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# Before Civil Religion. On Robert Bellah's Forgotten Encounters with America, 1955-1965

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Flashback / “Heritage and Choice in American Religion”:  
An Unpublished Essay by Robert N. Bellah

## Before Civil Religion

### On Robert N. Bellah’s Forgotten Encounters with America, 1955-1965

by Matteo Bortolini

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It is the occupational disease of the intellectual to see problems and crises everywhere.

Robert Bellah, “Heritage and Choice in American Religion,” 1965

The name of Robert N. Bellah is indelibly linked with his work on American politics and religion. Since the publication of his classic essay, “Civil Religion in America,” until his present-day activity as an occasional blogger writing on Barack Obama’s presidential election, Bellah has been known as much for his penetrating studies on the United States as for his passionate leftist political commitment. However, Bellah’s starting point was completely different. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he was widely recognized as a specialist in Far Eastern religions, the author of a well-known book on Tokugawa Japan, and a theorist of the sociology of religion. “Civil Religion in America,” published in 1967 as he was entering his forties, was Bellah’s first foray into American studies – a debut which proved to be so successful that it revolutionized the entire trajectory of his life and work.

Over the years, Bellah has tried to make sense of his shift from Japan to America, narrating how he was almost forced to write “Civil Religion in America” as an occasional contribution to a *Daedalus* conference on American religion and culture. The unexpected success of the essay catapulted him into an extensive multidisciplinary debate which he had not anticipated, but in which he decided to take part due to his deeply felt duties as an intellectual and a citizen [see Bellah 1989; Bellah 2001; Mathisen 1989]. In his autobiographical introduction to *Beyond Belief*, Bellah [1970a, xvii] described the late 1960s as a period of personal turmoil, characterized by his “dismay at the failure of [American] society to move quickly and efficiently to correct racial injustice, distress at the growing turbulence [...] in the academic community and above all horror at the profoundly immoral and unjustified war in

Vietnam.” Bellah’s depiction of “Civil Religion in America” as “a strong endorsement of core American values, at least in their most self-critical form,” reinterpreted in the wake of “the deepening involvement [of the United States] in the Vietnam War” [Bellah 1970a, xvii; Bellah 2003, 3] frames his shift to American studies as the political awakening of a hitherto optimistic intellectual interested in exotic cultures and theoretical sociology.

A different reading of Bellah’s shift was proposed by Jeffrey C. Alexander, a former student of Bellah’s, and Steven J. Sherwood in a short paper titled “Mythic Gestures” [Alexander and Sherwood 2002]. Here the originality of “Civil Religion in America” is found more in the framework, writing style and “aesthetic form” than in its focus. Alexander and Sherwood’s explanation is couched in purely intellectual terms: the move is interpreted as the consequence of the gradual clarification of the foundations of a new hermeneutical paradigm for the social sciences, and the essay is interpreted as an attempt on Bellah’s part to move beyond the sociological ideas of his mentor, Talcott Parsons. This interpretation – which takes the elaboration of a full-fledged “cultural sociology” as its endpoint and closely links Bellah’s work with that of his friend and colleague, Clifford Geertz, – is persuasive, and is supported by Bellah’s own reflections on his intellectual biography [see Bellah 1970a; Bellah 1970b].

Psychological and intellectual explanations, however, only recount part of the story. In the following, I would like to extend and complete them with a more structural account which, following the work of Randall Collins and Pierre Bourdieu, starts from an understanding of intellectuals and their ideas as constituted by their interactional and structural networks:

It is intellectuals’ experience in the network of intellectuals that constitute them as intellectuals, and shapes the contents of their thinking as they take up a position *vis-à-vis* other intellectuals in seeking their niche in the attention space [Collins 2004, 357].

In particular, vertical (teacher/student) relationships are necessary for the production and reproduction of intellectual practices via the transmission of cultural capital and scholarly skills [Bourdieu 1988; Bourdieu 2001]. Like any apprenticeship, intellectual training is bound to come to an end as the thinker, or the scientist, is presented with the crucial prospect of whether to move toward the center of the profession or to settle in a peripheric position. This means that the emancipation of pupils *vis-à-vis* their teachers is not simply a psychological or intellectual process; it also has a strong structural component: it is the very logic of intellectual distinction to drive scholars to break with their mentors in order to gain recognition within a

portion of the field. In addition, the more eminent the teachers, the more intensely this problem will be experienced by their pupils [Collins 2002, 52-56]. On the one hand, the latter have experienced the energy of their mentors and have interiorized ambition as a fundamental ingredient of their intellectual habitus. On the other hand, the stature of their teachers and the number of gifted students attracted by their eminence will make the stakes higher and the competition harder. Thus, the very structure of the intellectual field leads the most ambitious pupils to break off their intellectual relationship with their mentors and try to find a voice of their own. As Neil J. Smelser [2000, 13] put it in his autobiographical reflections, the brightest students of important teachers will seek “to set up their own shop” as soon as they feel ready to “fly solo,” to mix metaphors.

This paper focuses on Robert Bellah’s work prior to 1967, in order to make two points. Bellah’s scholarly relationship with the United States began long before the publication of “Civil Religion in America.”<sup>1</sup> A careful reading of some of his published work reveals a constant engagement with American culture and society, and archival research disclosed two papers on American religion written before “Civil Religion in America.” My first argument is that these forgotten encounters with America represent a vantage point to examine the process of Bellah’s individuation and “coming of age” as an intellectual. In sections 1 to 5, I summarize Bellah’s early academic career to show how the cultural, institutional and relational contexts within which he carried on his scholarly work between 1955 and 1965 both motivated and shaped his interest in the United States.<sup>2</sup> My second point is that, precisely at the time of writing “Civil Religion in America,” Bellah was facing the Collinsian problem of the gifted student, required to decide between remaining in the shadow of his mentor or trying to step out and occupy an individual position within the intellectual field. In sections 6 and 7, I recount the process that led to the publication of “Civil Religion in America” and advance some hypotheses on the relationship between

<sup>1</sup> I am not talking here of Bellah’s personal, “non professional” political ideas. At Los Angeles High School, Bellah was the editor of the school newspaper, *Blue and White*, and his column often verged on political matters (see, for example, Bellah [1944a]; Bellah [1944b]). In 1947, he joined the Communist Party and was a member of Harvard’s John Reed Club, a communist student organization. He left the party in 1949. See Lipset [1975]; Bellah [1977]; Bellah [2005].

<sup>2</sup> Although far from arbitrary, my choice of contexts is highly selective. Bellah was from the beginning a versatile scholar and, as I will make clear, he always embraced an eclectic, multidisciplinary stance. He also maintained strong ties with scholars, such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who explicitly opposed some of the principles of modernization theory and area studies as they were promoted and practised at Harvard [see, for example, Wallerstein 1997]. I will touch upon these “minor” contexts in the conclusions. On “going local” in the sociology of ideas, see Camic 1992 and Camic and Gross 2001.

Bellah's ideas about America and the development of his scholarly and academic career.

