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Matteo Bortolini

A Joyfully Serious Man. The Life of Robert Bellah. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. 528 pp., US\$35.00, ISBN 9780691204406.

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Introduction: The sociology of religion

Bortolini undertook years of research to write this biography in conducting six interviews with Bellah in 2007, attending conferences with Bellah in Erfurt, Freiburg and Heidelberg towards the end of his life, conducting interviews with members of his family, and with an endless number of people who worked with or were close to Bellah. The result is a biography that is full of details, both public and intimate, together with valuable assessments of the many publications, grants and connections in Bellah's curriculum vitae. Bortolini (2019) has also edited a valuable *Companion* to Bellah's sociology. Bortolini's research is thus a valuable addition to *The Robert Bellah Reader* (Bellah and Tipton, 2006). Although Bellah made many valuable contributions to sociology, in this book review I shall concentrate more or less exclusively on Bortolini's treatment of Bellah's place in the sociology of religion.

In the early development of the sociology of religion the key figures were Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Georg Simmel. The principal figure in Bellah's development was Max Weber. Bortolini draws attention to Weber's presence in Bellah's development including an amusing encounter with a tour guide in Heidelberg who proceeded to lecture Bellah and his companions on Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In what we may call the 'second wave of the sociology of religion', the key figures in the United States were Talcott Parsons, Peter L. Berger, and Robert Bellah. In his history of the sociology of religion in America, Blasi (2014: 66) records that in the citation figures up to 1984 Berger and Bellah were in the top six most cited sociologists. In Europe the key figures were David Martin. Thomas Luckmann and Bryan Wilson. Chapter three of JSM is devoted to Parsons's relationship to Bellah at Harvard and beyond. Parsons was a continuous influence on Bellah's intellectual development, despite the rapid eclipse of Parsons's version of functionalism. By the time of his death in Munich in 1979, there already existed an anti-Parsonian movement in American sociology. Bellah, speaking about Parsons at the ASA memorial session, saw Parsons as 'the central man, the human globe, responsive as a mirror with a voice' (JSM:221).

The key issue for both the classical cohort, especially if we include Karl Marx, and the second wave was the nature of modernity and secularization. In this unending debate regarding secularization, Bellah stood closest to Weber, especially the idea of 'the disenchantment of the world'. However, while Berger and Martin were overtly opposed to the idea of secularization, Bellah's view was far more ambiguous. He recognised that, while the Christian Church had declined in terms of recruitment and influence, Christian beliefs, rites and myths continued to influence western culture. In the complicated debate about secularization, Bellah's article on 'Civil Religion in America' (Bellah, 1967) was obviously influential and indeed gained a life of its own outside Bellah's control or indeed his interests (SJM: 96-9). His central argument was:

Considering the separation of church and state, how is a president justified in using the word God at all? The answer is that the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension. Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share (Bellah, 1967: 3).

While recognising Bellah's importance in the development of sociology, Bortolini is equally clear that the unique features of both his life and his research interests made Bellah both distinctive and often isolated from mainstream sociology. Bellah's research interests were unusually catholic and comprehensive. It is often forgotten that his earliest research interests included a study of the Southern Athapaskan kinship system in *Apache Kinship System* (Bellah, 1952). Perhaps equally distinctive was his interest in Japan and in Asia more generally. Much of his research was focused on the similarities between Weber's Protestant Ethic Thesis and the role of Tokugawa religion in the modernization of Japan (SJM: 312). His doctoral thesis was published in 1957 as *Tokugawa Religion* (Bellah, 1957). He also edited *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* (Bellah, 1965). Many of his essays on modern interpretations of Japanese tradition appeared as *Imagining Japan* (Bellah, 2003). The interest in Japan was overtly a comparison with Weber's analysis of Protestantism and its unintended consequences for secular capitalism. These studies also reflected Bellah's ethical concerns about the future of American society for which the post-war development of Japan offered an interesting comparison (Borovoy, 2016). Few American sociologists of religion in the second half of the 20th century showed any interest in religion outside the United States. While Bellah was an accomplished Asian scholar, Bortolini also provides ample illustrations of Bellah's deep sociological, but equally moral, interest in American society that continued well beyond that civil religion article to include *The Broken Covenant* (Bellah, 1975) and *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al., 1985).

Habits of the Heart is a reflection on the legacy of Alexis de Tocqueville's notion of 'mores'. In this study of 'middle America', Bellah and his colleagues came to the conclusion that the excessive individualism of modern-day America was undermining any prospect of a united nation (JSM:289). In this regard, Bellah's analyses of the dilemmas of modern America were a continuation of his early Japanese studies. Bellah's concerns about community, ethical modernity and political destiny were abiding features of his early and late work. Religion, and its changing character, were, for Bellah, fundamental issues for modernity.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Bellah's work was his commitment to an evolutionary perspective. Very few sociologists of his generation, with the exception of the

Cambridge sociologist W.G. Runciman, shared his interests in biological, cultural and social evolution. Evolutionary theories had been commonplace in the 19th century, but in Bellah's generation they had been generally discarded. It is perhaps ironic that Parsons (1937), referring to the evolutionary approach of Herbert Spencer, began *The Structure of Social Action* (p. 3) with Crane Brinton's question 'Who now reads Spencer?' Parsons dismissed Spencer and his generation in favour of his own argument about the convergence of sociology towards a theory of social action involving selection in terms of norms and values.

Bellah's version of evolution was obviously different from Spencerian theory. The two key texts were *Religion in Human Evolution* (Bellah, 2011) and *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (Bellah and Joas, 2012). The axial age debate brought together an extraordinary collection of sociologists, anthropologists and historians. They came to be known, according to Shmuel Eisenstadt, as 'the Axial Age road show' (JSM:315). In these volumes towards the end of his career, his controversial conclusion regarding human evolution was that 'nothing is lost'. In short while there is human and biological evolution, our past in various shapes and forms, travels with us. In an interview with Nathan Schneider on 14 September 2011 for *The Immanent Frame* 'Nothing is ever lost: an interview with Robert Bellah', he spoke about the danger of forgetting our historical and biological past (Schneider, 2011). Indeed, for Bellah the human race, in its persistent collective forgetfulness, is threatened by extinction. In short, his evolutionary perspective, unlike Spencer and his 19th-century followers, was not triumphalist.

Bortolini has produced what one imagines will prove to be a matchless achievement. It compares favourably with equally massive works on *Emile Durkheim. A Biography* (Fournier, 2013) and *Max Weber. A Biography* (Radkau, 2009). These biographies also come, as it were, 'warts and all', such as Weber's 'neurasthenia' with his months spent in the sanatorium in Konstanzer Hof and his complicated relationship with Else Jaffe-Richthofen. Fournier's biography is primarily of Durkheim as a public rather than a private figure with a stoical personality in the face of adversity. After the death of his son Andre in February 1916, Durkheim forced himself to return to work to live with rather than to overcome by his grief. There is an important difference however between the biographies of Durkheim and Weber and Bortolini's biography of Bellah. The biographies of Durkheim and Weber were published over a century after their deaths, whereas Bortolini worked with Bellah on the biography which was published in less than a decade after Bellah's death. As a consequence, *A Joyfully Serious Man* is a more intimate and personal account, but at the same time less focused on detailed and critical analysis of Bellah's oeuvre. Bortolini's uniquely sensitive portrait of Bellah is as much memoir as biography.

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