



**CASCADe Books**

A division of WIPF and STOCK Publishers

199 West 8th Avenue, Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401

Tel. (541) 344-1528 • Fax (541) 344-1506

Visit our Web site at [www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

# Religion and the Social Sciences

*Conversations with Robert Bellah and Christian Smith*

*edited by*

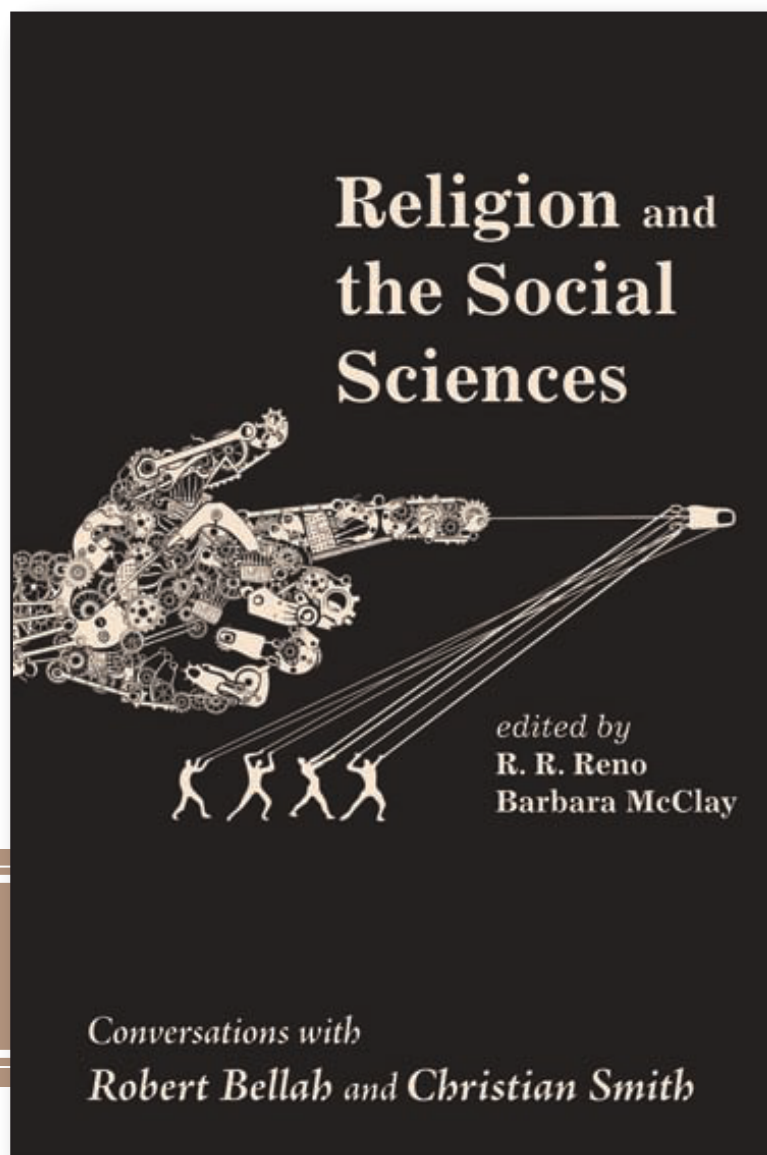
**R. R. Reno**

**Barbara McClay**

More often than not it's a class in the social science that challenges the faith of students, not a class in biology. Does critical understanding of our religious traditions, institutions, and convictions undercut them? Or can a modern social scientific approach deepen faith's commitments, making us full participants in today's intellectual culture? In these conversations with eminent sociologists Robert Bellah and Christian Smith, leading scholars probe the religious potential of modern social science—and its theological limits.

**ISBN: 978-1-62564-172-4**

**140 pp. | \$17 | paper**



**R. R. Reno** has served at the editor of *First Things*, America's most influential journal of religion in public life, since 2011. He received his PhD in theology from Yale University, and taught theology and ethics at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska for twenty years. He has been published in many academic journals, and his opinion essays have appeared in *Commentary*, *The Washington Post*, and other popular outlets. His most recent books include *Fighting the Noonday Devil*, *Sanctified Vision*, and a commentary on the book of Genesis.

**Media, Examination, and Review Copies:**

Contact: James Stock

(541) 344-1528, ext 103 or [James@wipfandstock.com](mailto:James@wipfandstock.com)

**Orders:** Contact your favorite bookseller or order directly from the publisher via phone (541) 344-1528,

fax (541) 344-1506 or e-mail us at [orders@wipfandstock.com](mailto:orders@wipfandstock.com)

# Religion and the Social Sciences

Conversations with Robert Bellah  
and Christian Smith

EDITED BY

R. R. Reno

&

Barbara McClay



CASCADE *Books* • Eugene, Oregon

RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Conversations with Robert Bellah and Christian Smith

Copyright © 2015 Wipf and Stock Publishers. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Cascade Books

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

ISBN 13: 978-1-62564-172-4

*Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

---

Religion and the social sciences : conversations with Robert Bellah and Christian Smith / edited by R. R. Reno and Barbara McClay.

xvii + 118 p. ; 23 cm. Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 13: 978-1-62564-172-4

1. Sociology—Religion. 2. Sociology—Philosophy. I. Reno, R. R. II. McClay, Barbara. III. Title.

BD450 R425 2015

---

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

07/22/2015

## Contents

*Preface, R. R. Reno* | ix

*Introduction, R. R. Reno* | xi

*List of Contributors* | xxi

### **Part One: Religion and Human Evolution, Robert Bellah**

I.1 From Play to Freedom, Francesca Aran Murphy | 3

I.2 Impossible Pluralism, Paul Griffiths | 9

I.3 Sociology as Theology, Thomas Joseph White | 18

I.4 A Reply to My Critics, Robert Bellah | 27

I.5 Ritual and Religion, Lenn Goodman | 39

I.6 An Offensive Book, Philip Gorski | 47

I.7 Natural Theology, Revealed Theology,  
Liberal Theology, Edward Feser | 53

### **Part Two: What is a Person? Christian Smith**

II.1 The Person Before God, Phillip Cary | 59

II.2 Revelation's Nature, David Yeago | 69

II.3 On Being Human, Candace Vogler | 73

II.4 Religion's Rightful Claim, David Novak | 83

II.5 The Gimlet-Eye of Social Science, James R. Rogers | 88

II.6 Reductive Temptations, Stephen C. Meredith | 100

II.7 Reply to My Critics, Christian Smith | 104

*Bibliography* | 117

|

—

—

|

---

## Preface

THE CHAPTERS IN THIS book began as papers drafted to stimulate discussion at two day-and-a-half-long seminars sponsored by the Institute on Religion and Public Life, publisher of *First Things*. Funded by the Religion and Innovation in Human Affairs project of the Historical Society, the first seminar focused on Robert Bellah's remarkable synthesis of evolutionary science, social science, and religious studies, *Religion in Human Evolution*. It met in New York on December 10–11, 2012. The second met on April 8–9, also in New York. This group of scholars discussed Christian Smith's program for social science, *What is a Person?*

The written word is no substitute for the vitality of a living conversation, and the two seminars were nothing if not lively. However, it is my hope that these critical essays and responses by Robert Bellah and Christian Smith give readers a sense of how theologians and philosophers engage the social sciences. This is an important conversation, not just for contemporary academic culture, but for our society as well.

