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# Axial Age Religious Commitment in Theoretical Perspective

by Mark Gould

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While this paper aims to construct theoretical arguments, it might properly be viewed as a narrative, relating a story instead of making analytical contentions and evaluating them empirically. It is, however, “theoretic,” a second-order reflection on the logic of argument in Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution (RHE)*. I want to convey my conviction that *RHE* should be taken seriously, and that, both regarding its form of argumentation and the content of its arguments, taking it seriously requires a critical perspective on it. The focus of my concern is on “religion,” on what Bellah neglects in his characterization of “religion.”

I contend that Bellah should reconsider certain lessons from our shared teacher, Talcott Parsons: Parsons [1949] argued that Weber and Durkheim transcended the dichotomy between positivist and idealist theories, the former scientific and the latter humanistic. Parsons saw in Durkheim and Weber’s work a convergence on a “voluntarist” perspective, one that maintained the integrity of meaningful (and, more generally, normatively-mediated) *action* in the construction of scientific explanations. Bellah’s turning away from this “voluntarist” position leads him to mischaracterize “religion” theoretically, too often reducing it to practice, even while emphasizing that religion should be characterized “so far as possible as its adherents understood it” [Bellah 2011, 227]. We need, instead, to integrate these perspectives systematically (within a “voluntarist” theory). An understanding of the axial age requires an analysis of religious conviction and the practices it conduces.

Religion, at least in the axial age, constitutes commitments that motivate and legitimate practice. Weber emphasized that these commitments may diverge from the self-understanding of actors, and he certainly did not reduce religion to the practices that constituted it. The omnibus and eclectic portrayal of what counts as “religion” that we find in Bellah’s book inhibits our capacity to understand both the nature of axial-age religious commitments and their significance, the socio-cultural consequences of the axial age.

A similar problem affects Bellah’s understanding of evolution and the relationship between evolutionary and stage-sequential theories. In a discussion of religion, the latter cannot be reduced to stages of *cognitive* maturation; in a discussion of axial-age religion, we need to understand the different consequences of particular logics of religious commitment, both at the level of development that constitutes the axial age and regarding the differences between religious convictions at that level of development. Bellah’s too diffuse depiction of axial-age “religions” prevents him from assessing systematically their differences, both in regard to the commitments they constitute, and in regard to the consequences of those commitments in the forms of activities they animate.

Finally, a clear understanding of what Parsons meant by voluntarism requires that we reflect on the relationship between situational constraints and opportunities and forms of normative regulation. Bellah’s arguments are, instead, somewhat surprisingly, often reductionist, reducing religion to other forms of social practice. I conclude with a defense of Weber, which takes the form of a very brief discussion of what it means to analyze the logic of religious commitment across two, axial-age faiths and how such an analysis suggests the societal consequences of the differences we find in the logics of religious commitment.

## 1. The Voluntarist Theory of Action

“Science,” Bellah writes, “has some pretty clear rules that require an I-It relation between scientist and the object of study. The scientist must maintain an austere objectivity that inevitably makes the object into a thing” [*ibidem*, 82]. This represents the classical position, where science is understood to study objects, and the humanities, human subjectivities; to study subjectivities scientifically, we must reduce them to objects, thus compromising their integrity. To maintain the integrity of the I-Thou relationship, Bellah favors a humanistic methodology, preferring, for example, to deal with “the axial age in interpretive rather than explanatory terms” [Bellah 2012]. Like Habermas, he acknowledges a place for science in the study of social action,

but, in Habermas's terms, this results in a dualist perspective, one for social systems (explanation) and another for social institutions (hermeneutics).<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, Parsons finds a "category mistake" in Durkheim and Weber, the attempt to construct a social science, a science of social *action*. He contends that they constructed explanations of what he later called "action systems." In Weber's words, "Sociology [...] is a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects" [Weber 1964, 88].<sup>2</sup> To characterize social activities usefully, in a way allowing for their explanation, requires that we understand their meaning within their own cultural context. Instead of reducing subjectivity to an object, a thing, a viable social science, one that constructs valid explanations, must maintain the integrity of the I-Thou relationship. A viable social science prioritizes neither social systems nor social action (social institutions,) but instead sees both economic and religious activities as forms of social action (action systems), which may be analyzed successfully scientifically, but only if we construct interpretive understandings to help us conceptualize both our explanations and what it is we endeavor to explain.

