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The Promise and Contradictions of Axiality

by Jeffrey C. Alexander

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Religion in Human Evolution (RHE) is a magnificent intellectual achievement, and it is munificent as well, morally conscientious and emotionally caring. “The story I am about to tell,” Bellah writes near the book’s beginning, is “the story of life” [Bellah 2011, 53]. Manifestly an exemplar of the theoretic consciousness that Bellah attributes to the “Axial breakthrough”, the work is also, implicitly, existential narrative and historical myth. Not just strenuously rational social science, *RHE* is a wisdom story, a tale about the origins of the universe and the development of the earth and its creatures.

RHE presents a meditation on whether humankind is exceptional and, if so, whether our moral judgment and emotional experience can ever match our analytic and critical powers. Bellah has written a *Bildungsroman* about the human race, how it left hearth and home, separated from tribe and custom, became estranged from fathers and mothers, and became capable of thinking about thinking.

Because this story of *Bildung* stops shortly after the Axial breakthroughs were made, some 2000 years ago, we are uncertain about how, exactly, they bear on our present and future. In his preface, Bellah informs us “this book asks what our deep past can tell us about the kind of life human beings have imagined was worth living” [*ibidem*, xxiv], but the very point of the Axial breakthrough, which Bellah so subtly demonstrates and reconstructs, is that “history does not determine us, because organisms from the very beginning, and increasingly with each new capacity, have influenced their own fate” [*ibidem*, 83].

The Axial breakthrough has made a moral life possible, but will we ever be able to repair our societies so that, amidst all our wealth and power and critical debate, we will be able to live in a substantively moral way? *RHE* is peppered with dark hints and fateful forebodings. The normatively toned narrative focuses on the romance of increasing human mastery, but there is a submerged theme of the tragic failures that have been triggered by such hubristic success. The Axial breakthrough allowed humankind to taste of the tree of knowledge, but moral rightness and emotional happiness remained hard to find.

How have the capacities unleashed by the Axial age helped and hindered our efforts to make the critical decisions that determine our collective social fate?

The conceptual idea driving *RHE* is the religious creation of cultural-cum-social “capacities.” Bellah and his sources are clear about Axial-provided capacity in the cognitive sense: it is the capability of thinking about thinking, to be reflexive in Piaget’s sense and theoretical in Donald’s. They are also confident and lucid about moral capacity: It is the capability for sustaining universalism and exercising critical judgment. *RHE* is not at all clear, however, about what the Axial breakthrough contributes to emotional capacity. The developmental theories upon which Bellah relies have little to say about emotions. Little recourse is made to Freudian ideas, the most important Twentieth century theorizing about emotions. Instead of approaching feeling psychoanalytically, Bellah writes about play, describing it as a space for creative expression. How play-theory relates to developmental cognitive and moral theory is murky. Still, there can be no doubt that *RHE* pursues Parsons’ quest to integrate psychological, social, and cultural levels of analysis. Bellah brings together new and old findings in cognitive psychology and evolutionary biology to make a new case for the venerable but still robust argument that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

In addressing the question of what historical forces have triggered the developmental phases of religious evolution, and what are their social effects, Bellah connects the argument of *RHE* to the central question of the sociological tradition – the vexing problem of cultural autonomy. Sociological practice has been mostly about the determination of culture by society, not about its autonomy, the disciplinary “lesson” being that, while ideas may seem independent, actually they are not. Most of sociology has portrayed beliefs as reflecting status and power, putatively revealing how ways of thinking, feeling, and judging are deeply imbedded in social position. *RHE* challenges this dominant perspective. Its point is to show that, because of Axial breakthroughs, precisely the opposite is the case. Post-Axial culture cannot be reduced to the interests of dominating powers and the material conditions they are purported to represent.

Hegemonic cultures of East and West have been driven by narrative logics that facilitated moral transcendence and intellectual independence. Axial age religions do

not just allow but demand *dis*-embeddedness. Persons and groups without material privileges are not necessarily controlled by those who possess them; neither are they necessarily defined by the identities ascribed of their tribes. Other-and this-worldly utopias emerged from the Axial breakthrough. Idealized visions of morally perfect social orders have provided leverage for civil repair of, and social inclusion into, the deeply flawed social structures of actually existing historical societies. Does the always present possibility of this-worldly transcendence also guarantee the unhappy consciousness of the modern mind?