On behalf of the Institute on Religion and Public Life and all the participants in the two seminars, I would like to thank Donald Yerxa, director of Religion and Innovation in Human Affairs. I would also like to thank Robert Bellah and Christian Smith. The paper writers and seminar participants spoke their minds, which sometimes meant sharply worded criticism of their books. Both responded with an enviable combination of intellectual confidence and personal good will.

I also would like to thank staff members here at *First Things* for their work in coordinating the seminars and bringing this volume into shape for publication. A special thanks goes to Lauren Wilson and Bianca Czaderna.

Finally, a special thanks goes to Barbara McClay, my coeditor. She worked with all the authors and her fine editorial skills contributed a great deal to the success of this book.

–R. R. Reno

|

—

—

|

---

## Introduction

IN MY TWENTY YEARS of teaching undergraduates, more often than not it was a class in the social sciences that challenged the faith of students, not a class in biology. Most potent was biblical studies, a modern tradition that gave rise to some of the most important techniques of social and cultural analysis by applying them to the Bible. In these classes pious students felt themselves undercut. What they had imagined as solid, fixed, and authoritative became a plastic reality. Moral truths, religious doctrines, religious experiences? These are manifestations of hidden historical, cultural, and psychological dynamics. So papal authority reflects an institutional need for fixed boundaries; doctrines about the Virgin Mary need to be understood in terms of a larger context of religious exaltations and domestications of the feminine; and so forth.

It's not hard to see why faith finds itself challenged by modern social science. Christianity and Judaism privilege sacred texts as the ultimate horizon for our historical, social, and moral imaginations. By contrast, Freud saw monotheism as emerging out of an Oedipal psychodrama enacted in the distant past. Weber interpreted religion in terms of an oscillation between charisma and institutionalization. These and other theories have their secular critics, but the general structure of explanation was (and remains) constant. As a modern tradition of inquiry, social science wants to get underneath religion, as it were, explaining it in terms of something more fundamental.

As was argued by Ludwig Feuerbach, one of the forefathers of sociology of religion, God is not the source of all reality. On the contrary, he is the projection of our conception of idealized human reality, and the source of all culture is that conception—or, better, our capacity to form such a conception. Like everything else, God is the upshot of our uniquely human



---

## INTRODUCTION

culture-making potency. Almost all social scientists make this claim, even if only implicitly.

Need it be so? Is social science necessarily on a collision course with traditional modes of religious understanding? It was with this question in mind that we gathered two groups of scholars to participate in seminars to discuss two ambitious books of sociology: Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution*, and Christian Smith's *What Is a Person?* Seminar participants were from different disciplines, though heavily tilted toward philosophy and theology. We met for a day and a half of intense discussion, focusing on papers and responses prepared in advance, and allowing time for Bellah and Smith to respond. The results are before you in this volume.

The seminar to discuss Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* met in New York in December 2012. Bellah's work is a big, remarkable book with an important argument that is for the most part congenial to religious people. By Bellah's reckoning, a full assessment of the evidence for biological evolution shows that human development involves more than genetic mutation and the struggle for survival. Animal play, which is widely observed, creates an experienced reality that operates on different principles. The upshot is a primeval pluralism, a prehistoric division of consciousness in animals that creates a tension.

It's across this difference between survival and play that distinctively human cognitive characteristics emerge: imagination, intentions, and eventually, cultural forms. Religious ritual, argues Bellah, is a kind of play, and the imaginative possibility of human modes outside the struggle for existences both feeds and is fed by religious beliefs and practices.

In a sense, therefore, Feuerbach was right. We are culture-making animals. But Bellah's remarkable engagement with evolutionary theory reminds us that we were not always so. We were at some point *just* survival-seeking organisms. It was the liminal experiences of play—moments of freedom in which our prehuman ancestors transcended the gritty game our DNA plays to maximize its chances of survival—that created the possibility of our evolution into culture-making animals.

But that means, of course, that we do not “create” religion, as Feuerbach suggests. On the contrary, in its most primitive form, religion—play—creates us. Put differently, when we go “underneath” our inherited moral and religious beliefs with the techniques of social science, we find their most primitive forms, not explained by supposedly deeper psychological

---

## INTRODUCTION

or cultural dynamics, but rather as the explanation for what makes humans distinctively human.

The seminar featured a number of essays and responses. Three were revised and published as a symposium in *First Things* (June/July 2013), along with substantive response by Robert Bellah, which built upon his oral remarks during the seminar. We have kept them in a unified group in this volume.

In “From Play to Freedom” Francesca Murphy takes up Bellah’s emphasis on play, reading *Religion in Human Evolution* as a fitting sequel to and a deepening of Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. To a great extent our secular intellectual culture has accepted, at least tacitly, the view that human behavior stems from the survival game played by our selfish genes. What Bellah shows, however, is that culture emerges in the zone of play. We are of course deeply and profoundly formed by inherited modes of thinking—what Bellah calls “conserved core processes”—but those modes have an open-ended quality that allows us to say that we are both created by and create culture. For this reason Murphy concludes that Bellah articulates an anthropology of freedom, and the mode of social science he advances offers a congenial resource to Christian theologians.

Paul Griffiths is less enthusiastic. In “Impossible Pluralism” he argues that Bellah’s book—and by implication the social scientific project taken as a whole—collides with Christian theology. Both purport to provide an ultimate explanation of the origins and ends of life, “metanarratives” in his terminology, and so must compete in the end. We’ll either adopt a social scientific theory of everything, in which theology plays a subordinate role, if any, or a theological account of reality, in which the traditions of modern social science are subordinate. Metanarratives brook no competitors. There is no third, mediating possibility.

We should read Thomas Joseph White’s contribution to the seminar, “Sociology as Theology,” as performing what Griffiths asserts: the primacy of theology. He argues that *Religion in Human Evolution* should be read as an exemplary text of liberal Protestant theology. It follows in the tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher, and especially Ernst Troeltsch, showing how religion expresses a universal and natural human potency for transcendence. In Bellah’s telling, a universal history of humanity told with the tools of modern science reinterprets the premodern dogmatism of traditional

---

## INTRODUCTION

religion as reflecting a deep human truth, and in that sense builds theology “from the bottom up.”

