
In Memoriam: Robert Neelly Bellah (1927–2013)

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AS WE LEFT THE PODIUM for the panel at the 2011 San Francisco AAR annual meeting that had featured a discussion of Robert Bellah's book *Religion in Human Evolution*, Bellah thanked me for convening it. Then he added, "I'm glad I lived long enough to see this day."

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion, December 2013, Vol. 81, No. 4, pp. 897–902
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lft057

Advance Access publication on October 11, 2013

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What he had in mind was not just the thoughtful discussion of the book, but also, in particular, the appreciative comments of Jonathan Z. Smith, one of Bellah's old critics. It was a bit of a risk to have invited Smith to be on the panel. After all, he had harshly criticized the article "Religious Evolution" which Bellah wrote when he first explored this topic. But that was in 1964, and now, almost fifty years and 746 pages later, the book was a different story. Smith loved it, as it turned out. He thought it properly located the changes in religion within the larger scientific study of human evolution and examined the evidence in a dispassionate way. And then, he added, it was "a damned fine read."

The choice of having Smith on the panel was Bellah's. I had suggested several names of scholars who I thought would be more reliably appreciative of Bellah's work, but that's not what he wanted. Bellah requested those he thought would be his most severe critics, who would question as well as admire his work—scholars such as Smith, Wendy Doniger, and Luke Timothy Johnson—and they were indeed both critical and appreciative by turns.

Bellah liked to be challenged and to challenge. He reveled in being the contentious outsider and playing a prophetic role. And indeed, when he questioned an opposing idea in his thundering, erudite voice, it seemed that Isaiah or Jeremiah had returned in an academic mien. How did a Presbyterian kid from Los Angeles become sociology's most admired Old Testament prophet? It was a combination of possessing a sharp mind and wise mentors, and having the sensitivity to respond to the world's social conditions.

As an undergraduate and then graduate student in sociology at Harvard University, he was taken under the wings of his mentor, Talcott Parsons. Still, he was a middle-class West Coast outsider, somewhat ill at ease in the tweed-jacketed old school network. Worse than that, he became involved in radical left-wing politics and flirted with Marxist ideas and communist organizations.

That was enough for Harvard. Bellah's dean at the time, McGeorge Bundy, indicated that his fellowship was threatened and his teaching position would require him to "name names." At the same time, Bellah had received a great deal of attention with his dissertation, which became his first book. It was a Weberian analysis of Tokugawa religion, showing how religious values in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries prepared Japan for the modern industrial age. Though he was considered by many to be the likely successor to Parsons, Bellah left Harvard for a postdoctorate at McGill University, where he studied Islam and the Arabic language, and fell under the influence of the scholar of comparative religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

Bellah returned to Harvard after Bundy moved on to public service as National Security Advisor to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War. Bellah opposed the war, of course, and remained at Harvard for ten years. There, he reunited with Smith, who had come to Harvard in 1964 to direct the Center for the Study of World Religions. In 1967, Bellah made his way to the University of California, Berkeley, where he remained for the rest of his life. But his time at Berkeley was not always peaceful. Each of his major works was met with a certain degree of controversy.

The year that Bellah came to Berkeley was the year he published his influential essay in *Daedalus*, "Civil Religion in America." Bellah took an idea fashioned by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: that national communities have a moral and spiritual momentum of their own. This idea fit well with Bellah's Durkheimian notions about the religious character of all collectivities. And in the inaugural speeches of John F. Kennedy and other U.S. Presidents, Bellah saw the appropriation of biblical language for an underlying "religion" of an American national community.

The concept of civil religion was quickly criticized, in part because it was misunderstood. Some thought that he was advocating a kind of worship of the state. Others thought he was talking about the appropriation of Christianity for political purposes. Though Bellah was impressed at how easily Christianity and American civil religion could co-exist (unlike, for example, the antagonism between religion and politics in France), civil religion was always its own thing, an aspect of a nation's political culture.

Bellah's discussion of the religious dimension of American political life came at a rowdy moment for both Berkeley and the country. I remember coming to Berkeley as a graduate student about the same time Bellah arrived there as a professor, and the streets were full of antiwar protestors and supporters of the Black Panther Party. I recall the electric moments when Bellah held forth in crowded seminars on religion and society at the Graduate Theological Union where the issues were both academic and political, and often the two were intertwined. For Bellah, America's civil religion could have a prophetic side, challenging it to renounce war and racism, positions that Bellah took to the great approval of his students and the harsh criticism of many of his colleagues.

