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A Conversation with Robert Bellah**

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Sociology as Quest for a Good Society: A Conversation with Robert Bellah¹

ABSTRACT

Sociology does not just study what it is; based upon the study of is, it also gives voices to the striving for the ought in our lives and society. This way Sociology takes part in the striving for a good society which is a continuous journey of criticism, creativity and transformation. The paper discusses the striving for a good society as it unfolds in the work of Robert Bellah, a creative sociologist of our times. It discusses Bellah's work starting from his classic work on Tokugawa Religion and discusses his latest work on sociology as social criticism, religion and public sphere and religious evolution.

Indeed, there are times when the work of contemporary sociologists is characterized by such depth and seriousness that one is inclined to think that they are the true inheritors of the ancient prophetic traditions working in the world today.

— David Smith (2007), *Moving Towards Emmaus: Hope in a Time of Uncertainty*, p. 83.

We live in a society obsessed with the self: above all, most of us want to be rich, powerful, beautiful, and admired, or at least one of the above [...] But instead of saying we are so obsessed with the self, perhaps we should say we are not obsessed enough; we have not looked deeply enough into what we really want, which is the just self, capable of treating others justly in the context of a just society.

— Robert N. Bellah (2007), "Ethical Politics: Reality or Illusion?," pp 67-68

However, the greatest weakness of the book has nothing to do with Japan but with a weakness in the modernization theory I was using: I failed to see that the endless accumulation of wealth and power does not lead to the good society but undermines the condition necessary for any viable society at all. I suffered myself from the displacement of ends by means, or the attempt to make means to ends, which is the very source of the pathology of modernization. [...] What would it mean to reverse the functionalization of religion, the reduction of the realm of

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ultimate ends to the status of means? What would it look like if religion set the ends, and the means—wealth and power—that have usurped the status of the ends, were reduced to the status of means again?

—Robert N. Bellah (1985), Introduction to the Paperback Edition, *Tokugawa Religion: Cultural Roots of Modern Japan*, pp. xix, xx.

[...] in the present situation a politics of the imagination, a politics of religion, may be the only sane politics. There is no hope in any of the competing absolutisms. If the forces at war are locked in their own death like scenarios perhaps the only responsible politics is to unmask the pretensions of all the contending parties and give witness to the enormous possibilities in human experience, in a word, to awaken the actors out of their trance. To this end a human science can perhaps join with a human religion to help create a human politics.

— Robert N. Bellah (1970), *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, pp. xviii

I

Robert N. Bellah (born 1927) is a creative sociologist of our times who has deepened the craft of sociological practice and imagination as well as made sociology a part of normative public discourse and striving for building a good society. Good society for Bellah is a society where both self and society do not suffer from delusions such as considering wealth and power as ultimate ends of life, and strive to realize their potential of blossoming, fulfilment and realization of meaning. The vision and quest for good society is not a prisoner of dualism between good and evil rather it seeks to realize goodness in both self and society by creating appropriate institutional conditions for self as well as societal blossoming. Building good society in Bellah is a multi-dimensional striving and struggle of critique, reconstruction and creativity and sociology fulfils itself by taking part in it. Good society is a space of realization of beauty and dignity.

Bellah has written on different aspects of religion, society and modernity in Japan and North America. He has gifted us with such important works as *Tokugawa Religion* (1957), *Beyond Belief* (1970), *Imagining Japan* (2003), *Habits of the Heart* (1995), *The Good Society* (1991). His later two books which are co-authored have influenced normative thinking and quest for a good society across many institutions and fields in American society. After years of correspondence occasioned by my review of his *Habits of the Heart* in *Indian Anthropologist* (Giri 1992) it was an enriching experience meeting with him and being in conversation with him in his office at the Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley in March 2003 where Bellah is an emeritus professor.

During our conversations Bellah began by pointing out that from

the beginning he was interested to study a society other than the mainstream American. As an undergraduate at Harvard he had studied Navaho religion and wrote his undergraduate theses on “Apache Kinship Systems.” In graduate school he wanted to study something other than American. Alfred Kroeber, the great anthropologist, once said in a lecture at Harvard that “the two cultures that are most different from our own are Japan and India” which helped him to crystallize his interest to do sociological work on a society other than American. But Bellah became drawn to Japan, especially to its aesthetics and traditions of Zen Buddhism. Though himself born into Christianity and raised as a Presbyterian, he soon became deeply interested in Zen Buddhism not only academically but also personally. But his participation in paths of spiritual practice such as Zen Buddhism has not made him forget the deep spiritual significance of his nurturing himself in his journey as one who is born into a Christian faith.¹ He could draw spiritual sustenance from his own religious upbringing with notions like sin which made him realize the fragility of human life and our exaggerated claim of authorship of actions. For Bellah: “I saw the worst is only a hair’s breadth away from the best in any man and any society. [...] If I am not a murderer it is because of the grace I have received through the love and support of others, not through the lack of murderous impulses within me” (1970: xvi).²

Bellah carried out his doctoral work on religion of Japan during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) from the Department of Social Relations of Harvard where Talcott Parsons was one of his main teachers. After his doctorate he joined Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill as a post-doctoral fellow and worked with the eminent scholar of religion and its founder Wilfred C. Smith. He studied Arabic as well as Koran. But he thinks he got a different religious experience in Japan. In his words, “For me, the East Asian perspective was significant for difference. Personally for me the most important part of Muslim tradition is Sufism but most of the modernist movements have been anti-Sufi. The trouble with Islam is that it is all too familiar. Koran is saturated with Moses. Islam is one of the three Abrahamic religions and as such is close to Christianity. ‘Orthodox Islam is superheated Calvinism.’ At the same time Islam offers an extraordinary challenge for sociologists; it emphasizes creation of community, *Umma*.”

