as merely vestigial but as actively functional. Writing with Joas in the introduction to *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, he writes with some feeling: “These two great domains—the mimetic and the mythic—are mandatory, hard-wired, and extremely subtle and powerful ways of thinking. They cannot be matched by analytic thought for intuitive speed, complexity, and shrewdness.” In short, Bellah sees no immanent quasi-Hegelian teleology in nature. Evolution for him is a tale of emergent new capacities, none of which emerges necessarily or deterministically, and emergent complexity is not to be judged inherently superior to prior simplicity. The human psyche is an elastic habitation, and simplicity has its merits, especially when complexity means maladaptive fragility.

Bellah has always been a sociologist of a notably psychological cast of mind, as witness *Habits of the Heart* (University of California Press, 1985). (Three co-authors of that work—Ann Swidler, William M. Sullivan, and Richard Madsen—are contributors to *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*.) But as much may well be said of Karl Jaspers. Though now seen as a philosopher of culture, he was a social psychologist as well and indeed trained first as a psychiatrist. The axial shift to which he attached such importance was a shift of attitude, and perhaps only a scholar attuned to attitudes and schooled to, as it were, a therapeutic patience in the recovery of alien attitudes from original sources could have noticed all that he noticed. Chronologically, Jaspers (1883–1969) stands between Max Weber (1864–1920) and Bellah himself (1927–). Bringing multiple religious traditions together in a single conspectus as Jaspers sought to do and relating that conspectus to modernity and to the future constituted an attitudinal shift that would become paradigmatic in the later twentieth century for the creation of organizations like the American Academy of Religion and in the early twenty-first for the reception of a popular work like Karen Armstrong’s *The Great Transformation: The Beginnings of Our Religious Traditions* (Knopf Doubleday, 2007; unmentioned in *Religion in Human Evolution*). Bellah (604) credits Jaspers’s *Meaning and Goal of History*, the work that launched even if it did not quite originate the concept of an “axial age,” with having taken “a great step forward” in the fostering of an intellectually grounded pluralism.

The Axial Age and Its Consequences is dedicated “To the memory of Karl Jaspers,” and it certainly honors his legacy. That said, its several German contributors render a signal service by locating Jaspers in German intellectual history more fully than is common in American scholarship. One learns, to begin with, that though the phrase *Axial Age* was Jaspers’s coinage, he was not actually the first to single out the first millennium as an age of simultaneous transition in several major religious traditions. To have clarified this is above all the service rendered by Hans Joas in his opening, context-setting contribution, “The Axial Age Debate as Religious Discourse.”

I found Joas particularly gratifying on a minor point that happens to have been in my craw for many years—namely, the transparent inappropriateness of the word *axial*, which evokes rotational motion around an axis, for the cultural movement of the first millennium, which academic discourse invariably characterizes as either forward motion (as in the “breakthrough” to transcendence) or lateral motion (as in “turning point”). *Pivotal*, I have always irritably thought, was clearly a better term for these linear movements than *axial*. From Joas I now learn that when Jaspers sought to break with Hegel’s philosophy of history, in which the birth of Christ was the epochal turning point, he thought his task was to name a new axis of history. But Hegel had not used the German *Achse*, “axis” for this moment but rather the German *Angel*

–a word that is normally translated as “hinge” or “pivot.” Could it be that Jaspers’ confusion of “Achse” and “Angel” is the origin of the term we use today? (10)

Hans Joas seems not quite to have persuaded himself that *Axial Age* is indeed a designation born of lexical confusion, but he has persuaded me. Alas, Jaspers’s infelicity has long since attained canonical status in academe.

The eminent Egyptologist Jan Assmann, in his contribution to *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, takes detailed and erudite exception to any relegation of Egypt to the archaic or pre-axial age. Going further, he regards the Axial Age itself as a myth. But as the title of his contribution, “Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age,” may suggest, Assmann regards myth—implicitly understood as narrative that links the distant past to the present and derives morality from the linkage—to be culturally inescapable and even analytically indispensable, however deficient as academic history. He writes in his conclusion:

I have to confess that I cannot bring myself to really believe in the “Axial Age” as a global turn in universal history occurring *grosso modo* in the middle of the first millennium BCE. On the other hand, I find the concept of axiality (with pre- and post-axiality) a valuable and even indispensable analytic tool in the comparative study of cultures. (398)