To make the same point a bit differently, Parsons contends that positivist analyses of the social world reduce social action to the situation in which it occurs.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, idealist theories, reduce action to subjectivity, to normative orientations of one or another sort. Voluntarist theories integrate into their explanations both situations and subjectivities/normative orientations. While Bellah discusses both situational and "normative" variables, he does so within a framework incapable of integrating them systematically; thus his arguments tend to be eclectic instead of systematic. Adopting Parsons's position would have aided Bellah in his conceptualization of "religion," in his characterization of the various "religions" he discusses, and in an explanation of their emergence and consequences.

<sup>1</sup> For an extended discussion of Habermas, see Gould [1996].

<sup>2</sup> I have quoted from Parsons's translation. For a comparison between it and the Roth and Wittich translation, which makes Weber seem closer to Bellah's position, see Gould [1996].

<sup>3</sup> More accurately, for Parsons, positivist theories conceptualize a single, positively-stated normative orientation. Radical positivist theories reduce social action to the situation in which it occurs, in behaviorist theories to an external (social and non-social environment) and in (socio)-biological theories to a biological, genetic, environment. However, Parsons also considers positivist-utilitarian theories (neoclassical economics), where the ends actors seek are autonomous from the situations in which they act. These ends are exogenous to the theory, parameters of action. Thus in utilitarian theories there is one additional mechanism, ends, in addition to the situation and the single, positively-stated normative orientation.

## 2. Religion

Given what I have just argued, that Bellah's sociology is primarily interpretive, it might seem paradoxical that he maintains that religion is "first of all" a set of practices, "not theories, ways of living more than ways of knowing" [Bellah 2011, 112, referring also to science]. He contends, in an interview with Nathan Schneider, discussing *RHE*, that "our preconceptions about what religion is are so influenced by Protestantism [...] and its assumption that beliefs are the most important thing. But it's clear all the way through history that practices are primary and beliefs are secondary" [Bellah, in Schneider 2011]. Thus, he is able to conclude, "My own problem with definitions of religion, and why I use them only as starting points, is that they too often concern only beliefs. But religion is a thing you do" [Bellah, in Joas 2012, 77]. This perspective, focusing on religious practice, may be due in part to the focus of the book, especially in the chapters dealing with pre-axial religion, on ritual, or it may be in line with the current fashion, which reduces culture to practice [Gould 2009]. Whatever the reason, it predisposes Bellah to miss what Weber viewed as essential to religion, the logic of religious commitments.

Weber recognized that religion is special because of its capacity to create binding obligations, commitments that motivate and legitimate actions.<sup>4</sup> He insisted that religious beliefs and dogma are not the same thing as religious commitments; religious commitments are both psychologically sanctioned and socially institutionalized. Religious commitments both emerge out of and constitute religious practice, but they are important because they motivate actions in the wider world and they legitimate those actions when they are consistent with the religious convictions that partially constitute a religious creed.<sup>5</sup> Unlike theoretic culture, the capacity for second-order thinking, which, "by its very nature [...] is [...] limited to an intellectual elite – it is

<sup>4</sup> Bellah draws on, but eventually marginalizes, Geertz's characterization of religion: "...a religion is: 1) a system of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" [Geertz 1966, 4]. Here Geertz is interested primarily in *Religion as a Cultural System*, cultural norms that constitute a taken-for-granted reality, the tacit constitution of meaning, "moods and motivations" that "seem uniquely realistic." Weber was more concerned with religious values, with the convictions that constitute moral obligations, which, in Geertz's terms, are both uniquely realistic and that motivate (and legitimate) action. Bellah draws on Geertz's definition in the "Preface" to *RHE*.

<sup>5</sup> See my *Revolution in the Development of Capitalism* and "Puritanism and the English Revolution: The Role of Social Values in the Constitution of the Economic Tendencies Leading to a Political Revolution" for analyses of the role of English Puritanism in the motivation of capital accumulation in early capitalism and in the genesis and legitimation of the English Revolution [Gould 1987; 1997].

never a popular enterprise” [Bellah 2005, 88], religious commitments may be widely shared within a social order.<sup>6</sup>

One consequence of Bellah’s focus on “religious” practice is that it leads him to include under the rubric of religion much that others do not consider religion. The crucial cases are Greek philosophy and Confucianism, but any cultural system that constitutes meaning appears to count as a religion. This would not be problematic if Bellah had provided us with a functional characterization of religion and then argued that structurally religion is manifest in different forms (perhaps at different levels of social development) or that there was a functionally religious dimension in all social systems. In Bellah’s analysis, however, the “practice of science” or philosophy may count as religion [Bellah 2011, xiii, 54-55, 96].

