Robert N. Bellah – In Conversation with Michael Lerner

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Lerner received a B.A. from Harvard University in 1965 and a Ph.D. in political science from Yale University in 1971. He taught political science and psychology at Yale before moving to Bolinas and co-founding Full Circle, a residential center for children with learning and behavior disorders. In 1976, Lerner co-founded Commonweal, a nonprofit institute that offers programs in health, environment, education, and justice. In 1996, Lerner co-founded the Smith Center for Healing and the Arts in Washington, D.C., a nonprofit health, education and creative arts organization that serves individuals, families and communities affected by cancer and other serious illnesses.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

(transcribed and edited by Sam Porter)

Lerner: It is a very great honor for me to be here in conversation with Robert Bellah tonight. I had a chance to chat with him briefly before we began. Because Robert's work is extraordinarily well known in the field of the sociology of religion, among those specialists he would need no introduction. But in a generalist community I really want to tell you a little about Robert.

He is the Elliot Professor of Sociology Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, best known for his work related to American civil religion, a term he coined in a 1967 article. His *magnum opus*, which we're going to be discussing, *Religion in Human Evolution*, traces the biological and cultural origins of religion. Jürgen Habermas, the great German intellectual, wrote of Bellah's work, "This great book is the intellectual harvest of the rich academic life of a leading social theorist who has assimilated a vast range of biological, anthropological, and historical literature in the pursuit of a breathtaking project…. In this field I do not know of an equally ambitious and comprehensive study." Also, Han Joas of the University of Chicago –

Bellah: And also of the University of Freiburg in Germany. He's spends more time in Freiburg than Chicago.

Lerner: Right, and so he wrote, "This book is the *opus magnum* of the greatest living sociologist of religion. Nobody since Max Weber has produced such an erudite and systematic comparative world history of religion in its earlier phases."

That's an extraordinary statement.

Bellah is also known for his 1985 book, *Habits of the Heart*; how religions contribute to and detract from America's common good; and, as a sociologist who studies religious and moral issues and their connection to society.

So this is *Wikipedia*'s summary. But there are a few other things of note.

Robert was a student of Talcott Parsons at Harvard and he and Parsons remained intellectual friends until Parsons' death.

I also didn't know that as an undergraduate at Harvard Robert was a member of the Communist Party USA and Chairman of the John Reed Club. Mac Bundy threatened to shut it down and threatened to withdraw Robert's Fellowship if he didn't provide the names of his former associates. So I thought that was an interesting moment in his intellectual past.

He served in various positions at Harvard from 1955 to 1967 and then became Ford Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley.

His political views are often classified as communitarian.

Robert is also the author of about a dozen books in addition to the two I've mentioned. He's a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Bill Clinton awarded him the National Humanities Medal in 2000. Bill Moyers interviewed him, among many other honors.

As I was saying to Robert before we began, I have rarely been as challenged to assimilate a book of this extraordinary complexity and richness. So, while we cannot cover it all in an hour and a half, I'm hoping we can provide some insights into the extraordinary thought of the greatest living sociologist of religion. So Robert Bellah.

Bellah: The Germans love me [Bellah and audience laugh]. I did not intend this. I had no choice in what they put on the back cover. But it is charming to me that out of the four blurbs not one of them is an American. There are two Germans, one Chinese and one Canadian, Charles Taylor. Of course, all of them have spent much time in this country and are sort of half-American. Hans Joas teaches one quarter a year at Chicago. Habermas spent a year in the '80s at Berkeley. Yang Xiao had to leave China because of Tiananmen and teaches in this country. So they are American after all. Maybe one of the best things about this country is that we have so many people who come from elsewhere and spend time with us.

I didn't expect to have my undergraduate membership in the Communist Party raised. But there are several reviews and symposia of my book and most of them are friendly. But one was extremely hostile. He accused me of arguing that religion is always in favor of social stability and the status quo.

Any careful reader of this book will see, though it's never made explicit, a strong Marxist undercurrent. The treatment of the early state and the origin of class society is ruthlessly clear about the brutality involved. And when you get to the Axial Age – the great beginning of all our cur-

rent civilizations in the First Millennium BCE – we find that every one of the great figures of that period is very critical of state society and give very strong criticisms of it.

So although there's no red banner, I never gave up my earlier beliefs. They've been modified in many ways, thank God. I never was a Maoist. That's really crazy. But when I was in Beijing last December and saw this huge portrait of Mao in Tiananmen Square I was literally horrified – one of the monsters of the 20th Century. It's like seeing a big portrait of Hitler on the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. It's a shock, and it's a shock to many Chinese intellectuals.

Anyway, I'll lose all my 10 minutes to introduce the book if I go on. Oh, one last thing I have to tell you: a very charming thing that just happened. I thought I was escaping the culture wars because the book stops at roughly the time of Christ and doesn't say anything about Christianity or Islam, which usually are at the center of the warfare. But a former student of mine who teaches at a community college in the East Bay told me he was teaching the book, and particularly the chapter on ancient Israel, and one of his students asked, "What part of hell does this author come from?", which must mean I am not giving a fundamentalist view of ancient Israel. So in a way I'm sort of pleased. Hell is an interesting place. I'm not quite sure which part I come from.

I want to leave time for discussion and conversation with Michael. So I'll just talk about a few major dimensions that are important to me in this book.

It's very important to me that I ground human cultural evolution in the whole of life, that I don't have an Iron Curtain between nature and culture.

Unfortunately, there are quite a few humanists and, in a backward kind of way, quite a few natural scientists who think there is an Iron Curtain. The humanists don't want anything to do with biology; and certain kinds of biologists think that they can reduce culture to biology.

