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An Interview with Robert N. Bellah, July 8, 2013

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Abstract

In this interview, the late Robert Bellah outlines his thoughts on and academic contributions to the study of religion in Chinese Society. Drawing on his extensive experience and knowledge, Dr. Bellah answers a wide range of questions from the role China played in his intellectual endeavors to the role of Confucianism in China, to Sheilaism and civil religion as universal phenomena.

Keywords

Confucianism – civil religion – Sheilaism

摘要

这是罗伯特·贝拉生前最后一次学术访谈,谈到中国宗教在他的整体学术思考中的重要地位和角色,并且以他广博的知识和经验,回答了关于儒教、公民宗教、稀拉教等众多问题。

关键词

儒教、公民宗教、稀拉教

Could you Please Tell us the Role of China in your Intellectual Imagination?

I first encountered China seriously when as a third-year undergraduate at Harvard I took the famous course, East Asian Civilization, known to undergraduates as “rice paddies,” with John K. Fairbank teaching the fall semester on

China and Edwin O. Reischauer teaching the spring semester on Japan. I was fascinated and intrigued by this course and it tempted me to want to dedicate my life to the study of East Asia. My views were further developed by a semester course the following year given by Talcott Parsons: Comparative Social Institutions. This was essentially a course on Max Weber's comparative sociology and China had a significant place in it. There were two things that tempted me to specialize on Japan rather than China. I had taken a course with the great anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, who had just retired from Berkeley and was a visiting professor at Harvard, called, simply, "Culture." Among many other fascinating things, he said that there are two cultures in the world that are radically different from ours: India and Japan. Since I was not very happy with my own culture, I decided I should study one of these. Japan won out mainly for aesthetic reasons: I just liked Japanese art better than Indian. But then the combination of Reischauer and the Weber course with Parsons convinced me that of all the non-Western societies, Japan had gone through a developmental sequence that was most like the West: whereas the term "feudalism" was used very loosely, Japanese feudalism really was comparable to Western feudalism, and Japanese industrialization was undertaken under an autonomous initiative that was again unique in the non-Western world. Somehow this combination of cultural difference and social similarity, at least as I thought at the time, was most intriguing.

On the other hand, although I learned to have a great respect for Chinese high culture, and learned much from Benjamin Schwartz, who taught on the East Asian Civilization course and whose later book, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, is perhaps the finest volume in English on its subject, I also absorbed from Max Weber a notion of Confucianism as a form of adapting to the world rather than transforming it, and so it had less cultural capacity for rapid modernization than Japan. I later argued in my doctoral dissertation, *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan*, that Japan had more goal-oriented and in that sense political values than China. The irony was that I found in pre-modern Japanese religion a "functional equivalent" to the Protestant Ethic in the West, without realizing that what I found was not simply Japanese but East Asian, and had a lot to do with Confucianism. So while I was one of the first to point out the relation between a social ethic and economic development in East Asia, I made the mistake of thinking that Japan was the unique case.

I developed, I think, a much more adequate picture of Chinese culture in the long chapter on China in the Axial Age, one of four chapters on Axial Age societies, in my 2011 book *Religion in Human Evolution*, a book that includes India, but not Japan, as Japan was still at the tribal level during the Axial Age,

the first millennium BCE. In the many months I spent rereading the early Chinese classics and how they have come to be understood in modern scholarship, I developed a degree of sympathy that came close to personal identification, and certainly enlarged my understanding of the Chinese contribution to human civilization.

Could you Please Say a Few Words about the Place Chinese Religion Holds in *Religion in Human Evolution*?

Since my long chapter on China in the Axial Age tries to answer this question, I will say only a very few words here. I am unhappy with any definition of religion and also unhappy with the distinction between religion and philosophy before quite recent times. I consider most of the schools of Chinese thought in the Warring States period to be, in my broad terms, religious. I don't have much to say about popular religion as we must rely mainly on archaeology for that, so I talk mainly about elite religion; even when it comes to the central importance of sacrificial rites, it is mainly those of the elite which our surviving texts describe. But even though what we know is almost completely dependent on written texts, and in all societies only a few are really literate, we still find an amazing range of differences. If there were not literally 100 schools, there were surely several very different ones, attempting to answer the fundamental questions of the meaning and purpose of life in very different ways. The debate between these different schools provides evidence that Chinese thought had entered the Axial Age, defined as involving a degree of generalization and theory that moves beyond the rituals and myths that defined earlier phases of religion. What is important about religion, or religio-philosophy as Weiming Tu likes to say, in the period of my book is that all subsequent developments in Chinese thought look back to and interpret or revise traditions that began then.