This omnibus characterization of religion produces three problems: first, Bellah underplays the differences between science and philosophy and religion. This is manifest most clearly when he argues for the existence of multiple worlds, each with its own form of “truth,” each distant from the appearances of commonsense. “Even in a culture where ‘everyone’ knows that the earth goes around the sun, there are very few people who could prove it — it is a belief based on faith in science even though it contradicts the senses. And scientific explanation depends heavily on invisible, at least to the naked eye, though natural, entities such as genes. Does that make common sense real and science imaginary?” [*ibidem*, 103] While Durkheim [1995, 439] wrote of our “faith in science”, the fact that I have faith in physics and cannot prove quantum entanglement does not mean that physicists cannot prove it. In contrast, neither I, nor any religious adept or religious scholar, can prove the existence of heaven and hell.<sup>7</sup> Religion and science are both social activities; both require adaptive resources to function effectively; in both, resources and actors are mobilized politically; integration and solidarity are manifest in both science and religion and activities in both are legitimated morally. Even so, science is not religion. Not all social activities, even when concerned with questions of meaning, are religion (or science).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Here Durkheim is as crucial a figure as is Weber.

<sup>7</sup> “Because transcendental realms are not subject to disproof the way scientific theories are, they inevitably require a new form of narrative — that is, a new form of myth” [Bellah 2011, 276]. Some theologians have analyzed the form of “truth” that may be manifest theologically. While I have no problems with this type of analysis, insofar as it is recognized that theological and scientific truth are not the same thing, it might be better to appropriate within theological discourse a Habermasian term, “truthfulness,” which is manifest when one speaks authentically. Both “truth” and “truthfulness” differ from “moral rightness.” See Bellah, Tritpon [2006, chapter 24].

<sup>8</sup> Social scientists seem to have difficulty with the simple idea that X and Y may be *both* the same and different. Bellah and Scarlett Johansson are the same (humans,) but they are also different (a man and a woman.) Religion and science are the same (socio-cultural institutions,) but they are also different.

Relatedly, Bellah elides a, maybe the, crucial difference between philosophy and (philosophy in the service of) religion. Philosophers, and this includes Plato and Aristotle, are expected to challenge fundamental assumptions and principles; they are second-order thinkers who reflect on the premises of their own thoughts [Bellah 2011, 274 ff]. Thinkers within religion, while they may use religious principles to problematize non-religious institutions, and while they may use religious understandings to problematize the significance of appearances, think within a given religious paradigm. As Goldziher wrote about the Mu'tazilites, among the most philosophical of Muslim thinkers, "Their way of going about their business justified the charge that philosophical independence and unprejudiced thought were wholly alien to them, for they were tied to a clearly defined religion, and their purpose in working with the tools of reason was to purify that religion." In consequence, their arguments brought scorn from philosophers [Goldziher 1981, 89]. While the religious commitments that partially constituted the axial age constructed a critical theory (the first critical theory,) and provided the capacity to motivate and legitimate actions to transform aspects of the social order (including other religious systems,) unlike philosophical criticism, they did not enable a self-criticism of the premises of the particular religious paradigm itself.<sup>9</sup>

Third, science and philosophy are primarily cognitive endeavors that came to be institutionalized in socially differentiated roles among elites. While practitioners may be committed to either science or religion,<sup>10</sup> and while these commitments may motivate and legitimate activities, the commitments may be differentiated from the cognitive orientations. While, as Weber argued, scientists may be motivated by extra-scientific values, for example, in problem selection ("value-relevance," a biologist may study the mechanisms generating an illness found in her child in hopes of finding a cure), their work must be regulated by scientific values (value-freedom, what Parsons sometimes referred to as "cognitive rationality") [Parsons 1967, chapter 3]. While it would be absurd to ignore the influence of science and philosophy on society, neither constitutes a type of "religious" movement that motivates people to

<sup>9</sup> Axial age religions could criticize pre-axial age beliefs and, in due course, one another, and (at least some of them) could provide sophisticated arguments defending their beliefs, but unlike philosophy, they did not criticize their own constitutive principles. This contention requires modulation in the analysis of the different axial age religions. For example, one might argue that Christianity (Christian theology) looks different than Islam in this regard because of its absorption of so much from Greek philosophical thought.

