

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2021

The biographical sketches were written by staff and
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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In the Nation's Service and the Service of Humanity

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ROBERT J. WUTHNOW



Robert “Bob” Wuthnow, the Gerhard R. Andlinger ’52 Professor of Social Sciences and professor of sociology, is one of the most prolific social scientists of his generation. He is retiring after forty-five years on the Princeton faculty.

Bob authored a shelf of definitive books; created an interdisciplinary center for the study of religion across the humanities and social sciences—Princeton’s Center for the Study of Religion—in 1999; trained or mentored many of the major figures in the sociology of religion; played a consequential role in his department’s rise to the very top of its discipline; and chronicled the moral lives of ordinary Americans with insight and empathy.

Born on June 23, 1946, Bob was raised on a small farm in Kansas. He received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Kansas in 1968 and his doctorate in sociology from the University of California-Berkeley in 1975. Berkeley’s influence on his intellectual and scholarly development was in part a reflection of the worldwide events whose effects were felt on campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Bob recalled in a 2005 interview for a Berkeley alumni publication, “I arrived shortly after the People’s Park and Third World mass demonstrations, routinely found my way to Barrows Hall through clouds of tear gas, lived near Black Panther headquarters, took courses in black nationalism, heard lectures by a professor who made periodic junkets to North Vietnam, participated in anti-war protests, served as a campus liaison for an East Asian religious group, and was employed in the same office as Emily Harris the day she kidnapped Patty Hearst.”

While a graduate student at Berkeley, Bob worked mostly at the Survey Research Center under the supervision of Professor Charles Glock. In 1973 he was appointed project director of the center’s Bay Area Survey—which produced one of the largest and richest bodies of survey data on religion ever collected, and served as the basis for his dissertation, “Consciousness and the Transformation of Society.” In the dissertation, Bob sought to explain then-current variations in personal experimentation with new, emerging lifestyles that included liberal sexual practices, drug use, and alternative religions, as well as to illuminate the rise of the new systems of meaning—including individualism—that gave rise to these cultural developments.

The year Bob completed his Ph.D., he co-authored *Adolescent Prejudice* (Harper and Row, 1975), his first book with Glock and

others, thus establishing the pattern of high productivity that would characterize his career for the next four decades. After teaching briefly at the University of Arizona, he joined the Princeton faculty in 1976 as an assistant professor and a William Patterson Bicentennial Preceptor. Within four years of receiving his doctorate, Bob had been promoted to a tenured associate professorship (after a single three-year term) and had published three more books: *The Consciousness Reformation* (University of California Press, 1976), *Experimentation in American Religion* (University of California Press, 1978), and *The Religious Dimension: New Directions in Quantitative Research* (Academic Press, 1979). In those early works, he identified fundamental transformations in American values, documented their influence on conventional religious belief and practice, and indicated their effects on the emergence of new religious movements. To an area of inquiry—the sociology of religion—that was notoriously polemical and time-bound, Bob brought a felicitous combination of broad historical learning and quantitative sophistication. By his early thirties, he stood among the top practitioners in his field.

From there, his scholarship grew even more ambitious and original, at once helping to put culture on the sociological map in America and giving fresh and vital emphasis to the sociology of religion. His contributions to the volume *The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation* (Aldine, 1983), which he also edited, revealed his customary judiciousness and penchant for placing religious movements in historical context at a time when many observers still took a partisan approach to the relationship between religion and conservative politics.

His next book, *Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), offered a brilliant comparison of four leading perspectives on the study of culture as represented by the schools of thought founded by Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas. This effort to clarify and synthesize abstract theoretical constructs, as well as his next book *Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis* (University of California Press, 1987), served as a kind of theoretical precursor to *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Harvard University Press, 1989), a 732-page historical and comparative investigation of the relationship between ideology and social structure in three key periods of European history: the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism. The study, still without parallel in historical sociology and the sociology of culture, demonstrates Bob's remarkable versatility and sustained capacity for intellectual self-transformation.

