



Sociological Faith: Reflections on the Life and Legacy of Robert Bellah

Laura R. Ford¹

Accepted: 10 May 2023

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2023

Abstract

In Matteo Bortolini's elegant and thoughtfully-written biographical account of Robert Bellah, we are given the opportunity to study an arc of development in U.S. sociological theory over the course of the 20th Century, in contact with several of sociology's most influential shapers. This means that, to grapple with Bellah's life, as presented by Bortolini, is to grapple with the ways that a broad range of social movements in American history, perhaps most powerfully the 1960's "counter-culture," have shaped contemporary American sociological theory and cultural life, particularly in the area of religion, but also in the area of politics. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to remain neutral about such developments, and therefore about the character of Bellah himself, as Bortolini presents him. And yet Bortolini manages to achieve an admirable even-handedness in his treatment of Bellah, albeit through a rhetorical strategy that carries risks, as this essay illustrates. In this essay, I accept Bortolini's welcome and important invitation to grapple with Robert Bellah's life and legacy. Unlike Bortolini, I am unable to be even-handed, but I do strive to be fair. While I acknowledge the ways in which Bellah enriched sociological theories of culture, my overall assessment of Bellah's legacy is very negative. In Robert Bellah's religiously-tinged politicization of sociology, and in his relentlessly hostile attacks on political and religious positions with which he disagreed, I see prescriptions for the terribly intensified culture wars of today.

Keywords Robert Bellah · Matteo Bortolini · Emile Durkheim · Talcott Parsons · Cultural sociology · Sociology of religion

✉ Laura R. Ford
lford@faulkner.edu

¹ Faulkner University Jones School of Law, Montgomery, USA

“If the resources of the world’s religious thought could be made vitally available to social science, what rich possibilities there would be.”

Robert Bellah, April 1969¹

Introduction

Among Jesus of Nazareth’s more well-attested sayings is some version of the following: “a prophet is not without honor except in his home village” (Luke 4:24; Dunn, 2003, 661; Johnson, 1991, 77–82). In a 1998 communication to Ann Swidler, Robert Bellah adopted this proverbial adage for himself, referring to the fact that, unlike the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, which accepted his submission without requiring any revisions, *The American Sociological Review* had asked him to revise and resubmit in accordance with suggestions by two anonymous reviewers. “I do feel like a prophet without honor in my own discipline,” Bellah communicated to Swidler (Bortolini, 2021, 292). A “revise and resubmit” from *The American Sociological Review*, which might be enough to make the career of a junior scholar, was scandalous enough to Robert Bellah to invite emulation of, and implicit comparison with, Jesus Christ.

This episode, chronicled in Matteo Bortolini’s thoughtful, elegantly written, and historically insightful biography, encapsulates the reasons I find Robert Bellah terribly difficult to like, after reading Bortolini’s book and digging more deeply into Bellah’s work, as a result. The intellectual arrogance on display in this episode is stunning, and it is consistent with a broader pattern that I now see in Bellah’s life. Leaving aside the messianic and prophetic invocation, with its self-importance, there is the assumption that, given his position within the academy, Bellah should not have to be reviewed, like other plebeian members of the sociological discipline. Presumably, *The American Sociological Review* should simply be grateful to have the opportunity to publish his work.

In this essay, I have tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to overcome an intensely negative response to the biographical *persona* of Robert Bellah, and to focus instead on the extent to which Bellah’s life and legacy can be seen to represent, as Bortolini very successfully shows, a broader story of Twentieth Century U.S. sociology. The essay is not, strictly speaking, a review of Bortolini’s book, but rather a discussion of selected themes presented in the book, together with consideration of Bortolini’s rhetorical style in approaching his subject. I have sought to draw these disparate elements together by way of responding to a question: What can we learn from Bortolini’s biography of Robert Bellah about the sources and foundations for politicization and moralism in sociology and social theory today, and about the implications of such disciplinary developments for contemporary American society?

Bellah openly advocated a religiously-inflected, politicized form of sociological normativity, which drew inspiration from the Progressives of the early Twentieth

¹ Reprinted in Bellah 1970, Chap. 14.

Century. Bellah's own self-assessments, combined with Bortolini's biographical study, confirm that, in ways quite consistent with the intentions of Auguste Comte, Bellah's was a Progressive faith that fused a kind of Christian religiosity, leftist politics, and claims to social knowledge. This is, in a very literal sense, a sociological faith, and it is one that is perfectly content to propagate crude over-simplifications of opposing views (preeminently Protestant Christian conservatism and classical liberalism) in order to condemn them. Taking him at his word, Robert Bellah may indeed be seen as a prophet of Progressivism, and of the culture wars that harken back to their religious origins in Europe, which we see on such vivid display today.

Putting *Habits* in Personal Context

In company, doubtless, with many other Americans of my generation ("X"), I first encountered Robert Bellah as an undergraduate student, reading *Habits of the Heart* (1996) in a sociologically-themed, upper division course in what my denominationally-affiliated liberal arts college referred to as the "behavioral sciences." The college did not have a separate sociology major, and the strengths of the department were in psychology and social work: social science-related disciplines that perform a clearer public service than sociology. I remember reading and discussing *Habits*, particularly the phenomenon of "Sheilaism," manifestations of which I recognized (and no doubt was encouraged to recognize) in myself.

I did my graduate work in sociology at Cornell, where sociology of religion would not be claimed as a particular strength. Robert Bellah's name came up infrequently, and only in courses on cultural and political sociology. But because of my increasing interest in "traditions" (particularly legal and religious traditions), I rediscovered Bellah's work toward the end of my doctoral studies, learning with excitement about his work on the Axial Age (Bellah & Joas, eds., 2012) which spoke to my interests in historical sociology.

