

Adam B. Seligman

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# Reflexivity, Play, Ritual, and the Axial Age

by Adam B. Seligman

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Robert Bellah's study of *Religion in Human Evolution* is a rich and multilayered account that can be interrogated from many different perspectives and points of view. The scholarship is so broad and the field so wide that it is almost impossible to discuss the whole, without one's own words taking on the character of the superficial, the hagiographic, or the formulaic. In the following then, I will engage with only one or two themes presented in the book, not so much to critique a thesis but more to embellish certain insights that have implications beyond the grand presentation of millennia of the human experience that this book seeks to address.

Bellah's study is bounded on one extreme by the Paleolithic Age and at the other by the Axial Age. About half of the book is devoted to Axial Age religions, in ancient Israel, Greece, India, and China. And it is here, rather than in the Paleolithic that I wish to begin. The idea of the Axial Age, first introduced by Karl Jaspers following the Second World War, has been garnering much attention recently. The work of Eric Voegelin, of Benjamin Schwartz, and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's studies of the 1980s, as well as that of other scholars, have all been renewed *foci* of interest and different readings of the concept and its importance have contributed to a growing literature around the concept of Axial religion. The concept has in fact become somewhat blurry over time, as scholars have moved from speaking of an Axial Age, to axiality (as a characteristic of certain social orders) and some very serious scholars, such as Jan Assman, have questioned the very binary distinction posited between Axial and pre-Axial civilizations.

In the most basic of terms, the Axial Age refers to that period, between roughly 500 BCE and 600 CE when, in Eisenstadt's terms there emerged and became institutionalized "a conception of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders, a conception which differed greatly from that of a close parallelism between these two orders or their mutual embedment which was prevalent in so called pagan religions, in those very societies from which these post Axial civilizational emerged" [Eisenstadt 1982, 294]. The emergence of these Axial civilizations followed a period of institutional breakdown characterized by a similar breakdown in cosmological symbolism. This period, in Eric Voegelin's terms of "cosmological disintegration" during different "times of troubles," resulted in a new appreciation of the relations between the individual and society and the cosmic order [Voegelin 1954, 74]. This change was accomplished through the fundamental restructuring of terms of relations between mundane and transmundane orders [Schwartz 1975]. As noted by many, the emergence of this conception across different civilizational endeavors constituted a major force in restructuring the terms of collective life, in the principles of political legitimation, as well as in the very conception of the self. To quote Voegelin,

These experiences [of transcendence] become the source of a new authority. Through the opening of the soul the philosopher finds himself in a new relation with God; he not only discovers his own psyche as the instrument for experiencing transcendence but at the same time discovers the divinity in its radically non-human transcendence. Hence, the differentiation of the psyche is inseparable from a new truth about God. The true order of the soul can become the standard for measuring both human types and types of social order because it represents the truth about human existence on the border of transcendence. The meaning of the anthropological principle must, therefore, be qualified by the understanding that not an arbitrary idea of man as a world-immanent being becomes the instrument of social critique but the idea of a man who has found his true nature through finding his true relation to God. The new measure that is found for the critique of society, is indeed, not man himself but man in so far as through the differentiation of this psyche he has become the representative of diving truth [...] The truth of man and the truth of God are inseparably one [Voegelin 1952, 66, 69].

The discovery of transcendence thus provided, for the scholars quoted above, a new *loci* for both individual man and for society. In somewhat simplistic terms, it provided a point of reflectivity and critique – a conceptual place, outside of the world, from which the world, its categories and its orders (political, religious, social, scientific, etc.) could be reflected on and critiqued. Not surprisingly, when Eisenstadt discussed the new elites spawned in this developing civilizational project his paradigmatic example was that of the Israelite prophets. Nathan's confrontation with David is one such encounter that comes to mind as evoking all that was now possible in an

age when kings were no longer gods and the idea of the *Good* could be abstracted from the real existing orders of the world.

