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Richard L. Wood

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Wood, Richard L.. "From the Beginning." *Commonweal*, October 11, 2011 (2011). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/soc_fsp/9

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Richard L. Wood

From the Beginning

Religion in Human Evolution

From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age

Robert N. Bellah

Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,
\$39.95, 784 pp.

Throughout a long and illustrious career, the sociologist Robert N. Bellah has been helping Americans make sense of their world. While Bellah's scholarly work has focused on specialized understandings of the role of religion in society, *Commonweal* readers will recognize him for works that have reached a broad audience concerned about the direction of American society. Indeed, *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*, co-written by Bellah, were among the most widely read critical reflections on American culture and institutions published in recent decades.

Now, late in his life, Bellah weighs in with an audacious project: to locate our human condition within the two great narratives of the human experience, religion and evolution. *Religion in Human Evolution* is no simple effort to "reconcile" religious belief with scientific understanding, but something far more interesting and ambitious. It seeks to take both religion and evolution seriously on their own terms, and to locate us within the stories they tell about the human condition in a way informed by the best emerging research on both terrains. Bellah spent thirteen years systematically reading that research in order to address perennial questions: Who are we humans? How can we best understand our contemporary place in the world? The result is a grand narrative written in full understanding of the failures and limitations of recent grand narratives. *Religion in Human Evolution* is a magnum opus founded on careful research and immersed in the "reflective judgment" of one of our best thinkers and writers.

Bellah begins by exploring "daily life," the world of work, of striving, of meeting needs, and providing for the future. Much of what we value in human existence occurs here; yet, if not relieved by other realities, daily life also represents a "dreadful immanence" which saps the human spirit. While showing how art, science, and other pursuits help us transcend the burdens of daily life, Bellah goes on to note that religion represents the predominant way human communities have traditionally escaped this dreadful immanence. "Escaped" is not quite the right word to describe the very "this-worldly transcendence"—both deeply personal and political—that religion can promote. At the heart of such transcendence lies the mystical experience of God (or, for secularists, the cosmos); of personal well-being despite frank honesty about the world; of being "struck by love" amidst the harshness of reality. In such moments, Bellah notes by way of an evocative translation of Plato, the soul "draws near to and makes love to reality."

Such unitive experiences permeate not only the consciousness that is rooted in our embodied selves, but the symbols and stories that help us see and find meaning in the world, and, more abstractly, the concepts that help us make sense of it. These varieties of human consciousness developed over the long evolution of humans from earlier species. Bellah draws on cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald to suggest how, 2 million years ago or so, our distant ancestors began to transcend mere fixation upon the present—that is, episodic consciousness—through "mimetic culture," imitating sounds and rhythms to communicate with one another. Over eons, this mimesis may have generated a proto-language that Bellah, borrowing a term from evolutionary psychologist and neuroscientist Stephen Brown, calls "musilanguage." A crucial breakthrough comes with the subsequent

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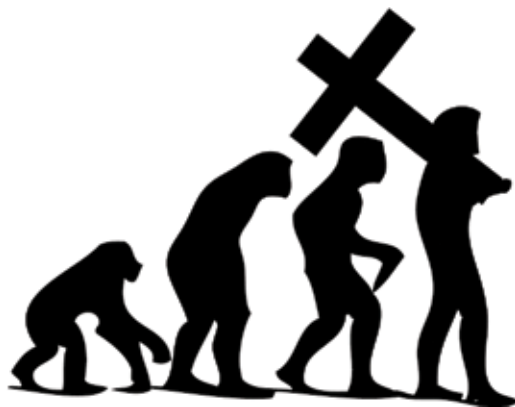
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emergence of symbols, stories, and full language, eventually generating “mythic culture” at the predawn of human history (perhaps a hundred thousand years ago). Finally, during the first millennium BCE—and initially only in a handful of places around the world—comes a further cultural breakthrough, to a “theoretic culture” based on an ability to generate concepts and symbols that hold existing understandings up to criticism and present alternative possibilities to them.