I'm certain that culture is an emergent from biology – where else did it come from? – and that human beings are living beings and that we are indeed mammals. We are animals. It's all too obvious that we are related to the whole of life. But that means we have to understand we are not mechanisms. There is one view of the natural world that still lingers in some circles. But it is totally deterministic. There is no free will. There is nothing but ruthless material causation and that everything we think of as consciousness will ultimately be shown to be purely chemical. Purely chemical? I mean, my God, consciousness is consciousness. Who in their right mind could think that? Yet, there are people who think that. It's not that we're not chemical. Of course we're chemical. But chemical things can give rise to other kinds of things. I believe that in all of life, right down to the unicellular organisms, the bacteria with which life began three-and-a-half billion years ago, there is something I could call sentience, not consciousness as in humans. But they know something. They know where it's too cold and where it's too dark and to go somewhere else. No rock knows how to do that. So there is a sense that living beings, even of the simplest sort, have some degree of autonomous behavior and, as some biologists say, participate in their own evolution. This is a theme. I did not think these things up.

Chapter two is perhaps the most important chapter in the book, which is about religion and evolution, and really about the rootedness of religion in biology and nature. For one thing – for

mammals and for other animals too but since we are mammals and mammals are two hundred million years old so that's quite enough to think about – we still operate under, I think, two very powerful forces.

One is *nurturance*.

Remember, mammals are creatures who give birth to helpless infants. They don't lay eggs. Those infants would die if they weren't taken care of. What is called parental care, which is a kind of nice gender neutrality to what is overwhelmingly statistically maternal care. Most papas don't give a damn. But mamas do and if they didn't their offspring would die – very quickly die. That has enormous repercussions. We'll get into that when I think Michael wants to talk about play. But play is impossible without maternal care.

The other very powerful element among mammals and among humans is *dominance*.

Dominance hierarchies are general in the animal world but particularly obvious in mammals and in the primates who are our closest relatives. Dominance hierarchies are a complex thing. They have a lot of cruelty, a lot of fighting. Old alpha males get attacked by younger ones who want to replace them.

At the same time, nurturance and dominance are not totally at odds with each other.

A mammal mother has to dominate her offspring to some extent or they will die. She has to do things to keep them from getting into danger. One of the things she has to teach them is don't be flip with an alpha male because that could lead to a very quick end to your little life.

On the other hand, alpha males have to have some degree of nurturance. A dominant figure – and this is true in human life too – can try to rule solely by terror and violence. We can see that that lasts for a while. But in the long run, without some sense that that dominant figure cares about those who are subordinate to *him*, because overwhelmingly the dominant figure in mammals and humans are male, the legitimacy of rule will be gone.

So things that are very fundamental to human life like nurturance and dominance – and which we still have to deal with every day and in every relationship – are very old and very rooted in life. I'll stick with mammals. Two hundred million years is enough. But it goes beyond that.

So then there is the notion that everything is determined by natural selection, sheer random genetic change giving rise to variation which is then chosen by who will survive and who will not survive. There are people who think that's all there is to it. But if you read my chapter two you will see that there is something called "conserved core processes," that not everything is up for mutation. Animals can manage to protect certain structures over hundreds of millions of years.

For instance, most body plans of animals – I'm not talking about plants but animals – are at least three hundred million years old. You don't just change your body-type randomly.

So there is persistence. There is variation. There is variation that is actually promoted by different structures that sort of invite change in some areas and simply close or turn off genes that they don't want to work.

So the notion that everything is randomly a throw of the dice, mutation and selection is wrong.

One of the things I'm particularly interested in is the fact that over the course of life new capacities have arisen; and over the course of culture new capacities have arisen; and over the course of the history of religion new capacities have arisen.

So I see I'm probably running out of 10 minutes already but I'll just say one other thing.

Besides my concern to root everything in the whole of life and not make any line that says this is not – I mean ethics, even politics are found among advanced mammals. Empathy – I mean we were just talking in the car with Paul, who loves dogs, about what empathetic creatures they are. How could a mechanism have empathy? They're not mechanisms. They're living beings. But when it gets to the cultural level, and most of the book is about that, I want to cast my net very wide.

To begin with hunter-gatherer societies, to go on to early agricultural societies, then the early state and, ultimately, to the extraordinary things that happen in the first millennium BCE when everything that people thought was taken for granted was called into question, and the beginnings of the traditions in ancient Greece, Israel, China, and India – I want to include them all.

I was in China twice last fall, 18 days in Beijing and a week in Hong Kong. Two separate trips. I think the thing that moved me most was they were so interested in this book. Actually, Harvard University Press has a contract for a Chinese translation.

I treated China as totally the same as I treated Greece or Israel. There is no *us* and *them*. China and India are absolutely as serious, important and central as our heritage, which is Israel and Greece.

Maybe. I think our heritage is mainly the pop music on the radio. There's no heritage left. But that's another story.

In any case, although I have found Israel and Greece utterly fascinating all my life, I give them no privilege. I've also been deeply moved by China in much of my life beginning in my graduate study. And India I had to learn for this book because it was the only major culture I didn't really know pretty deeply. I found that almost absolutely overwhelmingly fascinating. It's the longest chapter in the book. I think it's just astounding what happened in ancient India.

So that gives you the two dimensions: the depth of the biological connection and the breadth of the comparative treatment.

Lerner: Do you want to stop there?

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: Okay. Thank you very much for that.

As you spoke about India, I was reflecting on a wonderful quote attributed to Toynbee – I'm not sure it's correct or not – that it might turn out that the most important event of the 20th Century was the coming of the *Dharma* to the West. I was thinking of these great traditions, and you mention this in your book that the Modern Age is the first time one has the chance, that religious or spiritual orientation is an elective decision, that one can choose among them. So these great traditions have all become competitive memes in some sense. You talk early in the book – when you're talking about tribal religions, for example, you compare the Navajo with the Apache – about the question of which of those tribal memes has had survival capacity in the modern world. I just wondered, starting at a very broad point, would you agree with Toynbee that it might turn out that the most important event of the 20th Century was the coming of the *Dharma* to the West?

