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# Bellah, Joas and the Future of “The Elementary Forms”

by Edward A. Tiryakian

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## Introduction

In the present decade, the sociology of religion has been enormously boosted at home and abroad by two sets of first-class intellectual enterprises. One has been prompted by the endeavor of Robert Bellah and Hans Joas to provide a dynamic analysis of religion linking it to the “axial age” framework of comparative analysis. Stemming from a conference of leading scholars meeting in Erfurt in 2008, Bellah and Joas published in 2012 a massive tome, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*; the preceding year, Bellah climaxed decades of research with his monumental *Religion in Human Evolution* [Bellah and Joas 2012; Bellah 2011]. Together these works mark an important theoretical (re)turn in the sociology of religion and will be discussed later in this paper.

The other, equally important for the sociology of religion, is of a different collective nature, one with nevertheless a common focus. The year 2012 marked the centenary of the publication of Emile Durkheim’s *magnum opus*, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (hereafter, *The Forms*) [Durkheim 1912]. To commemorate the century mark of its being a foundation of the sociology of religion, special issues of journals and conferences were held in many sites, inside and outside France. One might well speak of the intellectual sparks generated by *The Forms* worldwide as a moment of “collective effervescence.” And as such, in a more sober mood of the morning after, one can ask, “what follows?”

At the international Durkheim conference organized by Raquel Weiss in Brazil in October 2012, I presented a paper whose last section will be used as background for my present discussion [Tiryakian 2012]: I will extend my line of thought by linking it with the Bellah and Joas volumes, and by providing additional remarks on the problematic status of religion in the Twenty-first Century.

## I

What is the future of *The Forms* for the sociology of religion? Undoubtedly, in the past 100 hundred years it has entered in our sociological pantheon as a "classic", one whose "spirit" is kept pulsating with a dedicated corps of Durkheimian practitioners. I consider myself one of these, and am also a staunch admirer of a young generation of such practitioners who regularly publish new *historical* finds in Durkheimian Studies, such as Matthieu Béra, Raquel Weiss, Alexander Riley, and Massimo Rosati among others who supplement a greying generation of "elder" Durkheimians.

Impressive and extensive as this international Durkheimian research-oriented community is, my perspective of the future of *The Forms* in the American side of the sociology of religion in the graduate curriculum and training of students at leading research universities is more tempered. In the prevailing harsh, cold climate of empirical training in the United States, *The Forms* is becoming more of a shelf space in the Valhalla of classics than a desktop companion. What seems to be of value worth transmitting to new generations of American graduate students is the preparation of research articles that comb or harvest survey data which measure in some statistically sophisticated manner correlations and trends relating features of religious life to other institutional sectors of our society.<sup>1</sup> And while American society is still an anomaly among advanced industrial societies for its high level of popular religious involvement (symbolically shown by presidential and other candidates proclaiming at the end of their hortation to their faithful, "God bless America!"), there is no indication of religion being an active force in foreign or domestic affairs. If anything, in the United States at least, traditional religious symbols – such as "merry Christmas" greetings, a crèche in public schools, the Ten Commandments, and even the calendar dating of AD/BC – are receding from the public sphere, often under legalistic challenges appealing to secular interpretations of the separation of church and state.

<sup>1</sup> Among the best of the current empirical research may be mentioned Putnam and Campbell [2010], Chaves [2004], and Chaves [2011].

In any case, the challenge is to bring back to the fore the intellectual vigor of the sociology of religion, both empirically and theoretically. What (and who) then, are stimuli within this field of studies that bode well for future research?

Christian Smith, director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, is one of the foremost American figures in the sociology of religion. He has drawn on Durkheim's "social epistemology" to address very basic, "elementary" questions, such as "what is a person?" and how does a realistic social ontology inform us of the dignity of all humans, as an alternative to the individualistic atomism of liberal individualism [Smith 2010]? A very fruitful dialogue should ensue between the work of Smith and a large part of Durkheim's analysis of religion and of individualism (in his essays on "Individualism and Intellectuals", and "The Duality of Human Nature") [Durkheim (1898) 1973a; Durkheim (1914) 1973b].