While teaching undergraduate sociology, first at Cornell, then Ithaca College, and finally at Bard College, I assigned readings from Bellah in several courses, and this gave me the opportunity to engage with his thinking at a deeper level. I found in Robert Bellah's work a welcome and strong foundation for sociological attention to the deep legacies of ancient, normative, literary traditions (Biblical and civic Republican), with regard to which contemporary U.S. sociology typically seems quite happy to profess ignorance. I thought of Robert Bellah as a friend, albeit a friend I had never met (cf. Bellah, 2011, Preface).

In Fall 2019, I assigned the entirety of *Habits* for an upper division seminar in historical sociology at Bard, which I called "Big Changes, Grand Narratives." Returning then to *Habits*, and reading it carefully again in its entirety, I was struck anew by its rhetorical power, but I was also troubled by its moralism and politicized tone, which I had apparently taken for granted the first time I read the text. I ordered *The Good Society* (1992), to try to follow this moralizing thread further, but did not have a chance to read it until now, prompted by the writing of this essay.

The moralism that comes through in *Habits*, and particularly in *The Good Society*, has been helpfully placed within the broader context of Bellah's life and

scholarly projects in Matteo Bortolini's book. In the remainder of this essay, I grapple with that moralism, seeking to ascertain what it might teach us about Bellah's own political normativity and its implications for sociology and politics today. But first I take the opportunity to compliment Bortolini on his success in presenting Bellah's life in a way that strikes this reader as being remarkably even-handed.

Even-Handed Treatment of a Polarizing Figure

Robert Bellah was a polarizing figure, partly because of his cheerful refusal to recognize the "fact/value distinction" (Bellah, 1974, 2006; Gorski, 2015; Lockwood, 1975). I vaguely knew that his thesis of "civil religion" (1970c/1966) was controversial, but I had not realized the extent to which his scholarship was associated with conflictual debate, not only with conservative Christians, but also within the academy itself. This polarizing character of Bellah's *persona* and academic career makes Matteo Bortolini's treatment of him especially admirable, given the extent to which it would be almost impossible to avoid taking sides in the debates.

And yet, my sense is that Bortolini, overall, does largely avoid taking sides. Bellah is ultimately neither hero nor villain, and Bortolini's willingness to allow Bellah's less-than-admirable moments stand alongside his most sympathetic moments, with careful documentation of both, is worthy of comment and compliment.

The less-than-admirable moment that struck me as being most sensitive occurs in the section of the book chronicling Bellah's explorations of his sexuality (Chap. 13). A cringe-worthy episode comes when Bellah, having ordered the services of a male prostitute, expresses relief in his diary at never needing to see the man again (207). No hand-wringing here about the possibility of participating in an "individualist" institution of sexual exploitation. Pronouncing "Brad" to have been "not unintelligent," Bellah's comment was: "Nice to have no involvements," and "know you will never see him again." (207) Somehow Bortolini manages to chronicle moments like this without passing judgment, balancing invitations to sympathy with Bellah, in the wrenching tragedies of his life, with a clear-eyed view of the man, wrinkles and all.

Bortolini achieves his even-handedness in a somewhat peculiar way, however, which did sometimes give me the impression that his sympathies were ultimately with Bellah, and that he was taking sides in a particular debate. The impression was enhanced by the use of the familiar name for Bellah, "Bob," throughout the text. And yet, whenever I was tempted to conclude that the book was becoming too one-sided in its sympathies, one of Bob's critical interlocutors would enter the scene, and Bortolini would portray the interlocutor's criticisms in ways that were incisive and, sometimes, devastating (e.g. Bortolini, 2021, 160–63).

The overall impression Bortolini gives is sympathy with Bellah, with corrective recognition of the human and intellectual costs associated with the ways in which Bellah acted and made sense of the world. But, speaking personally, the experience of arriving at the basically generous and humanistic assessment involved a swing, from what initially seemed like excessive sympathy, to critical appraisal. The best way that I can describe the rhetorical effect of this is to say that it is like whiplash.

An example may be given in what was, for me, the most troubling revelation about Bellah. In Bortolini's telling (160–63), it may also have been the thing that was most costly to Bellah, in terms of his academic career. This was Bellah's conversion to what I can most generously describe as a postmodern form of Christianity, rooted in Bellah's close reading of *Love's Body* (1966) by Norman Brown (whom I will hereafter call "Nobby," following Bortolini). The account appears in Chap. 8, covering the period 1968–1969, a chapter that opens with the conversion experience itself, and then traces its radiating effects in Bellah's ringing, public affirmation that "religion is true" (Bortolini, 2021, 116–29).

Bortolini's summary of "Nobby" in the first paragraph is striking because of the extent to which it announces themes that remained significant in Bellah's work for the remainder of his life. The summary pertains to Nobby's previous book, *Life Against Death* (1959), which Nobby "expanded" and "trashed" in *Love's Body* (Bortolini, 2021, 116). *Life Against Death*, which Bellah had previously read (Bellah, 1971), in Bortolini's words (116), offers:

a portrait of the whole of human history based on a psychoanalytic view of man as 'the animal which represses himself and which creates culture or society in order to repress himself' in the face of his own death. The only way to escape from the catastrophic condition where civilization and neurosis were fully synonymous consisted in bringing both repression and sublimation to an end and embracing Dionysus – an existence of free play, poetry, and narcissistic fulfillment. In Brown's plea for polymorphous perversity, disparate strands of Western and Eastern wisdom merged in the image of a 'resurrected body' pervaded by a new 'dialectical imagination.'

An apocalyptic (i.e. revelatory) portrait of the whole of human history, explaining the creation of culture and society, as depending on "free play" and poetry, with a plea for polymorphous embrace of Western and Eastern wisdom, seeking the solution to imminent catastrophe in a resurrected social body pervaded by a new dialectical imagination. Does this not sound just a bit like Bellah's *magnum opus* (2011; cf. Bortolini, 2020)?

