Rethinking Secularism and Religion in the Global Age

Mark Juergensmeyer and Robert N. Bellah in Conversation
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Eminent sociologist Robert N. Bellah joins SSRC Working Group Chair Mark Juergensmeyer for a discussion about religious evolution, the ideas of religion and secularism, the rise of extreme positions associated with both of those terms, and the future of universalistic faiths in an emerging global civil society.

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MARK JUERGENSMEYER: I'm Mark Juergensmeyer, Professor of Sociology and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where I'm also the Director of the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies.

Today I'm speaking with Professor Robert Bellah, from the Department of Sociology, University of California at Berkeley, one of the country's most distinguished sociologists, with a glorious career including books such as *Tokugawa Religion*, the influential essay "Civil Religion in America," and the widely read book *Habits of the Heart*.

We will be discussing the topic of "Rethinking Secularism in a Global Age." Bob, the idea is to get around to the contemporary situation, the rise of political Islam, the rise of a new kind of religious politics, the whole issue of what is religious and what is secular in the contemporary world, the rise of global civil society and the role of religion there.

That's where the conversation is heading, but I thought we would begin way back in the time that you are currently working in, in ancient history, with the development of religion and religious evolution—the Axial Age, on which you have recently written an essay that is going to be a part of your new book, which I think will be out fairly soon, about the transition from *theoria* (the word from which we get "theory") as religious practice and religious insight into, in Plato and the Greek philosophers, a different perception, a different kind of discovery, which was more intellectual than it was spiritual.

Is this about religion? Is this about the emergence of secularism in this particular time? Or do you want to just avoid using those terms altogether?

ROBERT BELLAH: I certainly think, at this point, both the word "religion" and the word "secularism" are used in such chaotically diverse ways that they are almost useless.

Nonetheless, I think what you are pointing to is relevant. If you go into the deep evolution of the human species and look for where religion is, you find something that's quite different from

much of what goes on today. Today many people, including the harshest critics of religion, like Dawkins, Hitchens, et cetera, think religion is a theory or a set of theories that are simply wrong: science has disproved those theories; therefore, we don't need them.

The point of the essay that you are talking about is that theory emerged at a certain moment in human history, and before that, it didn't exist. We can say it emerged a long time ago, in the middle of the first millennium B.C., about 2,500 years ago. But looking at human evolution, it's extremely recent; it's the flick of an eye. Probably between 1 million and 2 million years ago humans communicated entirely with their bodies, what is called mimetic culture. We still do. It is never lost. It's critical. For religion, it's absolutely fundamental.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But when *theoria* developed, at least the way you have explained it—the earlier use of the term was related to something we might call religion.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, because—again, in this complex use of the word—everything starts with religion. The key to understanding mimetic culture is ritual. I think ritual is the phenomenological basis of all religion. Ritual, of course, is part of our lives. If you live in the university, you are hemmed in by an extremely elaborate set of rituals. We don't call it that, we don't remember that, but that's what it is.

Then, when language emerged around the period—we don't know for sure—between 50,000 and 120,000 years ago, we get narratives. Narratives add an enormous amount of information to what was communicated through bodily, or mimetic, exchange. Again, we're still there. Most of our lives are controlled by narratives, not by logical reasoning, not by science. But rational, logical thought emerges at a certain moment, and that is the so-called Axial Age, more or less around 2,500 years ago.

There, too, it comes out of religious experience. The two examples I gave in that little paper are Plato and the Buddha, two of the great rationalists. People who think Buddhism is some kind of crazy mysticism haven't read very much. The Buddha could give you very definite reasons for

everything that he said—he could convince you rationally. He was, of course, coming out of a profound transformative experience that we would call religious.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: And everything before the Buddha, of course, in the Hindu tradition was ritual, which is about the role of the Brahmins.

ROBERT BELLAH: Well, not everything, because the Upanishads already had the beginnings of something like *theoria*.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Before that, there were the Brahmins and manipulating the gods and the role of—

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, certainly, before the Upanishads, it's all ritual. Hinduism is ritual to this day. Of course, all religions are. That's why refuting religion as if it were a set of theories is not the point, because you are not getting at what religion is all about.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But there is ritual without religion. You can say that the way you brush your teeth, the way you comb your hair—

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: We all live through patterned activity.