## 1. Talcott Parsons and the Professionalization of Postwar Sociology

When Bellah enrolled at Harvard in 1945, American sociology was undergoing a massive shift toward professionalization. Thanks to the rise of confidence in the practical uses of social research propelled by the participation of social scientists in the war effort, a huge flow of public and private money entered all major departments of sociology. A new structure of funding adopted by federal agencies and philanthropic foundations, which privileged interdisciplinary collaborations focused on particular projects, dramatically changed the character of scholarly life: "Dependence on the approval of one's professional peers, which had to be affirmed explicitly and frequently, became the new condition of scholarly competition" [Turner and Turner 1990, 95-97; Crowther-Heyck 2006; Buxton 1985]. In the decade 1945-1955, the number of PhD's in sociology and that of the members of the American Sociological Association rocketed. Soon after Bellah got his first job as a lecturer, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 further expanded funding of the social sciences.

On the intellectual side of these structural changes stood a reform movement intended to create a clear-cut scientific and autonomous social science.<sup>3</sup> The movement adopted a naturalistic attitude which succeeded in bringing together different, and often conflicting, intellectual traditions [Steinmetz 2007]. The spread of methodological positivism – which defined the goal of science as the discovery of covering laws through the collection and treatment of empirical data, – led to increases in quantitative techniques and mathematical modeling, and the establishment of huge research venues such as the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University [Wallerstein 1996, 46; Steinmetz 2005; Wallerstein 2007; Haney 2008]. This methodological normalization was combined with an attempt to develop a specific disciplinary language intended to differentiate sociology from amateur thinking on social problems and to legitimate its findings, not only as "truly scientific" but also as reliable policy-making tools [Abbott and Sparrow 2007; see Wagner and Wittrock 1991, 346].

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the movement was much wider and aimed at strengthening the legitimation of the "behavioral sciences" *tout court*. The term was introduced in the late 1940s, "to avoid the confusion of social science and socialism" [Crowther-Heyck 2006, 438-439]. See Harvard University [1954] and Miller [1955] for two contemporary assessments of the term and its consequences.

The vanguard of this intellectual-scientific movement was located at the universities of Harvard and Columbia. While they never fully hegemonized postwar sociology, Talcott Parsons' and Robert K. Merton's variant formulations of *structural-functionalism* represented one of the most significant efforts to redesign the boundaries and constitutive norms of the discipline. Structural-functionalism was characterized by a penchant for European theorists, an analytical conception of sociological theory, and the search for functional explanations of societal phenomena in terms of normative structures and systems.<sup>4</sup> The main credo of the structural-functionalist movement was articulated by two of its key members, Seymour Martin Lipset and Neil Smelser, when they wrote that “without a guiding body of theory and methods to enable men to relate their findings to society or its various problems, no real accumulation of valid action-relevant findings is possible” [Lipset and Smelser 1961, 6; see also Parsons 1945a; Coser 1976].

Within this context, Talcott Parsons' organizational and charismatic leadership is hard to overestimate. His project of creating a unified analytical framework under the rubric of the “general theory of action” promised to further the professionalization process by accomplishing two goals: facilitating the division of labor, as well as meaningful interchanges, between the behavioral sciences, and providing the tools needed to study and compare all kinds of social phenomena [Parsons 1937, 753-775; see also Parsons and Barber 1948]. Parsons' cybernetic theory was part and parcel of the project. The concept of the “social system” performed a mediating function, positing the absence of any ultimate element of “the social” in favor of an understanding of reality as a multi-layered field in which objects could be observed either as wholes or as complexes of parts and processes. The “pattern variables” were introduced as a set of five distinctions aimed at dismantling the rigidities of the all-encompassing dichotomies used by those European theorists on which Parsons' based his work – i.e., Ferdinand Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* vs. *Gesellschaft*, Émile Durkheim's mechanical vs. organic solidarity, or Max Weber's traditional vs. rationalized societies [see Parsons 1951a; Parsons and Shils 1951]. These trends were strengthened

<sup>4</sup> It should be stressed that many of these points remained at the state of *desiderata*. For example, the integration between theory and empirical research, as they were practised at Harvard and Columbia, was more imaginary than real [see Haney 2008, 46 ff.]. While Parsons and Merton retrospectively rejected the “structural-functionalism” label, it is quite clear that, at the time, it was widely used within their circles [see Parsons 1970; Parsons 1975; Bellah 1952, 145, n. 1; Levy 1952]. In addition, its success in the common understanding of their work in the 1950s-1960s seems appropriate to maintain it, at least for the sake of brevity. In his book on theory groups in American sociology, Nicholas Mullins [1973] proposed to call the Parsons-Merton movement “standard American sociology,” but current scholarship warns against too consensual a view of postwar sociology [Calhoun and VanAntwerpen 2007].

by Parsons' shift to radical functionalism and the creation of the so-called "AGIL" or four-function paradigm in the early 1950s. The AGIL scheme was based on the premise that all systems should fulfill four basic functions – adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance – in order to endure within complex environments. The model was said to be suited to any kind of psychological, social or cultural system, and was viewed as a theoretical mechanism working across disciplinary fields and boundaries [Parsons *et al.* 1953; Parsons and Smelser 1956]. The four-function paradigm allowed Parsons to introduce a last major theoretical step, an evolution theory of social change, according to which functionally specialized structures progressively emerged from a primitive state of functional diffuseness [Parsons 1964].<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Robert Bellah at the Department of Social Relations at Harvard

Talcott Parsons was not only one of the most active and visible advocates of the intellectual reform of the social sciences. He also gave it a strong institutional base. Harvard's Department of Social Relations was founded in the summer of 1946 by Parsons together with a cultural anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, a social psychologist, Gordon Allport, and the director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic, Henry A. Murray. Inspired by the intense interdisciplinary collaborations of wartime and dissatisfied with both the way their fields were organized at Harvard and their own academic prospects, the four founders advertised their disciplines as the "basic" theoretical foundations of the remaining (but decidedly more firmly established) social sciences – economics, history, and political science [Gilman 2003; Gerhardt 2002, 129-183]. The Department also had its own Laboratory of Social Relations, directed by Samuel Stouffer, the technical director of the Army-funded wartime research project published in 1949 as *The American Soldier* [Haney 2008, 46-59]. In fact, the internal consensus Parsons had sought was never reached [Nichols 1998; Johnston 1998], and some of the most renowned members of the faculty – such as David Riesman, George Homans, Jerome Bruner and Erik Erikson – were never part of the wider project. On the side of professional training, however, by the mid-1950s the Department had granted PhD's to scholars of the stature of Arthur Vidich, Harold Garfinkel, Renée C. Fox and Clifford Geertz.

For those who belonged to his inner circle, Parsons' example and stamina were a constant source of inspiration and excitement [see Fox 2010; Tiryakian 2007; Smelser

<sup>5</sup> A full assessment of these ideas would have to wait the late 1960s [Parsons 1966a; Parsons 1971]. On Parsons' evolutionism, see Eisenstadt [2004] and Bortolini [2009a].

2000; Geertz 1995; Johnson and Johnson 1986; for a different view, see Vidich 2000].<sup>6</sup> As a student at the Department of Social Relations, Bellah was immersed in this climate and identified strongly with structural-functionalism. He “discovered” Parsons as an undergraduate thanks to his honors-thesis advisor, David Aberle.<sup>7</sup> Upon graduating in social anthropology, in the fall of 1950 he entered a joint PhD program in sociology and Far Eastern languages, with Parsons and John Pelzel, an anthropologist, as his advisors. The subject of his doctoral dissertation, an extension of Weber’s Protestant ethic thesis to Japan, was highly consistent with his mentor’s theoretical and empirical interests. Moreover, as a member of the stricter Parsonian circle, Bellah could take advantage of early formulations of the AGIL scheme, and used them as the main analytical tool to interpret the relationship between Japanese cultural and social structures [Bellah 1957; Bellah 1964a; Bellah 2007].