Despite Bellah's lifelong affinity with Durkheim – "I am closer to him in my sense of calling as a sociologist and an intellectual" [*ibidem*, xxvi] – the case *RHE* makes for the autonomy of culture is not at all what the great French thinker had in mind. Durkheim insisted culture was independent of social structure in the earliest societies, much as Levi-Strauss later marveled at the extraordinary rationality and complexity of the "savage mind." Especially in his later writings, Durkheim was fascinated by the internal structuring of culture, not its changing historical constitution so much as its binary constitution into the sacred and profane and the symbolic order this division sustained. Weber dismissed such "structural" insights as of dubious value; it was their cultural transformation that interested him. In *RHE*, Bellah thinks about culture in much the same way: "Almost every line displays a hidden debt to Weber, whose work was much closer as a model for me than Durkheim's" [*ivi*].

As Bellah is quick to acknowledge, it was Max Weber who initiated the idea that the prophetic religious dualism of ancient Judaism marked a radical historical rupture, constituting a cultural innovation that eventually, via ascetic Protestantism, created the modern age. What Bellah only rarely acknowledges is how *RHE* goes beyond Weber in an absolutely critical way. Despite its extraordinary erudition and comparative scope, Weber's historical analysis of culture was blinkered by the myopia of Orientalism. He regarded the Judeo-Christian tradition as uniquely transcendental, Confucianism as purely practical and this-worldly, and Hinduism as neutered by caste imposition. While Parsons' evolutionary sociological history paved the way for Bellah, it also suffered from Western particularism.

Bellah broke through the parochialism of the Western sociological tradition. He spent his adulthood in a postwar world where Japan was rapidly modernizing and China rising; he was trained as a scholar of Eastern religions and he experienced its practices firsthand. In his richly detailed hermeneutical reconstructions, Bellah demonstrates that Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism are as Axial as Judaism and Christianity. His lifelong friend and colleague, Shmuel Eisenstadt, also engaged evolutionary and Axial age theory and made the same anti-orientalist break vis-à-vis Weber and Parsons. Eisenstadt's "multiple modernities" is the twin to Bellah's reli-

gious evolution. Together, these late-Twentieth century thinkers created the basis for a post-imperial, post-orientalist elaboration of the Weberian cultural tradition.

The narrative of the Bellah *Bildungsroman* is a progressive one, a story about the opening up of capacities, not only for intellectual reflection, but, in the long run, for individual freedom and social equality. The bad guy in this progressive narrative – the antagonist that the Axial protagonist overcomes – is the Archaic religion enveloping the millennia between the Tribal and Axial periods. Describing the emergent chiefdoms that segued from Tribal equality to Archaic kingship, Bellah suggests “the chief also had a terrifying, destructive side, as indeed did the gods” [*ibidem*, 203].

The question roiling the only apparently smooth surface of *RHE* is whether Archaic chiefs and gods were the only destroyers. Bellah knows very well they were not. His story is about the world-historical breakthroughs that *allowed* cultural possibilities. Whether, and how, such possibilities can actually be realized is another matter, one that concerns, not the creation of meaning, but its institutionalization. In *RHE*, Bellah tells a story about Axial breakthroughs creating cultural capacities for arrogant kings and pharaohs to be brought to heel. The Greeks actually did without them, creating the first democracies; yet, the Athenians were also brutal fighters and imperialists, and their fledgling civil spheres excluded slaves, foreigners, and children. Despite the breakthroughs that allowed Confucians, Hindus, and Hebrews to monitor and mediate social hierarchies, none of the societies they inspired were able to dispense with authoritarian controls.

This is all about the relation between culture and institutionalization. What kinds of social developments did the religious breakthroughs of the Axial age trigger in the 2000 years after they emerged? There have been extraordinary social advances, such as rule of law, bureaucratically rational states, productive economies, civil spheres, science, and technology. But there have also been unmitigated disasters, dark developments that in the last century began to threaten the very future of humankind.

What are the cultural and social reasons for Bellah’s warning in the conclusion of *RHE*, two millennia after the Axial breakthrough, that “the hour is late” [*ibidem*, 602]? In the 1970s and 1980s, he wrote biting, critically acclaimed sociological jeremiads about the fall from grace of the contemporary, post-Axial age. Those books represented a break from the evolutionary project Bellah had already begun to nurture. Now he has taken that thread back up, confronting the challenge of relating religious evolution to the dark side.