II

Bellah’s first major work, *Tokugawa Religion* (Bellah 1957), is a landmark study in sociology of religion applying the insights of Max Weber to Japanese society and history. Bellah finds the closest

equivalent of Protestant ethics in a Buddhist religious movement named Jodo Shinshu. It preached hard work and austerity which contributed to economic rationalization in Japan. But the book has many other insights about Japanese religion in particular. Bellah shows us how in Japan all religious streams—Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian—interacted with each other and influenced each other. For Bellah, in Japanese religion, “Nature is not alien to the divine or to man but is united with both” (1985: 63). Bellah tells us: “[.] Japanese religion is fundamentally concerned with harmony—harmony among persons and harmony with nature. Each strand of the tradition views harmony somewhat differently and offers its own peculiar approach. And yet each of them eventuates in the idea of life as ceremony, as play, almost as dance, in which what is being expressed is compassion, care for all beings of the universe” (1985: xix). But this harmony is not static but dynamic and what Bellah (1985: 62-63) writes below has a lot of insights for us as we seek ways of harmony in our dynamically changing world:

What has been said about the unity of man, nature and divinity should not be interpreted as a static identity. Rather it is a harmony in tension. The gratitude one owes to superordinate benevolent entities is not an easy obligation but may involve the instant sacrifice of one’s deepest interests or even of one’s life. Union with the ground of being is not attained in a state of coma but very often as the result of some sudden shock in daily living. Something unexpected, some seeming disharmony, is more apt to reveal the Truth than any formal orderly teaching. Japanese art and aesthetic attitude toward nature are also concerned with the unexpected [.]

Bellah’s book discusses several religious movements in the Tokugawa period which has interesting comparative sociological and historical lessons. He discusses a movement among the peasants named Hotoku which gave stress on labor. Hoko means labor as a sacred obligation. This resonates with the vision and practice of *shramabhakti* (devotional labor) in Swadhhyaya, a socio-spiritual movement where participants farm together and build orchards and other spaces of collective well-being (see Giri 2008a). Bellah discusses another interesting movement starting with the merchants but then touching many other social strata in Japanese society, Shingaku. It was founded by Ishida Baigan (1685-1744) who came from humble origins in a village. Being a younger son, and not having right to inheritance, Baigan came to work as an apprentice in a merchant house in Kyoto and with a life of struggle and fortitude to learn the Way he had his own house of teaching at the

age of 45. Baigan was a teacher in whose meeting “mutual questioning took place” (ibid: 137). Baigan not only questioned his followers but his followers also questioned him. This spirit of mutual questioning is rare even today in religious and spiritual spaces around the world, most specifically in India where spiritual gurus hardly want to be questioned, and Bellah’s description of this important teacher of humanity has important lessons for all of us concerned.³

In his recent book on Japan, Bellah (2003) has an insightful paper, “Japanese Emperor as a Mother Figure: Some Preliminary Notes,” in which Bellah is showing us how the Japanese Emperor has been perceived and works as a mother figure and not only as a patriarch. Though the emperor was also a figure of “austere masculine authoritarianism,” the emperor was also a mother figure. For Bellah, “All Japanese authority figures have a maternal succoring aspect to a great extent than would be the case in many other cultures” (2003: 183). This maternal aspect is related to the significance of sun goddess Amaterasu o mikami in Japanese mythology, self-perception and social life who exercise her influence in “a very feminine way” (ibid: 178). For Bellah, “She is no patriarchal despot like Jehovah [...] She is a peacemaker, conciliator, mediator [...]” (ibid). Bellah’s insightful discussion of both Japanese Emperor and the Goddess Amaterasu as maternal figures⁴ can inspire us to wonder if we can not only look at but also realize our politics, religion and spirituality also as a space of maternal nurturance and not only as a space of authoritarian command and control. Could American Presidents and Indian Prime Ministers also embody maternal nurturance?

III

Bellah is not only interested in different world religions such as Islam and Buddhism but also in tribal religions. During our conversation Bellah told me: “Tribal religion is important. It is part of our human heritage which we cannot look down upon. In religious evolution nothing is lost.” And he writes about this in his self-reflective introduction to a selection of his writings published by Duke University Press entitled *Bellah Reader*: “[...] tribal and then archaic religions and societies needed to be understood in their own terms, especially since, as I came to see, ‘nothing is ever lost,’ and the whole of human cultural and religious history is still with us. So, while the abiding concern was the understanding of modernity, and most immediately, American modernity, from very early on I knew that modernity was a mere fragment of the whole, that the idea that what went before could be forgotten is a fallacy, and that only coming to terms with the whole would serve us in facing

the present and the future. Thus the lifelong preoccupation with religious evolution” (Bellah 2005b: 5). Tracing his current and long-standing interest in religions of our ancestors to his earlier seeking as a student Bellah told me during our meeting: “I did my undergraduate work on the Navaho. They have Navaho theologians. We are now seeing tribal people becoming self-conscious about their identity.” During our conversation Bellah drew our attention to the cruelty to which tribal people and their religions have been subjected to. At the same time, he also pointed to the violence practised in some archaic religions such as the Aztec sacrifice.

