

Religion and axiality: theological reflections on Robert N. Bellah's Axial Age hypothesis

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Abstract

The article addresses controversial questions related to Robert N. Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011), and the sequel, *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (2012). Discussed is the difference between the macro-historical hypothesis of an axial age and more abstract aspects of axiality. Critical questions are raised about whether Bellah's theory of the emergence of religion in play and ritual does not underestimate the cognitive functions of pre-axial religion. Finally, Bellah's project raises questions as to the creative transitions taking place in post-axial epochs, not least due to the development of canonical traditions in the first centuries CE, and to the emergence of concepts of autonomous individuals in early modernity.

Keywords: axial age, axiality, canonicity, religious evolution, ritual, Robert N. Bellah

One rarely comes across a work of such compass and eminent scholarship as Robert N. Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (hereafter abbreviated as RHE). This book – and the subsequent discussion volume, *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (abbreviated as AAC) – encapsulates a rare mind's life work on the role of religion in human evolution.¹ As early as 1964, Bellah wrote the programmatic article on 'Religious Evolution' at a time when evolutionary approaches to the history of religions were seen with suspicion.² While Bellah won fame through his sociological theory of 'civil religion' in modern Western societies, his writings on religious evolution were sidetracked until the topic reappeared in the late 1990s. With his 700-page opus on *Religion in Human Evolution*, Bellah's life work came to a full circle.

¹ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* [hereafter RHE] (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas (eds), *The Axial Age and its Consequences* [hereafter AAC] (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

² Robert N. Bellah, 'Religious Evolution', *American Sociological Review* 29/3 (1964), pp. 358–74. This article was indebted to the work Talcott Parsons and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt.

This brief article will not be able to do justice to the immense historical work laid out in Bellah's studies on the main axial religions. After briefly introducing the idea of the axial age, I discuss Bellah's views of the emergence of religion in play and ritual. From this background I turn to his views on the role of religion in axial civilisations, while pointing to aspects of post-axial religion that may not be fully reflected upon in Bellah's work. The major world religions of today, such as Christianity and Islam, are both ritual and textual. *Homo religiosus* is both *homo ludens* and *homo legens*.

The axial age hypothesis

As is well known, the term *Achsenzeit* comes from the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers who (in *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* from 1949) pointed to the deep cultural transformations taking place in the centuries around 500 BCE in Greece, Israel, China and India. According to Jaspers, these 'axial' transformations offer shared resources for humanity in an age of a potential atomic disaster. Proponents of the axial age hypothesis nonetheless describe the 'axial' in slightly different terms. Some have seen the identifying trait mainly in the depths of selfhood facilitated by the urbanisation and large-scale empires of the axial age (so Jaspers). Others have foregrounded the basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders and the emergence of intellectual elites questioning the established social powers (so the Jewish scholar Shmuel N. Eisenstadt). Still others point to transformation towards rationalisation and the accompanying move towards universalised forms of ethics (so Jürgen Habermas in the vein of Max Weber).

The theory of the axial age is thus a macro-historical hypothesis with vested interests. As shown in the perceptive analysis of Hans Joas, the axial age debate was early on framed as a 'religious discourse'.³ Its prehistory lies with the Catholic thinker Ernst von Lasaulx, who wanted to broaden the concept of revelation. Later on, the idea has mostly been promoted by liberal Protestant thinkers (from Max Weber onwards) who wanted to distance themselves from sacramental forms of religion associated with Catholicism.

A 'Protestant' emphasis on individuality also still seems to be a guiding vision in Bellah's project. But in other ways Bellah is a synthetic thinker, and in this sense a 'catholic' thinker (without a capital C). He does not want to reduce axial mentalities to a few tenets only, but rather analyses concrete manifestations of 'axial phenomena' in the four traditions that he investigates.⁴ One will thus look in vain for an exact definition of 'the axial' in Bellah. What distinguishes axial from archaic religions, according to Bellah,

³ AAC, pp. 9–29.

