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Robert Bellah and cultural reformation

American habits

by Richard L. Wood

FOR FOUR DECADES, Robert Bellah's books, articles and public speeches have influenced thoughtful sectors of American faith communities. Widely known among academics and the holder of an endowed chair at one of the premier public universities in the United States, Bellah is best known in church circles for *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* (both coauthored with the team of Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton). Their interpretation of the deep cultural patterns of American life has resonated with religious leaders of many stripes and has shaped sermons and adult education hours in many congregations.

A collection of Bellah's writings offers an occasion to revisit the insights of this keen interpreter of American faith life. *The Robert Bellah Reader* brings together many of his seminal articles and speeches on topics ranging from the cultural currents of the 1960s to the possibilities and dangers of the United States being the hegemonic world power. Many readers will recognize with sadness and anger how two strands of American culture, the deep individualism of the 1960s and a long-standing strand of traditional authoritarianism, have joined forces to forge a resurgent American nationalism under President George W. Bush—with the tragic results that we see around us.

The chapter called "The New American Empire" in particular exemplifies the way that Bellah's analysis of societal trends allows him to read the signs of the times. He notes the expansion of American unilateralism in the war on terror, especially as articulated by the Bush administration in its 2002 National Security Strategy document. Pointing to the historical pattern of empires collapsing due to military exhaustion and bankruptcy, he argues:

It is surely in our interest to connect all nations, great and small, in agreements that limit weapons and mandate arbitration rather than assuming we will always have the capacity to dominate the world by force. My great fear is that this latest American outburst of "the arrogance of power" [the then-approaching Iraq war]

will mobilize most of the world against us. . . . We have embarked on an endless "war on terrorism" in which the invasion of Iraq is only the next step—until exhaustion sets in. A chance for another course, another role for America in the world, depends ultimately on the reform of our own culture. A culture of unfettered individualism combined with absolute world power is an explosive mixture.

The Robert Bellah Reader.

Edited by Robert N. Bellah and Steven M. Tipton. Duke University Press, 568 pp., \$27.95 paperback.

No other analysis published in 2002 better captures the dynamics that have so damaged American credibility, ideals and interests in the intervening five years.

In saying that our culture needs to be reformed, Bellah looks past the fashionable calls to replace Republicans with Democrats in our government. Though surely aghast at the corruption ushered in during the recent years of Republican dominance, Bellah knows that ultimately our political life reflects trends embedded in American culture. Only if we rethink and reshape our sources of meaning and recommit ourselves to sources that can sustain a truly democratic culture—and that can elicit the vigorous adherence of millions of our fellow citizens—will American culture be reborn.

Bellah's most influential writings have been dedicated to promoting this reshaping of American culture. *Habits of the Heart* argued that the longstanding strength of American culture, a sense of shared destiny and communal interest, was collapsing under the onslaught of "expressive individualism" and "utilitarian individualism." It called on Americans to reclaim biblical religion and civic republicanism as crucial antidotes for our culture's ills. *Habits* quickly became a central text in seminaries and congregations within mainline Protestantism and Catholicism, and to a lesser extent in Judaism and in some sectors of evangelicalism.

Some critics charged that the authors of *Habits* paid too little attention to the structural influences on American life, such as political and economic power, focusing

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instead on the niceties of culture. We can now see how racism and economic inequality were reemerging in the 1980s, so these criticisms are well founded in a certain sense, but they fundamentally miss the point: Bellah argues that political and economic processes are founded on shared cultural assumptions. Bellah and company analyzed the soft-power dynamics of culture rather than the hard power of politics and economics, and argued that the former fundamentally shape the long-term dynamics of the latter. They likewise defended *Habits'* focus on white, middle-class American culture,

arguing that it has a powerful role in shaping all of social life.

THE INDIVIDUALIST trends that Bellah identified were rapidly pushing communitarian forms of civic republicanism and biblical religion out of the "mainline": by the end of the century, radically individualist forms of religion and spirituality were closer to mainstream American culture. To the extent that much counterweight to radical individualism existed at all, it was located more in traditional authoritarian expressions of religion than in the old mainline currents. Thus neoconservative ascendancy linked to radical individualism in religious garb dominated the initial years of the new millennium, until neocon gaffes and disastrous policies undermined the project. The cultural reform project that the authors of *Habits* aimed to launch was stillborn, or at least forced into a prolonged gestation beneath the surface of social life.

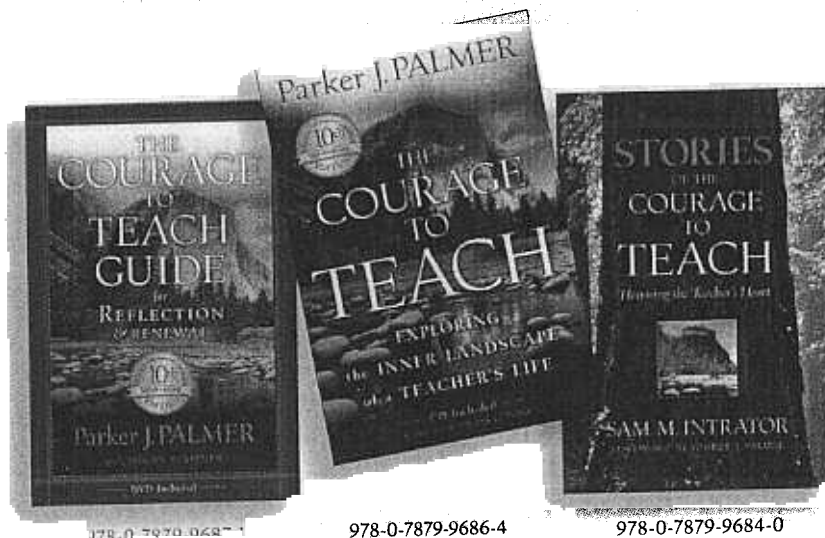
That gestation was nurtured by many sources, among them *The Good Society*, the sequel to *Habits*. *The Good Society* makes explicit an argument that is only implicit in the earlier book: deep cultural reform can result only from a thoroughgoing rethinking of our shared institutions. That is, we must rethink our assumptions about how our economy, government, churches, schools, media and other institutions foster or undermine the creation of a good society.