Bellah told me when I met him five years ago that he is completing a long-nurtured work on religious evolution and during our recent email communication he wrote me how understanding religious life of Ancient India is difficult for him. Bellah wrote his classic paper, “Religious Evolution” more than four decades ago. In this paper, as he does in his book *Tokugawa Religion* Bellah, looks at religion as a “set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate condition of his existence” (Bellah 1970: 21). In this paper Bellah without taking a linear evolutionary stance nonetheless invites us to understand differentiation that has taken place in the field of religious symbolization in the religious history of mankind. For Bellah (1970: 21): “Neither religious man nor the structure of man’s ultimate religious situation evolves [...] but religion as symbol system” (ibid: 28). Bellah presents us five stages in this evolutionary journey of differentiation of symbolic systems of religions: Primitive Religion, Archaic Religion, Historical Religion, Early Modern Religion and Modern Religion. In primitive religions, there is close identification between the mythical world and the actual world and in rituals “participants become identified with the mythical beings they represent” (Bellah 1970: 28). Here, “The mythical beings are not addressed or propitiated or beseeched. The distance between man and mythical being, which was at best slight, disappears altogether in the moment of ritual when every when becomes now. There are no priests and no congregation, no mediating representative roles and no spectators. present are involved in the ritual action itself and have become one with the myth” (ibid). In archaic religion there is move towards differentiation between the mythical and the actual: “Archaic *religious action* takes the form of cult in which the distinction between men as subjects and gods as objects is much more definite than in primitive religion” (ibid: 30). In historical religions, for the first time, there is discovery and hierarchical articulation of an other world which is superior to the actual world. All historical religions share elements of world rejecting transcendentalism which are “dualistic” (p. 32). For Bellah, “*Religious*

action in the historic religions is [...] above all is action necessary for salvation. The identity diffusion characteristic of both primitive and archaic religions is radically challenged by the historic religious symbolization, which leads for the first time to a clearly structured conception of the self. Devaluation of the empirical world and the empirical self highlights the conception of a responsible self, a core self, of a true self, deeper than the flux of everyday experience, facing a reality over against itself, a reality which has a consistency belied by the fluctuations of mere sensory impressions” (ibid: 33).

Continuing the story, Bellah tells us that in Early Modern Religion, especially in Protestant Reformation, there is collapse of the hierarchical ordering of the other and this world. Even though dualism between the worlds—other and this— remains there is more confrontation between the two. “Under the new circumstances salvation is not to be found in any kind of withdrawal from the world but in the midst of worldly activities” (ibid: 36). And in modern religions Bellah tells us that there is the questioning of this dualism between the other and this world: “it is not so much a question of two worlds as it is of as many worlds as there are modes of apprehending them” (ibid: 40). In modern religions there is questioning of fixed positions but this does not mean abandonment of religious symbolization rather transforming religion as a space for self-exploration and mutual communication without being constrained by rigid structures. In modern religions there is “increasing acceptance of the notion that each individual must work out his own ultimate solutions and that the most the church can do is to provide him a favourable environment for doing so, without imposing on him a prefabricated set of answers” (ibid: 43-44). Bellah’s characterization of modern religion is not to be understood in a linear and literal way as in the contemporary world all stages of religious evolution co-exist in varying degrees. What Bellah writes provides us an insightful way of understanding our contemporary religious predicament and possibility: “The historic religions discovered the self, the early modern religion found a doctrinal basis on which to accept the self in all its empirical ambiguity; modern religion is beginning to understand the laws of the self’s own existence and so to help man take responsibility for his own fate” (ibid: 42).

As a student of religion, Bellah laments lack of a deep interest in modern sociology on matters of religion. On being asked about sociology, religion and the calling of spirituality Bellah said:

I have not come to terms with the word spirituality. I feel more comfortable with the older word religion. My fundamental understanding of religion is what makes human beings better. It

refers to something beyond human beings. Without the transcendental domain the solidarity of the world comes apart. The very root of religion is society. I do not draw a deep divide between theology and sociology.

At the same time, transcendence is a problematic word. There has to be reference something beyond the human, the intrinsically good—Good in itself and not God in a Judeo-Christian way. It is beyond individual and society without which genuine individuality and genuine sociality is not possible.

Bellah finds “comfortable the older word religion.” But for many, the word religion is just the beginning of the manifold foundational difficulties of religion especially the way it has been used by powers that be to suppress realization of human potential—self as well as societal. Bellah fully agrees with such a critique of religion but still wants to challenge all those who glorify spirituality that they do not always realize that the quest in this field—whatever name you may give, religious or spiritual—does not always sufficiently acknowledge that this is not just an individual act, this involves life of a community. The advocates of spirituality can acknowledge this theoretically by referring to the vision and practice of experimenters in human history such as Sri Aurobindo who talks about the *Life Divine* and building of spiritual communities. But the actual sociological embodiment of such spiritual communities is not much different from the work of religious communities. For Bellah, spirituality seems too individualizing and for the proponents of spirituality religion is too much bound up with classification, **categorization and violence**.⁵ As the building of spiritual communities with a new practical logic of coordination, community life and power is still an evolutionary task, there is need for transformative dialogue between views like Bellah’s who are reluctant to abandon religion and other spiritual seekers who would like to replace religion with spirituality.

