American Habits: Robert Bellah and cultural reformation

Richard L. Wood

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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.

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

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, 

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

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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.

N 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

Bridging conversations

35 CHRISTIAN CENTURY September 4, 2007
The 9th Annual CHRISTIAN CENTURY Lecture & Workshop

Monday, September 24, 2007

9:00 a.m. - Workshop*
"Preaching and the Things That We Do: Making Sense of Words and the Divine Experience"
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

*Continuing education credits are available for the morning workshop
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6:00 p.m. - Dinner and lecture
"Dare we change our minds?"
(Reception: 6:00 - 6:45; Dinner: 7:00)
The Palmer House Hilton, Chicago

Widely regarded as one of America's most distinguished preachers, Peter Gomes is minister at Memorial Church of Harvard University and a member of the Harvard faculty. His best-selling books include The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart; The Good Life: Truths That Last in Times of Need and Strength; for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living.

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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
The CENTURY welcomes submissions of unsolicited articles. Articles not accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope (or international postage coupons) cannot be returned. Feature articles should not exceed 3,000 words; reports and editorial material should not exceed 1,500 words. Send via e-mail to main@christiancentury.org (label your document "Submission") or mail to: Submissions, The Christian Century, Suite 700, 104 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60603-5901.

Christian College Seeks a Chaplain to Start June 2008
Calvin College, a liberal arts institution in the Reformed tradition of historic Christianity, is seeking a Chaplain to serve as our campus pastor and leader.

The Chaplain serves as a teacher and mentor to students and must enjoy discipling young adults into a fuller faith in Jesus Christ. In addition, the Chaplain leads and equips colleagues in their own ministries to students. This position enjoys faculty status.

Calvin is located in Grand Rapids, MI, and serves 4200 students through the work of 700 dedicated faculty and staff members. As a community, we value academic inquiry, faith formation, and service to God in all areas of life.

To learn more about this position, please visit our website: www.calvin.edu/go/chaplain-search

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McCormick Days 2007
October 22-23 | SPEAKING OUT ABOUT POVERTY

Keynote Speaker:
Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, activist and author of Dead Man Walking
Registration:
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September 14-15
Breaking the Silence: Black and Latino Religious Summit on Sexuality
Keynote Speaker:
Rev. B. Herbert Martin, Progressive Community Center, Chicago
Information and Registration: www.breakthesilencechicago.org

September & October
Voices and Visions: Latina Theologians Speak

- September 24, 10:30 a.m.
  "Feminist Christology Revisited: A Latin American Perspective"
  Dr. Nancy Bedford, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

- September 24, 4 p.m.
  "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.
  "Reconceptualizing Our Differences: Towards a Mujerista Perspective of Justice in a Multicultural World"
  Dr. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Drew University

- October 15, 4 p.m.
  "The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God"
  Dr. Mayra Rivera, Pacific School of Religion

Information: 773/947-6330 or 773/947-6310

November 12, 10 a.m. – noon
Preaching Matthew: plenary and workshops
Featured Speaker:
Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, Candler School of Theology
Information: 773/947-6283 or gavancamp@mccormick.edu

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