Bellah: Well, it would really depend on how narrowly you define *Dharma*.

Lerner: Right.

Bellah: Because I think the presence of the Chinese tradition is as important as the Indian. There's a tendency to think, "Oh, Confucianism is philosophy, just secular." That's not true. It's a profound spiritual tradition. And of course Daoism; the most translated book in the world is the *Daodejing*. But that those parts of the world that were considered inferior and *other* have been accepted as equals is extraordinary.

Toynbee would be wrong, however, to make it just the 20th Century. If you look at Schopenhauer, if you look at Emerson, it's already beginning. Goethe, in *East-West Divan*, is very fascinated with Sanskrit poetry. So it's older than the 20th Century. It's beginning maybe even in the 17th Century: the discovery of religions *other* than. Before that, people thought there were four religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and paganism. A very good [i.e., biased, Western] choice: the three deeply related monotheistic religions – and everybody else.

But already in the 17th Century they were beginning to say, "No, hey, this is not adequate. It's much more complicated than that." Paganism is a totally absurd idea because it throws everything that's quite different into one basket.

So it's been percolating, I think, since the Age of Discovery but of course much more explicitly in the 20th Century.

Lerner: There're so many dimensions of this book I'd like to touch on but what I think I'd like to do first is to ask you – with the greatest sort of possible succinctness – to walk us through the major transitions and major stages you discuss.

So, for example, you talked about the importance of chapter two on religion and evolution. Chapter three is on tribal religion and the production of meaning. What is the core theme of your work on tribal religion?

Bellah: Well, I am rooting myself in an evolutionary psychologist by the name of Merlin Donald with whom I've had a long-standing e-mail relationship and in 2008 actually met at a conference at the Max Weber Center at Erfurt University in Germany. I draw a lot from Donald. He has four stages of the evolution of culture.

The first is *episodic* culture.

By episodic culture that means an awareness of what episode you are in. What is this like to be present?

You were speaking about chimpanzees looking into space. Now, Donald would say that's episodic consciousness. Total awareness of what's present. Now you can speak of that as attention without intention. You're only paying attention. You're not trying to do something. However, it happens to be highly adaptive because if you're paying attention to everything and there's some predator out there or some juicy piece of prey you're going to be alert to that; whereas if you were just bumbling along thinking of what's inside your own head you might miss it.

So I'm not saying that attention and intention are at odds. But the capacity for full, one-pointed attention does seem to go back to the pre-human higher mammals. That's episodic culture.

Every stage of Donald's never goes away. You don't abandon one stage and go to the next. You go to the next, incorporate the other one and create some new hybrid that involves them both.

The next stage, and that's where tribal religion comes in, is *mimetic*.

Mimetic of course means mimicking or miming. But Donald's term is used much more broadly for enacted, embodied communication: using your total body, including your vocal cords but not words. Singing is older than language, according to at least quite a few evolutionary psychologists.

Evolutionary psychology is a field I don't recommend as a whole because much of it is junk. The latest *New Yorker* has quite a damning review of much recent work. But anyway Merlin Donald is really great.

Again, mimetic culture is everywhere. We never got rid of it. I mean if you look at a football game or if you look at a political convention, it's how people use their body, how they come across physically, how they smile. Whether they're stiff as a rod as some candidates are or they're human as other candidates are. There's quite a lot of difference without saying a word.

So then the mimetic is rooted in collective activity because humans are the only species that can keep together in time, although someone recently sent me this fascinating data that there are certain kinds of parrots that can also keep together in time. But aside from humans and one kind of parrot, no animals, including chimpanzees, can keep together in time.

If you strike up a rhythm, and maybe a little music to go with it, you can lead a bunch of chimpanzees who will follow you in rhythm. But if you abandon them they can't do it by themselves.

So this is an extraordinary human capacity and it's the basis of ritual. The rhythmic beat, the music, the doing things together – keeping in time together – that's basic, and it's basic in very simple things in our life.

Like when you're introduced to someone, very frequently you shake hands. And if you're introduced to someone and you put out your hand to shake the other person's hand and the other person pulls it back – "What is this guy doing? What's his problem?" I mean not shaking hands is a statement. It's not just an absence. It's very much a presence. It's saying, "I'm not going to touch you." In other words, many things we take for granted are totally bodily. They don't involve language.

But then the tribal level also involves also the next step. We don't have any non-verbal society. So we cannot prove that there was a stage of human cultural evolution that was purely mimetic, without language. But almost certainly there was.

Speciation is a problematic thing. It doesn't just begin and end with a simple line in the sand. But the speciation of *Homo sapiens* is 250,000 years old, roughly. But language is only about 100,000 years old, maybe 120,000.

There was probably a long period when *Homo sapiens*' brains had the capacity for language but didn't use it. According to Merlin Donald, we have no archeological evidence for mimetic behavior but they probably were relating to each other in rather complex ways, and probably singing together.

The British archeologist Steven Mithen thinks the Neanderthals specialized in music and we specialize in language. He's got a book called *The Singing Neanderthals* (2007). Well, I think we do pretty well with music too. The trouble with the poor Neanderthals is that they were great singers but they never did learn to speak and talk, I mean, in language.

In any case, Donald believes *myth* is fundamental. Myth is what people were out for when language arose.

In mimetic behavior you can mimic an episodic event. You can have an event about an event. Within episodic culture, you can't think about it. Even now, very young children can't string together the things that they know perfectly well. If they're taken to a certain place they will remember they were there before. But they cannot tell you where the places were, where they were, because they don't link the episodes together. Language begins to change that.

