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Robert Bellah: In Memoriam (1927–2013)

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ROBERT BELLAH WAS A METICULOUS scholar and an eloquent public intellectual—two identities that go together uneasily in the modern academy. As Max Weber noted, one who practices science as a vocation, with the requisite attention to empirical detail and logical rigor, will rarely be able to address prophetically the great questions of what we should do and how we should live in the modern world. Undaunted, Bellah began his classic *Habits of the Heart* in the prophetic voice, asking the great questions: "How ought we to live? How do we think about how to live?" He and his co-authors—of whom I was proud to be one—set out to engage such questions with sociological rigor, never doubting his insistence (sometimes enforced with irritated criticism) that

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we be fastidious about the quality of our sources and the accuracy of our footnotes.

The tension between the vocation of social science and the call to prophesy played out along with the other great tensions of Bellah's career. These were rooted in the experiences of his generation. Coming of age after World War II, he had a deep faith in American democracy but was profoundly disappointed by its failures to live up to its promises. He was a vocal critic of the use of the atomic bomb against Japan. He was appalled by America's racism and its inequalities. Such misgivings and an earnest idealism led him to join the American Communist Party while he was an undergraduate at Harvard. That same idealism soon led him out of the party, particularly when he learned about the brutal realities of Soviet communism. Later, as a new assistant professor at Harvard, his youthful engagement with communism exposed him to the fires of McCarthyism, and Harvard refused to protect him. He once again experienced the dark side not only of the country but of the university he loved.

Such experiences surely shaped the vision—at once idealistic and realistic—that first crystalized in his great 1967 essay on "Civil Religion in America." His examination of the sacred foundations of American aspirations fortified his own transcendent vision and drove his critique of what he saw as the profane realities of American imperialist and racist politics. This vision animated further explorations up through the 1980s, both in *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*. Those books identified the damage that mainstream American utilitarian and expressive individualism had done to the promises of American democracy, even as they affirmed the countervailing force of America's "second languages" of biblical religion and civic republicanism.

Another tension within Bellah's career was his commitment to a cosmopolitan internationalism along with an equal devotion to the special promises of the American experiment. As a graduate student at Harvard, at a time when most theoretically ambitious students focused on the historical foundations of European social theory, he became one of the first members of the program on sociology and Far Eastern languages. His dissertation was on Tokugawa religion, the pre-modern foundations of Japan's particular path toward modernity. This work entailed deep study of East Asian cultural traditions, including Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism. His book on Tokugawa religion is still in print and remains a foundation for modern Asian studies. He had as strong an understanding of East Asian languages and cultures as any scholar of his generation. But as was rarely the case with area specialists, his study of East Asian cultural histories only deepened his understanding of the classics of Western thought.

Like the outstanding area specialists, he was committed to understanding cultures holistically, appreciating their particularities and differences on their own terms, without reducing them to a common denominator of abstract sociological processes. This reflected a cosmopolitan rather than universalist vision. He was profoundly aware of the interdependence of what the British political scientist Graham Wallas had called the

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"Great Society" of the modern world and of the challenges in creating a good society out of the turbulent confluence of cultures. But he saw the answer to such challenges in what the distinguished East Asia specialist Wm. Theodore de Bary has called "the great civilized conversation." His last essay was a review of de Bary's book by that title.

Bellah's richly informed vision of the varieties of transcendent yearnings found brilliant expression in his final masterpiece, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011). The book culminates in long, detailed chapters on the religious civilizations of ancient Israel, Greece, China, and India. In Bellah's telling, Hebrew monotheism, Greek philosophy, Indian Buddhism, and Chinese Confucianism are each unique, the product of many historical contingencies. What unites them is not the sharing of some common essence of "religion" but their connection to a "deep past," to a common historical story that extends all the way back to the Big Bang.

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The epigraph to that book is from the Chinese sage Mencius: "When one reads the poems and the writings of the ancients, how could it be right not to know something about them as men? Hence one should try to understand the age in which they have lived. This can be described as 'looking for friends in history.'" For Bellah, thinkers such as Confucius and Mencius were not simply creators of systems of thought; they were friends in history, conversation partners. The same was true of Socrates and Plato, Isaiah and Jeremiah, the Buddha, and more recent thinkers like Kant and Hegel, Weber and Durkheim. Bellah did not simply study *about* them. He argued and searched together *with* them for answers to the great questions of how we ought to live and how we think about how to live. In the end for Bellah, culture was not a static system of values but a long conversation, carried on throughout history by people struggling within their traditions to find the meaning of a good life. He saw it as his task to further that conversation with the widest possible network of conversation partners.

For the past 35 years, I was privileged to be one of his proximate conversation partners. He was an extremely good listener—far better than most academics I have known. When we worked on *Habits of the Heart,* he created an atmosphere that inspired the liveliest intellectual effervescence I have ever experienced, a context for the genuine co-creation of ideas. He was often very funny and down to earth. Our conversations were usually joyous. But there was an undercurrent of sadness about him, an acute awareness of tragedy. He and his wife had faced terrible tragedies with the deaths of two of their daughters, and he had endured more than his share of conflicts and controversies in the course of his long academic career. The end of *Religion in Human Evolution* contains the prophetic warning that by destroying its environment, the human species may eventually make itself extinct. The partial drafts of the new book he was working on when he died further elaborate this theme. The strength of his idealism made him see ever more clearly the contrasting harshness of modern reality. Yet he never lost hope in what his teacher and favorite theologian Paul Tillich called the "structure of grace in history." This extended to his own history. In one of his last e-mails to us, shortly before his surgery, he said: "About death I have no anxiety, no need to cling to life. I am not saying I don't care. I choose life and hope I have a chance for a few more years, but I am quite resigned to whatever happens. My native stoicism, plus a dose of philosophical Stoicism and Zen, help me to deal with this possibility quite calmly." His lifetime of conversations with "friends in history" had prepared him to die. We, by contrast, were far less prepared for his passing. Nonetheless, his books and his example leave us deep and enduring lessons on how to live.