ROBERT BELLAH: The way you give a lecture. The academic lecture is one of the most ritualized things in the world, a highly formal ritual.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But at what point, then, do you think of ritual in terms of religion? Is it that it is collective or is it the character of a ritual that points to the transcendent? At one point you had a famous quotation about the definition of religion that talked about the transcendent as being an essential character of what we think of as religion.

ROBERT BELLAH: Again, the transcendent—what the hell does that mean?

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: What does it mean? You're the guy who used it.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. I would say this. The religious side of mimetic culture—"ritual culture," let's say, which is an easier term than "mimetic" — is that it's about the most important things. It's a way of expressing those important things by a group together. But there is a sense in which every form of ritual is quasi-religious. The university is an institution that we believe in. Some of us are ready to lay down our lives for it when it's under attack. Family ritual is critical—and in danger. The family meal is a central expression of the common life of the family, and it has a religious dimension. The family is an instantiation of a kind of group that, through its deep ties, is tied into and related to some pretty deep meanings. So you are sliding in and out of what is religious and whatever this word "secular" means.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Still, despite the fact that you can have sex without marriage, people are getting married.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. And now gays want to get married because they want to have that right, too.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: They want to participate, yes.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, they want that as a possible thing to do. In Europe, you have to be married in a secular setting first. Then you can have a church wedding if you want. But in the United States, we think of marriage primarily in a religious context.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: In the definition of religion that you just used—that is, the kind of patterned activity or thought related to the deepest, most important things in a collective context— marriage, whether you think of it as being religious or not, is religious.

ROBERT BELLAH: It is, yes. I think so. It also, because it's a powerful force that can compete with other kinds of demands on human beings, can become a negative thing.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right. So now let's go back to the Greeks. If *theoria* is now being taken over by the Greek philosophers as a patterned activity regarding thought or ideas, rather than mimetic activity, is this, in a sense, a kind of new religiosity? Classically, we think of the origins of secularism in the Greek philosophers. Yet we had Wilfred Cantwell Smith for a number of years arguing that *philosophia*—and he went right back to the Greeks, where you do—began essentially as a religious tradition, only not calling it that.

ROBERT BELLAH: It was very convenient for Christians who wanted to adopt a lot of Greek culture to say, "Oh, that's philosophy, not religion."

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right.

ROBERT BELLAH: But, in fact, of course, it was religious. It always was religious. Pierre Hadot, the great French classicist, speaks of philosophy as a way of life, a total way of life, and certainly always tied into some sense of transcendence. It's there in Plato centrally, and it's also there in Aristotle, it's there in Stoicism. It's just part of that side of our tradition, and it gets absorbed into Christian theology. Thomas Aquinas, certainly one of the two or three greatest Christian theologians who ever lived, is saturated with Aristotle. So where does philosophy end and religion begin?

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right.

ROBERT BELLAH: But *theoria*, in its pre-philosophic meaning, meant to go and look at a religious spectacle and then come back and tell what you saw. In Plato, it becomes the philosophic quest to actually see the form of the good.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Like in the cave.

ROBERT BELLAH: To come out of the cave and see what's really there, what the truth is, a vision of the truth.

Nonetheless, once you have seen the truth, you look at the normal world in a different way. You see through all of its falsehoods. That gives you the beginning of the chance to use theory in a different way—namely, as a critical form of undercutting accepted beliefs. Certainly, both Plato and Aristotle—Plato was one of the great deconstructionists of all time—he wandered throughout the entire history of Greek culture—Homer, the tragedians, all of Greek poetry—and replaced it with whom? Himself, because he saw the truth and he saw all these people as saying a whole bunch of lies.

That notion of *theoria* gets into our notion of science. Science takes nothing for granted. It asks questions about everything. There's nothing that is taboo. We can doubt everything. We can't doubt everything at once, but at least we can doubt things one at a time. That is a direct inheritance from—the term itself that we use, "scientific theory," comes from the Greeks.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: There are two ways of looking at the Greek tradition, the philosophic religion, in terms of religion. One is that it, in a sense, addresses some of the same kinds of things that what we think of as religion does. The other is to simply say, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith said in his famous essay "Philosophy as a Religious Tradition of Humankind," that it is a religion, that we are all with religion of one sort or the other.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: And the secularism that we proudly espouse as nonreligious is a religion with ancient roots.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. People have the right to use words the way they want to. But there is a

lot of truth in what you say. It's also true if you look at China. Confucianism is not supposed to be a religion; it's supposed to be a philosophy.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right.