But in any culture there can be an event about an event and in thinking about something while not being in it is a tremendously important advantage. We'll come back to that subject later. But language is a huge leap forward in that regard.

Myth can tell you a whole lot of episodes and not only the episodes but how they're linked together: why episode A leads to B leads to C and how some figure in one is transformed and killed or becomes a much greater figure or what not.

Lerner: So there are myths or origin and then there are myths of how we fit into the cosmos that the mythology describes. Is that correct?

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: So those are two of the central functions that myth serves.

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: So if we move on – and I'd love to spend more time on the tribal society but – what is *new* that happens in *archaic* society?

Bellah: Well, unfortunately what's new that happens in *archaic* society is not any cultural advance. It's still locked in a *mimetic* and *mythic* world. But what begins to happen has to do with the origin of agriculture, the origin of the surplus.

I've been reading work on the origin of war. Some people think war is coterminous with the human species. That human beings are aggressive and can kill each other is certainly not at all implausible. But war means the organized energy of one group to attack and maybe destroy another group.

According to this logic, before agriculture there is no war. Hunter-gatherers simply don't have enough surpluses to fight over. It's sort of one day at a time as far as food goes. There's nothing to fight over. Territories are very fluid. The world was not very populated. Remember, the notion that the world's human population is seven billion is insane.

Lerner: You showed this in your study of one of the aboriginal societies in Australia where the movement of another tribe into the space of a first tribe did not create conflict.

Bellah: They did not fight over territory. In the first place they were moving all the time throughout a given area. They never stayed still and said, "This is mine and you can't come." [It was more like] "You're welcome to come. You can come to our ceremony."

Lerner: One of the points you make about primitive societies I found very interesting was – you've spoken already about these two factors of nurturance and dominance as key dimensions of our genetic heritage and then you ask why is it that a species with such a strong dominance gene, in effect, would have in primitive societies such egalitarian conditions. You have a very intriguing discussion of why you get egalitarian systems in primitive societies.

Bellah: Yes. This comes from an anthropologist named Christopher Boehm [*Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (1999)], which he called reverse hierarchy, namely, in hunter-gatherer societies they really don't want any alpha male.

Alpha male chimpanzees are rather unpleasant creatures. Among other things, they try – they never succeed wholly but they try – to monopolize all the females. No male can have sex with a female except the alpha male and maybe one or two of his most trusted allies. The young guys

are just out of it, supposedly. I mean who knows what goes on. But nonetheless any notion of pair bonding is impossible in an alpha male dominated group. There's reason to believe that humans have had pair bonding for a very long time. Pair bonding means you've got to not have an alpha male.

Lerner: The pair bonding is what distinguishes us from primates?

Bellah: Yes. Well, we have male solidarity which links us to the chimpanzees, female solidarity which links us to the bonobos and cross-gender solidarity which makes us unique, at least as far as other primates are concerned.

So in order to maintain a stable relationship between male and female parents and their children, you need to have the capacity to get rid of an upstart that would try to dominate everything. In a small hunter-gatherer society without much surplus to fight over that's not so hard. In the first place, you tell him to stop it. In the next place, you shun him. You won't deal with him. If it goes on, other men kill him. It isn't a non-violent society. It's a society that violently prevents domination by one, or a small group of people, over everyone else.

Lerner: So primitive societies have a mechanism –

Bellah: Just say *hunter-gatherer*. *Primitive* is a pejorative term.

Lerner: Right. Okay, hunter-gatherers. Well, to me, primitive is not a pejorative term.

But in any case, hunter-gatherers or early societies have an effective mechanism for dealing with upstarts.

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: Which creates an egalitarian ethos.

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: Which counter-acts the dominance gene.

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: Which is one of our inheritances.

Then you reach *archaic* society and then all of sudden it shifts. You have this identification of the leader with god in one way or another.

Bellah: Well, that takes a lot of work, of course. Because hunter-gatherers don't have gods at all. They just have powerful beings.

Lerner: Right.

Bellah: Until you have somebody who claims to be a king, you can't think of god as a king.

So with the surplus to fight over, then certain groups of warriors can create a military force and establish dominance. Ancient Assyria and ancient Egypt are archaic societies that had millions of people. This is unheard of. I mean this is recent – really recent – if you think of how long the human species have been around. This is like five or six thousand years. It's not that long.

We never had states. We went for hundreds of thousands of years without states, without any boss telling us what to do, without any policemen, or anything like that.

As I say, it wasn't peaceful because hunter-gatherers can get angry and they can kill each other in a fight, to be sure. But they didn't have any power structure. They said, "These people will get more and you will get less and shut up because we'll kill you if you don't like it."

That's what happens with the early state. You begin to have large-scale peasantry; and peasants are always exploited. They work themselves to death and then most, or at least half, of their crop is taken from them and given to a few people at the top.

Lerner: That's where you begin to have a religious system which splits.

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: There are elite practices and non-elite.

Bellah: Yes, for a stable, archaic society you need to have legitimation. You need a reason why somebody should be getting so much more than everybody else. And you say, "Oh, because he's a god" or he's "a son of god" or he's "god's chosen one: the king. Great. Hallelujah" – and then they have rituals about how great the king is.
In the meantime, the poor are starving. Read Amos and Hosea about how the poor are starving and how the rich are pressing their heads into the ground. That's what begins to happen.

I might add Warren Buffett and Bill Gates' net worth is the equivalent of 40 percent of the American people, that is, about 125 million people. Is that so different from the archaic state?

Lerner: Not at all.

So along with the split in religious ceremony between the wealthy and the poor, you also have the development of priest classes, which you characterize as, in some respects, the equivalent of an intellectual class.

Bellah: Oh, yes.

Lerner: And these intellectuals are tasked with explaining why the rich should have all the money.

Bellah: Yes, among other things, and anointing the ones who have the power – and sometimes calling them into question.