We Understand that you are Working on a New Book on Religion and Modernity. Could you Please Tell us a Little about how China Configures in this New Work?

In my work on a modest sized sequel to *Religion in Human Evolution*, tentatively entitled *The Modern Project in the Light of Human Evolution*, China plays a major role. In this book I need to understand above all the exceptional nature of the last 200 years, what in a narrow sense can be called modernity. But I also need to understand what led up to that dramatically new stage in

human evolution by telling, however briefly, the story of the 1800 years between the end of the Axial Age, described in my last book, and this latest modern phase. I knew that I had no space for even a very condensed overview of world history, but I could not tell one more time the story of “the rise of the West.” My solution was to reduce my sample to two, surely more than twice as good as one, and I chose China in part because in the late 18th century it was at a stage of development almost exactly equal to the West, or, more accurately, part of China, the lower Yangtze valley, was the equivalent of England, since development was uneven at both ends of Eurasia, as it has always been.

I am finding the great story beginning with the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire extraordinarily interesting in its similarities and differences. Just to give one thing that I had never thought carefully about before, how could we find a parallel in the West to the great hiatus that the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi found between Mencius and themselves in which, they believed, the true Confucian tradition was essentially lost for over a thousand years until they rediscovered it? The obvious Western parallel would be Luther and the Reformation which declared that the entire Christian tradition since early times had been distorted and confused by the Roman Catholic Church until the Reformation had recovered its original form. Yet in his meaning for Chinese culture from his own day until the 20th century, Zhu Xi (1130–1200) would seem to be comparable not to Luther but to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who lived at almost the same time. That gives just a hint at the many parallels and differences in these two civilizational histories. Finally I have not yet begun to think about how these long term histories worked themselves out, and are still doing so, in the modern world, though there are many scholars who have claimed to know and whose work I will have to investigate.

Do you Think Confucianism could become Central for China and the World?

I think Confucianism has never ceased since the Axial Age to be central for China, though its history since 1911 has been precarious and uncertain, as it continues to be today. I knew during the Cultural Revolution when Confucius was attacked almost every day on the front page of the *People's Daily* that Confucius was still central. Someone unimportant would never need to be attacked every day. The attacks ceased with the fall of the gang of four and more recently a cautious campaign of rehabilitation has been pursued by the government. The new quasi-legitimacy of Confucianism is founded on the emphasis on “harmony” as a central value in the People's Republic, so it is the

harmonious side of Confucianism that is emphasized. However, Confucianism, like any great tradition, consists not only of more than one tendency, but also of argument, even conflict, between the tendencies. Harmony has never been the whole story and the strongly critical side has always had its advocates as it does today. I am certainly no China expert, but from my two brief trips to China in 2011 I found quite a few very bright young intellectuals who took Confucianism seriously, but viewed it as a source of criticism of current conditions. Anna Sun's wonderful book, *Confucianism as a World Religion*, gives a vivid picture of the contending positions in the current lively discussion of Confucianism in China today.

How important Confucianism will turn out to be in the rest of the world remains to be seen. Religious seekers are usually looking for some kind of salvation or enlightenment, and the Confucian equivalents to these are subtle and not easily translated into popular terms. I doubt that Confucianism will ever rival Buddhist traditions, particularly Zen, or some Hindu traditions, or Sufism for non-Chinese seekers. Nonetheless among Western intelligentsia with some serious knowledge of Chinese culture, even if it is not expert knowledge, Confucianism will continue to have strong admirers, some with the need to internalize what they have learned. So at an elite cultural level I think Confucianism is already a serious part of world culture and its influence will continue to grow.

How about Sheilaism as a Universal Phenomenon, Perhaps also in China?

Sheilaism, for those who are not familiar with the term, is the religion of a person named "Sheila," (not her real name) who has her own religion, "just my own little Sheilaism," she calls it, as described in *Habits of the Heart* which I published with coauthors Richard Madsen, Ann Swidler, William Sullivan, and Stephen Tipton in 1985. Sheilaism was discussed as the ultimate state of religious individualism where all persons have their own religion with their own name. Actually, whether they call their religion by their own name or not, many people in today's world put together a set of personal practices, disciplines and beliefs drawn from bits and pieces of all the world's religions in a combination all their own. Max Weber even described such a possibility early in the 20th century, so really not so rare as it might have seemed in *Habits*. Particularly among well-educated, highly mobile young professionals such religious individualism may be taken for granted, as is often expressed by people who say they are "spiritual but not religious," by which they mean they are

not attracted to “institutional religion.” My sense is that the global economy and the culture that expresses it makes such a choice understandable in China as well as in the United States or Western Europe, although we will need empirical research to find out to what degree this is happening.

