

### **Jeffrey Alexander's comments on the passing of Robert Bellah**

We learned with great sadness that Robert Bellah died last night in Berkeley. The world-wide intellectual community of cultural sociologists loses its last living founder. There is a sense in which every contemporary sociologist is Bellah's child, niece, or nephew. 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's 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 religious sociology of the late Durkheim, and his extraordinarily original essay on American "civil religion," written almost half a century ago, forged a radically different, more cultural model for thinking about institutions. Fearless politically as well as intellectually -- he was forced into a two-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 60s and 70s. Only after retiring did he return to his work in historical religious evolution, spending the last decades of his life on his magnum opus *Religion in Human Evolution*. Building upon Jasper's interpretation of Weber's sociology of religion, Bellah, a life-long scholar of Japan, 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, Bellah joined his life-long friend Shmuel Eisenstadt in creating a bridge for Weberian sociology to move beyond its origins in the Western imperial age. One of the last living links to to the fertile post-war period of American sociology, Bellah is a giant figure in the study of culture whose work will be still be read in the century that follows.

As my former student, Elizabeth Breese, aptly states: "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."

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