If speaking of a clearly defined division of labor would be unwarranted,<sup>8</sup> it is true that, after completing his PhD dissertation, Bellah had already become *the* theorist of religion of the Parsonian group.<sup>9</sup> In a paper entitled “The Systematic Study of Religion,” written in 1955, he used a sophisticated version of the four-function paradigm to present a detailed analysis of three structural levels (symbols, actions, and institutions) and three processual phenomena (socialization, differentiation, and “pathology”) related to religion [Bellah 1970a, 260 ff.; see also Bellah 1958a]. Although Parsons had devoted some papers to both the sociology of religion and American religion [see Parsons 1944; Parsons 1945b; Parsons 1951b],<sup>10</sup> Bellah’s manuscript was the first attempt at framing the study of religion according to the then unfolding Parsonian paradigm. As “The Systematic Study of Religion” began to circulate

<sup>6</sup> A similar climate was to be found at Columbia: see Coleman [1990].

<sup>7</sup> Aberle, a social anthropologist specializing in the Navajo, was himself a former student of Parsons. Together with Marion J. Levy, Francis X. Sutton, Albert K. Cohen and A. K. Davis, Aberle was the author of a well-known paper entitled “The Functional Prerequisites of Society” [Aberle *et al.* 1950]. Bellah’s very first publication, *Apache Kinship Systems*, was a version of his prize-winning honor thesis, and used concepts taken from Parsons’ manuscript of *The Social System*. See Bellah [1952, 145, n. 1].

<sup>8</sup> For different visions on concepts such as “group,” “cluster,” “movement,” or “school,” see Collins [1998]; Mullins [1973]; Clark [1973]; Frickel and Gross [2005]. Edward Tiryakian’s thesis on the compactness of the “Parsonian school” seems a little too bold [see Tiryakian 1986].

<sup>9</sup> Geertz was also working on religion, but he was an anthropologist and went to Indonesia in 1954. After his return, he taught at Harvard as a lecturer and then went to Chicago University [Geertz 1995]. It should be noted that, when Bellah got his first job as a lecturer at Harvard in 1957, his graduate school companions had already left Harvard. Bellah and Parsons also co-taught a course on the sociology of religion for several years.

<sup>10</sup> Parsons also wrote several papers on the United States, and for nearly thirty years taught a general course on American society. He also wrote several versions of a long book on America, all of which remained unpublished at the time of his death. One of the most recent versions was published in 2007: see Parsons 2007 and Sciortino 2007.

among the structural-functionalists,<sup>11</sup> it became the immediate cause behind Bellah's first documented professional encounter with America.

### 3. A Parsonian Clue to the Religious History of the American People

Between 1955 and 1956, Robert Bellah wrote several versions of a paper entitled "Religion in America" at the request of Charles Y. Glock, who had been impressed by his theoretical work and was unsuccessfully trying to bring him to Columbia.<sup>12</sup> Following in Parsons' footsteps, Bellah criticized his fellow sociologists of religion for their lack of theoretical sophistication. As a first step, he defined religion as a sub-system devoted to fulfilling tension-management and pattern-maintenance functions; he then analyzed religious organizations using the AGIL scheme, differentiating between service (adaptation), worship (goal attainment), fellowship (integration) and piety (pattern maintenance) [Bellah 1955-1956, 3-4]. Armed with these theoretical weapons, Bellah read the major changes in the history of church life in the United States as an alternation between instrumental (A/G) challenges and integrative (I/L) ones. His interpretation was profoundly influenced by his framework: since religion analytically had to do with meaning, tension management and pattern maintenance, expressive moments lasted longer and produced deeper changes than instrumental ones [*ibidem*, 36].

The continuous shift between the institutionalization of religious values in social structures and their internalization within the personalities of individuals was the *leitmotiv* of the paper. According to Bellah, soon after the foundation of the first Puritan colonies, the church found itself "fighting for its survival and for [its] values in the secular society which it found essential to its life" [*ibidem*, 9]. In fact, the particular settlement between the church and society on which the Republic was founded was a product of the first wave of pietistic revivalism [*ibidem*, 12]. In the early Nineteenth century, a new wave of revivalism was instrumental in helping new

<sup>11</sup> In a review of the state of the sociology of religion in America in the 1950s, Charles Y. Glock [1959] was to praise Bellah as the most promising theorist in the sociology of religion, citing this unpublished paper. In a letter dated November 14, 1955, Bellah asked Parsons to send a copy of the paper to Jeremiah Kaplan, Geertz, and Levy, of the Free Press, who had expressed interest in it [Harvard Archives, HUF (FP) 15.2, box 5].

<sup>12</sup> The existing version of "Religion in America" is 45 pages long and undated. It was never published and was only recently recovered from Bellah's own archive after I showed him his old correspondence with Parsons in Berkeley in July 2007. It was first cited in a letter to Parsons dated May 21, 1956. Bellah, who at the time had no job and was a fellow at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, told Parsons he had not accepted Glock's proposal to join the Columbia faculty in a letter dated June 7, 1956 [both letters are now stored at Harvard Archives, HUF (FP) 15.2, box 5].

and old forms of Protestantism to evangelize the West. Here, again, Bellah found a symbiotic relationship between the values of the church and those of secular society: "The revivalist churches [were] seen as assimilating mechanisms engaged in bringing people into the sphere of the values of the Protestant ethic, which [was] at the same time the dominant value system of the culture" [*ibidem*, 15]. Accordingly, the original theocratic project of ascetic Protestantism was abandoned in favor of the establishment of a "Christian society."

In the early Twentieth century, the churches had to face new problems: crime and delinquency on one hand, and the labor question on the other. This gave rise to the Social Gospel movement and to the "crusades" against alcohol and the "war to end war." The period was marked by little attention to theological concerns and a generally optimistic outlook on man and his potential, as the churches started to look more and more like voluntary associations and fulfilled many recreational and social functions [*ibidem*, 19-21]. At the same time, urbanization and industrialization had brought about new stresses which the churches were ill-equipped to face, among which were the tensions caused by the quest for individual success. The answer, not surprisingly, was a new wave of revivalism, which this time included the Roman Catholic church. Apart from Billy Graham and other successful evangelists, the early years of the Twentieth century saw the rise of "holiness pentecostal churches" and a number of sects and preachers, such as Christian Science and Norman Vincent Peale, "which promised to obtain empirical ends by means of the use of divine power" [*ibidem*, 24-25].

This last change marked the end of hegemony of liberal Protestantism, unable to face the competition of tension-management doctrines and the American dream. The 1929 crisis was in fact the first depression which was not accompanied by a strong religious revival. At the same time, neo-orthodox thinkers Richard Niebuhr, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich brought about "a marked realignment of religious thinking" and an intellectual renaissance of Protestantism. Bellah's essay depicted the early 1950s as a contradictory age: a strong sense of tragedy went hand in hand with massive church attendance, while the resurgence of religious symbols in public life – such as the introduction of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance [*ibidem*, 29] – accompanied new forms of adaptation of religion to the American way of life. The emerging forms of Protestantism turned away from social reform and focused on individual piety and managing the stresses caused by the Cold War and the quest for success, often by way of over-optimistic preaching [*ibidem*, 31-33].

