

Tokugawa Religion

Robert N. Bellah

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ROBERT BELLAH TOKUGAWA RELIGION



THE CULTURAL
ROOTS OF
MODERN JAPAN

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Robert N. Bellah : Tokugawa Religion before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Tokugawa Religion:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Love this bookBy VioletVery interesting, used this book to write a very long paper about Japanese honor culture. Very well written.7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Can This Landmark Study Still Stir Up our Fighting Spirit?By Etienne RPUpon reading Tokugawa Religion after its publication in 1957, Maruyama Masao wrote the following: "There are not many books lying around which can shake

us out of our inertia. Of the many American research works on Japan which are constantly coming out, Bellah's book, more than any in a long time, has aroused my appetite and my fighting spirit." By this, one of postwar Japan's most influential critics was endorsing the work of a young and yet unknown social scientist freshly out of Harvard with a joint doctoral degree in sociology and Far Eastern studies. Maruyama's lengthy review underscored the theoretical ambition of the book, which purported to do to Tokugawa religion and Japan what Max Weber had done for the Protestant ethic and the West. But he questioned whether the particularism of Japan, its tendency to concentrate loyalty on particular groups and their leaders, from the emperor and the nation down to the family and the firm, could really be, as Bellah had argued, an adequate substitute for ethical universalism. Maruyama pointed out that economic development did not necessarily correlate with political democratization or the prevalence of universal principles and human rights. He argued that economic development, unaccompanied by certain other changes, could even undermine the conditions of its own continuation. By arguing so, Maruyama, perhaps unwittingly, was being faithful to a different Max Weber: not the theoretician of rationalization and the bureaucratic order that Talcott Parsons had adapted to derive his theory of social structure, but a more somber and pessimistic Weber, who felt that magic had gone out of this world and that mankind had locked itself into an iron cage. This is this last Weber that Robert Bellah echoes in his 1985 preface to the paperback edition of the book, pointing towards the limits of the modernization theory embraced by the original essay, and noting with much foresight, in an allusion to Ezra Vogel's recently published bestseller: "the position of Number One in the world seems to be uncomfortable, and no one holds it long." More than fifty years after its publications, can Tokugawa Religion still shake us out of our inertia and arouse our fighting spirit? The world the early twenty-first century seems very different from the world of the mid-1950s, or even from the mid-1980s when the preface was written. The passage of time has eroded the book's angles and softened its impact. We no longer believe in the modernization theory espoused by Bellah's teacher Talcott Parsons, the idea that all societies would converge towards a unique model of modernity along a uniform path of economic and social development. Most would doubt the claim that the United States represents the direction in which all other societies are moving, or indeed whether any society adequately exemplifies a model that other should follow. We have lost appetite for the theoretical constructs by which sociology was staking its claim of scientific rigor. We no longer believe that a complex society can be summarized into a four quadrant, two dimensional chart, as the one Bellah uses to plot the conceptual model that underpins his analysis of Japan's social structure. We don't feel the need to look into the teachings of the Jōichū; do Shinshū; sect to find equivalent of Protestant "inner worldly asceticism", or to propose the notion of shokubun as an analogue to the concept of the calling ("Beruf") through which labor becomes a sacred obligation. We don't need to explain Japan's exceptionalism, because Japan is no longer an exception: the whole region of East Asia has followed Japan in its successful pursuit of economic development, and one can no longer claim, as was the case in the 1950s, that Japan represents the only non-Western nation to have transformed itself into a modern industrial state. In addition, Japan has lost its magic: already in 1985, Bellah deplored the loss of traditional values and lifestyle, and he wondered how long the vaunted work ethic and social discipline of the Japanese salaryman would survive. The original edition of the book found a general readership yearning to learn about Japan; now Tokugawa religion remains a subject only for scholars, and no one would find in it lessons that would apply for today. In addition, as the author acknowledges in his preface, "scholarship has advanced so rapidly in the last thirty years that it would require rewriting the whole book to take account of it." Reading Tokugawa Religion with the hindsight of accumulated knowledge, one can only be struck by the many limits, biases and defects that the book accumulates. First, despite the claim that it remains one of the few attempts to apply Max Weber's framework to a religion other than Protestantism, it makes only a limited contribution to the field of Weberian studies. As already mentioned, it considers only an optimistic and sanitized Weber, the one Talcott Parsons imported into US academia as a founding father of the branch of sociology he was developing. Anchored in functionalism, it makes excessive use of the concept of rationalization, which explains the direction taken in the areas of economic values, political control, cultural integration, and institutional building. The book ostensibly refers to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and draws parallels based on this short essay, but it makes little use of Weber's sociology of religion, which at the time of Bellah's writing was only partly accessible in English. Max Weber provides many tools and concepts to the study of religion that could have been put to good use: the notions of charisma and of legitimacy, the processes of secularization and institutionalization, the figures of the prophet and the priest... Applying these concepts to the study of Tokugawa religious movements, and in particular to his case study of Ishida Baigan and Shingaku, would have provided a much richer material. In any case, it would have been interesting to put Weber's writings on oriental religions into perspective, and to discuss his claim that Confucianism was inimical to the development of capitalism. As a second limitation, Bellah's essay suffers from the dearth of bibliographical references. It is a reminder to a time when Japanese studies in the West were still at their infant stage, and when one could still quote Lafcadio Hearn or George Sansom as authorities in the field. The evidence that Bellah produces is patchy: sometimes he is forced to draw inference on Tokugawa Japan by observing social aspects in modern Japanese society, such as child socialization or women's status. Bellah acknowledges his debt to Ruth Benedict, who wrote *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* without having set foot in Japan. He uses all the sources in English he could get, but is often obliged to confess his ignorance and