Bellah has been exploring creative pathways of mediations and transformations between religion and modern science, especially social sciences, without falling into the trap of what he calls “Enlightenment fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism” (Bellah 2005: 1). Given the worldwide resurgence of religion now including its violent manifestations Bellah’s creative search for moving beyond the battle between science and religion and search for a “new integration” (which is not just superficial but deep)⁶ deserves our careful attention. Taking a creative contingent view of history nurtured by cross-cultural realizations Bellah writes: “The Enlightenment theory of secularization and of the relation of religion and science is understandable as a reaction

to a particular religious tradition, one with a strong cognitive bias and a stress on orthodox belief. Had the Enlightenment occurred first in a culture dominated by Zen Buddhism, for example, the outcome would have been very different [...]” (ibid: 238). But the split between science and religion need not be our fate as there have been transformations in both, and as both science and religion are continuously invited for further transformations. For Bellah, “[...] there are greater resources now for healing the split between the imaginative and the cognitive, the intellectual and the emotional, and the scientific and religious aspects of our culture and our consciousness than have been for centuries. Social science is now beginning, faintly and crudely, to be able to cope with the richness of reality as religion has seen it” (ibid: 245). And for Bellah, the view of reality that religion presents is a multidimensional one rather than the flat world of secular realism: “For religion is not a kind of pseudogeology or pseudohistory but an imaginative statement about the truth of the totality of human experience. [...] So-called post-religious man, the cool, self-confident secular man [...] is trapped in a literal and circumscribed reality [...] The world of everyday reality is a socially and personally constructed world. If one confuses that world with reality itself one then becomes trapped in one’s own delusions, one projects one’s wishes and fears onto others and one acts one’s madness all the while believing that one is a clearheaded realist” (ibid: 244).

For Bellah, sociology must transform itself to understand the quest for the whole, especially “felt whole,” of man which “includes subject and object and provides the context in which life and action [...] has meaning” rather than just subject it to scientific study (Bellah 1970: 253). For Bellah, “The canons of empirical science apply primarily to symbols that attempt to express the nature of objects, but there are non-objective symbols that express the feelings, values, and hopes of subjects, or that organize and regulate the flow of interaction between subjects and objects, or that attempt to sum up the whole subject-object complex or even point to the context or ground of that whole. These symbols too express reality and are not reducible to empirical propositions” (ibid: 252). Bellah calls this approach that of symbolic realism. For Bellah sociological study of religion ought to embody symbolic realism rather than a flat empiricist realism. Since Bellah initially wrote about it four decades ago there have been a lot of new developments in social sciences on the issues of realism, for example critical realism, constructivism, and a constructivist realism. Bellah’s approach of symbolic realism is not an escape for coming to term even epistemologically our empirical reality but it is a plea for understanding our multi-layered reality without falling into a dualism of realism and

constructivism. But Bellah's approach of symbolic realism has to address much more theoretically as well as practically relationship between symbols, social action and social institutions as symbolic approach to religion both in anthropology and spiritual traditions have sometimes neglected to relate symbols to institutional contexts, for example, as it happens in Clifford Geertz's approach to religion (Giri 2008b).

Bellah offers symbolic realism as "the only approach for the social scientific study of religion" (Bellah 1970: 253). Given the dangers of any assertion Bellah may consider that this is not the only approach but one approach. But as an approach it is significant not only in the study of religion but also in science. The objects of understanding in science as well as methods of understanding also have a symbolic dimension. New developments in science tell us that empirical reality itself is interpenetrated by the supra-empirical and instead of an opposition between symbolic approach and an empirical approach to reality now there is a need for a new integration. Sociologist JPS Uberoi develops such a new symbolic approach to reality—science, religion, self and society—based upon Goethe's method and work on colors and optics (Uberoi 1978;1984).

But Bellah has not only been trying to heal the split between religion and science he has also been trying to transcend the wall of separation between religion and public sphere calling for transformation on both sides.⁷ For Bellah, secularism is not only the outcome of Enlightenment anti-clericalism⁸ nor civil society is only a so-called secular sphere divorced from religious concerns. Bellah does not make an a priori distinction between good society and civil society as does Andre Beteille (cf. Beteille 2001) nor does he exclude religion from the public sphere as does Jurgen Habermas. Bellah acknowledges that there has been violence⁹ in the name of religion but religion cannot be expelled from civil society aprioristically; rather all concerned should shun violence which is not only physical but also epistemological (i.e, when one party condemns the knowledge system of another, for example, secularists condemning meditations of religions and vice versa) and take part in arguments as well as sharing of experiences in the public sphere.

Bellah laments that the discourse of civil society and public sphere is not open to voices from religion. But public sphere should move beyond any absolutism, secular as well as religious, and ought to be a space for mutual learning and transformations. For Bellah, public sphere and public discourse becomes impoverished by excluding religious discourses on themes of contemporary concern. Bellah here draws our attention to important urgent issues such as global poverty and global

warming (Cf. Bellah 2005a). On both the issues we have a lot to learn from religions. Bellah draws our attention to both poverty in the US where 13% of adults and 18% of children live below poverty line and world poverty where 40% of world population live below poverty line (ibid: 24).. For Bellah this is a political, ethical and spiritual issue and discourse on it in the public sphere both locally as well as transnationally can learn a lot from religions especially from anger in religious traditions about production of and indifference to poverty and mindless pursuit of wealth and conspicuous consumption.