More to the point for now is the essay of Smith reviewing the field of the sociology of religion [Smith 2008]. After discussing two paradigms – positivist empiricism and hermeneutical interpretivism – which have generated a great deal of current research, he looks for going beyond well-ploughed features of the quotidian, to newly emerging areas of social experience [*Ibidem*, 1563]. What are some promising understudied areas in the sociology of religion that can generate creativity in scholarship and research?

The first he mentions is *beliefs*. Survey research only indirectly gets at people's beliefs, and Smith argues that the substance of people's beliefs is not obtained in most simple survey questions about "belief in God", which informs us little about why or how persons commit to some religious organization rather than another. Smith points to a study that shows how survey can improve religious measurement by taking more seriously the actual beliefs of particular religious groups [*Ibidem*, 1564]. But a great deal of *The Elementary Forms* is precisely given to analyzing religious beliefs; much may be gained by a new perspective in survey research stemming from re-reading Durkheim and applying this to contemporary organizations' structures, in terms of the beliefs which underlie commitment to these structures.

A second area which Smith views as deserving improved study is "the role of the religious body;" as he notes: "bodies partly incarnate religious beliefs and enact religious practices" [*Ibidem*, 1565].<sup>2</sup> Smith goes on to discuss how integrally religion relates to the body, yet contemporary research in the sociology of religion is still in an early stage, lagging some rich analyses and historical theorizing discussed by Turner [1997]. Still, promising starts have been made in the context of medical sociology, such as organ transplants [Healy 2004]. Smith does not propose a specific research

<sup>2</sup> For a cross-regional spectrum of perspectives, see Coakley [1997].

program, but opines that the study of the body in relation to the sacred will greatly enrich our sociological understanding of religion. Here again, I would note, is another juncture for a fruitful dialogue with Durkheim and contemporary researchers in the sociology of religion and in cultural sociology. For Durkheim drew attention to the significance of the body in much of totemic religion, for example, in the personal and collective identity of tattoos. Durkheim's lead was followed after World War I by Mauss's own seminal work on the "techniques of the body" [Mauss 1935]. Both Durkheim and Mauss would find it of great interest to see how tattoos have gone from archaic primitive Aborigines to modern, bourgeois urban settings!<sup>3</sup> This, alongside body piercing by young adults, is an anomaly of modernity and identity which needs serious empirical research and theorizing, one which can further enhance the necessity of dialogue between today's trustees of Durkheim's *Forms* and advanced contemporary research in the sociology of religion.

Besides the mutilation of the body as a feature of the mutilation of the presentation of the self [Turner 1997, 19], body mutilation also is part of a set of practices in a wide array of contexts, both traditional and modern. On the "light side" one can treat self-imposed mutilation of bodies (e.g., nose, ears, tongue piercing) to conform to dictates of consumerism, status enhancement in youth groups, or as an expression of egalitarianism [Simpson 1993]. But mutilation has a more severe "dark side", of which women's mutilation in patriarchal societies, West and East, are shameful examples, past and present. Torture has been used for both expressive purpose and in instrumental rationality to extract information; if torture is associated in popular imagery with the Dark Ages of the past, it has been legitimated in the use of "enhanced interrogated techniques" (such as waterboarding<sup>4</sup>) against Al Qaeda and other military detainees in Guantánamo Bay Prison. Rituals of mutilation, such as circumcision, have been used widely traditionally, on both male and female children; whether this should continue to be sanctioned in modern secular states or whether condemned as a violation of human rights (especially but not just in the practice of female genitalia mutilation) has fueled controversy among "traditionalists" and "modernists."

While Smith discusses other areas of promise for innovative research in the sociology of religion, we need consider just one more: *emotions* [Smith 2008, 1566]. Emotions have become legitimate concerns of sociologists, and have even drawn

<sup>3</sup> From its anti-social, anti-establishment image in the 1960s, tattooing has become a multi-billion industry with an estimated 1/3 of Americans below 25 and as much as two-fifths aged 26-40 wearing a tattoo. It has come into the mainstream, not only in team sports but also among a wide variety of public celebrities [see Levins 2012].

