

2007

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Recommended Citation

Wood, Richard L.. "Reading Robert Bellah: On Faith, Culture, and Power in America." *Christian Century* 2007 (2007).
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/soc_fsp/12

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Reading Robert Bellah

On Faith, Culture, and Power in America

Christian Century 2007

Richard L. Wood

For four decades, Robert Bellah's books, articles, and public speaking have influenced thoughtful sectors of American faith communities, including readers of *Christian Century*. Though widely known among academic specialists, and holder of an elite endowed chair at one of the premier public universities in America, Bellah is best known in church circles for the books *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* (both co-authored with the team of Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton). Their interpretation of the deep cultural patterns of American life has found resonance among religious leaders of many stripes, and shaped sermons and adult education hours in many American congregations.

The recent publication of a new collection of Bellah's writing offers an occasion to revisit the insights of this keen interpreter of American faith life. *The Robert Bellah Reader* (Duke University Press, edited by Bellah and Steven M. Tipton) brings together many of his seminal articles and speeches, on topics ranging from the possibilities and dangers of America being the sole world hegemonic power today to the deep cultural currents of the 1960s. Regarding the latter, many *Christian Century* readers will recognize with sadness and anger how two strands of American culture, the deep individualism of the 1960s and a longstanding strand of "traditional authoritarianism,"

have joined forces to forge a resurgent American nationalism under President George W. Bush – with the tragic results we see around us today.

The chapter on *The New American Empire* in particular exemplifies the way that Bellah's analysis of deep societal trends allows him to read the signs of the times with prescience. He notes with concern the expansion of American unilateralism in the war on terror, especially as articulated by the Bush administration in the "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (issued in 2002 and guiding American policy today). Suggesting the historic 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. (pp. 355-56)

No other analysis published in 2002 better captures the dynamics that have so damaged American credibility, ideals, and interests in the intervening five years. Crucially, in his call for "the reform of our own culture," Bellah sees past the fashionable calls to replace Republicans with Democrats in our government. Though surely aghast at the corruption ushered in by recent years of Republican dominance, Bellah knows that ultimately our political life reflects deeper trends whose foundations are embedded in the culture of American life. Only by rethinking, reshaping, and recommitting ourselves to sources of meaning that can sustain a truly democratic culture – and can elicit the

vigorous adherence of millions of 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 long-standing strength of American culture, with its understanding of shared destiny and communal interest, was collapsing under the onslaught of "expressive individualism" and "utilitarian individualism" in American culture. 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 some sectors of evangelical Christianity.

Habits was criticized for its inattention to more structural influences on American life; these critics often argued that Bellah and his co-authors paid insufficient attention to political and economic power, in favor of the niceties of culture. Given that we can now see how racism and economic inequality were reemerging in the 1980s, these criticisms were well-founded in a certain sense. But they fundamentally miss the point: Bellah argues that such political and economic processes are founded upon the kinds of shared cultural assumptions on which *Habits* focused. In our contemporary terms, 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 long-term dynamics of hard power. They likewise defended *Habits'* focus on white middle class American culture, arguing that its hegemonic status gave it profound influence on all of social life.

But, ironically, the very cultural trends 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 surely closer to mainstream American culture. To the extent much counterweight to radical individualism existed at all, it was located more in traditional authoritarian expressions of religion (whether Catholic, evangelical, Muslim, or other) than in the old mainline currents. Thus, neoconservative ascendancy linked to radical individualism in religious garb dominated the initial years of the new century, until neocon gaffes and disastrous policies undermined their project. And thus, the cultural reform project that *Habits* strove to launch was stillborn, or at least forced into prolonged gestation beneath the surface of social life.

That gestation was nurtured by many sources, among them the sequel to *Habits*, written by the same Bellah-led team of authors. *The Good Society* makes explicit an argument only implicit in the earlier book: that deep cultural reform can only be the fruit of a thorough-going 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 a “good society.” The latter book has been less widely read, perhaps because its central argument swims upstream against the powerful current of American culture: It asks us to forewear the arrogance and illusion of being “self-made,” and instead to recognize the ways that institutions shape our lives. Along with that recognition, it calls us to dedicate ourselves to reconstructing those institutions, both through our everyday engagement with work, church, and schools and through active political and civic work. The task at hand: re-forging institutions that can sustain our best human striving, help us face our sobering societal challenges, and thus become the

society we are called to become.

