

SYMPOSIUM ON THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF *HABITS OF THE HEART*

Introduction: *Habits of the Heart* at 20*

David Yamane

Wake Forest University

At the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) in 1985, an “author meets critics” session was held on *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. Organizing the session was a no-brainer. The book was published in the spring of 1985. By the time the ASR met in Washington that August, *Habits* had already been reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, as well as in *Newsweek*, *The New Republic*, *US News and World Report*, and elsewhere. It was on its way to becoming a national best-seller and the subject of other reviews and symposia in such prominent publications as *The Nation*, *Psychology Today*, *Science*, and the *Washington Monthly*, to name but a few. By the time the ASR “author meets critics” session was published in *Sociological Analysis*,¹ the commercial success of the book was apparent. Edward Tiryakian, for example, declared, “*Habits of the Heart* belongs to that rare breed of sociological works: a literary event, with sales figures beyond the total number of practicing sociologists in the world, past and present” (p. 172).² That the book was significant intellectually was also clearly recognized in the symposium. Dean Hoge began his review stating plainly, “We have here an important book, one destined to become a standard in the interpretation of American culture” (p. 171).

*Thanks to Teresa Ciabattari for her multiple readings of drafts of this introduction and for her insightful suggestions.

¹From 1964 to 1993, this journal was called *Sociological Analysis*.

²As the reviews are not individually titled, this and all further references to the 1985 ASR symposium are to “Review Symposium,” *Sociological Analysis* 47 (Summer 1986):169-73.

The significance of *Habits* that was sensed early on continued to mark it over the years. It was read and debated not only by sociologists, political scientists, and historians, and not only by professors of religious studies, theology, and divinity. *Habits* was also read and debated by clergy and congregants, organizers and activists, educators and therapists, and no doubt by many, many students. By its 10th anniversary, *Habits* was one of the top eight best-selling books ever written by sociologists, according to Herbert Gans' (1997) exploratory study, with sales in the range of 400,000 to 499,000 copies. That it continues to sell well is evidenced by the publication of University of California Press paperback editions in 1996, with a new introduction, and again in 2007, with a new preface (which is reproduced in this issue of *Sociology of Religion*).

Thus, the book made its mark in both the marketplace of ideas and the commercial marketplace. But does the work stand the test of time? In his 1985 symposium comments, Hoge noted that books "purporting to depict basic changes in American values have had uneven success in the past." Referring to books "about alleged basic shifts, such as Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* and Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*," Hoge claimed, "No one seriously believes them now" (p. 172). Can the same be said of *Habits of the Heart*?

Although it does not (and could not) definitively answer this question, the present symposium takes up the legacy of *Habits* two decades after its publication. As with the symposium published in *Sociological Analysis* in 1986, these essays had their origins in the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. When I was chosen to serve as the program chair for the 2005 annual meeting, I knew immediately that I wanted to organize a symposium on "*Habits* at 20." In Philadelphia, Ann Swidler was good enough to commute to the ASR meeting from the American Sociological Association's hotel to represent the authors, as she did (along with Steven Tipton) at the 1985 meeting. Later, Bellah kindly made his previously unpublished essay, "Reading and Misreading *Habits*," available for inclusion in this issue.

Of the symposium critics represented here, one is a direct offspring of Robert Bellah, and two are grandchildren of sorts. **Richard L. Wood** earned his Ph.D. in sociology at UC-Berkeley. The dissertation he wrote under Bellah's supervision was a comparative analysis of the internal cultural dynamics of faith-based and race-based forms of community organizing in the U.S. It was ultimately published as *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (University of Chicago, 2002), which won the American Sociological Association Religion Section's outstanding book award in 2003. **Wendy Cadge** and **Kelly Besecke** are also descended from Bellah, but with one more degree of separation. Cadge studied at Princeton with Bellah's best-known student in the sociology of religion, Robert Wuthnow. Her dissertation and later book, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (University of Chicago, 2005), is an ethnographic study of how immigrant Buddhists from Thailand and mostly white convert Buddhists in the U.S. understand and practice Buddhism in

their everyday lives. Besecke, too, studied with a student of Bellah's, Paul Lichterman at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Her research, published in *Sociological Theory* and *Sociology of Religion*, highlights the cultural and especially the communicative dimension of religion, particularly the language of reflexive spirituality that helps Americans reground modern society in a sense of shared transcendent meaning. She is exploring these issues in a forthcoming book based on her dissertation, "Rational Enchantment: Transcendent Meaning in the Modern World." Given their connection to and separation from Bellah, all three of these scholars are well situated to engage *Habits* critically but sympathetically.