<sup>4</sup> For an extensive presentation of waterboarding through the ages down to contemporary use, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waterboarding>.

scholars into a new section of the American Sociological Association [see Turner and Stets 2005; Stets and Turner forth.]. While cognizant, Smith sees this has not been incorporated in the mainstream of the sociology of religion which prefers to focus on “respectable” aspects of organizational, political, or economic aspects of religion. Yet, as Durkheim clearly understood in working through the ethnographic materials of the Arunta, and in deploying the moments of “collective effervescence” in historical moments when new ideals are generated and actualized, religious life may be experienced through strong emotions – of joy, fury, awe, exaltation – and not just cognitively. Once again, this is an important link in a dialogue between *The Forms* and the sociology of religion.

Lastly in this context is the importance for the future of the sociology of religion to have an institutional organization for ongoing research projects beyond the history of the field.<sup>5</sup> That is the potential of the Center at the University of Notre Dame that Smith is directing, with various collaborative projects in promising areas, such as an initiative to stimulate multiple scientific research on the practice of generosity, and another on “multiple modernities” on social and cultural change around the world as a theoretical and analytical framework. This Center provides an empirical complement to the Centre for Durkheimian Studies at Oxford first organized under W.S.F. Pickering and now enjoying a board of leading Durkheimian scholars.

Both Centers conduct, in their own fashion, what may be thought of in terms of Durkheim’s implicit research program for the sociology of religion as “normal science.”

## II

A second major field of inquiry for the future of the sociology of religion, in addition to some areas of empirical research just traced above, is new analytical and theoretical endeavors. Although short of being a theoretical system or even a paradigm, various threads have started to form a coherent framework with the focus being the comparative, dynamic study of civilizations. We need to briefly indicate some of its lineage in the context of post-war modernity.

In Germany after the collapse of the ill-fated Nazi regime which engulfed Europe in carnage for the second time in the century, the German existential philosopher Karl Jaspers took stock in 1949 of the need for a new historical narrative to replace the privileged, triumphalist narrative of the nation-state (and for that matter, of

<sup>5</sup> Durkheim himself benefitted not only from the *Année Sociologique* as a functional “laboratory” but also from his institutional affiliation with the Sorbonne and the *École Normale*.

the triumphalist narrative of Western civilization). In his short but pregnant *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (*The Meaning and Goal of History*), Jaspers drew attention to multiple starts of modernity in several regions of the world that were fairly concentrated in time, roughly in the first millennium B.C. This period of intense cultural creativity and new cognitive awareness Jaspers termed "axial age", of which the Christian tradition of Christ as the "axis mundi" was one but not a *primus among pares*.

After Jaspers (who did not subsequently amplify his insight in world history), the theme of axial age was continued by others seeking to amplify cultural studies. We should briefly note some of the conceptual development leading to the works noted at the beginning of this article.

An important current gained new currency after the collapse of the Soviet system, not the "end of history" [Fukuyama 1992], but the current of globalization, which stressed the interdependence and interrelation of the world, in both cooperative and antagonistic relations. A new narrative of the international scene was generated by the substitution of the concept of "civilization" for "nation-state" as the key unit of analysis.

The political scientist Samuel Huntington had introduced it in the 1990s in viewing a new basis of international conflict in the "clash of civilizations" across different regions of the world. The unexpected attack on the United States at the start of the new millennium by a non-state force, plunging the United States and the West into a war without boundaries, rendered more urgent accounting for the world in terms other than the narrative of nation-states.

The theme of "civilization", long dormant in the sociological tradition, came back with vigor, as a broad, dynamic cultural complex evolving over time and space, and providing a large set of actors with significant resources, including finding meaning and motivation to cope with modernity. Various aspects of "civilization" were examined in a special issue of *International Sociology* that appeared the week of 9/11 and was republished as a volume a few years later [Arjomand and Tiryakian 2004].

