

# Robert Neelly Bellah

**Robert Neelly Bellah** (February 23, 1927 – July 30, 2013) was an American sociologist, and the Elliott Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He was internationally known for his work related to the sociology of religion.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 1 Education

Bellah received a BA in social anthropology from Harvard College in 1950. His undergraduate honors thesis was titled “Apache Kinship Systems,” and won the Phi Beta Kappa Prize. It was later published in 1952.

He graduated from Harvard in a joint sociology and Far East languages program, with Talcott Parsons and John Pelzel as his advisors, respectively.<sup>[2]</sup> Bellah first encountered the work of Talcott Parsons as an undergraduate when his senior honors thesis advisor was David Aberle, a former student of Parsons. Parsons was specially interested in Bellah’s concept of religious evolution and the concept of “Civil Religion.” They remained intellectual friends until Parsons’ death in 1979. He received his PhD in 1950. His doctoral dissertation was titled *Tokugawa Religion* and was an extension of Weber’s Protestant ethic thesis to Japan. It was published in 1957.

While an undergraduate at Harvard, he was a member of the Communist Party USA in 1947–1949 and a chairman of the John Reed Club, “a recognized student organization concerned with the study of Marxism”.<sup>[3]</sup> During the summer of 1954, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard McGeorge Bundy, who later served as a national security adviser to John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, threatened to withdraw Bellah’s graduate student fellowship if he did not provide the names of his former club associates.<sup>[4]</sup> Bellah was also interrogated by the Boston office of the FBI with the same purpose. As a result, Bellah and his family spent two years in Canada, where he was awarded a post-doctoral fellowship at the Islamic Institute in McGill University in Montreal. He returned to Harvard after *McCarthyism* declined due to the death of its main instigator senator Joseph McCarthy. Bellah afterwards wrote,

...I know from personal experience that Harvard did some terribly wrong things during the McCarthy period and that those things have never been publicly acknowledged. At its worst it came close to psychological terror against almost defenseless individuals.

...The university and the secret police were in collusion to suppress political dissent and even to persecute dissenters who had changed their minds if they were not willing to become part of the persecution.<sup>[3]</sup>

— Robert N. Bellah

## 2 Career

Bellah’s magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011), traces the biological and cultural origins of religion and the interplay between the two. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas wrote of the work: “This great book is the intellectual harvest of the rich academic life of a leading social theorist who has assimilated a vast range of biological, anthropological, and historical literature in the pursuit of a breathtaking project... In this field I do not know of an equally ambitious and comprehensive study.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Bellah is also known for his 1985 book *Habits of the Heart*, which discusses how religion contributes to and detracts from America’s common good, and for his studies of religious and moral issues and their connection to society. Bellah was perhaps best known for his work related to American civil religion, a term which he coined in a 1967 article that has since gained widespread attention among scholars.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

He served in various positions at Harvard from 1955 to 1967 when he took the position of Ford Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. He spent the remainder of his career at Berkeley. His political views are often classified as communitarian. An academic biography of Robert Bellah, “the world’s most widely read sociologist of religion”,<sup>[8]</sup> is currently under way.<sup>[9]</sup>

## 3 Personal

Bellah was born in Altus, Oklahoma on February 23, 1927. His father was a newspaper editor and publisher and died when he was 2. His mother Lillian moved the family to Los Angeles, where she had relatives. Bellah attended Los Angeles High School, where he and his future wife, Melanie Hyman, were editors of the student newspaper. They got married in 1948 after she gradu-

ated from Stanford University, and he began studying at Harvard University after a service in the Army. Bellah's wife died in 2010.

Bellah was briefly a communist during his student years at Harvard, as he recalled in 1977 in a letter to the *New York Review of Books* regarding McCarthyism at the university:

Harvard's capitulation to McCarthyism is still being defended as a form of resistance to McCarthyism. An account of my experiences will, I believe, support Diamond's and not Bundy's interpretation of those years.

I was a member of the Communist Party as a Harvard undergraduate from 1947 to 1949. During that period I was mainly involved in the John Reed Club, a recognized student organization concerned with the study of Marxism. In that connection I might recount an incident that indicates that a difference between a public policy and a private policy at Harvard such as Diamond has suggested may already have begun in 1949. According to Lipset:

In 1949, the John Reed Club sponsored a talk by a well-known Communist, Gerhart Eisler, who was on his way to a job in East Germany after having been convicted for contempt of Congress. When the University was attacked for allowing students to be corrupted, William Bender, then Dean of Harvard College, defended the students' right to hear, stating: "If Harvard students can be corrupted by an Eisler, Harvard College had better shut down as an educational institution...[p. 182]

I was, I believe, chairman of the John Reed Club at the time and was informed shortly after we announced that Eisler would speak that the university was considering forbidding the meeting and that the chairman and executive committee of the Club were asked to meet with an administrative officer. The administrator told us in the strongest terms that the invitation was extremely embarrassing for Harvard and asked us for the good of the school to withdraw the invitation. When we stood fast he told us that quite probably none of us would ever get jobs if we persisted in our course of action. The Harvard administration was attempting to do privately and indirectly what it would not do publicly and brazenly, namely suppress freedom of speech, which was precisely the aim of McCarthy.