There are quasi-prophets in archaic society. They don't get much leverage.

But when things start turning bad, when there are famines and the barbarians are causing a lot of trouble and the people that are supposed to be taking care of you aren't, people say, "Where's the king? Where are the gods? What's going on here?"

Then you have the opening for some kind of religious questioning of the legitimacy of the whole situation.

Lerner: Right. Now, isn't that the point that makes the shift to the Axial Age?

Bellah: Yes, exactly.

Lerner: So the Axial Age – which you describe as the Age of Theory, right? – is when people begin to think critically about this inheritance from the Archaic Age of a set of beliefs about how things are supposed to be?

Bellah: Yes, exactly, and in every case of the Axial Age the identification of the existing power structure with the divine is called into question.

Lerner: Right, so then you have a very interesting question about where the criticism came from. Did it come from the intellectual class of the priests or were they too bought into the hierarchy; or, did it come from the renunciates?

Bellah: Well, the difference between renunciates and priests is not all that clear. In the Israelite prophets, Isaiah, at least, was a priest. There was a tendency among Protestants to say, "Prophets great, priests bad." Protestants didn't have priests, allegedly.

But actually, yes. Renouncers are found in all traditions, particularly vividly in India. Probably the first monastic order was Buddhist. Since Christian monasticism was maybe three or four hundred years later, the possibility that it was stimulated by Buddhist monasticism cannot be overlooked. Egypt, after all, had a lot of visitors from India. That's where Christian monasticism began.

We can't explain with any simple sociological formula why what happened, happened. But the fact of the matter is – and Weber was very brilliant in saying this; he remains the greatest sociologist of comparative religion who ever lived, even though he made a lot of mistakes; I certainly don't compare myself to Weber – there are two things about Axial Age religion.

It is, *one*, a religion of virtuosi, that is, spiritually gifted people who were capable of extraordinary feats of asceticism and extraordinary feats of caring for other people at their own cost.

And, *two*, it is a religion of intellectuals. It raises the bar of how we think.

It's very odd – I mean you could certainly think of Jesus as a virtuoso because he was really quite astounding in many of the spiritual things we are told he did.

But to think of Jesus as an intellectual? What do you mean? This carpenter's son? What's going on here?

Read the parables. Read the Sermon on the Mount. This is heavy-going. This is serious stuff. I mean philosophers still aren't making too much clarity on some of these things. This is a great mind at work.

That's true of all the great figures: the Buddha – an incredible intellectual genius, no question; the writers of the *Upanishads*; the great Confucians – Mencius is an absolute genius.

So there is a new level of capacity to bring critical reflection on the given reality.

Lerner: You make a very interesting move into looking at the psychology of moral development – [Swiss developmental psychologist and philosopher Jean] Piaget and [American psychologist Lawrence] Kohlberg – in reflecting on these developmental shifts in religion.

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: So from [the perspective of] the Piagetian and Kohlbergian stages of concrete thinking to the sort of acceptance of how things are supposed to be, to post-conventional thinking – and I don't know if you adopt it directly but – you look at the parallel between individual development and the development of these phases of religious consciousness.

Bellah: Yes, exactly. Chapter one plays out the ontogeny and chapter three lays out the phylogeny.

Lerner: Right.

Bellah: They are very parallel.

Lerner: So one of the very interesting things you did that fascinated me was you looked at Plato's myth of the cave and the Buddha's journey as two parallel stories of a movement in consciousness.

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: Could you describe that parallel?

Bellah: Well, both of them involve calling into question the givenness of everyday life.

I draw on a great [Austrian] sociological phenomenologist named Alfred Schütz (1899-1959), who spoke of the world of daily life as the taken-for-granted world. The world as we see it is the only world there is. [Schütz points to] the capacity to put [the world of daily life] in a different

perspective so that one says, "Well, this is one possible reality but it's not the only possible reality."

In fact, the world of everyday life may be illusory, may be false, may be a lie! The Buddha says the world is a burning house. It is a lie. The Buddha calls into question every taken-for-grantedness.

The parable or allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* is saying the world of daily life is you're really chained in a cave and what you think is reality is just a reflection of images. Because behind your back, which you can't see because you're chained up, are guys with fire. They're holding puppets up in front of the fire and what you're seeing are just these fake things.

But if you could escape your bonds and go out of the cave and go up into the sun light you would see the real world.

So in both cases there is a contrast between a sense of *deep* reality and the givenness of the unquestioned, taken-for-granted everyday life.

Now, in the long term, every religious tradition has to put these things back together again. But there is now a crack: what is taken for granted is really never legitimately totally taken for granted; everything we encounter has a big question mark over it.

Now Mr. [English evolutionary biologist Richard] Dawkins (b. 1941) thinks that only scientists think that way. The fact is all of the great religions were thinking that way. They were raising the question about everything that was taken for granted. They were not mimicking some past thing as having the whole truth. They were moving into new understandings of truth that called everything existing into question.

Then the tradition can become, as Max Weber said, routinized, solidified, fundamentalized, and no longer open to question. To be sure, that's part of the history of religion: a constant tension between establishment and reform, between using religion to prop-up the taken-for-granted and religion itself becoming a question as to why we shouldn't take for granted the givenness of the world.

Lerner: So I'd like to ask you now to reflect on some of the other extraordinary figures who have thought about the nature of religion, not necessarily from a sociological perspective.