⁴ Bellah, RHE, p. 266.

is the breakdown of the homology between state and cosmos. The king of the state is not God, and vice versa. This gives ample room for cultivating critical questions, such as ‘who is the (true) king, the one who really reflects divine justice?’⁵ Such forms of reflexivity and criticism were exercised by social ‘denouncers’, who were also often ‘renouncers’ of the mundane world, such as Plato, the Buddha and the Israelite prophets. What defines ‘axiality’, if anything, is a probing attitude towards the inherited traditions and a discontent with the alignment between the transcendent realm and the social sphere of kings, emperors and other traditional rulers. Taking a stance beyond the traditional power structures created a new mentality amongst prophets such as Jeremiah and the Second Isaiah, private thinkers such as Confucius, itinerant philosophers such as Plato and an extreme renouncer such as the Buddha in India. Being a ‘renouncer’ goes along with being a socially disembedded ‘itinerant’ thinker. On this point, modern intellectuals easily find a resonance with the itinerants of the axial age.

Bellah on the evolutionary emergence of religion

Bellah’s book *AAC* spans from early hominisation to the axial age, and he is firm in his contention that ‘evolution is historical; history is evolutionary’.⁶ He describes his own view as ‘basically neo-Darwinian’, with variation and selection operating at the level of cultural traits and institutional structures.⁷ Already in *RHE* it is evident, however, that he is not a standard neo-Darwinian. He argues for an organism-centred rather than a gene-centred view of evolution, and he points to the importance of niche constructions (think of beaver dams), which presuppose a goal-directedness of purposive organisms.⁸ On this background, he views reductive programmes in evolutionary psychology of the Pascal Boyer-type as ‘particularly unhelpful’, not least due to their ‘lack of insight into religion as actually lived’.⁹

However, human religion does have evolutionary roots, and the tough mechanism of selection operates also on religious life-forms. Moreover, the evolutionary perspective implies that the mentality of our forefathers and foremothers is still with us today: ‘Nothing is ever lost’.¹⁰ But like other niche-constructing animals, human beings are socially sheltered from too

⁵ Robert N. Bellah, ‘What is Axial about the Axial Age?’, *European Journal of Sociology* 46/1 (2005), p. 70.

⁶ *AAC*, p. 448.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁸ Bellah, *RHE*, pp. xii–xiii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 629. See also Robert N. Bellah, ‘Religion in Human Evolutions Revisited: Response to Commentators’, *Religion, Brain, and Behavior* 2/3 (2012), pp. 260–70.

¹⁰ Bellah, *RHE*, p. 267.

direct pressures of natural selection. Human cultures offer ample room for what Alison Gopnik has helpfully termed the ‘useful uselessness’ of play.¹¹ Religion, along with science and art, exemplifies the human capacity to ‘go offline’, as we do when we fall asleep and dream, and when we play and use the specific human capacity of symbolic imagination.¹² The capacity for play has evolutionary precursors in other mammals, and even among birds. Bellah here refers to Gordon Burghardt’s writings on the characteristics of animal play. Burghardt points to the following five features of play: (1) its limited survival value; (2) its inner pleasure, being enacted for its own sake; (3) its structural differentiation with temporal phases; (4) its modes of repetition; and finally (5) the ‘relaxed field’ of play, sheltered from too strict pressures of selection.¹³

While play and ritual can be traced back in animal evolution, the capacity for symbolic transcendence may be a human prerogative, even though forms of expressive and indexical language exist also among higher animals. On this issue Bellah follows the argument of Terrence Deacon in the *The Symbolic Species*. Also, he is in line with Wentzel van Huyssteen, who in his Gifford Lectures suggested that ‘the institutional animal behaviour such as territoriality, ritualisation, play, and the unmistakable capacity for feelings of meaning and loss (death) may be seen as precursors of the human sense of sacred place and time, of ritual and myth, ecstasy and mysticism’.¹⁴

Bellah on tribal and archaic religion

Bellah is a sociologist who clearly situates himself in Emile Durkheim’s predominantly moral understanding of religion.¹⁵ This comes to the fore in his opening definition of religion in *RHE*: ‘Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community’.¹⁶ Incidentally, Bellah sometimes transcends this definition by highlighting aspects of religious life that go beyond the function of creating moral bonds between practitioners. Eventually, religious beliefs also bring with them a sense of unitive experiences, not just between religious agents but also in relation to the wider reality. There is, as admitted by Bellah, ‘a deep human need – based on 200 million years of the necessity of parental

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 80–90.