Bellah was fluent in Japanese and literate in Chinese, French and German, and later studied Arabic at McGill University in Montreal.

Bellah died July 30, 2013 at an Oakland, California hospital from complications after heart surgery. He was 86 and is survived by his daughters Jennifer Bellah Maguire and Hally Bellah-Guther; a sister, Hallie Reynolds; and five grandchildren.<sup>[10]</sup> Raised as a Presbyterian, he converted to Episcopalianism.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 4 Works

Robert Bellah is the author, editor, co-author, or co-editor of the following books:

- *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (1957)
- *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* (1965)
- *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (1970)
- *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society* (1973)
- *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (1975)
- *The New Religious Consciousness* (1976)
- *Varieties of Civil Religion* (1980)
- *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985)
- *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America* (1987)
- *The Good Society* (1991)<sup>[11]</sup>
- *Imagining Japan: The Japanese Tradition and its Modern Interpretation* (2003)
- *The Robert Bellah Reader* (2006)
- *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011)
- *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (2012)

## 5 Awards and honors

Bellah was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1967.<sup>[12]</sup> He received the National Humanities Medal in 2000 from President Bill Clinton, in part for "his efforts to illuminate the importance of community in American society." In 2007, he received the American Academy of Religion Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 6 See also

- Lifestyle enclave

## 7 References

- [1] Robert Bellah's profile at Hartford Institute for Religion Research
- [2] "Before Civil Religion. On Robert N. Bellah's Forgotten Encounters with America, 1955-1965". *www.academia.edu*. Retrieved 2016-04-06.
- [3] Bellah, Robert (July 14, 1977). "To the Editors". *The New York Review of Books*. Retrieved August 7, 2013.
- [4] Fox, Margalit (August 6, 2013). "Robert Bellah, Sociologist of Religion Who Mapped the American Soul, Dies at 86". *The New York Times*. Retrieved August 7, 2013.
- [5] "About Religion in Human Evolution". Harvard University Press. Retrieved August 7, 2013.
- [6] Bellah, Robert Neely (Winter 1967). "Civil Religion in America". *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. **96** (1): 1–21. Archived from the original on March 6, 2005. From the issue entitled *Religion in America*.
- [7] Woo, Elaine (August 3, 2013). "Robert N. Bellah dies at 86; UC Berkeley sociologist". *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved August 27, 2013.
- [8] "Of God, justice, and disunited states". *The Berkeleyan*. UC Berkeley NewsCenter. October 26, 2006. Retrieved August 7, 2013.
- [9] Bortolini, Matteo (2012). "The trap of intellectual success. Robert N. Bellah, the American civil religion debate, and the sociology of knowledge". *Theory & Society*. **41** (2): 187–210. doi:10.1007/s11186-012-9166-8.; Bortolini, Matteo (2011). "The "Bellah Affair" at Princeton. Scholarly excellence and academic freedom in America in the 1970s". *The American Sociologist*. **42** (1): 3–33. doi:10.1007/s12108-011-9120-7.; Bortolini, Matteo (2011). "Before civil religion. On Robert Bellah's forgotten encounters with America, 1955–1965". *Sociologica*. **4** (3).
- [10] "Robert N. Bellah dies at 86; UC Berkeley sociologist". *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved August 5, 2013.
- [11] Andre, Claire; Manuel Velasquez. "Creating the Good Society". *Santa Clara University*. Retrieved May 5, 2008. "The social problems confronting us today, the authors argue, are largely the result of failures of our institutions, and our response, largely the result of our failure to realize the degree to which our lives are shaped by institutional forces and the degree to which we, as a democratic society, can shape these forces for the better."
- [12] "Book of Members, 1780–2010: Chapter B" (PDF). American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Retrieved May 30, 2011.

## 8 See also

- American civil religion
- Sheilism
- Sociology of religion
- Civil religion
- Political religion
- Communitarianism
- American exceptionalism

## 9 External links

- Robert Bellah's website
- Bill Moyers interview with Robert Bellah on PBS, September 27, 1988
- The Immanent Frame, a SSRC blog with posts by Robert Bellah

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