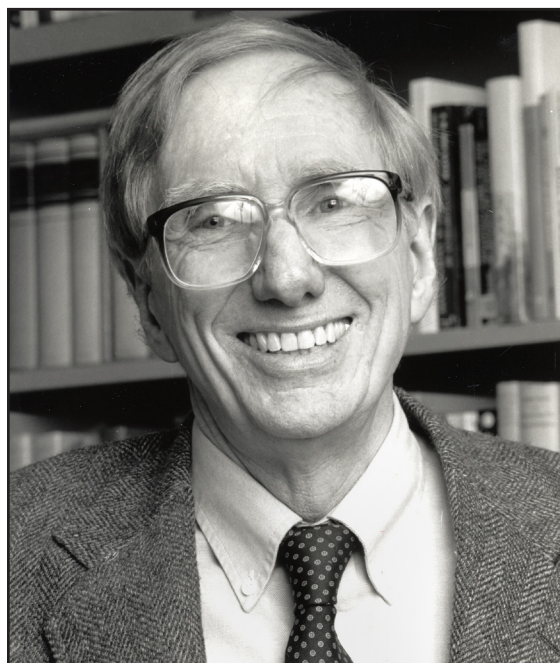


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ROBERT BELLAH



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23 FEBRUARY 1927 · 30 JULY 2013

“**T**IME IN ITS AGING COURSE teaches all things,” wrote Aeschylus. No one learned more from it than Robert Bellah. Where does religion come from, and where does it lead us? No one wrestled and played more deeply with these questions than he did or more broadly embraced the moral challenge of what we must do to be saved. He brought the axial arc of this challenge down to the ground of how to live, not only there and then, once upon a soteriological time, but here and now. “Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God,” in biblical Jerusalem and down these uneven streets in this promised land. Let the good city move in tune with the lawful harmony of the soul and the cosmos, in ancient Athens and in these unsustainable days of global warming. From Micah and Plato, through Durkheim and Weber, to Paul Tillich and Talcott Parsons, Bellah heeded his teachers and made friends with them in history, as Mencius urged. The past is never dead, Bellah taught in turn. It breathes in and through us, confounding us as we repeat history and uplifting us as we make it by seeking to attain the impossible.

Born in Oklahoma in 1927 and raised in Los Angeles, Robert Bellah first read Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* at Harvard College, where he majored in social anthropology and wrote his senior thesis, “Apache Kinship Systems.” His first book, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan*, emerged from his work at Harvard to complete a joint doctoral degree in Sociology and Far-Eastern Languages. After accepting a research fellowship at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in 1955, Bellah returned to teach at Harvard in 1957 and then moved to the University of California at Berkeley in 1967, where he continued to teach for more than 30 years. In 1970, he published *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-traditional World*, followed in 1975 by *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. With Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, Robert Bellah co-authored *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985) and *The Good Society* (1991). For more than a dozen years, Bellah concentrated on researching and writing *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011). He was at work on a related project on religion, nation states, and the challenge of modernity when he died unexpectedly at the age of 86.

In seeking to make sense of modernity in the classical tradition of sociology as a field, Bellah’s work spans the humanities and social sciences to embrace the global diversity and coherence of religion as the key to culture across civilizations and epochs within the frame of human evolution. Because religion is centrally the narrative self-interpretation and ritual enactment of all human cultures, he argued, the whole of the

history of religion is our own. For most of a million years before members of the genus *Homo* began speaking in sentences, they communicated and expressed themselves through their bodies. Through mimetic movement, gesture, and example, they learned to make meaning as well as tools. Through sharing the rhythmic action of “keeping together in time” at the root of ritual, they composed the harmonies of moral community as well as the survival strategies of social solidarity. Endless interaction rituals continue to orchestrate everyday life today from greetings to good-byes, and formal rites of passage continue to mark the movement of generations from birth to death.

Since humans became fully linguistical sometime between 250,000 and 100,000 years ago, religiously inspired and morally charged narrative in the form of myth ruled human consciousness without conceptual challenge, Bellah saw, and the most encompassing forms of cultural self-understanding today continue to unfold as mythic narrative. They tell the story of uniquely individual selves in culturally common genres. We get to know ourselves and each other by sharing our stories. We grasp the multiple meanings of modern social membership by learning the stories that define our families, communities, and nations. Literacy turns practical theoretic consciousness toward more critical questioning of myth in both the logical and lexical terms of second-order “thinking about thinking” at the heart of the axial breakthroughs. But theories do not replace stories as the source and substance of the spheres of ethics, politics, or religion, and none of these spheres has been reborn within the bounds of reason alone. Narrative is the way we understand our lives, criticized and clarified by rational argument, to be sure, but also revealing in its own rational way that “reason” itself has a long history with multiple meanings and practical differences.