In his analysis of the axial age Bellah makes an interesting move, one that is congruent with his evolutionary schema based on Merlin Donald's [1991] stages of human cognition – mimetic, mythic, and theoretic. For Bellah identifies the Axial Age with what Donald terms the theoretic stage of human cognitive and cultural evolution – viewing this stage, moreover, as relatively disembedded from the preceding mimetic and mythic stages. He focuses on the “theory construction” aspect of theoretic culture (over and above the innovations in graphic representation and the external memory that this allowed). The Axial breakthroughs are, thus for Bellah, very much a cognitive phenomena (here he follows Yehuda Elkana [1986] on second-order thinking), allowing us to “think about thinking” and he strongly identifies this theoretical posture with human reflexivity. The case made is a strong one and there is no gainsaying its power and coherence.

The only question that arises is, if it is not somewhat constraining of our view of reflexivity. For one can be reflexive from many a stance, not just from the cognitive one. The case of the prophet Nathan above is a case in point. The very break posited by radical transcendence (and note that Voegelin speaks of transcendence, not the transcendental) allows for a position of moral reflexivity that can exist independent of reason and its workings. People reflect from many places, and the construction of theories is not a necessary and perhaps not even sufficient condition to such reflection. The simplest architectural forms, the first vertical, the *temenos* around a Temple – all these are points of reflection with no necessary theoretical articulation beyond the acts of building. As Louis Kahn reflected: “The beauty of architecture is that it deals with the recessions of the mind, from which comes that which is not yet said and not yet made” leading to such “momentous event[s] in architecture [as] when the wall parted and the column became” [Kahn and Lobell 1979, 42, 54]. Play too continues to be a powerful place of reflection on all aspects of culture and social order, again with no theoretical development.

Play does appear in Bellah's book, mostly as an afterthought around which the conclusion of the book is centered, though it does appear earlier as well in reference to animal play. Bellah admits to the book's deficiency in failing to engage sufficiently with the element of play in human culture. I will attempt to address some of that deficiency here, most especially in the context of reflexivity and the role of play in providing a space for such.

For, play, like ritual, deals with the subjunctive, with the “as if” – the place par excellence for reflection, even if, often, with minimal theoretic elaboration. Play presents us with a mode of assimilating both the object world and the world of social

relations into the experiential world of the individual – and ultimately of a group of such individuals – a society. In this, play shares some strongly salient features with ritual, that set them both apart from the world of work, of instrumental calculation and other modes of integrating self and world. We may recall here how thinkers such as Jean Piaget saw play as a developing stage in the coordination of self and world. Piaget [1962] develops an idea of play as providing a crucial moment in our developing capabilities to re-present, that is, in the widest sense, to symbolize the world. It is, he explains, a way station in the progress and development of mimeses, from simple repetition to abstract symbolization. He argues that a child begins developmentally with imitation, simple repetition (which affords the pleasure of mastery) and slowly progress through half a dozen stages to child's play and make-believe. Make-believe already requires the ability to symbolize, to dissociate signifier from signified and so to create the illusionary world of play where the rocking chair is the mountain and the lamp-shade the damsel in distress. At its final stage, full-fledged symbolization (beyond play) provides the crucial means to move from what Piaget calls "assimilation" (of world to ego) to "accommodation," that is, the construction of symbols and symbol systems that allow the self to change in response to the world. Play for Piaget thus takes us beyond imitation, which is but the ego attempting to reproduce the object world, but not yet to symbolization – where we already begin to accommodate to that world. Hence the particular character of the ludic in assimilating reality to the needs of the ego: it is neither pure imitation, nor pure symbolization. Play is the synchronic space where the epic moves studied by Donald and followed by Bellah, the moves between mimetic and theoretic culture take place. But play happens all the time. It is not simply a "remainder" of some prior form of being in the world. Play remains absolutely necessary to our lives, to our continual psychic development and to our ability to engage with the world and its demands.

Imagine a familiar story: A three year old boy is regularly put to bed by his father, after his mother has fed and bathed him. The procedure is ritualized, and the child greets deviations from it by strong protest, though the father might be more welcoming of a deviation that shortens the length of the ritual. The little boy sits on his father's lap, holding his favorite stuffed toy animal, while the father reads a story to him, the child having gone through the ritual procedure of picking which book to read (it always turns out to be only one or two out of a large number of possibilities). The father reads, "Jack and the Beanstalk," and must read it the same way each time, but either father or child can make some variation if the other consents to it, usually done in a slightly teasing or playful manner.