<sup>10</sup> Or to both.

engage actively in their social world, and neither, in and of itself, has the capacity to transform the way the majority of people think.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. The Axial Age

Bellah's most compact characterization of the axial age is in his "Response to Three Readers": axial breakthroughs "in every case call into question the fusion of god and king, claim an immediate relation of ordinary people to the divine and question the legitimacy of the political order. In so doing they use abstract reasoning that can be called theoretic in Merlin Donald's terms" [Bella 2012].<sup>12</sup> The question is how they do these things. In Bellah's argument, theory constitutes a form of argument; it must be understood cognitively and seems akin to Piaget's notion of formal operations.<sup>13</sup> The latter is, of course, a cognitive capacity, one that has little or no motivational force. In Bellah's own terms, theoretic reasoning is inaccessible to most of the people,<sup>14</sup> which is a far cry from the motivational force of religious convictions

<sup>11</sup> "Compared to the other three cases, Israel approaches theoretic culture only asymptotically, yet it was there, perhaps, that the revolution in mythospeculation was most profound. And it is perhaps for this reason that biblical religion in its successor faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, was able to contribute to ethical and political transformations of society that Greek philosophy and its Hellenistic and Roman successor traditions, even when we view them not as purely concerned with argumentation, but as ways of life [...], never succeeded in doing" [Bellah 2005, 89].

<sup>12</sup> Bellah's characterizations of the axial age regularly conflate what is to be explained with the conditions that explain it (or, more precisely, with necessary, but insufficient conditions, generating it). When he is attending to the developmental logic, he takes from Donald to structure his analysis: "the axial breakthrough was essentially the breakthrough of theoretic culture as a means...for the 'comprehensive modeling of the entire human universe'" [Bellah 2005, 78], quoting [Donald 1993]. When he is thinking about the social conditions leading to the axial age, it is the rethinking of "the relation between god and king" that is "the very hallmark of the axial transformation" [Bellah 2005, 83; Bellah 2011, 277]. I have quoted, here and elsewhere, from a relatively brief article, written several years before the publication of *RHE*, which states Bellah's theses about the axial age more compactly than they are found in the book. In addition to the attributes of the axial age mentioned above in the text, Bellah also mentions several others, including the notion of transcendence, and especially the notion of a transcendent God who "provides the point of reference from which all existing presuppositions can be questioned" [*ibidem*, 321-2; quotation at 322], more generally, "the capacity to imagine alternative social realities" [*ibidem*, 352; 387], ethical universalism [Bellah 2012; Bellah 2011, 479-80; 559; 573], and the emergence of persons who remain real to us as interlocutors [Bellah 2012].

<sup>13</sup> Theoretic culture "is the ability to think analytically rather than narratively, to construct theories that can be criticized logically and empirically" [Bellah 2011, 274]. "[T]he emergence of second-order thinking, the idea that there are alternatives that have to be argued for...marks the axial age" [*ibidem*, 275].

<sup>14</sup> Bellah does not adequately distinguish between the cognitive development of individuals and, for example, the level of moral judgment (a cognitive capacity) institutionalized socially. All "normal" persons in all known societies develop the capacity for formal operational thought, a rationally constituted mutual respect. This occurs because this capacity emerges within peer relationships and



that, while they may conceptualize a God who is transcendent, may also conceptualize an unmediated relationship between *all* “believers” and that God. In Shmuel Eisenstadt’s terms, “there emerged the conception of the *accountability of the rulers and of the community to a higher authority, God, Divine Law*, and the like. Accordingly, the possibility of calling a ruler to judgement [sic] emerged” [Eisenstadt 1986, 8, my italics].<sup>15</sup> This accountability of rulers and the community was facilitated by (charismatic) leaders, but the commitments were institutionalized broadly.

The logic of religious commitment constituted both a critical standard capable of delegitimizing or legitimating a social order and a motivation to enforce that standard in the world in an inner- or other-worldly way. Often, in Bellah’s book, we have discussions of groups of thinkers who manifest a breakthrough to theoretic thinking, but we have no sense of either the generality of the mode of thinking they articulated – whether it was institutionalized socio-culturally – nor of its effect on “believers.” In what way does it matter if Heraclitus was an axial-age thinker if his impact on everyday Greeks was minimal?