Starting with his own tradition, namely the Biblical tradition, Bellah tells us that in this there is condemnation of and anger about structural poverty or what may be called involuntary poverty. For Bellah, “The first thing we have to recognize about the biblical teaching about poverty is that there is a lot of anger there. Much poverty comes from the oppression of the poor and weak by rich and strong, and, according to the prophets, God detests that” (Bellah 2005a: 13). Secondly, the Bible tells us: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16: 13). The New Revised Standard Edition says, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” For Bellah, “The rich are in danger of worshipping their riches, indeed of worshipping themselves” (2005a: 16). Thirdly, for Bellah, Bible tells us that poverty is a blessing. And Bellah links it to the calling of voluntary poverty which resonates with the vision and practice of Gandhi. For Bellah, earlier voluntary poverty might have been confined to monasteries as exemplified in the vision and life of saints such as St Francis of Assisi but now we are all invited to live a life of voluntary poverty. To live a life of voluntary poverty is to live with what is needed and not to run after wealth. It also means to reduce our consumption including our consumption of energy. For Bellah, “[.] a life based economically on a sufficiency rather than the expectation of ever increasing income is, in today’s world, a form of voluntary poverty” (ibid: 31). “Thinking of a life based on sufficiency instead of wealth frees us up to take on all kinds of work that serves others, not just ourselves” (2005a: 31). At the same time, a life of sufficiency does not just give us opportunity to serve others, it also gives us time and space to blossom ourselves. Bellah links a life of voluntary poverty to the issue of creativity. For Bellah, “Genuine creativity requires leisure, which, in its original meaning, is not absence of work, but the possibility of a fulfilling form of life [...] a life of sufficiency, of, in modern times, voluntary poverty, might not only have the benefit of allowing one to undertake a life of service to others, it might also allow time for genuine creativity in art or thought or whatever field” (ibid: 32).

IV

Bellah has been interested in communities and search for meaning in religion, society and history but from the beginning of his personal and intellectual journey he has been painfully aware of the violence of totalizing communities and the fragility of human life and the existential loss with which we go through. Bellah lost his father at a young age and this personal loss corresponds to the loss of certitude that characterizes human life trajectory in general and loss of traditional certainty in transition of societies from traditional to post-traditional and modern ones. What Bellah (1970: xx-xxi; xix) had written 38 years ago in his moving introduction to *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* can help us in coming to terms with our own sense of loss as we are blown off our feet from many of our taken-for-granted assumptions and as we painfully go through loss as a result of violence committed in the name of religion and totalitarian certitude of many kinds in this troubled worlds of ours:

It is a story of loss: the lost father, the lost religion, the lost ideology, the lost century. And it is not, finally, a story of existential despair [...] For the deepest truth I have discovered is that if one accepts the loss, if one gives up clinging to what is irreversibly gone, then nothing which is left is not barren but enormously fruitful. Everything one has lost comes again out of the darkness, and one's relation to it is new—free and unclinging. But the richness of the nothing contains far more, it is the all possible, it is the spring of freedom [...]

For me the search for wholeness from then on had to be made without totalism. A critical stance towards every society, ideology and religion was henceforth essential

Bellah's (1995) collaborative study, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, had created a stirring in American sociology as well as public discourse. The subsequent collaborative study, *The Good Society* continued this normative and critical probing. For example, in *Good Society*, Bellah and his colleagues tell us that contemporary American form of life minimizes seeking of any "larger moral meaning" and Americans have pushed the "logic of exploitation as far as it can go" (Bellah et al. 1991: 43). Furthermore, "[...] the main line churches have done a lousy job in naming the suffering of middle class existence"—they do not say that it is the competition-driven existence which is a "form of human suffering" (Bellah et al. 1991: 210). In this context, they plead for a new paradigm for the actors and

the institutions of the United States what they call the “pattern of cultivation.” This paradigm of cultivation refers to the habit of paying attention to the needs of one another and building of communities. Attention is described here normatively which refers to pursuing goals, and relationships which give us meaning, and is different from ‘distraction’ and ‘obsession’” (ibid). For Bellah et al. (1991: 273): “Attending means to concern ourselves with the larger meanings of things in the longer run, rather than with short-term pay offs. The pursuit of immediate pleasure, or the immediate pleasure is the essence of dislocation. A good society is one in which attention takes precedence over distraction.” Bellah tells us during our conversations: “Both *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* could not have been written without an outsider perspective.” He further tells us about these two books during our conversation: “Our perspective is problematic because we are neither right nor left. The Right does not like our critique of the market. And the Left does not appreciate our emphasis on community and does not realize that individualism is related to market. We get a sympathetic audience among the churches, above all from the politically active religious groups such as liberal Catholics.” “On our part, we come from different backgrounds, for example, Ann Swidler [one of the co-authors] is Jewish but all of us are practising members of religious communities.”

Both *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* offer critiques of American society and this critique has become far more deep seated in the subsequent works of Bellah. Bellah is a critique of parochialism of American society in general and its recent imperial manifestation in particular. One evidence of this parochialism is that among the rich countries of the world United States shares the least, only .15 % of its national income, for reduction of world poverty.¹⁰ Bellah is a critic of recent tendency to an empire in some Americans. Bellah (2002: 6) writes in his essay, “What kind of empire?”