¹² Ibid., p. 9.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 76–83.

¹⁴ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World: Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 204.

¹⁵ See Robert N. Bellah, ‘Durkheim and Ritual’, in Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), pp. 183–210.

¹⁶ Bellah, *RHE*, p. 1.

care for survival and at least 250,000 years of very extended adult protection and care of children . . . – to think of the universe, to see the largest world one is capable of imagining, as personal'.¹⁷

The inner connection between ritual and play was already central to Johan Huizinga's classic study *Homo ludens* from 1938, as it was for a major theologian such as Wolfhart Pannenberg.¹⁸ Bellah here points to the similarities between religious life and other human offline experiences: dreaming, playing, participating in wider fields of awareness beyond what is needed for our mere survival. Bellah is perhaps less clear in clarifying the specificities of religion in relation to other forms of play, dreaming and going offline. After all, the observance of rituals, especially in tribal and archaic religions, is highly rule-governed – more like a game than like a free-wheeling play.

Bellah revitalises Durkheim's profane/sacred distinction through distinctions more accessible to modern readers, such as that between being online/offline, Alfred Schütz's between living in the communal world of daily life versus going beyond that common-sense world, and Abraham Maslow's between 'Deficiency-knowledge', related to fulfilling the needs of daily life, and 'Being-cognition', which is about simply existing and enjoying life.¹⁹

My question is whether these otherwise very helpful distinctions can be extrapolated back to the early phases of religious life. One does not need to go as far as Lucien Lévy-Brühl who (in *La mentalité primitive* from 1922) suggested a pan-sacral consciousness in early human development. But it seems to me questionable to assume that tribal and archaic religion were not concerned with cognitive features of the natural world. After all, having cognitive value means having survival value. Let me mention totemism as an example.²⁰ The relation between a group and its totem was neither an issue of social self-identification only, nor just a free play; it was about human hunters attuning themselves to salient features of their environment. The world of animals had to be understood from within, as it were, if human groups were to succeed and survive. Therefore totemistic bonds often existed between human hunters and their prey. These bonds are not just about establishing a 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim) within the group by virtue of artistic ornamentations. It is also about establishing relations and rules for the interaction between the group and the observed animal

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Historicity of Nature: Essays on Science and Theology* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008), pp. 75–86.

¹⁹ Bellah, *RHE*, pp. xv–xxii, 5–6.

²⁰ Bellah refers to totemism in passing in *RHE*, p. 151.

behaviours in the environment. Likewise for the aboriginal dream-time might well have had a significant survival value, since it was about gaining a deep awareness of the landscape on which they lived and thrived.

That religion is concerned with the life-supporting aspects of reality does not apply to tribal religions only. From many sources we know that archaic religions saw the correct observation of rites as essential for survival. Even in post-axial religion this view persists: on the Round Tower (built for the astronomer Tycho Brahe) of the Trinity Church in central Copenhagen, the motto of King Christian IV (r. 1588–1648) was attached: *Pietas firmat regnum* (Piety strengthens the kingdom). There was not, as in later modernity, a distinction between inner religious life and social cohesion on the one hand, and the flourishing of crops, the avoidance of epidemics and other hazards on the other.

Certainly, tribal and archaic societies did not exercise ritual at all times and in all places. In this sense Durkheim's distinction between sacred and profane remains central to the understanding of religion. However, even though religion is characterised by ubiety, performed at particular places and times, it is also about comprehending ubiquitous conditions of reality. In this sense, I wonder whether Bellah is right when stating uncompromisingly that 'ritual clearly precedes myth'.²¹ Did religious rituals ever exist without 'formulating conceptions of a general order of existence', as phrased by Clifford Geertz in his famous definition of religion?²² What religions normally do is to combine a wide-scope view of reality with a focus on what is important for the well-being of human beings. Hence the cognitive aspects of religion so important for everyday orientation are not secondary to the ritual aspects of religious life.

