

Notes on Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age  
By Robert Bellah

- Preface
  - “...looking for friends in history” – Mencius
  - find friends from whom we can learn all there was in the deep past
  - Chapter 1: **biological history**, i.e., evolution, is part of the human story
    - David Christian, Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History
    - Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene
    - To understand the origins of language, we have to go back to **the birth of the lowliest animate creatures for language itself depends on a matrix of volition and primitive consciousness that was laid down hundreds of millions of years ago.**
  - Chapter 2: empathy – It is a significant evolutionary heritage that we share a sense of justice, capacity for various forms of cooperation, and play with other mammals, along with aggression and violence.
    - Sense of awe at the indifference of the universe: is this in itself a form of religion? – Dawkins
    - Bellah: There is room in evolution for meaning and purpose
    - **The evolution of certain capacities**
      - Symbols
      - Language
    - Language using humans can always transcend world of everyday objects
    - Clifford Geertz definition = **system of symbols that when enacted by human beings establishes powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence.** Note there is no mention of “belief in supernatural beings”.
    - Geertz also spoke about how **ritual** creates worlds
    - How religion creates other worlds and interacts with the world of daily life is the subject of this book
    - **Homo Erectus** and evolution of mimetic culture
    - Dance is basic to ritual in almost all tribal societies
    - **Mimetic and mythic culture continue to be central; humans cannot function without them, in fact.**
    - The role of **Play** in human evolution. Commonest in species that continue child care for extended periods.
      - Sheer joy of play as well as role in culture.
    - Goal is not to say whether religion is good or bad but to understand **what religion is and what it does**
    - Asks what kind of life human beings have imagined was worth living
    - To draw living water from the well of the past, to find friends in history who can help us understand where we are.

- Bellah's thanks to the creators of great traditions as well of the reciters of myth and dancers of ritual in all the tribal and archaic traditions, his teachers in this enterprise
- **Religion and Reality**
  - Geertz definition: Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community. But what is the sacred?
  - The Sacred: daily life vs. suspension of daily life
    - Maslow's D-cognition (Deficiency cognition) vs. B-Cognition (Being cognition)
      - D: Striving, means/ends, practical, pragmatic
      - B: Union of subject and object, participation, wholeness
        - Feeling of the general rightness of things and personal well-being
        - Wallace Stevens: "Perhaps the truth depends on a walk around a lake..."
      - Capacity for symbolic transcendence – when something ordinary becomes extraordinary by becoming symbolic
      - We seek to escape a world of dreadful immanence
      - Daily life is a world of lack
    - Religious Representation: experiential-expressive approach to describing what religion is
      - Lindbeck argues that identifying religion with a set of propositions whose truth can be argued would be to make it into what would more accurately be called philosophy. Religion is more experiential-expressive than propositional.
      - Propagated by Paul Tillich emphasis on B cognition and the felt-whole
        - In this way, religion can be said to be the surface manifestation of this deep panhuman experiential potentiality
      - Geertz: Cultural-Linguistic approach - symbolic forms shape religious experiences and emotions – can't remove anything from its cultural context
      - Unitive representation – in trying to create a religious typology, cannot fail to refer to representations that attempt to point to a unitive event or experience
      - Context in which there is a "collective effervescence as the condition in which people experience a different and deeper reality
    - Jerome Bruner: children first experience objects as extensions of their own bodies, learning is lived rather than thought
      - This total bodily relation to reality is never lost – human beings remain corporeal beings.
      - Religion is by and large deeply involved with the body; ritual is always significantly embodied

- Bodily gestures are intrinsic features of ritual
  - Symbolic representation – Piaget – controlled symbolic play – classic example of peekaboo where there is controlled disappearance and reappearance of object or person
  - Child engages in ritualist delight in endless repetition of a game that arouses anxiety and dispels it
  - Images are full of muscles.
  - Iconic symbolization – child drawing, for example
  - Musical symbolization – music reaches right into the body
  - Not communication but insight is the gift of music
  - Linguistic symbolization – symbolic language
- Religion and Evolution
  - Tribal Religion: The Production of Meaning
  - From Tribal to Archaic Religion: Meaning and Power
  - Archaic Religion: God and King
  - The Axial Age I: Introduction and Ancient Israel
  - The Axial Age II: Ancient Greece
  - The Axial Age III: China in the Late First Millennium BCE
  - The Axial Age IV: Ancient India
  - Conclusion