Of the many rich essays expanding on the sociology of civilizations in that volume, of particular relevance here is that by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Civilizational Dimension of Modernity." In that piece Eisenstadt, as is suggested in the title of his essay, outlined major features of a cultural and political programme of a distinctive type of civilization. Eisenstadt had already made much of Jaspers' concept of "Axial Age Civilization" and now went beyond this to consider that the development and expansion of modernity had institutional challenges and confrontations providing modernity with "the continual changeability of patterns" [*Ibidem*, 59]. Adding to this dynamic, reflexivity produced a widely spread critical spirit, one that could even challenge in certain settings some of the transcendental visions that had formed

breakthroughs at the heart of specific Axial Age civilizations. Eisenstadt saw that the historical experiences of various civilizational “traditions” and their changing institutional frameworks, greatly criss-crossing each other in our period of advanced globalization, meant that the world as a set of “multiple modernities” remained even more an “open system.” In the course of historical development, he also noted that earlier perspectives of “modernization” had not factored in the force of political contestation and violent struggle, some even leading to revolutions and the Jacobin state, not just in Eighteenth Century France but also to more recent modern and even contemporary instances.

For three decades, right up to his death in 2010, Eisenstadt was in the forefront of drawing and extending the historical and analytical conceptualization of “axial civilizations” and their “multiple modernities” [Eisenstadt 1986; Eisenstadt 2000; Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock 2005]. He had a keen ability to examine both specific and general patterns of sociocultural development, from Israel to India and Japan, and had written much about the dialectic of “tradition and modernity” in some respect renewing Durkheim’s legacy of the duality of “sacred and profane.” Eisenstadt’s ability to incorporate a vast amount of empirical and theoretical research at a high level of generality, included integrating the macrotheoretical legacy of Weber and Parsons’ comparative analyses of key societal and civilizations units of the historical process.<sup>6</sup>

Parsons in one of his last writings had turned his attention to the evolution of modern societies from “primitive societies”, with attention to the key general processes of social differentiation and integration. Over time, and with innovative cultural and technological breakthroughs that may become institutionalized, some societies reach a new level of “adaptive capacity” which gives competitive advantage in relation to other societies [Parsons 1977, 50]. There is in his discussion no linear development, and no closed boundary on modernity: patterns of successful upgrading are presumably available to different societies. And unlike the social Darwinism of the Nineteenth Century, Parsons insisted that increased adaptive capacity “does not imply moral superiority” [*Ibidem*, 70].

Parsons’ later “evolutionary turn” on modernity may be seen as providing a fertile background to the evolutionary treatise on religion of Bellah (who had worked closely with Parsons as a graduate student and as faculty colleague at Harvard).<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> Weber’s religious studies of China, India, and ancient Judaism are well known, but one should also in the comparative study of civilizations and modernity acknowledge the works of the later Talcott Parsons [Parsons 1971; Parsons 1977].

<sup>7</sup> Bellah had participated with Parsons and Eisenstadt in a faculty seminar on social evolution held at Harvard in 1963. His contributing essay “Religious Evolution” [reprinted in Bellah 1970,



broad framework in *The Evolution of Societies* is of an open system, at both ends of sociocultural evolution. At the upper end Parsons discusses the most advanced stage of the "societal community" and its value-commitment to inclusion. As to the beginning of societal evolution Parsons treats this with a brief analysis of "primitive societies" and enters the disclaimer,

Let me [...] confess that, although I assume an evolutionary progression, I have no explanation for the emergence of primitive societies from primordial subhuman forms. [*Ibidem*, 48]

After considering the stage of "archaic societies", he discusses China as a fully institutionalized historic religion in a unified large-scale society. Interesting as his discussion regarding China and later early empires, is, my point here is that Parsons begins by citing Bellah as his authority on Confucianism as the most archaic among historic religions [*Ibidem*, 73]. He would certainly have renewed his esteem if only in terms of the detailed scholarly exposition of Bellah's chapter on Confucianism's lasting influence in paving the way for China's axial age (*China in the Late First Millennium*) [see Bellah 2011].

