

Robert Bellah on Religious Evolution¹

Introduction

There are 5 major phases in the world-wide evolution of religion. Acceptance of "this world" is emphasized in the first and last phases. Rejection of "this world" is highest in the middle phase, Historic Religion. Rejection of "this world" is a function primarily of religious dualism. Dualism reaches its peak during the historic phase when the "great, universal, ethical religions" emerged—Christianity, post-tribal Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam.

Primitive Religion

1. **Symbol System:** Myths are dream-like, occurring "out of time." Mythical characters are human and animal ancestral figures. They are heroic beings, but not gods. They do not control the world, and they are not worshiped. They were the progenitors of human beings. There is no deep gulf between ideals and reality. There is only "one world."
2. **Action:** Community members act-out myths, identifying themselves with the mythical beings they pretend to become, often believing they are literally transformed. Most important rituals are rites of transition, such as "puberty rites," and rites of sacrifice—a communal slaughtering and consumption of the sacred totemic species of the clan.
3. **Organization:** Religion is an attribute of the kinship system. No separate organization of specialists exist. Church and society are one. Age is an important criterion of leadership.
4. **Social Implications:** Rituals reinforce social solidarity of the clan, and induct youth into adult responsibilities as they are allocated in the clan.

Archaic Religion

1. **Symbol System:** Mythical beings are considered gods. They actively, willfully control the world, and must be worshiped in a prescribed manner. A hierarchy among the various gods is established. The afterlife becomes an important religious concern. There is still, basically, "one world," but a hierarchy between "this world" and the "other world" is established, with the "other world" being more powerful. Individuals and society are seen as merged into one, divine cosmos.
2. **Action:** Men are subjects, and gods are objects to be worshipped. Sacrifice is the principle means of communicating with the gods. Specialists (priests) emerge to mediate between subjects and the gods, presiding over sacrifices.
3. **Organization:** Each god is the focus of a cult, with its own specific rituals. Priests are in charge of each cult, but there is no congregation. Different social groups focus on different cults. Religious organization is still merged with

social structure, but only at the top. A certain degree of conflict involving power-struggles is set in motion between religious and military authorities, but not enough separation for religion to be clearly differentiated and independent of political authority. At the top, in the person of the king, religious and military-political leadership are combined.

4. **Social Implications:** Religion sacralizes society. There is little conflict between religion and social conformity. However, struggles between social groups are portrayed as struggles between gods. Political changes are rationalized in terms of religious change. The tolerance associated with early pantheism gradually erodes, as religion is used to support political movements.

Historic Religion

1. **Symbol System:** Literacy develops, and with it, sacred writings. Monotheism emerges. The realm of the sacred, the "other world," is portrayed as more remote, more judging of action in "this world." Both "this world" and the "other world" are hierarchically organized. Monistic cosmology is replaced by dualism. Reality is clearly dualistic, with the afterlife either heaven or hell.

Salvation becomes the primary focus of religious concern, though it is conceptualized somewhat differently in each major religion. Salvation is achieved by bringing people into harmony with God. Magic is de-emphasized. Historic religion says mankind has a deep-seated flaw that is responsible for human unhappiness. Religious truth is said to be divinely inspired, based on revelation from God. The idea of a special, inner self, capable of moral choice is developed — a responsible, knowing self. The concept of sin is created.

2. **Action:** Religious action is that action necessary for salvation. Community values are sacralized within this over-arching concern, as salvation requires, among other things, living in harmony with other people. Because of the severe dualism, religious action also, often, requires ascetic withdrawal from as much of "this world" as possible, including vows of poverty, and other forms of self-denial for those who are especially worried about salvation. Mankind is doomed without the benefits of religion.
3. **Organization:** The profound dualism of historic symbolism is expressed in social structure by the development of separate religious and political institutions. The distinction between religious adherent and political subject is developed. The priesthood has a special relationship with God. Religious memberships begins to develop, as membership in one's cultural group and in the religion are essentially the same. Various orders develop in which individuals can withdraw from most contact with the daily life of society in order to focus on salvation.
4. **Social Implications:** Major societies are multi-ethnic, and religious conflict often is the basis for political and military conflict. Political action may now be judged according to religious standards embedded in a separate institution. Religion may now be a force for change as well as for stability. The prophetic function emerges, distinct from the

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priestly function. This causes a great deal of tension between religious and political groups and institutions.

Early Modern Religion

1. **Symbol System:** With the Protestant reformation, the hierarchical dualism between "this world" and the "other world" collapses considerably. Salvation may now be found in "this life," in the midst of worldly action. Religious specialists are no longer required for salvation. One's own conscience becomes the fundamental basis of moral decisions. The individual is in a direct relationship with God.

Cosmology is dropped as superstition. Salvation is available in spite of sin, rather than in the absence of sin. There are still "two worlds," but no longer does "this world" seem so inferior and damning as before. The "self" not only is involved in moral choice, but also in making interpretations of reality. Awareness of the self, of perception and subjectivity is greater.

2. **Action:** Commemoration replaces sacrifice. Sacred writings are more open to interpretation by ordinary people. Awareness of the nature of symbols begins to develop. Religious action is synonymous with all of life. Special ascetic life-styles and devotional services are dropped.

Faith is stressed rather than peculiarly religious acts. The world rejecting ethos of historic religion is eliminated, in principle if not in all behavior. Action in "this world" may be sanctified, although the world as it is, is not accepted, humans may act in "this world" according to God's wishes.