The little boy and/or the father might accentuate in voice or gesture one or another of the characters, suggesting a partial imitation-identification with that char-

acter – the little boy can become the menacing giant, but it has to be in a particular way, with a particular verbal and non-verbal formula. A videotape would show also the repertory of bodily gestures, the alternating enfoldings and then separations of the bodies of father and son, the fidgeting and touching of different body parts at different points in the story, the variations in how closely the stuffed lion is held. There might then be one final good night hug, and perhaps one song sung together, or sung by the father. With all of this, the child can go to sleep, and the father can leave the room.<sup>1</sup> If the child asks for one more story, or one more repetition, or begins to demand, not just ask, he is breaking the “ground rules,” the frame of the ritual, just as surely as if the father announces that tonight we will only read part of the story.

If one were to observe and study this bedtime ritual over time, it would become clear how much is being enacted between father and son: issues of giants and little boys, tiny things that can grow big and straight and strong, little boys who can act like the father, mothers who encourage their little boy’s efforts at “manhood,” and the virtues of cleverness as a weapon of the weak. The father is re-entering the childhood world of big and small, powerful and powerless, reverberating perhaps with some of his own childhood experiences of being read to by his father, the child’s grandfather. While all these multiple issues are being symbolically represented, actual negotiation of role and power differentials are taking place between father and son, and in a setting of safety and familiarity, established and maintained in large part by the repetitiveness of the bedtime scene. The enactment and the negotiation require from both child and parent a capacity to relax and re-form boundaries, to shuttle back and forth between “is it really true” and “pretend”; to shuffle roles and role expectations, to imagine past, present and future, and somehow to conclude, knowing all this will be repeated countless more times. Needless to say, as we grow and broaden our repertoire of play and games, we reflect and come to grasp other, facets of our life, whether competitiveness (in tennis say), love’s challenges (in theatre) or the absurdity of order (as we tickle each other to tears or splash wildly in the pool). None of these, I posit, require heavy doses of theoretic elaboration. All however are necessary – today as long ago, in our adulthood as in our childhood. The needs of a diachronic perspective, while quite clear in a study devoted to human evolution, must not blunt our full appreciation of the synchronic importance of the phenomena under investigation.

As noted, play shares many of its defining characteristics with ritual, though not we would claim in terms of symbol construction (which Bellah focuses on) and more

<sup>1</sup> See Bruner and Lucariello [1989] for discussion of how the child might not go to sleep right away, but continue the “ritual” in the form of a monologue, recounting various parts of the recent interchange and/or other parts of his day. Interestingly, they found that the child’s language in these monologues is more complex and richer than in her ordinary interactive speech.

in its underlying *Gestalt*. One of the most influential attempts to merge the categories of ritual and play – and one well noted in Bellah’s book – came from Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* [1950, 5, 25], in which he placed play as a primary building block of civilization, viewed “culture *sub specie ludi*,” and where he viewed archaic ritual as sacred play. Nearly all critics agree that his concept of play is too ambitiously broad, and his style of argument too fast and loose. Nevertheless, his definition gets at so many of the core features of play that no one writing on the topic can avoid him. It also helps clarify just why games and rituals seem so similar [Huizinga 1950, 8-11].

First, play for Huizinga is free. It is never imposed by biological need or moral duty, and the players can always suspend the game. Play, in other words, stands apart from the world of coercion. If politics is ultimately the legitimated control of coercive force, then play always lies outside its realm. Second, play is disinterested. It is not about satisfying needs or maximizing life interests. Play does not make life possible by providing food or shelter; instead, he writes, it “adorns life” [Huizinga 1950, 9]. That is, play is not economics any more than it is politics. It epitomizes the sphere apart from our mundane needs, and we can see how this would lead Huizinga to the idea that play undergirds human civilization, which he sees primarily as high culture.

Third, play is somehow separated from ordinary life. It has its own time and place, its own course and meaning, secluded from the rigors of the everyday. Finally, play creates its own order within its delimited time and space; it is order. These last two points lie at the core of my claim here on the subjunctive nature of play, which it shares with ritual, its construction of an “as if” world that is bounded apart from ordinary life with its own sets of rules and its own space and time. Huizinga himself is quite explicit and bold with the comparison:

Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds, within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart [Huizinga 1950, 10].

