

## *Review Essay*



# **Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution*: A Post-Review<sup>1</sup>**

*Michael Stausberg*

University of Bergen, Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion (AHKR)

Postboks 7800, NO-5020, Bergen, Norway

*Michael.Stausberg@ahkr.uib.no*

### **Robert Neelly Bellah**

*Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. xxvii, + 746 pp. ISBN 9780674061439 (hbk.)

### **Abstract**

This essay is a “post-review,” that is, it surveys some forty book notes, reviews, and comments on Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011). Because of its unusual breadth in scope the book has received praise as a *magnum opus*. Main issues of critical contention include the work's minimal engagement with other evolutionary approaches in the study of religion\,s, the relevance of its evolutionary perspective for the chapters on the Axial Age, and the concept of the Axial Age.

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1 I wish to thank Steven Engler, Knut Melvær, Jane Skjoldli, and Ingvild Gilhus for comments, corrections, and suggestions and Jens Inge Flataas for tracing the reviews.

## Keywords

Robert Bellah – evolution – evolutionary theory – the Axial Age

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... no single reviewer can do justice to this extraordinary book.

(HANN 2012:318)

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## Introduction

Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, the last book he published, seeks to ground religion in human evolution.<sup>2</sup> The book discusses four main topics. (1) The first chapter proposes to understand religion as a way of creating other worlds that interact with the world of daily life. (2) Chapter two lays the evolutionary groundwork by embedding religion in biological and cosmological history; among other things, Bellah emphasizes the importance of parental care and play. (3) The following three chapters trace the development from tribal to archaic religion; these chapters comprise case studies of the Kalapalo, the Australian Aborigines (the Walbiri), the Navajo, Tikopia, Hawai'i, ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, and Shang and Western Zhou China. (4) The four final long chapters deal with the Axial Age in ancient Israel, ancient Greece, China in the late first millennium B.C.E., and ancient India respectively. For Bellah, it was during the Axial Age that "challenges to the dominant cultural order became widely apparent" and "that a universally egalitarian ethic first appeared" (573). The book has an outspoken practical intent. Bellah proposes a narrative of evolution devoid of "any kind of triumphalism," but he believes that "evolution . . . is the only shared metanarrative among educated people of all cultures that we have" (573). For Bellah, remembering the legacy of the Axial Age with its "possibility of universal ethics" (606), its notion of criticism of the extant order and the achievement of the theory could potentially open the way towards a new vision of universal ethics beyond Western ideas of superiority, racism, imperialism, and colonialism.

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2 The main drafts of this essay were written before Bellah passed away on 31 July 2013 (at the age of 86).

Soon after publication in September 2011, *Religion in Human Evolution* (RHE) has risen to fame. Books published by scholars of religion\s (with the possible exception of certain theologians) rarely receive endorsements from philosophers of the stature of Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, as Bellah's did. RHE was the subject of a very well-attended "conversation" with some distinguished American scholars of religion (presided over by Mark Juergensmeyer) at the 2011 American Academy of Religion (AAR) annual meeting.<sup>3</sup> The book has been widely reviewed, also beyond the ivory tower. Including the contributions to this AAR conversation and other blog responses to RHE posted on the Social Science Research Council's website *The Immanent Frame*,<sup>4</sup> at the time of preparing this essay (in May 2013), a research assistant (Jens Inge Flataas) traced and downloaded some 47 published reviews of the work. There were probably more, published in journals not searchable on the Internet. The number will have increased in the meanwhile (e.g., Miles 2013). The sample also includes a review symposium published in the relatively new journal *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, which comprises six reviews followed by a response by Bellah. Similarly, one issue of the *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* contains three review articles of RHE (but no response from Bellah). Instead of adding another lone voice to this chorus, I felt that I would do readers a greater service by providing a review of reviews, a post-review, which highlights some of the threads that run through the corpus of reviews, embellished by some observations of my own. The first part of this essay outlines the praise RHE has received, before moving to some points of contention that have emerged. Bellah has responded to some criticism (2012b; 2012c).<sup>5</sup> I will not cover all points of criticism, but focus on some main topics. Nor will I repeat points of contention that Bellah has refuted in, to me, a convincing manner. However, I will quote some harsher statements, even though I would not endorse them. Space does not permit me to comment on reviewers' opinions.

