
Robert Bellah and the Politics of "Civil" Religion

Beyond Belief Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World,
by Robert N. Bellah (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). Cited
in the text as *BB*.

***The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of
Trial,*** by Robert N. Bellah (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
Cited in the text as *BC*.

The Good Society, by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William
M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton (New York:
Knopf, 1991). Cited in the text as *GS*.

***Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in Ameri-
can Life,*** by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M.
Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton (Berkeley: Univer-
sity of California Press, 1985). Cited in the text as *Habits*.

***Individualism and Commitment in American Life: Readings on
the Themes of Habits of the Heart,*** by Robert N. Bellah,
Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven
M. Tipton (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). Cited in the text
as *Individualism*.

By his own report Robert Bellah, in his 1967 article examining the
Kennedy and Johnson inaugurals and several national holidays,
brought "American Civil Religion" to our "consciousness" (*BB* 175-
6). While one certainly may argue with his claim to originality,¹ it is

1. Cushing Strout, in "Tocqueville and Republican Religion," *Political Theory* 8,
(February 1980), 9-26, points out that discussion of civil religion in America goes
back at least as far as Carl Becker's 1914 treatment of the Great Awakening revivals.
See especially 11.

undeniable that literally hundreds of articles and books have made reference to that "collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity" Bellah saw serving Americans "as a genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding" (BB 175-6).² Bellah now is concerned more with a "world" than with an American "consciousness" (GS 286). But his more recent work, including the best-selling "sociological study" *Habits of the Heart* and its more overtly prescriptive sequel *The Good Society*, continues to receive praise for focussing upon the role of religion in political life. Indeed, the currently fashionable academic movement of "communitarianism" owes much to Bellah's explication of what he sees as the "lost " soul of American politics.

In his original article on American Civil Religion, Bellah argued that his goal was merely to describe an existing phenomenon. Critics, however, quickly accused him of praising a form of "national self-worship" (BB,168) . The critics need not have worried. Bellah's work, from its inception through its development in numerous succeeding studies of civil religion and the breakdown of the American community, has constituted a stinging indictment of Americans' "selfish materialism" in the face of egalitarian ideals. Religion for Bellah, is "civil" or, more precisely, political. But its purpose is to transform radically, not to idolize, our given character and way of life.

In his own mind Bellah's analysis is indebted to the "republican" tradition which once formed the basis of the American community. In the minds of himself and many commentators, Bellah is a modern day Alexis de Tocqueville, seeking as Tocqueville himself would to bring Americans out of their individualistic isolation and into the realm of common spiritual sentiment and action. According to Bellah, if we are to reconstruct the virtuous local life Tocqueville praised in the America of his day, we must undertake democratic innovations ensuring the equal distribution of material goods and the

2 Citations to Bellah listed in the *Social Science Research Index* since 1967 actually reach into the thousands. For an extensive bibliography of the literature on American Civil Religion see James A. Mathisen, "Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion?" *Sociological Analysis* 50 (Spring 1989), 141-6.

elimination of "authoritarian" systems of morality.

My purpose here is to show that Bellah's radical egalitarian and fundamentally materialistic project is hostile to the very traditions of thought and practice he claims to value. Bellah's proposed reforms, I will argue, would undermine the ordered liberty Tocqueville saw as the only alternative to the twin dangers of individualism and (in modern times generally *egalitarian*) tyranny. Bellah's political "cure" for our selfishness would destroy the traditional, social arrangements of local life and so leave us lost, isolated, and easily subjected to the unmediated will of the majority.

Bellah's use of Tocqueville is, in fact, unwittingly ironic. While Tocqueville would not recognize the influence of his own thought in Bellah's work, he could account for the malaise Bellah describes by referring to Bellah's own prescription. For Bellah, the progress of history. has reduced human choice to one between "humanistic" socialism and an empty and solipsistic pantheism.. For Tocqueville, socialism and pantheism are twin products of the same inhuman predicament of individualism: both feed on isolation and end by swallowing up the weakened individual into the indistinct mass of his fellow pursuers of material comfort and spiritual self-delusion.

It is true that Bellah borrows Tocqueville's notion of "individualism:" that "calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends." For Bellah, capitalist economics have shorn Americans of their "traditional" belief in substantive equality by chaining them to an individualistic, self-worshipping materialism. But for Tocqueville, selfishness was the *result* of the progress of equality-not something that arose in opposition to it. Equality destroyed traditional., qualitative distinctions, leaving only quantitative, economic distinctions-themselves as eagerly pursued as they were resented.. In arguing against egalitarian materialism Tocqueville sought to promote a well-ordered local life rather than egalitarian political action as the proper goal of any society.' The

3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (hereafter *Democracy*) trans. by George Lawrence, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), 506.