In any case, Bortolini introduces Bellah's experience in reading Nobby by characterizing it as "a feverish, dazzling moment of revelation," a "sudden burst of insight" (116). Nobby's previous project, according to Bortolini, had been to oppose "Protestant [Biblical] literalism" as part of a broadly Christian project in the "unification of mankind as one resurrected body" (117). Now, with the new project of *Love's Body*, Christ and Dionysus were to be fused in a synthesis "in which meaning is not fixed, but ever new and ever changing; in a continuous revelation; by fresh outpouring of the holy spirit" (117), in apocalyptic fire and madness.

Bortolini provides us with a first-person window into the effect of this book on Bellah – who read the book on the plane back to San Francisco from the East Coast – via extended quotes from his diary. The images Bellah used to describe his experiential consciousness were highly sexualized, fantastic, and ecstatic. For example:

It is easy to be haunted, dominated, possessed by the reading – to be fucked by it...But one is also impregnated. And the power of imagination...is swelling to

phallic ripeness, Creativity is the overcoming of all boundaries, of subject and object, of male and female. (Bortolini 2021, 118)

We are then immediately led, with Bellah, to the implications for his life and career, and from there to the trip to Rome, and to Bellah's ringing endorsement of the "truth" of "religion."

Because of the emphasis on Bellah's experience, interspersed with portrayals of rational and ethical decision-making, the reader is pulled at first toward sympathetic (if also horrified) identification with Bellah. And then, in tracing the vigorous academic exchange in Rome, the account moves the reader between identifying one moment with Bellah, and another moment with his critics. The chapter concludes with description of a speech in which Bellah laid out the kernel for what would later be sketched as a theory of "symbolic realism" (1970a, b, 1971), together with a harsh criticism by the sociologist Benjamin Nelson, who pronounced Bellah's project to be "totalism" and a "return to premodern Gnosticism," and finally a letter from Bellah to Talcott Parsons, in which Bellah professes an innocent puzzlement at the harshness of the attacks (Bortolini, 2021, 126–29).

The overall effect of this style of writing is perspectival: one moment we see things from Bellah's perspective, and another moment we see things from the perspective of his critics. And Bortolini does not hold back from the harsh criticisms of the critics (e.g. Bortolini, 2021, 162). In the end, the portrayal is even-handed, but at any given moment in the story, the portrayal is most definitely *not* neutral, because we are either identifying with Bellah, or with one of his critics, or we are seeing Bellah at a moment when he is not particularly sympathetic.

This is one impressive and thoughtful way to achieve even-handedness, but it is risky, because it may not be possible to pull the reader back into sympathetic identification with Bellah. For me, in the end, it was not.

The Psychoanalytic Thread: Unconscious Unity and Talcott Parsons

Bortolini places periodic emphasis on Bellah's early loss of his father – under tragic and bizarre circumstances involving bigamy and suicide – and I was at times inclined to skepticism about the Freudian, psychoanalytic thread that Bortolini draws across Bellah's life (e.g. Bortolini 2021, 137). The Freudian theme is particularly pronounced in the discussions of Bellah's complex relationship with Talcott Parsons, and Bortolini successfully broadens the canvas of this theme, at times, to *sociology's* complex relationship with Talcott Parsons (e.g. 130–36). I will try to emulate Bortolini's skill in moving between these levels, the personal and the institutional, because there is perhaps no better figure than Bellah through whom to explore the legacy of American sociology's revolt against its institutional version of the patriarchy.

Staying with the personal dimension for just a moment, however, I am now convinced that the psychoanalytic emphasis is true to Bellah's life, and to his own embrace of psychoanalytically tinged theoretical frameworks, most notably in Nobby, but more generally in "symbolic realism" (Bellah, 1970b, 2011, Chap. 1; Caporale & Grumelli

(eds.) 1971, 155–82, 271–93; see Bortolini 2020). In this respect, as in so many others, Bellah was a child of his times. The emphasis given to therapeutic culture in *Habits*, together with the limitations of that culture, takes on new poignancy when placed in the context of Bellah's own life-orientations (Bortolini, 2021, 195, 219–20).

Bellah seems to have been committed to clear-eyed self-awareness, of the type cultivated by psychoanalysis, and Bortolini documents the participation of both Melanie and Robert Bellah in psychological counseling, alongside their experimentation with forms of open marriage (Bortolini, 2021, Chaps. 13–14). Bellah's commitment to intellectual and ideological self-awareness makes the essays published in the 1970 collection, *Beyond Belief*, particularly revealing, and the first-person narrative that Bellah himself offers there is broadly consistent with the third-person narrative that Bortolini offers ((Bellah, 1970a).

Bellah's review of Nobby, re-published in *Beyond Belief*, both briefly describes and then explicates the implications of his conversion. Bellah tells his readers:

Love's Body is an unsettling book. When it first came out I glanced through it, read a paragraph here and there, and put it away, disturbed. It was two years later, in the spring of 1968, that I read it on the plane coming home from the East Coast. It made me dizzy, intoxicated; it made me change. I am still living with the book, teaching with it, absorbing it.

With respect to psychoanalysis, this conversion is significant because the vocabulary and concepts of psychoanalysis are deployed extensively throughout the book, in juxtaposition with vocabulary and concepts from Christianity, Marxism, and Buddhism, as Bellah himself attests in his review. Bellah is lucid in describing the way that these languages are blended and used to reinterpret one another, so that any one vocabulary “can crosscut another, break into it, force it to yield new meanings” ((Bellah, 1970a). One of the “major functions” of the psychoanalytic language, Bellah tells us, with its “insistent sexual language,” is “to purge the religious language of any false spirituality.” The Christian notion of resurrection can, in this way be displaced, so that “resurrection of the body” instead means “an erotic sense of reality.”