It was Griffiths’s fierce challenge and the provocation of White’s denomination of his project as liberal Protestant theology that dominated the December 2012 seminar, evoking from Robert Bellah forceful and multi-faceted responses that asserted the independence of social science from theology and—more importantly and persistently—insisted on the possibility of interpretive pluralism. At a critical juncture on the second day of the seminar, Bellah asked a probing question: Can one believe in more than one religion? A number of participants gave measured, nuanced responses that allowed for the benefits of interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue and analysis, but nevertheless added up to a “no.” Bellah thought this answer overdetermined by a theoretical monism of the sort Griffiths theorizes. Can’t we in fact entertain and enter into alternative accounts of reality? It’s an arresting question, one that embodies a noble ideal: the intellectual and spiritual life is enriched by a participatory, empathetic understanding of a diverse range of views. This ideal animates the modern university at its best.

This collision—Griffiths’s relentless either/or over and against Bellah’s cognitive pluralism—helped me see our intellectual and cultural options more clearly. Surely, we have minds plastic enough to enter into world views different from our own. And surely, that’s a capacity to encourage, for it enriches us in many ways. But just as surely, our minds are deepened by love’s abandoning commitment. Love’s knowledge is in many ways blind, because it sees all things in the beloved. And if I must choose between enrichment and abandonment, it’s the latter that seems to hold out the most promise, not only for our souls, but for our minds as well. The committed intellect is a penetrating intellect.

The other papers presented at the seminar raise important issues as well, rounding out the seminar’s theological engagement with social science. Lenn Goodman’s “Ritual and Religion” offers a detailed critical discussion of Bellah’s appropriations of evolutionary theory. In “An Offensive Book” Philip Gorski situates *Religion in Human Evolution* in the larger context of contemporary sociology. Edward Feser challenges the interpretive authority of modern social science in “Natural Theology, Revealed Theology, Liberal Theology.”

In April 2013, many of the same participants gathered to discuss Christian Smith’s *What is a Person?* This programmatic book seeks to

---

## INTRODUCTION

introduce a robust concept of the human person into the theory and practice of contemporary social science. Smith sees tendencies in two directions in most scholarship today. The first restricts human reality to what is measurable—a reductive, positivist empiricism. The second assumes a hermeneutical constructivism in which what we experience as human beings gets interpreted as products of socialization. In both cases, the social scientific view of the human person becomes impoverished. Our lives as free, reflective, relational persons are either ignored or get interpreted away.

Against these tendencies, which he examines in detail in different streams of social theory, Smith outlines an alternative: critical realism. In this approach social science fully acknowledges the biological, psychological, and social components of human existence, but sees them contributing to the life-world of a human person who is more than the sum of these components. In other words, we can gain insights from neuroscience, sociobiology, analysis of patterns of socialization, and much more, but we must see them as shaping and refining our understandings (thus the *critical* part of critical realism) rather than providing an exhaustive account of human persons who exist as more than an array of component parts (thus the *realism* part of critical realism).

As is the case in Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution*, the concept of emergence plays an important role in Smith's critical realism, allowing him to offer an account of how the reality of the human person is intimately connected but not reducible to its powers, capacities, and relations. We are most definitely animals—instinctual, social, rational, and more—but we're a distinct kind of animal, and that distinctness is best thought of in terms of the concept of person.

The seminar was less contentious than the earlier one that focused on *Religion in Human Evolution*. The theological contributions by Phillip Cary ("The Person Before God") and the response by David Yeago ("Revelation's Nature") advanced a nuanced argument for the priority of theology over social science. Cary outlines the way in which Christian theology shaped the meaning of the concept of person in ways that resist any reduction to powers or capacities. However, instead of emergence, Cary sees the crucial concept defining personhood as relation or role. For the human being it is our relation to God. One might say, therefore, that he outlines an account of the source of personhood by way of bestowal—"Let us make man in our image and likeness"—rather than emergence. This does not contradict the substance of Smith's program for the renewal of social science, but it

## INTRODUCTION

throws into sharp relief the limits of a purely secular approach to the human person.

Yeago reflects on the social and historical significance of Cary's theological account of person. The pathologies of contemporary social science rightly critiqued by Smith are perhaps best understood as the consequences of post-Christian Western culture. Wounded by sin, our reason can see but dimly the true nature of reality, including the reality of the human person. But revelation illuminates reason, guiding us toward the insights of Smith's critical reason. Can we then be optimistic about a social scientific culture disinterested in and often hostile to Christian teaching? Yeago thinks not, though he certainly hopes Smith's critical realism will restrain the distempers of contemporary social theory, if not cure them. We need divine grace and a renewed theological imagination to overturn the antihuman tendencies in our present-day academic culture.

In "On Being Human" Candace Vogler offers a "friendly philosopher's addendum." She suggests that Smith's critical realism requires a dose of Aristotle and Aquinas. *Emergence* is something of a weasel word, a way of demonstrating empirical bona fides while getting something more than what's measurable. While certainly better than a reductive view, it would be better to start with what we actually see and know, which are human beings, full stop. According to Vogler, therefore, we should be empirical in a more radical sense, basing our social science in what we observe as flourishing human life. A moral component—what humanizes?—needs to be built into the starting point of social science.

David Novak agrees and presses a theological point. It is plainly the case that human beings are religious animals, as Aristotle recognized, making contemplation of God the highest good. It would indeed be revolutionary if contemporary social science even allowed (much less endorsed) such a view.

Is social science really in such a bad state? Does it need critical realism in order to be effective and humanizing, as Smith claims? James Rogers thinks not. We don't need to have the whole reality of the human person in view when we undertake social scientific study. In fact, he argues, we can't. Some sort of reductionism becomes inevitable if we're to focus our inquiries and constrain variables sufficiently to produce useful theories. Just as the astrophysicist has to think about the heavens only in one respect, ignoring the full sweep of the night sky, so the social scientist needs to focus on one or two dimensions of human behavior and motivation. Therefore,

---

## INTRODUCTION

instead of being pernicious, reductionism is justified as an “analytical convenience,” and social scientists should modestly pursue slices of reality rather than trying to assemble a view of the whole. It’s a view Stephen Meredith largely endorses, reminding us that for the view of the whole we need philosophy, not science.

In his “Reply to My Critics,” Smith accepts Vogler’s friendly amendment, but defends the concept of emergence as the best way to defend humanism in today’s academic culture. Aristotle may offer a more philosophically elegant solution, but at the price of currency in contemporary debates. Theology is even less likely to gain traction, which is why Smith expresses appreciation for the insights of theologians, but little inclination to follow their theological leads.

