

Sociologist Wade Clark Roof dies at age 80

People in the [September 25, 2019](#) issue

Sociologist Wade Clark Roof, who helped Americans grasp the spiritual lives of the baby boomer generation, died on August 24 at the age of 80. Perhaps best known for his 1993 book, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, he wrote widely on religious pluralism, generational change, contemporary spirituality, and civil society. He was a frequent commentator on the shifting current of mainline Protestantism.

Roof taught at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst for 19 years before moving in 1989 to the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he founded the Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life.

“That was an extraordinary labor on his part,” recalled Shawn Landres, a former student of Roof’s. “Public understanding of religion was a relatively new idea.”

In reviewing *A Generation of Seekers* for the *Christian Century*, Laura Nash wrote: “Roof’s contribution is his finding that the hyperindividualism of this generation has stimulated interest in rather than indifference to spiritual matters. Though the religious symbols, rituals and fundamental meaning systems they knew in childhood fail to capture their hearts and minds, they are not without a desire for spiritual richness. The higher the education level, the greater the search for alternative blossomings of the spirit.”

Historian Diana Butler Bass said that the book was pioneering for its unapologetic inclusion of ethnographic work alongside more traditional, data-focused sociological study.

“He was part of an argument to move away from seeing sociology of religion as purely about numbers, and instead understand [it] as the lived experience of people in community,” Bass said.

Bass noted that Roof regularly attended an Episcopal church that grew from less than 100 attendees to more than 400—in part, she said, because the church’s leaders incorporated lessons from Roof’s research on spirituality into their work.

Roof's other books include *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (with William McKinney); *Beyond Establishment: Mainline Traditions in Transition* (with Jackson Carroll), and *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (with Jackson Carroll and David Roozen).

He was slated to receive the Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion at this year's meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

"I think that his biggest continuing impact is going to be through the lives of the students that he trained; dozens and dozens of them now are professors themselves at universities across the United States and even a few across the globe," Bass said.  
—Religion News Service, *Christian Century* staff