In describing the effects of a book that changed him, Bellah is also describing the embrace of psychoanalytic language, used to critique and transform the meaning of Christianity, in combination with Marxism and Buddhism. The conversion that Nobby afforded Bellah was thus one in which psychoanalytic language became an important tool, both for self-awareness, and for explicating his developing conceptualization of “symbolic realism.”

The key contribution that Bellah discusses is in unpacking the implications of “the unconscious” for sociological and theological insight. The unconscious is not, we learn, “a closet full of skeletons in the private house of the individual mind,” but it is rather “that immortal sea which brought us hither...one sea of energy...embracing all mankind, without distinction of race, language, or culture...embracing all the generations of Adam, past, present, and future, in one phylogenetic heritage...in one mystical or symbolical body.” In the unconscious, in other words, is where we are mystically united with one another, where we achieve wholeness. It is “more or less” equivalent to God (1970a).

What Nobby offers us, from this socially unitive, unconscious foundation, according to Bellah, is a “consciousness of symbolism,” which can help us to transcend literalism, enabling the recovery of meaning. “Meaning is made in a meeting between the holy spirit buried in the Christian and the holy spirit buried underneath the letter of scripture.” In the process of juxtaposing specifically Christian vocabularies with psychoanalytic, Marxist, and Buddhist, “everything specifically Christian” can be “washed away or burned up,” because we realize that all of these discrete symbolic vocabularies are really referring to the same thing. Symbolism, including the symbolism of psychoanalysis, becomes “the link between conscious and unconscious...the way out of all dividing literalisms...the road to resurrection and reunion.” (Bellah, 1970a/1969).

A powerful book, indeed, which sheds important light on Bellah’s theorizing of “symbolic realism,” and perhaps on the undertheorized “realism” of *Habits* and *The Good Society*. I return to the implications of “symbolic realism” below, but here I want to try to explore the implications of this intense conversion for Bellah’s relationship with Talcott Parsons.

Reading the introduction to *Beyond Belief*, in the light of Bortolini’s biography, the reader is struck by Bellah’s deep longing to devote himself to something. The impression is overwhelming that Bellah gave himself over, heart and soul, to the fads of his time, whether this be Marxism, psychanalysis, the “holism” of “primitive peoples,” as offered by anthropological theorizing, or the counter-cultural movements of Berkeley in the 1960s.

During his years at Harvard, Bellah gave himself over, heart and soul, to Talcott Parsons’ theoretical analysis, alongside specialized study of Japanese culture, and one can only be impressed by the results on display in *Tokugawa Religion* (1985/1957). The relationship with Parsons helped to launch Bellah’s career, and this makes the moment of their meeting in Rome, after Bellah’s Nobby conversion, all the more poignant (Bortolini, 2021, Chap. 8; Caporale & Grumelli (eds.), 1971).

Bortolini refers periodically, sometimes by allusion, and sometimes explicitly, to the Freudian theme that Bellah needed to “kill father Parsons” (2021, 176) in order to achieve maturity as a scholar. One could also tell such a Freudian story of sociology itself, as a discipline, and the break with Parsons did coincide with the revolutionary movements of the 1960s. Bortolini strongly suggests this, drawing the connection between the personal – the relationship between Bellah and Parsons – and the disciplinary – the relationship between American sociology and Parsons. This is especially clear in Chap. 9, the chapter immediately following Bellah’s “Nobby” conversion.

Bortolini suggests – and Alexander and Sherwood (2002) made the point explicitly in their contribution to Robert Bellah’s *Festschrift* (2002) – that the birth of U.S. cultural sociology, in particular, was attributable to the break with Parsons (Bortolini, 2021, 130–40). Bortolini compares Bellah’s break with Parsons to the break in anthropology, with Clifford Geertz and David Schneider. The anthropological strategy, as Bortolini describes it, was to isolate culture as a symbolic system, setting culture off from any systematic relationship to social and psychological systems, let alone biological systems. Having eliminated the functionalist connections, culture could simply be treated as its own world of conventionally interrelated

symbols, spun like a spider's web, without explicable causal connections to practical activity, human physiology, and reason (135).

For Bellah, however, the break was more subtle and ambivalent, in Bortolini's telling, and the psychoanalytic "Nobby" conversion was essential. Working through Nobby, Bellah arrived at a position he compared to Marx's relationship with Hegel (Bortolini, 2021, 137-9). "I am a left Parsonian like Marx was a left Hegelian" (138). Nobby enabled Bellah to move beyond Parsons by placing "the creative role of symbolism" (138) at the center of a new synthesis of Parsonian action theory categories: "between physical organism, social system, personality, and symbol systems" (138, quoting Bellah). Here was the beginning of a more analytic (less ecstatic) foundation for Bellah's "symbolic realism," launching him into a theoretical position that was increasingly independent of Parsons.

In his second short essay on Nobby, Bellah drew out the psychoanalytic emphasis further, critiquing Nobby's critics for not having fully recognized that psychoanalysis is the key institutional mechanism by which culture is moved *from* civilized, scientific objectivity *to* "magic and madness," "conscious magic or conscious madness," to "dreaming while awake." (Bellah, 1971, 452, quoting Nobby). Nobby, according to Bellah, was an "iconoclast," something like Nietzsche's philosopher with the hammer, training his blows on "the dominant rationalist empiricist consciousness" and the "idolatry" of Christian "literalism" (Bellah, 1971, 453).

