

RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION or DEVELOPMENT

according to Robert Bellah

Chapter 2, in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*

Evolution spoken of in these terms:

- increasing differentiation and complexity of organization
- greater capacity to adapt to (changing) environmental conditions
- increasingly differentiated symbolization (systems) that are more comprehensive and increasingly rationalized (in Weber's sense)

MAJOR Phases:

1) in contrast to that period during which the world's great monotheistic religions began, prior to the first millennium B.C. a virtual absence of world rejection, or to put it more positively, a continuity between the nomos and the cosmos, the human world and the natural world, such that the two are not really differentiated.

2) the emergence in the first millennium B.C. in the centers of high culture of the Old World of the religious rejection of the world (of the nomos) characterized by an extremely negative evaluation of human life and society together with the exaltation of another realm of reality (the cosmos) as alone true and infinitely valuable.

3) the shift, principally occasioned by the Protestant Reformation in the West, away from this dualism

Five Periods or Stages:

Major defining characteristics of each:

Basic World View; Exemplar; Symbol System; Action; Psychological Orientation; Societal Organization; Social Implications

Primitive

- *Basic World View:* cosmological monism
- *Exemplar:* Australian Aborigines, African Dinka (Sudanese) People
- *Symbol System:* a mythical world of ancestral figures, some human, some animal, progenitors and creators of particular things fluidly related to the detailed features of the actual world, often heroic and with unusual powers, but not gods who control the world and not worshiped.
- *Action:* identification, participation, acting out; coming into harmony with the natural divine, cosmos; ritual *par excellence*.
- *Psychological Orientation:* acceptance of the world in its manifold givenness.
- *Societal Organization:* "church" and society are one; life is a "one possibility thing."
- *Social Implications:* reinforcing social solidarity and inducting the young into the norms of social behavior.

Archaic

- *Basic World View:* cosmological monism
- *Exemplar:* Greek Mythologies and City States

- *Symbol System*: objectified mythical beings conceived as actively and willfully controlling the natural and human world with whom humans must deal in definite and purposive ways; emergent hierarchically related gods, dominating various parts of the world with unusual and extensive knowledge, wisdom, and power.
- *Action*: emergence of the cult with worship and sacrifice between humans and the gods.
- *Psychological Orientation*: through attendant sacrifices fulfill incumbent religious obligations/requirements and attain peace with the gods.
- *Societal Organization*: increasingly stable, with emergence of an upper and a lower social class, the development of specialized priestly roles, tribal cults and cultic centers, even divine kingships.
- *Social Implications*: traditional social structures and practices are seen as grounded in the divinely instituted cosmic order, little tension between religious demand and social conformity since the latter is always reinforced by religious sanction; struggle between rival groups interpreted as a struggle between rival deities or one deity's favoritism for one group rather than another.

Historic

- *World View*: cosmological dualism, emergence of a transcendent universal higher reality beyond the natural world.
- *Exemplars*: especially Judaism, Christianity, Islam
(Note the increased differentiation among these World Religions)
- *Symbol System*: a dualism of supernatural and earthly realms organized in terms of a religiously legitimated hierarchy presided over by a monotheistic, sole creator and ruler of the universe, overt concern for life after death which may be infinitely better or worse, potential for universal salvation (i.e., not dependent upon clan membership).
- *Psychological Orientation*: emergence of the concept of an essential self, a true/core self, which, through religious knowledge, can grope toward an understanding of the fundamental structure of reality and through a rigorous idealized religious separation or withdrawal, participate actively in one's own salvation.
- *Action*: directed toward the mediated achievement of salvation: escape from basic human nature through performing mystical exercises (Buddhism); obedience to God and his laws through rigorous conformity (Judaism); submission to the divine will (Islam); receiving of Grace through participation in a sacramental system (Christianity).
- *Societal Organization*: increasingly differentiated religious collectivities; increasing separation of religious and political hierarchies, believer and subject becoming distinct statuses; an increasingly differentiated class system (political-military elite, cultural-religious elite, urban lower status merchants and artisans, rural lower status peasants and serfs); market and money economies sponsoring the development of bureaucracy.
- *Social Implications*: new tensions and potentials for conflict and change between groups, religion becoming a source of ideology and cohesion fostering rebellion and reform as well as justifying the stability of the *status quo*.

Early Modern

- *World View*: collapse of hierarchical structures, but retention of the cosmological dualism, except that mediation was removed, set aside, and salvation could be directly available to anyone
- *Exemplars*: most successfully institutionalized in the Protestant Reformation (note that something somewhat similar is associated with Vatican II, however since moderated and is increasingly being invoked as a desirable corrective to traditional/fundamentalist Islam).
- *Symbol System*: concentrated on the direct relationship between the individual and transcendent reality; rather than re-enactments, rituals are seen as commemorative, primarily figurative or aesthetic.
- *Psychological Orientation*: positive autonomous action in the world rather than passive acceptance
- *Action*: religious action conceived to be identical with the whole of life, service to God a constant and total demand in everyday life (life as a secular calling), the world becomes an arena in which to work out the divine command and accept the self as acceptable of faith in spite of sin.
- *Societal Organization*: hierarchy changes from those religiously skilled and privileged and those not, those more perfected to those less, to the elect and the reprobates since all have equal access to Grace, religious and political statuses increasingly become two among many.
- *Social Implications*: the rise of a number of contending institutional identities and arrangements, a pluralism of ideas and behaviors, in which the religious increasingly becomes simply one among many, at the same time the realization of religious values becomes expressed through secular agencies.

Modern/Contemporary (Here we are speculative and uncertain: this may in reality and of necessity be a Post-Modern stage or, to put it another way, the Early Modern period survives through in a series of vacillations into this stage)

- *World View*: collapse of dualism, especially through the ascendancy of the scientific perspective, a resulting “infinitely multiplex, infinitely possibility” world viewd(s).
- *Exemplars*: Ethical Culturalism, Unitarian-Universalism, Humanism.
- *Symbol System*: increasing analysis of the nature of symbolism itself, a loss of
- *Psychological Orientation*: extreme individualism, a recalcitrant or reluctant communitarianism, the self as endlessly revisable.
- *Action*: increasing self-responsibility together with humanistic concern and caring for humankind, especially through various social good works.
- *Societal Organization*: open and flexible patterns of membership, and no longer the monopoly of groups explicitly called religious, the group as endlessly revisable.
- *Social Implications*: beginning to understand the “laws” of the self’s own existence and so to help humankind take responsibility for its own fate.