Moreover, artistic and religious perception of the orders of reality has feedback effects on the coping with everyday issues. This is also admitted by Bellah in his concluding perspectives in *RHE*, where he points out that the 'relaxed fields' are not without influence on the human cultivation of the struggle for survival: 'In life and clearly in human culture there are no impenetrable boundaries and no fields that aren't overlapping. Indeed, play can be sucked into the world of daily life, can become part of the struggle for existence.'²³ It even goes the other way round: 'If play can get sucked into the world of daily life, work, in the sense of overcoming deficiency, can sometimes be transformed into forms of play.'²⁴ Exactly!

²¹ Ibid., p. 136.

²² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 90.

²³ Bellah, *RHE*, pp. 587–8.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 588.

Differences between the axial civilisations

Probably one of the best attempts to characterise axial civilisations in general terms can be found in Shmuel N. Eisenstadt who refers to the ‘combination of cultural orientations and institutional formations’ based in the rupture of social orders in the axial age.²⁵ Axial visions include a *broadening of horizons*, opening up for universal perspectives, an *ontological distinction* between mundane and transcendental orders, and the *normative subordination* of the mundane under the transcending perspective.²⁶ This characterisation has the advantage of seeing the axial age as emerging from historical constellations that facilitated a new cluster of attitudes towards society and the wider reality.

The cluster-view of the axial age also opens the possibilities of recognising differences between the four principal axial civilisations. The concept of *Tien* (heaven) in China, for example, is not separated from mundane reality in the manner of the Jewish God, the Platonic realm of ideas or the Buddhist concept of *Nirvana*. It is a strength in Bellah’s approach that he lets the four cultures speak for themselves without subsuming them under one and the same category. Comparative perspectives do not suggest identity, just as similarity does not suggest sameness.

This admission, however, raises a set of new questions. First, could there be other axial civilisations of which we have no sufficient records? Mentioning the case of Zoroastrianism, Bellah’s answer is a resounding Yes. Due to the lack of sources, he ‘regretfully’ omits the Persian Empire (c.550–330 BCE). Second, does Akhenaten’s monotheistic reform in Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE constitute an early axial turn, as suggested by the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann? Bellah’s answer is No, since there was no sense of a rupture between Aten and the Pharaoh in Akhenaten’s reform, no evidence of a theoretical reflection, and no subsequent tradition of axial mentality.²⁷

As we have seen, Bellah emphasises the danger of prioritising one of the four axial cases over the other, thereby reading our own presuppositiona into the interpretation of the material.²⁸ For Bellah’s project it is important to be based in a broader theoretical perspective, which is not predisposed towards particular religious traditions.²⁹ Bellah thus follows Merlin Donald’s

²⁵ AAC, p. 266.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 267.

²⁷ Bellah, ‘What is Axial about the Axial Age’, pp. 82–3, cf. RHE, pp. 276–8.

²⁸ Bellah, RHE, p. 272.

²⁹ This might explain why Bellah does not refer to two more theologically inclined presentations. The one is Karen Armstrong’s *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions* (New York: Knopf, 2006), which speaks of the birth of compassion in the axial age. The other is Rodney Stark’s *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (New York: HarperOne, 2008 [2007]), who argues that ‘all these new

theory on the development from episodic cultures (also found among higher primates) to mimetic culture (in tribal societies), further on to mythic culture (in archaic society) towards the gradual formation of theoretical cultures, a development presupposing a new cognitive ability to store memory in external media outside the brain. In his earlier writings, Donald traced the beginnings of a theoretical culture back to about 40,000 years ago.³⁰ He pursues a *longue durée* perspective regarding the consequences of the axial age:

The Axial Age might be considered the first period that germinated the seeds of later full-blown Theoretic cultures, such as those currently governing the developed world. The evolutionary trend in the direction of institutionalized analytic thinking grew very slowly . . .³¹