We remain a profoundly provincial, monolingual nation. [...] when Bush visited Europe after taking office it was said that it was his first trip to that continent. It is not just his ignorance (which has played into the hands of the small cabal of foreign policy advisors that in fact makes the decisions) but his lack of interest in the rest of the world that is typical. Most Americans are not interested in the rest of the world and certainly don’t know much about it.

Bellah’s critique of American provincialism is linked to his critique of American radical individualism which draws on Protestantism. This weakens provisions for social support in the Government as well as

impoverishes solidarity in wider society.¹¹ For Bellah sociology is a critique of society as it is inspired by a passion for reconstruction what Bellah et al (1991) in their study *The Good Society* had called a “hermeneutics of recovery.” But for Bellah this hermeneutics of recovery is not only textual but also practical. In a recent paper, Bellah makes (2005a) a profound critique of tolerated poverty, income inequality and declining standards of quality public education, and lack of access to quality private education on the part of many in contemporary United States. Speaking of condition of life and society in contemporary United States Bellah tells us: “One segment of our population has the best education, health care and recreation in the world and another segment might as well be in an underdeveloped country. Life expectancy in many of our inner cities is lower than in Bangladesh” (2005a: 26).¹² And he talks about condition of work in companies like Walmart in the following way:

If you want to think about what life is like on the bottom look at the employees of Walmart, America’s biggest corporation and largest employer. Work discipline at Walmart is almost like life in the gulag. Talking to a fellow employee about anything unrelated to work is called “stealing time” and is punished, only one of many such rules. You can say people couldn’t get out of the gulag but they are free to leave Walmart. Yes they are and yes they do. Walmart has a yearly turnover of 50 percent. For most corporations that would be a catastrophe, but for Walmart it is a price they are willing to pay if it keeps labor costs low. In a society where good jobs grow ever scarcer there will always be those who, in desperation, will work at Walmart—for awhile. Many of Walmart employees work at minimum wages with no health benefits. They overburden the health care system by having to resort to emergency rooms. Since they can’t provide for their families on a minimum wage they need food stamps and other public benefits. So when you think you are buying cheap at Walmart, remember you are paying in taxes for those cheap prices. Walmart is a kind of state socialist enterprise that can only exist if there is a state to pick up the pieces it leaves behind (2005a: 28).

Bellah had begun his sociological journey working on societies and cultures other than American. But he was drawn to American studies inadvertently being invited to write a paper on “Civil Religion in America” for a Daedalus conference on American religion in May 1966. This has been one of the classic papers of Bellah which had a major influence in understanding American religion, culture and politics. In this Bellah is

discussing the work of civil religion in America which is a “collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity” (1970: 175). There is a belief in God but this is not a Christian God: “Though much is derived from Christianity, this religion is clearly not itself Christianity” (ibid). For Bellah, American civil religion works autonomously in the interstices of State, civil society and religious communities without being absorbed by any. Further more, “The American civil religion was never anticlerical or militantly secular. Furthermore, it borrowed selectively from the religious tradition in such a way that the average American saw no conflict between the two” (ibid: 180-181).

Bellah is not using American civil religion for an idolatrous worship of American nationalism. Bellah shows us despite attempts to make regressive use of it, civil religion in America has helped Americans to move towards the side of dignified transformations in moments of trial. Bellah discusses two such epochal times of trial: the time of American independence and civil war for abolition of slavery. In both these times of trial American civil religion has inspired people to fight for independence and freedom and abolition of slavery. For Bellah, the third time of trial is the “problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world” (ibid: 184) and in a globally interconnected world. Even forty years ago, Bellah with so much fore sight had pleaded passionately for incorporation of responsible internationalism to American civil religion hoping that American civil religion becomes part of a “new civil religion of the world” (ibid: 186).¹³ Bellah was a passionate critic of American war in Vietnam in the 60s as he is a trenchant critique of American war in Iraq. He used his discourse of civil religion to foster such a critical approach to American penchant for domination and for a responsible and peaceful relationship with the world. Towards the end of his essay on civil religion, Bellah is asking some fundamental questions. Could there be a civil religion without God? Bellah is referring here to the theological crisis of God but it is also an existential crisis and a crisis in existing representation of God as anthropocentric and patriarchal. Could we imagine and realize God not only as Father but also as non-human and mother? Furthermore, Bellah himself writes that God in American civil religion is “also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love” (1970: 175). But this austere God is changing not only in shifting theological discourses but also in the work of Christian socio-religious movements such as Habitat for Humanity which is building houses for the low-income in the US and around the world inspired by the vision and work of a loving God (Giri 2002). Does the work of loving God in American civil society transform

the image of austere God in American civil religion? Furthermore how does the image of God in American civil religion derived mainly from Protestantism meet the challenge of a multicultural God nourished by different visions and realizations of God in different religious and spiritual communities from within contemporary United States as well as from around the world? Building upon Bellah civil religions have to transform themselves to civil spiritualities where one may not utter the name of God as one is not overtly mentioning the name of Christ in civil religion (Cf. Derrida 1998; Giri 2006). This transformed civil religion as civil spirituality would have multiple relationships with God including agnostic and god as non-human and maternal. But Bellah may choose not to answer some of these questions directly as in our recent communication he wrote to me: "I stopped using the term 'civil religion' in the early 1980s because of too much of the discussion was about definition and too many people, in spite of my repeated argument to the contrary, regarded it as idolatrous worship of the state. In *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* we do not use the term but talk about the same issues in terms of the Biblical tradition and civic republican tradition."