ROBERT BELLAH: You look at the history of Confucianism and tell me it's not a religion.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: The Department of Religion in Beijing does not include Confucianism, of course.

ROBERT BELLAH: Actually, now—

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: They do?

ROBERT BELLAH: They are beginning to.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: How interesting.

ROBERT BELLAH: This tremendous about-face is going on in Communist China, where Confucius was vilified on the front page of every newspaper during the Cultural Revolution.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: It has made a comeback, but as a religion?

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, actually, now as a religion. I have a former student, now getting her PhD at Princeton, who has written that they actually want to use the rubric of religion—it's under debate—they want to use the rubric of religion for Confucianism.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Of course, culture is the other way of speaking. In India, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), when it wanted essentially to be a religious party without being a religious party—because, as a secular state, India couldn't have, of course, a religious party—it

embraced ”Hindutva,” a term it invented to mean “Hindu values.” That is sounding a lot like American politics, isn’t it?

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: We’re not preaching one particular kind of religion, but we are appropriating Hindu values proudly as a part of India’s tradition. Does that work?

ROBERT BELLAH: This is one of those murky areas. Remember that many European countries have Christian democratic parties that are avowedly Catholic, and yet they are “democratic.” They don’t have an established church—

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Sweden does. In some ways, England has an established church.

ROBERT BELLAH: Sweden has ended the establishment. The U.K. still has it, in a very vague way. But it has nothing to do with whether you have an established church or not. We have a Christian democratic party in the United States. There’s nothing in our Constitution that would deny you the right to have such a party.

The place of religion in a public sphere that is secular (in the sense that it doesn’t require any one religion) is open for discussion.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: When people, in a kind of loose way, talk about “religious culture,” and it’s not religion, you don’t see the distinction.

ROBERT BELLAH: I have a very pervasive view of religion. I think it’s something you can’t get away from. One of Paul Tillich’s definitions of religion, probably his central one, is that it’s one’s ultimate concern. In a sense, everyone has some kind of ultimate concern.

Roger Williams, the founder of the Rhode Island colony, one of our early Baptists in American

colonial history, spoke of people who worship "God-belly" or "God-purse." He knew that ultimate loyalties, quasi-religious, weren't just about Jesus Christ and his papa.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: And he was a Baptist. Imagine that.

ROBERT BELLAH: He was a Baptist. He didn't approve of these people. He thought they were idolaters. But he recognized those as forms of religion.

When you see a bumper sticker, as was around a few years ago in the United States, that says "The one who dies with the most toys at the end wins," what is that telling you? It's telling you that consumerism has become a religion. The person who has the most stuff is saved, so to speak. So some kind of religious dimension is inescapable, in my view, and is true of even Mr. Hitchens and Mr. Dawkins, though they wouldn't like to be told that.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: This brings us up to Taylor. I know you appreciate Charles Taylor's book, *The Age of Secularism*.

ROBERT BELLAH: *A Secular Age*.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: *A Secular Age*, my apologies. But, of course, you question, as Taylor also does, whether we really had a secular age. But by thinking we have, we have created a kind of image of religion which is a very peculiar kind of thing. It's a very rigid, simple idea of what religion is. Not everybody has to have it; not everybody does have it.

Was secularism, like religion, ever really a thing? Was there ever really this distinction? Is that part of the problem?

ROBERT BELLAH: The history of the word would be worth going into, although we don't have time to do it now. Originally, "secular" was a religious term.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right, as was "religious," two different kinds of—

ROBERT BELLAH: It simply meant a part of the total religious structure. It didn't mean not religious. But coming out of, particularly, the wars of religion following the Protestant Reformation and the effort to enforce religious conformity, sometimes by very violent means, by both Protestants and Catholics, the European intellectuals—a very significant number of them—said, "Enough, already. Let's get away from this. Let's just leave religion out of it."

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Or what they thought of as religion.

ROBERT BELLAH: Well, religion was a very tangible thing when you had established churches that were persecuting people. Yes, that's what they meant by religion. On the other hand, their own beliefs and their own values and their own ethical demands, which were focused around an extraordinary elevation of the notion of human dignity, were themselves an expression of the religious tradition. Taylor is pointing out that it goes by successive stages: In the 18th century, belief in God, but not Jesus—

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Like the deists, like the people who founded the American—

ROBERT BELLAH: Deism. We all believe in God. This has been true in America. No presidential address has ever mentioned Jesus, but every presidential inaugural address has mentioned God. So we are a deist nation. Some of our friends who think it's a Christian nation would be upset to hear that.