Forced to choose an era as a turning point in world history, he would choose the years 200 BCE–200 CE as the time “when the texts were canonized that we are

still reading” (399), while his deeper conviction remains that “Different civilizations have different turning points in their history” (*ibid.*). Yet, while yielding nothing as a pure historian, Assmann immediately concedes the legitimacy of Jaspers’s cultural agenda as Joas articulates it—namely, as the attempt to employ philosophy to enable “seeing other faiths, and not only our own, as attempts to articulate the never-fully-expressible experiences of the divine” and learning “to see our own religious traditions not as dogmatically fixed doctrines, but as never-completed attempts at articulation” (23). Or as Assmann puts the same aspiration, recognizing the mythopoeic element in even the most secular culture, “The idea of the Axial Age is not so much about ‘man as we know him’ and his/her first appearance in time, but about ‘man as we want him’ and the utopian goal of a universal civilized community” (401).

Assmann’s specifically Egyptological reservations about Egypt and the allegedly pivotal importance of the first millennium BCE are of just the sort that I believe comparably accomplished historians of any of the religious traditions dealt with in *Religion and Human Evolution* will predictably have about their home subjects. Scarcely less risky, no doubt, but for me, at least, more promising and more compelling is the link between biological and cultural evolution that Bellah forges around the notion of play. Moreover, I am prepared to believe that this notion will prove to bear in unexpected ways on our contemporary religio-cultural reality, including our ecological crisis. It is indeed one measure of the synthetic *élan* of *Religion in Human Evolution* that it brings Jaspers’s civilizational aspirations and Huizinga’s psychological insights into dialogue with each other.

Another measure of the same *élan* (I am tempted to call it Bellah’s “late style”) is that *Religion and Human Evolution* forthrightly includes subjective religious experience as well as objectively measurable utility or functionality in its purview. Bellah, in other words, does not exclude what one recent scientist has referred to in print as “the spooky stuff” of religion. In his Chapter 1, “Religion and Reality,” acknowledging the work of Alfred Schutz, Bellah draws a brief but powerful picture of the social construction of reality and of the ubiquity and indeed the necessity of periodic escape from the constriction of its construction. These escapes to “mysteries, other worlds to live in,” to recall Geertz’s Santayana epigraph once again, are experiential escapes from the “real” world, and they are a part of the reality of religious practice. Religion is commonly faulted as escapist, sometimes consigned to “the childhood of the human race” for this very reason. But theater, fiction, music, dance, and all other forms of “playing around” are escapes as well, as are grosser forms of escape such as drug addiction. Escape, you might say, is inescapable for us humans, as hard-wired into our species as anything more “adult” or “serious.” Bellah embraces the use in some contemporary ethological studies of language borrowed from computer culture: We cannot be “online” all the time; some of our best moments—dare I say our saving moments?—come when we are “offline.”

Bellah quotes with approval (89) Alison Gopnik’s defense of “useful uselessness” in *The Philosophical Baby*:

Adults and children spend their days differently—we work, babies play. Play is the signature of childhood. It's a living, visible manifestation of imagination and learning in action. It's also the most visible sign of the paradoxically useful uselessness of immaturity. These useless actions—and the adult equivalents we squeeze into our workday—are distinctively, characteristically, human and deeply valuable. Plays are play, and so are novels, paintings, and songs.

“. . . and religion,” Bellah would add. Arthur Koestler, deeply fascinated by neoteny, once spoke of Johannes Kepler as “one of those eternal adolescents through whom the race matures.” Gopnik and Bellah would assert rather that because the adolescence of the race is eternal, it never will “mature” to the point of not being periodically adolescent, not to speak of being periodically childlike or babyish, and requiring periodic escape from our adult participation in the social construction of our reality.

An emphasis on all this, placed as it is at the very beginning of the book, puts Bellah instantly at a distance from narrowly functionalist anthropology of the classic sort, anthropology whose explanatory hypotheses have typically been confined to the immediate, practical utility of, for example, belief in a supernatural enforcer in preventing cheating in early hunter societies. The same emphasis puts him at an equal distance from more recent, naturalistic attempts to suggest that science itself, or its discoveries, can somehow replace religion. Of Stuart Kauffman (*Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion* [Basic Books, 2008]), who believes that “God, a fully natural God, is the very creativity of the universe,” Bellah writes (99):

Kauffman, like most religious naturalists, is basically offering us a theory, a theory about what the term “God” could mean in a fully natural world. . . . Those who think religion is not primarily a theory, but a practice, would find it a little difficult to see how one could worship the creativity of the universe, how it could become the basis of a way of life. . . .