In all, Bob has published thirty-nine books of his own as well as numerous edited volumes, amounting to an average of more than a book per year, to which can be added a long list of articles in refereed journals. Again and again, as his creative mind has uncovered a fresh theoretical problem, he has mastered the materials to deal with it, typically assimilating an entire new literature in the course of producing a single volume and working simultaneously on several books at different stages of development, so each book is usually the fruit of no less than five years of research and reflection. In works such as *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton University Press, 1991); *God and Mammon in America* (Free Press, 1994); *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton University Press, 1988); *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (University of California Press, 1998); and *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1998), he illuminated the forces of social and cultural change as felt in the tensions between religion and politics, individualism and altruism, and diversity and cultural tradition, and he dealt with such perennial concerns as the meaning of work and money, the nature of virtue, the self, community, and the human quest for transcendence.

Starting in 2011, Bob turned his attention to rural America and the kinds of small towns and moral communities that would sharply alter the course of national politics in 2016. His childhood in rural Kansas provided him with a unique resource for making sense of the political transformations in the United States during his adulthood. He grappled with those transformations in *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America Since the 1950s* (Princeton University Press, 2011); *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* (Princeton University Press, 2012); *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* (Princeton University Press, 2013); *Rough Country: How Texas Became America's Most Powerful Bible-Belt State* (Princeton University Press, 2014); and *In the Blood: Understanding America's Farm Families* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

After the 2016 election, Bob published *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America* (Princeton University Press, 2018), based on a decade of research but one of the first book-length studies to focus on the voters who had elected Donald Trump president. "To find out what people in these communities think—what their lives are like, what they value, and how they arrive at their opinions about political candidates and government—wouldn't it make sense to spend time talking with them?" Bob asked. Although acknowledging that he was now a member

of East Coast liberal society, he explained: “I’ve deliberately sought out people whose views differ from mine.... I’ve attempted to understand them as fairly and as objectively as I can.” The book showed that, in voting for Trump, his subjects were giving voice not just to the simpleminded clichés of Rush Limbaugh and Fox News, but to deep-seated convictions that their way of life was slipping away and that the national culture was leaving them, their morality, and their religious beliefs behind.

All the while, Bob was known as a quiet and humble presence on the Princeton campus. This demeanor, however, did not prevent him from acting as an institution-builder as well. When he arrived at Princeton in 1976, the sociology department barely ranked among the top twenty nationally in the discipline and was struggling to attract first-class faculty and graduate students. After receiving a number of offers from other universities in the eighties, Bob worked with Marvin Bressler, the department chair, to extract a commitment from Presidents William Bowen and Harold Shapiro that would induce him to stay—namely, to build the department as well as a new Princeton Center for the Study of Religion. The result was a series of hires—Paul Starr, Viviana Zelizer, and Paul DiMaggio—which laid the foundation for a department that would rise to the top of national rankings. In 1992, Bob was appointed the Gerhard R. Andlinger ’52 Professor of Social Sciences. He would serve the department continuously through these years as both director of graduate studies and chair.

When he was not working tirelessly for the department, Bob wore a different hat as the director of the Center for the Study of Religion. His yearlong seminar on religion and social science for students across the University has been a model for student research training. Through this seminar and other programs, the center has facilitated the understanding of religion by creating opportunities for visiting scholars; sponsoring conferences and public lectures; offering support to Princeton faculty who wish to undertake teaching, research, and scholarly engagements in the field; providing postdoctoral fellowships and other support to Princeton graduate students conducting dissertation research and undergraduates engaging in independent studies; hosting interdisciplinary colloquia; establishing an undergraduate certificate in culture, society and religion; and amassing a growing library of publicly available digital media.

Bob is a world-class scholar, a peerless teacher and mentor, and a cherished colleague. An elected member of the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and past president of the Eastern Sociological Society, he is a recipient of the

Warren J. Mitofsky Award for Excellence in Public Opinion Research, the Mirra Komarovsky Best Book Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Martin E. Marty Award for Public Understanding of Religion. In his sixth decade of scholarship, he continues to pursue an active research agenda focused on the sociology of religion, social change, and sociological method and theory—and if his forty-five years at Princeton are any indication, we can expect another book, or two, or three or four, in the next few years.