

Civic Sociology

Comments on Matteo Bortolini's *A Joyfully Serious Man: The Life of Robert Bellah*

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Comment and questions for Matteo Bortolini's *A Joyfully Serious Man: The Life of Robert Bellah*

I'm not sure I have much to add to the comments that blurb the back of this remarkable book. Matteo Bortolini has achieved what books of this kind rarely do. He uses Bellah to provide insight into the history of the social sciences in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century, and he paints an intimate portrait of the man who is the focus of the study. We understand Bellah's place in that history as at once one of its products—a (sometimes dissident) student of Talcott Parsons and the extraordinary group of scholars Parsons mentored at Harvard—and as a strikingly individual figure intent on following his own intellectual path. We learn how Bellah both came from and contributed to American social science—a distinctive voice in conversation (conflicted, collegial, adamant) with his students and peers. Bortolini details, with clarity and critical insight, the place of Bellah's work on religion as a topic in itself, a way of better understanding something of human sensibility as a cultural and historical force. And he provides insight into how and why religion became an enduring pre-occupation for this professor of sociology.

My knowledge of Bellah, apart from some of the work on civil religion and the popular *Habits of the Heart* (1985), was mostly centered on the controversy (in 1972–73) about his appointment as a faculty member in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study. (I arrived at IAS in 1985, and the controversy was still very much alive among the faculty.) The "Bellah affair," as it is still known here, occupies only part of a chapter, one of twenty-two that make up Bortolini's impressive tome. It details the unjustified role played by mathematicians and historians to oppose the appointment, leaving aside some of the more vicious comments that remain part of the Institute's lore. Bortolini doesn't deny the sour memory the experience continued to represent for Bellah—who, despite his friendship with Clifford Geertz (who had proposed and fought hard for his appointment), declined to return to the IAS in 2006 for Geertz's memorial service. Still, the deservedly small place this incident holds in the life of Robert Bellah is at odds (in my perception of things) with the pernicious impact the "affair" had on the life of the School of Social Science. It took many years to achieve the stable and recog-

nized place the school now has. In the event, more damage was done to the Institute than to Robert Bellah.

Bellah didn't need the Institute to make his mark, and he did it with what seems his characteristic energy and ambition. In the hundreds of pages of this book (and the hundreds Bellah himself wrote), it is clear that life after 1973 brought satisfaction and prestige for this joyfully serious man. Bortolini's comments in the epilogue on his choice of a title for the book explain well what we have come to learn in the previous pages: this was a man for whom the pursuit of ideas—hard thought, playfully engaged—constituted a joyful pursuit. The seeming irony of the juxtaposition of "joyful" and "serious" was not, in Bellah's case, the least bit ironic.

What distinguishes this book for me is the way Bortolini has integrated the personal and the professional aspects of Bellah's life. The revelation in his diaries and letters of his suppressed and then actualized homosexual desire becomes an occasion neither for voyeuristic treatment (as some biographers might have done) nor for suppression (an alternative biographic strategy). Instead, Bortolini weaves the psychic hardships and desire that marked the man into the story of his scholarly career. Bellah's reading (in 1968) of Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body* helped him figure out how to make sense of and act upon his erotic longings, and it spurred "a great storm of creativity," at once personal and intellectual. Bortolini weaves the strands together effortlessly. Personal loss, friendship, love, and grief are neither afterthoughts nor drivers of this narrative of a life. Rather, we come to appreciate how the life and the mind worked together—sometimes in conflict, sometimes in sync. In a standard intellectual biography, life is often the background for thought. In this book, there is no distinction between them.

Since Matteo Bortolini will be responding to these texts and since I have no serious criticism for him to engage, I'll end with a few questions about method.

1. How did you decide to treat some of the more astonishing revelations about Bellah—the revelation, for example, about his homosexuality? How did you man-

age to resist what might be a current approach to assign him an "identity"? Or was it simply the facts of Bellah's own life—maintaining his marriage, refusing a gay identity—that provided the lead you needed to follow? And what led you to understate what might have been your own comments on the ways in which Bellah's lived sexuality challenges the more essentialist forms of identity politics today?

2. How did you manage to create a tone of appreciation, even as you clearly had your own criticisms of some of Bellah's writing: a) by citing other critics in a seemingly neutral manner? b) by pointing out contradictions in his arguments as part of the narrative, again in a seemingly neutral tone?
3. Were there things you decided to leave out, and if so, for what reasons?
4. What was your goal in undertaking this project? Did it change in the course of the research? How did it lead to your next project, the biography of Clifford Geertz?

Will these two projects become for you a larger comment on the achievements and the limits of late twentieth-century social science? Or is there something else at stake?

I look forward to your answers.

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