Crucially, for the book’s argument and for any of us who take both evolution and religion seriously, Bellah draws on the evolutionary concept of “conserved core processes” to argue that nothing is ever lost in this cultural evolution; instead, all levels of culture, from episodic to mimetic to mythic and theoretic, remain present and real parts of the modern human person and society. Thus, spiritual experience via contemplation or communion, the embodiment of religious feeling in music or dance, and the carrying of religious meaning in symbols and stories are no mere retrograde products of evolutionary dead ends, but rather realities that continue to express fundamental dimensions of the human. This view holds rich implications for Bellah’s analysis of the evolving role of religion in society. His core argument holds that as some tribal societies evolved from their relatively egalitarian structures into hierarchical ones, religion underwent a transformation. The human-like qualities of mythic figures in tribal religions gave way to more distant gods, to whom people had little or no direct access except through mediating figures such as priests. These ritual leaders were tied to the rigidly hierarchical socio-political structures of their societies; indeed, the rituals they led were in part a means of enacting—and legitimizing—existing power arrangements.

Bellah goes on to analyze how and why a further cultural breakthrough occurred around the four “axial” religions that shape the lives of billions of people today—and, through their



theoretic cultures, gave rise to contemporary scientific thought. Several figures loom large: the social prophets of ancient Israel; Plato, Confucius, and Mencius; and the Buddha with his origins in Upanishad Vedic culture. These extraordinary figures and their associated movements elaborated upon the symbols and myths of previous religious systems to create ways of thinking that could transcend and criticize those systems’ fusion of religious symbolism and political power. As a consequence, for the first time human culture began to develop alternatives to the rigid social hierarchies of archaic societies. The result, two thousand years later, is the world we inhabit today, in which science, urban industrial society, the vast consumer culture it has generated, and the axial religions and their offshoots all compete for cultural influence.

This is a big book, full of big ideas that demand sustained attention and disciplined thought. But in my view it repays a reader’s effort in full. Full disclosure: Bellah was a key mentor during my doctoral studies in sociology almost two decades ago, and remains today a colleague and friend. Readers will have to discern whether this friendship distorts my judgment about *Religion in Human Evolution*. Certainly, it is not a perfect book. Its intellectual ambition occasionally leads to speculative insights that only future research will be able to judge; more troublesome for some readers will be the analytic detail and theoretical rigor of certain sections. Yet despite these obstacles, Bellah’s clear writing and acute insight ultimately carry the day.

It may surprise some to find this serious and weighty work turning at its end to an insistence on the centrality of play, both today and throughout human evolution. Play relieves the dreadful immanence into which work draws us; conceived as ritual and liturgy, it allows us to transcend daily life. Bellah offers meditations on the role of beauty in science (he interestingly ties in our looming global ecological crisis)

and on the urgent need for adherents of all religious traditions to move beyond tolerance and generate something akin to true mutual care. Catholic readers will appreciate 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, and to that end quotes the legal and moral philosopher Herbert Fingarette: “One may be a sensitive and seasoned traveler, at ease in many places, but one must have a home.”

Religion in Human Evolution closes with a vision of how we might construct a truly global civil society—our best hope for the future, Bellah believes. His summons, though steeped in theory and scholarly research, links clearly to our contemporary challenges, and deepens this book’s impression of a great intellect helping us situate ourselves in history, global ecology, and the cosmos. For over half a century, Robert N. Bellah has set his extraordinary mind out on the frontiers of human knowledge and has written back to make that knowledge accessible to the educated reader. This remarkable book finds him nearing the close of a long and fruitful life, and generously giving it back to us in love. ■

Richard L. Wood is associate professor of sociology and founding director of the Southwest Institute on Religion, Culture, and Society at the University of New Mexico. He is the author of *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (University of Chicago Press).

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