

IN MEMORIAM

Bryan Ronald WILSON
(1926–2004)



On 9 October 2004, Bryan Ronald Wilson, Emeritus Fellow of All Souls College of Oxford University, suffered a heart attack after enjoying supper with a good friend in a restaurant in the Cotswolds, and passed away. He was 78 years old. Dr. Wilson had suffered from Parkinson's Disease for several years. A ceremony celebrating his life was held at 11:30 AM on 21 October in the chapel of All Souls College and was attended by many friends and former students.

Born on 25 June 1926 in Leeds, where he was educated, Bryan Wilson studied at University College, Leicester, after National Service in the Army. He took a first-class honours degree from London University in 1952, and then obtained a PhD at the London School of Economics. After a period as lecturer in Sociology at the University of Leeds (1955 to 1962), he moved to the University of Oxford as a Reader in Sociology. From 1963 to 1993 he was a Fellow of the historic All Souls College, where he served as sub-warden (1988 to 1990) and domestic bursar (1989 to 1993). He also served as Senior Treasurer of the Oxford Union Society from 1983 to 1991. Among the many honours conferred upon Dr. Wilson were a DLitt from the University of Oxford (1984), honorary doctorates from Sōka University (1985) and the University of Leuven (1992), and election to Fellowship of the British Academy (1994).

Dr. Wilson was a major figure in the field of twentieth-century sociology of religion. Not only did he contribute to the advance of sociology — particularly the sociology of religion — in the United Kingdom, he was also at the forefront in promoting the sociology of religion on the international stage. As President of The International Society for the Sociology of Religion (1971 to 1975) and later its lifelong Honorary President (1991 to 2004), he traveled to various countries, including Japan, encouraging scholars to join the Society. He made major contributions to the Society not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. The Society was previously an association of Catholic sociologists, whose main research involved using a type of applied religious sociology for their churches that had fallen into decline in the urbanization following World War II. Dr. Wilson was instrumental in transforming this association into a genuinely scholarly and non-confessional community of sociologists of religion.

Needless to say, Dr. Wilson's academic achievements as a sociologist of religion include his research on "secularization theory," and his study of "sects" and "new religious movements." He became well known as an advocate of secularization theory through his early works, such as *Religion in Secular Society* (1966). His theme was that contemporary societies, which are organized rationally and practically, would gradually become more secularized and that the social significance of religion would be lost. In its initial stages, this argument was taken as a statement about the general decline of religion, and the resulting shockwaves rippled through traditional religions. Even when I was staying at All Souls Colleges as a Visiting Fellow in 1988/1989, I was surprised to hear a theologian of the Church of England criticize Wilson's research as "extremely dangerous."

Wilson's secularization theory, however, was not merely a theory about the decline of religion; it included an analysis of the changes of religions themselves, as is apparent in his research on various sects. He certainly held that through modernization and rationalization, the basic order and institutions of the public sphere of society, in particular the state system, economics, and even the educational system, would become non-religious. As a result his theory seemed to emphasize that established religions would decline and that religions in general would be marginalized. On the other hand, he also suggested that in the private sphere religions could change and survive, and that they would evolve and transform themselves into various sects or new religious movements. But it is true that the negative

aspect of the argument, namely the diminishing importance of religions, was conspicuous in the initial period of his research.

After visiting Africa and Asia, however, and especially Japan on a number of occasions, and as he formed close contacts with new religious movements in these areas, Dr. Wilson began to appreciate that not only did religious movements effectively mobilize the passion and energy of people, they also elicited from them goodwill, devotion, deep concern, and affection toward others and the environment. After the 1980s, his argument began to show the more positive aspects of new religions, evaluating them as rare sources that draw out humanistic qualities or passions in contemporary societies, which were turning into excessively rationalized “iron cages.”

He started paying close attention especially to the new religious movements of Japan, especially those which were actively involved in social and political areas, such as dealing with environmental problems, helping refugees, and denouncing political corruption. These arguments were made clear in *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 1982 (translated into Japanese in 2002), a collection of lectures he gave in Japan at the time of the Tokyo Regional Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion in 1979. The publication of dialogues he held with the then-President of Sōka Gakkai, Ikeda Daisaku, *Human Values in a Changing World* (1984), and his joint research and co-authorship on a book with Dr. Karel Dobbe-laere on the United Kingdom’s Sōka Gakkai movement, *A Time to Chant* (1994), are expressions of his new interests and perspectives.

Dr. Wilson’s theories on secularization and sects became the focus of intense debate. Some of his publications were translated in Japan as well, starting with *Religious Sects* (1970, translated in 1972) and had a major influence on the study of religions as well as the religious world in general. Although there were many criticisms, they were undoubtedly made because he raised some extremely important points concerning the destiny of religion in contemporary societies. As a pioneering researcher on sects and new religious movements at a time when society in general tended to view such groups as faddish and suspicious, Dr. Wilson investigated them thoroughly from a neutral yet sympathetic perspective and continued to identify them as new forms of religion in contemporary societies. His contributions were not limited to his academic work. In response to criticisms and a number of court cases that charged new religious movements with being dangerous cults, he wrote articles and statements to courts defending

their assertions and positions, and took a firm stand on protecting religious freedom. Considering his personal position as an atheist or agnostic, he placed individual liberty and autonomy above all else, and was a “man of action and belief” who defended the rights of minorities.

Dr. Wilson always wore a neat suit, white shirt, and neck-tie, even during his leisure time. He preferred formal dining and took great pleasure in choosing an appropriate French wine to suit the menu. In fact, his knowledge of wine surpassed that of the average sommelier. He not only maintained a wine cellar in his College, but I recall a time when he, in his capacity as advisor to the Oxford University Wine Club, coached the students who were preparing to enter a competition with Cambridge University. He remained a steadfast bachelor throughout his life and spoke only of being “married to academia.” All Souls College previously required all Fellows to be bachelors: Dr. Wilson was the last single Fellow who upheld the rule.

On first impression, Dr. Wilson may have struck one as being the last surviving prim and proper, rather straight-laced English gentleman. His close friends and students, however, will never forget the humor and mischievous smile that characterized his gentle nature. When he came to Sōka University as a Visiting Professor in 1997, he responded to students’ questions with kindness and courtesy in his lectures and seminars. On a number of occasions after lectures, he treated graduate students to dinner at a fine French restaurant in Hachioji. We took him to Kamakura and hiked around Mount Takao with him, and also visited Osaka, Ise, Shima, and Nagoya, where he had the opportunity to meet up with old friends from Nanzan University. This was the least we could do to repay Dr. Wilson, who dearly loved Japan in his later years, and I believe he fully enjoyed the autumn he spent here.

Dr. Wilson was an excellent scholar and teacher. He was an infinitely gentle “Uncle Bryan” to younger people and a true gentleman to the last who was resolute and full of goodwill.

Dr. Wilson— the very sad news of your passing away has grieved us deeply, but you will remain close to our hearts forever. Thank you very much for all you have given us over the years. May you Rest in Peace.

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(Translated by Benjamin Dorman)