limitations. Bellah's translations of classical texts offered as quotes are not his own, and may have carried forth the load of misconceptions and approximations inherent from past interpretations of Japanese culture. The few Japanese sources that he refers to--almost exclusively on Ishida Baigan and Shingaku--all predate 1945 and must have conveyed the statist and hierarchical outlook that so much influenced Japanese scholars and their Western interpreters. It didn't occur to Bellah that these accounts may have been biased by the ideology of the time, and that the supremacy of the political over the economic that he thought characterized Japan during the Edo period may have been superimposed on that period at a later stage. Scholarship has certainly progressed since the time Tokugawa Religion was published (for any evidence, it would strongly recommend to the interested reader the two books published in English by Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai* and *Bonds of Civility*). And yet, are we so sure we are free of the same biases and errors we detect in past works? A book is always a product of its time, and the role of a classic study is to provide a bridge between present and past interpretations. We can read past essays in a new light. The argument of particularism that so much stimulated Maruyama is now advanced by those who advocate a return to the ethic of Ohmi merchants to find a distinctly Japanese conception of corporate social responsibility. And the whole debate on Asian values and their role in capitalist development reproduces Bellah's interpretation of Weber on a larger scale. To know where these debates originate, it is always better to prefer the original to the copy, and to defer to the opinions of scholars. For all these reasons, Tokugawa Religion remains a landmark study.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Eye opener
By BR3
The author developed the ideas of this book in his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard in the 1950s, and this book originally came out in 1957. The subtitle was "The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan." Apart from the different subtitle and new introduction by the author, the 1985 and 1957 books seem exactly the same. Sociologist Bellah follows the foot steps of Max Weber, a German sociologist who explained, several generations before, that Northern European capitalism was strongly influenced by Protestantism (the religion of N. Europe for the last 500 years). Bellah similarly makes a strong argument that the industrialization of Japan had its roots in a very special religious and pre-religious configuration. Though he comments about more ancient and more recent Japan, his focus period is the so-called "Tokugawa Period": 1600-1868. He feels that in this period Japan's religion and values had greatly stabilized compared to the upheavals of past centuries. The religion and values continued to evolve in the T period, but they were steadily leading to a concentration of political power in the person of the emperor. Japan's case is very different from N. Europe in many ways. Let me just mention one: for more than a 1,000 years before the T period, what is called Japanese religion had been a blend of Shinto, Confucianism, and Buddhism (and some Taoism). That blend always remained close to real life, through codes of ethics that were taken seriously in day to day living. Bellah makes illuminating comparisons to China, and a couple of key comparisons to Europe that are also very illuminating. Why did I give such an important book 4 rather than 5 stars? First because I couldn't give it 4.5 stars. The half star I take off is to live some room for other books that are as important but also better written. The book is clear enough to be very well understood. Although I know a few authors that organize their material better and put more emphasis on concise sentences, one has to excuse Bellah for 1) dealing with a complex material often written in Japanese and 2) extracting a politico-econo-religious connection which too few social scientists have attempted. Highly recommended.

Robert N. Bellah's classic study, *Tokugawa Religion* does for Japan what Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* did for the West. One of the foremost authorities on Japanese history and culture, Bellah explains how religion in the Tokugawa period (160-1868) established the foundation for Japan's modern industrial economy and dispels two misconceptions about Japanese modernization: that it began with Admiral Perry's arrival in 1868, and that it rapidly developed because of the superb Japanese ability for imitation. In this revealing work, Bellah shows how the native doctrines of Buddhism, Confucianism and Shinto encouraged forms of logic and understanding necessary for economic development. Japan's current status as an economic superpower and industrial model for many in the West makes this groundbreaking volume even more important today than when it was first published in 1957. With a new introduction by the author.