But the main force of his reply is directed at Rogers and his defense of reductionism. Yes, of course we need conceptual focus and abstraction to bring precision to our work. But such focus is quite different from the reductive move, which is covertly metaphysical, sliding from what’s methodologically necessary to what’s “real.”

The detail and urgency of Smith’s rebuttal of Rogers reveals an important decision for religious intellectuals to make about social science, and perhaps about secular academic study taken as a whole. Rogers knows that lots of bad social science is being done, just as lots of useless papers are being written in comparative literature and trivial experiments are being conducted in the natural sciences. Sloth, blindness, self-deception, group-think: it’s the human condition. But he’s largely satisfied with today’s social scientific practice, at least when done well. It provides a modest but real margin of insight into human motivation and behavior. Social scientists sometimes say true things about this or that aspect of the human condition, and for that we should be grateful rather than resenting their field’s limitations.

By contrast, Smith views today’s social science as promoting a crimped, crabbed view of what life is about, thus reinforcing the inhumane tendencies in postmodern culture—and, in some cases, conceiving and gestating them. In Rogers he sees a temptation: that a certain kind of theoretical elegance may satisfy us, or that small gains in understanding will palliate our larger, unnecessary ignorance about what it means to be human. We should be more ambitious, both for the sake of intellectual fulfillment and to combat the incipient nihilism of postmodern academic culture. We need to venture big truths about the human condition—claims based on

---

## INTRODUCTION

disciplined scientific inquiry—even at the risk of theoretical inelegance, even at the risk of outrunning empirical verification.

Whether we cast our lots with Rogers or Smith depends a great deal on our intuitions about the limits of reason. There is in Rogers a strong Augustinian streak. The university is part of the city of man, and therefore Christian scholars should have modest expectations. As Augustine argued for political realism satisfied with the merely relative peace of the earthly city, Rogers argues for an academic realism satisfied with the merely relative understandings of a reductive scientific method. Only the heavenly city governed by God's revelation can reliably provide us with the larger, deeper truths about the human condition. By contrast, there's a good bit of Thomism in Smith's approach. Reason can't substitute for revelation, but it has a natural integrity that takes us to the forecourts of divine truth. We should not be satisfied with the meager, anti-metaphysical skepticism of our present academic culture. Our disciplines of study can carry us much further, much higher, enriching our religious understandings and making them more fruitful—not just for us, but for society as whole.

Today, the social sciences often train us to be just technicians. Some disciplines promise to make us expert diagnosticians of the soul (psychology); others, mechanics able to tune up the marketplace (economics) or realign society (the wide variety of disciplines falling under "public policy"). This evolution in the direction of technocratic expertise isn't surprising. Our lives are to a great degree organized by bureaucracies, corporate structures, and consumer culture. We need people able to push therapeutic levers here or turn the screws of incentives there. The machinery of modern life needs its maintenance men.

However contested and inconclusive these seminars may have been, they were undoubtedly about matters far more significant. The relations between religious ways of knowing and social science are difficult, and these two seminars suggest that they will remain so. Religions, or at least monotheistic ones, make imperial claims that always threaten the modern social scientific presumption that reason's methods get us to the bottom of things. I don't see that tension going away. Moreover, love's knowledge will always bridle at the temptations to polytheism always implicit in warm affirmations of pluralism. Finally, the conditions that make Aristotle so indigestible for nearly all social scientists today—to say nothing of theology—as well as the great chasm that separates Rogers from Smith, seem insuperable, at least by the usual methods of academic persuasion.

## INTRODUCTION

We can't transform our deepest intellectual prejudices and aspirations with new research or better arguments. Many important concepts and arguments are at stake in these essays, all of them well worth sorting out and debating. But as is always the case when fundamental truths about the human condition is on the table, as Pascal both rued and relished, the heart has its reasons that reason doesn't know.

– R. R. Reno



|

—

—

|

## List of Contributors

**Robert Bellah** (February 23, 1927–July 30, 2013) was an American sociologist, and the Elliott Professor of Sociology, as well as Professor Emeritus, at the University of California, Berkeley.

**Phillip Cary** is Professor of Philosophy at Eastern University. His most recent book is *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You DON'T Have to Do* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).

**Edward Feser** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Pasadena City College. His most recent book is *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid, Germany: Editions Scholasticae, 2014).

**Lenn Goodman** is Professor of Philosophy and Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. His most recent book is *Religious Pluralism and Values in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

**Philip Gorski** is Professor of Sociology at Yale University. His most recent book is *The Post-Secular Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

**Paul Griffiths** is Warren Professor of Catholic Theology at Duke Divinity School. His latest book is *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

**Stephen Meredith** is Professor in the Department of Pathology, the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, and the College of the University of Chicago.

---

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

**Francesca Murphy** is Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Notre Dame. Her forthcoming book is *Illuminating Faith: An Invitation to Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

**David Novak** is Professor of Philosophy and J. Richard and Dorothy Shiff Chair of Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto. His forthcoming book is *Zionism and Judaism: A New Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

**James Rogers** is Associate Professor of Political Science at Texas A & M University. His most recent book is *Institutional Games and the Supreme Court* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

**Christian Smith** is the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame. His forthcoming book is *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

**Candace Vogler** is the David B. and Clara E. Stern Professor of Philosophy and Professor in the College at the University of Chicago. Her most recent book is *Reasonably Vicious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

**Thomas Joseph White, O.P.**, is Director of the Thomistic Institute and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Dominican House of Studies. His forthcoming book is *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

**David Yeago** is Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics at Trinity School for Ministry and the North American Lutheran Seminary. He is the series editor of *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

PART I

# Religion and Human Evolution

Robert Bellah

|

—

—

|

## I.1 From Play to Freedom

Francesca Aran Murphy

AT THE BEGINNING OF the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant contended that struggle is the motive force of human civilization. Through his successors, especially Hegel, the somewhat oxymoronic idea of armed combat as the motor of civilization came to permeate German high culture and soon Western thinking as a whole. Evolutionism, the idea that fit and lasting species originate through success in competing for food and territory, is a vulgarized version of this high-German myth of creative struggle. This myth has proven tenacious, perhaps because it ties in with certain of our deepest intuitions, such as the sense of our human freedom.

In 1938, the Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga wrote a book called *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. He saw all too clearly where the Prussian adulation for armed combat was going. A few paragraphs added to the second edition, published in 1944 when he was imprisoned in a Nazi detention camp, indicate that he proposed his theory of *homo ludens* as an alternative, and an antidote, to the German idealist theory of war as the root of civilization.

The great cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt had proposed in the previous century that ancient Greece was really great when it had *real* war and genuine warriors: from this it degenerated into a merely “agonal” civilization, with its Olympics and drama competitions, and finally ended in decadence. Against this account of the decline of warrior culture, Huizinga argued that Greece had not moved from battle to play, but that its culture had developed from the beginning in “play-like contest,”<sup>1</sup> in “an almost childlike play-sense expressing itself in various play-forms . . . all rooted in ritual and productive of culture by allowing the innate human need of

1. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 75.

