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JZS Panel Presentation AAR 11-20-11

"Conversation with Robert Bellah on Religion
in Human Evolution."

My appearance, this afternoon, at this panel discussion carries with it something of a peculiar tone. I have, in the past, been highly critical of Bellah's 1964 essay, "Religious Evolution"—at one point employing, uncharacteristically, some inexcusably intemperate language. This remains a lapse I've long regretted.

As with other attempts at an evolutionary account of social and/or cultural structures, Bellah's early essay seemed to me to fail at the level of specifying mechanisms and carriers. It did not answer the crucial questions as to what would be the appropriate cultural analogues to biological variation and inheritance, to gene and/or organism. An abstract, generic noun such as 'religion' has a linguistic usage history, but it does not evolve.

As is the case with the majority of so-called nineteenth century 'evolutionary' proposals with respect to religion, Bellah's 1964 essay appeared to be a typology, focused on soteriology, loosely linked to a temporal series. As such, it more closely resembled a morphological than an evolutionary approach. As I saw it, Bellah's

Bellah's critical observations on the relations of Durkheim to Comte in his magisterial 1959 article, "Durkheim and History," were equally applicable to his 1964 essay: Bellah had, then, challenged the notion "that placing a society in an historical series was, in itself, sufficient for sociological explanation." "This," he continued, "is the fundamental ground of Durkheim's opposition to any unilinear theory of social evolution."

At the same time, despite my criticisms of particular efforts, I have consistently argued that there is nothing, in principle, to prevent the development of proper evolutionary theories or accounts of religion. Drawing on examples of such theories and accounts from other fields within the human sciences — especially the long tradition of historical linguistics, as well as more recent developments in folklore studies and archaeology — I went on to make a few suggestions as to prerequisites for such an enterprise. First, that such accounts of religion be related to strong theoretical interests (as distinct from apologetic ones). Second, that the data selected and described should form a thick dossier in which

microdistinctions prevail (as opposed to 'quantum leaps,' 'revolutions' and the like). Third, as a consequence of the first two, that there be the provision of something like rules of difference or of differentiation.

I should add that I have not revisited this topic in the past decade, chiefly because the burgeoning enterprise of cognitive theories of religion has begun to provide theoretically interesting and important empirical observations towards an evolutionary account of religion.

(For me, most especially the works of Scott Atran). In public discourse, my own, keen sense of not having yet fully mastered the relevant literature has prevented me from doing much more, in public speech, than calling attention to this development and signalling my interest in it.

Robert Grant, a long-time senior colleague at Chicago, in a memorable phrase, spoke of Paul's "prepositional Christology" ("in Christ," "by Christ," "through Christ," and the like), which taught me to focus attention on these small, syntactic indicators. In Bellah's work at hand, it is the preposition

in Bellah's new title, "Religion in Human Evolution" that is sufficient, in itself, to cause me to retract my previous criticisms and queries concerning his enterprise as represented by the earlier 1964 title, "Religious Evolution." The burdens of mechanism, agency, bearer, et al. now fall to the biological. It is the genus Homo and not generic 'religion' that is the subject of evolution (as Bellah's extraordinary bibliography bears out). This new work is superlative in its range and readings of data and theoretical proposals; in the boldness and fruitfulness of its connections and comparisons.

When I first received my copy of Religion in Human Evolution by post, the initial impression was of its sheer heft. After opening the package, I turned first, as usual, to its notes and citations. What came immediately to mind was Bellah's first-person footnote at the conclusion of his aforementioned article, "Durkheim and History":

In spite of long-standing opposition...
I agree with Durkheim that the problem
of evolution, including our own social

social origins, is central for sociology as a science. To be convincing, this view must be backed by research, a challenge not to be evaded.

Bellah, this year, in this work under discussion, has responded to, has not "evaded" his own "challenge," in an exemplary fashion. What is more — given the density of both his data and his arguments, the product of his "research," apparent on every page — Bellah has attained that rarest of academic achievements, his new book is a damned good read!

I would not fulfill an implication of my present assignment if I failed to signal those components of Bellah's synthesis which give me pause, a measure of dis-ease. From my notes I lift out two — one of which is important to Bellah, but not to me; the other clearly reflects a deep-seated difference in how we parse central elements, basic structures, of religion. The former has to do with the typification, 'Axial Age'; the second with an element foregrounded in Bellah's treatment of ritual.

I have spent a good bit of my energy, as a teacher, from my first appointment to the present, offering, in various forms, a year-long, introductory college course — variously named — that serves as a survey of religions in western civilizations. One prerequisite for any teacher of such a course is some sort of typology of religions that both enables and grows out of comparative interests. Since I first read Karl Jaspers as a college student, the construct, 'Axial Age,' appeared to be one candidate, although I must confess that, early on, I was troubled by Jaspers's lack of a convincing causal formulation (setting aside his rather tentative suggestion that it was the result of the Indo-European invasions). As Jaspers described it, the "Age" appeared to be more of a miracle than an event. For the purpose of today's discussion, I need only remark that for me now, the exclusion of Mesopotamia from the "Axial Age," an exclusion clearly required by that "Age's" characterization by all of its adherents (see Peter Machinist's concession to this point) made its employment, by me, in such a teaching situation, impossible inasmuch as Mesopotamia looms large as that cultural formation without which the religion

of so many ancient, secondary, urban civilizations — from Hittite to Greek to Israelitic — would be all but incomprehensible. For me, this has been a sufficient reason to exclude the notion of an "Axial Age" on pragmatic as well as on pedagogical grounds. Bellah includes Mesopotamia under the rubric of archaic societies; but I am unconvinced by its comparative companions. For me, the rubrics "primary" and "secondary imperial formations" have proved more useful as generic categories, organizing the data more comprehensively than appeals to such a-historical elements as "critical spirit," "theoretic culture" and the like. This latter observation holds not only for Mesopotamia, but even more urgently with respect to non-writing, traditional cultures.

As a second differentiating marker, I was troubled by Bellah's linkage of ritual with "play" — one aspect of his more general interest in the latter category. Bellah appears to value a Romantic conceptualization of play that situates the ludic in opposition to 'work' as a mode of 'freedom' — a position from which I've dissented since the mid-60s. I have generally characterized ritual as a prime mode of work, focusing on its ethic and ethos of

perfection, of 'taking-care'; work-elements highlighted in both Indo-European and Semitic term-inologies from orgia to avôdâ. More precisely, I would associate myself with those theorists who link ritual to games, rather than play — retaining ludic elements, but insisting on the rule-governed nature of the activity. I cannot understand ritual apart from this latter constraint.

I missed, here, some sort of a causal account of play, beyond an appeal to its presence among animals. While there is much to criticize in its brief formulation, something, perhaps, akin to Durkheim's remarks on play in relation to 'surplus energy', for example.

These are but two loci offered by way of beginning a conversation about Bellah's new work. His is an achievement that is so complex and comprehensive, so provocative, that it will take much more than the past month's reading and re-readings to take its measure fully. I have read enough to know that such effort, on our part, is both required and fully justified — an act of both work and play of a most serious and

delightful kind. For that we all must be grateful
for Bellah's unimaginable labors on behalf of
all students of religion.

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