Only one scholar is represented in my sample by two essays. This is the Canadian cognitive scientist Merlin Donald, whose work on cognitive co-evolution with its model of four stages in the evolution of human consciousness, namely the episodic, the mimetic, the mythic, and the theoretic (Donald 2001), serves as a major point of reference for RHE (as it does for some other cognitive-evolutionary work, e.g., Geertz and Markússon 2010). In particular

3 American Academy of Religion. "A Conversation with Robert Bellah on 'Religion in Human Evolution.'" URL: <http://www.aarweb.org/node/547> (last accessed 18 December 2013).

4 The Immanent Frame. "Religion in Human Evolution." URL: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/bellah/> (last accessed 18 December 2013).

5 Bellah 2011 provides a glimpse into his workshop and scholarly network.

his longer essay (Donald 2012) provides a congenial reading of RHE. This is acknowledged by Bellah: “At several points in his commentary ... Donald makes my case better than I have” (2012c:262).

### Praise

There are different types of reviews, partly reflecting the different types of journals in which they are published. On the one side of the spectrum, there are very short book notices, mostly published in information bulletins for librarians such as *Choice* or *Library Journal* or reference websites such as *TheFreeLibrary.com* and review magazines such as *Bookforum*;<sup>6</sup> on the other side, there are long review articles such as the ones from the review symposia mentioned above. Somewhere in between are reviews in professional journals, newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* or magazines like *The American Interest*, and religious publications such as *Christian Century* (mainline Protestant), *Commonweal* (lay Catholic), *America* (Catholic/Jesuit), *anglican.ca* (Anglican), *Perspectives of Science and Christian Faith* (non-denominational Christian), *Tikkun* (Jewish and interfaith religious left), *Tricycle* (Buddhist), or secularist websites such as *rationalist.org.uk* and psychoanalysis blogs such as *internationalpsychoanalysis.net* (see Lang,<sup>7</sup> who does not actually engage with RHE at all). Interestingly, RHE seems to please different audiences — the evaluation of the book is generally favorable. It seems to resonate with different agendas; for *The Christian Century* it witnesses “our ongoing capacity to transform ourselves” (Webb), while *The Commonweal* finds it noteworthy “that, in calling for mutual appreciation across traditions, the author urges not New-Age eclecticism, but rather a shared understanding rooted within commitment to particular faith traditions” (Wood). *Tikkun* anticipates that by reading *RHR* “adherents of every modern religion — especially Jews, Christians, and Muslims — will find vast new reasons for gratitude for our ancestors human and extra-human” (Shriver), and the *rationalist.org.uk* realizes that seeking to “marginalise religion in the contemporary world, or to eliminate it altogether, underestimates the complex and deep-rooted links that tie what we now call religion into the very fabric of all our civilisations” (Kahn-Harris).

6 Reviews published on booksellers' websites and readers' networks are not considered here.

7 In order to save space, for short reviews I will provide neither year of publication nor page numbers; the lack of page numbers can also indicate reviews published in blogs.

It is not the case that all long pieces engage in criticism. Some mainly present extended summaries and well-meaning comparisons with other scholars, works, or approaches but do not contain any criticism (e.g., Madsen; Marangudakis; Tipton; Xiao); others defend Bellah against critics (Bortolini). There are also reviews in scholarly journals that merely present sympathetic summaries and comments (see Guhin and Zhe for sociology and Cusack for religious studies). There is nothing wrong with expressing sympathy or even admiration, but unless additional evidence or perspectives are added this does not advance the discussion apart from signaling positive parameters for quality and values for scholarship in the field.<sup>8</sup>

Reviews that offer some critical comments provide extensive (and sometimes hyperbolic) praise as well. The unusual range and breadth of the topics covered by RHE are acknowledged throughout the corpus of reviews: "It is about everything," as Donald (2011) expresses it succinctly. One feature of RHE that is acknowledged in eight reviews in positive terms is its cross- or interdisciplinary character, its "integrative scholarship" (Barrett 2012:225; see also Green 2012:239; Turchin 2012:256). *RHR* is "an essay in meta-science, a fundamental reflection going beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries" (Stroumsa 2012:470). RHE does not only say things, but "it *does* something"; "it *shows* us who we are": "Upon leaving the axial worlds, we return home and see our own world anew" (Heuman).

