

Robert Bellah's Search for Unity

Philip S. Gorski

*A Joyfully Serious Man:
The Life of Robert Bellah*

Matteo Bortolini

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Intellectual biography is not the most promising of genres. The life of an intellectual doesn't usually tell us that much about the work, which is what we're most often interested in. What's more—let's be honest—the outer lives of most intellectuals tend to be fairly uneventful, and their inner lives poorly documented, at least as compared with those of, say, politicians and celebrities. Which is why so many intellectual biographies end up being just books about books, and why it's usually best to simply read the subject's work.

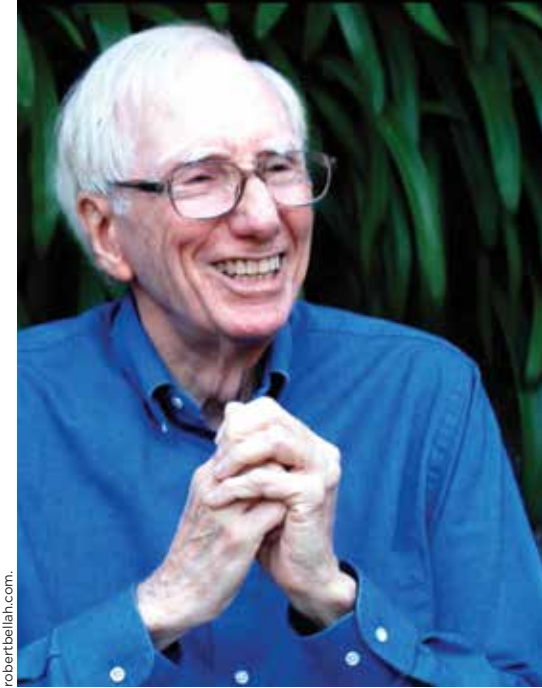
As it turns out, Robert Neelly Bellah (1927–2013) makes an excellent subject for a biography, and Matteo Bortolini has written a fascinating account that illuminates not only the work, but the life and times of this leading American social scientist. Bortolini, an Italian professor of sociology and the editor of a companion volume to the works of Bellah, did his homework. He conducted dozens of interviews with Bellah and his family as well as with Bellah's many students and colleagues. He secured access to many of the personal papers of Bellah and his family, including Bellah's own personal diaries. And he read deeply and widely in the intellectual and political history of the twentieth century. While Bellah's life might have looked conventional from the outside, it was full of tragedy as well as triumph, much intrigue, and a few closely guarded secrets.

On the academic front, there were plenty of triumphs: At Harvard, a rapid ascent from scholarship student to tenured professor and heir apparent to the leading sociologist of the

era, Talcott Parsons. Then, at the University of California, Berkeley, an endowed chair at age 40. Along the way, Bellah took sabbaticals at the advanced studies institutes at Stanford and Princeton. His 1970 collection *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*, was a National Book Award finalist, and *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985) became the biggest sociological bestseller since *The Lonely Crowd*. Bellah met with senators and governors and received multiple invitations to the White House, as well as a National Humanities Medal. Published in 2011, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* was the long-awaited magnum opus that displayed the vast erudition Bellah had acquired over a lifetime of study. To be sure, there were also a few disappointments, such as an unsuccessful nomination to the Harvard Society of Fellows and a foiled appointment to the permanent faculty of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies. Still, Bellah's was a curriculum vitae that almost any academic would envy.

By contrast, Bellah's personal life overflowed with tragedy. His father, Luther Hutton Bellah, was a restless grifter and serial bigamist who abandoned the young Robert's mother, Lillian Neelly, and eventually took his own life. Robert was just four at the time. Eighteen years later, tragedy turned to triumph when Bellah married Melanie Hyman, the brainy belle of his high school in Los Angeles, herself a Stanford graduate. By the time the two returned to California, in 1967, they had four daughters to fill their splendid new home in the Berkeley Hills neighborhood. But the family idyll proved brief. The same year they returned to California, their eldest daughter, Tammy, took her own life. In 1976, their second daughter, Abby, died in an automobile accident in Berkeley Hills.

Then there were the intrigues. At Harvard, a youthful interest in Marxism had led to a brief flirtation with communism. When pressed to name names during the McCarthy era, Bellah



stood firm through three successive grillings by the FBI. His refusal to cooperate came at some cost. It led to the denial of a visa to do dissertation research in Japan and, he suspected, to the sabotaging of a faculty appointment at Harvard by Dean McGeorge Bundy, perhaps with Talcott Parsons's acquiescence. (Decades later, it would turn out that Bellah was wrong about Bundy and Parsons.) Later, a campaign by the distinguished Princeton anthropologist Clifford Geertz and others to have Bellah appointed to a permanent position in the newly formed School of Social Sciences at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies ran into a wall of opposition in the Schools of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. Behind-the-scenes maneuvering by the Institute's director eventually resulted in an official offer. But when the Bellahs learned of Tammy's suicide back in Berkeley, he and Melanie promptly packed their bags for California.

Finally, there are the secrets. During the early 1990s, when I was a graduate student in the Berkeley Sociology Department, there were whispers in the halls that Bellah was gay. They seemed

absurd to me at the time. Bellah was married. He had children. He even went to church! All in all, he seemed conventional to the point of conservative. It turns out that the rumors were true. Or not altogether false. Bellah had experienced same-sex attractions since adolescence and finally began to act on them sometime during the mid-1970s. He even marched in the gay pride parade in San Francisco. But he never came out—except to his family. Melanie was unperturbed. She and Bob had another secret. They had agreed upon an open marriage some years earlier, and she had had many love affairs, some brief, others long. Of course, there was nothing unusual about sexual experimentation in 1970s California, as any reader of Joan Didion or John Updike well knows. What was perhaps unusual about the Bellahs' marriage is that the openness was not a sign of weakness and never led to a rupture. They remained deeply bonded to one another until the very end.