### III

Bellah provides a key link not only with Parsons, but also with Eisenstadt, the theoretical tradition of the sociology of religion, and with evolutionary theory (see *infra*, footnote 7). As noted in my introductory remarks, the twin volumes of his own *Religion in Human Evolution* [Bellah 2011] and the collaborative publication (with Hans Joas) of *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* [Bellah and Joas 2012] form together what might be viewed as a contemporary companion, if not an "upgrade", of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

A preparatory essay for the two works was his provocative "What is Axial about the Axial Age?" [Bellah 2005] Therein he provided first an historical overview of "axial phenomena", including new patterns in the relation between "god and king" (in Durkheimian terms, between "sacred" and "profane"). Bellah pauses in his narrative long enough to emphasize that in his framework on religious evolution "nothing is ever lost": the form of the relationship between, say, political and religious

20-50] proposed as a final consideration of the evolution of religion a cautious optimism. If culture and personality are "endlessly revisable" as evolutionary thought surmises, this is not tantamount to the collapse of meaning and decline of moral standards, but also an opening for creative innovations in all human spheres [*Ibidem*, 44]. His conclusion here bears a likeness to his substantially enlarged evolutionary theory forty years later.

power, may become altered from one early evolutionary stage to a later one, but “the relationship never goes away” [*Ibidem*, 72]. Similarly, rituals, having their genesis in the unfolding of mimetic culture in the prehistoric past, do not disappear in later stages of cognitive evolution. Following this caveat, he gives critical attention to the cultural innovations of and beyond those treated by Jaspers.

A decisive influence on Bellah’s evolutionary thinking is that of Merlin Donald, a distinguished Canadian cognitive neuroscientist, well versed in psychology and psychiatry, the humanities, and the social sciences.<sup>8</sup> Immensely productive, Donald has provided a challenging new perspective on the development of the human mind and cognitive evolution [Donald 1991; Donald 2001]. To indicate very briefly some features of his theorizing and research in the present context, Donald’s exploration of consciousness and human symbolic activity proposes three major stages of cultural evolution in the adaptive upgrading of human beings. Making use of anthropology and archaeology, he proposes an initial (but already after a long process of “episodic” contacts among our ancestors even prior to the complex symbolic system of language) stage of *mimetic culture*. It is in this phase that our distant ancestors created prelinguistic symbolic traditions such as rituals, dance, art, and craft. While short, and therefore limited in symbolic expression, mimesis made possible participation in other minds, and as Bellah comments here, “mimesis remains indispensable in ‘the collective modeling and hence the structuring’ of human society itself [Bellah 2011, 131].

Mimetic culture was essentially limited to a narrow sphere of action, the here-and-now. But it was a necessary stage that paved the way for a second major development, that of *mythic culture*, with the development of language by *Homo erectus*, and carry-overs from mimetic culture (such as rituals) that gave our distant ancestors adaptive advantages. The third stage of cultural development that is significant in accounting for the human mind is *technologically supported culture*. Our memory received important external storage, beyond oral transmission (universally recognized in various forms of story-telling and their specialists, secular and sacred). Technological inventions have succeeded one another with increasing frequency, into our present technologically advanced society, changing the way our brain adapts to the gigantic information environment. The latter is continually expanding in time and in space, and provides individuals not only with greater constraints (of being manipu-

<sup>8</sup> The importance of Donald on Bellah’s theorizing is amply indicated in the latter’s *Religion in Human Evolution* and in Donald’s own chapter, “An Evolutionary Approach to Culture: Implications for the Study of the Axial Age,” in Bellah and Joas [2012, 47-76].

lated with loss of privacy) but also with greater possibilities for freedom and action with an enlarged and readily available set of networks.

