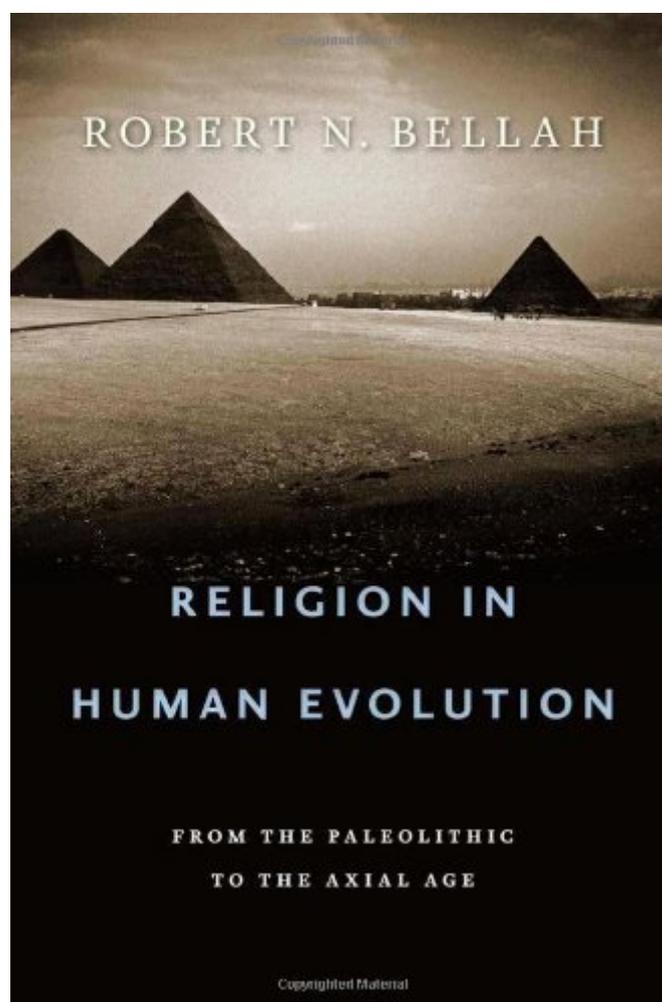


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Religion In Human Evolution



Synopsis

This ambitious book probes our biological past to discover the kinds of lives that human beings have imagined were worth living. Bellah's theory goes deep into cultural and genetic evolution to identify a range of capacities (communal dancing, storytelling, theorizing) whose emergence made religious development possible in the first millennium BCE.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a critical, historical sociology of religion of the highest order. Whether you're secular or religious or a bit of both or neither, I highly recommend reading this book. There is much going on in this text on multiple levels, theoretically and empirically. In brief, it puts into helpful perspective a lot of questions many of us have about religion. You will learn from this book a lot about how some of the major cultural traditions of the world have developed. Robert Bellah has been thinking about the topic at least since 1964 when he published "Religious Evolution" in the American Sociological Review. In a way, Religion in Human Evolution is a general theory of religion; and, while written over the last 13 years, Bellah has been developing his theory of religion for more than 40 years of a distinguished teaching and writing vocation at Harvard and the University of California at

Berkeley. Bellah's approach recognizes the importance but partial independence of all the variables: cultural, biological, social, political, economic, etc. - but his focus is on "religion" broadly and carefully defined. The book's subject is the way religion creates multiple realities and how those realities interact with the reality of daily life. Bellah begins with "the reality of life in the religious mode" and emphasizes that "religious evolution does not mean a progression from worse to better." Religion adds capacities to our cultural repertoire, so to speak, "but it tells us nothing about how those capacities will be used." In part, this book is a work of critical retrieval of what in the traditions of ancient Israel, Greece, China, and India might speak to us today. It is also informed by an Enlightenment critique of tradition. It tells a very human, grand story.

*****"Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* is the most important systematic and historical treatment of religion since Hegel, Durkheim, and Weber... Bellah breathes new life into critical universal history by making ancient China and India indispensable parts of a grand narrative of human religious evolution." -- Prof. Yang Xiao, *J. Comparative Philosophy*

Bellah's research project, using the insights of biological and cultural evolution to explore the development of religion from as early as the Paleolithic Era, continuing through tribal, archaic, historic, and modern societies, was supported by the John Templeton Foundation. Dr. Robert Bellah's research focuses on the Axial Age, the first millennium BC, when religions developed around the world that transcended the archaic fusion of divinity and kingship. It was a period of great empires in Mesopotamia, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece declaring the possibility that ordinary human beings could relate directly to a transcendent reality. The results of this research constitute the book, *Religion in Human Evolution*. Anthropologists have found that virtually ancient state societies and chiefdoms have been found to justify political power through divine authority. States founded out of the Neolithic revolution, as Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, were theocracies with Chieftains, kings and Emperors performing dual roles of political and religious leaders. This proposes that political authority co-opts collective religious belief to bolster itself. Bellah's work, of exceptional erudition, is a wide-ranging project of distinction in meaning, and expression, that probes our biological past, to discover the kinds of lives that our early human ancestors, have most often thought were worth living.

This is not an easy book to read. Its subject matter is indefinite, its scope extremely wide and deep, and it is very long (it took the author 13 years to write it - see page 567). Saying that, it is engaging (most of the time) and with patience (lots of, I have to say) one can see its underlying themes and

ideas. To understand it, firstly one needs to understand the definition of religion in this book: "religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community" (page 1) and "the sacred" is "something set apart or forbidden" (same page). It does not matter whether you agree with this or not - I resoundingly don't! - but this needs to be kept in mind when one tries to comprehend the next 600 pages. Next, the concept of "play" is introduced and is very important to the author. Again, I cannot agree with him entirely but this idea is prominent and pervasive throughout. He believes religion is a kind of "serious play" (page 109-116 and 569-576). That, I think, is contestable. Another key theme is the gradual development of a "theoretical" view of the world on top of a "mimetic" and "mythic" culture, i.e. the ability to reflect and abstract ideas concerning in particular society and religion. However, no matter how much we want to be "rational", we retain the innate desire to form narratives. But the ability to reflect facilitated the blossoming of egalitarianism and democracy, so the author claims, limited and feeble as they were. The main bulk and main theme of the book (pages 175-566) describe how the structure of a society influences that of its religion, and vice versa - this is the "evolution" bit in the title.

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