On the whole, Bellah's analytical interpretation of the development of religious life in the United States was consistent with Parsons' refusal of simplistic seculariza-

tion theories, which depended, on its part, on the functionalist underpinnings of his general analytical scheme [see Lidz 1982; Tiryakian 1982; Lidz 2010a]. Bellah's main thesis was that in America the churches and "society" had always been reciprocally necessary: while secular society provided the dynamism necessary for the achievement of religious goals, the churches supplied meaning, inspiration, and integration in the face of continuous social change [Bellah 1955-1956, 16]. From time to time, this had called for a revitalization of individual piety and a process of osmosis between the churches and society. In the Twentieth century, industrialization and urbanization had been accompanied by a new rise of religious sentiment and the emergence of new churches:

The church, which as an institution specialized in such [integrative and pattern-maintenance] function[s] from the start, was called on to play an *increasingly important role* in this respect through the rise of a complex industrial society. Further, its integrative function in highly mobile urban residential areas became increasingly valuable.

This also meant that "the new piety [typical of the 1950s, should] not be interpreted as a mere fad, but [might] be indicative of crucial long-term equilibrating functions which religion can play in modern society" [*ibidem*, 39]. As we shall see, the Weberian theme of how modern society strived to create and maintain significant identities in the face of continuous social change was to be of constant concern for Bellah.

Whereas the essay was preceded by a warning in which Bellah declared his lack of expertise,<sup>13</sup> his long review of the relevant literature showed his mastery of all major works on American religion, with a preference for Perry Miller's history of Puritan New England and fellow structural-functionalist Robin Williams' *American Society*, defined as "perhaps the best sociological treatment of the overall problem" of religion in America, and Benton Johnson's dissertation on Holiness and non-Holiness groups [*ibidem*, 41-42; see Williams 1951]. Bellah continued working on the manuscript for a long time: in a letter he wrote in 1960 while in Japan as a Fulbright fellow, he cited a shorter version of the paper and regretted not having being able to add a section on the importance of Parsons' pattern variables for the analysis of American religion, although it was clear that the United States were less than a marginal focus of Bellah's research. As he wrote to Glock, "it has been, as you can imagine, horribly difficult to write about America when all I really want to do is steep myself in Japan."<sup>14</sup> However,

<sup>13</sup> "This paper is based on a month and a half of general reading on the subject of American religion. Its purpose is to make a brief analytical survey of the subject and to review the literature" [Bellah 1955-1956, 1].

<sup>14</sup> Robert N. Bellah to Charles Y. Glock, October 1, 1960 [BPF].

even in his work on the Far East America had always been part of the picture. Let us see why.

#### 4. Modernization Theory and America

Up to this point, I have focused on the wider intellectual *milieu* of Bellah's encounter with the social sciences. As a student at the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, Bellah entered the sociological profession by way of Parsonian structural-functionalism. His unpublished essay on American religion, a work that was commissioned to him as the "appointed" expert on religion of the Parsonian group,<sup>15</sup> did reveal the intensive use of concepts derived from his mentor's work and a creative implementation of Parsons' "AGIL logic." As most of the reviews of Bellah's first book, *Tokugawa Religion*, show, the imprint of structural functionalism was also evident in his work on Japan [Passin 1957; Liu 1957; Nash 1958]. Here, however, the general theoretical scheme was supplemented by a specific middle-range framework: as Bellah [1970a, xvi-xvii] retrospectively acknowledged, his early studies were all framed in terms of *modernization theory*, the then hegemonic paradigm for the explanation of societal change. Given the key role played by Talcott Parsons in the development of modernization theory and its currency within Bellah's relational circles, this comes as no surprise. As I will show in a moment, the rhetorical power of this discourse depended partly on the identification of America at the apex of the modernization process. While Bellah tried to differentiate his work from reductionist versions of modernization theory, his understanding of the United States was entirely consistent with that upheld by Parsons and other modernization theorists.

Generally speaking, modernization theory may be described as a set of inter-related assumptions about economic, political, social and cultural change explicitly designed as an alternative to Marxist (and thus Sovietic) understandings of the rise of industrial society.<sup>16</sup> As Michael Latham [2000] and Nils Gilman [2003] have shown in detail, Parsons' conceptual elaborations and his systematizations of some widely-held notions about modern and developing societies constituted the backbone of the work of many anthropologists, sociologists, economic historians and political scientists. One could even say that in modernization theory Talcott Parsons' dream of a unified social science built on a small set of shared structural-functionalist principles

<sup>15</sup> The anecdote about the 1965 *Daedalus* conference (see *infra*, section 6) clearly expresses Parsons' idea of the relationship between general theory and particular topics.

<sup>16</sup> One of the most important books of the age, Walt W. Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth*, was explicitly characterized by its author as *A Non-Communist Manifesto* [Rostow 1960].

was – albeit for a limited period and among a limited number of working social scientists – fulfilled.

Among the main tenets of modernization theory were a sharp distinction between “modern” and “traditional” societies; a systemic conception of societies as quasi-coherent wholes in which structural and cultural change occurred in a highly integrated way; the idea that social change followed an almost unilinear path composed of a succession of clearly identifiable “stages”; the selection of technological and economic factors as independent variables; a technocratic understanding of public life, according to which the political and military élites should create the necessary consensus around post-ideological decisions in a sort of top-down, albeit benign and non-coercive, management of public opinion [Latham 2000, 4, 22; Harrison 1991, 29-32; see also Alexander 1987, 73-88; Alexander 1995, 11-19; Joas and Knöbl 2009, 308-309]. Deeply immersed in the general scientific climate of their times, modernization theorists approached the empirical study of developing countries using an array of new comparative methods.

Integral to this project was a powerful strategy of identification between America and modernity. On one hand, the idea of a single evolution path automatically pointed to “the most modernized societies” as a model and an inspiration for “underdeveloped” societies. In fact, modernization theory aimed at demonstrating “to the ‘emerging countries’ that development along liberal, capitalist lines could alleviate poverty and raise living standards at least as fast as revolutionary and Marxist alternatives” [Latham 2000, 28; see also Chomsky *et al.* 1997; Engerman 2010]. On the other hand, what counted as “the most modernized society” was an ideal image of the United States as a society of strong interdependencies, where market economy, democratic pluralism, religious secularization, open and free communication, and individualism supported one another by way of a widespread agreement on a basic set of post-ideological values [Gilman 2003, 101-102]. Building on this understanding of the United States as “the most modernized society,” American sociologists, economists and political scientists could appoint their fellow citizens, in David Riesman’s words, to the global role of “apostles of modernity” [*ibidem*, 63-69].

## 5. Bellah as a Modernization Theorist

At Harvard, Bellah’s association with Parsons and the Department of Social Relations, the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the Institute for Far Eastern Studies made him an integral member of the networks in which modernization theory was

a pervasive *doxa*.<sup>17</sup> Key modernization theorists Alex Inkeles and David McClelland were senior members of the Harvard Department, while Parsons' students and associates Marion J. Levy, Jr., Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Seymour M. Lipset, Francis X. Sutton, Clifford Geertz and Neil J. Smelser all played leading roles in developing the paradigm. Scholarly and organizational exchanges between Harvard and other centers devoted to modernization theory – such as the Committee on the Comparative Study of New Nations led by Edward Shils at Chicago, and the MIT Center for International Studies – were continuous and intense.

