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Robert N. Bellah

Richard L. Wood

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Encyclopedia entry on “BELLAH, Robert Neelly (1927-)”

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Robert N. Bellah was born on February 23, 1927 in Altus, Oklahoma, where his father was a small town newspaper publisher, and raised in Los Angeles, California. In 1949 he married Melanie Bellah. He graduated summa cum laude in 1950 from Harvard College with a degree in Social Relations and a concentration in Social Anthropology. His undergraduate honors thesis focused on Southern Athabascan cultural patterns in the Southwest, and was published in 1952 as *Apache Kinship Systems*. He pursued doctoral studies under the leading social theorist of the period, Talcott Parsons, earning his Ph.D. in sociology and Far Eastern languages from Harvard University in 1955. His dissertation was a Weberian analysis of the role of religion in the modernization of Japan, and was published as *Tokugawa Religion* in 1957. This formative period coincided with the systematic effort within American social science to translate the works of the European founders of sociology, particularly Max Weber and Emile Durkheim (with their roots in the philosophical work of Hegel) into English, and to incorporate their insights into an overall theory of social relations. Though the resulting school of “structural functionalism” was later rejected by most social scientists – and in some ways transcended in Bellah’s own work – this attention to American and European currents of social thought would mark his entire career.

Bellah’s undergraduate engagement with Marxist politics and the McCarthy-inspired closure of intellectual freedom in the United States during the 1950s led to his acceptance of a post-doctoral fellowship at the Institute for Islamic Studies at McGill University in Toronto, where he studied from 1955 to 1957. He returned to Harvard in 1957, and until 1967 served as a research associate, lecturer, associate professor, and professor of sociology. In 1967, Bellah became the Ford Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, where he remained until his retirement as Elliott Professor of Sociology, Emeritus in 1997 (a more complete autobiographical sketch is available in the introduction to Bellah 1970).

In developing a theoretical framework for interpreting empirical sociological findings, Bellah has drawn on the classical sociological tradition of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim and on a long tradition of social thought within philosophy, particularly Aristotle, Hegel, and the American pragmatists, as interpreted by such contemporary philosophers as Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. Thus, although little of Bellah’s *oeuvre* is explicitly philosophical in tone, much of it carries important philosophical weight through its wide-ranging attention to classical and contemporary social theory, American and European social philosophy, and the philosophy of religion from both Eastern and Western traditions. The important contributions of Bellah’s research and teaching include his long focus on an interpretive and humanistic understanding of social analysis (during a period of narrowly positivist emphasis within much of American sociology) and his having helped to shape several generations of scholars in the

sociology of religion, the sociology of culture, religious studies, and social theory.

Bellah's most important works fall into three areas. His earliest works cited above focused on applying a Weberian intellectual framework to two important societal systems never systematically analyzed by Max Weber: the tribal societies of the Americas (using Apache societies as the case study) and Japan during the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868). During this period, and partly under the influence of theologian Paul Tillich (1952), he also re-engaged intellectually and personally with the Christian tradition, ultimately as a member of the Episcopal Church. Bellah's middle period focused on the role of religion and religion-like phenomena as the central cultural systems of society. The core insights of this period are found in three publications: "Religious Evolution," "Civil Religion in America" (1964 and 1967, both reprinted in Bellah 1970), and the introduction to *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society* (1973). This period brought a more profoundly Durkheimian cast to Bellah's analysis, particularly in his attention to the dynamics of collective effervescence and shared mental structures in society. In this vein, Bellah analyzed the ceremonies, symbolism, and concepts of civic and religious currents in American life. Finally, beginning in the 1970s, Bellah's work turned increasingly toward critical engagement with American culture and institutions in a genre he termed "sociology as public philosophy." In two co-authored books (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985, 1991) and myriad magazine articles and public lectures, Bellah emerged as a leading public intellectual calling for reform within American society, within the tradition of Walter Lippman, John Dewey, H. Reinhold Niebuhr, John Courtney Murray SJ, and, before them, Jonathan Edwards, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and W.E.B. Dubois.