So the first step was to say, "Yes, we all believe in God, but we don't believe in these particular things where people are killing each other."

The next step says, "What do we even need God for, even without Jesus Christ? We have capital-p Progress." In the 19th century, people thought progress was going to bring about the millennium—a perfect society; we would all be nice to each other. Modern progress brought the

atom bomb and all kinds of chaos and economic disaster to much of the world and so on.

But there is a lineage here in which each of these so-called secular ideals clearly comes out of a religious tradition. I think that is Taylor's whole point, that secularism as we know it would make no sense in a society that was not rooted in a Christian history. It's the reaction to it and, in some ways, a fulfillment of it. As Taylor says, the Enlightenment, modernity, has fulfilled elements of the Gospel that were never fulfilled when the church had more power.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: In a curious kind of way, it's Dietrich Bonhoeffer's vision of religion as Christianity, his complaint that the problem with Christianity was the church. The church often got in the way of the expression of religiosity in a more fundamental moral and spiritual way.

ROBERT BELLAH: That gets us into another theme. En route to that, we should remember George Bernard Shaw's saying that "Christianity might be a good thing if anyone ever tried it."

But the attack on the church, or on what in America today is often called institutional religion, has become very widespread among people who still consider themselves "spiritual." I'm not religious, which means I don't go to church, but I'm spiritual, which means I read a book about Zen Buddhism or something.

So that's another way of slicing up the conceptual pie here, which doesn't really get away from religion as a sociologist would look at it. But on the other hand, it says something about the nature of our society, that even dignitaries of the church will often attack the "institutional" side of the church as oppressive.

But as a sociologist, I would tell you that if there were no institutional side, there would be no religion in short order, and these people that have their private spirituality—that's going to disappear with them.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: No Christian religion, but you could have the religion of secularism, in the way that you have just now been talking about it.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. You couldn't have Christianity, that's for sure.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: You were talking about Taylor. Taylor makes this very interesting distinction between three kinds of secularism: the division between church and state, the kind of diminishment of beliefs and practices in popular culture, and then the appropriation of a quest for meaning and morality in secular life, which fascinates you the most and wherein most of your interests lie, in true Durkheimian fashion, because this is a kind of religion of the collective.

But what I want to get at is your slight disagreement with Taylor over the post-Durkheimian notion that this kind of secularism is different or beyond Durkheim in some way. You were concerned not just that Taylor seemed to not understand or appropriate Durkheim in the way in which you understood him, but you were concerned that he didn't even consider the possibility.

ROBERT BELLAH: The question is whether you can have a society without anything important in common. I'm arguing, again on sociological grounds, that such a society is impossible.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Even a society of expressive individualists who are all doing their own little greedy, selfish, consumer-driven thing, like us.

ROBERT BELLAH: And even now, when nation-states are certainly still important but by no means the only kind of society that counts, and we operate in many ways at a global level, not a national level, there is a very widespread value consensus—not absolute, obviously, with many doubts and hesitations—the so-called human rights consensus, that any society in which the dignity of the individual is violated is a bad society and will be subject to all kinds of criticism. There are people in every society who strongly believe that. The notion that the earth is kind of sacred and that the violation of our atmosphere is something wrong, deeply wrong—almost like Calvinistic sin—is a view that transcends any nation and is shared by millions of people all over

the earth.

In other words, even at the global level, there are common beliefs that have consequences. I would argue that, to the extent that there is something which you can call a global society, you are going to find some global beliefs, because those two things, sociologically speaking, always go together.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Beliefs in the sense of shared values or moral sensitivities?

ROBERT BELLAH: And shared notions of the sacred, the sacredness or the dignity of the individual, the sacredness of the earth. There's something here beyond just cognitive beliefs. There is a profound evaluative ethical and religious dimension.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But that's a way of saying that any kind of shared moral sensibility, any kind of shared sense of a source of meaning, has religious character to it.

ROBERT BELLAH: So? This is what Paul Tillich called "the dimension of depth," which is there in every sphere of life.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But sociologically, from a Durkheimian point of view, this assumes that there is a collectivity.