The two books together have helped a generation of religious leaders interpret American society for their congregations. They have also inspired other efforts at the long-term reconstruction of American institutions, including congregations and universities (see sidebar for one such endeavor).

Sidebar:

On a spectacular autumn day in the American Southwest, twenty-five clergy and faculty from a variety of religious traditions and intellectual disciplines gather over a shared meal at a public university to reflect together on key challenges facing citizens and faith communities in America. Called *Nexus: Religion in the Public University*, this is a different kind of university series: Nexus seeks to bridge the contemporary chasms between faith and reason, between university and congregation, between diverse faith traditions, and between the intellectuals we call faculty and the intellectuals we call clergy. As Bellah has argued, these chasms are artificial, unnecessary, and corrosive of a thriving American culture, but they are very real, constituting significant divides and assumptions in contemporary America. In particular, these divides undermine the ability of either congregations or universities to address the challenges faced by American culture and society in the 21st century.

On this day, religious leaders from Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Mennonite, Roman Catholic, Congregationalist, Unitarian-Universalist, Byzantine Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions gather with university professors of religious studies, history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, language, medicine, and

political science. They first join an audience of several hundred to hear Dr. Anouar Majid present “Saints at Odds: Islam and America in the World,” on the fundamental challenges facing both Islam as a faith tradition and America as a nation. He argues that America’s response to 9/11 continues to undermine our status as beacon to democratic aspirations worldwide, and to erode the precious legitimacy on which effective power must draw. But he also challenges the Muslim world to recognize its failure to confront effectively and systematically 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 join Dr. Majid over a private lunch sponsored by the University, to talk about the and challenges Majid presented to congregation and classroom, preachers and teachers. It’s an engaging and invigorating discussion, pastorally and intellectually – one of six such encounters a year between these religious and university leaders.

On other occasions this group discusses global warming, the challenges to faith amidst a materialist and hyper-individualist culture, terrorism and democracy, the ethical challenges of new medical technologies, religion and science, globalization, or the differing Jewish and Christian understandings of being “chosen people.” Religious leaders and university teachers alike find new inspiration in these conversations. Through the Nexus dialogue, we strive to link congregation-based pastoral work and university-based pedagogical work to an overarching project: Diagnosing the state of American society, analyzing its underlying dynamics, and discerning its future possibilities. These clergy-faculty conversations aim for a reflective and informed interpretation of the context in which we live – and thus to better help preachers and teachers interpret the

world for and *with* the members of their congregations and classrooms.

Though conceived locally and funded by The Louisville Institute, the inspiration for Nexus came from the writings of Robert Bellah. At the core of his work lies an understanding of society as fundamentally a *conversation* about how we arrange to live together – including the rules of the game codified in law, but just as importantly the culture we share and often take for granted. Much of Bellah’s work has sought to consciously reconstruct American culture by re-appropriating its positive threads and critiquing its destructive threads. This cultural critique has its positive 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 our culture through reflective conversations about topics that matter – and his belief that faith communities and universities are crucial sites for doing so.

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

First, his realism about the sheer scale of American power today, and the global

responsibility that comes with that power, combine with his hope for a better future to produce in some recent writings a positive view of America's global mission. Given the recent misadventures of an administration that claimed such a global mission, and the resulting enormous costs in human blood and national legitimacy, this view of a democratic mission to the world is widely contested. Yet one must ask: what is the alternative? Properly understood and circumscribed by a far healthier respect for other peoples and for human rights, might an American commitment to a democratic mission in the world still make sense?

Second, despite a jeremiad 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 American future. But 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. Bellah welcomes all sorts of voices into that project, but insists that “religion is the key to culture.” Thus, pastors and religious scholars are crucial to rebuilding America from 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.

***** [Christian Century: could end here, for shorter article]

For a glimpse at Bellah's current major project, one should not miss *The Robert Bellah Reader's* opening chapter on “Religious Evolution.” Though this piece was first published over forty years ago, it has remained influential, and Bellah is today hard at

work revising and clarifying its central theme: the role of religion across the entire sweep of human history, understood in light of current knowledge across many scholarly fields. This return to his intellectual roots completes a remarkable arc in Bellah's biography: From a specialized academic to a public intellectual engaged in the crucial debates of the day, he has remained throughout a scholar to the core. His writing has been part and parcel of being a social scientist, citizen, and member of a faith community, integrated in a life that has responded to the demands of our age and the claims of his faith tradition upon his talents. As faith communities, we have learned much from Bellah; as a culture, we have a great deal yet to learn.

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