In fact, the doxic horizon should be conceived less as a monolithic bloc than as a platform for the continuous emergence of distinctions, which often took the form of alternative simplifications of Parsons' theories on the part of working social scientists [Latham 2000, 37 ff.; Gilman 2003, 116 ff.]. As it has been noted [Joas and Knöbl 2009, 331], Bellah's early publications remained closer to his teacher's intricacies and the classical sociology of Weber and Durkheim than much of his colleagues' work. The introduction to *Tokugawa Religion* might be read as a first attempt to establish Bellah's position within the field of modernization theory.

For a start, Bellah differentiated his object from all other developing countries: Japan was the only non-Western fully industrialized nation. The task, then, was not that of envisaging the pre-conditions of modernization and “take-off” – as his friend Clifford Geertz was doing in his studies on Indonesian society and religion [Geertz 1960; Geertz 1963; see also Geertz 1995; Gilman 2002] – but rather to reconstruct from a historical point of view the emergence of those functional analogs to the Protestant ethic which had contributed to the modernization of Japan in the Nineteenth century [Bellah 1957, 2-3]. From a methodological point of view, this sounded like a plea against reductionist approaches, as most modernization theorists shared with Marxist students of development a preference for materialist explanations:

Both the Restoration and the subsequent modernization of Japan must be seen first in political terms and only secondarily in economic terms. I am insistent on this point because the tendency to regard economic developments as “basic” and political

<sup>17</sup> As a graduate student, Bellah supported himself thanks to a fellowship at the Harvard-Yenching Institute, then directed by the famed Japanologist Serge Elisseeff [Monteith Deptula and Hess 1996; Bellah 1977]. The godfather of Harvard's Far Eastern studies, Edwin O. Reischauer, was himself a proponent of modernization theory and had a intermittent but solid relationship with Parsons [Buxton and Nichols 2000; Harootunian 1993, 206-208]. As one of the founders of the so-called “area studies”, he gave a strong organizational impetus to one of the major arenas where modernization theory was practised. See Reischauer and Fairbank [1948]; Jansen [1988]; Packard [2010]. On Parsons and area studies, see [Wallerstein 1997, 205; Gilman 2003, 73 ff.]. On the concept of *doxa* (and its correlates field and *illusio*), see Bourdieu [1977].

developments as “superstructure” is by no means confined to Marxist circles but permeates most current thinking on such matters [*ibidem*, 185].<sup>18</sup>

America entered the picture when Bellah used Parsonian conceptual tools – the pattern variables and a simplified version of the AGIL scheme – to distinguish between different kinds of modern societies according to their main value models. The United States were characterized by the ascendancy of “economic values,” that is “those values which above all characterize[d] the process of rationalization of means” at the intersection of performance and universalism. Japan, instead, could be described as a social system where “political values” emphasized the attainment of collective goals and the upholding of particularistic loyalties [*ibidem*, 5].<sup>19</sup> By drawing the distinction between economy-driven and polity-driven industrial societies, Bellah was implicitly criticizing those scholars who absolutized the American model and took for granted an inevitable convergence of all modernizing societies. Japan, as well as some unnamed European countries, had proved that a social system built on the values of particularism and performance could find its own way to modernity, so that a rationalization of the economy would not necessarily destroy traditional structures and impose its hegemony on every societal sphere. At the same time, the United States remained “the type case of a modern industrial society” [Bellah 1957, 4] and maintained a clearly paramount comparative importance.

*Tokugawa Religion* launched Bellah into the pantheon of American Japanologists. More than one reviewer, including the eminent Japanese political scientist, Maruyama Masao, compared the book to Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* [Maruyama 1958; Harootunian 1963]. In the early 1960s, Bellah was involved in the Conference on Modern Japan, the main organizational vehicle for the institutionalization of modernization theory as the hegemonic discourse in Japanese area studies [Jansen 1988; Harootunian 1993; Koschmann 2003]. This further reinforced his commitment to the paradigm and its basic tenets, as is apparent in the comprehensive assessment of American culture and society he presented in spring 1961 in a lecture devoted to the premises of his own work on modernization in Japan.<sup>20</sup>

Inspired by Parsons’ multidimensional sociology, Bellah defined social change as an evolutionary shift from traditionalism to rationalism, understood not as a di-

<sup>18</sup> Bellah was forcefully to reiterate and extend this critique in many of his published works of the period: see Bellah [1958b] and Bellah [1968].

<sup>19</sup> In *The Social System*, Parsons had proposed a similar classification of modern societies: see Parsons [1951a, chapter 5]. On the differences between Bellah’s and Parsons’ assessment of Japan (and China), see Bellah [1964a, 181 ff].

<sup>20</sup> The lecture was delivered during Bellah’s first visit to Japan as a Fulbright fellow and was *not* included in his collection of essays, *Beyond Belief* [Bellah 1970a].

chotomy but as the two poles of a continuum on which all historical societies could be located. Modern society was defined as a social system where “the rationalization process [operated] relatively freely and continues constantly with relatively few limits to revolutionize every aspect of human existence.” Following Weber, Bellah [1963, 15-16] ascribed the modernization of Europe to a combination of economic and religious factors, with an attempt at implementing the principles of the Protestant Reformation to whole societies as the key independent variable.

America was introduced as “the only large scale example of the almost completely pure working out of the fundamental motives of left-wing Protestantism.” Its comparative significance was clear: since the main cause of modernization was the diffusion of the principles of the Reformation, and America was the most radical product of the Reformation, social scientists should study it as “the purest case of modern society” and “the logical conclusion” of the rationalization process. Generalized and translated into secular terms, the Protestant ethic constituted the backbone of American culture and institutions, a virtuous – although not completely problem-free – combination of autonomy and bureaucracy, which Bellah defined, using a key Parsonian concept, as “institutionalized individualism” [*ibidem*, 27; see Bourricaud 1981; Parsons 1974]. Bellah also subscribed to a Tocquevillian version of American exceptionalism when he described the United States as the only social system which had not undergone the transition from tradition to modernity. America had been from the beginning “a Gesellschaft society”:

I think in America modernization goes all the way down to the roots, because there is not anything else in America and never was. It is not surface; it is the whole structure, the whole substance of the society itself [Bellah 1963, 21-22].

In fact, the United States were so modern that they seemed to have no relationship with underdeveloped nations. However, since the process of rationalization was one and the same, the study of American past could be a useful resource for modernizing countries [*ibidem*, 22].

Bellah also touched upon the critical political theme of modernization theory: the comparison between America and the Soviet Union. In his interpretation, Communism as the anticipation of an undifferentiated, communal society in the future, was a hopeless project, for it tried to further the process of modernization by suppressing the contradictions intrinsic to any differentiated social system. The Soviet Union had not been able to combine individualism and bureaucracy and had employed “mechanisms of suppression and denial” in order to maintain social stability, a strategy that leaned on “feudal [i.e., non-modern] elements” [*ibidem*, 24-25].

In January 1962, Bellah took the opportunity given by delayed publication to add a note and to specify his views on America. Observing that his return home had somehow darkened his outlook, Bellah explained that the value of American experience entirely depended on the upholding of “certain universal principles.” His “loyalty” and appreciation were contingent on the adherence, on the part of his country, to those (modern and revolutionary) values. At the same time, however, he drew a confident parallel between America and Pericles’ Athens, according to which the United States could be seen as “the educator of the modern world.” Although he was quite careful in differentiating his ideas from other varieties of modernization theory, Bellah’s depiction of America largely coincided with theirs. While “modernity” was not to be confused with “America,” “America” was exactly that kind of rationalized, individualized, and ever-changing society that other modernization theorists were proposing as a benchmark for evaluating the progress of other societies.