Bellah tells us that Obeyesekere questions whether the Upanisads reflect axial ethicization, which we might suggest is integral to an axial-age *religion*. This ethicization must, according to Bellah’s characterization of the axial age, be universalistic. We must add, however, as Bellah himself puts it with regard to Buddhism, “Buddhist truths are to be understood logically in terms of what the words mean (that is, semantically), but *to be ‘really’ understood they must change the bearers in their practical stance toward themselves and the world*” [Bellah 2011, 540, my italics]. Collins writes that “When the Saint realizes the truth, it is not that he or she has simply acquired some new knowledge, but rather that such knowledge instantiates a new existential state or condition” [quoted in *ibidem*, 542]. This transformed “piety” must be conceptualized in terms of a set of religious convictions that motivate and legitimate social action.<sup>16</sup>

Differently, the axial age was not simply an intellectual(’s) movement. It did result from and in the emergence of “religious intellectuals” (and religious charismat-

such relationships are found in all “societies.” Thus, even when we are discussing a society where “theoretic thought” has not been institutionalized, we are dealing with people who are able to think “theoretically.” Bellah hints at this understanding in his brief discussion of Lévy-Bruhl [Bellah 2011, 274; Eisenstadt 1956; Piaget 1962].

<sup>15</sup> As can be seen from the cited article, Eisenstadt was inconsistent in his emphasis on a commitment to divine law as integral to the axial age. Even so, it was from him, many years ago, that I learned how to analyze the logic of religious commitments. Interestingly, the closest Bellah comes to my position is when he quotes Eisenstadt [*ibidem*, 478-479]. For a preliminary analysis of the logic of religious commitment in Islam and Christianity, see Gould [2005].

<sup>16</sup> “I do think with the Axial Age, the emergence of a deep, personal piety comes along” [Bellah, in Horn 2011].

ics), but the ethos that they articulated was internalized by individuals and institutionalized socially. The axial age was constituted through the social transformations that resulted from the emergence of these religious commitments, and differences between axial-age religions were generative of different outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Evolution and Social Development

Bellah combines an evolutionary with a stage-sequential model. While he tells us that his use of evolution is to be taken literally [Bellah 2012], the status of evolutionary models in the book is ambiguous. While “culture never ceases to be a biological capacity and is subject to the same evolutionary pressures as are biological organisms” [*ibidem*], most of his discussion in *RHE* emphasizes developments in relaxed fields, like play, that are protected from the evolutionary pressures of natural selection [see, for a summary statement, Bellah 2011, 600]. He tells us that “religion participates in human evolution; whether one can say religion itself evolved, I would leave as an open question...” [Bellah, in Joas 2012, 75]. Yet, he writes about the “evolution of religious symbol systems” [Bellah 2011, xix] in a book that is “a history of religious evolution” [Bellah 2012]. He informs us that he “will return to the question of evolutionary adaptation in my next book...because it is in the modern era, with which that book will be concerned, that the issue becomes absolutely central. In that book I will point out that natural selection, modified in terms of recent biological theory, applies to religion as much as any other cultural sphere” [*ibidem*]. Bellah’s best summary of why the book is structured as an analysis of “religion in human evolution” is, I think, the following: “I do believe we need to speak of evolution, *which is the only shared metanarrative among educated people of all cultures that we have*, but in a way that shows the dangers as well as the successes in evolution and that is not afraid to make distinctions between good and evil” [Bellah 2011, 600, my italics]. “Evolution” is a metanarrative more than a theory in *RHE*.

I do not want to comment on the distinction between good and evil, but I do want to point to a problem in Bellah’s analysis of stage-sequential development as an element in his evolutionary “theory,” one that brings us back to Parsons’s characterization of voluntarist theory in asking what it means to order stages hierarchically.

<sup>17</sup> I do not mean to make an idealist argument here, that “ideas” generate outcomes; I mean only to emphasize, with Weber, the autonomous, independent, effects of institutionalized religious commitment and to suggest that I find it puzzling that a book about religion in the axial age does not provide an analysis of the logic of the very different religious commitments that constitute “axial-age religion.”