In 1973, when Bellah's name was proposed by Clifford Geertz to become a fellow of Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Studies, all hell broke loose, in the refined way that such back-room academic brawls occur. Part of the issue was Bellah's politics, and part of it was his interest in religion (a disreputable subject to many scientists at the Institute); but much of it was about styles of scholarship. The social sciences in general were becoming more quantitative, more empirical in their

approach, and Bellah's old-school grand theorizing did not sit well with some of the social scientists on the Princeton board. Eventually, the idea of Bellah's appointment was dropped, but the hard feelings on both sides remained for years.

Though Bellah had global interests and wrote about Islam, Japanese religion, Confucianism, and Apache culture, he kept coming back to the religious and moral dimensions of contemporary American society. He began working with a team of younger sociologists on a large project that would probe issues of individualism and commitment in American life through in-depth interviews with a variety of subjects. The team—Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven Tipton, and Bellah—worked intensely for years, writing and rewriting each other's work. Bellah had final editorial responsibility, and in 1985, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* became an instant best-seller and the subject of national conversation. Terms such as “expressive individualism” and “Sheilaism” (the personal religion of one of the subjects in the study, a woman named Sheila) became part of the lexicon of American religious society.

Again there was controversy, both over the sociological methods and the conclusions. But no one could doubt that Bellah and his team had exposed some of the critical problems of modern life: the longing for community in a society intensely individualistic to the point of cultural narcissism.

Bellah retired from teaching in 1997, but in some ways, his biggest project was just beginning. He returned to the subject of his 1964 essay on religious evolution—the one that Jonathan Z. Smith so despised—determined to understand more fully how culture changes as human capacities evolve. Bellah immersed himself in biology and physics and tried to make sense of the remarkable connection between the evolution of sentient beings on this planet and their capacity for extraordinary reaches of activity and imagination, including especially religion. He began with the Big Bang and ended with the Axial Age in the sixth century BCE, a period in which religion became abstract and personal in different parts of the planet at the same time, from China and India to Greece and Ancient Israel.

In the midst of this remarkable travelogue of ideas, Bellah came to some striking insights about the nature of religion. Unlike many contemporary thinkers who have found the idea of religion to be a puzzling and difficult invention, Bellah asserted that it is something, a form of activity and a stretch of human imagination that can be set apart from other, material aspects of human occupation. He regarded religion as a way of perceiving and acting out an alternative reality. It is one of the “other

realities,” like poetry and science, which “break the dreadful fatalities of this world of appearances” (Bellah 2011: 9).

Even at the end of an extraordinarily rich career, Bellah was challenging the fields of religious studies and sociology of religion to embark in new directions. In this case, he was encouraging scholars to conceive of religion in global and vast historical terms, to appropriate insights from science, and to approach the study of religion in a way that takes seriously the perceptions of those who hold religious world views. This is an analytic approach that I and others have called sociotheology, and Bellah was a pioneer.

Bellah was working on his final book when on July 30 of this year complications following heart surgery led to a sudden end to a long and productive life. The book in progress was to be the sequel to *Religion in Human Evolution*, tracing developments from the Axial Age to the present. He had planned to devote much of it to the intellectual and cultural elements of modernity, returning to his familiar topic of the role of religion in the tension between individualism and commitment in public life. The final chapters were going to be prophetic: addressing the ability of human reason to create patterns of resource exploitation and environmental abuse that could spell an end to life as we know it on the planet.

At his memorial service in the Episcopal Church in Berkeley that Bellah frequently attended, the gathering included colleagues, friends, and the families of his two daughters, both accomplished professionals (his life-long partner, Melanie, had preceded Bellah in death almost three years earlier). The congregation was comforted by eulogies from Bellah’s old friends Albert Craig and William Sullivan, by a letter from Bill Clinton with a handwritten note about Bellah’s influence on his thinking, and by music and scripture chosen in advance by Bellah himself, including a section from the Bach cantata “*Ich habe genug*.” But the gathering was startled when the priest began reading from an e-mail written by Bellah some years earlier in response to a query from a graduate student; it was an e-mail about death.

In the e-mail, Bellah, with his characteristic intellectual honesty, dismissed the simplistic notion of heaven as a nonbiblical, “bourgeois” idea, and declared, with the theologian Paul Tillich, that the eternal is now. He was comforted, however, by the notion that the atomic matter of one’s physical body would rejoin the material stream that had existed since the time of the Big Bang, and that he would, as would every living being, leave some contribution to the “cultural pool” that makes up the human family, and that that mark would endure “for a long, perhaps immeasurable time”—“unless,” Bellah added, “we become extinct soon, which is also possible.”

Bellah ended his e-mail with the observation that Heraclitus was right in asserting that “life and death are one.” Indeed, I suspect that Bellah’s prophetic voice will defy the distinction between living and dying, and continue to resonate, challenging our easy assumptions about religion, science, and social reality for some time to come. The contribution that Robert Bellah made to humanity’s cultural pool will surely endure, barring human’s extinction from the planet, for an immeasurable time.

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