

“Mythic Gestures”

Robert N. Bellah and Cultural Sociology

Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven J. Sherwood

One's life and work are an effort to find a form which will reconcile inner needs and outer pressures. The form itself is unique and personal even though both the inner needs and the outer pressures are transpersonal. In my life there has been a long preoccupation with fragmentation and wholeness and it is this which has made religion such an abiding concern.

ROBERT N. BELLAH, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*

One of the curious but invariably neglected aspects of any social theory is the fact that it has a form as well as a content.

ALVIN GOULDNER, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*

There are many ways to consider the career of Robert N. Bellah. He is: sociologist of religion, Japanologist, Americanist, historian of sociology, public intellectual, teacher, and mentor. Our interest here is to consider Bellah's fundamental contribution to the development of a field called the sociology of culture—or, as we would prefer to identify it, cultural sociology. Such a consideration requires discussing Bellah in relationship to the Parsonian tradition, within which he worked for a good part of his life, the tradition that, like every good son, he had to transcend to make his own profound contribution—even while, paradoxically, he extended the scope and vision of Talcott Parsons's.

A fundamental premise of this essay—one that resonates with Bellah's own aesthetic—is that form and content are as intimately and inextricably related in sociology as in the arts or, for that matter, in any other intellectual endeavor. Sociologists, no less than artists, confront the problem of style, of the form in which the content of their work is conveyed. And style, like theory, is seldom the product of individual idiosyncrasy or of *sui generis* creation; typically, it is a matter of internalization. The profound challenge facing the sociologist who would aspire to intellectual maturity is to assimilate the tradition in order to externalize it anew, to use tradition to achieve the substantive and stylistic skills necessary to creativity, to internalize a master's orientation in order to find a way to transcend it—or, at least, innovate

within it. Traditions are not killed by innovation and innovators, but by stylistic stagnation and intellectual conformity. It is only through the contributions of those who break with traditions that traditions survive.

Let us begin to understand this productive tension between the master, Parsons, and his master-student, Bellah, by starting with the marked difference in sensibility. The central vision of Bellah's work and career lies in his belief that to understand ourselves as social subjects we must also understand ourselves as religious subjects; it is this religious sense that makes fragmentation and wholeness such significant and recurring concerns in Bellah's *oeuvre*. Here Bellah stands in clear contrast to Parsons, for whom wholeness and fragmentation at the level of the subject seldom constituted interests worthy of attention. Such matters were never fundamental, but pathological, merely "strains" in an otherwise homeostatic system. Parsons always felt that totalistic concern, and the experience of fragmentation that it paradoxically produced, were mediated by values and institutions. If society had a fundamental purpose for Parsons, it was precisely to provide such remedial mediation. Society was enabling, not constricting.

This substantive difference between master and master-student is represented in form, in contrasts of style. Parsons's ideas about society were always anchored in an abstract model, an anchor that seemed to warrant the formal style within which it was conveyed. The dearth of autobiographical references in the vast Parsonian corpus reflects the fact that Parsons saw his theoretical structures as his medium of communication. His theory *was* his style. By contrast, Bellah and his close friend and collaborator Clifford Geertz—they were Parsons's two most important cultural students—would both be far more biographical and personal, drawing not only on fieldwork and theory but from the *zeitgeist* and their personal experience. It was for this reason that Bellah and Geertz could so easily negotiate the linguistic turn.¹

It is in terms of Bellah's negotiation of this linguistic turn that we wish to understand and periodize some critical aspects of his middle-period work. We wish to examine the shifts in this work in terms of what we can understand, in retrospect, to have been the emerging field of cultural sociology. In this process, we display our hermeneutical orientation: cultural sociology is, unlike "ideology," not just something that applies to others, to other people, cultures, or social structures; it just as powerfully shapes the consciousness and self-consciousness of the interpreter of social reality. We shall try to understand this experiential relationship between Bellah and his sociology through two moments in the development of cultural sociology. The first was the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Bellah turned from the dominant, static Parsonian paradigm to "Civil Religion in America." We shall characterize this first development as simultaneously a much more sophisticated and dynamic elaboration of Parsonian theory and a transcendence

of it. The second moment, in the mid-1970s, came with Bellah's decisive "break" with Parsons, exemplified in *The Broken Covenant*. In the conclusion to this essay, we will sketch an argument that space restrictions prevent us from developing more fully, namely, the importance of Bellah's "religious" reading of Durkheim and the role this played in the development of the third, contemporary phase of cultural sociology.