4. Ibid. References are legion, but see for example 315 where Tocqueville argues

pursuit of equality in fact leads to the false faith of pantheism. Seeing himself as an indistinguishable part of a vast, faceless majority, man comes to fear his own weakness and to worship the seemingly omnipotent whole.

Bellah's predicament is understandable, from a Tocquevillean perspective, because the "transcendent" values he seeks to put into action are in fact all too terrestrial. Bellah's "proper" religion utilizes the "explanatory device" of God (though *not* faith) in furtherance of an egalitarian political program. In the rituals of "church" religion and the "cultic" celebrations and exhortations of American Civil Religion, we explain our experiences to ourselves and so are able to further our "common" purposes. In effect, religion becomes the tool of the general will (a term which had only negative connotations for Tocqueville), and of its egalitarian materialist projects. The result is a loss of distinctions among men, creatures and things, and a curious egalitarian heresy: the divinization of the whole, and of man as a part of that whole. The result is the misconception that all we see, all we possess, and especially that all we *will* is divine—and a loss of the beliefs and practices which allow man to achieve his true greatness: his distinctive status as an *individual* participant in public life.

In examining the political and religious implications of Bellah's work, I will begin by outlining his conception of American Civil Religion. According to Bellah the "transcendent" values at the heart of our civil religion present a utopian vision of the egalitarian good life; a good life demanding that the community as a whole distribute material goods and social and moral status through overtly political means'. The millennial project that is American Civil Religion has always had its own dark, authoritarian side according to Bellah. But, until the rampant materialism of modern capitalism lured us from our local communities, our civil religion served to keep active the spirit of egalitarian public service.

Next I will turn to Bellah's political and social prescriptions as developed in his earlier work on American Civil Religion, and then

that a democratic "social state" is merely one circumstance among many which must be taken into account *in* the ongoing struggle to obtain and maintain liberty.

in his more recent work on American and "global" community and "consciousness." According to Bellah himself, American Civil Religion always has demanded equality in all things-and opposition to all men and all creeds fostering "antidemocratic" and so "individualistic" distinctions and judgments. American Civil Religion prescribes only political action and political values and so, I will argue, serves only to obscure Bellah's very unTocquevillean (but in his earlier work quite explicit) attachment to socialism.

Bellah does not openly refer to either American Civil Religion or socialism in his more recent work. But his critique of American "selfishness" continues to emphasize the need for egalitarian political action. Our loss of virtue and community requires, according to Bellah, local action aimed at extending, democratic politics to the realm of economics and private life.

In the next section I will argue, relying upon Tocqueville's analysis of the relationship between egalitarianism and individualism, that Bellah's attachment to utopian political programs produces the very malady (individualism) he seeks to cure. Stripping away the nonpolitical functions and character of intervening institutions such as family, church, and voluntary association, Bellah also strips away man's ability to participate in public life as a separate, distinct individual. Faced only with Bellah's grand political program and the political power of his "democratic associations, man will, a Tocquevillean would argue, come to fear and worship the majority whose general will has come to rule his life.

Next, still relying upon Tocqueville as Bellah's proper foil, I will argue that man's very character would be the victim of Bellah's egalitarian materialist project. For the institutions, practices, and beliefs Bellah deemed necessary for man to develop the mores proper for a decent, public life, cannot exist in a society committed to radical egalitarian transformation. It is Bellah's transformative project that undermines man's ability to lead a good life in the community because it is this project which makes it impossible for the individual to develop and recognize the interests, beliefs, and attachments he has, or should have, in common with his neighbors.

In the final section of this essay I will turn to Bellah's explicitly

religious writings to show that their sole purpose is to reinforce his political positions. For Bellah, this world is the proper and indeed the only realm of religious action. Bellah's religion is a purely terrestrial phenomenon, resting neither upon belief in God and a hereafter, nor on any criteria for the judgment of human activity which are not themselves man-made. Instead, Bellah's religion serves as a collection of symbols by which man may explain to himself the inherent contradictions of his own life. Bellah criticizes democratic pantheism because he recognizes that it is a religious form of individualism-resting upon man's selfish desire to reject all outside obligations and so divinize himself. But Bellah does not recognize that his remedy for religious individualism-political "commitment"-is in fact the source of man's confused drive for self-deification.

