**[Religion in Human Evolution](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/category/exchanges/book-blog/bellah/%22%20%5Co%20%22View%20all%20posts%20in%20Religion%20in%20Human%20Evolution):**

[**A travelogue of ideas**](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/02/28/a-travelogue-of-ideas/)

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In a special session at the meetings of the American Academy of Religion on November 20, 2011, Robert Bellah discussed his new book, *Religion in Human Evolution,*with members of a distinguished panel, including the scholar of comparative religion and Indic mythology, [Wendy Doniger](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/author/donigerw/); the comparativist and theoretician of religious studies, [Jonathan Z. Smith](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/author/smithjz/); and an expert on ancient Greek and biblical religion, [Luke Johnson](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/author/johnsonl/). Bellah introduced the project and [responded to the comments](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/02/27/a-response-to-three-readers/), all of which have been published [here](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/tag/2011-aar-panel/).

Why was this event so special? It was not just the distinction of the members of the panel themselves, beginning with Bellah, arguably the country’s best known sociologist of religion and author of such seminal essays as “[Civil Religion in America](http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm)” and “[Religious Evolution](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2091480),” and groundbreaking books, including[*Habits of the Heart*](http://books.google.com/books?id=XsUojihVZQcC&printsec=frontcover&dq=%22habits+of+the+heart%22&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false)and [*Tokugawa Religion*](http://books.google.com/books?id=qmm-yR0GcrUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=%22Tokugawa+Religion%22&hl=en#v=onepage&q=%22Tokugawa%20Religion%22&f=false)*.*Rather, the significance of the event lay in its recognition of the importance of the book’s project, a breathtaking survey of the whole sweep of the history of religiosity, which is nothing less than the history of humankind.

It can be said that no one else would have dared to write such a book, nor *could* anyone else have written it. Comparisons have been made to the wide-ranging explorations of Émile Durkheim and[Max Weber](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/11/09/weber-for-the-21st-century/), early pioneers in social thought who also found in religion the key to understanding much about the social imagination. Bellah’s book is that kind of project.

The wonder is that it is written so well. It reads like a travelogue of ideas, a captain’s diary of a long exploration of uncharted intellectual seas. Bellah asks some simple questions: Where did religion come from? How did it develop? These are questions that have no simple answers, though the voyage of his discoveries through different disciplines and schools of thinking are fascinating, from physics to biology, from ancient history to classic texts. Through it all Bellah maintains a wonder about the questions and their possible answers—a humility towards the vastness of the project—that is both endearing and seductive. The reader is easily brought along for the ride.

Though the 746 pages of the book cover much, and will be mined for their varied insights for some time to come, there are roughly three foci. One is the engagement with scientific theories about evolution. Here Bellah explores the literature on the Big Bang, the beginning of the time/space continuum, and the emergence of self-sustaining life. The evolutionary physical and social development of humans is linked with their cultural development, and Bellah is aided by the theories of Merlin Donald, who outlines three major stages in human cultural history: mimetic, mythic, and theoretic. Bellah views the religious dimensions of this development, seeing in them three types of religious representation—enactive, symbolic, and conceptual.

Fully half of the book is devoted to the axial age, one of the most significant stages of religious change in response to the enlargement of human societies’ cognitive and social capacities. Here, in a way that is reminiscent of Max Weber’s comparative project on the religions of India, China, Israel, and Protestant Christianity, Bellah takes each of several ancient cultural traditions in turn, revealing an exhausting study of historical detail. He looks at ancient periods of Greece, China, Israel, and India. What Bellah explores is how—in four cases that are in many ways quite different from one another—they each have developed some of the characteristics of what are the hallmarks of axial age religiosity: individualism, critical thinking, and theoretical and reflective observation.

The third focus of the book is religion itself—what it is, and how it came to be. Unlike many contemporary thinkers who find the idea of religion to be a puzzling and difficult invention, Bellah seems confident in asserting that it is something—a stretch of human imagination that can be set apart from the other, more material aspects of human occupation. He regards it as an alternative perception of reality. It is one of the “other realities,” which, like poetry and science, “break the dreadful fatalities of this world of appearances.” But the ability to perceive these alternative realities does not come easy or early to the capacities of living species. He searches for those moments in the early development of conscious life when basic material needs are sufficiently met, and the mind can roam freely to imagine distant forms of order and other ways of understanding reality. Bellah sees this not just as a cognitive but as a physical activity, and finds the early origins of ritual and religiosity in the simple acts of play.

The critical comments about Bellah’s book tend to be related to these three foci—the relationship of religion to scientific theories of evolution, the historical cases of ancient religion during the axial age, and the conceptualization of religion and how it emerged. Regarding the scientific aspect, Luke Johnson [raised the issue](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/12/07/five-questions-for-robert-bellah/) of the connection between biological evolution and cultural evolution. Johnson observed that Bellah meant to use the term “evolution” in more than a metaphorical sense, but he questioned to what degree that is possible. Religious dispositions are not, of course, genetically transferred traits, so this makes commentators such as Johnson question to what extent the exploration of scientific evidence is relevant to developments in religious expression, and to what extent religion can be said to evolve as opposed to simply change. In the subsequent response, Bellah made clear that religious evolution was real enough, though it was related to the evolving capacities of humans and their societies for different kinds of religious representation.

Regarding the specific case studies that Bellah explores as examples of axial age religiosity, specialists such as Wendy Doniger raise significant questions of their own. Doniger [pointed out](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/01/05/axial-axioms/) that changes in ways of thinking are gradual, and that elements of the reflective, philosophical ideas associated with the Upanishads are also present in early Vedic writings. Luke Johnson added that theoretical thinking is the privilege of elites, and for the masses, narrative and mimetic forms of religiosity continue to reign supreme. Jonathan Z. Smith [questioned](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/12/21/a-damned-good-read/) the very notion of the axial age, and suggested that Bellah’s book would have worked just as well without mentioning it. Bellah appreciated these insights, while affirming that different strands of religious representation can exist together, that change often does not work in steady increases but in paradigmatic leaps, and that such moments require observation and explanation.

Finally, there have been questions about the way in which Bellah thinks about the notion of religion and its origins. Jonathan Z. Smith asserted that he was intrigued with Bellah’s suggestion that religion is associated with play, but he wondered whether it was even more related to a certain kind of playfulness—games, which are guided by rules as well as by spontaneous creativity. In responding, Bellah affirmed that play and games are closely related to each other, and for that matter both are associated with another form of familiar human activity, work—and that these three often overlap. The religious impulse is related to all of them, though probably more essentially to the activity of play.

Each of the commentators couched their remarks in the context of an enormous appreciation for the immensity of Bellah’s project, and the value of the book for a wide range of subjects in the study of the role of culture in human evolution. It is a book that is large in many ways, a culmination of a lifetime of diligent analysis and fertile reflection, and it sets a new landmark in the efforts to understand the nature of religion in social life.

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