Bellah has expanded this in discussing the rise and development of *theoretic culture*. Over the course of several centuries, a symbiotic process has taken place between our expanding mind and our expanding cultural environment. Bellah rejects seeing the evolutionary process as unmitigated triumph, neither of a specific cultural tradition (e.g., Western Christian civilization), nor, in the face of the growing degradation of the environment, of the whole human species. Yet, he suggests what might appear to be an appropriate Stoic end state in our current axial age phase of development:

The increasing number of serious students of religion who can accept religious pluralism as our destiny without making a claim to the superiority of our tradition [*Ibidem*, 603].

We began by mentioning the contemporary juxtaposition of recent Axial Age scholarship with the centennial celebration of Durkheim's classic *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. What perspective emerges from this juxtaposition that might further stimulate theorizing and research?

## Conclusion

In a brief, terse "think piece", Merlin Donald sketched out from a thoughtful scientific perspective a challenging summation of the evolving situation of religion and the modern mind [Donald 1999]. Western intellectual life is marked by a growing secular intelligentsia, alienated and uncomfortable with their own deeply religious past: "we are in a cultural free-fall, with no ground in sight" [*Ibidem*, 22]. Religion has been co-extensive with the collectivity, far longer than its being internalized as we have understood our moral self; this applies to all religions, even those which have adopted a rational veneer in the form of explicit theologies. Donald reiterates that our deepest cultural life lies in collective action and mimetic thought, including the rituals of formal religion still manifest in the public arena. Even modern spirituality rests on a "mimetic" ground, which ultimately originates in the traditional sources of communal practice and belief.

Durkheim would find his theory of the genesis of religion and the periodic revitalization of the sacred in rituals congruent with the evolutionary framework of modern neurobiology and cognitive evolution. And as a spokesman and formulator of this scientific approach to the mind and consciousness, Donald can only find Durkheim to be a valuable social science ally. And while both might be all too readily

be seen as part of the modern secularist intelligentsia who cherish as a privilege and a duty to demolish the traditions of the past, neither Durkheim nor Donald can in fact be so classified.

Donald, for instance, ends his brief tour viewing the new condition of the vastly increased externalization of cognitive reality having possibilities of moral anarchy or, by contrast, a new religious genius may “discover a fantastically clever way to protect the sacred core that has sustained our turbulent history as a species.” Is this not an echo of Durkheim searching for a renewal of communally-based religion generating the ideals and values of advanced modern society, lest it continue its free-fall into *anomie*?<sup>9</sup>

What then of *Religion in Human Evolution* and *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*? There are undoubtedly several ways of reading Bellah. He has produced an awesome integration of materials from a large number of sources and has synthesized them in a single narrative of the long, very long unfolding of religion coextensive with multiple stages of human evolutionary adaptation, before and during the axial age. In some respects, this is the most extensive broadening of Jaspers’ initial pursuit of a new historical narrative that one could ask for. As a metanarrative it bears favorable comparison with previous comprehensive accounts of man’s situation in the universe, by two authors who are not cited in either Bellah [2011] or in Bellah and Joas [2012].

One is a grand synthesis of population dynamics and biology that E. O. Wilson offered in his *magnum opus*, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* [Wilson 1975], bringing together great empirical advances in neurobiology, archaeology, and anthropology. It sought, in the case of Wilson, to promote a dialogue of “consilience” with other enlightened scientific bodies (with a partial ticket of admission given to economics). Going beyond the boundaries of “normal science”, Wilson extended the realm of sociobiology to account for all significant aspects of human nature, including what he acknowledged a critical aspect, religion [Wilson (1978) 2004]. Religion in the past has been able to provide answers for major dilemmas, but the new challenges of genetic engineering require new adaptations of sociality, calling for a new “Promethean spirit of science” to construct “the mythology of scientific materialism, guided by the corrective devices of the scientific method” [*Ibidem*, 209].