ROBERT BELLAH: That's the whole point, of course. If there were no collectivity, we would just be reduced to a Hobbesian war of all against all. American politics at the moment looks a bit Hobbesian, doesn't it?

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Doesn't it, right. And you think the nation-state has enough collective character left to it to provide that kind of shared—

ROBERT BELLAH: It's quite variable. It's remarkable how much the United States continues to

have a powerful sense of national identity, whereas in most European countries it's much weaker. In Japan, which I have spent a lot of my life studying, you see a resurgence of a kind of nationalism—not aggressive, not militarist, but very similar to what you saw in the 1930s.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: I wonder whether in Europe the EU doesn't express in some way more of a shared identity—

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Especially with the—let's take the Danish cartoon controversy.

ROBERT BELLAH: I think the EU is a partial effort to transcend what is now a delegitimated nationalism, because it gave rise to such horrible wars. But it's still struggling. Then we see the emergence of sub-national loyalties—the Welsh and the Scots and the this and the that. In Spain you have very significant sub-national loyalties. What is the area of which Barcelona is the—

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Catalan.

ROBERT BELLAH: Catalonian and Basque. Some of these people want their own nation. We have some people who want Alaska to be its own nation.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Some of us think maybe California should become its own nation. Just get rid of all those other people.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, especially Northern California. Let's get rid of the south as well.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Hey, come on, I'm a born-again Southern Californian. But I think California is much too close to Alaska for my temperament.

What do you make of militant secularism? Let's take the Danish cartoon case and this kind of

strident sense that we have to defend the freedom of speech, annoying Muslims be damned. In Turkey, they were kind of marching in the street.

ROBERT BELLAH: Unfortunately, anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe are quite similar to the response to massive immigration that we saw in the United States. José Casanova, professor of sociology at Georgetown, who has written extensively on political religion in the modern world, points out that the things that the Europeans are saying about Islam are very similar to the things that Americans said about Catholics in the late 19th and early 20th century—it's undemocratic, its loyalty is to external forces, it undermines our values, it's bad.

Taking on those things in Islam that are considered highly sacred and making fun of them is a way of taunting, so to speak. I think free speech is pretty fundamental in any democratic society. I wouldn't say they should be prohibited from doing that. But what the motive was for doing it, it seems to me, is not particularly admirable.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: It was to taunt the Muslims.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Isn't there also involved in this a sense of, like the Catholics, "They're religious and we're not"—the kind of superiority of the secular cultural values that —

ROBERT BELLAH: Not only, "They are religious," but, "They are undermining our culture." Even if you are a non-Muslim religious person, you can think they are undermining our Christian heritage, they are undermining Western culture, or whatever.

Again, as I say, it wasn't long ago that many Christians, not only in Europe but even in this country, thought that the Jews were "undermining" Western civilization and were a real serious problem. So this anti-Muslim thing is an old story that we have been through before.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But then you turn it around and on the other side you have the radical jihadists who see exactly the same kind of thing in what they imagine is the threat of the secular West.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: That secularism is out to destroy what is good and valuable and decent about their culture.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. It's charming, though, that the jihadists, particularly the al Qaeda variety, have killed many more Muslims than they have non-Muslims. They particularly hate Shiites. They are the people who blew up those mosques in Iraq that nearly caused a caused civil war and did cause thousands of people to be killed on both sides.

So with the true believers, their primary hate is actually towards fellow Muslims. They hate the regimes in power in the Middle East. They hate the Saudi regime. They hate the Egyptian regime.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: The near enemy and the far enemy.

ROBERT BELLAH: America is bad primarily because it supports these people they hate at home.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But it's bad not only because it's the far enemy supporting the near enemy, in exactly the way you talk about it, but also because it is secular, which is translated as anti-religious, as being the enemy of religion.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: When I interviewed Abouhalima, one of the guys involved in the

1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, I asked him about Christianity, and if America were a Christian nation, would that make it worse or better. He said better; at least it would have some values. The problem with America now, from his point of view, was that it was against religion. Of course, he meant especially Islam. But in his mind there was a kind of special hatred for anti-religion that would have been assuaged a little bit if America were a Christian nation.

ROBERT BELLAH: The irony, of course, is that America is closer to being a Christian nation than any place in Europe. Just try to attack Christianity and run a political campaign, and see how effective it is in this country. So I think he didn't understand America too well.