The career of Robert N. Bellah will be presented here, in other words, against the profound growth of the theoretical and methodological self-consciousness of cultural sociology.

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY I: THE ORIGINS IN "CIVIL RELIGION IN AMERICA"

Like other forms of representation, sociology has always confronted the stylistic conflict between formal classicism and informal naturalism. While the theoretical model and the methodology of controlled experiment have connected sociology to the formal transparency of scientific language, the fact is that, in discursive terms, models and experiments are always conveyed in more naturalistic ways as well, through narrative, trope, and metaphor. The linguistic understanding of social science simply has made this discursive aspect much more apparent, allowing a post-positivist literature to develop that explores the boundaries between science and the humanities.

In his 1959 debunking of Parsons as a substantively irrelevant "grand theorist," C. Wright Mills condemned particularly his elliptical, obtuse prose, which suggested that, in his empty formalism, words were parading as insights. Ironically, it is precisely such a "convoluted" prose style that has come to be associated with the sociological discipline at large, "sociologese" being the standard pejorative for anyone who speaks in its jargon. If Parsons was in any way exceptional, in fact, it was only because he was particularly good at it. This was recognized in a backhanded fashion by Alvin Gouldner, who exclaimed over "the paradoxical aspect for those who merely complain about Parsons's literary style" and suggested that it was "through the sheer force of his conceptualizing rhetoric" that "more than any other modern social theorist [Parsons] has persuasively communicated a sense of the reality of a social system, of the bounded oneness and coherent wholeness of patterns of social interaction."²

If to establish form is also to establish content, then substantive changes will be accompanied by changes in form. The middle-period writings of Robert N. Bellah, along with those of Geertz, served as a critical bridge between what we would call formal and informal Parsonianism; in so doing, they also bridged mid- and late-twentieth-century sociology, the difference between which can be seen in the very emergence of cultural sociology as a robust rather than apologetic form. One of Parsons's signal contributions to

sociological theory was to lay the groundwork for the exploration of culture. We wish to suggest, however, that it was only through the writings of Bellah and of Geertz that this framework has been passed on to sociology at large. This transmission made cultural sociology possible.

That Bellah's *Beyond Belief* and *The Broken Covenant*—and, for that matter, Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*—were not only seminal texts in the 1970s but continue to exhibit vitality today is due as much to their aesthetic form as to their intellectual content. In content, they exploit a key tenet of Parsons's theory, the critical nexus between religion and culture and the ramifications of this connection for social action, particularly politics. Prior to Parsons, these categories had largely been segregated, even in the work of Max Weber. The analytic and synthetic scope of Parsons's theory allowed him, by contrast, to assert the interdependence not only of these crucial categories but also of every previously segregated sphere of society. Yet, although Parsons could assert this interdependence hypothetically, it required the empirical interventions of Bellah and of Geertz to liberate this profound insight from the complex and largely unapproachable theoretical edifice encasing it. An important part of this liberation was stylistic, the appropriation of Parsonian systematics into a more accessible, humane, hermeneutically oriented style. Bellah and Geertz both became successful as former specialists of "primitive," or non-Western, religion who employed these hermeneutic perspectives to reveal the cultural aspects of modernized Western societies. Yet, the *way* that these writers presented culture had as much to do with the revolutionary impact of their work as *what* they said. Bellah and Geertz were able to create a substantive argument for the structural integrity of culture without engaging an aesthetic form that contradicted it—which had been Parsons's mistake when he conceptualized culture as some monumental and monolithic abstraction. In this regard, one need only compare Parsons's multitudinous, highly schematic definitions of culture with the supple and rich definitions in the famous cultural essays of his two prodigal sons.

In *Beyond Belief*, we find an exemplary illustration of how form and function came together in Bellah's initial turn toward culture and away from Parsons. To this collection of essays, which famously included the only just published "Civil Religion in America," Bellah appended another piece, "The Systematic Study of Religion." Dating from over ten years earlier, 1955, and never previously published, this essay lays out his conception of the relation of religion to society, in a fully complex and abstract Parsonian way. Looking not at all different from something Parsons himself might have written, "Systematic" is replete with arrows and boxes, and lays out the interconnections between the various spheres of the "action system" (A-G-I-L) and their ramifications for religion, religious symbol systems, and religious institu-

tions. While Bellah characterizes this piece as having been created when he was "still caught in the unfolding of the Parsonian theoretical scheme," he rather gamely asserts that "much of it is easily accessible and, I think, still of some interest."³ If so, the interest is only to demonstrate how cramping AGIL formalism was to Bellah's ability to explore the relationships between religious and other aspects of social reality. We get to see what the sociology of Robert N. Bellah would have been like had he never weaned himself from the fourfold paradigm. It is not a pretty sight.