V

During our conversations Bellah lamented the parochialism and narrowness of present-day American sociology as it has little interest in other parts of the world. It is also positivist and empiricist." "The main stream of American sociology is not interested in our work." For Bellah, American sociologists should have a much broader interest than just with the politically correct emphasis on race and gender. Bellah and his colleagues have drawn much inspiration from philosophically enriched sociologists such as Jurgen Habermas or sociologically interested philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, especially their work on significance of tradition, quest for values and self-realization. But it must be noted that in this company of philosophers and sociologists Bellah is probably the only seeker who knows spiritual quest, social history and cross-currents of transformation outside the Euro-American world personally. One does not find another Bellah with the sole inspiring exception of SN Eisenstadt after fifty years in Euro-American sociology who has done fieldwork outside the enchanting imperium and at the same time has raised so many significant contemporary issues about Euro-American modernity and the humanity at large.

On being asked about his current work, Bellah pointed to his long standing work on religious evolution. Bellah is now writing a book on

the subject in which he is trying to show “[..how genealogically the history of religion is singular, that all existing religions have developed out of common roots and have constantly intertwined ever since” (Bellah 2007: 9). For Bellah, this recognition that “we are ultimately related, part of a single history, might, just might, if we give it enough effort, move us closer to mutual intelligibility, even toward a recognition that we are ultimately members of one another [..]without abandoning our indelible particularity, the fact that we are our history, we can move to a new history in which we see that those of other faiths are not as Other as the post-modernists like to claim, that we have much in common with them, that, in spite of all the differences, we are part of the same story, the human story” (Bellah 2007: 9, 23). Bellah’s perspective on religion and our shared human journey finds a sympathetic echo in the following lines of Chitta Ranjan Das, a great experimenter in education, literature and spiritual evolution from India:

The historian Arnold Toynbee goes to remark that for a true and lasting peace, a religious revolution is an indispensable condition. By religion he means the overcoming of self-centredness, in the life of individuals as well as of communities. Martin Buber has in one of his writings appealed to us to meet the world with the fullness of our being and in this way only will we meet God. The expressions denote that the familiar meanings man has traditionally given to God and religion are fast changing. Religions with the entire world of their paraphernalia are gradually receding giving place to a new spiritual consciousness which we can describe as religious, but which may not be exclusively Hindu, Buddhistic or Christian. Temples, churches, synagogues and mosques are receding making room for a spiritual living as if God were right up here before us. [..] Half-Gods have to recede if God is to be very much visible here. Paul Tillich, the theologian, perhaps suggests something like that when he talks of the God above God.

As our consciousness grows and expands, our concept of God has also to grow and expand. We are soon approaching an encounter where everybody’s heritage will become also everyone else’s heritage (Das 2008: 16).

NOTES

1 In a recent article though Bellah (2007: 16) tells us that the contingent nature of his own Christian identity:

Indeed, I almost cringe when I use the term Christian for myself as I know that

many, particularly on the Berkeley faculty, will instantly think that I agree with Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell, whose views, theological as well as political, I in fact almost wholly reject. What I cannot reject is that I share a common history with them, we are variants of the same tradition, but then, I share a common history with all believers of all religions: we are all variants of one religious history of mankind.

- 2 Bellah sees grace working in society as well especially in the work of social action and social systems. In the words of Bellah: "Some of the systems theorists such as Parsons and Karl Deutsch have conceived of human action as multi-layered and open. Deutch, for example, has spoken of the propensity for all highly complex systems to break down, and has borrowed the theological term 'grace' to designate the indispensable but unpredictable situational conditions that seem to be necessary in order for any complex system to function at all" (1970: 241).
- 3 On reading the first draft of this essay Professor Bellah commented on this point: "This is a normal feature of the student / teacher relation in East Asia. The Analects of Confucius contain many questions from students directed to Confucius and this practice continued in the tradition through all of its history." But here the issue is if the students could also challenge the teacher in the spirit of radical questioning of presuppositions of teachers. In Indian tradition and contemporary Indian socio-spiritual field such radical questioning rarely takes place. This certainly calls for more comparative socio-historical reflection between practices of mutual radical questioning between students and teachers in different traditions of the world including between China and India, East Asia and South Asia.
- 4 Bellah here may take note that that scholars and seekers in the path of Buddha have also realized and presented Buddha as a mother. Nalin Swaris who shares such a perspective and realization writes: "The Buddha took the metaphor of Mother Love to epitomize the noblest moral sentiment in his Teaching - *Maitriya* - Universal, Non Discriminating Friendliness towards all:

Just as a mother at the risk of her life watches over her own child, her only child, so also let every one cultivate a heart of boundless friendliness towards all beings. Cultivate goodwill towards all the world, a boundless heart of friendliness, above, and below and across, unhindered, without hatred, without enmity. Standing walking or sitting or lying, as long as one is awake, let one *maintain this mindfulness*. This way of living is the best in the world. (*Maitriya Sutra*) (Swaris 2008: 1)..
- 5 For Derrida (1998) those who speak of religion speak Latin authorizing themselves in the name of religion.
- 6 For Bellah (1970: 257), "The radical split between knowledge and commitment that exists in our culture and in our universities is not ultimately tenable. Differentiation has gone about as far as it can go. It is time for a new integration."
- 7 Bellah might find heartening that recently Jurgen Habermas, the pre-eminent theorist of public sphere who earlier mainly took a secularist position now urges us that there should be greater tolerance on behalf of both the secularist and religious positions in the public sphere towards each other in a spirit of learning. See Habermas 2003.
- 8 For Bellah, "To take the American case, freedom of speech and religious freedom were not simply the projects of Eighteenth Century leaders deeply influenced by Enlightenment philosophy, as the American founders certainly were, but by a public made up in significant part of dissenting Protestants, Quakers, but above all