This resonates, of course, with much anthropological discussion of ritual, like Mary Douglas on the role of boundaries, or Maurice Bloch on the way that ritual contexts encourage cyclical concepts of time in which nothing permanent ever changes [Douglas 1978; Bloch 1977]. Bloch in particular argues that ritual creates a “social structure,” that is, an image of society as rule-bound and changeless, systematically ignoring the strategizing and improvising that make up so much of life as we really live it. This can work completely, for Bloch, only within the ritual context. If we think

about it in these terms, Huizinga is arguing that this bounded realm of constructed order constitutes that most human world which falls between coercion and physical needs, politics and economics: society itself. His definition frustrates because he calls all of this “play,” but it has continued to inspire because it points to such important features of our social world.

Hans-Georg Gadamer provides a far more systematic account than Huizinga when he explores the relationships among play, festival, and art.<sup>2</sup> All these realms, for Gadamer, require us to enter into their alternate worlds, to join a “community” which they both typify and create. All bring us into “traditions,” even if those traditions renounce earlier ones and require us to accept a new one, like much avant-garde music or art. His use of “symbol” in this context pulls us away from meaning as representation to meaning as action – he reminds us of the etymology of the term in the ancient Greek token, split in half, by which one party could identify another. Its significance lay in its ability to mesh with its other symbol-half, rather than in its allegorical reference to something else.

In the same way, children playing imaginative games are not so much representing superheroes or puppies as being them for the moment. They are not even “playing,” in the sense that they have momentarily put aside self-consciousness of play. That is why an adult presence can so ruin the fun – it forces attention on the fact that this is play and thus breaks the subjunctive world. Jokes are like this too. Any joke that has to begin or end with “I’m just joking” will fail. Within the world of the game, those children simply are superheroes and puppies, just as a wafer is the body of Christ. The children do not need to be able to fly or wag their tails any more than the wafer needs skin and hair.

Play, ritual, art, and festival each thus create their own bounded communities and worlds of action. Each is a shared and bounded human construction with a rhythm (usually called repetition in ritual studies), rules of understanding and action, and powerful performative effects. Each deals with the dynamics of boundaries and boundlessness, maintaining a tension that is built into human existence. Ritual and play are both, to borrow a term from Brian Sutton-Smith [1997, 29], “enacted subjunctives.” Both construct a third space (similar to Winnicott’s transitional space or object) where we create, experience, and share alternative realities and orders. Both provide a critical place for reflexivity on normative orders, demands and hierarchies.

While Gadamer works through festival and play to develop a theory of aesthetics, he does, like Huizinga, leave us wondering how we can distinguish ritual from play, if indeed we should. What exactly is the difference between making a pun and

<sup>2</sup> See especially Gadamer [1986]. See also Grondin [2001].

saying grace, waving around a rubber chicken and sacrificing a real one? We have learned something by putting these things together, but surely we run the danger of losing sight of some important distinction in the process.

As a beginning, we can recognize that all of these acts create subjunctive spheres, that is “third spaces” of reflexivity. Yet, the particular “as if” worlds differ from each other in important ways. Some subjunctive worlds claim to be true and eternal, while others are ephemeral and *ad hoc*. In play we can create worlds of cops and robbers, goalies and forwards, or pawns and knights, but we can choose to abandon those worlds at any time. On the other hand, we must always return to purification rituals, because living a human life means becoming polluted, and the only way we can adjust is through periodic returns to another world of possibilities.

Note that this is not the same as saying that play is voluntary but ritual is compulsory. Sometimes the social pressure to play is overwhelming: no one feels more isolated and lost than the child kept out of game. And many rituals are voluntary, although some are clearly constitutive of their traditions (like baptism for a Christian). Rather, ritual worlds – performed or not – are eternal, while play’s are ephemeral. Hockey (not to mention more obviously *ad hoc* play like tickling) could disappear forever from the universe, and while some few hockey players and fans would feel that the world had fundamentally changed, most would probably shift their sports passions elsewhere. Remove communion, however, even for a Catholic who rarely takes it, and everything is different. It is then not so much the “commitment with respect to future action” [Bellah 2011, 145] that is so critical in ritual, but rather the creation of a subjunctive space, a reality, and a shared world of those involved in ritual’s performance.

