

Robert Bellah, influential religion scholar, dies at 86

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue

Robert N. Bellah, an eminent sociologist of religion most remembered for defining the interplay of U.S. religion and politics as a civil religion and for describing Sheilaism, a forerunner of today's "spiritual but not religious" individualism, died July 30 of complications related to heart surgery at an Oakland, California, hospital.

Bellah, raised in Los Angeles, was educated at Harvard and taught there before becoming a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley in 1967. He retired as a professor emeritus in 1997 and was working on a sequel to his ambitious 2011 book, *Religion in Human Evolution*, before his recent heart problems.

In 2000, President Bill Clinton awarded Bellah the National Humanities Medal for raising "our awareness of the values that are at the core of democratic institutions and of the dangers of individualism unchecked by social responsibility."

"Bob Bellah was a towering intellectual figure and a remarkable friend, colleague and teacher," said Ann Swidler, a UC Berkeley professor of sociology and one of Bellah's collaborators for his *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. That much-discussed book sold nearly 500,000 copies within a decade of its 1985 publication.

Swidler, as quoted by UC Berkeley media relations, said Bellah's work focused on "what our society conspires to drive apart—the life of the intellect and the moral life. For him reason really was the search for the good, and reason devoid of moral purpose was utterly irrational."

Raised as a Presbyterian, Bellah joined an Episcopal church in Berkeley after "25 years of shopping for the right parish," he wrote in the *Century* in 1991. His humor, intellect and accessibility earned him the American Academy of Religion's Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion in 2007.

Writing a tribute to Bellah for the website Religion Dispatches, Mark Juergensmeyer, who teaches at UC Santa Barbara, said that over 50 years ago “Bellah rocked the field of religious studies with a different kind of pioneering study,” one that required him to become fluent in Japanese. During his three decades at UC Berkeley, he served as chair of sociology and chair of the Center for Japanese and Korean Studies.

“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*,” wrote Juergensmeyer. “He showed how the social values embedded in religious thinking can help to support certain kinds of social transformations.”

In his 1967 essay in *Daedalus* on civil religion, Bellah founded a fruitful academic path—probing the political significance of religious ideas and vice versa, according to Juergensmeyer. “He borrowed the phrase ‘civil religion,’ which Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined in *The Social Contract* to describe the moral underpinnings of public order,” he said.

While the political significance of religion appears obvious today in an era of strident religious movements and religious nationalism abroad, when Bellah first wrote on civil religion it was a bold new idea, said Juergensmeyer.

When Bellah and four collaborators wrote the best-selling *Habits of the Heart*, they said their interviews found “a radical individualism” rampant in U.S. culture in the 1980s which they feared “may have grown cancerous . . . threatening the survival of freedom itself.”

It was in this book that Bellah and his cowriters coined the term *Sheilaism* to describe the prototype of a nonchurchgoing believer in God (“Sheila”) who had invented a faith system so private and personal that she described it as “Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.” Many religious leaders have blamed that trend for a decline in organized religion.

Bellah wrote or coauthored a dozen books and won numerous academic awards in his long academic career. But it was not a smooth academic start.

He began to read Marxist literature while attending Los Angeles High School. He served in the U.S. Army in 1945 and 1946. After entering Harvard University he took a leadership role in a club affiliated with the Communist Party. He was a graduate student completing his doctorate in 1954 when McCarthyism, the anticommunist

movement, was strong in Washington.

Harvard's dean of the faculty pressured him to disclose his activities and identify excommunist associates. Bellah refused to do that, moving to Canada to study at McGill University. He returned to Harvard as a lecturer in 1957 when McCarthyism was waning. In the next decade, while teaching sociology at Harvard, Bellah's views were strongly influenced by events of the 1960s, including the growing opposition to the Vietnam War.