Of course, from an orthodox Muslim point of view, Christians are People of the Book. They are not to be attacked.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But then there are other jihadists who say that behind America is really a kind of covert Christian agenda. This point of view avers that secularism doesn't really exist, that civilizations are fundamentally religious, and that America's secularism is really a Christian secularism—a point not that different from yours or Taylor's.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. Actually, it's historically true. Secularism as such emerged only in one place—namely, the West. Islam showed no indigenous movement that you could call secular. There have been secular Arabs and Iranians and so on, but they have been educated in Western schools and they have picked up their secularism from the West. Even many pious Muslims, who have been called Muslim modernists, have accepted the idea of separation of church and state or mosque and state. But that was a Western idea. It didn't come out of Islamic tradition. This is true in India and it's true in East Asia. The whole idea of secularism is modern and Western. So it's doubly alien when you move outside the West.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But this is a point that is lost on the religious right in the United States, for example, which is terribly afraid of secularism, which sees secular politics and culture as the enemy of religion, in much the way that Abouhalima, the Muslim jihadi, thought of

secularism being the enemy of religion.

Are they simply wrong? Are they right, but the secularism of the West is a different kind of religion than their kind of religion, so it's still fundamentally flawed?

ROBERT BELLAH: Here again, if you look at the history of anxiety about this—that our Christian religion is being undermined by secularism—you go back to fundamentalism, which is an America invention in the early decades of the 20th century and—

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: These tracts, "The Fundamentals of Christianity."

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. The target there was primarily other Christians. Particularly, since they were Protestant to begin with, they were upset about other Protestants besides them who had been too influenced by secular ideas. They were too liberal. It was not really so much a war against secularism per se as it was a war between groups which considered themselves Christian.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: It's as if the Enlightenment thinkers invented this idea of "secularism" in order to protect them from strident religion, but now we have strident religion precisely because there was this invention of secularism to be opposed to.

ROBERT BELLAH: Well, I wish I could see an organized secularism that was attacking religion in this country. Aside from a few half-baked intellectuals, I don't see any massive secularist movement in the United States.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: And yet this is the great fear of the religious right, that the secularists are going to force abortion and—

ROBERT BELLAH: Maybe. I think they are still angrier at other Christians than they are at secularists. Religious people want to be the ones who have it right, while all the other religious people have it wrong.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But it's interesting to me that the rise of the religious right in the United States would appear in a country that is not fundamentally antagonistic to religion, whose secular values are, as you point out, permeated with the values of the Christian tradition.

ROBERT BELLAH: As you know, as your writings have pointed out, much of this has to do with questions of identity, of people who feel that their sense of who they are is being undermined by the society in which they live, and they are holding onto certain kinds of religious beliefs in order to affirm their own sense of self-respect and dignity.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: And that brings us to the contemporary situation of globalization. That's everybody's problem in an era of globalization.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, it is indeed.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: When everybody can live everywhere, and does, this sense of having a grounded community is a very fragile thing.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. So you hold onto certain fetishes—basically, fetishes. What is the headscarf thing? To focus the whole meaning of the Sharia on whether or not you wear a headscarf? This is like the Christian right in this country focusing on abortion, which was never an issue until quite recently—

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right. Homosexuality was also not traditionally an issue in Christianity.

ROBERT BELLAH: Gay marriage, too, which was certainly not a focus. Early in the 20th century, what they were focusing on was not only drinking—they were behind Prohibition—

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: My mother was a member of the WCTU, the Women's Christian

Temperance Union.

ROBERT BELLAH: But they were against dancing and they were against divorce. Those were the defining issues that told them who they were. What big evangelical preacher is going to get away with attacking divorce every week these days, when half of his congregation is divorced? So these things change. They have no rooting whatsoever in the New Testament, but they become the hot-button issues that define who is good and who is bad.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: They would be shocked to learn that the motives for their extreme religiosity are not religious, but really more sociological.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: They are trying to seek some identity, some claim, and some cultural rootedness.

In an era of globalization, maybe they are right, in a sense, that traditional religion or religious identities, like all socially constructed identities, are under attack. They are fragile things. They no longer have a kind of geographical or political rootedness to protect them.

ROBERT BELLAH: The poignant thing, however, is that most of these extreme religious groups are not traditional at all. They are very modern. They have little understanding of the tradition.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Well, they are responding to a modern fear.