PART I—RELIGION AND HUMAN EVOLUTION

rhythm, harmony, change, alternation, contrast and climax, etc., to unfold in full richness.”<sup>2</sup> Associated with this sense of play

is a spirit that strives for honor, dignity, superiority, and beauty. Magic and mystery, heroic longings, the foreshadowings of music, sculpture and logic all seek form and expression in noble play. . . . In play, therefore, the antithetical and agonistic basis of civilization is given from the start, for play is older and more original than civilization.<sup>3</sup>

Huizinga describes play as pretend combat, and as the source of culture, including its war-making dimensions, not its degeneration. Man is not the animal who fights best, and thus survives, but an animal who plays for the sheer joy of it, and thus thrives. Huizinga sees all cultural forms as emerging from such pretend struggles. For instance, poetry arises from riddling contests and mythology from mimetic, “danced-out” (in Bellah’s words) enactments of conflicts. His alternative to the mythologizing of the survival-of-the-fittest idea is not to deny that struggle makes any contribution to the progress of culture, but rather to propose that *unbloody* struggle is the seed of all human sacramental ritual and cultural achievement.

I didn’t know much about the history of philosophy when I first read *Homo Ludens* as an undergraduate. I owe to Huizinga a mental picture of communal play as the exercise of freedom within a structure of law and form. That helped me to understand what a sacrament is and in particular what the sacrifice of the Mass is. And thus the book led me to begin to consider religion as an objective and public phenomenon. It might seem like a long step from play to the sacrifice of the Mass. But Huizinga quotes Plato, in the *Laws*: “Man is made God’s plaything, and that is the best part of him.”<sup>4</sup> Plato continues, “Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest.”<sup>5</sup>

Robert Bellah, in *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, pays his respects to this same passage from Plato, and affirms that Huizinga led him back to it. *Religion in Human Evolution* is, as it were, a more scientifically informed version of *Homo Ludens*. Bellah

2. Ibid., 75.

3. Ibid.

4. Plato, *Laws*, 7.796.

5. Ibid.

## I.1 FROM PLAY TO FREEDOM

argues that play is among the elemental “core processes” that enabled the first human beings to become human. “Play is a new kind of capacity, with a very large potentiality of developing more capacities . . . , some of them quite extraordinary.”<sup>6</sup>

It was the evolved capacity for play that enabled our first ancestors then to evolve the capacity for symbolic speech and for ritual. They played games that led them to ornament themselves, “dance out” stories, and begin to use language symbolically. Each capacity emerged out of and was embedded in the earliest “core processes,” as Bellah calls them: first “self-domestication” or, effectively, familial love, and then, as a result, “a childhood free enough to create intricate and innovative forms of play.”<sup>7</sup>

*Religion in Human Evolution* is important when countless scholars and popular writers describe every cultural phenomenon and pattern of human behavior in evolutionary terms because its account of an emergent humanity positively requires the exercise of freedom. This idea too goes right back to *Homo Ludens*, where Huizinga argues that “play only becomes possible . . . when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos.” As he puts it, “Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Bellah argues that play is the free generation of an “alternative reality” outside of the reality in which the struggle for existence is paramount. Unlike activities oriented toward survival, “play is something ‘done for its own sake.’” It is “spontaneous and voluntary” and “not a means to an end.”<sup>9</sup>

Today everything from aesthetic beauty to romantic love gets translated into the conniving inventiveness of our selfish genes. In such a climate, Bellah’s book could intrigue young people and others as *Homo Ludens* intrigued me. And perhaps more so. Many want to understand the implications of modern biology for a larger view of the human person than selfish-gene theory and similar ideas provide. At the same time, we want to take human freedom seriously—including the radical freedom of living for the sake of the transcendent. In other words, we’re looking for accounts of religion that factor in evolution without being simplistically reductionist. Bellah’s book offers just such an account. He places religion within the story

6. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 80.

7. Ibid., 88.

8. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 8.

9. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 77.



of human evolution while leaving open the question of whether or not it is a wholly natural phenomenon.

Whatever one thinks of the details of his argument, Bellah is surely pointing us in the right direction. Freedom is an obstacle to reductionist naturalism: we know as a kind of experiential first principle that we are free. Freedom is a datum in the light of which we know all else about ourselves. Play is an expression of this freedom. Bellah contends that freedom as expressed in play, playful freedom, steps outside functional evolutionary competition. People can refuse to be persuaded that human beings play just for the fun of it. But it is powerful evidence in favor of his view that we take so much pleasure in the exercise of playful freedom, strongly suggesting that such freedom is a fulfillment of human nature. So I would say that he is on the right track in seeing ritual as an exercise of playful freedom.

Bellah doesn't go all the way with Plato's *Laws*. If he had, he might have developed a richer idea of freedom. Plato thinks that men and women play because we were made to do so by the gods. Playing is not just an escape from material determination or a rest from the daily evolutionary struggle. It is more, even, than the creation of alternative realities, like Bilbo's riddles, in which to take joy. If Plato is right, playing is the fulfillment of our human nature, what we were made by the gods to do. But Bellah is content with the Kantian conception of freedom as *freedom from* determination or strife, whereas a Platonist would want to press on to the idea of freedom as *freedom for* the fulfillment of our natures as "playthings" of the divine. If one aims to defeat evolutionism from within, one has to go all the way with Plato, as I think Huizinga did.

Even though Bellah limits himself to a narrow and Kantian conception of freedom, reflecting, perhaps, the limitations of the modern way of thinking that shapes our philosophical imaginations, his account of religion as the exercise of free playfulness should be given due credit and taken further. The only time I ever saw Richard Dawkins reduced to stuttering silence was when an Irish philosopher repeatedly asked him about human freedom. Dawkins was left saying "I don't *care* about freedom," because he could not deny that these human DNA carriers experience it. Without any other presuppositions, every person in the audience knew he experienced the exercise of freedom.

Christian theologians, myself included, can get very angry with moderns for defining the term "freedom" in the wrong way. This can lead us to forget what an explosive datum freedom is, in and of itself, no matter how

## I.1 FROM PLAY TO FREEDOM

well- or ill-defined it is by our dominant philosophical assumptions. As shown by the Vatican II *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, a little vagueness about the precise meaning of freedom goes a long way in exposing common ground between Christians and nonbelievers.