From tribal peoples to the present, we remain deeply embedded in the unfolding of religion’s embodied ritual drama and mythic narration, as well as its reasoned remaking by critical reflection. This holds true, Bellah judged, even when—especially when—we think of religion in peculiarly modern Western terms as primarily private beliefs held by individuals and voluntary associations made up of like-minded believers or spiritual seekers. By contrast, the world-rejecting symbols, rites, and congregations of historic salvation religions break through the cosmological and moral unity of archaic and tribal societies in tandem with their fused political and economic structures. But we need to understand our ancestors in their own terms to grasp how such salvific breakthroughs carry the whole of the human past into modern acceptance of this world as the only world there is, instead of as a moment masking eternity or a veil of illusion obscuring the timeless truth of cosmological dualism. This evolution includes the early modern

Protestant patterning of American modernity, grounded in convictions of the providence of our progress, the covenant of our constitution, and the sacred soul of our human rights.

Beginning with his article “Civil Religion in America,” published in 1967, Bellah stressed the dialectical coherence of civil religion in the moral argument of public life in modern societies. A decade later, in “Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic,” he elaborated the critical interplay of civil religion with manifold forms of public philosophy and theology in the free exercise of religion and speech in America, institutionalized in ways that mediate but never resolve the tension between civic republicanism and constitutional liberalism in our ambiguous polity. Civil religion frames modes of moral discourse and imagination to enable coherent cultural conflict in successive times of trial. These trials give rise to contrasting public theologies and philosophies that contest the meaning of civil religion and, in turn, reshape it. This dialectical logic extends to the model of cultural conversation and argument across multiple moral traditions seen as continuities of conflict in *Habits of the Heart* and Bellah’s later work, by contrast to construing civil religion as a unitary moral foundation that is once fundamentally fixed and then fragmented by culture wars.

“Can We Imagine a Global Civil Religion?” (2010) defines the direction of Bellah’s ongoing inquiry into the modern project in the light of human evolution. He answers the question of its title by distinguishing between the impossibility of a global civil religion and the necessity of strengthening global civil society to create a world order coherent enough to engage the grave problems of global warming, military–political strife, and economic inequality that interdependent nations now face. Bellah observes that any actual civil society will have a religious dimension—not only a legal and ethical framework, but also some notion that it fits the nature of ultimate reality. In fact, religion-like values carried by an emerging global market culture may worsen international problems and place greater weight on the actual beginnings of world governance evident in world law and economic regulation today. The nation-state itself and the principled independence of the market from the state have arisen as cultural forms and institutional arrangements transmitted around the world over the past few centuries. So have popular sovereignty and the public sphere of civil society, even where ideals of universal human rights, democratic elections, and the formation of public opinion freed from the state and the market are honored in principle but not in practice. Nationalism itself has always been an international phenomenon inspired by both the right of every people to self-government and the responsibility they share for their common fate.

Today, Bellah argues, global market ideologies and practices threaten the capacity of nations to carry out the responsibilities inherent in their ideals of common membership, including responsibility for their least advantaged citizens through sustaining fair wages and taxes as well as public provision. What are the moral and religious resources we need to think about membership in global civil society profoundly enough to balance the autonomy of nation states and check the power of global markets? The religious roots of global ethics of human rights lead Bellah to ask if the world's religions can mobilize their deepest commitments to universal neighbor-love and mutual recognition to give genuine institutional force to human rights regimes. Can they help turn ideals of world citizenship into practical willingness to share responsibility for the world of which we are citizens instead of trying to transform the world into the naturalized image of our own nation? Religious motivation is needed to turn the beginnings of world law and the growth of global ethics into effective forms of global solidarity and governance. Religious insight is needed for us to recognize the primacy of the world instead of trying to force the world to recognize our primacy as a nation.

"Nothing is ever lost" in the whole of religious evolution, as Bellah deepened its conception over the course of his work, culminating in *Religion in Human Evolution* in 2011. This book ends with the axial age, but it situates modernity within the history of the human species. It reframes the story of how the theoretic culture of "thinking about thinking" becomes partially disembedded from mimetic and mythic meaning to give rise to the achievements and predicaments of modernity. By asking what our deep past can tell us about the kind of life human beings have imagined was worth living, Bellah illuminates the often implicit moral visions we hold and contest in the modern world. He points toward the critical reappropriation of their underlying mimetic and mythic dimensions in an ongoing dialectic with our theoretical understanding to find common ground on questions of our common good, including the future of the environment, the justice of the economy, and the possibilities for peace in the warring world we share.

Deep is the well of the past, and from it Robert Bellah drew living water. Bright and clear and encompassing, the flow of his work will go on through ever-widening waves of resonance in our thoughts and arguments. In the communion of all souls—and all citizens—the goodness of his spirit will live on through the work of our hands and the habits of our hearts, world without end.

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