This has some important further implications. Ritual’s evocation of a more permanent truth and reality encourages greater predictability and repetition in ritual than in play. We know how a ritual will end, because it always comes out the same way. Eternal truths demand it. This is not true for play. Even when we know there will be a winner and a loser, we cannot know in advance who it will be. Other kinds of games just stop rather than ending – playing house suddenly seems less interesting, or tickling starts to become annoyance, and we move out of that world and on to other things.

We know in advance how rituals end, but because rituals create worlds of unending truth, there is also a sense in which they have no end. The ancestors receive incense smoke every day, the witch Rangda and a magical animal called Barong in a Balinese festival always battle to a stalemate, Easter comes every year. Weddings and funerals, in which each of us may play the central role only once, are just as endless when seen from the society as a whole. Even petty etiquette like saying “please” is

more like ritual than play in this sense. We cannot say please just once and then forget about it. We repeat these niceties eternally, because the social conventions they enter must always be renewed. Play, on the other hand, never has to be repeated at all. So when we play, the ending is unknown but its world can easily end. Ritual's world, however, is endless, even though we know the ending of every performance. This also means that ritual always incorporates its past in a way that play does not. Because ritual is endless, it continually makes the past into the present. Play, however, continually defers the present into a future when the ending will become clear.

Thus we can see clearly that while ritual does indeed share certain characteristics of play, especially those focused on the subjunctive nature of their engagement with the interaction of world and self, it also differs from play in certain critically important features. Like child's play (according to Piaget) it has a strongly developed subjunctive sense and an emphasis on repetition and indexicality (all of which characterize child's play). Yet at the same time it also shows an extremely high degree of symbolization, quite unlike what can be found in any type of play, children's or adult's. Adult play of course involves a degree of symbolization (the rules of tennis, or golf, etc.), but the scale, depth and elaboration of that symbol system is nothing compared to what one finds in ritual. Scratch a ritual – religious or secular (the Eucharist or the saying of “please” and “thank you”) – and you will find a virtual library of meanings, interpretations, teachings, historical events, symbol systems, visions of perfection, and so on. Not so in the rules of tennis, which can be summarized in a brief notebook. Thus the scope of significance given to the system of symbolization differs markedly between ritual and play. In Bellah's terms we may say that ritual has had the “benefit” of theoretic elaboration (and consequently, social scientists and other observers, must work hard to uncover the pre-symbolic core in the performative act itself) while play's very naiveté permits a much less elaborated space for reflection and challenging accepted ways of “thinking” without necessarily “thinking about thinking”.

And just as it is important to appreciate the place of reflexivity beyond any theoretical aspects that have accrued to it over time, so it is important to recognize that the theoretic, contains elements that both predate the Axial Age and continue to exist as only one of multiple forms of understanding and engaging with the world. One of the very first stages of symbolization is, after all, the construction of categories, primarily through language and its codes. Here too, I wish only to emphasize the continued existence of a cognitive facet, as well as the problems inherent to it that both pre-date the Axial age and the continue today, to confound our attempts to make sense of the world. There are ways in which we continually attempt to clarify the world around us and just as continually increase its confusion. A brief review of

such may help us appreciate just how fragile are our cultural achievements, regardless of their semantic richness and just how much our reflection on this conundrum may well rest on totally non-symbolic events and activities.

