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How Robert Bellah (1927-2013) Changed the Study of Religion

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* When the great sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah, died suddenly this week he was in the midst of writing the book that was meant to be the successor to his massive and magisterial *Religion in Human Evolution.*That book started with the Big Bang and ended with the Axial Age in the 6th century BCE. Although it covered much—the emergence of human culture and society in the evolution of the human species—there were still some significant changes in the social shape of religiosity in the last 2500 years that remained to be explored.

What the next book would focus on, Bellah told me, were the remarkable developments of the 16th through the 18th century that in Europe included the Reformation and the Enlightenment. This was a moment of anti-authoritarian popularism in society that resulted in a new social form of religiosity, a communitarian spirit that transformed Christianity and gave rise to a whole new protestant movement.

At the same time, similar movements were emerging in other traditions in other parts of the world. In India, for example, *bhakti* movements of social rebellion were erupting throughout the subcontinent, eschewing Brahmanical authority for the fellowship of devotees of a new breed of eclectic saints and teachers who could be outcastes, blind, female, or partly Muslim. Elsewhere in Asia, what has been called a “Protestant Buddhism” was appealing to the masses in the way that a more orthodox clerical order could never do.

What Bellah was exploring in these two books—one recently published and the other, alas, eternally to be unfinished—was a new subject of religious studies: global religion. This is a field of study that tries to show the connection between seemingly disparate forms of religiosity around the world and forces of globalization that effect societies virtually everywhere on the planet.

A recent form of global religion—the emergence of strident religious politics—is related to the worldwide crisis of the nation-state and is a defensive response to the era of global interaction. Bellah shows us that this has happened before, at important moments earlier in history, when global social changes have created religious responses on a virtually global scale. Hence, in his mid-80s, Robert Bellah has once again become a pioneer in religious studies.

Over fifty years ago, in 1957, Bellah rocked the field of religious studies with a different kind of pioneering study, this one focused on Japanese religion. In *Tokugawa Religion,*Bellah did for Japanese Buddhism, Confucianism and Shinto what Max Weber did for Christianity in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.*He showed how the social values embedded in religious thinking can help to support certain kinds of social transformations. In the case of Tokugawa Religion these values helped to pave the way for Japanese industrialization and global economic success.

This study made Bellah’s name not only in sociology but also in the emerging field of religious studies, where it showed the social utility of studying religious ideas. Moreover, it showed how concepts from Western scholars such as Max Weber could be applied to different cultures around the world. The essays on religion in China, Japan, Islamic societies, and the United States published in 1970 in his book of essays, *Beyond Belief,*illustrates that point.

In his 1967 [essay](http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm) in *Daedalus*on “Civil Religion,” Bellah founded a whole new enterprise for religious studies scholars: probing the political significance of religious ideas and the religious significance of political ones. In this case it was Emile Durkheim that Bellah evoked, taking up Durkheim’s notion of the spiritual character of all collectivities. In his examination of the inaugural addresses of U.S. Presidents, Bellah showed there was a strain of patriotic religiosity in American public life that was both nationalistic and religious—specificially Protestant Christian. He borrowed the phrase, civil religion, that Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined in *The Social Contract* to describe the moral underpinnings of public order.

In the American context, however, Bellah saw this moral patriotism as infused with religious images and rhetoric that came from what politicians liked to call “the Judaeo-Christian tradition,” an imagined homogenous religious stratum underlying American political culture. This interest in the political significance of religion seems obvious now, in an era of strident religious movements and the rise of religious nationalism around the world, but when he first wrote “Civil Religion,” it was a bold new idea and an innovative way of thinking.

This was when I first knew Bellah, in Berkeley in the late 1960s, when I was a graduate student and later his colleague in the religious studies program. I saw how influential Bellah was on generations of graduate students—not only in sociology but also in religious studies. During those days he frequently reigned over the religion and society colloquia at the adjacent Graduate Theological Union, and it’s fair to say that the impact of his scholarship has been as formative in the fields of comparative religion and sociology of religion as it has been in the social sciences.

The religious concerns of Bellah were present even when his studies seemed to be more centrally focused on purely social issues. The widely-read *Habits of the Heart,* published in 1985, is an example. The book was written by Bellah, based on the interviews and reports of a team of younger sociologists with whom he had worked for several years. The title comes from a phrase by Alexis deTocqueville, and, like the 19th century French traveler, Bellah and his colleagues were attempting to assess the moral character of American society.

What they found was a profound tension between individualism and commitment to community. The religious expressions of this tension were evident: on the one hand catering to American individualism and indulgent self-expression, while providing havens of communal commitment on the other. Once again, it prompted religious studies scholars to take seriously the social dimensions of religious belief, even—or perhaps especially—when they seem so personal and devoid of social significance.

This brings us to 2011 and the publication of what has been described as Bellah’s magnum opus, the 700-page *Religion in Human Evolution,*on which he had been working since his retirement in 1997*.*How will this book make an impact on the field of religious studies in years to come, just as Bellah’s earlier works have done?

For one thing, it will encourage religious studies scholars to locate expressions of religiosity within their socio-historical milieus. What Bellah has convincingly shown in this book, as in his earlier work, is that religion is always a shared experience. That shared social context makes a difference in how one understands religion, and how religion is seen as affecting social life. Bellah’s study is one of sociotheology, a term that has been applied to the study of the interaction of religious ideas and their social contexts.

A second contribution of this volume is Bellah’s understanding of religion itself. Unlike many of the present-day attempts to explain religion away as if the term has no intrinsic meaning, Bellah demures. And he shows what religion is. It is not, however, what you might expect if you remember his long-winded definition of religion that he cobbled together from ideas provided by his friend, Clifford Geertz, some years ago. In his new book, the notion is simple: an awareness of an alternative reality.

The religious instinct, according to Bellah, is the ability to sense an alternative reality and in some way participate in it. The first expressions of this were not cognitive; they were physical. Bellah looks at other species and at earlier moments of the evolution of life on the planet, and finds the origins of religion—and all culture—in play. A creature is able to play when it has satisfied its immediate material needs and can imagine, or act out, alternative ways of being. My guess is that this understanding of religion will eventually have a profound effect on the way that religious scholars conceive of their subject matter, and how to go about studying it in its physical as well as literary expressions.

Finally, Bellah’s last book has made a lasting contribution to our understanding of religion as a global phenomenon. As I said at the outset, once again Robert Bellah has become a pioneer in the social study of religion, as a founder of the field of global religion. In this case he is taking the broadest view imaginable, seeing religion as a part of the reality of life on this planet from its moment of physical conception to the unimaginable future. And that is, indeed, a vision of cosmic proportions from a scholar whose stature, like his ideas, will long endure.

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