ROBERT BELLAH: And their focus is so skewed in terms of any serious understanding of the tradition, much of which they don't even know. A former student of mine, in teaching the sociology of religion, just to get a sense of who the class was, handed out a little questionnaire. Among other things, he asked for your own religious identity. There was Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and so on, and "Other." A significant number of his students put down "Christian" under

"Other."

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: That's interesting, because they thought they were in a minority.

ROBERT BELLAH: The very notion that there was any history here in which Christians were divided between Catholics and Protestants was gone. They didn't know about that. They didn't know what Protestantism was.

Talk about tradition. These people are so profoundly uneducated. They don't know anything about the tradition. They only know certain identity issues that they are ready to fight other people about.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right. And it's not a problem that they don't know the tradition, unless they begin to get very arrogant and dogmatic about trying to preserve what they think this newly invented idea of tradition is. That's where it gets into politics.

ROBERT BELLAH: What happens, of course, is that when the evangelicals start getting serious and start getting educated, they become Episcopalians.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: That's not such a bad thing, is it?

At one point in one of your articles, you thought a global religion was unlikely. But in an era of globalization, where this kind of extreme fastening-on of identities that we are seeing in radical religious groups certainly cannot be the future—God help us if that's the case—then we are just going to be more fragmented. There will be more of these tribal wars. Isn't there a possibility of a kind of global civil society, in the sense of shared values, a sense of common citizens of this planet?

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes. That's really what I was trying to point to earlier when I spoke about the human-rights agenda and ecology. I think these are two elements of a common set of beliefs

that—

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Not just for America —

ROBERT BELLAH: No, no, no.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: —but as part of the cosmopolitan world in which we live.

ROBERT BELLAH: Millions of people all over the world affirm these things.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Doesn't that have, in your kind of Durkheimian way, a religious depth?

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, it does. Sure it does.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: This shared morality in the public sphere, a common search for meaning.

ROBERT BELLAH: No question. We have a global economy that lacks much of any kind of control or regulation. We badly need a global civil society, for one thing, to keep the economy from destroying us. There the institutions are incipient. There is international law. There are certain international bodies—but weak, very weak, compared to the extraordinary power of the global economy.

Jürgen Habermas and other European intellectuals have argued that we need to build a global civil society. If you are going to build a global civil society, I think part of what would make it viable is some framework of common beliefs. Of course, there, too, you find that people who talk about a global civil society do have a very strong commitment, for instance, to human rights and to democracy.

All of these things are out there bubbling and burbling away. In the meantime, the concentrated centers of economic and political power go their own way, pretty much disregarding all these things.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But one would hope that they would have to change that at some point if there are some sorts of instruments of justice or accountability, just as the WTO is increasingly pressured to take on more than trade accommodations, but also labor standards and environmental protection.

ROBERT BELLAH: It's very, very poignant, if you think about it—and most people don't realize it—that the very center of the most extreme reactionary kind of Islam in the world is Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi movement gave birth to al Qaeda and other such groups. They are able to disseminate these very, very reactionary Islamic right-wing beliefs, because they have so much money all over the world. They are our big buddies; they are our big allies.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: We need their oil.

ROBERT BELLAH: George Bush is very friendly with the Saudi family.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: If the Amish had oil, we would be befriending them.

ROBERT BELLAH: What are they talking about, the war against Islamic extremists? They are subsidizing Islamic extremism by billions and billions of dollars. Indeed, Osama bin Laden would have been nowhere without the American money that came in to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Union. So we have actually subsidized extremist Islam. I don't think most Americans realize that.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right. They, of course, imagine that at least the bin Ladens of this world, and those who share his kind of global megalomania, are not rejecting globalization, but capturing it and becoming the new—

ROBERT BELLAH: The new caliphate, which will involve the whole world under one caliph.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Right. That would be a different kind of global religion, wouldn't it?

Let me push you on this earlier point. If there is a kind of religious dimension to global civil society—at one point, you talked about building it, but it seems to me it's going to emerge. You don't have to build it. It's simply a dimension of inhabiting the globe, of being concerned citizens and interacting in some way. But if it has a religious depth, what did you mean, at one point, when you doubted there could be a global religion? Do you mean religion in a very limited sense?

ROBERT BELLAH: I think religion operates at many different levels. I don't think that what we call the world religions, the great traditions, are going to disappear into some global homogeneity. I think they will continue to be part of the global conversation. There will be elements in which the major religious groups can share.