## 6. Enter Civil Religion

In the early 1960s, Bellah shifted his attention of the work of those Japanese intellectuals who had tried to make sense of the modernization of Japan.<sup>21</sup> His essays on Ienaga Saburo and Watsuji Tetsuro, characterized by a less sociological and a more humanistic attitude, and his widely read paper on religious evolution [Bellah 1964b] had little to say about America. Only in his “Epilogue” to the edited book on *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* did he touch upon the relationship between American political life and religion: writing of moments of political transition, Bellah [1965a, 173] suggested that “solemn religious symbolism – for example, the inauguration of an American president – by reference to what does not change helps to make change tolerable.” America remained a minor object of interest, which entered the picture only when the logic of comparative research called for a model of full modernization where the problem of the relationship between continuity and rationalization had been solved quite successfully.

Things, however, were about to change. On October 15-16, 1965, Bellah participated in a conference on “Religion in American Culture” at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.<sup>22</sup> He was drawn in by Talcott Parsons, who was to be the Academy chairman for the 1967-1971 term. According to his recollections, Bellah’s reaction was negative at first:

<sup>21</sup> These essays have been now collected in Bellah [2003].

<sup>22</sup> I obtained copies of the proceedings of the two conferences from Todd T. Ito of the University of Chicago Law School, whom I would like to thank.

Parsons had urged me to write a paper for a *Daedalus* conference on religion in America preparatory to a subsequent issue of the magazine. I had not wanted to participate because I did not feel I knew enough about America. I was, after all, a Japan specialist; but Talcott assured me that a sociologist can write on anything [Bellah 2006a, 137].

As we have seen, this was the main idea beyond the Parsonian view of scientific work: the existence of sound analytical frameworks allowed the sociologist to organize and understand available empirical and historical data about any social phenomenon. After all, this was what Bellah had done exactly ten years before with his first paper on American religion. In writing his new paper, entitled “Heritage and Choice in American Religion,” he did not recover any of his unpublished materials on America. As I will show in a moment, some of the themes of the first and third sections, “Historical Identity” and “Problems,” were quite consistent with what we have already seen. The most original part of the essay was section two, “The Civil Religion,” which in many respects overturned Bellah’s previous (and sparse) observations on the relationship between political and religious life in America.

The first section, devoted to the “private” heritage of American religion, centered on one of Bellah’s trademark themes: the relationship between identity and meaning, on the one hand, and modernization and change, on the other. As he had done in almost all his papers written in the early 1960s, Bellah framed this Weberian issue by drawing a distinction between modern society, characterized by “institutionalized” change, and the deeper cultural themes which constituted the basis and foundation of religious life. According to Bellah’s Durkheimian analysis, the churches provided Americans with stability in meaning and orientation, allowed them to express their sentiments and common identity, and somehow acted as a vehicle of “mechanical solidarity” [Bellah 1965b, 5-6]. Religious groups and organizations acted as the custodians of those “fundamental truth[s] about reality” which helped Americans to make sense of their everyday lives. In this sense, Bellah wrote, “certain events of the ancient past still have the most immediate significance for religious people” [*ibidem*, 1]. At the same time, the pace of social change had serious consequences for the preservation of religious traditions, a dilemma which had a particular influence on mainline Protestant churches. Since American culture and society were the stepchildren of the process of detraditionalization and rationalization inaugurated by the Reformation, the churches faced the problem of adapting to the rapidly changing society they had themselves created. At the same time, this also meant that tradition and modern society could go hand in hand, and that “one could be ‘traditionally religious’ without feeling alienated from or opposed to ‘modern society’” [*ibidem*,

5]. As he had done in his unpublished essay on religion in America ten years before, Bellah forcefully stressed the fact that interpretations of American Protestantism as a “prisoner” of the American way of life<sup>23</sup> ignored the most important historical fact about the relationship between the two:

But before we accept too quickly the critical conclusion that religion in America has been made captive by an alien culture or has been completely “privatized” we should remember to how great an extent that culture is itself a product of the religious tradition and how important for the “public” sectors of life a stable private sector can be [*ibidem*, 6].

Bellah used this critique to the thesis of the irrelevance of religion in the United States to introduce section two, which presented the “second leg” of the American religious heritage: its public dimension. Bellah introduced “civil religion” – defined as “religious acts and language in connection with many official public occasions” – with a close analysis of President Kennedy’s inaugural address, and tried to make sense of his references to an abstract (i.e., non-Christian) God [*ibidem*, 7]. According to Bellah, Kennedy’s was not a perfunctory homage to popular religious sentiments, but “the most recent statement of a theme which [lay] very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to build the Kingdom of God on earth.” In the American political tradition, Bellah said, ultimate sovereignty belonged to God, not to the people [*ibidem*, 12-13]. Thus, Kennedy had spoken of a generic God because he was using an inclusive, abstract language which could be understood, and shared, by all his fellow citizens: instead of a violation of the separation between church and state, Bellah saw a genuine interpretation of one of America’s deepest cultural themes.

Section three moved from the past to the present. Here Bellah saw two cleavages: the first divided America’s secularized élites and the religious population, and the second opposed committed clergymen and passive churchgoers. While the élites and the clergy focused on social problems, change and rationalization, the average churchgoer looked for security and relief [*ibidem*, 18]. Bellah’s grim observations about the uneasy relationship between theology, science and popular religiosity were clearly influenced by his own experience with Divinity School students and their sense of detachment toward their own parishioners. While recognizing these difficulties, Bellah put himself on the side of the “good (repressed) bourgeois,” if only for

<sup>23</sup> In his successful book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, Will Herberg [1955, 268] had interpreted the sanctification of the American Way of Life as a form of idolatry and the American “civic [*sic*] religion” as an almost consolatory practice. Even in the absence of references, any listener to Bellah’s paper would have understood his hint to this thesis. In rejecting Herberg’s critique of civil religion, Bellah was implicitly assuming a stance within an ongoing, but still unnamed, discussion.

sociological reasons. Since no change could ignore the middle class and its “irrational anxieties” about the future, Bellah suggested a mobilization of precisely the religious heritage, in its private and public dimensions, to elicit a powerful and positive response from “the majority middle strata of the society” [*ibidem*, 15-19].

“Heritage and Choice” was well received and its middle section on civil religion greatly aroused the attention of Bellah’s peers. David Riesman praised the paper,<sup>24</sup> and Parsons immediately incorporated its main point into his own writings. This long excerpt from “Religion in a Modern Pluralistic Society,” published in 1966, demonstrates Parsons’ appreciation for Bellah’s unpublished working paper from the first *Daedalus* conference:

One major evidence of [the fact that America is not a secularized country] is the emergence of what Bellah has called the American “Civic [*sic*] Religion.” There is a subtle line between the constitutional requirements of the separation of church and state, and the respects in which a “belief in God” is held to be characteristic of and even in a sense constitutive of the national community. We use the motto “In God We Trust” on coins and in various other symbolic contexts. The expression “One Nation under God” is a national slogan, also used officially. Presidential inaugurations are, so far, always attended by prayers and invocations by the clergy, though deliberately not confined to those of one “faith.” The same is true of opening of sessions of the Congress. Moreover the speeches and pronouncements of political leaders, notably Presidents such as Kennedy and Johnson, abound with religious references which often have an almost biblical tone. One may perhaps say that the “theology” of this “civic religion” is carefully kept at a very general level, so much so that it may sometimes be interpreted to be more deistic than theistic. This, of course, is in accord with the trend of the Revivalist tradition within Protestantism [Parsons 1966b, 134].