Fortunately, weaning took place, and we have "Civil Religion in America" as a result. However, if by 1968 Bellah had evolved beyond Parsonian style, he remained deeply ambivalent about leaving Parsons's substantive paradigm behind. On the one hand, from the perspective of a cultural sociology, there is a revolutionary dimension to "Civil Religion," for it applies to a secular and modern society such "religious" and "primitive" concepts as mythical narrative and sacred time. On the other hand, the 1968 essay upholds the very kind of modernization perspective that, then and now, stops cultural sociology dead in its tracks.

"Civil Religion" is a largely affirmational work. Appearing on the tail end of the modernization approach of the 1950s and 1960s, it fits, for the most part, within Parsons's evolutionary ambit. Indeed, a key to understanding "Civil Religion" is Bellah's earlier essay on "Religious Evolution," which emerged from the 1962-63 seminar on social evolution he taught at Harvard with Parsons and S. N. Eisenstadt. In this still deeply impressive theoretical effort, Bellah had offered the compelling claim that "neither religious man nor the structure of man's ultimate religious situation evolves . . . but rather religion as a symbol system."⁴ On the cusp of cultural sociology, Bellah implies here that religiosity and religious symbolism penetrate the secular arenas of modernity in a more primitive, less differentiated manner than is suggested by Parsons's formal, linear, and much more clean-cut model. This opening is foreclosed, however, by Bellah's insistence that, in the scheme of human history, the evolution of religious symbol systems ensures that "at each stage the freedom of personality and society has increased relative to the envioning conditions," with the result that "religious evolution has implied at almost every point a general theory of social evolution."⁵ This is the roadblock that modernization theory throws up, a barrier that militates against the new possibility of a cultural sociology. Bellah follows here Parsons's singular appropriation of Weber's religious sociology, a reading that acknowledges modernity as the sacralization of the secular but conceptualizes this sacralization primarily in ethical and developmental, rather than symbolic and imagistic, ways. There has been the greater penetration of religious standards into the social world, but they have taken on a generalized, universalized, and abstract form. Bellah's optimistic con-

ception of the social actor during this period clearly echoes that of his teacher:

The fundamental symbolization of modern man and his situation is that of a dynamic multidimensional self capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation and capable, again within limits, of remaking the world, including the very symbolic forms with which he deals with it, even the forms that state the unalterable conditions of his own existence.⁶

So it is that when Bellah looks at what Rousseau called “civil religion” in relation to American society, what he sees is largely a positive and adaptive ethical regulation. He defines civil religion as “certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share,” as a set of beliefs that “reaffirms the religious legitimation of the highest political authority.”⁷ Characterizing the famous inaugural address of John F. Kennedy, Bellah suggests, “The whole address can be understood as only the most recent statement of a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God’s will on earth.”⁸

While allowing for the continued intrusion of religious elements into the political sphere, this element of Bellah’s discussion affirms the comfortable synthesis of secular and religious culture.

The American civil religion was never anticlerical or militantly secular. On the contrary, it borrowed selectively from the religious tradition in such a way that the average American saw no conflict between the two. In this way the civil religion was able to build up without any bitter struggle with the church powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals.⁹

Thus, civil religion is neither specifically sectarian¹⁰ nor a substitute for Christianity.¹¹ Rather, civil religion describes the continuing moral interpenetration between religion and secular cultures in the political sphere, such that, as Bellah states in his essay on religious evolution, “it will be increasingly realized that answers to religious questions can validly be sought in various spheres of ‘secular’ art and thought.”¹² There are clouds on the horizon, to be sure. Bellah asserts that the American Revolution and the Civil War represented America’s first two “times of trial” and that the then-current era of the mid-Sixties is America’s “third time of trial,” mentioning specifically the problem of “responsible action in a revolutionary world,” and, more obliquely, Vietnam. Yet, overall, the tone is one of cautious hope and optimism, for the telos of civil religion is “concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations.”¹³