Bellah suggests that "...Donald's scheme of cultural evolution... [involves] successively the emergence of mimetic, mythic, and theoretic culture. Perhaps each of these is a 'conserved core process,' *never lost* even though reorganized in the light of new core processes, each promoting variation, adaptive and innovative, but each essential to cultural integrity. That comes close to stating *the central argument of this book*" [*ibidem*, 65, my italics]. Bellah emphasizes, repeatedly, the continued necessity and value of pre-theoretic culture within the axial age. "Nothing is ever lost," and for good reason. We should value archaic religion, just as we value axial-age religion. There is nothing Western-centric about his analysis; he gives equal time to both non-Western and "pre-Western" religions (see *ibidem*, "Conclusion," especially the discussion of McCarthy [2009]).

I think that this discussion misses a crucial distinction between "evolutionary" and stage sequential models of cultural and social development. A stage sequential model orders the stages in terms of an "evolutionary" (if this is the right word) progression. While the later stages are not "good," "better than" the earlier ones (the successful social orders are, presumably, adaptive within their environments,) they do manifest a hierarchically-ordered *progression*.<sup>18</sup> Simply, this means that the earlier stages may be generated from within the later stages when it is appropriate to do so. In Bellah's and Donald's terms, mythic "thinking" can be and is generated from within a "theoretic culture," but theoretic thinking cannot be generated systematically from within a mythic culture.<sup>19</sup> This is a process of transcendence (*Aufhebung*), where the prior stages are preserved and transformed (if only by being placed within a new social and cultural stage.) This does not mean that science is "better than" poetry; as Bellah suggests, poetry is never lost, but it is to suggest that a developmental model manifests a hierarchically-ordered progression.

This progression cannot be (or would be very difficult to) manifest within the theoretical framework Bellah articulates. Within a voluntarist theory, where the relationship between heterogeneous situations and complex "normative orders" is theorized systematically, theoretic culture is a complement to mimetic and mythic (and episodic) culture. Their relationship to one another may be thought of systematically and we need not be defensive about characterizing their relationship within a set of hierarchically-ordered stages. Not only is there no reason to think that poetry is lost, we are able to theorize the systematic relationship between affective and cognitive

<sup>18</sup> I take the notion of "progression," as distinct from "progress," from Ariel Loewy, a cellular biologist who was my colleague for many years.

<sup>19</sup> "Systematically" because, if it is the case that all "normal" persons in all human social orders develop the capacity to think theoretically (in terms of formal operations,) we can expect there to be bits and pieces of theoretic thinking in all social orders.

aspects of culture at each stage of development (see the “Introduction” to the section on “Culture” in Parsons *et al.* [1961] and Gould 2001); for a discussion of a developmental model, drawn from Piaget and applied to social systems, see Gould [1987, chapter 8]). Or differently, what is, I think, really at issue – we can theorize systematically the relationship between “religion” and theoretic culture without reducing “religion” to “bad science” [Bellah, in Joas 2012].<sup>20</sup> This suggests, however, that we have to think about the hierarchically-ordered, stage-sequential development of (certain aspects) of religion, like the logics of moral commitment they articulate. Ethical universalism is a progression from ethical particularism, even if we cannot adjudicate between them from within a particular religious tradition.

## 5. Natural Law, Human Fallibility and the Transcendence of God

Bellah is one of our most important sociologists, a theorist of great acuity and an empirical researcher with a sense of data close to what we find in Weber. In *RHE* he finds his theory in Donald’s articulation of the stages of cultural evolution, and he illuminates each of Donald’s stages richly and insightfully. He does not, however, make and sustain a theoretical argument about *religion*. I want to suggest 1) meta-theoretically, what such an argument might look like and 2) outline a particular argument dealing with religion and its social effects.<sup>21</sup> I hope that this outline will give some sense of what I miss in Bellah’s discussion.

1) Bellah is, I think, correct that historical sociology is a narrative. In the absence of experiments or controlled observations, our task is to generate a logically-coherent story, one that makes sense of our data. Others, however, can tell equally coherent stories making sense of our data, stories that differ dramatically from the one we tell.