As a result, in drafting his contribution to the second American Academy conference on religion in America [May 13-14, 1966; see Cogley 1966], Bellah removed the sections on the private heritage of American religion and focused his attention on the civil religion thesis, strengthening its main assumptions, putting it into historical perspective, and presenting it in a much more elaborate way. The paper, titled “Civil Religion in America,” fully reproduced the “Kennedy section” from “Heritage and Choice,” but added new sections on other Presidents, the Civil War, and the prospects for civil religion in what Bellah called “the third time of trial,” which combined the responsibilities of the United States in the new world order of the Cold War

<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Franklin L. Ford, then Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, David Riesman wrote: “I also share with [Bellah] an interest in the sociology of religion and recently was with him at the *Daedalus* planning conference on Religion in America to which he contributed a paper of remarkable penetration.” [David Riesman to Franklin L. Ford, 11/16/1965, Harvard Archives, HUF (FP) 15.4, box17].

and the intimations of a global civil religion. The new paper, which was published as the first essay on the Winter 1967 issue of *Daedalus*, opened with a neat articulation of Bellah's main thesis on the American civil religion – “There actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America. This article argues not only that there is such a thing, but also that this religion, or perhaps better, this religious dimension, has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does” [Bellah 1967, 1], – a thesis that was to be one of the most frequently cited and criticized pieces of work for at least a decade.<sup>25</sup>

## 7. Conclusion: Intellectual and Organizational Emancipations

Bellah's papers for the *Daedalus* conferences showed both continuities and breaks with his previous work on the United States. On the side of continuities, it was clear that the difficult relationship between the changes brought about by the process of modernization and the necessity of preserving meaningful points of reference remained a major theoretical problem, as well as the relationship between politics and religion, which had always been one of the *leitmotifs* of Bellah's work, from *Tokugawa Religion* to his essays on the preconditions of revolutionary change and the modernization of Japan [see Bellah 1958b; Bellah 1970a; Bellah 2003]. The analysis of the role of the churches in American life and the significance of Protestantism for the wider American culture put forward in “Heritage and Choice” was not dissimilar to that found in “Religion in America,” and clearly contrasted those interpretations, such as Will Herberg's or Martin E. Marty's, which saw the surrender of traditional religion to the American dream.<sup>26</sup> The revolutionary theme of the existence of a higher set of religious values by means of which ordinary national political and social life could, and should, be judged, as well as the suggestion of a “world civil religion” transcending the American experience, were deeply consistent with Bellah's “additional note” to his 1961 speech on Japan.

On the side of novelties, it is true that no previous essay contained any adumbration of the most original aspects of the civil religion thesis. The close relationship

<sup>25</sup> For a sociological account of the influence of the American civil religion debate on Bellah's intellectual career, see Bortolini [2010].

<sup>26</sup> Compare, for example, Bellah's “The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will be judged; it is possible that the people may be wrong”, with Marty's “The God who was the product of America's climate of religion-in-general was neither worthy of glory nor capable of being ‘enjoyed.’ he was useful and used in a limited way; A God fashioned by a nation is free neither to judge nor to save it.” [Bellah 1967, 4; Marty 1959, 108; see also Herberg 1955].

between religion and politics portrayed in “Civil Religion in America” was almost completely absent in “Religion in America.” In 1955, Bellah had attributed the Revolution and the founding of the republic to “secular movements” alone, and had emphasized that their primacy had probably “drained away interest that would otherwise have had a religious expression” [Bellah 1955-1956, 12-13]. In another, rapid passage he had explained the insertion of the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance as a symptom of the postwar religious revival, without any indication of a deeper cultural theme in American history and politics. The last section of “Civil Religion in America,” with its clear critiques to American foreign policy, was also far from the positive, almost optimistic tone of Bellah’s previous work.<sup>27</sup>

However, as Alexander and Sherwood [2002, 2, 13-14] have shown, the most striking novelty of the two *Daedalus* papers was the search for an original voice. The two papers were free of sociological jargon, and all previous Parsonian frameworks – the four function paradigm, the pattern variables, and modernization theory – were completely absent. The search for a new language was undoubtedly due to intellectual reasons. Bellah’s attention to the stratified nature of symbols, his awareness of the constant struggle between fragmentation and wholeness, his firm belief in the deep religiosity of any human subject all called for a “thicker,” less abstract, and more interpretative understanding of culture which went far beyond Parsons’ formal analyses of the “cultural system.” As I have anticipated, however, Alexander and Sherwood ignore the structural factors of Bellah’s break with Parsons. In so doing they fail twice: first, they absolutize intellectual, i.e., cultural, variables at the expense of structural ones; second, they pay no attention to the intellectual networks which supplied Bellah with the conceptual vocabulary he needed to elaborate a new position. In so doing, they impair our understanding of Bellah’s ideas by attributing too much originality to them.

In 1966, Bellah was the only offspring of the Department of Social Relations to go through the whole *cursus honorum* from undergraduate student to full professor within its walls. Unlike all his former colleagues and friends, he had decided to pursue his career at Harvard.<sup>28</sup> He and Parsons continued to teach together and, as their correspondence and the anecdote about the *Daedalus* conference show, the latter continued to be Bellah’s major “interface” for academic matters at Harvard.<sup>29</sup> As he

<sup>27</sup> For two different analyses of the emergence and development of the civil religion concept, see Lidz [2010b] and Tipton [2010].

<sup>28</sup> Over the years, Bellah had refused offers from Michigan, UCLA, Columbia, and the University of Chicago. See letters between Parsons, Ford, Riesman, and Bellah, November 1966 [Harvard Archives, HUG (FP) 42.8.8, box 3, and HUG (FP) 15.4, box 17].

<sup>29</sup> This impression is reinforced by the fact that all existing histories of the Department of Social Relations [Fine 1973; Schmidt 1978; Nichols 1998; Gilman 2003] barely cite Bellah at all.

approached his forties, his scholarly ambitions led him to look for a way to break with the Parsonian project. A comprehensive assessment of Bellah's decisions would require an essay on its own.<sup>30</sup> Suffice it to say that, given the structure of the attention space of the intellectual world [see Frickel and Gross 2005], his path closely followed the one his mentor had drawn some forty years before: the launch of a new intellectual paradigm and the attempt to create an organizational basis for it.

Intellectually, Bellah clearly shifted to the humanistic side of his research. He had always been interested in the comparative history of religions as it was at the time practised by Mircea Eliade, Joseph Kitagawa and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, with whom he had studied at McGill in 1955-1957 and who had come to Harvard in 1964 to direct the Center for the Study of World Religions.<sup>31</sup> His membership within these intellectual networks and his knowledge of their symbolic resources helped Bellah to detach himself from structural-functionalism and to relocate as the supporter of a more hermeneutic and myth-conscious sociological paradigm. The latter was systematized in a series of straight-talking methodological essays in which he criticized the "symbolic reductionism" of both the sociological and the Freudian traditions and boldly proposed his own "symbolic realism," according to which "nonscientific and nonscientific symbols are constitutive of human personality and society – are *real* in the fullest sense of the word" and could be reduced neither to empirical knowledge nor to "deeper" social and psychological processes [Bellah 1970c, 92-93].<sup>32</sup> As Parsons had done in 1937 with *The Structure of Social Action*, Bellah left the level of normal science and tried to establish a new theoretical paradigm.