No less than ten reviews praise RHE as a *magnum opus*.<sup>9</sup> The same number of reviews, and partly the same ones, use the word "magisterial"; Wendy Doniger explicitly reasons why this label is not only blurb-talk in the case of RHE. Several reviewers detect "remarkable" features, five reviewers refer to the work as "impressive," four find it "monumental," three call it a "masterpiece," three praise its "landmark" qualities, and two call it "extraordinary," "pioneering,"

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8 As presented in these reviews, such achievements, qualities or values of RHE include its "humane" character (Cusack), "depth of scholarship and clarity of narrative" (Joldersma), its synthetic frame (Joldersma), its ambitiousness, "impeccably scientific" quality, its "scope across time, space, and themes," its "richness" as "a veritable mine of facts and ideas" (Zhe), its "originality, depth, and cross-disciplinary nature" (Marangudakis), its power of being "more imaginative, more provocative, and more suggestive" than ordinary scholarship (Marangudakis), its complexity (Madsen; among several other reviews), its congruence "with the mood of the times" (Madsen), its "global perspective" (Tipton), and the return of a "grand narrative" and the "generosity and breadth of Bellah's empathy and curiosity in humanity" that are "on full display on every page" (Xiao).

9 Stroumsa (2012:468) trumps this trope by calling *RHR* Bellah's "*opus maximum*."

“marvelous,” or simply a “great book.”<sup>10</sup> RHE “has few equals” (Donald 2012:237). It “will outlast its critics” (Mathewes).

Praise is sometimes cast in an explicitly heroic mode: “The story of Robert Bellah and *Religion in Human Evolution* can thus be told as the quest a hero had to bring to an end against all odds and impediments” (Bortolini). Two reviewers speak of “Bellah’s brilliance” (Wolfe; Heuman), while another invokes his “genius” (Joldersma). RHE is “full of the wisdom and erudition that comes only when someone quite brilliant has thought about a big subject for many years” (Doniger). The extended period of RHE’s gestation may have contributed to a sense of awe in its reception. Sometimes, in statements like the following one comes close to an attitude of reverence: it “is a delight to read the work of a master of the study of religion” (Cusack); an “immensely ambitious book on a topic only a scholar of Robert Bellah’s stature could dare to tackle” (Riesebrodt); “no one else would have dared to write such a book, nor *could* anyone else have written it” (Juergensmeyer).

Some reviews flag Bellah’s qualities as a writer, including comments on the “clarity of narrative” (Joldersma) and the “clear writing” (Wood). RHE is a “good read” (Horst) or even a “damned good read” (Smith); it is “written so well” (Juergensmeyer) and has an “accessible tone” that “invites conversation and dialogue” (Green 2012:239). Jack Miles comments on “the great strength as a learned writer of being able to convey the excitement of learning itself” (2013:854). Even though he speaks of its “accessible style” (*ibid.*:854), he warns that RHE is not intended for a lay reader or beginner (*ibid.*). Some commentators find the book “demanding reading” (Martin), “a difficult and sometimes exasperating book” (Turchin 2012:256), “heavy going” (Renvall), or “at times . . . slow going” (Heuman).<sup>11</sup>

One strategy of celebrating the seminal importance of a work is to put it in a category with classics. In this case, this is done either by claiming this status for

10 Other adjectives invoked are “interesting” (sometimes “deeply” or “immensely”), “fascinating” (Weissenbacher), “sprawling” (Cusack), “courageous” (Morrison), “immense” (Mathewes), “majestic” and “amazing” (Mendieta), “large in scope . . . large in significance . . . large-minded” (Johnson), “exceptionally rich” (Arnason 2013), “breathtaking in its scope” (Coleman), “axial” (Green 2012:242), “daring and daunting” (Jensen 2012:243), “magnificent” (Jensen 2012:247), “a stunning performance” (Guhin), “provocative,” “superlative in its range and readings of data and theoretical proposals; in the boldness and fruitfulness of its connections and comparisons” (Smith). It “provides a model of how to connect the study of religion to other fields of learning” (Green 2012:242). “The sheer amount of what this man knows about religion is otherworldly” (Wolfe).

11 Personally, I find the writing clear and reflective, but neither captivating nor elegant. It can sometimes be rather slow-moving and the book could well have been shortened.

