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Remarks For a Memorial Remembrance of Robert Bellah

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Flashback

Remarks For a Memorial Remembrance of Robert Bellah

by Edward A. Tiryakian

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I am seldom at a loss for words, but this may well be such an occasion. Not because of a special relationship to Bob Bellah, because all of us here today, I am sure, feel a special relationship to him, whether as a student, colleague, or just friend. Bob had an incredible set of such relationships around the world, commensurate with his immense cognitive knowledge and *gusto* about the world, as a physical, biological, social, and ethical evolving reality. I had the good fortune of knowing Bob for sixty years, going back to being fellow graduate students in Social Relations at Harvard, and to having Talcott Parsons as our prime mentor. Over the years I came to feel that Bob was for me an older brother in leading the way as we traveled similar theoretical paths.

Evoking Parsons reminds me of his retirement celebration. Robert Merton was chosen to make the initial remarks, and he began with a saying of G. K. Chesterton: "Sentiment is like jam on your bread; sentimentality is spreading it all over your face." So in evoking our souvenirs of Robert Bellah in this bitter-sweet occasion, let us make use of sentiments, not sentimentality.

There was a serenity about Bob Bellah, like some of the special Zen rock gardens in Kyoto he knew so well. He was a deep thinker, yet very alert and *engagé* to the world around him, and to its spiritual needs. He could, and did, fulminate against those who abused democracy, and he lived the modern tension of being a Christian and a scholar, drawing the ire of both dogmatic secularists and tradition-bound orthodoxy.

He had countless students, who flowered with his mentorship, as his associates, not as his subordinates.

Some people retire early, and stay retired. Bob retired in 1997, having made indelible marks on so many critical fields from the start, even with his undergraduate *Apache Kinship System*, the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Essay for 1950 [Bellah 1952], and continuing with his life-long fascination, comparative interest, and expertise in Japan and East Asia. The American crisis of the 1960s prompted him to take another look back home, and he responded with an acute analysis of the United States being in a “third time of trial” in his seminal essay “Civil Religion in America” [Bellah 1967]. Ten years later, the Nixon Watergate mess and its aftermath was another crisis for American democracy, which Bob addressed with his remarkable, though somewhat neglected *The Broken Covenant. American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* [Bellah 1975]. In between these two works that marked Bob as a public intellectual, he himself had undergone an agonizing personal trial during 1972 and 1973, which our colleague Matteo Bortolini [2010] has recently covered in a remarkable documentation, “The ‘Bellah Affair’ at Princeton. Scholarly Excellence and Academic Freedom in American in the 1970s”. Combined with the tragic loss of a daughter, Bellah endured a Job-like set of public vilification by those set on denying him a faculty appointment at the Institute of Advanced Study.

Rather than becoming a bitter person, his fortitude and generous nature – like Zeno the founder of the Stoic school – took him back to Berkeley, with new vigor, new students, and new collaborative projects. America in the 1980s was in another period of transition, when economic individualism got its voice with Gordon Gekko in the movie *Wall Street* embodying a new spirit of public amorality, that of “greed.” Robert Bellah and his four Berkeley associates responded with a different perspective on individualism and the normative embeddedness of the American nation: their qualitative empirical study was the landmark *Habits of the Heart*, and they went on further in their sociological quest of the “good society” [Bellah *et al.* 1985; Bellah *et al.* 1991]. Bob became an early light in the communitarian movement and brought his deep sense of sociological theory, particularly the Durkheimian tradition which he knew as well as any one, to bear on the philosophy of communitarianism.

So Bellah retired in 1997, having made multiple seminal contributions to American studies, comparative sociology, theory, and religious studies in a very broad sense. But retirement was for Bob little more than a figure of speech, for he had embarked on another, more embracing problématique: the evolution of this human phenomenon which is religion, and its bearer, *homo religiosus*.

I had the good fortune of being at Harvard in the spring of 1963 when Shmuel Eisenstadt, Talcott Parsons, and Bob Bellah joined together to offer a remarkable

seminar on evolution, bringing back into play a concept, a notion – evolution – which had seemingly passed out of sociological favor after World War One. Each of the triumvirate was to get new mileage of “evolution.” Bob spent at least a dozen years on painstaking research on various components of religious evolution, not just in the Western context, but in all stages, even before what, in association with Eisenstadt and some others, would be called the Axial Age. Amidst a burgeoning field of macro-oriented writings that opened up anew the comparative-historical field of sociology, Bellah in 2005 produced theoretical clarification in yet another seminal essay, “What is Axial about the Axial Age?” [Bellah 2005]. It was a preface for his magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution* [Bellah 2011], and its companion volume that he edited in collaboration with a leading European theorist, Hans Joas, *The Axial Age and its Consequences* [Bellah and Joas 2012].

Since others will have much more to say about Bellah, I will close these remarks by relating him to a sociologist I know best, Durkheim. One hundred years ago, Durkheim published, in a period of spiritual crisis in France, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, arguably the most important sociological volume of the Twentieth century, a lodestone for sociological theory, sociology of religion, and sociology of culture [Durkheim 1995]. Yet, it was also unfinished, in its search for the foundations of the religious forms and the normative structure appropriate for modern society.

Bob Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution* may arguably be viewed by young sociologists in this audience fifty years from now as the most important sociological volume of the Twenty-first century. Yet, it too, like Durkheim’s – and Marx’s *Capital*, – is an unfinished work. Bob was fully cognizant that his broad evolutionary framework ended with the emergence of the Axial Age, leaving untold the last 2000 years. He saw the need “to integrate in new ways the dimensions [mimetic, mythic, and theoretic elements of religious symbol systems] we have had since the axial age,” I believe he was hard at work continuing his dedication to understanding the religious mode in the reality of life [Bellah 2011, xxii], just as Durkheim after *The Forms* was hard at work in preparing his *Ethics*.

Bellah opens the preface to *Religion in Human Evolution* by giving us three clues as where he was going, with quotations from Thomas Mann, Hegel, and Mencius. I recommend you read, or re-read them carefully. And then we can get a glimpse of the ethics at the close of his preface, which I feel Durkheim would have gladly endorsed. I will let you read and savor that concluding paragraph, which echoes Bellah’s previous writings of modernity on trial. I just want to cite the last two sentences: “I cannot in this book give an account of that trial. All I can do is call up some important witnesses” [*ibidem*, xxiv].

Bob Bellah, I would propose as a toast to his spirit here with us, was more than a sociologist with a clear *consciousness* of social reality; he was for all of us, a *conscience* of American society. Like Durkheim for his followers, students and associates, he was – and remains – a *presence*. We *are* his “important witnesses,” that is the spirit of organic solidarity that Durkheim and Bellah exemplified, and which Bob would want us to retain. A toast for Bob Bellah, my gross attempt at a Haiku:

Bob Bellah died young, smiling.

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