Yet if “Civil Religion” remains within Parsons’s theoretical orbit in significant and ultimately restrictive ways, there are other, equally important ways

in which it decidedly does not. Stylistically, Bellah has already transcended this orbit. He achieves his own "voice," leaving theoretical classicism far behind. Further, in achieving his own profoundly personal and prophetic voice, he has also produced a new content, what Hayden White¹⁴ would later call "the substance of form." Drawing on the inaugural addresses of John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln, as well as on the latter's Gettysburg Address, Bellah deftly deploys hermeneutic, phenomenological, and myth analysis—the rudiments of the late-Durkheimian, "anti-Weberian" repertoire that would later become so central to cultural sociology. Adopting a thickly narrative form that Parsons had abjured, Bellah introduces heroes (Lincoln and Kennedy) and weaves a redemptive plot centered on America's "mission," anchored in the nation's renewal and rebirth during the Civil War. He explicitly refers to the typological sources of America's civil religion narrative: "Behind the civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth."¹⁵ While such references now seem rather commonplace, for a sociologist in the 1960s, even more so one so closely associated with the "abstract upgrading" of Parsons's system, these were revolutions in both substance and form. Rather than refer to cultural objects and patterns in the abstract, as Parsons had, Bellah actually set them in motion, drawing on them to evoke the architecture of meaning in a secular faith. Rather than see the continuity of cultural control only in morally regulative terms, and conceive of its repercussions primarily in terms of institutional effects, Bellah was beginning to explore the *internal*, meaning-making aspects of cultural patterns in their own right. He had transformed Parsons's structure of style into his own style of Parsons's structure.

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY II: THE "BROKEN COVENANT" AND CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY

"Civil Religion in America" might be considered the first significant document of contemporary American cultural sociology. Although Clifford Geertz significantly deepened and extended cultural analysis in two much more theoretically self-conscious essays, "Ideology as a Cultural System" and "Religion as a Cultural System," written earlier in the decade, it would take some time for these to establish their disciplinary (and cross-disciplinary) influence. Bellah, on the other hand, is dealing with something specific and immediately compelling in a moral sense, something that neither Parsons nor Geertz ever fully confront—the idea of America. Parsons taught a course on American society throughout his career at Harvard and left a substantial but incomplete manuscript volume (which unfortunately remains unpublished) titled *The American Societal Community*. Geertz contended with specific aspects of American culture, such as the metaphorical aspects of the

Taft-Hartley Act. Still, neither fully engaged, as did Bellah, in explicit cultural commentary on America—and it is at least partly for this reason that neither became public intellectuals in the same way. Cultural commentary on “America” is generally restricted either to lay social commentators or to professional intellectuals whose central interest is in debunking the *idea* of America, for example, David Riesman with *The Lonely Crowd* or C. Wright Mills in *The Power Elite*. While Parsons had engaged in debates with these critics, these discussions had never attained wider visibility. One reason is that affirmation, especially within intellectual and academic circles, is never as compelling as criticism. The other is that Parsons’s abstract and complex formalism made his ideas inaccessible to a more public audience. Bellah’s increasingly cultural sociology, employing a hermeneutic that rested in shared sensibility, was.

While the critics of Parsons were no less strident in the early 1970s, they had moved from his model’s formal aspects to its political implications. The reasons for this shift were anchored not only in the prevailing social movements of the time but also in the adaptation, by Parsons’s bitterest enemies, of the very degree of abstraction and sophistication (“grand theory”) that Parsons himself employed. This was especially true in the cultural realm pioneered by Parsons and his students. The “linguistic turn” was beginning to take hold, and cultural sociology to burgeon in Europe. Aided by the turbulent social climate and stagnant economies of the time, and informed by the growing appreciation of Gramsci, Habermas, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and such contemporary British cultural Marxists as Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson during the 1970s, Stuart Hall and his colleagues and students at the University of Birmingham established the first self-conscious school of what is still known as “cultural studies.” It was as passionately anti-American in its content as it was proto-American in its increasing level of Parsonian abstraction. (Perhaps this realization was what moved Gouldner late in his life to find an increasing appreciation for Parsons.) Cultural sociology, like theoretical sociology, could define itself only in relation to Parsons and his school, even if obliquely.