Loosely following in the path of John Henry Newman [1903, 52], I call this process of constant clarification “notation.” By this I mean the process of intellectual abstraction from real experience or apprehension: “creations of the mind” in Newman’s terms, rather than of direct apprehension.<sup>3</sup> Notation is not simply a matter of new words. We do it, for example, when we follow the inevitable child-rearing advice that we should define clear boundaries for our children. A simple rule that everyone should eat dinner at the same time might soon find itself vastly elaborated as a teen-aged child pushes on its edges and parents try to clarify the boundaries over and over again. There is just too much homework and she has to eat at the computer. She had a big snack and is not hungry. Forced to sit at the table anyway, she brings a textbook (pushing on yet another rule), or demands to leave far earlier than everyone else. New rules (leaving early is allowed, but only if there is a lot of homework) are met by new challenges (it is always a lot of homework). Smaller children test limits just as constantly, and clarifying the limit just leads to a new test. The process may be crucial for growing up and establishing understandings of both self and how to deal with a social community. Yet it also illustrates the constant push to notate as well as the inevitable limitations on the possibility of notation.

In quite a different context, something similar goes on with lawyers in a courtroom, who often argue less about the facts of a case than about their conflicting understandings of how the law applies in this unique case. Passing a new law will move the arguments onto new turf, but it can never get rid of the gap between the complexity of any specific (i.e., particular and unique) situation and notation, which is always general and hence leaves an opening for different interpretations – for ambiguity. There is a paradox of thought here: every increase in notation, in the detail of description or prescription, takes us further from the unique context because it entails greater use of abstraction. The more we “understand,” “think,” or “represent,” the further from the thing we get. We gain clarity of vision at the expense of the fullness of experience. By increasing notation, we have, among other things, increased abstraction and hence the ambiguity of the experience itself.

Every human notational act is to some extent caught in this paradox. We cannot speak without categories, and even societies without legal systems still have rules of

<sup>3</sup> Newman actually uses the term “notional,” but means something very similar to our concept of notation.

some sort, always at one remove from experience. There are important differences, though, in how far different societies push this paradox or try to resolve it. At one extreme, we have mystical traditions that suggest the rejection of all categories, and thus a deep suspicion of language. The *Daode Jing*, for example, warns us that “When all in the world know beauty as beauty, ugliness arises; when all know good as good, evil arises... therefore the sage teaches without words.” (translated in Chan [1963, 140]). Words only work through difference, and each thus carries its own opposite; better to avoid language completely. At the other extreme we have attempts to remove ambiguity forever by finding the right words for everything through an ideal language, and defining rules to cover every possible contingency. While this can never be more than an aspiration, it has been a vitally important project at some historical times, perhaps never more than in the period that began with the Enlightenment and continues in many ways today. Stephen Toulmin, has in fact argued that somewhere between 1590 and 1640, a skeptical tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty lost its intellectual respectability [Toulmin 1990, 44].

Language is arguably the most fundamental human way of dealing with the ambiguities inherent to experience. All language abstracts away from the infinite richness of our experience in the world; all of it reduces flow to categories. As many have pointed out, every word is both too general and too specific: too general because it loses the precision and detail of actual objects and experiences, and too specific because it bounds those objects within the clear borders of some class. The problem of categories thus remains rooted in the very ambiguity of language. To paraphrase Gregory Bateson, one problem is that every communication is both a message and a message about a message [Bateson *et. al.* 1951, 23]. It is both descriptive and, in a sense, normative – a claim about the world-as-it-is and a claim about the nature of claims. The interstices of the two kinds of messages are always ambiguous, as the orientations of these respective messages pertain to very different realms.

Creating categories is an example of what is perhaps the most common strategy of dealing with the ambiguity of the world. Categories, that is notation, solidifies and refines boundaries. It works through the contrast of categories, through the creation of clearly defined alternatives. It attempts to disambiguate for all times (and climes) rather than understand its categories as indexed to a particular people or place. It therefore tends toward the abstract and general rather than the local and particular, more toward what Basil Bernstein called an “elaborated code” rather than a “restricted” one.