A moment later, he adds, astutely:

Most of those who propose some form of religious naturalism to meet the need for meaning in a world where science is viewed as incompatible with historical religions are not concerned to explain the evolution of religion, whereas most of those who have worked on the problem of the evolution of religion have not been concerned with the problem of religious naturalism.

Writing thus (and in passing neatly naming the assignment he has given himself in his *magnum opus*), Bellah essentially leaves open the question of the place of science in the practice of religion, or vice versa, but that is just his point: Answering the question of how historic religion may be replaced by some

alternative to it, whether it be science or something else, depends on what one understands religion to be *in practice*. A proposed replacement that does not accommodate even religion's stranger but ultimately practical role in facilitating the escape to other worlds will not have replaced it in its entirety.

I recently had the pleasure of hearing a marvelous dramatic recording by the late actor Frederick Davidson of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, in which the Victorian schoolmaster, Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, imposes upon his hapless charges a curriculum with no room whatsoever for useful uselessness. Fantasy is useless for Mr. Gradgrind, ceremony is useless, holidays are pointless, and entertainment—symbolized by the circus—is positively sinister. In Dickens's merciless parody of applied utilitarianism, Mr. Gradgrind will have only the most demonstrably useful varieties of usefulness under his roof until, to his great distress, his approach turns poignantly destructive in the life of his beloved daughter. Married off early, she pays the price for his commitment to the socially constructed reality of a grim and brutal English mill town.

In *Religion in Human Evolution*, Bellah's sympathies are entirely with Dickens. Industrial society as the triumph of what economists call "utility maximization" finds in his book a surprising kind of comeuppance. But so, I should think, do all "serious" understandings of religion—all theologies or philosophies of religion, all of our latter-day scientific diagnoses of the phenomenon of religion—that seek to look past the stories, the songs, the smells and bells, and all the folderol to what religion is seriously *about*. These accoutrements, one begins to think, reading this work, are not merely integral to the deeper reality of religion, they are essential to it.

It is not that religion is never serious, any more than fiction or art or cinema is never serious, but its seriousness can never be confined to the utilitarian work that it does any more than theirs can be. And if I may conclude with a small riff on a comment Bellah makes in his final few pages, it may be that prophetic religion in our day will prove to be religion that takes religion playfully rather than seriously. Having discussed the possible relevance of religion to the world ecological crisis, Bellah writes:

I would like to close by discussing another practical intent of my work, one less apocalyptic than our ecological crisis, yet one of great importance. That is the possibility we have of understanding our deepest cultural differences, including our religious differences, in a dramatically different way than most humans have ever done before. (602)

He refers to the absence from the historic religions and largely from early modern and modern religions as well of anything close to an attitude, emergent from the later twentieth century through the present, that "can accept religious pluralism as our destiny without making a claim to the superiority of one tradition" (603). Jaspers, one imagines, would applaud.

The present state of the world's ecology certain does constitute a changed environment for religion as for everything else on the planet. In this

environment, will religion prove adaptive or maladaptive? Does further progress toward “religious pluralism” accepted as “our destiny” bear on that question? The last sentence in the book is:

If we could see that we are all in this, with our theories, yes, but with our practices and stories, together, even though we must contend through mutual discussion with abiding differences, we might just make a bit more likely the actualization of Kant’s dream of a world civil society that could at last restrain the violence of state-organized societies toward each other and the environment. (606)

A commendable hope: Who among us would not share it? My closing comment, though, is that if Bellah and those he draws upon most crucially are correct in their contentions about play, then perhaps our chances of realizing that hope will be greater if, facing the prospect of the extinction of our species, we fight for its survival by making believe this fearsome task is not a task at all and take it on, instead, as a great game, laughing in our excitement over how silly we all look in our death-masks and life-costumes.

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Editor’s Note: In connection with the upcoming sociology of religion roundtable, Bob Bellah was shown a copy of the preceding review and saw fit to write Jack Miles on July 20, 2013 about, among other things, the sequel he hoped to write:

“I had already in somewhat other terms realized that my next book, a much shorter effort to ‘cover’ the 2000 years since the end of the axial age, would have to end on a hopeful, not a doom and gloom note. But you have shown me it has to end on a playful note and that is absolutely right. Scaring people to death about the great hard ceiling looming above does not motivate action, but only a strong desire to think about something else. I must show that facing reality is an opportunity for us to show what all those capacities we have been gaining over our long evolutionary history can do when we need them in an emergency, and the joy it would bring to use them creatively.”