<sup>20</sup> See “I would argue that the myths told by the ancient Israelite prophets, by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, by Confucius and Mencius, and by the Buddha, just to stay within the purview of this book, are all true myths. They overlap with each other and with Chaisson’s myth, but even in their conflicts, which are sometimes serious, they are all worthy of belief, and I find it possible to believe in all of them in rather deep but not exclusive ways” [Bellah 2011, 47]. Or, “Science is an extremely valuable avenue to truth. It is not the only one. To claim it is the only one is what is legitimately called ‘scientism’ and takes its place among the many fundamentalism of this world” [*ibidem*, 115]. It seems to me that Bellah too often confuses “science” with “scientism.” Very few scientists confuse science and poetry, but equally few are likely to turn to poetry or religion for scientific “truth.” One can and should recognize that music and poetry have intrinsic value, and lead to types of insight and understanding, but these are different from the “truth” that we learn from science. While we might contend that insights that prove to be scientifically valuable might come from dreams, this is not to say that dreams generate “truth.” Science is not only the insight, but also the capacity to separate what is, proves to be, “truth” from scientific gibberish (which may include contentions articulated in great poetry or religious thought.)

<sup>21</sup> *RHE* focuses mainly on the genesis of Bellah’s historical cases; see also Bellah, Joas 2012.

For traditional historians, there is no getting around this problem, and, as Bellah sometimes suspects, the stories told reveal as much or more about the teller and her socio-cultural world as about the events and structures under analysis.

While there is no definitive way out of this dilemma in historical analyses, unlike traditional historians, practitioners of historical sociology have a way of breaking into the hermeneutic circle. The coherence of our story must extend to include our explicitly stated theory. If our theory is general, it must also be consistent with the story we tell about other empirically-relevant cases, including those told by other researchers. If our theory “fits into” several historical narratives, this provides warrant for its veracity. Thus, historical sociology is a hermeneutic enterprise, but one where our stories may have explanatory effect when generalized beyond the case(s) under examination.<sup>22</sup>

2) I cannot illuminate satisfactorily such a theory, such an analysis, here. Instead I want to hint at one (if only through a set of assertions). Substantively, it relates to axial-age religions and suggests that if we want to understand their effects within society, we need to analyze them in terms of their fundamental presumptions. More simply, I have emphasized their independence and their autonomous effects.<sup>23</sup>

To take an example that is of particular concern to me, I want to argue that the notions of right reason and human fallibility, when constitutive of the logic of religious commitment that is dominant in the *conscience collective*, the shared values of a society, predispose that society towards democracy. I can illustrate this argument in a brief discussion of Islam and Christianity.

Right reason and human fallibility are found in a robust form in (some forms of) Christianity, but not in Islam. The notion of right reason/natural law, when coupled with original sin, and thus the fallibility of our understanding, predisposes Christianity to be compatible with democracy. God, as conceptualized in Christianity, acts justly, while the actions and expectations of God, as conceptualized in Islam, constitute what is just.<sup>24</sup> The absence of a notion of natural justice, when coupled with the belief in man’s natural affinity for God (*fitra*), and thus the ability to follow precepts laid down by God, predisposes a contradiction between Islam and a democracy that composes laws from the people (instead of through the sovereignty of God).

The belief, found in many varieties of Christianity, that God has imbued all humans with an understanding of justice, results in a predisposition in Christianity

<sup>22</sup> This analysis is derived from Gould [1992b].

<sup>23</sup> This discussion is taken from a paper in progress [Gould 2011b]; there I turn assertions into arguments, attempting to illuminate the mechanisms relevant to my contentions.

<sup>24</sup> The theoretic analysis of this issue derives from Plato and has come to be called the “Euthyphro dilemma.”

for a universalism (focusing on humanity) that may regulate the particular (focusing on specific religious denominations,) for the creation of a civil religion that legitimates religious pluralism. The absence of a natural understanding of justice in Islam results, in contrast, in the domination of particularism, of Islam, and the fitting of non-Islamic faiths into a structure dominated by Islam. While, for many years, Islam was more tolerant than Christianity, because it created space for people of the Book within “Islamic states,” this status was not one of full inclusion; it was not dependent on a notion of universal reason/rights and a strong sense of human fallibility, and thus it did not develop a belief in the sovereignty of the people, of a community of citizens.<sup>25</sup>

The apparent contradiction between original sin and right reason created space in Christianity for revelation, whereas a notion of right reason, in the absence of a notion of human fallibility as strong as original sin, does away with the need for revelation. If people could appeal to a natural notion of justice transparently, institutionalized religiosity could not be sustained. Only if there is a notion of original sin correlative with right reason, does the necessity for revelation, as an aid to right reason, make sense. No notion of right reason is supportable at the core of religious orthodoxy without a correspondent notion of original sin or its functional equivalent. Christianity institutionalized just the right combination of natural reason and human fallibility to sustain the conditions generating religious commitments with a predisposition towards democracy.<sup>26</sup>