So, for example, [German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von] Leibniz (1646-1716) and [English writer Aldous] Huxley (1894-1963) proposed that there is a perennial philosophy at the heart of all the great spiritual traditions. One sees this picked up and made more particular by traditionalist thinkers like [French author] René Guénon (1886-1951) and [Swiss philosopher] Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), who not only argue that there's a core of a perennial philosophy. They also argue that every religion has a mystic core and then a shell around the mystic core. Every great civilization is built around a religion. That mystic core and the shell are always in tension with each other. The fate of the civilization depends upon the skill with which the religious community handles the tension between the mystic core and the funda-

mentalist shell, which is necessary for people who are functioning at lower levels of Kohlbergian or Piagetian religion, in effect. In other words, because large masses of people need black and white systems, those black and white systems are in tension with a mystic core, which Jesus, Buddha or whoever proposed.

In other words, here is a non-sociological perception, in effect, a philosophical perception that there is a core perennial philosophy and then elaborated into a view that there's a mystic core and a shell and the fate of a civilization depends on the skill with which the mystic core is kept alive because the shell is necessary.

Bellah: Yes. Do you know [the American philosopher of religion] Huston Smith [b. 1919]?

Lerner: I do.

Bellah: Have you had him in this [series of conversations]?

Lerner: I haven't but I know his work.

Bellah: I see. Well, Huston certainly believes that. What you laid out is pure Huston Smith. Huston is one of my oldest friends. I knew him when he was teaching at MIT. It's very odd to think of Huston at MIT but he was there for a while.

Actually, ironically, it's much older than Leibniz. It goes back to the Renaissance. The Renaissance was recovering the great classics of Greece and Rome. They were saying, "Look, the Bible is great. But this stuff is just as great. We can even see the same truth as we can see in the Bible as we see in Plato or as we can see in Cicero. Really, all these things are saying the same thing. They're just different ways of blah, blah, blah."

The emergence of serious study of religion required a profound criticism of this notion of the perennial philosophy. It starts in the 17th Century and it really gets going in the 19th Century but it starts with the Age of Exploration.

No! They aren't all the same. They're *profoundly different!* They're asking *different* questions. They're *not* giving different answers to the *same* question. That is the beginning of serious study of religion.

I'm sorry. I'm very fond of Huston and I love the perennial philosophy people because everything they believe ethically is on track with my own [beliefs]. But it's just wrong.

It's not that there aren't certain things that are in common. I speak in my first chapter of *unitive* experience, which I think is a psychological possibility that's true for any human being.

But there is not unitive experience that isn't culturally expressed and culturally formed.

In fact, in almost every culture that has unitive experiences, they have unitive experiences that fit the cultural expectation of what a unitive experience should be. So Christian unitive experiences are not the same as Buddhist unitive experiences; and Daoists' are not the same.

Unless you see that there is a fundamental difference between each of these traditions, in spite of the fact there are some things profoundly shared, you're just missing too much.

Lerner: Well, and thank you for that. [Bellah and audience laugh.] I would simply note the Dalai Lama, Brother David Steindl-Rast, Thich Nhat Hanh, and many others who approach this not from a sociological perspective but from a spiritual perspective may have a different frame from yours.

I'm sure you're correct that the serious sociological study of religion leads in that direction. But I'm not at all certain that the great spiritual teachers of our time would agree with your conclusion as superior to their experiential sense of the unity.

You make a very major point of saying that the development of religion from hunter-gatherer religion to Axial Age religion is not a moral valuation of the superiority of later forms to the earlier forms. So I wonder if you make the claim that the sociological imagination is superior to the spiritual imagination in evaluating human and religious experience.

Bellah: You can read this book and think it's not a spiritual book?

Lerner: I believe it's a spiritual book. But you just made a very strong claim that the serious study of religion had led to clarity and that the perennial philosophy really had no standing.

Bellah: None of the figures you mention are serious students of religion.
Lerner: That's an interesting point.

Bellah: They're profound spiritual figures.

Lerner: Yeah.

Bellah: They have the capacity to understand that people in very different traditions share some of their most profound spiritual insight.

They have not spent their life in the study of several traditions. They don't *know* how *different* they are. They *feel* this common core – and at some level they're right.

I don't say it's an either/or. In fact, in almost everything I ever study I find that both/and is always superior to either/or.

So the perennial philosophy people have a point. But they push it much too far. Because at this point in the world we need to understand *difference*. We are just simply not all the *same*.

There are certain things that we share. We all need nurturance and we all have to deal with dominance, for instance. I don't care where you are; you have to deal with those two things.

So it's not that there aren't things in common. But to imagine – and, really, the Renaissance thought this – the ancient Israelites and the ancient Greeks were saying the same thing is just to miss exactly what's most important about ancient Israel and ancient Greece – *spiritually*, not sociologically!

You are not getting the fact that Plato sees things that Isaiah doesn't see, and vice-versa. And that they can learn from each other. Or we can learn from both of them.

The creativity of the West is in part because we have these two *deeply* incompatible traditions that can never be completely fused – and refuse to be completely fused. They're always fighting each other at every stage in history.

The whole notion that reason can answer everything is from Greece, not from Israel. Israel wants to tell us that there are some profound experiences of revelation; and if you don't know that you don't understand reality.

We're still stuck in that. But it can be a creative stuckness.

All systematic theology is basically Greek, however much it claims to be biblical.

I happened to have the good fortune to know Paul Tillich a bit, a profoundly biblical Christian – and a deep Platonist. [Laughs.] But Tillich knew they weren't the same. He knew that it was always a struggle to deal with it and that it was actually spiritually healthy to face the fact that they weren't the same. They weren't different ways of saying the same thing. They were talking about different things.

Lerner: Well, I will not push the point. [Audience laughs.] I accept your vigorous view, and I have to say that I'm not entirely convinced.

Bellah: All right.

Lerner: But I want to go to another point of creative tension between us, which is your assertion that – you give preeminence to play in evolutionary history as *the* core source of human religious experience, if I understand correctly.

I said to you before we started that I thought that's an extraordinary defense or very creative exploration. But it seems to me that both in animal behavior and in the religious traditions one finds many other potential primary sources, other than play.