Sociology understood as public philosophy strives to provide a tool for societal self-understanding and self-reflection by entering into an ongoing dialogue with the cultural currents that flow within and provide meaning in social life – metaphorically holding up a mirror to society in a way that allows members to reflect upon and thus critically re-appropriate their own cultural traditions. Such public philosophy is skeptical of attempts in recent decades by the social sciences to emulate the physical or biological sciences, with their focus on accumulating objective knowledge of relatively fixed phenomena. It questions the disciplinary gulf between social sciences and the humanities – particularly philosophy – and seeks to reconnect them by drawing on social scientific knowledge and social theory for the purpose of better-informed and more democratic public dialogue about society and its direction. Sociology as public philosophy thus combines an analytic and a normative intent, simultaneously pursuing firmer knowledge, deeper insight, and a voice in the shaping of a good society. Oriented to the pursuit and promotion of the Aristotelian virtues of *phronesis* (practical reason), public philosophy seeks to deepen democracy through public dialogue that crosses the boundaries of philosophy, the humanities more broadly, the social sciences, and the physical sciences.

In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), Bellah and his co-authors fundamentally criticized the recent dominance of longstanding American cultural currents of "utilitarian individualism" and "expressive individualism." Key philosophical figures in the tradition of utilitarian individualism include Hobbes, Locke, and Bentham, with their emphasis on the self-interested pursuit of particular

ends by maximizing one's own share of those ends. Benjamin Franklin represents the paradigmatic American figure in this tradition. Though most at home in the business sphere, utilitarian individualism has become a dominant cultural theme across a great deal of American culture, most clearly wherever economic exchange, self-interest maximization, and cost-benefit analysis explicitly predominate, but also implicitly at work wherever human goods are treated as commodities to be maximized. In the scholarly domain, the dominant versions of utilitarian individualism take the form of rational actor models of human behavior.

Expressive individualism emerged in American life in the 19th century, partly in opposition to the rising dominance of utilitarian individualism. It posits an inner core of emotion, intimate experience, and uniqueness to each individual, which must be expressed in pursuit of self-realization. The fountainhead of expressive individualism in American culture was 19th century Romanticism, best exemplified in the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-92); its contemporary expressions include the influential American culture of psychotherapy, "New Age" spirituality, and the celebration of sexuality devoid of grounding in interpersonal commitment.

In criticizing the inability of utilitarian and expressive individualism to ground long-term commitment and provide ultimately meaningful orientation to human life, Bellah and his co-authors argued for a cultural re-appropriation of other longstanding currents that relativize individualism, particularly cultural currents of civic republicanism and biblical religion. The American tradition of civic republicanism originated in the city-states of classical Greece and Rome and deeply influenced the founding generation of the American Revolution. The republican tradition emphasizes shared membership in a national community and commitment to work for the common good of all societal members. Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln represent key figures in this current of American life – though Lincoln also drew deeply from the biblical tradition in framing his understanding of America.

Biblical religion matters enormously in American culture because it provides ethical grounding for trans-individualistic commitment in human life through participation in "communities of memory." Bellah's analysis of biblical religion as a key cultural tradition providing a counterweight to the dark side of American individualism should not be mistaken for a triumphal celebration of mainstream religion. Given their historical centrality in American culture, Christianity and Judaism inevitably serve as the focus of analysis, but they are important because they offer cultural symbols transcending individualism *and* are the locus of widespread commitment within American society. Other religious traditions – particularly others with long historical experience and societal roots – have parallel ethical resources and can play similar roles in contemporary American society. Likewise, Bellah et alia recognize and sharply criticize those ways in which biblical religions themselves have succumbed to the corrosive effects of individualism and therapeutic culture. Thus, some religious traditions some of the time offer vibrant resources in this regard, while others do not.

Implicit in this cultural analysis and made explicit in *The Good Society* (1991) by

the same authors, is the role of institutions in sustaining the cultural possibility of ethical commitment and in providing the settings in which such commitment is exercised. The term “institutions” is used in its social scientific sense, quite different from the everyday sense in which it essentially serves as a synonym for “organization.” Rather, institutions here refers to “patterns of normative, which is to say moral, expectations” (1991, p. 288). Thus, institutions shape interpersonal and societal understandings of how we are to act and what constitute legitimate ends and means; institutions serve to stabilize interaction by generating mutually shared expectations. Because institutions *mediate* between the self and the wider world (in both its social and natural dimensions), they are crucial to our individuality and to our understanding of others, science, and our place in the world. The focus of attention in *The Good Society* falls on analyzing particular institutional spheres in American life – the market, corporations, and work; government, law, and politics; education; and religion – but the underlying orientation rests constantly upon this attention to the ways that we are embedded in institutions and can work to reform them from within. Because institutions in the form of mutual expectations exist within the fabric of interaction, each of us as social actors either reify current institutional commitments or reform them by calling institutions back to their ideals and criticizing their basic values. We do the latter typically by seeing a given institution – say, the workplace – in light of the values and commitments of another institutional sphere – say religion with its call to mutual respect, or politics with its call to greater equality. In this way, institutional reform depends upon a rich plurality of strong institutional spheres; each strengthens the others by providing cultural resources for critique and reform.