Bellah then proceeded to sketch, in the direction he saw Nobby's work pointing, a line of thinking that looks familiar to a reader of Bellah's magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011). A scheme of child intellectual development is described, which relies on Jerome Bruner and Jean Piaget, a scheme in which the child moves through levels of symbolically-mediated cognition, finally attaining the level of conceptual representation with "full mastery of language," enabling "objective" forms of representation (Bellah, 1971, 455). But the earlier modes of representation are never lost. They are instead repressed, becoming part of the unconscious. This means, following the synthesis of Freud, Durkheim, and Weber that Bellah had previously sketched (1969/1970a) and to which Parsons (1971), incidentally, had mostly assented, that the earlier modes of representation remained available for religion.

This child development scheme can be related to the evolutionary development of the human race (Bellah, 1971, 455). At this civilizational, cultural level, the earliest developmental level – the level that becomes unconscious but remains available to unitive social experience – is to be found in ritual, the next in myth, and both finally "give way to philosophy, history, and science, the great forms of conceptual representation" (Bellah, 1971, 455). What Nobby did with *Love's Body*, apparently, was explode the idea that the layers of civilizational cognition should be related to one another sequentially, viewing the older layers as dead relics of the past. Instead, the "radical alternative" that Nobby points toward is a reunification of these layers, entailing a "new symbolic consciousness" in which "reason and feeling," "mind and body" are newly joined in a "total or final participation" (Bellah, 1971, 456).

What we find in Nobby, in short, is a return to the Platonic idea that "education is initiation" (Bellah, 1971, 457-8) and new possibilities for religion in contemporary culture. Nobby's work:

swallows up the narrow theologies in a broader sea of symbolic possibilities, but it gives back the key to genuine spiritual experience which may be found in the strangest of places, *as my students have found it* (458, emphasis added)

The outcome is not only conversion, but “transfiguration and rebirth” (458), which of course does not mean what simple, ignorant, traditionalist Christians mean by these words, but something altogether new. Quoting Nobby: “Suddenly at daybreak, we shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed, in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye” (458).

As Bortolini shows (2021, 140–43), Bellah took these new convictions into his prize-winning teaching at Berkeley.

The political implications of Bellah’s conversion are not obvious in these essays, despite Bellah’s self-description as a “left” Parsonian. However, the period 1973–1976, as described by Bortolini (Chap. 11), formed the crucible for a more politicized intervention, culminating in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (1992/1975). It is here that the pattern of critiquing Lockean liberalism seems to begin (e.g. Bellah, 1992/1975, 26). It is also here that the break with Talcott Parsons becomes clear (Bortolini, 2021, 175–6; Parsons 1977).

As Bortolini describes sociology’s disciplinary break with Parsons, it was very closely allied with a desire for more explicit political engagement for the discipline (Bortolini, 2021, 130–34; cf. Coser, 2003, 579–81). What became possible after killing “father Parsons” was a much more politicized brand of sociology. And this is consistent with the conclusion, supported by Bortolini’s narrative, that the real break between Bellah and Parsons came, not in the conversion to Nobby’s post-modern Post-Christianity, but in the extension of that embrace to political judgment.

In 1969, in Rome, Parsons had chided Bellah for the fact that he was blending science with eschatology (Bortolini, 2021, 123–4; Caporale & Grumelli (eds.) 1971, 160–62). Bellah had gone too far for his former teacher, in fusing science with religiosity, and in equating religion with Durkheimian collective effervescence, as seen in the counter-culturalist youth movements. Stressing the regulating dimensions of religion, Parsons had questioned Bellah’s ecstatic post-millennialism. But Parsons’ concluding essay (1971) was almost entirely complimentary of Bellah. And the letters between the two men, as documented by Bortolini, remained friendly (Bortolini, 2021, 129).

The killing of “father Parsons” only became a “fait accompli” with *The Broken Covenant* (Bortolini, 2021, 176). And this is the point at which Bellah became an avowed moralist and self-appointed prophet, drawing on his Durkheimian theory of society and “civil religion.”

But the Freudian symbols, particularly the sense that ultimate unity (and God) are found in the unconscious, were never lost (cf. Bortolini, 2020).

Sociological Faith

Bellah’s moralism seems to have been grounded in a particular kind of religious faith, which I will call a sociological faith. Drawing especially on Durkheimian sociological theory, Bellah believed he had found a way to avoid a reductionist approach to religion, an approach to religion that transcended scientific efforts to explain

religion in terms of something else (biological need, for example, or social power, or evolutionary theory). Bellah's early label for his alternative approach was "symbolic realism," an approach that he explicated in October 1969, asserting with rhetorical flourish that "religion is true" (1970b, 93).

As Bortolini shows, Bellah abandoned the phrase "symbolic realism," but I think it would be possible to show that he continued to adhere to it, that it undergirded the moralistic prescriptions of *Habits* and *The Good Society*, and that it was the foundation for his magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) (cf. Bortolini, 2020; Gorski, 2015). In the theoretical and methodological appendices to *Habits* and *The Good Society*, after all, Bellah and his co-authors described their approach as a form of "realism," in addition to "public philosophy." Chap. 1 of *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011), moreover, is titled "Religion and Reality." If there is something to be said for this argument, then the essays published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* in 1970 are particularly important, because it was here that Bellah explicated the theory in dialog with theologians and social scientists.²

Bellah's expository essay on "symbolic realism" was actually an essay on "Christianity and Symbolic Realism," an essay that lamented the cultural fragmentation that had resulted from the evolutionary split between theology and science. Purporting to quote and cite, without actually either quoting or citing, Bellah referenced (I think) C.S. Lewis' argument in *Mere Christianity* (that Jesus was either who he said he was or he was a lunatic or "the Devil of Hell") in order to dismiss it as one more lamentable version of the "historical realism" to which modern consciousness is continually drawn. Here is the regrettable quest for "reasonable" versions of Christianity, which have so much appeal to "educated laymen," and can all too easily take "neofundamentalist" forms (Bellah, 1970b, 89, 95).