RHE or by comparing Bellah's work with that of classics. Three reviews draw a line to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Yang Xiao provides a discussion of differences and similarities; among other observations, he finds that Bellah's evolutionary guiding principle, his "signature refrain" (Heuman 2012:90) "that 'nothing is ever lost' is a Hegelian idea" (Xiao). Closer to the sociological canon, the names Émile Durkheim and Max Weber are invoked in combination by eight reviewers, Weber only in four reviews. Here are some examples: "He has done for the 21st century what Weber did for the 20th century" (Converse; see also Perkins). Unfortunately, William Converse does not make it clear what exactly this contribution was. "One is tempted to say that it brings Durkheim and Weber into the twenty-first century, with its evolutionary genetics and developmental neurobiology" (Mendieta 2012:72). Yet, one wonders whether that addition of natural science perspectives is enough to establish this claim. "What is remarkable about Bellah's synthesis of Durkheim and Weber is his ability to use Weberian methods to come to Durkheimian (or Geertzian) conclusions" (Guhin). This is surprising, given that Durkheim, Weber, and Geertz had different views on evolution altogether. The same author continues: "If Durkheim motivates Bellah's journey, it is Weber who draws his maps." For Martin Riesebrodt, RHE "looks like a synthesis between Durkheim's 'Elementary Forms of the Religious Life' and Max Weber's 'Economic Ethics of the World Religions.'" Riesebrodt, however, also acknowledges some differences between Weber's and Bellah's projects respectively. While Riesebrodt's sympathy seems to be with Weber, who posed more precise sociological questions, for Madsen, Bellah's work is more in tune with the exigencies of our time than Weber's (which should surprise nobody). For example, "Bellah's privileging of process over structure through narrative makes his work more congenial to the academic currents of this new century." While "Weber's ideal types are built around distinctions[,] Bellah's narrative style pulls phenomena together. But the difference is also linked to the differences in the grand metanarratives that underpin each project." According to Manussos Marangudakis RHE supersedes neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian analyses because it "restores religion to its former glory" against their types of reductionisms. The fact that in Bellah's narrative religion gains a key place in human evolution is also appreciated by some other commentators (Donald 2011; Jensen 2012:243; Kahn-Harris; Mendieta), which may be good news for a field of study that often perceives itself as marginal or marginalized.

Only the future will show whether RHE has an impetus similar to that of Durkheim's and Weber's works. Matteo Bortolini compares RHE with Niklas Luhmann's late work (2000) on religion (English translation 2013, see Beyer 2009 for an assessment), which also has an evolutionary perspective. Yet, to

me Luhmann seems like a much more original thinker; he proposed a novel view of society (including religion) and a new way of analyzing it. In theoretical terms, Bellah provides a synthesis; in other words, he is eclectic. While this may be a wise strategy, because it allows for a more comprehensive view and to some extent avoids reductionisms inherent in all strong theories, Durkheim, Hegel, Luhmann, and Weber were not eclectics, but their names came to be identified with clearly profiled theoretical positions and programs. While Bellah provides a cumulative, long-term, global, pre-Christian history of religions, RHE has not fundamentally challenged and changed established ways of defining, understanding, analyzing, and theorizing religion, even if Bellah has developed his own voice and complex narrative. Work can be identified as Durkheimian, Weberian, or Luhmannian, but not so easily as Bellahian. A litmus test is this: Will RHE generate a new tradition of research questions?

### Criticisms

Some reviewers provide wish lists of topics that RHE could or should have treated. Here is an example:

I would have preferred to see in Bellah's book more emphasis on the crucial role that material culture played in ancient religion long before writing, including not only architecture, art, and sculpture, but also music, costume, and spectacle. I would also have welcomed a more extensive attempt to extract general theoretical principles that might throw more perspective on our current cultural drift toward a global society that lacks the kind of conceptual unity we once expected from religion. (Donald 2011)

Some add valuable perspectives from their own work. Peter Turchin, for example, comments on the importance of warfare and the Eurasian steppes. Marcel Hénaff's suggestions on the evolutionary importance of sacrifice and exogamic alliances strike me as particularly constructive.

