

Robert Bellah understands religion as an activity that takes us beyond the quotidian. The everyday world is ordered by lack -- of food, of shelter, of 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, together with all their accompaniments and entails. In this non-quotidian world, the fundamental mode of religious activity is ritual, which serves as a deeply meaningful play.

Religion, so understood, is among the principal culture-ordering and society-forming activities. Evolutionarily speaking -- and this is one of the fundamental claims he makes -- 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 (and not only in humans: other mammals and birds are ritualized beings, too) out of the matrix of play -- the paradigmatic non-quotidian behavior. And 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 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.

First, there's a question about whether the evidence at hand justifies the rich narratively speculative sweep of the story Bellah tells. For example, at the beginning of his discussion of ancient Israel, Bellah notes that there's "still only weak and contested consensus on such elementary facts as the dating of various biblical texts." 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." He also acknowledges disputes about the dating of texts and 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." 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." 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." That's not reassuring, for "common sociological sense," 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 four-hundred-year socio-cultural 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 45 years ago in respectable English schools about the evolution of the human species could now be found in high school or college textbooks on the subject. Few of the particulars of the four-source (J, E, D, P) documentary source-hypothesis about the texts of the Old Testament that I learned a little 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 humans have evolved to a point where we have difficulty in 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. "The hour is the late" (602), he writes, improvising on 1 Corinthians 7. In addition to preventing species disaster, Bellah 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 sub-culture 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 we could. 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).

The call for abandoning claims of religious superiority is even less convincing. Bellah 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 in 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 which 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." 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 1751 wrote a book called *The Natural History of Religion*, whose professed goal was "to trace all [religion's] varied appearances in the principles of human nature, whence they are derived." 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 Christianity (or Islam or Buddhism) as a emergent phenomenon, and to do so without using the vocabulary proper to itself. 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 sui generis. Our primary categories are ritual, myth, and so forth, which happen to be filled with Christian content. We see ourselves sociologically, as it were, rather than theologically..

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 Christianity 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 and 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. What reason can show is that "it is wise to act as if another life -- and the moral state in which we end this one -- is unalterable."

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). Humans 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 the moral benefit of treatises like his own. Thus there is a problem here whose face Bellah can see, but which 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 in avoiding it.

Universal histories are by definition axiological -- committed, that is, to an understanding of what is better and what worse in the phenomena whose story they tell. Bellah's is not 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 with the fact 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 even guilty of a species-ist triumphalism because he affirms the evolutionary advantages of bacteria and arthropods when compared to those of humans. But once it is remembered that most humans have not had the advantage of Bellah's knowledge of the cosmos' 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 proposed 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 Bellah understands it, is inextricable from the genre in which he writes. If you're doing Humean natural history and 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 a lexicon and syntax, which together constitute a grammar, are essential. The lexicon provides the non-negotiable 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, does not prescribe the particulars of the story, but it does 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, hardboiled 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."

Whether 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. 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 Bellah's 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*, with spacetime 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 (they are all, therefore, creatures), and has whatever being it has by way of participation in him. Among these creatures are angels; (almost) simultaneously with creation (*in ictu*), some among these rebel against their creator, and introduce thereby deep damage into the otherwise harmoniously beautiful spacetime 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 creature, 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 *fnis* is the transfiguring of the cosmos' 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 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 univerrally shared, understood, or offered, and in this it is just like Bellah's account. If Bellah's metanarrative is true, this Christian one must be false -- because Bellah's account, he thinks, requires Christians exactly not to offer this narrative as a metanarrative. And if this Christian metanarrative is true, Bellah's 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 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.