If conservative (and especially Protestant) Christians represent the fundamentalist right wing of the cultural fragmentation, secular scientism represents the left wing, the effort to reduce Christianity to something else in order to explain it away. The alternative Bellah sketched, the third way of "symbolic realism," would follow Emile Durkheim to the reality of symbols, rooted ultimately in experiences of unity enabled by ritualistically-generated collective effervescence. Here is the place of unconscious unity, which Freud ultimately concluded could only be understood in the symbols and language of myth. Here is the place where we encounter:

Nonobjective symbols which express the feelings, values, and hopes of subjects, or which organize and regulate the flow of interaction between subjects and objects, or which 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. (93)

From this position, religion is a symbol system that evokes holistic feelings. It is accordingly "the totality which includes subject and object and provides the context in which life and action finally have meaning" (93) It is a reality *sui generis*, and it is true.

² In *Beyond Belief*, Bellah republished his essay, in juxtaposition with an essay read earlier in 1969, in Los Angeles (Chap. 15).

Bellah elaborated in his 1973 Introduction to *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society*. “Society,” conceived in terms of “symbolic realism,” is the real object to which the word “God” points (ix-x). This divine, multi-layered reality, for Durkheim, as interpreted by Bellah, is “something deeply inner...the source of morality, personality, and life itself at the human level” (ix). Interpreted as this deeply inner source of all reality, it is no idolatry to equate society with God, because the word “society” has been so elevated, purified, and deepened that it can worthily “take the place of the great word it supersedes.” (x).

To recognize the implications of this is to see the possibilities for Ultimate Reintegration. Theologian and secular intellectual can speak the same language, can come together in cultural unity, as long as they can recognize that reality has many meanings and many layers. “We must learn to keep the channels of communication open between the various levels of consciousness” (Bellah, 1970b, 94). If we manage to do this, we will see that science and religion, and all religions, are one, not because they are saying the same thing, but because Man, who produces them, is one (95–6).

The published responses to Bellah’s exposition of symbolic realism ranged from chastened cautionary notes to concern and horror at the implications for universities and academic life. Samuel Klausner (1970, 106) worried that “reintroducing a religious vision in the academy” would reduce the effectiveness of universities and introduce new levels of social divisiveness.” James Burtchaell (1970) reflected sadly on the history of mistrust and “evil temper” (97) between theological faculties and the social sciences, noting the sense theologians had that their social science colleagues were far less restrained in their methods of ideological indoctrination. Speaking of colleagues in religious studies departments, Burtchaell commented that they:

[S]till sense a sort of low-grade contempt from the established scholars in the social and physical sciences, who still consider religious studies as a covert exercise in proselytizing. To gain the honors of the Academy, religion departments have gone out of their way to push Buddhist and Hindu studies, the history of religions, and other “neutral” subjects, while exercising their hard-nosed but shy scholarship in Christianity under the ambiguous rubric of “Western Religions.” Such an inferiority complex could be borne in good temper did the divines not suspect that across the quad the sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists were coming to the classroom and lab with a missionary zeal that knew no concealment. Armed with a righteousness, a new ritual of salvation, and a conviction that the latter days of refreshment had indeed dawned, they seemed to call for a submissive faith such as their colleagues in religion never dreamt of. (97)

The strongest reaction came from Benjamin Nelson: “Bellah brings us back full circle – to Gnosis and the Gnostics” (1970a, b, c, and d, 108; also Bortolini 2021, 128).

Bellah’s response was, once again, innocent puzzlement that he could have been so profoundly misunderstood (1970d). Far from seeking to undermine theology or science by unifying them, symbolic realism was simply seeking an alternative, non-reductive way to talk about the realities expressed in religious language. “Symbolic realism simply holds that religious symbols are not primarily social or psychological

projection systems (though they always contain some projective elements) but the ways in which persons and societies express their sense of the fundamental nature of reality, of the totality of experience" (113).

Like Durkheim, Bellah was seeking the "integration of science, religion, and morality" (Bellah, 1970d, 114). The result would be, Bellah asserted, a new form of faith, a "faith based not on the repression of all the achievements of reason and intellect but in important respects made possible by those achievements." This would not be, God forbid, an "orthodoxy," but it would enable scholars to step outside of the "neutral zone" of scholarship into the world of action, i.e. the world of politics. In conclusion, Bellah proclaimed his freedom to speak about his "conception of religion," a conception that had "grown out of the scientific study of religion," with "profound implications for the integration of my life, the life of my students, and the vitality of my culture" (115).

Ironies in Teaching Americans How to Live: *Habits of the Heart* & *The Good Society*

The basic project of *Habits*, I now believe, was to demonstrate the moral inadequacy of American culture. The moral languages of the interviewees are all, at one time or another pronounced to be "inadequate," although the strategy is usually more subtle – critically juxtaposing the interviewees with one another, so that one critiques the position of the other, without the authors themselves needing to do the critiquing. The inadequacy is never analyzed by presenting a clear alternative, but the way in which all the views are pronounced inadequate seems, finally, to be their incapacity to fully address the "larger whole" and the "public good," as conceived by Bellah and his co-authors.

One interviewee does seem to escape criticism, and she therefore provides a clue to the implicit ideal: Cecilia Dougherty. In the morality tale that is *Habits of the Heart*, there is, after all a heroine (Chap. 6). Drawing on second languages from Catholicism and feminism, from a commitment to labor causes, left-leaning political activism, and her family, Cecilia, unlike other interviewees, found a way to transcend individualism. She is an exemplary individual, who has learned how to go beyond individualism, finding it fulfilled *in* community, rather than against the community.