Perhaps the most fundamental affirmation of freedom comes in Bellah's idea of conserved core processes. This concept allows us to identify structures or patterns internal to organisms that exercise ongoing influence over the evolutionary process. The implications are dramatic: "Instead of lumbering robots, organisms are actors in the process of evolution." In other words, as a species, we exercise some influence over our own development. As he puts it, "We are embedded in a very deep biological . . . history. That history does not determine us, because organisms from the very beginning, and increasingly with each new capacity, have influenced their own fate."<sup>10</sup>

In addition to introducing freedom in the story of our humanity, Bellah also offends against a materialist orthodoxy because he draws on Lamarck's idea that acquired tendencies can be inherited, which means that culture isn't epiphenomenal to the evolution of *homo sapiens*, but is in fact a constituent part. Scientists may think he is skating on thin ice here. But human beings are the only animals who can create traditions, and who are to an extent created by traditions, perhaps even at a deep, biological level.

So again, with his cultural Lamarckianism, Bellah is articulating the principles of a cultural anthropology based on the premise that human beings are free. To the extent that we create and are created by traditions, there is an element of free self-creation integral to what it means to be human. Human evolution must, to an extent, be in human hands, and in human minds. *To an extent*: certainly human beings are not plastic to be engineered in any way we choose.

However controversial among evolutionary scientists, something like Lamarckianism is theologically unavoidable, for it is a presupposition of the Christian doctrine of the fall. If we assume that original sin is not passed on precisely genetically, but *is* transmitted from generation to generation, one has to say that human beings are free to alter human nature, and to do so in a radical way. In *Principles of Catholic Theology*, Joseph Ratzinger writes that "the origin of 'humanity' coincides in time with the origin of man's capacity for tradition."<sup>11</sup>

10. Ibid., 83.

11. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 89.

PART I—RELIGION AND HUMAN EVOLUTION

On that basis, “Original sin, then, would mean this: The *humanum* is rooted in tradition, to the beginnings of which there belongs, above all, the ability to hear the Other (whom we call God). . . . From the start, not only this ability to hear and this actual hearing but also sin were constitutive in the formation of subjects in whom tradition would inhere—a kind of formation that is itself constitutive of mankind per se.”<sup>12</sup>

And one need not say that damage to human nature is the only way in which human beings can cause their nature to evolve. We are capable of transmitting developments for good as well as evil. The gospel is a tradition that Christ promises will become constitutive of our humanity. We have the freedom to transmit the living Word, and we do so by allowing ourselves to be formed by it so deeply that it becomes constitutive of us.

It’s quite impossible, of course, for an orthodox Christian theologian to buy into Bellah’s narrative taken as a whole. In their essays, Paul Griffiths and Thomas Joseph White explain why that is so. But his anthropology of freedom is important and should be assimilated into a Christian anthropology. Christian theologians need to situate the biblical narrative in relation to the evolutionary narrative about the origins and ends of humanity. And I think that, to the extent that his anthropology puts creative freedom at the heart of human nature, Christian theologians can make use of Bellah’s narrative.

Bellah, Robert. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. New York: Beacon, 1955.

Plato, *The Laws*. Translated by Thomas L. Pangle. New York: Basic, 1980.

Ratzinger, Joseph. *Principles of Catholic Theology*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989.

12. Ibid., 89.

## I.2 Impossible Pluralism

Paul Griffiths

ROBERT BELLAH UNDERSTANDS RELIGION as an activity that takes us beyond the quotidian. The everyday world is ordered by lack, of food, shelter, sex, and so on; it is a world of demand and pressure and need. The non-quotidian world is ordered by excess; it is a world of play and sleep and is eventually given shape and made habitable by ritual, language, art, and so on, with all their accompaniments and entails. In this non-quotidian world, the fundamental mode of religious activity is ritual, and ritual serves as deeply meaningful play. Play is the paradigmatic non-quotidian behavior.

Evolutionarily speaking, Bellah claims in his magnificent book *Religion in Human Evolution*, ritual-on-the-way-to-religion is an emergent phenomenon, different in kind from what has gone before, in the same (formal) way that life is a phenomenon emergent from the lifeless. Ritual emerges in organisms—other mammals are ritualized beings, too, as are birds—out of the matrix of play. Once it has emerged, religion follows and becomes the principal generator of meaning and structure in human societies.

The bulk of *Religion in Human Evolution* is devoted to analysis and thickly described examples of how this has worked in particular cases, with special attention paid to the emergence of theoretical cultures during the Axial Age of the first millennium BC. The richly detailed chapters treating tribal and archaic religion are thoroughly engaging. The synthesis of scholarship and many instances of nuanced historical judgment in long chapters on ancient Israel, Greece, China, and India reflect an enviable intellectual breadth and sympathy.

All that said, however, I have my doubts.

PART I—RELIGION AND HUMAN EVOLUTION

First, there's a question about whether the evidence at hand justifies the rich speculative sweep of the story Bellah tells. For example, at the beginning of his discussion of ancient Israel, he notes that there's "still only weak and contested consensus on such elementary facts as the dating of various biblical texts."<sup>1</sup> In his discussion of ancient Greece, he notes that it "is very hard to reconstruct social structure from archaeological data alone, and using Homer as a source of data is fraught with problems."<sup>2</sup> He also acknowledges disputes about the dating of texts, events, and ideas in ancient India.

Taken on their own, these areas of scholarly debate strongly suggest that we'll never know what really happened. This skeptical conclusion, Bellah says with disarming frankness, "is not an escape open to me."<sup>3</sup> That's because the requirements for a grand narrative of human history forbid it. "My comparative historical undertaking requires that I give some historical reality to the data or not use it at all."<sup>4</sup> When there isn't a scholarly consensus—which is most of the time—he promises to use his "common sociological sense of what is probable and what is not."<sup>5</sup> That's not reassuring, for "common sociological sense,"<sup>6</sup> I should think, is just shorthand for "a story I like the sound of."

Matters are worse yet with respect to human prehistory, about which we know almost nothing. We'd have more evidence relative to time span if we tried to reconstruct the 400-year sociocultural history of New York City from one worn shoe discarded in 1720 and a broken telephone dating from 1948. In this instance, as in the others, we should be very skeptical of the particulars of reconstructions based on such scanty evidence.

Such skepticism is supported by the realization that intellectual fashions change. More often than we're inclined to admit, scientific theories get revised, sometimes drastically. Almost no particular of the story I was taught forty-five years ago in respectable English schools about the evolution of the human species can now be found in high school or college textbooks that treat the subject. Few of the particulars of the four-source (J, E, D, P) hypothesis about the texts of the Pentateuch that I learned a little

1. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 283.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 284.
6. Ibid.

## I.2 IMPOSSIBLE PLURALISM

later as an assured result of modern scholarship now command the assent of anything more than a rump among contemporary biblical scholars. This is the usual thing: it would be easy to multiply examples.