In the first decade of the new century, evolutionary theory has seen an enormous rise in recognition in various disciplines, even in the study of religion's.<sup>12</sup> In a subsequent publication, Bellah identifies his "conception of social and cultural evolution" as "basically neo-Darwinian, with variation and selection operating not with genes but with cultural traits and institutional structures"

12 See also Miles 2013: "the climate for all social science, including the social-scientific study of religion, has been changed by contemporary biology" (853).

(2012b:447). As far as I can see, in *RHE* Bellah avoids any self-identification as (neo-)Darwinian. In the early pages of *RHE* Bellah takes a clear distance from “fundamentalist forms of Neo-Darwinism” (xii), but late in the book he (somewhat reluctantly) affirms that he “did not shy away from the fact that natural selection is the primary mechanism of evolution” (600). Bellah argues “that evolution is considerably more complex than what some biologists and many humanists think” (xiii). Indeed, several reviews find that *RHE* successfully challenges several misconceptions of, or prejudices against evolutionary theory, for example, by showing that evolutionary theory is not tied to teleology (Guhin; Marangudakis) or to triumphalist progress (Morrison).

As Bellah puts it, his “particular interest in evolution is the evolution of capacities” (xiv), “in the sense of increasing capacities” (602). The evolution of cognitive capacities is at the heart of Donald’s above-mentioned narrative, and the wording “evolution of capacities” sometimes occurs in the co-authored work of the evolutionary theoreticians Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson (e.g., 2005:69, in the context of social learning). In *RHE*, the evolution of capacities provides grounding for the emergence of religion, and the development of the human capacity for “theory,” or second-order thinking and radical critique, is traced historically in the lengthy chapters on the Axial Age.

It seems that *RHE* was first conceived before evolutionary anthropologists and psychologists had started to study religion. *RHE* is independent from this new scholarly endeavor. Bellah’s reluctance to engage with this field is bemoaned by Steven Horst and Jeppe Sinding Jensen; the latter claims that evolutionary psychology might give a better grounding for the processes described by Bellah than “a ‘sociological nowhere’” (Jensen 2012:245). In his response, Bellah reasserts to be “pretty sure I will not find help” in evolutionary psychology (2012c:266). He criticizes theories from evolutionary psychology for an overemphasis of the cognitive dimension of religion (which is a misunderstanding),<sup>13</sup> for the “absence of empirical religion” in their work and “the absence of history” (*ibid.*).<sup>14</sup> It is true that evolutionary scholars generally do not provide descriptions “of a single religious system” (*ibid.*), but that, as

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13 I think this is not so much a limitation of evolutionary work, but of its partial reception. This may be stimulated by the label Cognitive Science of Religion that effectively hides the evolutionary dimension of this enterprise. Critics of *RHE*, in turn, could argue that the chapters on the Axial Age in *RHE* are predominantly devoted to development of religious thinking, even though the importance of non-cognitive dimensions of religion is affirmed on a theoretical level.

14 In Bellah 2011 he makes some harsh statements about some key works of the cognitive-evolutionary study of religion.

such, is not an argument against the validity of this approach. The perceived absence of history in that work is in stark contrast to RHE, which outlines a history of religions, albeit not in chronological order, and with a relatively clear focus (the development of human capacities), from the Big Bang to the late first millennium B.C.E. Yet, this historical path may blind RHE to a systematic discussion of questions pondered in theories of cultural evolution such as social learning and forms of bias, transmission of culture, norms and conformity, reciprocity and punishment, altruism and cooperation, competition between groups, and group selection. None of these topics are paid much attention to in RHE, so that the work does not contribute to this debate.

In an interview with Hans Joas, Bellah spells out another reason for his lacking enthusiasm for work by unidentified biologists: “my rejection of biological explanations of religion is really a rejection of a certain kind of rigid reductionism and determinism that I think is a metaphysical prejudice and does not arise from the science of biology” (quoted in Joas 2012). One wonders whether this suspicion is not itself a prejudice against certain evolutionary theories.