Not surprisingly, Cecelia Dougherty's exemplary capacity to transcend America's "Lockean individualism" is closely connected with her political Progressivism, a prescriptive moral and political position that becomes clear in *The Good Society* (1992). The title of that work, we are told, draws inspiration from Progressive era public intellectuals, namely Graham Wallas and Walter Lippmann (7). The book offers a sustained critique of "Lockean individualism," together with heavy-handed prescriptions for moral uplift, which are notably light on institutional specifics.

Lockean individualism, we are told is a "cultural tradition that assumes that culture, community, and history do not matter much in the long run," a cultural tradition that teaches Americans to care only about their self-interest (228). The

authors summon their readers to repentance, following their Progressive forebears (e.g. Ross 1907) in naming the “social sins” of Lockean individualism. And, in conclusion, they summon us to sociological faith:

[I]f we are fortunate enough to have the gift of faith through which we see ourselves as members of the universal community of all being, then we bear a special responsibility to bring whatever insights we have to the common discussion of new problems....When enough of us have sufficient trust to act responsibly, there is a chance to achieve, at least in part, a good society....(286)

The irony of this sociological faith may initially be seen in the assumption that institutions and culture, in being judged inadequate, should be “disrupted” and revolutionarily changed, so as to be made better (Bellah et al., 1992; compare, e.g., Bortolini 2021, 180). We must step outside our culture and institutions in order to change them, and we are exhorted to do so, as it were, by our bootstraps. This is a “project,” to use Hannah Arendt’s (1978) language, of the “political will”: “It will, of course, take an extraordinary exercise of political will to achieve so major a transformation in our ideology and our institutions.” (Bellah et al., 1992, 107).

But if, as Bellah and his co-authors repeatedly assert, we are shaped by our culture and institutions, we are left with the perennial question about how we are to summon this extraordinary will-power, in order to radically remake the institutions that make us. And strikingly, we are given almost no concrete indications about the form this revolutionary transformation will take.

“Whatever the specific reforms – and we would expect a period of experiment to see what forms are most effective – the major benefit in the democratization of the economy would be to limit the harshness of the labor market, to give everyone who works a stake in the enterprise they work in and even in the economy at large, thus reducing both the anxiety and the cynicism that are rampant in our in our present economic life.” (107)

Happy to pronounce the moral, cultural, and institutional language of their interviewees “inadequate,” Bellah and his co-authors seem here to stumble upon their own version of linguistic inadequacy in prescribing the institutional changes that they nonetheless vigorously endorse.

In reviewing *The Good Society*, Mark Warren (1992) pointed to the irony: for a book that claims to solve so much in the way of institutions, there is very little in the way of actual institutional engagement. *The Good Society* is “heavy on consciousness-raising, but light on institutional analysis” (Warren, 1992, 21). Catherine Zuckert, also reviewing *The Good Society*, pointed to another irony: that at precisely the moment when people around the world were seeking to build American-style models of civil society and political institutions, “a group of eminent American social scientists publish a book in which they declare now is the time drastically to revamp those very same American political and economic institutions” (Zuckert, 1992).

For Zuckert the basic problem with *The Good Society* was a lack of empirically-grounded realism about what is possible for institutions, even the best ones. Warren, while clearly sympathetic with the goals Bellah and his co-authors were seeking to pursue, pointed to the basic problem that the book “is preachy and moralizing in places it should be working through the complex relations between interdependence and democracy” (Warren, 1992, 21). As Warren noted, given the book’s preachy tone, “it is often difficult not to feel patronized, not to detect an imperialistic quality to ‘the common good’ the authors propose, not to wonder at the standards of unity the authors set for democracy, not to suspect that they seek salvation in politics in ways more subtle than the American Messianism they criticize” (Warren, 1992, 21).

Bellah’s response to these reviews was petulant, sullen, and sulky (Bellah, 1992). Revealingly, in his 2002 Epilogue to the Festschrift of his work, Bellah stated:

I think there is much to be said for the idea that America needs something like the British clerisy, although I suspect the term cannot cross the Atlantic. If this be denounced as elitist arrogance, I am not afraid of the charge. (272)

The “clerisy” had been described in William Sullivan’s contribution (2002). Exemplifying the clerisy in John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge, and noting that the “possibilities of this kind of leadership” had been previously “adumbrated” by the American Progressives, Sullivan defined the clerisy as “a secular priesthood setting standards of value and behavior” (240). Bellah, after all, had introduced Emile Durkheim as a “high priest and theologian of the civil religion of the Third Republic and a prophet calling not only modern France but modern Western society generally to mend its ways in the face of a great social and moral crisis” (Bellah, 1973, x).

It is hardly a stretch to say that Bellah seems to have seen himself in these terms: as an intellectual, priest, and prophet, called to “hold a mirror to his society, to make conscious its deepest values” (Bellah, 1973, xxxvii), one who would lead America into a “genuinely democratic socialism” (xlvi) by deploying religious symbols creatively, transfiguring the realities to which they relate (lii). To this end, Christ’s transfiguration could be intentionally evoked, in a pattern which stretched back to the Nobby conversion, and forward to *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011).

To put the point as mildly as I possibly can, there is a troubling scarcity of “epistemic humility” (Gorski, 2015) here.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have taken the opportunity afforded by Matteo Bortolini’s historically-insightful biography to grapple with the legacy of Robert Bellah’s life and work. As the reader will no doubt see, I have been disturbed by what I have found. But I am grateful to both Bortolini and Robert Bellah for the intellectual (and emotional) journey.

