

Bellah, Robert N. *Religion in Human Evolution* ~ Readers Guide

During the first two weeks of class (and by our second meeting) you have a significant challenge: to read a 600 page *Religion in Human Evolution* book and write a 1000-1500 word report about it (double the usual writing assignment, since nothing will be due the first meeting). I would also like you to turn in either 100-300 words of summary separate from that on each chapter, or your outlines or other chapter-by-chapter notes, although this is optional. You must do this by no later than one hour before the class meets and you must show up for class to discuss this reading and your perceptions of it. To help you get off on the right foot with this class (and I hope others) I want to see how well you tackle such a text, and help you to deepen your ability to read carefully and well.

To succeed, you will need to read in a way scholars often must read, with a mixture of rapid reviewing of material combined with close scrutiny where the main arguments and evidence are to be found. Reading suggestions:

Skim the Preface. The rest of the chapters will require different levels of attention. Sometimes you will peruse or skim, other times you will read with extreme care. Be prepared to answer (both in your written assignment and in class) the central questions driving our analysis for *each* chapter (see the syllabus), especially with regard to its central contention(s) and evidence.

For example, in Chapter One: What does Bellah consider to be the central building blocks of the phenomena that today we perceive to be “religion”? In Chapter Two, try to discern not only his central contentions about Religion and Evolution, but also how he positions himself viz. the ‘religious naturalists’ he discusses. In short, where authors explicitly or implicitly reveal themselves, be sure to pick up on it.

In Chapter Three: What does Bellah mean by archaic religion? Also here Bella indicates that he finds Merlin Donald’s work especially compelling; how then does he think this work illuminates the production of meaning in tribal religion? In Chapter Four, how does an evolutionary frame help us to understand in Archaic religion the emergence of systems of hierarchal domination?

What does Bellah mean by ‘axial age’ religions? Chapters Six through Nine examine such religions, which Bellah characterizes as involving new political and moral forms that burst forth through the voices of “the moral upstart who relies on speech, not force” for their power and legitimacy (264). What are the continuities and discontinuities, both between the two so-called Western traditions analyzed, and between these traditions and the two that originated in Asia discussed subsequently, and what were the internal tensions among the axial religions originating in Asia? And what are the central insights that Bellah thinks can be derived from his analysis of the axial age religions in general?

Based on the preceding chapters and his conclusion in Chapter Nine, Do you think he is feeling positively or negatively toward religion in general and axial age religions in particular, and in what ways. And since in early work he suggested the possibility of the emergence of a global civil religion that might unify humanity and promote ecosystem health, do you think this work is in concert with this earlier vision or a retreat from it? And ultimately, we will want to address, how well does Bellah address evolutionary theories that purport to explain religious perception, belief, and practice? And . . . do more reductionist accounts of religion have more explanatory power than Bellah musters? For more background see the assigned entries in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. These additional questions to those that appear in the syllabus should help you get into this reading.