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Appreciating Robert Bellah's Life Project

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by Paul Lichterman

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I want to talk a little differently about Bob's legacy, since my reflections will be the last. They may be somewhat different, and shorter than the others. I want to close our time with some thoughts on Bob's life as a life-project. Bob asked the biggest intellectual questions we ask. His life project was a distinctively modern one, but we may not immediately recognize it that way. That's what I want to appreciate with you.

I first met Bob when I was writing a dissertation related to one of Bob's master questions: What makes modern political community possible? I had become interested in the debate about the role of individualism in American culture and its effects on political community. Northern California was a great laboratory for different kinds of political community – and “inquiring minds wanted to know.” My ethnographic inquiry taught me a great deal of what I called personalized politics. This was an individually expressive politics, and yet a politics geared to collective action – for social change, for environmentalism, for the end of nuclear weapons, feminism. So yes, the individualism in American culture could in fact produce a kind of political community. Since Bob was famously critical of the various individualisms and their effects on political community I went to talk to Bob about my research, *warily*.

There was a spicy rumor that went around among grads during that time, which basically said: “If you disagree with Bob, he'll tear you up into little pieces.” Now: I have no doubt that Bob had the intellectual vigor to do that if he really wanted to. But I never saw him do anything of the sort even when people disagreed with him.

And he brooked my disagreement with him very generously. Bob had tended to read American culture through Philip Rieff (author of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*). But what we talked about was the new work of Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

And my reference to Taylor makes a good *segue* into my main point that that Bob was much more a *modernist* than his public persona sometimes gave off. He once referred to himself in print as a “Jeremiah,” and he had that side of him – the side that critics of Bob might have noticed most – but his own life project was really about other things than angry prophecy. While he was unapologetically a “Christian sociologist” as he told an audience in 2005, he dared to ask questions that made religion a deeply *intellectual* concern, simply a matter of piety and not simply a subject for apologetics.

I think that is because Bob was trying to grapple with American culture, Western culture, at a civilizational level of analysis where we don't often dwell as sociologists. And he that's where he found what he called, in a marvelous essay published in 2000, the Protestant code. Beneath the various individualisms, beneath what he thought of as a withering civic republican tradition, there was a bedrock, master code; that code dictated the sacredness of individuality. It set high, even judgmental moral boundaries around the sanctity of individuality.

But this analysis was no apology for Protestantism or American culture, nor a statement of Protestant triumphalism. The code was *flawed*, he wrote. When individual autonomy becomes simply unimpeachable, singularly sacred, it may threaten the social order, he argued. He had in mind, ultimately, environmental catastrophe but also US society's decreasing ability to include great numbers of its citizens in steering itself. Bob was no stranger to the thematic concern of this year's ASA meeting – social inequality – but he got there by way of a civilizational look at culture. That's what he meant by “the religious sources of America's troubles.” He did not mean that private piety should be the sole or even the main answer to America's social problems, much as he himself was a believer and believed that the “public church” as Martin Marty called it should help Americans connect sacred (not necessarily Christian) precepts with public issues.

So Bob's religious engagement was a distinctively modern one: It wanted to fold the sacred into a larger story of social solidarity in a complex, and multi-religious, society. Bob said:

We need a searching religious criticism. The connections I am trying to make are so deeply embedded in our history, so unconscious and even counter-intuitive, that I think it is a major task of religious intellectuals to uncover them and then, if I may use the analogy, to suggest some genetic re-engineering of the deep cultural code [Bellah 2000, 297].

It is worth noting that Bob wrote these words in a divinity school journal; part of the essay is a call to a distinctly Christian audience. That does not diminish my point that his was at the same time a modern project of collective reflexivity, a call for collective refashioning of our terms of value that begins with an historically honest look at the source of those terms. For the broader audience, his inquiry into religion was a sociological bid for reflexivity into our cultural-civilizational-underpinnings. I doubt Bob would have wanted to say where the “sociologist” ended and the “Christian” began in his life’s work, but the arguments he made about religion and its place in American public life stood on sociological grounds.

To accept this kind of sociological argument we do have to give some credence to the evolutionary metaphor – the idea that entire societies take shape from foundational moral categories-cultural DNA. Some kind of evolutionary metaphor appears repeatedly in Bellah’s work, and absolutely in his recent, frankly great work: *Religion in Human Evolution* (Bellah 2011). Certainly there is plenty to discuss and argue about regarding this metaphor.

But I suggest that here, for now, we can see Bob’s engagement with that metaphor as part of his own version of a modern life-project. Again and again he looked for unity amidst the cultural fragments: a coherent narrative. That search took him beyond sociology, into history and sometimes into intellectual religious inquiry because he thought there really could be a unity if we challenged some of the compartmentalization we often equate with modernity itself. Bob did not think modernity meant rigid compartmentalization: He wanted to ask the *big* questions – and tie the fragments together even if that meant speaking to, and sometimes for, religious concerns. I think that is as much because his *sociology* told him those were part of the big picture as it was because of his Christian piety. Like any high modernist, Bob wanted to open conversational room for reflective, collective pondering about the big questions. That’s why his life makes sense to me as a modern life-project with the very biggest ambitions. His legacy is an invitation to us, at least sometimes to ask the big questions, and dare to go where the questions take us.

You have been generous taking your time to be with us. Thanks to all of our speakers.

References

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Abstract: Robert Bellah was at once a Christian believer and a sociologist committed to understanding the religious roots of American civilization in critical, cultural terms. He located and honored the sacred in a larger story of social solidarity. He tried throughout his life to piece together belief and social science in a distinctively modern synthesis: His was a modern life-project.

Keywords: religion, reflexivity, American civilization, cultural code

Paul Lichterman currently is Professor of Sociology and Religion at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. He studies political, civic and religious associations. He is the author of *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions* (2005) and *The Search for Political Community* (1996), and co-editor of *The Civic Life of American Religion* (2009). He has written many scholarly articles and won a variety of awards for his publications.