Bortolini’s book concludes, in the *Epilogue*, with what I took to be a finally positive and sympathetic portrayal of Robert Bellah (2021, 359–61). We are given to see a poignant humility and kindness, in Bellah’s response to a manifestation of

sociological ignorance by a Heidelberg University tour guide, speaking of Max Weber's work. Closely juxtaposed to this scene is Bortolini's explanation for the intriguing title to his book, *A Joyfully Serious Life*, and here, too, are notes of admiration for Bellah's "understanding of the human condition and his radical openness to both novelty and the universal," his "incessant curiosity about the boundless creativity of the human race" (359).

Mostly, however, the reader is struck by Bortolini's studied even-handedness in writing of a polarizing, while also greatly lauded, figure in sociology's recent past, and of American history during what was (and is) a profoundly conflicted period. Indeed, one of the richest aspects of Bortolini's book is the way in which it enables us to see Robert Bellah against the backdrop of his times, to see his intellectual projects and his character shaped by the events and institutions he lived through.

There is much to be learned from Matteo Bortolini's book, not only about Robert Bellah, but also about U.S. sociology and academic culture. Perhaps others, like me, will be troubled by what they see. To the extent this is so, Robert Bellah might nonetheless consider it an indication of his prophetic power.

Authors' Contributions Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Material Not applicable.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Not applicable.

Consent to Participate Not applicable.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests Not applicable.

References

- Alexander, J. C., & Sherwood, S. J. (2002). "Mythic Gestures": Robert N. Bellah and Cultural Sociology." In *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, by Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, 1–14. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Arendt, H. (1978). *The life of the mind*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Bellah, R. (1970a). *Beyond belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bellah, R. (1970b). "Christianity and Symbolic Realism." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (pp. 89–96).
- Bellah, R. (1970c). "Civil Religion in America." In R. N. Bellah (Ed.), *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Chap. 9). New York: Harper & Row.
- Bellah, R. (1970d). "Response to comments on 'Christianity and Symbolic Realism'." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (pp. 112–115).
- Bellah, R. (1971). "Brown in Perspective: A Commentary on 'Love's Body'." *Soundings* (pp. 450–59).

- Bellah, R. (1973). "Introduction." In R. N. Bellah (Ed.), *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society* (pp. ix-iv). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bellah, R. (1974). "American Civil Religion in the 1970s." In R. E. Richey, & D. G. Jones (Eds.), *American Civil Religion* (pp. 255–72). New York: Harper & Row.
- Bellah, R. (1992). "Robert Bellah's response to PEGS reviews of "The Good Society".*" PEGS Newsletter* (pp. 13–14).
- Bellah, R. N. (1996). *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (2d ed). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bellah, R. (2002). "Epilogue." In R. Madsen, W. M. Sullivan, A. Swidler, & S. M. Tipton (Eds.), *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self* (pp. 255–76). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bellah, R. (2011). *Religion in Human evolution: From the paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Bellah, R. N., & Joas, H. (2012). *The Axial Age and its consequences*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Bellah, R. (1992/1975). *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (2d ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bellah, R. (1985/1957). *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* (2d ed.). New York: The Free Press.
- Bellah, R. N., et al. (1992). *The Good Society*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bellah, R. (2006). "Introduction." In R. N. Bellah, & S. M. Tipton (Eds.), *The Robert Bellah Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bortolini, M. (2020). "The return of the repressed: On Robert Bellah, Norman O. Brown, and religion in human evolution." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* (pp. 20–35).
- Bortolini, M. (2021). *A Joyfully Serious Man: The life of Robert Bellah*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, N. O. (1966). *Love's body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brown, N. O. (1985/1959). *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (2d ed.). Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Burtchaell, J. T. (1970). "A response to 'Christianity and Symbolic Realism'." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (pp. 97–99).
- Caporale, R., & Grumelli, A. (Eds.). (1971). *The Culture of Unbelief: Studies and Proceedings from the First International Symposium on Belief Held at Rome, March 22–27, 1969* Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Coser, L. (2003). *Masters of Sociological Thought* (2d ed.). Waveland Press.
- Dunn, J. D. G. (2003). *Jesus remembered: Christianity in the making* (1 vol.). Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Gorski, P. (2015). "An Offensive Book." In R.R., & Barbara McClay Reno (Eds.), *Religion and the Social Sciences* (pp. 47–52). Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Johnson, L. T. (1991). *The Gospel of Luke (Sacra Pagina)* Edited by Daniel J. Harrington S.J. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press (Order of Saint Benedict).
- Klausner, S. Z. (1970). "Scientific and Humanistic Study of Religion: A comment on 'Christianity and Symbolic Realism'." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (pp. 100–106).
- Lockwood, J. (1975). "Bellah and his critics: An ambiguity in Bellah's Concept of Civil Religion." *Anglican Theological Review* (pp. 416–23).
- Nelson, B. (1970). "Is the sociology of Religion possible? A reply to Robert Bellah." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (pp. 107–111).
- Parsons, T. (1977). "Law as an intellectual stepchild." *Sociological Inquiry* (pp. 11–58).
- Parsons, T. (1971). "Belief, Unbelief, and Disbelief." In *The Culture of Unbelief: Studies and Proceedings from the First International Symposium on Belief Held at Rome, March 22–27, 1969*, by Rocco Caporale and Antonio Grumelli, 207 – 45. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ross, E. A. (1907). *Sin and society: An analysis of Latter-Day iniquity*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Sullivan, W. M. (2002). "Politics as the "Public Use of Reason": Religious Roots of Political Possibilities." In *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, by Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, 236 – 53. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Warren, M. (1992). "Democracy and the Common Good." *PEGS Newsletter* (pp. 20–21).
- Zuckert, C. (1992). "Good Society 'thinking,' alias the theory of unreasonable expectations." *PEGS Newsletter* (pp. 21–22).

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.