The latter book has been less widely read, perhaps because its central argument moves against the powerful current of American culture: it asks us to forswear the illusion that we are self-made, and instead to recognize the ways that institutions shape our lives. It calls us to dedicate ourselves to reconstructing those institutions, both through our everyday engagement with our places of employment and with churches and schools and through active political and civic work. The task at hand is re forging institutions so they will be able to sustain our best human striving and will help us to face our sobering societal challenges and thus become the society we are called to become.

Together, *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* have helped a gen-

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eration of religious leaders interpret American society for their congregations. They have also inspired efforts aimed at the long-term reconstruction of American institutions, including congregations and universities.

Throughout a five-decade career as a scholar, cultural critic, public intellectual and civic sermonizer, Bellah has exhibited clear-eyed realism. His sharp accounting of the acute costs of cultural trends has sometimes been marked with a tone of declension, often misinterpreted as a nostalgic cultural conservatism. But Bellah's realism has consistently been leavened with a dose of theologically grounded hope that the Spirit is at work beneath the surface of social life. This has produced two key emphases in his writing.

First, Bellah's realism about the scale of American power and the global responsibility that comes with that power combines with his hope for a better future to produce in some recent writings a positive view of the global mission of the United States. This view that the U.S. has a democratic mission to the world is widely contested, given the misadventures of the current administration, and the resulting costs in human blood and national legitimacy. But what is the alternative? Properly understood and circumscribed by a healthy respect for other peoples and for human rights, commitment to a democratic mission in the world might still make sense.

Second, despite its prophetic tone, Bellah's writing consistently looks toward a future in which the most authentic liberating currents of recent cultural trends might combine with democratic and biblical strands of America's past to become the vanguard of a new future. Such an outcome would require far deeper cultural reconstruction than a simple changing of the guard in the nation's capital. A long-term project to link cultural reconstruction to thorough reform of our political economy would be necessary.

Bridging conversations

ON A SPECTACULAR autumn day in the American Southwest, 25 clergy and faculty from a variety of religious traditions and intellectual disciplines gathered over a shared meal at a public university to reflect together on key challenges facing citizens and faith communities in the United States. The discussion was part of a project called Nexus: Religion in the Public University. Nexus seeks to bridge the chasms between faith and reason, between university and congregation, between diverse faith traditions, and between faculty and clergy. As Robert Bellah argues, these chasms are artificial and unnecessary, and they corrode American culture and undermine the ability of congregations and universities to address the challenges of the 21st century.

On the day of the Nexus meeting, religious leaders from Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Mennonite, Roman Catholic, Congregationalist, Unitarian-Universalist, Byzantine Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Buddhist traditions gathered with professors of religious studies, history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, language, medicine and political science. They first joined an audience of several hundred to hear Anouar Majid present "Saints at Odds: Islam and America in the World," on the fundamental challenges facing both Islam as a faith tradition and the U.S. as a nation. Majid argued that America's response to 9/11 continues to undermine its status as a beacon for democratic aspirations worldwide and to erode the precious legitimacy on which effective power must draw. But he also challenged Muslims to recognize their failure to effectively and systematically confront the internal distortions that have helped breed terror in the name of Islam.

After a vigorous public question-and-answer session, the religious leaders and faculty joined Majid at a private lunch sponsored by the university to talk about the challenges he had presented to congregation and classroom, to preachers and teachers. This engaging discussion was one of six such encounters each year between these religious and university leaders.

On other occasions this group has discussed global warming, terrorism and democracy, religion and science, globalization, the challenges to faith amidst a materialist and hyperindividualistic culture, ethical problems related to new medical technologies, and the differing Jewish and Christian understandings of being a "chosen people."

Religious leaders and university teachers find these conversations inspiring. Through the Nexus dialogues, they strive to link congregation-based pastoral work and university-based pedagogical work to an overarching project: diagnosing the state of American society and discerning its future possibilities. The participants aim to develop a reflective and informed interpretation of the context in which we live so as to better interpret the world for and with their congregations and students.

Though Nexus was conceived locally and is funded by the Louisville Institute, the inspiration for it came from Bellah's writings. At the core of his work lies an understanding of society as fundamentally a conversation about our life together—including the rules of the game codified in law, but just as importantly the culture we share and often take for granted. In much of his work, Bellah has sought to consciously reconstruct American culture by reappropriating its positive threads and critiquing its destructive ones. This cultural critique has its productive expression in institutional reform, the building-up of institutions that generate meaning, solidarity and commitment in people's lives. The Nexus conversations reflect Bellah's project of reclaiming culture through dialogues on topics that matter—and his belief that faith communities and universities are crucial sites for such conversations. —RLW

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• Bellah welcomes all sorts of voices into that project but insists that "religion is the key to culture." Pastors and religious scholars are crucial to rebuilding the U.S. after the catastrophe of the present period: by rebuilding and reinvigorating our faith communities and religious traditions, we can lay the groundwork for an American role in a global future that reflects God's will for humanity. ■

MANUSCRIPTS

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Dr. Nancy Bedford, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

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"Perspectives on a Feminist Intercultural Theology for a Just World"
Maria Pilar Aquino, Center for the Study of Latino/a Catholicism, University of San Diego

■ October 1, 4 p.m.

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Dr. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Drew University

■ October 15, 4 p.m.

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