Some reviewers bemoan the lack of attention RHE pays to prominent research questions that have emerged in the recent evolutionary study of religion: the question of the adaptive or maladaptive character of religion (Johnson) and the discussion of group-selection (or multi-level selection) (Hann). A philosopher would have wished to see RHE engage further resources provided by recent evolutionary theory such as phenotypic plasticity and nice selection (Horst). He misses a more innovative theoretical angle:

In my own case, as a philosopher of mind who has recently taken interest in cognitive science of religion, my main frustration is that what strike me as the most important innovations in the book — the attempts to bring cognitive and evolutionary approaches to the history of religion — seem theoretically under-developed and only tenuously connected with the historical, textual, and ethnographic scholarship. (Horst)

Indeed, the evolutionary perspective put forward in the beginning of RHE, only minimally informs the execution of the subsequent chapters, which could be written by a comparative-historical minded scholar without any evolutionary mindset. Whereas most scholars seeking to situate religion within the evolutionary landscape (or the study of it within the parameters of Darwinian evolutionary theory) subscribe to scientism (Slingerland 2008), consilience (Norenzayan and Gervais 2012), or seek to revise the study of religion as a “life science” (Bulbulia and Slingerland 2012), Bellah remains clearly within the framework of social science and history (Donald 2011). While this has prob-

ably contributed to the warm welcome of RHE in study of religion\|s and social science environments, some reviews make it clear that RHE does not assist the study of religion\|s with the task of clarifying the triangular relationship between evolution/evolutionary theory, history/historiography, and the social sciences. In a later essay Bellah holds that “evolution and history are two mutually compatible ways of looking at long-term development in nature and culture” (2012c:448), but he does not discuss the specific contribution of evolution and history, respectively, to that aim. Does “religion in human evolution” mean more than the study of the emergence of religion on a cosmic scale, as deep or big history, grounded in the unfolding of capacities, in organisms (ontogeny), and in pre-historic times? Is it evolutionary rather than historical because it searches for “the deep roots rather than the analysis of the proximate channels through which the religions with which we are familiar emerged” (Stroumsa 2012:468)? In RHE, this remains unclear on a (meta)theoretical level, but the problem also recurs with regard to the relationship of the chapter on religion and evolution to the subsequent historical narrative. Johann P. Arnason has pointed at this problem in the following terms: Bellah’s “idea of evolution calls for a corresponding definition of its relationship to history, but Bellah does not make that point as explicitly as we might wish” (2013:145). He argues:

bringing history back in is bound to raise the question of its relationship to evolution. The four chapters on the Axial Age do not add up to a clear statement on this issue. We can deduce from Bellah’s general statements that he does not want to see the Axial Age as a breakout from evolutionary order, but it is less obvious how he would propose to fit it into a continuing evolutionary narrative. (ibid.:148)

Riesebrodt finds that there was no need for Bellah “to frame his narrative in terms of evolution; not much would change if he called it development or history,” at least not from chapter three onwards. A philosopher drawing on the Frankfurt school suggests “that cultures, or societies, do not evolve: they learn. And here we have entered the space of reflexive judgment rather than biological evolution” (Mendieta 2012:73). It seems that different conceptions of evolution are at play here. For another sociologist the yield of RHE’s appeal to evolution is open to doubt: “I find what Bellah has to say about pre-human evolution immensely interesting, but exactly *what* difference does the postulated carryover into cultural development make when it comes to the way we frame problems in general sociology?” (Martin). He suggests “that the fairy lights of biological terminology add nothing in principle to the modalities of sociological understanding” (ibid.). In addition to concerns about the relevance of the evolutionary perspective,

David Martin also raises some questions about RHE's historiographical narrative: Are some patterns, such as Donald's stages, "superimposed" on the material and how exactly does one have to conceive the transition from one form of society to another? A political scientist and sociologist calls RHE's deep history perspective "sheer speculation" and he finds RHE's attempt to draw on evolutionary theory generally unsuccessful: "Bellah may be correct about going back to the beginning, but despite its length his book fails to make a case for the value of evolutionary theory" (Wolfe). In particular "Bellah's decision to encase his interpretation within the evolutionary theory proposed by Merlin Donald is, simply put, unnecessary; I, for one, learned nothing new from the twisting and turning Bellah engages in to make history fit that schema" (*ibid.*).