There are many adumbrations of Axial-inspired bad tidings in *RHE*. If one tries pulling them together, one finds two quite different, though possibly complementary, approaches. One conceptualizes the relation between Axial evolution and the

dark side as contingent, produced by what Bellah, earlier in his career and borrowing from Freud, called “compromise formations.” The breakthroughs of the Axial age were progressive, but they were never able to be fully separate themselves from the particularistic, more primordial legacies of earlier Archaic forms. There remained the “choseness” problem of Hebrew religion, the caste problem for Hinduism, the ancestor worship and loyalism of Confucianism, the militarism of the Greek city states.

The other approach implies that the dark side was not so much a matter of the Axial dimension not fully breaking away as a problem of tensions internal to Axial transcendence itself. At the core of the possibility of intra-Axial pathology is objectification: Can critical transcendence be achieved without what György Lukács called reification, without making nature and human beings into alienated and othered things? In the last paragraph of *RHE*, Bellah writes “theory that has come loose from its cultural context can assume a superiority that leads to crushing mistakes” [*ibidem*, 603]. But, of course, such disembeddedness is the very aim of theory, defined by Bellah as “disengaged knowing” [*ibidem*, 596].

Is it not such disengagement that allows the human “instinct” for aggression [*ibidem*, 70] to be expressed in violently systematic ways? Bellah quotes from Michael Walzer’s account of Moses’ “Leninist” side, where Walzer references *Exodus* 32: 27-29.

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor’.” The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, “Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day” [*ibidem*, 310].

Objectified, aggressively violent manifestations of Axial-ism suppress the maternal side that Bellah also associates with the “new relation between gods and humans” – where one “finds a significant place for the disposition to nurture as well” [*ibidem*, 261].

Axial objectification also provides capacities for intensifying polarization. The capacity for transcendence depends on dualism. The ability to draw sharp boundaries between heaven and earth can drastically moralize social divisions, rigidly separating the pure saved from the polluted unsaved. In the long history of its social institutionalization, the universalism of Axial culture has never not been undermined by primordial barriers, of tribe, region, empire, and state. Such boundaries have allowed the dark side of objectification to be applied to actors on the other side. Axial universalism has never been realized on the global stage. In the moving last sentence of *RHE*, Bellah calls for “the actualization of Kant’s dream of a world civil

society that could restrain the violence of state-organized societies” [*ibidem*, 606]. The nightmares of nationalism and statism are linked to objectifying tensions inside Axial-ism itself.

The challenge of connecting religious evolution to the dark side of modernity points to a conundrum in *RHE*’s conceptualization of developmental staging. What is the relationship between enacting, narrating, and conceptualizing, between gestures, icons, symbols, myths, and theories? On the one hand, the very idea of development suggests that each earlier stage has been surpassed. On the other hand, as Bellah is rightfully at pains to suggest, no earlier capacity is ever left entirely behind. It may be that “theory” is simply not an adequate category to express the Axial capacity for critical self-reflection. Is there ever such a separated category of understanding outside philosophy broadly considered and natural-scientific thought?

To properly connect the stages of meaning and motivation, we may need to return to Durkheim, to complement the Weberian obsession with universalism as emerging from cultural change with the idea of culture as possessing universal qualities of humankind. The sacred is never lost, rituals never disappear, totems and symbols remain, and it is these fundamental constituents of every culture that supply the sources for social solidarity. By pouring new wine into these old bottles, the Axial breakthrough made it possible, for the first time, to extend real existing social solidarities into closer approximation with the idealized heavenly state.

Because Bellah’s work has so adumbrated the contradictions and possibilities of modern, social thinkers will be eternally in his debt.

References

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Abstract: In its hermeneutically rich reconstructions of “Axial Age” breakthroughs in the world’s great religions, RHE provides an all-important historical explanation for the autonomy of culture vis-à-vis social structure in the present day. Powerfully documenting “Eastern” as well as “Western” Axial breakthroughs, RHE goes beyond the Orientalism that distorted Weber’s own historical and comparative sociology of religion, which restricted such breakthroughs to the Judeo-Christian tradition and its offshoots. Because RHE is a progressive narrative about the creation of new capacities, it cannot systematically address the dark side of post-Axial societies. RHE advances two possible lines of explanation. One is that earlier, Archaic modes of subordination and domination have continued to stick; the other is that there are contradictions inside Axial transcendence itself. Is it possible that Axiality facilitates reification and othering? If so, what cultural and institutional resources might serve as antidotes?

Keywords: Axial, culture, autonomy, reification, orientalism.

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