So, for example, as I mentioned to you, if you look at the Hindu tradition of yoga and you have *yana* yoga of wisdom, *bhakti* yoga of devotion, and *karma* yoga of work and so on – all these different yogas. I think you find in the great traditions a wide range of sources – not just the source in play – of the human religious experience.

You were arguing to me – again, you saw strong reason that play was really at the root of it, and I'd love to hear more about that.

Bellah: Well, can you find all these different yogas among primates?

Lerner: Well, that's what we were briefly alluding to. So, for example, it seems to me that in primates the mother-child bond remains a very strong thing.

Bellah: But that's the basis of play. There's no one who emphasizes the nurturant relation between parent and child, and usually mother and child, than I do in this book.

Lerner: No, I agree with that.

Bellah: If you look in the index – if you have the whole book on your computer, as I do, and can put in "mother," I can find dozens and dozens. The nurturance of mothers toward young animals is the basis from which everything comes. I make it very clear that without that, play is impossible.

Play requires what Gordon Burghardt, the greatest living expert on animal play, calls a "relaxed field" [see, e.g., Burghardt's *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits*, 2006]. That is, you cannot be concerned for the struggle for existence and play at the same time. You need to be warm. You need to be fed. You need to be relatively safe that predators are not around. Then you can play. Natural selection is called off for the moment.

See that's why some of the biologists who want to stress natural selection at every point – play emerges by putting a bracket around natural selection, as if to say, "We're not going to do that right now. We're going to do something else. We're going to play!"

Play then can lead into the notion of fairness. A big, strong animal can play with a relatively weak animal only if the big, strong animal handicaps itself. Then they can play. If the big animal is going to take advantage of his size and strength, there's no game. No play. Nothing can happen.

There are rules of play. It's the beginning of ethics – and it's the beginning of religion. Not only the beginning.

The amazing thing is, and I do quote this wonderful developmental psychologist, Alison Gopnik, who is at Berkeley and I haven't even met although I adore her work, who shows how important play is right now in our society for very young children. They prefer the world of play to the world of what we call reality. And they learn all kinds of things.

Pretend play is the nursery of all our culture – not just religion but everything.

Lerner: So nurturance clearly is a precondition of play.

Bellah: Yes.

Lerner: For example, just take love. Many people would intuitively believe that love lay behind the core of religious experience. Yes, love or nurturance is a prerequisite of play. But does that mean that play is the primary conduit through which love reaches religious and spiritual experience? Or is love also a source of religious and spiritual experience?

Bellah: Of course love is a source of religious experience. And so is power. And so is dominance. These are given.

But the *space* to create new possibilities is provided by play.

Lerner: Okay, yeah.

Bellah: That's the key. It's the *relaxed field* that's the key.

There are other relaxed fields, like sleep. Of course dreams can be very creative. But sleep can't quite do it without a lot of help.

Play seems to be polymorphous. It's amazing what can come out of play. Have you ever read that Johan Huizinga book, *Homo Ludens* [: *A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 1938]?

Lerner: Yeah.

Bellah: Well, he makes enormous claims for play.

Lerner: Yeah, he does. And you point to many, many sources of the play hypothesis.

Bellah: Again, it's not play as against other things.

Lerner: No, no.

Bellah: It's both/and – always.

Lerner: Yeah.

Well, I want to open the conversation to other people here. I'd like to take some questions. If you say your name and keep your comment brief, I'd appreciate that. Anybody have anything they'd like to ask?

A great silence descends. I will go on.

Bellah: Nobody wants to know what part of hell I came from?

Lerner: Go ahead.

Audience Member (male): Can you speak more about ritual? I've only read the table of contents.

Bellah: Of course ritual is the most obvious thing that's rooted in play because play occurs in bouts. It has a beginning and an end. It occurs in a place, a place set apart to play. So sacred time and sacred space are basic for ritual.

Play is always embodied. Ritual is always something enacted. We use our bodies. We may use language of course, which animals can't do when they're playing. But music and language are part of ritual.

Ritual, since it's rooted in what Donald calls the mimetic, is sort of the most primitive in a non-pejorative sense, the most original form of joint religious action.

Out of ritual comes all other kinds of things: religious art, forms of meditation, belief systems.

If you want to know what religion is – it's a profound mistake basically of the Protestant and then modern western notion that you need to list what you believe. "I believe X. I believe Y. I don't believe this." That's not what religion is about.

Religion is not a set of propositions. Religion is a way of living in the world.

So you need to know what people *do*; and then you'll find out what they believe. And you need to know what they do when they say they are doing something together religiously, which means you'll need to study their ritual.

I've had students come to me and say, "I really would like to join a church after reading *Habits of the Heart*," or something like that. "But I don't believe in God. What church should I join?" I'd say, "Well, I'm a professor. I cannot tell you what church to join. I'm not in the business of recruiting people to do anything." So a person will continue to try to get me to tell him what to do, which I won't do.

Then I say, "How do you know you don't believe in God? Is God something that you sit down and figure out all by yourself, just in terms of logic and rationality? Maybe if you joined a religious group that used that word and saw how they used it in their liturgy and in their ethical life, it would begin to have some meaning to you."

I remember hearing a sermon in my church, which is an Episcopal church. We have religious orders. They're copied from Catholics. But nonetheless there was a monk preaching. He said there was a professor of Christian theology at Yale Divinity School who was himself Eastern Orthodox. He was teaching a course on the creed. The creed in my Episcopal church is said every Sunday as part of the basic liturgy, and that would be true in the Catholic church as well. Then somebody on the first day of the course says, "But I don't believe in the creed." The professor says, "That's fine." Then he finishes the whole lecture and the guy says, "I still don't believe in the creed." He says, "It's not *my* creed." Then the professor says, "Of course it's not your creed. It's the church's creed. Maybe at the end of this course or maybe at the end of your life you'll understand what it means."