Although Bellah does not state this explicitly, he seems to believe that there was no religion in the episodic and the mimetic stages of Donald's narrative. For his reconstruction of what religion in episodic or mythic cultures could have looked like, as a "thought experiment" (138) Bellah draws on three contemporary or recent cases from around the world. This strategy has been criticized by two reviewers (Weissenbacher; Hann). "Some will have similar reservations about the analogies made by Bellah in his early chapters between anatomically early humans and child socialization as investigated by Piaget, Bruner and others" (Hann 2012:319). Riesebrodt finds the parallelism between ontogeny and phylogeny "unfortunate." Another related question is how studies of different cases and cultures, be it axial or pre-axial, can make a case for the cumulative evolution of capacities (Hann).

A related problem raised by reviewers concerns terminology. Jonathan Z. Smith voices concern over "appeals to such ahistorical elements as 'critical spirit,' 'theoretical culture' and the like." Christopher Hann, an anthropologist, wishes Bellah "had been able to find better terms than 'tribal,' 'archaic,' and 'chiefdom,' which have by now themselves come to seem rather archaic" (2012:319).<sup>15</sup> Hann also criticizes that "Bellah uses the familiar terms 'culture,' 'civilization,' and 'culture area' without adequately defining them and probing their problematic relations to each other" (*ibid.*:319). Another anthropologist-cum-philosopher finds that "RB's distribution — among tribal, archaic, and modern societies — is meant to be descriptive; it tolerates all sorts of nuances and intersections. But it may also be at risk of presupposing what it tries to escape: the teleological hypothesis, which the theory of evolution has so successfully dismissed" (Hénaff 2012:329).

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15 In Bellah's defense it may be said that the latter two concepts appear prominently in an anthropological primer on the evolution of human societies (Johnson and Earle 2000).

Roughly half of RHE is dedicated to the Axial Age, which Bellah situates in “the middle of the first millennium BCE” (266, 573), even though the developments he describes stretch over a much longer period. RHE provides extensive discussions of the cases of China, Greece, India, and Israel. Some commentators (Jensen; Turchin) bemoan the absence of the case of Iran, but I sympathize with Bellah’s reasoning that the available evidence for Iran would not allow for the same kind of complex treatment (RHE 271, 2005:75, 2012c:265). In *The Great Transformation* (2006), Karen Armstrong extensively draws on Jasper’s concept of the Axial Age and proposes a new interpretation, so that Bellah’s work does not seem that unprecedented as presented by some.<sup>16</sup> It is irritating that Bellah does not acknowledge Armstrong’s work with a single sentence and disappointing that he does not discuss it. Nor does he ever engage in a discussion about the concept of the Axial Age (but see Bellah 2005 for a comprehensive statement of his views), which is far from undisputed. As a theologian puts it: “Bellah hinges much of his project on the concept of the axial age, yet this concept is not without its detractors. Establishing the veracity of the concept could have been helpful” (Weissenbacher 2012:332). Murphy phrases this as a caveat (“If the concept of the axial age has any credibility . . .”) (2013:701). Maybe the fact that much of this discussion went on in German scholarship (e.g., Jan Assmann, Aleida Assmann, and Stefan Breuer) led to Bellah’s apparent naïveté, which in this respect is a step backwards from the level of discussion.<sup>17</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa calls the Axial Age narrative trendy and “easily seductive” (2012:473), but ultimately “a *fata morgana*” and “misleading” (ibid.:475). “Rather than focusing on one epoch when everything, everywhere, tipped over, it is probably wiser to identify major cultural changes, whenever they happen” (ibid.) — multiple axialities or “axial periods . . . in each cultural eco-system” (ibid.:476).

Some commentators doubt the consistency of the account arising from the four cases (Arnason 2013:148; Donald 2012:236; Morrison 2012:725). One problem with the Axial Age narrative is its apparent focus on events or moments of breakthrough. An intellectual historian objects:

16 Another interesting precedent (in French) is Lambert 2007.

17 Hénaff, an anthropologist and philosopher, comments on RHE’s monolingualism: “Allow me to mention . . . that with a few notable exceptions RB’s references only include relatively recent publications in English. Although these publications are excellent and demonstrate the vitality and quality of the research conducted in Anglo-American universities, it is regrettable that major contributions in German, French, and Italian are either ignored or only cursorily mentioned” (2012:328). In fairness to Bellah, however, it has to be acknowledged that in earlier works he has used other languages quite extensively (e.g., his study of Durkheim).