Inverting the tacit hierarchy of scientific materialism and religion in the grand narrative is the equally bold work of a modern evolutionary synthesis, Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man*, written on the eve of World War II and first

<sup>9</sup> It may also be viewed further, to now neglected Benjamin Kidd, who applied Darwinian natural selection in viewing religion as essential to the evolutionary survival and progress of society. His *Social Evolution*, reissued in 2009 [Kidd 2009], appeared the same year as Durkheim’s own evolutionary work, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1894).

published in French in 1955 [Teilhard de Chardin 1955]. A Jesuit priest and a scientist, marked by his experiences during World War I, he spent many years in China as a noted paleontologist and geologist. In extensive contacts with the scientific community, he stressed that the human condition leads to the psychic unity of mankind on a voluntary basis, by evolutionary stages of complexity in consciousness, toward the "Omega Point."<sup>10</sup> Space limitation prevents the fuller discussion that his works deserve.<sup>11</sup> Let me note, however, that Teilhard de Chardin, though well known in scientific circles in his lifetime, was equally suspect for possible heresy by his superiors in the pre-Vatican II period. The present discussions regarding the evolution of Axial Age civilization can find appropriate and relevant his endeavor to bridge science and spirituality, including the attention he gives to the breakthrough of human reflexivity. He would fit right in Joas's incisive opening "The Axial Age as Religious Discourse" [Bellah and Joas 2012, 9-29] and the ensuing theme of "Transcendence" that runs through that volume as well as in the evolutionary vision of Chardin. That theme is undoubtedly a key to the unfolding of the axial age conceptualization, past and present. It may be read as the Holy Grail of contemporary axial age debates.

Before closing, I should admit that I don't quite see the same tranquil panorama in the vast evolutionary process as one cursory reading might seem to provide. I see clashes in the course of the historical process between and within civilizations, not just centuries across which "breakthroughs" occurred long ago but also presently. Not all clashes are of physical violence, although that is our image. They are also verbal and symbolic, in the public sphere, over control of cultural institutions (the field of heresies is replete and awaits sociological research). Liberalism tends to gloss over the hard knocks of history and its cultural matrix, while realism takes fuller account of pitfalls and shortfalls. Secularist discourse seeks full emancipation from the oppression of religious traditions (which the French Revolution briefly achieved in doing away with the Christian era marking of time along with other remains of the *ancient régime*); fundamentalist discourse seeks a reversal of evolution in the rehabilitation of the traditional ritual order and its political legitimation.

In this ambiguity of advanced modernity, how religion fits in the Axial Age today, and whether we are early witnesses and actors of a "new" Axial Age civilization with new levels of consciousness detached from human agents, remains an open book. Stemming from this consideration, Bellah in *Religion in Human Evolution* has opened an important realistic pathway of religious evolution – which might be

<sup>10</sup> "It is to this higher term of human co-reflection... that I have given the name of 'Omega Point': the cosmic, personalizing center of unification and union" [Teilhard de Chardin 1975, 214].

<sup>11</sup> There is a vast literature on different aspects of his work, as a scientist, a philosopher, and a theologian. See, for example: Birx [1972]; Hanson [1970]; McCarty [1976].

viewed as a vast stochastic process – adding critical conceptual materials, and paving an avenue for theorizing and research with the collaboration of Hans Joas that has already generated *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*. They are worthy successors of Durkheim’s own quest for the Holy Grail of the inclusive religion appropriate for our age. We can do no better nor no worse than follow them.

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## **Bellah, Joas and the Future of "The Elementary Forms"**

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Abstract: While traditional religion has been losing ground in the public sphere in the United States, the sociology of religion has been gaining vitality from several sources, even beyond the many conferences held in 2012 to commemorate Durkheim's epochal *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. One set of empirical stimuli has been the work of Christian Smith and the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame. A second stimulus is new analytical and theoretical endeavors expanding on the sociology of civilizations, with important contributions from Parsons and Eisenstadt. A pinnacle of this development is the recent cultural evolutionary thinking of Bellah [2012], synthesizing materials from Jaspers, Eisenstadt, and cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald. As a grand narrative, it bears comparison with E. O. Wilson's and Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary frame. We are still grappling with Durkheim's challenge of what are the religious forms appropriate for our advanced modernity.

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*Keywords: Durkheim, Eisenstadt, Parsons, the body, civilization, mimetic culture.*

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