In “Civil Religion in America,” Bellah had been developing cultural sociology in a much less ideological fashion. Yet cultural sociology, like theory, is never an autonomous enterprise. Sociology is as much shaped by its environment as it is a factor in shaping it. The turbulent years of the late 1960s and early 1970s were the milieu in which Bellah was working. He had purposefully moved in 1967 from Harvard to the University of California, Berkeley—or, as he described it, from “magisterial order” to the “wide-open chaos of the post-Protestant, post-modern era.”¹⁶ As this master-student had already developed substantial independence, theoretically and stylistically, from Parsons, his geographic move could only reflect a further devia-

tion. As Bellah himself put it, “[t]he move from Harvard to Berkeley . . . was an outward expression of an inward change.”¹⁷

By the time *Beyond Belief* was published in 1970, Bellah, now in Berkeley, projected a strong ambivalence, protesting that he still considered his own work “more a développement than a repudiation of Parsonian theory.”¹⁸ By the time of the publication of his next major work, *The Broken Covenant*, in 1975, however, Parsons was neither referred to nor footnoted at all. *The Broken Covenant* would be Bellah’s first crystallized and fully autonomous response to his new environment, the America of the 1970s.

The Broken Covenant is a profound and provocative work. Based on a series of Weil Lectures first given at Hebrew Union College/Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati in 1971, it represents a clear break not only with the more optimistic presuppositions of Bellah’s earlier work but also with Parsons. In comparison to the New Testament feel of “Civil Religion,” the new work is very much Old Testament—much more prophetic, hortatory, and apocalyptic. In responding to the culmination of Vietnam, the Watergate crisis, and the gamut of social-movement issues in American culture, Bellah asserts that America can no longer be a “light to the world,” that instead it must concern itself first with internal reform and “conversion.” Loosely described by one reviewer as a “jeremiad with footnotes,” *The Broken Covenant* indeed represents the opening of a new era both in cultural sociology and in the career of Bellah, who has chosen to work not so much in the critical tradition of the Frankfurt school as in the critical tradition of such earlier American figures as Winthrop, Mather, and Garrison, all of whom he cites. In finding his own, more critical voice, Bellah embarks on a long and fruitful journey as a reader of America’s soul, delinking the close relationship he had earlier posited between religion and culture and arguing that the latter has drifted too far from the former. Indeed, this is the very definition of the “jeremiad,” which remonstrates the community for forgetting its sacred obligations in carrying out God’s plans and purposes and attempts to shame it back into submission to God’s will.¹⁹ This is the distinctive voice that will mark Bellah’s career henceforth, up to and including his more famous collaborations in the 1980s and 1990s, *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*. It is a voice that argues that America’s “punishment” for deviating from her spiritual commitments is, ironically, her very material “success.” Bellah writes, “we have plunged into the thickets of this world so vigorously that we have lost the vision of the good.”²⁰ Americans, he asserts, suffer not from a lack of means and goods but instead from a failure of “our central vision.”²¹

Let us briefly outline the work that went into Bellah’s conversion to a more critical stance regarding American society and its values. The gist of his argument is that American values are founded simultaneously upon two

competing tradition-complexes. The first is an amalgam of values embodying "virtue," represented by the Puritans who first founded the colonies in concert with principles of republicanism and civic responsibility. The second refers to an instrumental ethic of self-interest, which is said to have emerged especially from the end of the Civil War and from the ascendance of what Bellah for the first time calls "corporate capitalism." The first set of values is reflected in America's mythic heritage and embodied in such keystones as the Declaration of Independence and, especially, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address. The second is already reflected in such works as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* but seems to emanate largely, in its most corrosive aspect, from the industrial advances of the last century. Bellah's argument is that the second set of values has, in modern America, increasingly come to displace the more originary elements of "virtue"—hence the loss of vision.