3. **Organization:** Hierarchy is replaced with equality. The crucial matter is the elect vs. the abandoned. Denominations emerge, and membership in society and in religion are two different matters. Churches have limited authority over individuals. Churches are democratized.
4. **Social Implications:** Church-State duality is less significant, as societies become democratic, multi-institutional, more flexible organizations. The economy, science, law, and education emerge as separate institutions. The new religious ideas were part of a larger process of overthrow of monarchical political authority. Religious values become part of the institutional structure of complex societies through religion-directed social change. Democratic, voluntary, value-directed societies are the product of this development. These changes brought political freedom, but not necessarily cultural freedom.

Modern Religion

1. **Symbol System:** Symbols are now self-consciously understood and used, as symbols, representing something else. All doctrine is open to interpretation. Church organizations no longer have sole responsibility for religious symbols. The philosophical writings of Kant were a fundamental break with traditional, historic symbolization.

Kant revealed the problematic nature of traditional metaphysical basis of all religions by indicating that there are not just two worlds, but as many worlds as there are modes of apprehending them. In other words, perception is partly determined by our subjective, human nature. We are symbol users, and symbols plus sensations equal perception. Or, said differently, thoughts must be combined with sensation to create perception.

Kant grounded religion in ethics rather than metaphysics. Hierarchical dualism is no longer compatible with modern philosophy and science. Religious symbolism is not returning to the primitive monism, but instead is developing into appreciation for the multiple perspectives that are possible concerning the nature of reality.

These comments apply mainly to intellectuals and educated people, but evidence exists that modern philosophy is influencing non-specialists, as well. Doctrinal orthodoxy is no longer crucial. Personal interpretation is widely accepted. Religion is becoming "privatized," to use Berger's expression. One can purchase religion at the local bookstore and consume it privately. Religious organizations no longer have a monopoly on the production and distribution of religious ideas.

Christianity helped create the modern world viewpoint. Primitive and Archaic religion did not contain knowledge of the self. Historic religion discovered, or invented, the self. Early modern religion began the process of learning to accept the self, in all of its ambiguities and imperfections, and modern religion, borrowing from science and philosophy, is beginning to understand the natural laws of the self's existence, further encouraging personal responsibility, since now we know that humans make their own symbols.

2. **Action:** The search for meaning is less confined within religious organizations. Rituals are understood as reenactment, reminders, not metaphysical magic.
3. **Organization:** Churches are, more than before, voluntary organizations providing a favorable environment to explore religious issues. Individuals are little controlled by doctrine, and can "shop around" for doctrine and emphases which they respond to. Hierarchy is reduced within modern organizations. Church leaders are seen as specialists, not sacred icons. Democratic values are the basis for members to insist that their church is responsive to their perceived needs, rather than imposing a religious agenda on the congregation.
4. **Social Implications:** The idea that society can be revised developed during the early modern period. The modern period adds to this by believing in cultural and psychological change, as well. The modern situation borders on religious and cultural anarchy, but an optimistic viewpoint is that the modern situation offers unprecedented opportunity for creative innovation.

General Comments

Underlying Bellah's evolutionary model is the proposition that freedom has increased as religion and social structure have evolved. People are increasingly disengaged from society. Our relations with each other and with society itself are more complex and dynamic than ever before. The distinction between ultimate and alterable conditions keeps changing.

Modernists believe, rightly or wrongly, that much more can be changed for the better than any previous era has thought.

Modernists believe in accepting the world, but within a framework of progress, not gloomy resignation.

Primitive and archaic religion accepted the tragic side of life. The great historic religions differentiated between the self and the world that acts upon the self, and charged the self with moral responsibility, and portrayed threats to salvation as intolerable evils.

Early modern religion began a process of world acceptance, without abandoning the idea of personal responsibility. Sin is replaced with guilt. Forgiveness is supplemented with healing.

Modern religion is an open phase based upon the knowledge that the self and world are very different. World rejection marked the beginning of a clear objectification of the social order, the self, and sharp criticism of both. In earlier phases, religion and society were so fused that it was impossible to criticize society from a religious perspective.

The early modern and modern phases of world acceptance are based upon belief that the world and the self can be changed to conform to our values. That which we can change need not be hated, only understood. So the world is no longer so threatening, and the impediments to salvation and societal stability do not provoke modernists to hatred and rejection, but rather to understanding and work towards betterment.

What the next phase might be, nobody knows. The evolutionary model is open-ended. The modern period is simply the most recent, not the end of the process of evolution of religion, society, or the self. However, there is at this time a new, less optimistic attitude emerging, known generally as "Postmodernism."

Postmodernism in art rejects the notion of a creative "self" — rejects the idea that individuals can change the world.

Postmodern art borrows its images from previous art, and from commercial art. Postmodern artistic themes are, for the most part, parodies of modern faith, poking fun at our cultural preoccupations and beliefs in progress through individual effort.

Postmodernism in the social sciences is profoundly critical of modern science and its efforts to understand and control society. Most postmodern social scientists are social critics and social philosophers. Perhaps the determinism of modern social science has finally convinced many of us that human freedom is a myth, and therefore that human creativity, human imagination, and progress are myths. Postmodern social theory consists mainly in "deconstructing" ideology and even social theory itself.

Deconstruction consists of unraveling the rhetoric of texts to reveal their assumptions and devices designed to convince rather than illuminate. Rhetoric usually takes the form establishing two categories, portraying one as superior to the other.

Deconstructionists attack rhetoric at its dualistic heart. Once the rhetorical dichotomy is discredited, the entire text falls apart. The critical process destroys the meaning of rhetorical texts.

Postmodernism is a negation of modernist thought. Negation, by itself, doesn't provide a new order of society. If we are to leave modernism behind, it will only be through a doorway to some new, as yet unconceived, positive image of a new, possible society.