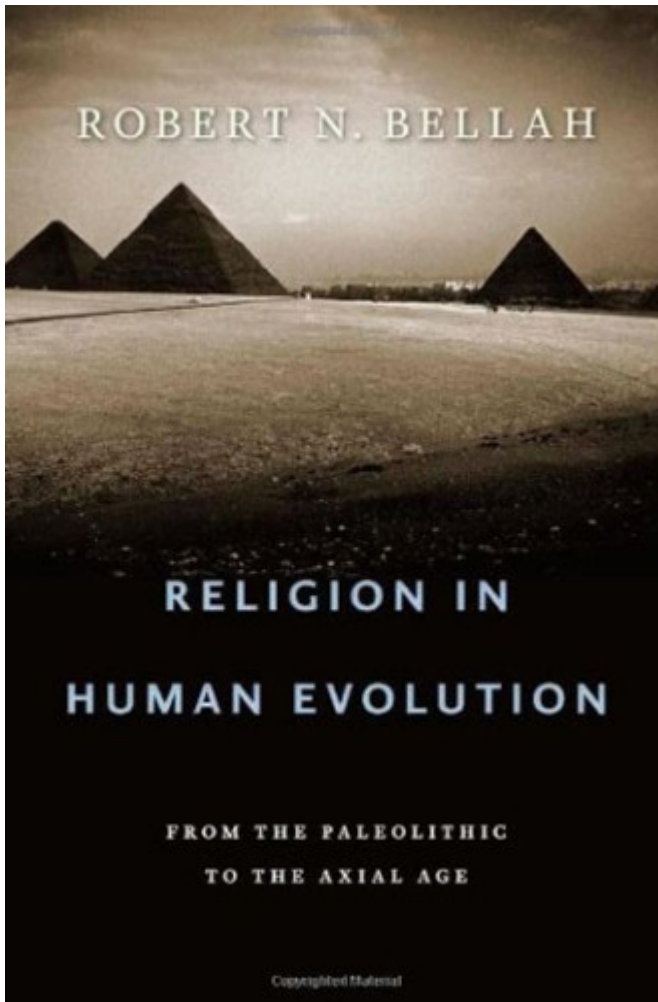


*Religion in Human Evolution*, by Robert N. Bellah

reviewed by [Benjamin S. Webb](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue

## In Review



## Religion in Human Evolution

By Robert N. Bellah  
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Some two decades before Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote the seminal 1985 book *Habits of the Heart*, which improved the public conversation about religion and society in the United States, Bellah penned a provocative essay called “Religious

Evolution.” He has finally returned to that ambitious theme in his magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution*, the fruit of 12 years of research and writing and of a distinguished life as an internationally respected public philosopher and sociologist of religion.

Perhaps only Bellah, with his lifelong passion and depth of curiosity for this huge subject, could synthesize for us such a vast range of biological, anthropological and historical literature that together reveal the origins and cultural evolution of religion, as well as its ongoing potential to transform human beings and societies in both East and West. He shows us how the world’s great religions have long demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt and renew themselves, while simultaneously contributing to breakthroughs at critical moments in history that have made the moral advance of human civilization possible.

These successive leaps in human moral development were particularly profound during the Axial Age of 800–200 BCE—where this book ends and its unfinished sequel begins—when the four civilizations of ancient Israel, Greece, China and India separately produced towering spiritual leaders and sages who helped move their cultures and us closer to a universal ethic that is still emerging in our day.

Bellah calls up some important witnesses from our deep past to see what they can tell us about “the kind of life human beings have imagined was worth living.” The way we all seem to be “driving beyond our headlights” today, as Wendell Berry puts it, is echoed in Bellah’s concern that “technological advance at high speed combined with moral blindness about what we are doing to the world’s societies and biosphere is a recipe for rapid extinction.” While Bellah does not revel in religious triumphalism, he does acknowledge the great moral advances, as well as the deep moral failures, of religion in history.