From an academic point of view, in the spring of 1967, just after the publication of "Civil Religion in America," Bellah accepted an offer from the University of California, Berkeley. There, although he chaired the Center for Japanese and Korean Studies from 1968 to 1974, the Far East became a minor object of attention as his star in American and religious studies continued to rise unremittingly. As should be clear by now, the interpretation of America was a cornerstone of the Parsonian project: it

<sup>30</sup> I am dealing with the problem of the teacher/student relationship in a manuscript tentatively entitled "Acts of Disembedding. Teachers, Pupils, and the Search for Distinctiveness," which compares the intellectual and academic careers of two of Parsons' most important students, Robert Bellah and Neil Smelser, analysing their relationship with Parsons, their positioning within relevant circles, and their different structures of opportunity.

<sup>31</sup> This tradition was highly suspicious of the aims and methods of coeval American sociology of religion, and Cantwell Smith had openly criticized the "area studies" approach built on the theory of modernization. See note 2.

<sup>32</sup> In a manuscript tentatively entitled "'To put it bluntly, religion is true.' Intellectuals, Disciplines, and Symbolic Boundaries", I chart in a detailed way the place which Bellah's methodological and empirical work from the 1965-1975 decade occupied in the field of American religious studies.

was at once the main object and the ideal model of structural-functional sociology and its close ally, modernization theory. Publishing “Civil Religion in America”, for the first time Bellah agreed to enter a “risky” arena; the jargon-free tone of the essay, together with its publication in an eminent interdisciplinary journal, suggest that Bellah was consciously addressing audiences other than the sociological one.<sup>33</sup> The very word “modernization” disappeared from his vocabulary some time before modernization theory came under serious attack [Gilman 2003, 241 ff.] – as we have seen, in the introduction to his 1970 collection of essays, Bellah was already historicizing that phase of his intellectual development.

Correspondence shows that he was also cautiously looking for new organizational solutions. In the mid-1960s, when some sociologists led by Alex Inkeles had challenged the interdisciplinary project of the Department of Social Relations and asked for the re-establishment of a regular Department of Sociology [Fine 1973; Nichols 1998], Bellah had been less than warm in his defense of Parsons’ creation and had toyed with the idea of establishing a Department of Religion at Harvard.<sup>34</sup> At Berkeley, he worked in close contact with the Graduate Theological Union and unsuccessfully tried to create a Department of Religion [Pearson 1999]. Also, Bellah was not going back: in 1968 he refused an offer to become the Houghton Professor of Theology and Contemporary Change at Harvard Divinity School.<sup>35</sup> In fact, over the years, the only proposal to move from Berkeley which he took seriously was the professorship offered him by Clifford Geertz and Carl Kaysen at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton in 1973, with the clear project of creating a humanistic school of social sciences.<sup>36</sup> As Alexander and Sherwood correctly emphasize, Geertz had been Bellah’s partner in his attempt to turn Parsons’ interest for cultural systems into a far more radical cultural analysis from the outset – it might be said that, in the midst of the wild rejection of structural-functionalism by the anti-Parsonian wave of the late-1960s, they were at least trying to “save the baby” of the Postwar movement [see Alexander 1987; Bortolini and Santoro 2007].

<sup>33</sup> It should be recalled that Bellah’s early publications had been praised precisely for their creative use of the Parsonian paradigm. In eliminating it, Bellah was renouncing a precious trademark. In their critique of Bellah’s work on America as “non sociological”, Alexander and Sherwood [2002, 12-13] simply ignore the fact that he was addressing a wider audience precisely because, at that time American sociology, and in particular the sociology of religion, were moving in a clear positivistic direction, that is, in the opposite direction to Bellah’s.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Bellah to Talcott Parsons, 06/05/1965 [Harvard Archives, HUF (FP) 15.4, box 4]. Harvard’s Department of Sociology separated from Social Relations in 1970.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Bellah to Talcott Parsons, 12/2/1968.

<sup>36</sup> The project did not work out, for a complex set of reasons which I recount in Bortolini [2011].

This may be one of the reasons why the relationship between Robert Bellah and Talcott Parsons did not show any manifest break until 1974, just before the publication of *The Broken Covenant*. Bellah's book presented a much critical view of America, which Parsons opposed, up to the point that the last version of his manuscript on American society has been considered as a long argument with his former student [see Alexander and Sherwood 2002, 7 ff.; Bellah 2006a; Bellah 2006b; Alexander 2007; Bortolini 2009b]. In one of his letters to Bellah, Parsons introduced his substantial critiques with a rather harsh observation: "Quite frankly I was disappointed in the manuscript and I feel that it is not up the high level of scholarly standards which you have so impressively maintained over a long period."<sup>37</sup> I read this unusual and largely unwarranted judgment as the realization, on Parsons' part, of the deep, and hitherto unthematized, break between his beloved student and himself. It was as if Parsons wanted to warn Bellah that he was leaving the terrain of a properly scientific and autonomous sociology and was going back to that valutative unscientific discourse that the Postwar movement had sought to eliminate from the cultural horizon of the social sciences. For Parsons, Bellah's general critique of American society – which accentuated particulars that he deemed as secondary, such as the bureaucratization of organizational and public life – was taking a "prophetic" direction of which he could not approve.

Not surprisingly, Bellah did not take Parsons' critiques into account and published the book as it was. One year later, *The Broken Covenant* won the Sorokin award of the American Sociological Association and launched once and for all its author into the pantheon of American social scientists. In 1970, Bellah had described the move from Harvard to Berkeley as an outward expression of his inward change [Bellah 1970a, xvii]. Alexander and Sherwood [2002, 8-9] interpret it as "a further deviation" from Parsons' theoretical and stylistical path. In fact, it also was a definitive act of self-disembedding from those networks which had made him an eminent scholar, but which also inhibited his full intellectual coming of age.

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<sup>37</sup> Talcott Parsons to Robert Bellah, 09/10/1974 [Harvard Archives, HUG (FP) 42.8.8, box 3].

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## Before Civil Religion

### On Robert N. Bellah's Forgotten Encounters with America, 1955-1965

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Abstract: Robert N. Bellah's shift "from Japan to America" in the late 1960s has been explained as either the outcome of a prolonged period of personal and political dismay or the beginning of the "culturalist revolution" in the social sciences. This paper uses published and archival materials to extend and complete these accounts from another point of view. It contends that, at the time of writing "Civil Religion in America" (1966-1967), Bellah was facing the structural problem of the gifted follower, which required him to decide between remaining under the shadow of his mentor, Talcott Parsons, or trying to step out and occupy an individual position within the intellectual field. In order to illustrate this thesis, the paper reconstructs Bellah's relationship with Parsons and the Parsonian circles at Harvard, and presents some unpublished papers on America and American religion from the 1955-1965 decade as an illustration of Bellah's development.

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*Keywords: Robert N. Bellah, religion, America, civil religion, modernization theory, positivism.*

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