The most consistent objection raised to the line of argument pursued in these works argues that, in their close attention to moral traditions and democratic public dialogue, Bellah and his co-authors fail to take seriously enough the workings of societal power. Though certainly recognizing that more power-centered analyses have their own value, and having pursued in earlier writings those related to race (1992 [1975]) and in recent public lectures those related to economic polarization in American society, Bellah ultimately emphasizes the ways that cultural patterns shape even the workings of societal power; thus, in the concluding pages of *The Good Society*, he and his co-authors argue, “Such a moral argument cannot alone produce significant institutional change. Power and profit are always involved. But where moral agreement is strong enough, it will find opportunities for breaking through, and power and profit will find it advantageous to go along. Such outcomes cannot occur without conflict, when power is pitted against power. But without the moral argument, there is no steady pressure to bring destructive economic and political forces to the service of human ends” (1991, p. 306).

Throughout Bellah’s work runs a consistent theoretical position termed “symbolic realism” which, though only discussed explicitly in a few places, is central to understanding the philosophical substratum of that work. Best articulated in the essay “Between Religion and Social Science” (Chapter 15 in Bellah 1970), symbolic realism

rejects both the anti-religious bias of Enlightenment rationalism, which sees religion as essentially false, *and* its main alternative in the Western intellectual tradition, termed symbolic reductionism. The latter accepts that religious insight may hold a kernel of truth, but that this kernel must be extracted from the fantastic myths and fabrications of traditional religion; that is, whatever religious truth may exist can and must be *reduced* to its non-religious core. Bellah argues that symbolic reductionism misses the real import of religion because it partakes in the mistaken cognitive bias of Western rationalism since the Enlightenment: “This position has held that the only valid knowledge is in the form of falsifiable scientific hypotheses. The task then with respect to religion has been to discover the falsifiable propositions hidden within it, to discard the unverifiable assertions and those clearly false, and, even with respect to the ones that seem valid, to abandon the symbolic and metaphorical disguise in which they are cloaked” (251).

Bellah’s symbolic realism instead strives to understand symbolic statements – centrally including religious symbols, rituals, narratives, etc. – not as cognitive statements about the nature of the self or of external reality, but as evocations of the *real relationship* between the self, others, the wider world, and ultimate reality. Thus, “reality is seen to reside not just in the object but in the subject, and particularly in the relation between subject and object. The canons of empirical science apply primarily to symbols that attempt to express the nature of objects, but there are nonobjective symbols that express the feelings, values, and hopes of subjects, or that organize and regulate the flow of interaction between subjects and objects, or that attempt to sum up the whole subject-object complex or even point to the context or ground of that whole. These symbols, too, express reality and are not reducible to empirical propositions. This is the position of symbolic realism” (252). Thus, though ultimately Bellah states polemically, “To put it bluntly, religion is true” (253), the fundamental point is that to make primary the cognitive question about truth is to miss the essential nature of religion and symbolism more generally: they attempt to express what is *real* in the world of human experience, rather than what is true in some abstract cognitive sense lying beyond human experience. He notes: “religious symbolization and religious experience are inherent in the structure of human existence... all reductionism must be abandoned. Symbolic realism is the only adequate basis for the social scientific study of religion. When I say religion is a reality *sui generis* I am certainly not supporting the claims of the historical realist theologians, who are still working with a cognitive conception of religious belief that makes it parallel to objectivist scientific description. But if the theologian comes to his subject with the assumptions of symbolic realism...then we are in a situation where for the first time in centuries theologian and secular intellectual can speak the same language. Their tasks are different but their conceptual framework is shared. What this can mean for the reintegration of our fragmented culture is almost beyond calculation” (253).

Throughout his career – in his analysis of the religious systems of Japanese and Apache societies, his theoretical work on religious phenomena as cultural systems, and

his work as a public philosopher – Bellah has been oriented by this commitment to symbolic realism. This orientation and Bellah’s role in training several generations of scholars at Harvard University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Graduate Theological Union have made Bellah a key figure in the late 20th century dialogue between religion and social science, not only in America but in multiple societies around the world. Since his retirement from teaching in 1997, he has continued to lecture widely while working on a final major work, an expansion and updating of the seminal work “Religious Evolution” (1970, Chapter 2) in light of recent scholarly understanding of human origins, prehistoric societies, human history, and genetic and cultural evolution.

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