To make such an argument, Bellah clearly must revise the theoretical foundations he drew from Parsons. The most fundamental change is to abandon the evolutionary, developmental impetus he had shared with Parsons until the early 1970s. The implication of this abandonment is not only a move toward ideological pessimism; it also has analytic, purely theoretical implications. It allows Bellah to pose a confrontation between normativity and amoral, instrumental self-interest, a confrontation that Parsons thought he had permanently displaced when he had proposed his synthetic model of the "unit act" in *The Structure of Social Action* almost forty years before. When, in the decade after, Parsons introduced the pattern variables, he had proposed not only that self-interest is itself normatively regulated, but that modern societies cannot function if primary emphasis is given to normative self-interest. Bellah's argument in *The Broken Covenant* that virtue has been increasingly replaced by self-interest draws precisely the opposite conclusion. Drawing from his studies of the professions, Parsons had argued that the pattern variables provide the specific values that enable professions to be seen as "callings" embodying virtues rather than as instrumental, self-interested occupations. Bellah's critique is premised upon the assertion that this is no longer the case. Why? Because the development of corporate capitalism has perverted this relationship. In Parsonian terms, Bellah is arguing that the social actor no longer operates voluntaristically but is constrained—by cultural and institutional tensions—toward self-interested and instrumental behavior. This is the utilitarian actor that, in *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons had argued against. From the perspective of that work, indeed, Bellah has walked right into the "utilitarian dilemma," the theoretical trap that Parsons blamed for Western social theory's insensitivity to moral and cultural concerns. Bellah asserts that what for Parsons was theoretical bad faith is, in contemporary America, an empirically "bad" reality: "The major tendency in the society at large seems to be erosion rather

than reaction or reconstruction,"²² there is a "declining sense of moral obligation," "freedom [has come] to mean freedom to pursue self-interest,"²³ the "self-interest of the isolated individual" is preeminent.²⁴

In "Civil Religion in America," secular morality represented an inclusive and integrative fusion of critical and salvatory elements. By contrast, near the end of *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah writes that "today . . . civil religion is an empty and broken shell."²⁵ Where, in "Civil Religion in America," secular and religious cultures had been seen as converging, here they are starkly opposed. In the earlier essay, American society itself had been a legitimating principle; civil religion, Bellah had written, was "genuinely American and genuinely new." In *The Broken Covenant*, "America" is neither new nor particularly genuine. Where earlier there had been an optimistic, if cautious and self-critical, hope for evolution, here there is only Bellah's grim intonation that America must recognize her "broken covenant," realize that the reality falls far short of the ideal. If redemption comes, it is no longer through our own efforts but as an act of grace. Bellah continues to assert that American society is facing its third time of trial, but now he says, "[i]t is a test of whether we can control the very economic and technical forces, which are our greatest achievement, before they destroy us."²⁶ Bellah has moved away from the convergence between culture and religion, toward a more specifically religious, radical Protestant, rejection of the world. Secular and religious dimensions of American society are much more strongly differentiated, as the form of the jeremiad requires. The condemnation of secular society requires the invocation of the higher standard that religious discourse represents, that is, the distinction between material and spiritual bases of satisfaction, between "virtue" and "self-interest."

The irony is that, even while impugning the health and robustness of American culture, in *The Broken Covenant* Bellah provides cultural sociology with its most robust model yet. For he broaches explicitly something no contemporary other than Roland Barthes had seriously considered, the power of myth. "It is the role of symbols and myths at the level of personal life both to stimulate and mobilize psychic energy and to provide form and control for it," Bellah writes.²⁷

Myth does not attempt to describe reality; that is the job of science. Myth seeks rather to transfigure reality so that it provides moral and spiritual meaning to individuals or societies. Myths, like scientific theories, may be true or false, but the test of truth or falsehood is different.²⁸

By recognizing myth as a variable in its own right, and by exploring in some detail what he calls America's "origin myth," Bellah provides sociologists with a new realm of potential investigation. Of course, the upshot of his empirical narrative is that "paradise" lies at the beginning of America's great experiment, whereas for evolutionists like Parsons "paradise" is never at the

beginning of history but always at the end. In conceptual terms, the gesture toward myth marks a fundamental advance. In his essay "Between Religion and Social Science," Bellah had outlined a program for what he called "symbolic realism," in which symbols and symbol systems were seen as having autonomy, as opposed to functioning solely in the service of other, more powerful interests. Symbolic realism suggested that symbolic patterns were themselves powerful determinants in their own right. This move is what allows Bellah to take things like myth and archetypes seriously for the first time in his work.

Once again, this change in content corresponds with, and is facilitated by, a change in form. Parsons's formal model is like a bronze Michelangelo: it could only stand and be admired, it could not take life and move. Parsons could posit, for example, what he called "constitutive myth" as the apex of the pattern-maintenance (i.e., cultural) subsystem of his social-system model, but he had no way of tangibly exploring it. In the more informal, more internal, hermeneutic style of Bellah, Michelangelo's cultural masterpiece can walk off the pedestal and look around. Bellah's style enables him to suggest how the empty box of Parsons's model can be filled in with the rich and full reality of American myth. Parsons's work provided the deep theoretical foundation for the later linguistic turn, for thinking about the relevance and importance of myth, ritual, and code, but his style precluded him, and anyone else who remained within his stylistic parameters, from demonstrating the *reality* of culture in terms of its feeling and form—that is, in terms of its internal structure. By contrast, Bellah's bold approach to the centrality of secular myth and symbol indicated the path that cultural sociology would take.