I hasten to add that, although he is often identified as *the* author, *Habits of the Heart* is not the work of Robert Bellah alone. His co-authors conducted the fieldwork for the four research projects that constitute the empirical core of the book. At the 2005 session, Ann Swidler suggested that much of the argument of the book emerged from group discussions focused on this empirical material. Still, *Habits* bears a strong imprint of Bellah's major ideas, most especially those in his essays on "Religious Evolution" and "Civil Religion in America."³

RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION

"Religious Evolution," originally published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1964, provides the theoretical key to Bellah's thought and puts *Habits* in a world-historical context (Yamane 1998). Bellah (1970b:21) begins by defining *religion* as "a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence." He argues that beginning with the single cosmos of the undifferentiated primitive religious worldview in which life is a "one possibility thing," evolution in the religious sphere is toward the increasing differentiation and complexity of symbol systems. His evolutionary religious taxonomy specifies five stages: primitive (e.g., Australian Aborigines), archaic (e.g., Native American), historic (e.g., ancient Judaism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, early Palestinian Christianity), early modern (e.g., Protestant Christianity), and modern (religious individualism). In the modern stage of religious evolution, the hierarchic dualistic religious symbol system that emerged in the historic epoch is collapsed and the symbol system that results is "infinitely multiplex." In this post-traditional situation, the individual confronts life as an "infinite possibility thing," and is "capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation and capable, again within limits, of remaking the world, including the very symbolic forms

³These two essays have a pride of place in both volumes collecting Bellah's works, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (Bellah 1970a) and *The Robert Bellah Reader* (Bellah and Tipton 2006).

with which he deals with it, even the forms that state the unalterable conditions of his own existence" (Bellah 1970b:42).

This argument foresaw the reflexive individualism that characterizes both the intellectual culture of post-modernism and the "new religious consciousness" of the 1960s and 1970s. In *The New Religious Consciousness*, Bellah (1976:339) foreshadows the argument of *Habits of the Heart* in claiming that the deepest cause of the 1960s counterculture was "the inability of utilitarian individualism to provide a meaningful pattern of personal and social existence." The crisis of the 1960s therefore was "above all . . . a crisis of meaning, a religious crisis." As a response to the sterility of the utilitarian worldview, the counterculture turned to the American tradition of expressive individualism in the form of a spirituality grounded in the primacy of individual experience and the belief in nonduality, exemplified by the appropriation of Zen Buddhist practices. Again foreshadowing the argument in *Habits*, Bellah highlights the danger that expressive individualism may come to articulate with utilitarian individualism, to which it was originally a response. When expressive individualist-inspired religious symbols and practices "become mere techniques for 'self-realization,' then once again we see utilitarian individualism reborn from its own ashes" (Bellah 1976:348).⁴

Thus, by the 1970s, Bellah's (1970a:xvii) positive embrace of the "wide-open chaos of the post-Protestant, postmodern era" in *Beyond Belief* had grown more cautious as the full consequences of the "modern" religious epoch became more evident. By the 1980s, the relationship is clearly strained. Understanding that the treatment of religion in *Habits* is an elaboration of the fifth, "modern" stage of religious evolution makes clear that the "infinite possibility thing" he lauds in "Religious Evolution" has become the hyper-privatized "Sheilaism" lamented in *Habits*.

SHEILAISM

In Sheilaism, *Habits of the Heart* contains one of the most famous expressions of religious individualism every recorded—right up there with Thomas Paine's "My mind is my church" and Thomas Jefferson's "I am a sect myself."⁵ The pseudonymous Sheila Larson is a young nurse who tells her interviewer, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith as carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." For the authors of *Habits*, Sheilaism represents untethered religious individualism

⁴This insight that the utilitarian and expressive are not necessarily odd bedfellows also predates by some 25 years David Brooks' (2000) "comic sociology" of "bourgeois bohemians" in *Bobos in Paradise*.