Perhaps the most important field defining the idea of notation is law (*nomos*). The very term “category” comes from the Greek *kategor*, that is, “prosecutor.” Laws

and categories are interwoven. Both attempt to disambiguate in the most critical realm we inhabit, that of human relations. They have been doing this, moreover, for millennia – even before the invention of written codes of law (such as the code of Justinian), which merely added to and fortified this tendency. The decidedly early and culturally wide-spread practice of blood brotherhood provides a wonderful example of this “legalization” and hence structuring of ambiguous fields. From pre-Homeric Greece to contemporary Africa (that is, among non-Axial cultures) we are familiar with this phenomenon of ritualized friendship. Blood brotherhood and similar forms of ritualized personal relationships define or include a relationship with an unrelated other, that – given a cognitive grid based on kin classifications – simply cannot exist [Eisenstadt 1956]. Yet, it clearly does. Such ritualized friendships make certain relationships possible, despite the fact that the logic of the system cannot accommodate them. The interstitial or ambiguous points in the system (i.e. its inability to accommodate non-ascriptive ties) are negated through the creation of what is essentially a legal fiction (*avant la lettre*). Highly articulated systems of both reflexivity and notation are thus at work in such systems and it would be extraordinarily helpful if we could understand the degree of intentional theorization needed to accommodate the very untheoretical bonds of affect that can develop outside of what is countenanced kin-based social ties. My guess is, less than we may imagine.

Notation is one of the historically most significant ways of dealing with the ambiguities of life. Notation, in its most abstract form, attempts to impose a preconceived grid on experience – an interpretive template drawn from some ideal set of all previously similar experiences that will provide an ideal context and interpretive vision for it. This is sometimes enormously helpful: for example, if we can identify the tool in front of us as a screwdriver regardless of its size, color or the handle’s material. In doing this we also identify the relevant purposes of the tool (tightening screws). In other cases, however, such notation can be tragically fallacious – for instance if we take the uncivil behavior of our neighbor to be just another example of what we already “know” about all Jews, or Muslims, or Blacks, or Greeks – or whichever group we may have prejudiced feelings toward. The shortcut to knowledge provided by our invocation of predetermined categories (notations) can be, depending on the relevant realm, a great boon or a blinding prejudice.

Notation tends to work better with inanimate objects than with individuals or groups of individuals, invested with “free will.” Free will imbues every human situation, encounter, meeting and dialogue with an ontological openness that no category can ever fully circumscribe – however subtle or sophisticated. Of course we use notation just as often in our dealings with humans as in our dealings with screwdrivers; it just does not work as well. Notate though we will, we still fall in love, we get into

fights, we (hopefully) change our opinions, we learn, we forget. Every day we tickle and get tickled, splash in the mud, break into an imitation of a famous singer or actor, and in short constantly show the impossibility of notation as sole indicator and guide to human behavior and interaction.

We seem indeed to have here returned to our beginnings: On the one hand, to the radical transcendence of the Axial Age, especially in Ancient Israel. It was, after all, this transcendence that allowed the emergence of that free-will, and so of that very individual conscience (standing apart from status, role and social context) which plays havoc with the 'timeless' categories of notation and symbolization. It is the free will of the individual, rooted in her transcendent orientation that belies all "thinking" and theory construction and makes of culture an endlessly open phenomenon. On the other hand, it brings us back to play, to a non-reflective doing in a "subjunctive space" that is, itself a timeless reflection on order, and its notated categories. Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies knew this, but so did Aristophanes and Cervantes, the greatest of jazz musicians and the children of Breughel's paintings. The story of religion in human evolution is a powerfully evocative story, as are all stories whose notated character is continually mediated by the play of their very narration.

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## Reflexivity, Play, Ritual, and the Axial Age

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Abstract: This paper argues the centrality of play for any understanding of reflexivity and so indeed for human existence in the world. It ties both play and ritual to the human potential to create “as if” or subjunctive universes through which other realities can be tested, explored and judged. These aspects of human social existence, together with our ability to symbolize and hence notate our experience are explored in terms of their relation to the transformations of the Axial Age.

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*Keywords: Play, reflexivity, notation, ritual, transcendence.*

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**Adam B. Seligman** is Professor and Chair of Religion at Boston University and Research Associate at the Institute for Culture, Religion and World Affairs there. His books include *The Idea of Civil Society*; *Inner-worldly Individualism*; *The Problem of Trust*; *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self and Transcendence*; *Market and Community* (with Mark Lichbach); *Modest Claims: Dialogues and Essays on Tolerance and Tradition*; *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (with Weller, Puett, and Simon); and, most recently, *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience and Ambiguity* (with Weller). He is Director of the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life which for over a decade has been leading seminars every year on contested aspects of religion and the public square in different parts of the world.