Bellah's move is from the analytical formalism of Parsons to narrative formalism, from the thin narrative of analysis to the thicker narrative of history. His historical narrative is a tragic one, and it comes with the requisite appurtenances of tragedy. There is the nostalgia for a paradise, made necessary by the need to compare the degenerate present (self-interested, corporate capitalist America) with the purer or pristine past (virtue-driven Puritan and Civil War America). There is a strong villain (the advent of corporate capitalism) and a helpless protagonist, the once-proud civil religion. While this move from analytic to historical formalism²⁹ ensures a thicker and more meaningful sociological narrative, Bellah's analysis also has become, as suggested above, thinner in significant ways. By stressing the tension between virtue and self-interest, Bellah reinstated the dichotomy that Parsons's pattern variable scheme and, indeed, *The Structure of Social Action* were designed to overcome. This reinstatement tended to obscure the important ways in which Bellah had moved to incorporate such cultural-sociological elements as myth, code, and ritual. Whereas these latter, theoretical innovations have been sustained by subsequent developments in cultural sociology, the em-

pirical dichotomies that Bellah saw as endemic to capitalist democracy have not stood up nearly as well. The apocalypticism grounded in *The Broken Covenant's* tragic narrative seems outdated. Was Bellah's conviction, echoing Melville, that America was facing the "Dark Ages of Democracy" borne out? Was America's covenant really "broken" by the mid-1970s? We do not believe that the answers to these questions are "yes." While *Broken Covenant* was successful as a cultural intervention, presaging the extraordinary resonance achieved by *Habits of the Heart*, the jeremiad is not social science. For us, it is Bellah's formal and substantive contributions to cultural sociology that constitute his most important legacy, not his rejection of the ethical traction of American civic culture or his "emplotment" of American history in a tragic frame.

CONCLUSION:

BELLAH'S DURKHEIM AND CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

We have traced some highlights in the culturalist revolution that Bellah initiated vis-à-vis Parsons. It is not our place here to speak about the deep psychological, even spiritual, motives that compelled him to undertake this revolt. Such complex and personal issues properly could be approached only through biography—for which Bellah's life and work would make a richly rewarding subject. Yet, without delving into Bellah's motives for this revolution, we would proffer a few concluding words about the intellectual resources that allowed him to carry it out.

We would point to, above all, his special relationship with Durkheim. To be sure, Bellah had a profoundly original interpretation of Durkheim, but this was more than an intellectual link; it was a markedly personal relationship, one that had distinctly religious overtones. Whereas Parsons had appreciated Durkheim, it was Weber whom he considered the true father of his own sociology. For Bellah it was the reverse; he appreciated Weber's comparative genius, but it was Durkheim who truly inspired him. More to the point, increasingly it was the *late* Durkheim, the Durkheim of "religious sociology," who led Bellah to the promised land of cultural sociology in 1968. "Civil Religion in America" has been read as Weberian because of its emphasis on asceticism as a political ethic; its deep structure, however, derives from Durkheim's late masterwork, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Bellah's essay challenges the very foundation of Weber's thesis of demagicalization; it describes the organization of a secular society "religiously," interprets history as myth, and puts civil ritual at its very center. What Durkheim said about his study of Aboriginal religion could just as well have been said by Bellah about his study of civil religion in America:

We are not going to study a very archaic religion simply for the pleasure of telling its peculiarities and its singularities. If we have taken it as the subject of

our research, it is because it has seemed to us better adapted than any other to lead to an understanding of the religious nature of man, that is to say, to show us an essential and permanent aspect of humanity.³⁰

While the tragic moral vision of historical declension that informed Belah's subsequent writings made this late-Durkheim framework less and less apparent, this framework had already made its way into the basic lexicon of cultural sociology, allowing the third stage in the development of this new field, cultural sociology, to be articulated in a particularly effective way. Belah's students have been centrally involved in developing this third stage, even as they struggle among themselves about the proper relationship between virtue and interest in contemporary society, about the contingency of action versus the traditions of structure, and about exactly how the later Durkheim's contributions to the study of contemporary societies ought to be considered.