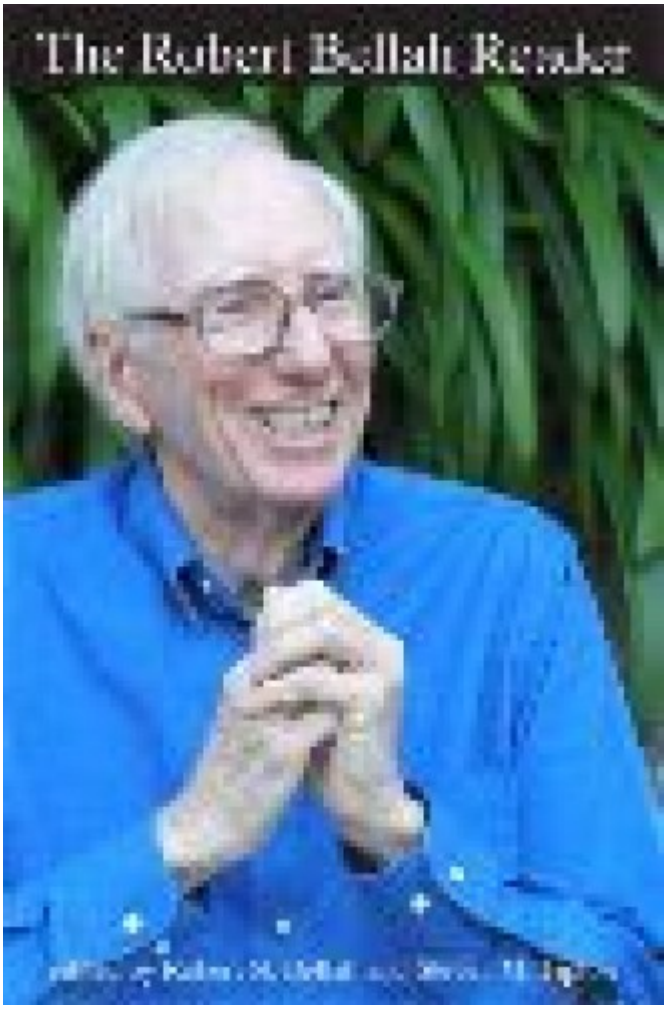
American habits

By Richard L. Wood in the September 4, 2007 issue

In Review



The Robert Bellah Reader

Robert N. Bellah and Steven M. Tipton, eds.
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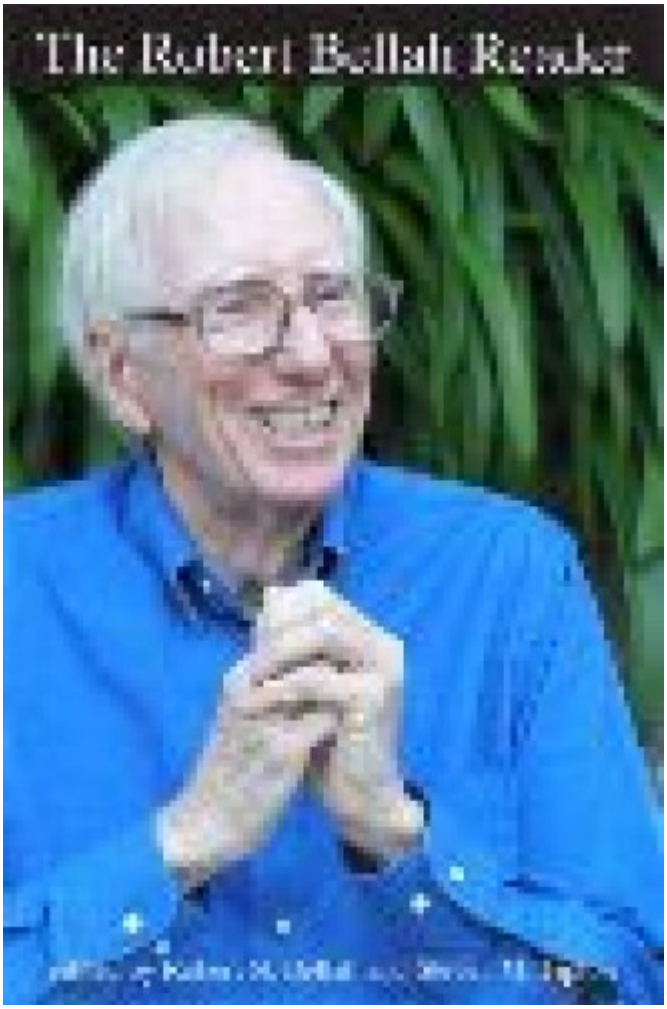

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For four decades, Robert Bellah's books, articles and public speeches have influenced thoughtful sectors of American faith communities. Widely known among academics and the holder of an endowed chair at one of the premier public universities in the 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 longstanding 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 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 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 foreswear 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 reforging 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 generation 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.

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.

Richard L. Wood studied under Robert Bellah