What do we learn when we consider the body of Bellah's work against the span of his biography? One thing is that he was a contrarian who liked to swim against the currents of academic life. His fundamental conviction was that religion matters. In the 1960s and 1970s, he set himself against the regnant orthodoxies of modernization and secularization. Already in his 1957 book, *Tokugawa Religion*, he had argued that the rapid modernization of Japan was rooted in a religious worldview that resembled Weber's Protestant ethic. Then, in his celebrated 1967 essay "Civil Religion in America," he insisted that American democracy had a sacred core. A few years later, he espied a new religious consciousness emerging out of the old churchly religion. With *Habits of the Heart* (coauthored by Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton), he essayed a public sociology written for a general audience during a period of high-browed, theoretical obscurantism and relentless academic specialization, and sought to recover a civic-minded ethic of the common good in a

mean-spirited era of “greed is good.” Finally, with *Religion in Human Evolution*, he pushed back against the reduction of evolution to biology (omitting culture) and of religion to illusion (omitting ritual), stances manifested in the work of cognitive-scientists-turned-atheist-crusaders such as Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett.

One of the more peculiar features of Bellah’s oeuvre, viewed as a whole, is its truncated structure. His early work consisted of comparative-historical analyses of non-Western religions. His first book, based on his undergraduate thesis at Harvard, was on Native American kinship systems. His next book, *Tokugawa Religion*, established him as an East Asia specialist. He used his brief exile to McGill University in Montreal during the McCarthy years to study Islam. One fruit of this wide-ranging study was an early essay on religious evolution. Next came a middle period: Bellah the Americanist. For roughly a quarter-century, he turned his attention to his own country. From the civil religion essay through *The Good Society* (a follow-up to *Habits of the Heart* written by the same team of authors), Bellah set aside his early interests in comparative religion. It was not until the final years of his career at Berkeley that he began to write the big book on religion he had long envisioned—a project that would consume fifteen years of his life.

In some ways, Bellah’s American phase was a long detour precipitated by the unexpected success of the civil religion essay. But Bortolini’s biography makes clear that the detour was also a homecoming. An arduous trip to the Middle East in the 1950s made him yearn for life at home. And a sojourn in Japan several years later deepened his appreciation of Christian universalism and American democracy and his hope that each might reshape the other. It is against this background that his ideas about civil religion and, later, the biblical and civic republican currents in American political culture, must be understood. Those ideas undergirded his efforts to articulate

what might be called a progressive version of an American patriotism.

If Bellah preferred to swim against the current, he could also be moved by the waves of the moment. As anyone who interacted with him knew, he was a man of passionate—and sometimes passing—enthusiasms. From Norman O. Brown through Jürgen Habermas to Merlin Donald, Bellah was always, to the end of his life, open to new intellectual inspirations. With this intellectual openness went an emotional sensitivity. He felt—truly *felt*—the truth of multiple religions. Confronted by a group of conservative Roman Catholic intellectuals about the exclusive truth of Christian teachings, Bellah thundered back that one can believe in more than religion because more than one can be true! With that sensitivity went a certain vulnerability. Some critical comments about a draft of *Religion in Human Evolution* in an email from the late Doug Mitchell, the legendary acquisitions editor at the University of Chicago Press, deeply wounded Bellah. He withdrew the manuscript the very next day and ultimately published it with Harvard University Press. But the prickliness was also balanced by playfulness. Bellah had a sly wit, and his occasional displays of prophetic anger had an element of preacherly performance: They were meant to rouse and provoke.

Bellah held the conviction that religious matters were not purely intellectual, much less merely academic. Religion was, for him, a well whose depths could be plumbed only through a process of immersion. More accurately, religion was many adjacent wells whose depths contained different truths. Nearest to the surface and closest to the present was a layer of theoretical truths captured in conceptual systems, what theists call theology and other traditions call teachings. But there were deeper truths, older truths, that lay beneath or beyond belief. The next layer was story or myth, narratives of origin or creation, of conversion and awakening. The most

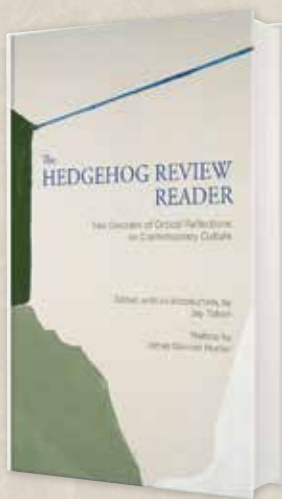
fundamental error of modern-day fundamentalists, both religious and secular, Bellah contended, was to mistake a true myth for a true theory. In this, at least, young earth creationists and the new atheists are of one mind.

The deepest layer, the one where cultural evolution meets biological evolution and first separates from it is the deep play we call religious ritual. Only by immersing oneself fully and experiencing each layer, Bellah concluded, does one come to a full understanding of religion—and a partial understanding of truths beyond *mere* religion. But Bellah's work was not just a work in recovery, a vindication of his maxim that "nothing is ever lost." It was also a work of hope: hope that the evolution of what we moderns call religion was not yet at an end, that it might serve to unify humanity rather than divide it.

It was a personal hope, as well as a political one, though not hope for an afterlife in which he would be reunited with his wife and daughters. Any such hopes he dismissed as a comforting fantasy. If we experience eternity, he believed, it is right here, right now, in the eternal present. The hope at the heart of Bellah's understanding of religion—made acute by the vicissitudes of his own biography—was for a moment of transcendent unity in a life full of tragic fractures.

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