As you know, there have been a lot of Muslim intellectuals who have been working on a Muslim version of human rights that will not simply copy Western liberalism, but will look for sources in the Sharia, in the Islamic tradition, that will also affirm these common beliefs. They are not going to stop being Muslims, although they can find some common ground with other groups. When you speak of "one religion," you tend to use "religion" in a traditional sense—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, or something. No, we are not going to have one religion in those senses. The great civilizations continue to be separate, to some degree—not nearly as separate as Huntington imagined. They don't necessarily have to clash. But they have values that will probably survive. They have certainly survived a lot already.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: And they may be a part of this global civil society, part of the religious character of the global society.

ROBERT BELLAH: Exactly. There is going to be a balance between what unites us and what is pluralistic, and hopefully, mutually tolerant and mutually intelligible.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: The religious character of global civil society could be thought of as secular, in the ways we have been talking about.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: It has, after all, this religious dimension to it. Or it could take on the characteristics of one particular kind of religion, in our narrower way of looking at it. I'm thinking about the Mediterranean world, which in some ways was a globalized world at that time. Who would have thought that a tiny little Jewish sect that was by no means terribly popular when it began in the Roman world would take off, newly manufactured and created as a kind of global religion, as something that can embrace all kinds of perspectives and cultures and absorb even paganism within its culture and its rituals and beliefs?

Could you imagine a kind of offshoot of Islam that is broad enough, that could be a big tent and embrace people who had previously thought of themselves as Christians or secularists?

ROBERT BELLAH: No, I don't think so.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: You don't think so. But there will be, if there is going to be a global civil society, a society with some kind of religious character or religious depth.

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, but it will not be—both Christianity and Islam claim to be universal religions, but they were never universal religions. They always bumped up against people that said, "Get the hell out of here. We don't want to become like you." They were more successful with tribal peoples than they were with some of the high civilizations.

If you look at the Sassanid Empire before it was destroyed by Islam in the 7th century, you find a great Persian culture that made Zoroastrianism into a state religion, very much to say, "We are not Christians." They were often at war with Byzantium. Unfortunately, they undermined each other so that the Muslims could take over both.

But in any case, I don't think the kind of so-called world religions we have seen in the past will be replicated by some new world religion. That seems to me extremely unlikely. It will be a question of another level of common understanding that will not eclipse or even totally include the previous traditions.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: And probably a kind of extension of what we have thought of as secular culture in the West?

ROBERT BELLAH: Yes, no question.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: In the way that you and Taylor talk about, with religious depth.

ROBERT BELLAH: The Iranian dissidents today, though they are still very pious Muslims, know that this kind of fusion of church and state is deadly, that they will never have democracy until they have a separation.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But the old religions are not going gently. If this is the trajectory of world history, just the opposite—

ROBERT BELLAH: I don't think they have to go at all. I think they have to adjust and change, as they always have. There is no religion that hasn't changed constantly.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Yes, but they are kicking and screaming right now.

ROBERT BELLAH: It depends, it depends. Each tradition has a thousand different varieties.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: I would never have accused you in any earlier point in our acquaintance of being optimistic.

ROBERT BELLAH: No, I'm not optimistic.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: But this sounds like a kind of optimism.

ROBERT BELLAH: No, no, no, because I think the concentration of global political and economic power right now is so destructive and so immune to any kind of not just ethical, but even long-term survival control. That the United States could refuse to sign the Kyoto Accord, that the United States goes on polluting at an unbelievable rate, that if we had done what Jimmy Carter said to do in 1979, the whole world would be a thousand times better off—just think of how much the power of this world violates any kind of consensus on values. We go on supporting terrible regimes all over the world.

We talk about human rights. We don't do much about it, except where we want the oil, like Iraq. Who is taking on Mugabe? Who is dealing with Sudan? Or Burma, one of the worst places on earth? Who is taking on these people? We could cut off Burma's water right now—just simply not buy their goddamn oil.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: So America has become the great enemy of global civil society.

ROBERT BELLAH: America and its allies don't do much to help us right now. So much of the present struggle is political, not religious.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER: Bob, even though you have been recently spending a lot of your time studying the past, clearly it says a lot about the future, in problematic, as well as tentatively hopeful, terms. This has been a very rich and interesting discussion. I want to thank you for taking part in it.

ROBERT BELLAH: My pleasure.

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