

## In memoriam: Robert Neelly Bellah (23 February, 1927–30 July, 2013)

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With the death of Robert Bellah, in Berkeley, California, on 30 July, 2013, the cultural sociological community lost its last living founder. Every contemporary American cultural sociologist is Bellah's child, niece or nephew, if sometimes once or twice removed, and his influence, direct and indirect, has spread worldwide. As Yale PhD, Elizabeth Breese wrote on the Center for Cultural Sociology website in the wake of Bellah's death: 'One of the gifts of academic life is being connected to the people whose names become placeholders for ways of thinking, where life meets durable knowledge and contribution. Often the most meaningful connections are between teacher and student, and on in a chain'.

One of Parsons' most creative and gifted students, Bellah and his graduate student friend Clifford Geertz spent their early and middle years forging a new pathway in the social sciences. Against every manner of reduction, Bellah created a notion of 'symbolic realism', an idea that continues to make sense today. Compared with any Durkheim scholar before him, Bellah was sensitive to the emergence of religious sociology in Durkheim's late writings, a sensibility that informed 'Civil Religion in America', the extraordinary essay from half a century ago that laid out a radically cultural model for thinking about social institutions. Fearless politically as well as intellectually – he was forced into a 2-year exile as a victim of McCarthyism – Bellah became an outspoken public intellectual during what he called America's 'third time of trial' in the late 60s and 70s. Only after retiring did he take back up his work on religious evolution, spending the last decades of his life on the *magnum opus* published in 2011, *Religion in Human Evolution*. Building upon Jasper's seminal framing of Weber's sociology of religion, Bellah found a way to transcend Weber's orientalism by demonstrating that Buddhism, Confucianism and Hinduism were as much 'Axial Age' religions as their Western counterparts. With this decisive leap, this lifelong scholar of Japan joined his colleague Shmuel Eisenstadt in creating a bridge for Weberian sociology to move beyond its origins in the Western imperial age. One of the

last representatives of the postwar American sociology that linked the classics to mid-20th century modernity, Bellah was a giant figure whose cultural understanding of contemporary society will continue to inform the new century now underway.

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