What does this mean for a book of universal history like Bellah's? It means that we may be entertained, edified, or otherwise moved by its particulars but not instructed, at least not in the way that Bellah intends. It doesn't show us what happened—or if perchance it does, we haven't any reason to think that it does. What we have instead is a good and often edifying story. I don't see this as damning criticism. A vital intellectual culture needs grand narratives and large-scale explanatory myths, if you will. That's the only way we can integrate the particulars of scientific knowledge into an all-things-considered view of the way things are. But it's distressing that Bellah only occasionally sees with any clarity the nature of his project.

However unpersuasive about the past, *Religion in Human Evolution* reliably mirrors something of the present—the “common sociological sense” upon which Bellah so often relies. It's a principle of judgment best understood as a substantive view of what it means to be a flourishing human being. This brings me to my second concern: an under-warranted moralism.

That Bellah writes with moral purpose is clear. In his conclusion, he identifies two such purposes. He calls them “practical,” but they are certainly also moral. First, he wants us to see that we human beings have evolved to a point where we have difficulty adapting to our adaptations. This may precipitate a “sixth great extinction event,” an event in which vast numbers of species will be brought to extinction by us, with ourselves perhaps among their number. He writes that the hour is late, improvising on the end of 1 Corinthians 7. Second, in addition to preventing species disaster, he also wants us to abandon claims to the superiority of any one religious tradition over any or all others, a good he seems to think necessary for meeting the great ecological and social challenges of our time.

Exhortations to ecological concern and pleas for an end to claims of religious (and cultural) superiority are common in the subculture called academic, but their connection to the grand narrative of *Religion in Human Evolution* is obscure. Why, for example, is the hour late? I can easily imagine that someone coming to know that major extinction events are a regular feature of our planet's life, with or without human involvement, might think of them as like forest fires: perhaps necessary, even though prima facie destructive, and thus not necessarily to be prevented, even if

they could be. This is my response to Bellah's story. Mass extinctions are part of the ordinary rhythm of life on this planet, it seems, as one might expect in a deeply damaged cosmos like ours (as it must axiomatically be said to be by Christian theologians).

Bellah's call for abandoning claims of religious superiority is even less convincing. He appears to think that taking seriously alien religious traditions in their own terms precludes, or at least sits uneasily with, judging one superior to another. But of course it doesn't: I can perfectly well appreciate, say, the precise technicalities of Sanskrit Buddhist scholasticism on their own terms, and judge that Catholic Christianity (my own tradition) might be instructed by them, without abandoning the claim that all salvation is mediated through Jesus Christ and that the Lord God established and maintains a relation with the people of Israel and with the church with a degree of intimacy given to no others.

So far as I can see—which may not be very far—nothing in the substance of Bellah's book supports the moral claims with which he ends it and that he takes it to serve. That is bad enough, perhaps, but there is much worse. His concluding words call for "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."<sup>7</sup> This universalism, were it to be realized, would mean the end of the church (and, I think, of most other religious traditions, though I have neither the expertise nor the right to speak for them), as I will now go on to show.

Bellah's universal natural history of religion has many predecessors. David Hume, for example, in 1757 wrote a book called *The Natural History of Religion*, the professed goal of which was "to trace all [religion's] varied appearances, in the principles of human nature, whence they are derived."<sup>8</sup> Hume had a different understanding of religion than Bellah does, and he had a deeply different understanding of history, historiography, and human nature. Hume has somewhat different moral purposes as well: he wants to place kinds of religion in a hierarchy of better and worse, which Bellah explicitly disavows as a purpose or implication of his book.

So there are differences between Hume's enterprise and Bellah's. But the similarities are deeper and more revealing. Both want to diminish the tendency of religious people to think their own religion unsurpassable, and both adopt essentially the same method of doing this, which is to describe

7. Ibid., 606.

8. Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, 27.

## I.2 IMPOSSIBLE PLURALISM

Christianity (or Islam or Buddhism) as an emergent phenomenon, and to do so without using the vocabulary proper to it. The goal is to alter the modes of thought and modes of expression of Christians (and other religious people), to get them to think of their religious lives as a species of a genus rather than as *sui generis*.

Bellah doesn't want to be a reductionist and explicitly distances himself from sociobiological accounts of religion that can be seen as successors to Hume's approach. But in spite of these limitations, the religion that Bellah offers to Christians is transfigured every bit as much as that offered by Hume. To write a natural history of religion coupled with the hope that the history's lexicon and assumptions will replace those indigenous to particular religious traditions is to reproduce a Humean account, whether you like it or not.

And Bellah, disavowals notwithstanding, does like it. For it will be generic sociological and historical categories, not theological ones, that inform the self-understanding of the citizens of the hoped-for world civil society.

This desired future of the triumph of "common sociological sense" provides a hidden and important warrant for the grand narrative of *Religion in Human Evolution*. Kant's eschatology is found most pithily in his 1794 essay "Die Ende aller Dinge," which could well form an appendix to Bellah's book. In brief, Kant's eschatology is one of skepticism about our (human) capacity to understand or characterize the end of all things. Attempting to analyze and argue about the nature of human existence in eternity, or to determine who will be damned and who saved, exceeds reason's capacities.

This moralized eschatology dovetails with Bellah's. Kant thinks that advances in understanding (in this instance, of the true nature and purpose of eschatological thinking) ought to yield advances in good behavior. That is, if and only if you come to understand the exhaustively moral purpose of eschatological thought will you be improved by it. The curve of progress here is upward, even if asymptotic (a frequent Kantian point). Human beings approach the goal without finally reaching it.

There is, nevertheless, an upward curve, and movement along it is marked by moral improvement, increase in civility, and approach to "perpetual peace" (to mention the title of another of Kant's essays). Sages (Kant in his own view falls under this category), then, ought to be encouraged in their work of getting ordinary people (those who can't manage sagehood) to see that what the pious doctrines of religion are really about is



the cultivation of practical reason, which is in any event the meaning and purpose of religion as he sees it.

Bellah is not Kantian in any technical sense, but he certainly shares Kant's assumptions about the meaning and purpose of religion and about the moral benefit of treatises like his own. Thus, there is a problem here whose face Bellah can see but that he tries to hold at arm's length. Humean natural histories and Kantian quasi-eschatologies typically, perhaps necessarily, place themselves at the apex of the conceptual and moral progress whose story they tell, and thereby inescapably place themselves as judges of what has come before. Bellah sees this and claims to avoid it. But he doesn't succeed.

Universal histories are by definition axiological—committed, that is, to an understanding of what is better and what is worse in the phenomena whose story they tell. Bellah's is no exception; his large-scale story has morals. Among them, perhaps central to them, is the thought that we (we humans? we Americans? we tenured professors who publish large books with university presses?) have no ground for triumphalism. His implicit (and, at the end, explicit) claim is that study of our long evolutionary past grounds, firmly, our conviction that triumphalism is no good.