⁵Not coincidentally, these religiously individualistic phrases of Paine and Jefferson are cited in both *Habits* (p. 233) and "Religious Evolution" (p. 43).

taken to its logical conclusion, and they conclude “‘Sheilism’ somehow seems a perfectly natural expression of current American religious life” (Bellah, et al. 1985:221).

Looking back on Sheilism after 20 years, now that some of the dust has settled, it is clear that the authors of *Habits* were onto something. Sociologists writing in the wake of *Habits* investigated more systematically the extent and distribution of the individualistic “personalized” or “privatized” religion that Sheilism represented. Some of them published articles with clever titles like “Desperately Seeking Sheila” (Greer and Roof 1992) and “When Sheila’s a Lesbian” (Wilcox 2002). Others sought to put the movement toward religious individualism into a broader, often generational, framework for analysis. Most notable in this regard was Wade Clark Roof’s two books, *A Generation of Seekers* (1993) and *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999), both of which examined the crucial role of Baby Boomers in transforming the American religious landscape. More recently, Robert Wuthnow has done the same thing over a slightly longer period of time in *After Heaven*. In understanding and explaining the cultural forms of spirituality in American society and how they have changed over time, Wuthnow (1998) argues that the dominant model of spirituality in 20th century America changed from *dwelling* to *seeking*. In my reading, Roof’s and Wuthnow’s analyses of spiritual seeking in contemporary American society strongly resemble Sheilism. Indeed, if Sheila Larson had today’s language available to her during her interview, she would surely have offered the contemporary mantra, “I’m spiritual, not religious.”

CIVIL RELIGION

While his guiding theoretical framework is encapsulated in “Religious Evolution,” Bellah’s best known essay is “Civil Religion in America” (1970c). This is an essay, according to Bellah, that “in important respects changed my life” (1992:viii) and that “I have never been allowed to forget” (1980b:3). Indeed, when *The Chronicle Review* ran a symposium on December 1, 2006 on the recently released *Robert Bellah Reader*, two of the three commentators (Alan Wolfe and Jean Bethke Elshtain) engaged the civil religion essay exclusively, though it was just one of the 28 essays in the volume.

I will not rehash the basic argument here (see Yamane 2006). Suffice it to say that, like Rousseau and Durkheim, Bellah saw legitimation as a problem faced by every nation, and civil religion as one solution—under the right social conditions. In *Varieties of Civil Religion*, Bellah (1980a:vii) ties civil religion to the religious evolution framework, arguing that every society has a “religio-political” problem, and that in premodern phases the solution consists either in a fusion of the two realms (archaic) or in a differentiation but not separation (historic and early modern). Civil religion proper comes into existence only in modern society, where church and state are separated as well as differentiated. That is, a civil

religion that is differentiated from *both* church and state is possible only in a modern society.

Although he never uses the term civil religion in *Habits*,⁶ the “biblical and republican traditions” championed in *Habits* are a new and more dynamic conceptual response to the same substantive issues. A public focus on commitment to the common good as opposed to the excesses of utilitarian and expressive individualism is possible, for Bellah and his co-authors, if the once-dominant cultural languages of the biblical and republican traditions—relegated in contemporary America to the status of “second languages”—are reappropriated by citizens actively pursuing the good society in common. The obstacles to forging a national community based on common moral understandings are considerable, but as any Durkheimian would argue, surmounting them is essential.

By the 1990s, other concepts began to compete in the arena once dominated by civil religion, most notably “public religion” and concern with the role of religion in civil society. Where civil religion was principally treated as a cultural phenomenon, this recent work has been much more focused on institutions (e.g., Casanova 1994) and social movements (e.g., Wood 2002). Even Bellah and his colleagues in *The Good Society* (1991) turned their attention to the institutional dimension of “the public church.” Whether or not future research and reflection is conducted in the name of “civil religion,” the fundamental religio-political problem of legitimation remains. Sociologists in the future, therefore, will continue to grapple with the question to which civil religion is one answer, hopefully standing on the shoulders of Rousseau, Durkheim, and Bellah as they do so.