Baptists, who had suffered from religious establishments and were committed to ending them. Thus the disestablishment of religion in the early American republic was not the product of intense anti-clericalism (even though some of the founders were privately anti-clerical), but of an alliance of secular and religious publics with a common end in view. As a result, no significant American religious group rejected the republic on religious grounds” (2005a: 7-8). This resonates with what Uberoi writes about the role of religious movements in the origin of secularism in Europe:

If we divide the history of mankind into five periods, that is, the prehistoric, ancient, medieval, modern and post-modern, one can say that the history of civil society begins only when the institution of the sacred or the or the divine kingship begins to dissolve into two differentiated institutions at the dawn of the ancient, or at the very latest the medieval, period out of the past. [...] Even if this civil society was indeed the ‘child of the modern world,’ still it is the Christian society and its early modern reform that we may also have to consider, and not only the bourgeois society of modern capitalism. By this wider definition, the modern civil society was established or revived in Britain at any rate by the struggle of the Nonconformists, the new Christians, who together severed connection with the established Church of England when it accepted royal supremacy at the time of the Reformation [...] The new Christians wanted instead what we may call salvation through religion in society, with pluralist freedom of conscience and worship for all (Uberoi 2003: 115, 120).

9 Bellah writes:

As a sociologist of religion I know that religions and spiritual traditions have often served mainly to reinforce commitment to the status quo: to quiet dissent, not to ask difficult questions. But I also know that it is from religious and spiritual communities that, time and again, there have arisen the great questioners, those who look beyond the taken for granted assumptions of their societies and consider them in the light of ultimate reality. Sometimes they have renounced their societies and sometimes they have denounced them. Probably the faithful need continually to move between renunciation and denunciation. But they do so in the full light of day. They demonstrate to the larger society their alternative realities by the way they live. The public sphere would be enormously impoverished without them. None of them have the sole answer, but perhaps together, and learning from each another, they can help move us from the impasse we have reached to a form of life that will be less destructive and more fulfilling for all life on our planet (2005a: 35).

10 Bellah writes about this in a recent paper:

The UN report thinks that if the developed nations gave even 50 cents of every \$100 of revenue, that could create a significant reduction in world poverty. That is .5 percent (half of one percent) of national revenue. A few rich countries are already giving that much and several more are getting close to it. But how much do you think the United States gives? When a poll asked Americans if we were giving too much, not enough, or just right to aid developing countries, a majority said we are giving too much. Then when asked to tell the pollster how much we do give, the estimate was 10 to 15 percent of revenue! But in fact until recently it was .1 percent (one tenth of one percent), until the Bush administration, under intense international pressure, raised it to .15 percent, that is about a hundredth of what the American public thought we are spending. If nations had to show up at

the last judgment as recounted in Matthew 25, would the US be with the sheep or with the goats? Can you imagine our leaders saying “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” And not just the leaders. If the poll I quoted is accurate, most Americans don’t know or don’t care how little we are doing for those in need in the world (2005a: 19).

11 Bellah writes about it:

[..] the weakness of public provision as an expression of social solidarity in the United States is not the result of a secularizing erosion of notions of common good, but, in part, of a religious tradition that never emphasized, except in moments of emergency, the common good, but which, on the whole, reinforced an individualistic ideology. Dissenting Protestantism was always suspicious of the state and emphasized the self-sufficiency of the saved and the prime necessity of individual salvation. The Christian symbol of the Body of Christ, so central in churches with a strong liturgical tradition, such as Roman Catholicism, was often marginal in Protestant thought. To the degree to which all religious groups in the United States have become Protestantized, the religious resource for solidarity has been weakened (2005a: 11).

12 About condition of public education in contemporary United States Bellah moving tells us:

Let me take an example close to home for any middle class American family: education. I came from a family of very moderate means and went all through primary and secondary education in the Los Angeles public schools, graduating from Los Angeles High School in 1945. I applied to only one college: Harvard, and was accepted with full scholarship or I could never have gone. In the first few months I was at sea compared to the prep school boys (there were only boys at Harvard then), but by the end of that year I was getting better grades than they were. My public high school preparation put me in a position to do very well at one of the best universities in the country in competition with those who had the best secondary education money could buy. In 1945 California was number one among all the states in its public education system. Today it is 46th or 47th, down there with Mississippi and Alabama.

I’m not saying that it is impossible for a bright California high school graduate to go to a good college today, but it is surely much harder than in 1945. Let’s think about why. It’s not only the decline in the quality of our public education system. College education has become much more expensive than it used to be, partly because the cost of higher education has risen faster than inflation, but in significant part because both federal and state governments have reduced support for higher education dramatically in recent decades. Even good scholarships don’t really cover the costs. So, many families of modest means don’t even think of sending children to college, or at most to community college. For the past 20 years, college education for the lowest-income quartile has dropped by 12 percent (2005a: 24-25).

13 With Fred Dallmayr (2001) we could add that such a civil religion strives for achieving our world rather than just achieving our country.

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