In every case, the perception of axiality came by hindsight, some centuries afterwards, after failure, reinvention, assimilation to new social orders, and in some instances, displacement: in other words, by entirely new inculturalizations. Such were all the conditions that did create the conceptual possibility of axiality in modern times. (Morrison 2012:725)

Doniger finds the metaphor “breakthrough” inappropriate for the slowness of the processes as they went on over longer periods than one single age (at least in India). She finds it “wise” that Bellah did not address the question whether there was independent origin, borrowing, or diffusion across the different axial cultures, but she also raises the question of causality with regard to the apparent coincidence of the assumed axial breakthroughs, which were probably the result of some individual minds, even if we do not know their names, rather than “the unfalsifiable hypothesis of an axial *Zeitgeist*.” Moreover, according to Doniger, in India “various forms of, and alternatives to, universal ethics, existed before the axial age.” (Both statements are challenged by Bellah 2012c, where he underlines the crucial importance of individual agency.) A New Testament scholar raises the question “whether the ‘breakthrough’ represented by critical thought was a permanent mutation or only an [*sic*] passing phenomenon” (Johnson). (Note that in biology mutations are by definition permanent changes in the heritable materials; by analogy, cultural mutations are permanent changes in the cultural information that is transmitted.) The focus on the axial breakthroughs comes at the cost of *a priori* downplaying the historical significance of the post-axial ages in human history. Given that the decisive evolutionary capacities are now in place, the temptation will be to treat post-axial ages as a mere reenactment of or appendix to axiality. Have no decisive breakthroughs come about in the post-axial periods? From the point of view of the history of religions, this perspective does not sound very promising since the emergence of religions such as Christianity and Islam are post-axial developments and it would seem problematic to reduce their significance to the perpetuation and assertion of “axiality.”

In the course of working on RHE, Bellah “discovered the importance of play among mammals and the extraordinary way in which play in animals provided the background for the development play, ritual, and culture among humans” (567). Miles points out that the emphasis on play displaces the primal role of meaning, implying “a distinct revision of Geertz” (2013:857). As play enters the story quite late, it is not integrated in the theoretical perspective and the historical analysis, “least of all in the . . . ‘axial’ chapters” (ibid.:858). The relationship between play and ritual is the target of some criticism. For Alan Weissenbacher “the question is not settled as to which developed first. Bellah posits that ritual develops from play; yet it would seem that for play to proceed, a certain degree

of ritual is required to indicate that play is being entered and to set the rules for play” (2012:332). Smith thinks rituals more fruitfully resound with work. He also associates himself “with those theorists who link ritual to games rather than play — retaining ludic elements, but insisting on the rule-governed nature of the activity.” (Bellah responds to this in 2012a by stating that being “a both/and person” he sees ritual as both play and work.) More generally, Smith “missed, here, some sort of causal account of play” (Smith). While I would not doubt the evolutionary importance of play, the way play translates into religion remains more speculative than argued in RHE. The entire question bears witness of the extremely speculative character of the whole endeavor and the shaky evidence we have for it (see also Stroumsa 2012:469).

This review-article has introduced the genre of “post-review,” a review of book reviews.<sup>18</sup> RHE has received extensive praise for its wide scope and level of ambition both on an empirical and a theoretical level. The book aims at offering nothing less than a new evolutionary theory of religion<sup>19</sup> and a new universal history of religion (up to the so-called Axial Age). To some degree RHE achieves and fails on both accounts at the same time; to some extent it is a theoretical history and a historical theory — both being major achievements. As a deep history it stops short of addressing the emergence of Christianity and Islam and the further development of Buddhism; as a theory, it appears more like a stimulating reservoir of ideas than as a coherent statement. Its eclecticism, or “synthetic *élan*” (Miles 2013:861), does not make it likely that RHE will gain the status of a contemporary classic, comparable to Durkheim or Weber; it is difficult to see what kind of research questions it will generate or help to approach. Main issues of critical contention include the work’s minimal engagement with other evolutionary approaches in the study of religion’s, the relevance of its evolutionary perspective for the chapters on the Axial Age and the concept of the Axial Age, which may now seem more obscure than ever.

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18 I have avoided the term meta-review since it is used often as a synonym for meta-analysis, i.e., a summary analysis of large quantities of studies on a given topic or in a given field.

19 “I want to understand what religion is and what religion does . . .” (xx).

20 Read “Review Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*” for all entries without a title being quoted.

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