What are your Latest Thoughts about Civil Religion, as well as Global Civil Religion? How do you See the Future of Civil Religion in China?

Due to endless debates about definition and the many people who thought civil religion meant the worship of the state, I stopped using the term around 1980. To some extent my original article, “Civil Religion in America,” published in *Daedalus* in 1967, which almost at once took on a life of its own and pulled me away from Japanese studies into American studies for many years, seemed like an unexpected catastrophe. I hadn’t wanted to contribute to the *Daedalus* issue on religion in America in the first place as I thought I didn’t know enough about America. My mentor, Talcott Parsons, however, pressured me into participating by telling me that “A sociologist can write on anything.” It was only when I retired in 1997 that I could finally turn my full attention to what really interested me: the comparative history of religion on the largest scale.

All that being said, I have been more than surprised in recent years to see how the civil religion idea and my original article are still circulating, not only in America but in other parts of the globe. When I was in China twice in 2011 I was completely amazed to find that several young Chinese scholars were not only familiar with the idea and had read my article and other things on the subject, but saw it as a possible model for China. From the beginning I described civil religion as a product of civil society, as not being established by the state, but open to public discussion and disagreement. That was precisely the idea that appealed to these young scholars. They saw Confucianism as a central but non-exclusive part of an open Chinese civil religion in an open Chinese civil society, a tradition that would include Buddhism, Daoism and Christianity in a discussion of common values for Chinese society that would aim at a consensus that would never be absolute and whose very life would depend on continuing debates and controversies. In this they were rejecting the state establishment of Confucianism in Guomindang Taiwan, as well as the state establishment of Marxism in the PRC. If Confucianism would continue to be relevant it would be because it could contribute good ideas to the common discussion, not through any state enforcement or educational requirement.

Interestingly enough, when I visited Germany in the fall of 2012 I participated in a televised interview with two young religious studies professors who told me that students in religious studies in Germany are all required to read my civil religion essay. I could not have been more surprised. But the reason was the same as in China. These young professors saw civil religion not as an expression of state authoritarianism, but of the openness and lifelines of civil society. So when I find today that serious books on civil religion in America are being published or are in preparation for publication, I can't be entirely surprised.

I think at least latent in the current revival of the idea of civil religion is the idea of a world civil religion. Jürgen Habermas has been advocating for some time the idea of a global civil society to offset the power of the global economy. He has also expressed some concern the "constitutional patriotism" may be too pallid to generate widespread support for such an idea. So the idea of a global civil religion that would probably focus on the already existing human rights consensus, but understand human rights in more than one kind of context, might be, perhaps already is, beginning to gain support,

Any Other Thoughts on China and Chinese Religion?

I would like to develop a little further what I said in my last answer about avoiding the educational requirement for a civil religion, as Marxism is required at almost every level of Chinese education today. My objection is to the teaching of one and only one tradition as true and as inherently superior to all others. This does not mean, however, that I think the educational establishment should not include, and perhaps even require, knowledge of the great traditions. Wm Theodore de Bary in his new book *The Great Civilized Conversation: Education for a World Community* (Columbia University Press, 2013) has argued eloquently for the availability and sometimes the requirement of courses on the great traditions as central for humane learning in today's world community. For him, in the West it might make sense to have a core course on the Western Tradition, including classic texts from ancient Greece to the Enlightenment, in the first year of college education, but to be followed by courses on the great Asian traditions in later years. He argues that the timing of the courses would be altered in different countries, for it makes sense to know where one comes from before studying the traditions of others, but to focus only on one tradition, on Western Civilization, say, is entirely inadequate to our current global community. So, courses on Chinese civilization or East Asian civilization that included, among other texts, the great classics of

Confucianism, would be entirely in order. And Chinese students also need to be exposed to the great traditions of the West, India, and others. The recovery of liberal education in a world that emphasizes only STEM courses (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) plus economics is a vital task for universities today. Without it we are producing a world of narrow specialists with no understanding of the past which has formed all of us whether we know it or not.