

## **Religion and Empire in the Axial Age**

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Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* is a difficult and, sometimes, exasperating book. Nevertheless, it yields a richly rewarding experience for those patient readers who work their way through its 700 pages. The central question of the book is, what role did religion play in human social evolution? The starting point for approaching this question is what has been called the 'U-shaped curve of despotism' in human evolution (p. 178) – from highly inegalitarian great apes (whose social arrangements, presumably, also characterized direct human ancestors) to egalitarian small-scale societies of hunter-gatherers, and then to large-scale hierarchical societies with their great inequities in the distribution of power, status, and wealth.

In his discussion of the despotic U-curve Bellah relies on Christopher Boehm's *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior*. Bellah gives a sympathetic and accurate account of this important book (one of many strengths of *Religion in Human Evolution* is the author's ability to range across a very broad spectrum of social and natural disciplines). The main message of Boehm's book is that equality does not simply happen because hunter-gatherers are poor and cannot accumulate much wealth. On the contrary, Boehm argues that equality requires active maintenance. People living in small-scale societies possess numerous norms and institutions designed to control 'upstarts,' those individuals who attempt to dominate others in order to control an unfair share of resources. The sanctions deployed against upstarts range from gossip and ridicule to ostracism and, ultimately, assassination. As Bellah concurs, Boehm does a very good job in describing how this system of escalating sanctions works in small-scale societies, although "he is perhaps less good at what I think is equally necessary, that is, the strong pull of social solidarity, especially as expressed in ritual, that rewards renunciation of dominance with a sense of full social acceptance" (p. 177). This sounds like an interesting idea, although it is not further developed in Bellah's book.

Given such fierce preference for equality, how did it happen that humans allowed inequality to develop? Small-scale societies of hunter-gatherers were integrated by face-to-face sociality. Such a diffuse, non-centralized social organization was well-suited to maintaining egalitarian ethos. However, the invention of agriculture c.10,000 years ago enabled evolution of large-scale societies. Once the size of cooperating group increased beyond 100–200 people, even gigantic human brains were overwhelmed by the computational demands of face-to-face sociality (Dunbar and Shultz 2007). The solution that social evolution found was hierarchical organization, with large human groups integrated by chains of command. A member of a hierarchically organized group needs to have face-to-face interactions with only a few individuals: a superior and several subordinates. The group size grows by adding additional hierarchical levels; a process that has no physical limit. The great downside of hierarchical organization, however, is that it inevitably leads to inequality. Thus, the side-effect of selection for greater societal size was the U-turn in the evolution of egalitarianism (Turchin 2011).

More specifically, Bellah proposes the following scenario. “An increasing agricultural surplus allows larger groups to form – groups beyond the face-to-face bands of hunter-gatherers – and the age-old techniques of dealing with upstarts are harder to apply in such larger-scale societies. But the opening wedge for a successful upstart is most often militarization. ... In a situation of endemic warfare, the successful warrior emanates a sense of mana or charisma, and can use it to establish a following. ... It is when the outstanding warrior can mobilize a band of followers that he can challenge the old egalitarianism and, as a successful upstart, free the disposition to dominate from the controls previously placed on it” (p. 261). I think this is just about right, but I would add that the primary selection pressure for the evolution of large-scale societies is endemic warfare itself (as the French military proverb goes, “God is on the side of big battalions”). Additionally, the state of endemic warfare selects for more effective (which means centralized) military organizations. Under such conditions, emergence of centralized hierarchies becomes virtually inevitable. In other words, large-scale warfare and large-scale sociality coevolve. As Charles Tilly famously remarked, “War made state and states made war” (Tilly 1975).

However, while highly effective on the battlefield, a centralized military hierarchy has drawbacks as a general way of organizing societies. A society cannot really be held together by force alone. Additionally, great inequities resulting from rapacious military chiefs and their retinues alienate large segments of the population. As a result, early despotic chiefdoms and archaic states were very fragile and frequently did not outlast their founders.