Even though Roman Catholicism shares with certain strains of Protestantism the notion of “natural law,” because God is understood as immanent within the Church, the fallibility of humans derived from original sin is mitigated through the immanence of God in, and thus the authority of the Church.<sup>27</sup> In consequence, the

<sup>25</sup> There is, I think, a parallel here with Myrdal’s argument about the universalistic-egalitarian values that he saw in the American Creed. When Americans were unwilling to include blacks within these values, they constructed a form of racism that denominated blacks as less than human. I have argued that a “New Racism” has emerged in the USA. We now, believing that they deserve equal opportunity, include blacks within our universalistic-egalitarian values. The majority of us also believe that blacks have equal opportunity. When we find that they perform, on average, less well than whites, we attribute these performances to various causes, most of which are racist (e.g., an inferior, instead of a different, culture). See Gould [1992a; 1999; 2011a].

<sup>26</sup> If it is the case, as has been suggested to me by my student, Angelo Ngai, that Confucianism posits something akin to right reason and the goodness of women and men, then my argument helps explain the absence of revelation in Confucianism and why so many people, contrary to Bellah, do not see it as a “religion.”

<sup>27</sup> A discussion of Protestant natural-law theory would take us too far afield. There is a complex, controversial literature on the relationships between Reformation thought and natural law. In my opinion, many of the controversies could be resolved with the simple recognition that Christianity, in general, and (at least Calvinist) Protestantism, in particular, need to be understood as founded in the contradiction between original sin (and thus salvation only through God’s grace) and natural law

relationship between Roman Catholicism and (the origins of) democracy is weakened considerably. In contrast, the Protestant notion of a community of saints, an unmediated relationship between each believer and God, emphasizes the fallibility of all individuals and creates for them an uncertainty about their salvation in the face of a transcendent God. This notion of fallibility, when conjoined with the belief that all individuals are imbued with a natural sense of justice, and the idea that each has a direct relationship to a transcendent God, predisposes societies dominated by this form of Protestantism to democracy.

I do not argue that Christianity is always compatible with democracy, nor do I argue that Islam is always incompatible with democracy. Such “idealist” arguments would place too much emphasis on the role of religious conviction, ignoring situational factors (both relating to religious institutions and to other social structures) relevant to actual empirical relationships. The same value commitments may have different consequences in various situations. I argue, instead, that there are foundational aspects of Christianity that predispose it to be compatible with the origination of democracy and foundational aspects of Islam that predispose it to inhibit the inauguration of democracy.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Bellaah believes that scientific methods are concerned with causes and functions, while humanistic methodologies are concerned with understanding, meaning. He believes that “both kinds of methodologies are required in both science and the humanities” [*ibidem*, 113]. I believe that a viable social science must provide an interpretive understanding of social action if we are going to be able to explain social action successfully.<sup>29</sup> While Bellaah discusses religion as practice and religious symbols, he does not discuss the logic of religious commitment that is constituted (differently) within each axial-age religion. It is these commitments that motivate and legitimate action among religious adherents. These widely-shared religious commitments are not the same thing as the second-ordered thinking we sometimes find among the elites, and,

(which means that no one, even those without faith, has an excuse for violating God’s law). While one may emphasize one or the other side of this contradiction, and Reformers and commentators, alike, do so, crucial in understanding the logic of religious conviction is the retention of both sides of it.

<sup>28</sup> A crucial variable is the location of (Christian) believers within the larger social order. Shmuel Eisenstadt once argued for me (in a personal communication) the contention that ascetic Protestantism predisposes towards authoritarianism when it is politically dominant and towards democracy when it is politically subordinate and part of a religiously plural social order, when it is not hegemonic. There is, I believe, considerable merit in this argument when it is contextualized properly.

<sup>29</sup> This does not mean that all social science is explanatory.

if Weber is correct, the second-ordered thinking of religious elites often constructed edifices that are structurally quite different from institutionalized religious commitments. I miss most in Bellah's great book an analysis of *religion* as an independent social and cultural structure with autonomous effects on both the activities of "believers" and on the larger social order.

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## **Axial Age Religious Commitment in Theoretical Perspective**

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