For Donald as for Bellah, nothing is lost – the past of oral, ritualised and mythic cultures is present in the post-axial civilisations. Yet Donald emphasises the case of Greece as outstanding, since only here do we find a cultivation of a written scholarly reflection: ‘It is debatable whether the germs of true Theoretic culture existed anywhere but Greece at that time.’³²

Defining the axial age as the emergence of theoretical culture, Bellah admits that ‘theory, if we define it narrowly as “thinking about thinking”, was not an Israelite concern’.³³ Likewise, the aphorismic anecdotes of Confucius do not display a theoretical attitude in the sense of systematic thinking.³⁴ Yet just as Confucius takes on ‘objective’ view of the tradition, so Jeremiah assumes a God’s eye view of the lives of the kings and cultic practices. Everything is judged from a higher perspective than that of the regnant political powers and religious cults. Here Bellah points to astounding parallels between the Hebrew and the Chinese traditions. Both are concerned with the continuity with history and tradition and speak in everyday parables and aphoristic sayings, quite unlike the situation in Greece, where we find the

faiths discovered “sin” and the conscience, as each linked morality to transcendence. Contrasted with the prevailing conceptions of immoral and amoral Gods, this was revolutionary’ (p. 20). In his response to me in Philadelphia 2012 (see n. 51), Bellah said that he took Stark’s position to be ‘a too partisan view’. It is nonetheless interesting that the question of the discovery of universal tendencies towards sin and defilement (not only among the rulers, but also among those ruled) is largely absent in discussions of the axial age.

³⁰ See Merlin Donald, *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (New York: Norton, 2001).

³¹ AAC, p. 266.

³² Ibid., p. 70.

³³ Bellah, RHE, p. 283.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 409.

pre-Socratic thinkers searching for ultimate reality, and Plato, who searched for the purity of the soul in the realm of ideas.

On further scrutiny, however, not even Plato is a clear case for a theoretical culture, since he was using what Donald calls a 'hybrid system', that is a system that 'includes mimetic, mythic and theoretic in a new synthesis, but not the replacement of mimetic and mythic by the theoretic alone'.³⁵ Likewise, 'mythospeculation' is typical for the Upanishads of the Hindu tradition and for substantial parts of Buddha's teaching. Accordingly, Bellah is aware of the fact that 'second-order theorizing' – thinking about the conditions for thinking as such – can't be found in any of the axial culture, perhaps with the exception of the Pythagorean proofs within geometry.³⁶ The covenant between Yahweh and his people is maintained in Israel; the laws of Tien are preserved in Confucianism; the Vedic tradition is faithfully transmitted in Hindu culture; even Plato continues to interpret myths, as he does in the *Timaeus*, the *Phaedrus*, and elsewhere. For the Buddha the eightfold path to *moksha* certainly includes meditation, but the role of theory is confined to showing the illusions of everyday existence. The theoretical attitude is never pure in any of the traditions. Mythospeculation – metanarratives with a great deal of reflections – continues. Also here 'the axial breakthroughs were the children of the archaic cultures from which they rose'.³⁷ And so it remained: 'Ritual, when thrown out at the front door, returns at the back door: there are even antiritual rituals. Our embodiment and its rhythms are inescapable.'³⁸

If this is the case, there is perhaps less of a common individualising move in the four axial traditions than is often suggested. When Jeremiah called for the law to be written into the hearts of flesh and blood (Jer. 31:33), this implied an interiorisation of the divine law. But was a similar move present in Hinduism and Buddhism? The Buddha denied the reality of the individual soul as an illusion to be cast away. The Upanishads (perhaps here closer to Plato's correspondence between the soul and the world of ideas) refer to a long list of correspondences between the eye and the sun, the feet and the earth, the wind and the nostrils, etc., which in the end are destined to be identical, since the core of the individual, the *Atman*, is identical with the *Brahman*. In brief, it is hard to find precursors for early modern ideas of individuality, in particular in the Eastern traditions.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 394–5.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 275.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 278.

³⁸ Ibid.

From the axial age to post-axiality?