At this point Bellah makes a very useful distinction between *dominance* (or despotism) and *hierarchy*, with hierarchy defined as “legitimate authority” (p. 178). In order to ensure a greater degree of permanence, large-scale societies needed to make the transition from the domination by military chiefs to “a new form of authority, of legitimate hierarchy ... which involves a new relation between gods and humans, a new way of organizing society, one that finds a significant place for the disposition to nurture as well as the disposition to dominate” (p. 261). In other words, the central argument in Bellah’s book is that a major driver in the evolution of religion was the need to reconcile the tension between the need for hierarchy and the need for legitimacy and equity. A major stride in this direction was made during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE), and making this argument constitutes the core of *Religion in Human Evolution*.

Historical trajectories of agrarian human societies, thus, went through two phases that Bellah calls ‘archaic’ and ‘axial’ (this should not be taken as fixed ‘stages’ of social development). The first, archaic phase was characterized by enormous fusion of power in the person of the ruler (p. 207). Archaic states invariably were characterized by some sort of divine kingship, and usually practiced human sacrifice on a massive scale, both indicators of extreme forms of inequality. During this phase we also observe the appearance of ‘gods,’ who are distinguished from other powerful supernatural beings in that they are worshipped (p. 189). ‘Worship’ suggests that the relationship between humans and supernatural beings also became much more unequal during this phase of human evolution.

The archaic states (and chiefdoms) persisted through several millennia (first chiefdoms appeared in the Middle East roughly 7.5 thousand years ago, and first archaic states date from c.5,000 years ago). The typical pattern was that of recurrent rise and

collapse, or cycling between less and more complex forms of social organization: chiefdoms/complex chiefdoms and complex chiefdoms/archaic states (Anderson 1996; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997). Then, something happened during the first millennium BCE, which resulted in the rise of qualitatively new forms of social organization – the larger and more durable axial empires that employed new forms of legitimation of political power. One aspect of this change was the first appearance of a universally egalitarian ethic, which was largely due to the emergence of “prophet-like figures who, at great peril to themselves, held the existing power structures to a moral standard that they clearly did not meet” (p. 573).

Bellah connects these developments to the “legitimation crisis of the early state” (an idea due to Jürgen Habermas), which became especially acute in the axial age (p. 574). Bellah calls these prophet-like figures, who passed harsh judgments on existing social and political conditions, “renouncers.” Examples include the Buddha, Hebrew prophets, Plato and Aristotle, and the Daoists (pp. 574–575). It is important to note that these renouncers were not isolated voices and enjoyed a certain degree of social support. “It seems apparent that some degree of unease about the state of the world must have been relatively widespread, even among the elite” (p. 575)

Why did the legitimation crisis of the early state become particularly acute during the axial age (middle of the first millennium BCE)? Bellah does not provide a clear answer. In his discussion of Ancient Israel he appeals to destabilizing social consequences of considerable economic growth during the eighth century BCE (p. 301). More frequently, however, he invokes not economic, but military factors. For example, he suggests that wide-spread use of iron was “more important in increasing the efficiency of warfare than in transforming the means of production” (p. 269).

I believe that the latter emphasis is the correct one. There can be little doubt that iron weapons and armor revolutionized warfare in the Middle East and elsewhere. But an even more important development, as I have argued elsewhere (Turchin 2009), was the invention of mounted warfare by Iranian pastoralists c. 1000 BCE. Putting together horse riding with sophisticated and powerful compound bows that shot iron-tipped arrows created a ‘weapon of mass destruction’ that enabled the nomads to put an enormous amount of pressure on the neighboring agrarian societies.

Bellah notes that “all axial cases except China experienced Persian pressure at critical moments in their development” (p. 270). I believe that this is a very important point, but it does not go far enough. First, most authorities (e.g., Eisenstadt 1986) consider Achaemenid Persia to be one of the most important Axial Age civilizations, which leads to the question, who influenced Persia? Second, there is another common factor shared by all axial cases, including Persia and China, – they all experienced pressure from the mounted archers originating from the Great Eurasian Steppe (Turchin 2009). This pattern was already noted by Karl Jaspers (1953).