Which reminds me also of a great passage in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Consciousness* [*Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807)] where he says, "The creed spoken by an adolescent means something very different than the creed spoken by an older person for whom the creed has become part of his or her entire life." The same words.

I'll just say one more thing. When people asked George W. Bush what was different from the Episcopal church in which he was raised and the Methodist church which he now belongs to, he said, "Well, the Episcopal church has the same service every week. There's a different sermon but same service. The Methodist church is more laid back. We have different things going on."

Now that implies the same thing every week is somehow a problem.

Now if you said to your wife or if your wife said to you, "Do you love me?" And you said, "Why do you ask? I told you that yesterday."

There are certain things that we don't – yesterday won't do it. [Bellah and audience laugh.]

The words have to be now.

You can't go to church – and if they're saying the Lord's prayer – and say, "Why are you saying the Lord's prayer. You said that last week."

It's a different meaning of words.

I mean the notion of words as *information* instead of *meaning*, which is what's so prevalent in the world today, is a great debasement. The meaning of those kinds of profound words like "Yes, I love you" is never exhausted. It's never a piece of information. It's always a profound communication between two people that has to be renewed and renewed and renewed.

Audience Member (female): Not having read the book, I'm curious to know if at any point do you discuss the work of René Girard and his discussion of sacrifice and scapegoating in the development of religion?

Bellah: I have met René Girard and I have read some of his work. I think he has a profound insight about scapegoating and sacrifice. But I think he is simply empirically wrong to think that sacrifice is at the root of religion.

What I have come to see is that hunter-gatherers do not have sacrifices. You have to have a notion of a divine being that's radically different from you in order for sacrifice to make sense.

Sacrifice is only present in hierarchical societies and the terrifying thing is that the earliest hierarchical societies, the early state just coming out of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism, practice human sacrifice sometimes on a ghastly scale.

What is human sacrifice saying? "You are nothing. It's up there that's everything: the king and the god behind the king."

I'm reading now a book on the end of sacrifice by a guy who teachers both at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Oxford. When did sacrifice end? In Judaism and Christianity of course it ended with the destruction of the Temple. But theologically why did it end? Why was the Eucharist not a bloody sacrifice? Why do we not kill animals every week?

So I think Girard is onto a lot of things. But I think he's also just wrong empirically.

You see, I do think people can be wrong. [Bellah and audience laugh.]

Audience Member (female): A couple of days ago, the Dalai Lama came out with something and I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts on it. He said, "All the world's religions, with their emphasis on love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness, can and do promote better values. But the reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. This is why I am increasingly convinced that the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics beyond religion altogether."

Bellah: Well, again, the initial premise is that all these good things are in all the religions.

The trouble is that there are a lot of other things that aren't so nice in those religions too, like the attack on the consulate in Ben Ghazi, which was probably carried out by Al Qaeda religious zealots who think that blowing up people is part of their religion.

So, empirically again, the Dalai Lama is not entirely a hundred percent right. They certainly can profoundly be found in Islam. Ninety-eight, ninety-nine or, God knows, even maybe more percent of Muslims do not approve at all of that kind of behavior.
So it can't be linked to Islam because violence has been justified in Christianity, Judaism, and even in Buddhism. There were warrior monks in medieval Japan killing each other.

So all the bad things are in all the religions too.

But when you say move beyond religion, again, I think it's an effort to say, "Well, since we haven't been able to get together with religions, maybe there's some other way."

The Dalai Lama is wonderful because he's always so hopeful. He's trying to find a way to get out of this mess to find a more peaceful, harmonious world. I love him for that. I have the deepest respect for him.

I think we can respect the deep, ethical seriousness of people who reject any existing religion. But I don't think they are going to answer our problems any better than the religions we've got.

Lerner: I'd like to close with one final question. We haven't spoken much of the comparative study of mythology as a root to understanding religion, although you use a lot of references to mythology in the book. But when we think of paths other than the sociology of religion to understanding religious and spiritual experience, many of us are familiar with the efforts of people like Joseph Campbell, James Hillman or Carl Jung and others to look at archetypal experiences that,

it is claimed, repeat in different parts of the world as a unitive way of thinking about religious experience.

My guess is that you would be critical of that. But I'm curious as to what, specifically, you would say.

Bellah: Well, I've read a lot of that stuff. I knew Joseph Campbell pretty well. I think *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) is a really good book. It does make the point that you're trying to make. I think a lot of Campbell is not worth that much.

I think the whole Jungian archetypal thing is – I read a lot of it at one point in my life. I think it, again, has a certain validity. I have not found it, on the whole, to be the answer. I think it's one way of thinking that is fruitful and productive.

There's another Jungian who writes about religion, whose name escapes me, that I like a lot better than Joseph Campbell. You don't know who I'm talking about?

Lerner: It's not James Hillman?

Bellah: No.

Audience Member (female): Marianne Williamson?

Bellah: No, never mind. He's a European.

Anyway, so yeah, I respect that tradition and I think it has a lot to say.
But beyond a certain point, again, it begins to miss what I think is another critical dimension, which is *difference*, that we are profoundly involved in *difference*, and really that's one of the deepest challenges of the world.

We need to have mechanisms to cope with the fact that we are and are going to remain *different*. We're not all going to be homogenized into one lovely common belief system.

We need to respect the fact that none of our traditions have all the truth, that there is truth in every tradition and we can be instructed and learn from every tradition.

But we have *different* traditions, and they're not going away. That's part of our challenge.

Lerner: Robert Bellah, author of *Religion in Human Evolution*, it's been an extraordinary honor to have this conversation with you. Thank you for being with us tonight.

Bellah: Well, thank you very much.

Audience: [Applause.]