

# Introduction to the Flashback: Words for Robert N. Bellah (1927-2013)

by Matteo Bortolini

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On July 30 2013, Robert Bellah died due to complications after minor heart surgery. He was 86. Born in Altus, Oklahoma, in 1927, Bellah grew up in Los Angeles and graduated from Harvard University in Social Anthropology (BA, 1950) and Sociology and Far Eastern Languages (PhD, 1955). A renowned expert on Japanese and Far Eastern religions in the 1950s and 1960s, Bellah rose to fame with the publication of his seminal 1967 essay, “Civil Religion in America.” The co-author of best-selling books such as *Habits of The Heart* (1985) and *The Good Society* (1991), Bellah devoted his last fifteen years to completing a lifelong project on the place of religion in human history. His groundbreaking 2011 work, *Religion in Human Evolution*, gave rise to a huge interdisciplinary debate and was the crowning achievement of a long and happy intellectual, scholarly, and teaching career. Unfortunately, Bellah’s last new work, *The Modern Project in the Light of Human Evolution*, is destined to remain incomplete.

A long-time friend of *Sociologica*, Bellah featured twice in our journal: in issue 3/2010 we published the manuscript of “Heritage and Choice in American Religion” (1965), the Urtext of his famous “Civil Religion in America”, together with commentaries by Victor Lidz and Steven M. Tipton. In our latest issue (1/2013, published before his death) the Symposium “Ritual and Religion in Human Evolution” analysed his last book and included essays by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Johann P. Arnason, Edward A. Tiryakian, Adam B. Seligman, Mark Gould, and Víctor Pérez-Díaz.

In order to commemorate Robert Bellah and to honor his memory, the editors of *Sociologica* asked Paul Lichterman and Jeff Alexander permission to publish some of the speeches given at the memorial gathering for Robert, which they had organized at the ASA Annual Meeting in New York City, on August 10 2013. This *Flashback* adds to the speeches by Ezra Vogel, Ed Tiryakian, Richard Wood, Philip Gorski, Matteo Bortolini, and Paul Lichterman, who were present in New York along with Alexander and Ann Swidler, the translation of Hans Joas's obituary published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on August 3 2013, on the grounds that Joas had been invited to the New York gathering but was unable to attend it. As diverse as they are, the papers collected in this section give just a small glimpse of what can be accomplished by thinking back to Bellah's intellectual and moral legacy.

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