At the end one might ask: do newer cultural developments influence present-day religious life more than the mindsets emerging in the axial age? Bellah's book is devoted to the time up to the axial age. Accordingly, we are here asking a question that lies beyond the scope of RHE. Nonetheless, the pungent question stands: 'What is axial about post-axial religion?' The volume AAC takes up this question in various shades. Most of the articles support or qualify the axial age hypothesis, while a minority of articles questions the historical theses altogether.

What is at stake? On the one hand, it certainly would constitute a problem for the axial age hypothesis to declare a long list of axial epochs in human history, some prior to the axial age, others from the dawn of Christianity or Islam up to and perhaps even beyond modernity. This is the problem of theoretical promiscuity: an endless additive approach to further axial 'breakthroughs'.³⁹ On the other hand, it would constitute a problem for the axial age hypothesis if it is simply declared to be an invention promoted by ethically (and perhaps religiously) concerned philosophers. This is the problem of a theoretical subtraction: the concept of the axial age is basically a historical myth. This path is taken by Jan Assmann, who declares the belief in the axial age (understood as a global turn in universal history) as 'a myth rather than a theory'.⁴⁰ What one would here lose would be the acknowledgement of a *synchronicity* of the historical constellations around the axial age, as well as the idea of *shared human resources* for further development.

It seems to me at least that the features of urbanisation together with new technologies of written language did offer new possibilities for being an itinerant mind. In this sense, there is a material substrate behind the axial age hypothesis, even if the hypothesis will need to be qualified from case to case. The question is then: will the hypothesis die the death of a thousand qualifications?

Indeed, the recognition that there are multiple ways of developing axial culture has opened up for a more generalised concept of 'axiality'. Jan Assmann, for example, makes this distinction between axial age and axiality as a mindset facilitated by writing as a new external memory device.⁴¹ From this perspective he is not only pointing backwards to Egyptian cultures, but also forwards to the important period between 200 BCE and 200 CE, when

³⁹ An example of this promiscuous use of axial ages can be found in Yves Lambert, 'Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?', *Sociology of Religion* 60/3 (1999), pp. 303–33.

⁴⁰ AAC, p. 398.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 398–9.

the great textual canons were established in a variety of philosophies (e.g. the schools of Plato, Aristotle and Stoicism) and emerging world religions. Hereby literacy was not only episodic, confined to a small elite, but became part of a shared cultural memory, facilitated by the writing, reading and hearing of holy scriptures.

This development applies not only to early Christianity and Hellenistic philosophy, but also to the Islamic Qur'an. From this perspective, however, Islam sits under the umbrella of axiality in an ambiguous way. On the one hand, the strict monotheism of Muhammad implies a very clear case of transcendence; on the other hand, Allah's unqualified transcendence is reinstantiated within the mundane realm, be it the form of Qur'anic text, or in the form of the authority of Muhammad (and, in Shi'a, his genetic lineage). This ambivalence does not go unnoticed by Bellah: 'Muhammed, God's chosen prophet, was, like Moses, a king and not king, but surely a ruler of a people . . . The old unity of God and king was broken through dramatically, and yet reaffirmed paradoxically in the new axial formulations.'⁴²

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam also exemplify another feature in Bellah's general theory of religion: the re-entry of rituality in scriptural religion. When holy texts are canonised for use in the larger religious community, studying the Torah (and the Talmud, etc.), studying the Qur'an (and the Hadith, etc.) and studying the Bible (and the church fathers, etc.) becomes itself ritualised.⁴³ The dividing line is whether the scriptures are read and interpreted by scribes, priests or imams only, or whether religious communities consisting of ordinary people take an active role in interpreting and responding to the holy texts during textual rituals. Here the *homo ludens* becomes *homo legens*, and vice versa: not the one thing without the other.⁴⁴ Thus, continuity (not a break) exists between the more general material conditions in the axial age manifest in the external memory device of scriptures (as emphasised by Merlin Donald and Bellah) and the more specific development of publicly shared canons (as emphasised by Jan Assmann).