A CONCLUDING PERSONAL NOTE

In concluding, I must admit to having very personal reasons for organizing and now publishing this symposium. Quite simply: I would not be a sociologist of religion were it not for Robert Bellah, and I would not be the kind of sociologist I try to be were it not for *Habits of the Heart*. When I began my undergraduate studies in sociology at UC-Berkeley, religion was not even on my educational radar. I was an Enlightenment Fundamentalist whose only interest in religion was as the butt of jokes. Then in the spring of 1989, I had a fateful conversation with a fellow undergraduate about which courses I should take in the fall semester. The conversation went something like this:

⁶This fact is pointed out by Mathisen (1989:137) in his essay, “Twenty Years after Bellah: Whatever Happened to Civil Religion?” In a comment on Mathisen’s essay, Bellah reveals that he consciously stopped using the term civil religion, even though he continued to be preoccupied with the underlying ideas. As Bellah (1989:147) explains, “*Habits of the Heart* is very much concerned with the same substantive issues as my writings on civil religion. Mercifully, I have been spared the irrelevant arguments about civil religion in comments on *Habits*, which confirms to me that I was right to drop the term.”

Me: "Dude, what classes should I take next fall?"

Friend: "Dude, Bellah is teaching sociology of religion."

Me: "Dude, I don't care about religion. It is the opiate of the masses."

Friend: "Dude, I know, but Bellah is teaching so *you need to take his class.*"

Me: "Dude, why?"

Friend: "Dude, because Bellah is *the man.*"

I took the course, and I was converted almost immediately to the sociology of religion in general and to Bellah's approach in particular. Reading Barbara Hargrove's comments at the 1985 ASR symposium on *Habits* made me realize that I am not alone. "I have been around Robert Bellah enough," Hargrove reports, "to know that, whether he wants to or not, he makes disciples" (p. 171).

Bellah's influence was not only on the substance of my sociological interests, but also on my approach to *doing* sociology. The "public sociology" that the UC-Berkeley sociology department actively promotes today was already evident back in my day, with Bellah playing a leading role. As Michael Burawoy and Jonathan VanAntwerpen write on behalf of the Berkeley sociology department, "We take as point of departure and as aspiration the vision of our colleague Robert Bellah, who sees public sociology as engaging the large social issues of the day—not in isolation but in dialogue with policy analysts and critical intellectuals."⁷ As a leading advocate for and practitioner of public sociology, Bellah has succeeded in transcending the discipline. He is a public intellectual.⁸

Within public sociology, *Habits* has a pride of place, and as the capstone to Bellah's sociology of religion class, it became the model of the type of scholarship I still aspire to produce. In the 1985 ASR symposium, Edward Tiryakian highlights the central virtue of the approach to doing sociology embodied in *Habits*: "I, for one, can only applaud Bellah (and, of course, his collaborators in the book), because sociology (and the sociology of religion) should applaud one of its own who can tackle the big issues of our times, who can treat the whole, and who can render them understandable using the lives of everyday Americans as concrete vehicles to bring in the broader moral and institutional fabric of American society" (p. 172). I do not imagine that I have accomplished anything like this in my own work to date, but I have always tried to follow Bellah in reaching beyond the walls of disciplinary sociology and speaking to other "publics": education and ethnic studies scholars, political scientists, and theologians inside the academy; political activists, Catholic intellectuals, and individuals working in the religious education trenches outside the academy.

⁷"Introduction: Public Sociology at Berkeley," in *Producing Public Sociology: Contributions from Berkeley Faculty*. Retrieved 12 December 2006 (<http://sociology.berkeley.edu/view/producing/>).

⁸In Posner's (2001:212-13) analysis, Bellah ranks 73rd in the list of the top 100 public intellectuals ranked by scholarly citations from 1995-2000, and 7th among American sociologists, trailing only James Coleman, William Julius Wilson, Robert K. Merton, Seymour Martin Lipset, Amitai Etzioni, and Theda Skocpol.

Beyond other scholarly and non-academic publics, I have long maintained that students are an important—and perhaps the most important—public to which sociologists regularly speak (Yamane 1994). So, almost twenty years after my life was changed by meeting Robert Bellah and reading *Habits of the Heart* in an undergraduate sociology of religion class, I assign his work and especially this book regularly in my own classes. When my students ask why they have to read it, I just tell them straight up: Because it is an important book. And because Bellah is the man.

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