The problem here is not that Bellah's universal history has an axiological axe to grind. The problem is incoherence. His anti-triumphalism is itself a triumphalism. Bellah is sure that he has taken what is good from Kant without Kant's racism; that he can see what is good in Mill's liberalism without Mill's approval of benevolent despotism; and that he is not guilty even of a speciesist triumphalism because he affirms the evolutionary advantages of bacteria and arthropods when compared to those of humans. But once it is remembered that most human beings have not had the advantage of Bellah's knowledge of the cosmos's long history, and that most have been, and most remain, triumphalist in just the sense that he finds undesirable, the triumphalism of his own universal history emerges into clear daylight. Most—nearly all—human beings have been deeply wrong and morally deformed by their triumphalism, which Bellah proposes to transcend and overcome.

There is in *Religion in Human Evolution* the sickly sweet scent of a self-righteousness blind to its own deformity. Bellah is no less triumphalist than Kant. He's just less aware of the nature of his triumphalism. Triumphalism, in just the sense that he understands it, is inextricable from the genre in which he writes. If you're doing Humean natural history and

## I.2 IMPOSSIBLE PLURALISM

Kantian eschatology—and it's not at all clear that a twenty-first-century academic writing a universal history with the categories and concepts of modern history and sociology can do otherwise—you will by definition be a triumphalist.

A universal history needs, as Bellah clearly sees, a metanarrative. That is, in order to be able to tell the story of everything, one must have a lexicon and syntax, which together constitute a grammar. The lexicon provides the nonnegotiable terms of art (they're always terms of art) by means of which the story is to be told, and the syntax provides the rules of combination in terms of which the lexicon is deployed. The grammar, the lexicon, and syntax in combination do not prescribe the particulars of the story, but they do determine the frame within which those particulars will be placed. Many different stories can be told with the same grammar, but they will all be the same kind of story (think of fairy stories, Whig histories, hard-boiled noirs, and so on).

In Bellah's case, the lexicon is a rich mix of the terms of art that belong to sociology of a stratospherically abstract kind with those that belong to evolutionary theory. Together, these provide his metanarrative, the narrative that, for him, frames and accounts for all other narratives, most especially those that belong to particular religious traditions. Moreover, he thinks it "the only shared metanarrative among educated people of all cultures that we have."<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not this is true depends, I suppose, on what's meant by "educated people"; I certainly do not share it, or at least not as a metanarrative, and I doubt that I am alone in this. That may be enough in Bellah's mind to exclude me, and those like me, from the set of educated people. But I think it would be more accurate to say that there is no universally shared metanarrative: not Bellah's, not Kant's, not that belonging to scholastic Buddhists, and not that belonging to orthodox Catholic Christians—to name only a few of the metanarratives available.

This is certainly true if we understand *metanarrative* as I've characterized it above, which is to say as a narrative that, in the eyes of its users, frames and explains all other narratives and can be framed and explained by none. To claim possession of a universally shared metanarrative is a hallmark of unreflective universal historians who would like to claim the conceptual and moral high ground by definitional fiat. Better to say that the metanarrative one has and offers is one candidate among many.

9. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 600.

That's always the case, and I'll end these comments by sketching the one I have, and by attending especially to the place that Bellah's holds within it. For I do not take his narrative to be false (except when it becomes incoherent). It is, rather, preliminary and partial, because it fits into rather than frames and explains my own metanarrative, which I summarize as follows:

The cosmos—everything there is, save the Lord God, who is not a thing, or, if the term must be used, is *una summa quaedam res*—comes into being *cum tempore et cum spatiis*, i.e., with space-time as a central feature. This occurs by the free creative act of the Lord. It is not an event that can be dated or placed. The before-and-after of dating, and the here-and-there of placing, belong only to the cosmos, and to all of it without remainder; the cosmos therefore has no before and no outside. Every particular being in the cosmos is created *ex nihilo* by the Lord (all particular beings, therefore, are creatures) and has whatever being it has by way of participation in him.

Among these creatures are angels; (almost) simultaneously with creation (*in actu*), some among these rebel against their creator and thereby introduce deep damage into the otherwise harmoniously beautiful space-time fabric of the cosmos. All creatures, material and immaterial, living and nonliving, are damaged by this fall. The Lord's response, indexed to time but not itself temporal, is to bring human beings, among many other kinds of creatures, into existence. (The evolutionary story that Bellah tells belongs here; its particulars occupy this place in the frame; and those particulars, as the framing narrative suggests, involve, without exception, death on a massive scale.)

Some among these creatures replicate the angelic fall, introducing new and worse damage into the fabric of the cosmos. The Lord's response (again, time-indexed but not itself temporal), a response whose *finis* is the transfiguring of the cosmos's chaotic deadly violence into an order more beautiful than the original, is to elect a person (Abraham) to special intimacy with himself, and to guarantee that same intimacy with his descendants. That response is intensified, eventually, by the Lord himself taking flesh, joining his substance with that of the man Jesus to become a single person, and in that flesh, as that person, dying and rising and ascending.

Human history then has the nexus of election and incarnation as its central thread; the fabric woven around this thread is of two colors, inextricably intertwined, one representing the love of the Lord, and the other the love of self, one peaceful and the other violent, one heavenly and the other hellish. (The particulars of Bellah's stories about specific human cultures

## I.2 IMPOSSIBLE PLURALISM

belong here: They all have the people of Israel and the church as their vibrant center, whether proleptically or actually.)

Consequent upon the election and the incarnation is the gradual healing of the cosmos, which progresses principally through the work of the body of Jesus Christ—the church—here below, and culminates in an eschaton, an end whose particulars lie beyond the scope of this paragraph, and in which the two threads in the fabric are finally disentangled.

There's a metanarrative for you. Its grammar is that of Christian theology. It enframes Bellah's, fully accounting for it without rejecting any of its particulars that turn out to be true. This Christian metanarrative is of course not universally shared, understood, or offered, and in this it is just like Bellah's account. If his metanarrative is true, this Christian one must be false—because his account, he thinks, requires Christians exactly not to offer this narrative as a metanarrative. And if this Christian metanarrative is true, his must be false—not in its particulars, necessarily, but certainly in its self-understanding as a metanarrative. Metanarratives don't brook rivals.

I've learned a great deal from Robert Bellah's magnificent book. But what I've learned is about particulars: the ideas of facilitated variation and conserved core processes, for instance, and their possible purchase on the evolutionary process; and the sociological analyses given of particular human cultural forms. These can stand. But the metanarrative Bellah uses to frame them cannot. And since it's the metanarrative that gives the book its point, I'm left wondering what point remains when the metanarrative is seen for what it is.

Bellah, Robert. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Hume, David. *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.