Axiality and individuality

There may be more of a discontinuity between the axial age and early modern emphasis on individuality. This can be shown by comparing Bellah's view

⁴² Bellah, *RHE*, p. 267.

⁴³ This point is made by Line Sogaard Christensen, 'Cultural Evolution in the Hebrew Bible: Animal Sacrifices, Blood Sprinkling, Sacred Texts, and Public Readings', *Jewish Studies* 50 (2015), pp. 15–35.

⁴⁴ I am here taking up an expression from my Old Testament colleague at Aarhus University, Professor Hans J. Lundager Jensen.

of axial age individuals with Charles Taylor's. Already in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989), Taylor argued that Plato did not have a modern concept of selfhood. In Plato we find the contours of a moral self-mastering self, but a self still engulfed in the realm of ideas. It was, according to Taylor, not until Augustine that we find a turn to a radical self-reflexivity of an individual who has a unique first-person given by God: 'It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought.'⁴⁵

In AAC Taylor follows up on this analysis. In Christianity as in Buddhism, a disembedding takes place between the self on the one side, and the cosmos, the social powers and the person's immediate wish for egocentric fulfilment on the other: 'our own flourishing (as individual, family, tribe, or clan) can no longer be our highest goal'.⁴⁶ There is, according to Taylor, a historical route from this religious view to later, modern concepts of a 'buffered identity', which is no longer open to the influence of an enchanted cosmos.⁴⁷ But the connection is not one of direct implication. For what is missing in the buffered self is the axial understanding of the self as having sources beyond itself in an unalloyed goodness – Plato's Good beyond any particular existence, the Chinese Heaven, the Jewish God of love beyond ambiguity. Thus, there might be undesirable consequences of post-axial thinking in modernity, where the buffered self becomes a self-disciplining self, without inner connections to sources in a goodness beyond itself, and without connections to the wider cosmos, from which we came and still belong.

Bellah's stance

Bellah himself does not share the *Kulturpessimismus* of a Max Weber. But neither does he end up in a facile optimism. The axial has given us resources that we would not want to live without: 'It is a great heritage.'⁴⁸ But is not an unambiguous heritage, since the great utopian visions of the axial age have motivated the noblest achievements of humankind as well as meanest systems of human action. Similarly, the theoretical option of disengaged knowledge has given astounding achievements but also the power to destroy our planet.

A similar ambivalence comes to the fore in Bellah's view of religion. RHE ends in a sort of theoretical indecision. On the one hand, he takes side with

⁴⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), pp. 120, 131.

⁴⁶ AAC, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 465.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Toward a World Theology* (1981), saying that we might refer to 'God' as the common point of all religions, while aiming to 'include the whole of human religiosity in his perspective without privileging any one tradition or any kind of tradition'.⁴⁹ 'God' is here not understood in any specific meaning but presupposes a stance (albeit a friendly one) above all actually lived religions.

This pathway of Cantwell Smith, however, stands in tension with another influence on Bellah's work, namely Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Bellah quotes him:

We must not ignore the fact that in this last analysis a commitment to a specific orientation outweighs catholicity in imagery. One may be a sensitive and seasoned traveller, at ease in many places, but one must have a home . . . Home is always home for someone; but there is no Absolute Home in general.⁵⁰

Although Bellah understands this view as perhaps the most discomfiting to believers, since it seems to suggest a sort of relativism, it is nonetheless the view that I find best accords with Bellah's twofold emphasis on the axial revolution, with its incipient discovery of the self, and the fact that elements of archaic human experience, such as rituals and embodied habits, remain with us in post-axial societies. The alternative is not between abstract claims of universality and a self-protective parochialism. It is always in the depths of the particulars that aspects of universality are uncovered, even if sometimes far from home.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Bellah, *RHE*, p. 604.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 604–5.

⁵¹ The present article builds on a response to Robert N. Bellah at the Symposium on Spiritual Progress: Honoring the Centenary of the Birth of Sir John Templeton (American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. 15–17 Oct. 2012), organised by the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton. Bellah sadly died in 2013; many of us will miss his generosity and broad-minded scholarship.