Such steppe influences took a variety of forms. The Medes and Persians themselves were Iranian groups that moved into the Middle East from the steppe. Persians, again, constantly fought against the Scythians/Saka, while the Chinese had a similar relationship with the Hunnu (Xiongnu). The Iranian nomads raided deep into the Near East, with the Scythians reaching as far south as Egypt. In the west the Kimmerians attacked the Greek cities of Anatolia, such as Ephesos, and destroyed several smaller cities (for example, Magnesia and Sinope). Robert Drews (2004) recently argued that the development of the

heavy infantry (hoplites) was a response to these invasions of mounted archers. Finally, the first axial states, such as the Median-Persian Empire and later Hellenistic empires, served as conduits of steppe influences, because they used mounted warfare against their neighbors (such as North India,<sup>1</sup> a point also made by Bellah on p. 528).

As new forms of warfare diffused out from the Eurasian steppe, they dramatically increased the role of warfare as a force of cultural group selection. More intense selection for large size resulted in the early and recurrent pattern of imperial development in the steppe-frontier belt stretching from Anatolia to North China. This belt, which Victor Lieberman (2008) called the Exposed Zone of Eurasia (that is, exposed to influences from the Great Steppe), also encompasses all regions with major axial developments. If the argument of Bellah is correct, and I think it is, it was the new scale of larger empires, whose rulers had even more resources to aggrandize themselves, that precipitated the legitimation crisis of the early axial state. The new regime of cultural selection favored evolution of new forms of legitimation of political power, which were needed to prevent huge axial empires from splitting apart. Additionally, as I argued elsewhere (Turchin 2009), a key axial innovation was the universalistic nature of religion that allowed axial empires to integrate ethnically diverse populations on a very large scale.

Thus, Bellah's argument suggests that large scale and greater durability of axial (and post-axial) empires was due in no small part to the religious innovations of the Axial Age. Bellah considers India as an exception to this rule: "After the collapse of the Mauryan dynasty, however, India remained divided throughout most of its subsequent history" (p. 544). However, this is not what the historical record tells us (see Table 4 in Turchin 2009). It is true that most (5 out of 9) of South Asian megaempires were ruled by dynasties of Central Asian origin, but this is not very different from the historical pattern of imperial unifications in China (see Table 1 in Turchin 2009).

To conclude, Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* is one of those big books that are sure to leave a large legacy. Bellah's argument, which connects the rise of axial religions to tensions endangered by the legitimation crisis of the early state, needs to be closely investigated by specialists on various axial civilizations. The huge lacuna of Achaemenid Persia and the role Zoroastrianism played in the development of that civilization needs to be filled. Many puzzles remain unresolved (for example, the precocious 'proto-axial' developments in Ancient Egypt that seemingly led nowhere). In the final analysis, one may disagree with Bellah on some, or even many issues, but the most important contribution of the book is in suggesting productive lines of future research.

One implication of Bellah's argument, which he does not develop in the book, is that the 'U-shaped curve of despotism' is actually a misnomer. The peak of inequality in human societies was apparently reached during the phase of archaic and early axial states. The hallmarks of this truly despotic phase of human evolution were the unprecedented divinization of the rulers, massive human sacrifices, and the worship of anthropomorphic supernatural beings (gods). Viewed from this perspective, the Axial Age introduced another trend reversal in the evolution of egalitarianism. The post-axial phase has been

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<sup>1</sup> I should note that the role of Eurasian steppe influences on North India is very complex and not completely understood. Direct influences include the movements of such pastoralist groups as the Aryans and later the Saka. Indirect influences include the already mentioned Persians and later the Turks, who, although ultimately of Steppe origins, impinged on India as rulers of agrarian empires.

characterized by three related trends. First, the rulers have been increasingly constrained to act in ways promoting the public good, rather than their own interests (most recently, as a result of the introduction of democratic forms of governance). Second, structural forms of human inequality have been gradually disappearing: most notably, the abolition of human sacrifice, slavery, and distinctions in the legal status (e.g., between nobles and commoners; although some would argue that our track record in reducing economic inequality has not been as impressive). Third, gods evolved from anthropomorphic to transcendental supernatural beings, and some religions/ideologies even dispensed with gods altogether. Thus, it was not simply a U-turn, but rather a zig, followed by a zag. I propose that we call this pattern the *Z-curve of egalitarianism* in human evolution.

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