What especially interests Bellah are the symbolic and behavioral aspects of evolution, in which, he contends, we find most of the resources for religious development. Bellah sees these evolutionary developments as driven not so much by genes, as Richard Dawkins believes, as by the human organism, which is the central unit of evolution because it is capable of learning, changing its environment and increasing its own chances of survival. Religious developments, Bellah argues, shape human capacity as yeast leavens a loaf.

In Bellah's theory, religion and culture have evolved together in stages, increasing capacity along the way. What is gained at each stage is not lost or replaced in subsequent stages but is creatively reorganized under new conditions, because each capacity is central for human functioning. Perhaps this is why Bellah goes looking for "friends in history": to share them with us when the present age seems incoherent, when something is amiss and the Spirit seems elusive, when we seem to be in search of a fugitive faith we've allowed to run away from ourselves.

In the second part of the book, Bellah walks us through the life and history of four Axial civilizations as a new stage of human evolution unfolds. This is where Bellah displays his endless fascination with religion, which is "sociologically interesting," he writes, "not because it describes the social order but because it shapes it." How on earth did four disparate places, without benefit of contact, create figures like the prophets in ancient Israel, Socrates and Plato in Greece, Confucius and Mencius in China and the Buddha in India, all of whom emerged around the middle of the first millennium BCE to confront, renounce and reveal a new world?

Of course, the "world of daily life" is culturally and symbolically constructed in many different ways in many different places and times, but it is universally characterized by striving, work, anxiety and survival through daily tasks that are made more difficult when despotic leaders overreach and lay heavy burdens on their people in increasingly stratified societies, as we see in the transition to the Axial Era. The counterpoint to humans' disposition to dominate is the disposition to nurture, which is sometimes expressed when legitimate hierarchies seek to limit the dominance of would-be despots.

The world of daily life—including the potential to dominate or nurture—is also significantly shaped by religion, which conveys mysteries and meanings to us about another world we live in. Bellah contends that it is through play and imagination that humans first discover that other world, which is also encountered in the revelatory moments (or unitive experiences) common to all religions. The origins of play and imagination, in turn, are traceable to extended childhoods enveloped by mothers' cherishing behavior. Play is thus one of the greatest evolutionary capacities in human religious development.

"When enough people have entered that other world," says Bellah, "then the world of daily life to which they return is never quite the same again." The dynamic process in which "religion creates those other worlds" and in which "those worlds

interact with the world of daily life” simultaneously conserves and innovates. In Bellah’s rich descriptions of the four Axial Age civilizations, we encounter “renouncers as moral upstarts” who envision and articulate another reality about self, society and cosmos, a reality that not only reaches down to transform individuals and their world of daily life but finds its way into the corridors of power and statecraft, where these prophetlike figures held the leaders of their early states to a “moral standard that they clearly did not meet.”

These leaders thought analytically and logically about alternatives—the mark of “theoretic culture”—and their weapon was not force but speech. That is how they broke the earlier fusion of the divine and human in the person of the king, whose death was previously the greatest threat to human order. From the king-guided individual we begin to see in the Axial Age the emergence of the god-guided individual.

Bellah writes also of theoretic culture as a new stage of religious development that was ushered in during the first millennium BCE. It involves “questioning the old narratives as it reorganizes them, . . . rejecting ritual and myth even as it creates new rituals and myths, and calling all the old hierarchies into question in the name of ethical and spiritual universalism.” In each case the cumulative capacities of religion are reformulated and adapted, and nothing is left behind as capacities evolve. In the Axial Age, we learn, culture changed quickly because of religion’s effect on daily life and statecraft—which demonstrates that religion is enormously important, full of resilient capacity and immensely adaptive.

Bellah and his colleagues first gave us *Habits of the Heart*, which redefined the terms of the debate about individualism and social commitment; then they delivered its sequel, *The Good Society*, which helps us to better understand the institutions through which we live and how we might take responsibility for them and ultimately transform them. Now Bellah has given the world’s religions and leaders *Religion in Human Evolution*, a great legacy in one volume that says so much about our ongoing capacity to transform ourselves and human cultures throughout the world.