Once again turning to Bellah's supposed progenitor for critical guidance, I will argue that Bellah's very attempt to chain religion to the needs of his political program renders the latter unattainable and the former at best meaningless. The God-based natural law which Bellah rejects in favor of egalitarian materialism was, for Tocqueville, the only possible basis for any good society. Religion is necessary for society precisely because it cannot be used in purely subjective or utilitarian terms. To view religion as a man-made system of explanation intended to justify "social justice" is to render it impotent to teach man his limits, his importance and the requirements and duty to live a virtuous life. To reduce God to the status of a hand-maiden of egalitarian materialism is to render man himself spiritually confused and impoverished, and to make him a likely slave to the next tyrant-or the next tyrannous belief or passion-to come along.

American Civil Religion

Bellah originally defined American Civil Religion merely as a collection of ceremonies and symbols allowing Americans to explain their experience, as Americans, to themselves. But for Bellah, its status as an explanatory device does not render our civil religion entirely subjectivist or self-indulgent. Instead, American Civil Religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent

religious reality. . . as revealed through the experience of the American people" (BB 179). According to Bellah, the role of our civil religion has been to subject American political life to a "transcendent" set of moral standards which neither include nor reject the particular dogmas of "personal" (generally denominational, later termed "specific") religion.'

Because it "was never anticlerical or militantly secular[.]" American Civil Religion managed to form *a* truce with the various church religions, and even to borrow "selectively from the religious tradition." In this way, according to Bellah, "the civil religion was able to build up... powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals" (BB 180-1).

The God of civil religion, as translated into American experience, is "on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love." But only adherence to the principles set down by this "austere" *God* would bring Americans "political prosperity" (BB 175). And the desire to please, and to call upon, the civil deity spawned *a* national religion.

Memorial Day observance, especially in the towns and smaller cities of America, is a major event for the whole community involving a rededication to the martyred dead, to the spirit of sacrifice, and to the American vision. Just as Thanksgiving Day, serves to integrate the family into the civil religion, so Memorial Day has acted to integrate the local community into the national cult. Together with the less overtly religious Fourth of July and the more minor celebrations of Veterans Day and the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln, these two holidays provide an annual ritual calendar for the civil religion. The public school system serves as a particularly important context for the cultic celebration of the civil rituals (BB 179).

The values of the American Civil Religion for Bellah are incul-

5. See "The Revolution and the Civil Religion," (hereafter "R & CR") in Jerald C. Brauer, ed., *Religion and the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) especially 60.

cated to this day, if increasingly fitfully, through public exhortations to do God's Will on Earth, and through "cultic celebrations" of national holidays. Such celebrations serve to convince Americans of the goodness of themselves, their nation and their causes. "Rededicating" themselves to the nation's martyrs, Americans come to believe that it is good to die for their community's values (*BB* 179). Civil religion integrates the political with the religious and so motivates citizens to act for the one as if it were the other.

In a more recent article Bellah spells out a further "religious" distinction: that between "general" and "specific" civil religion: For Bellah general civil religion is "religion in general, the lowest common denominator of church religion" ("R & CR" 57). Far from denigrating general civil (or "natural") religion as empty and formulaic, Bellah identifies it as an "indispensable prerequisite for government" ("R & CR" 57). Quoting men from Roger Williams to Benjamin Franklin to George Washington, Bellah argues that there was an early American consensus that society itself rests upon belief in God, the afterlife and divine judgment.

Bellah, self-consciously following sociologist Emile Durkheim, argues that "every nation and every people come to some form of religious self-understanding" (*BB* 168). In *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah asserts that the basis of this "self-understanding"-the essential concern of "general" civil religion everywhere-is public virtue.

It is one of the oldest of sociological generalizations that any coherent and viable society rests on a common set of moral understandings about good and bad, right and wrong, in the realm of individual and social action. It is almost as widely held that these common moral understandings must also in turn rest upon a common set of religious understandings that provide a picture of the universe in terms of which the moral understandings make sense. Such moral and religious understandings produce both a basic cultural legitimation for a society which is viewed as at least approximately in accord with them and a standard of judgment for the criticism of a society that is seen as deviating too far from them (*BC* ix-x).

The proper (or "true") function of general civil religion is to provide moral consensus for the community. Man uses his religion to "legitimate" his society and to help measure and "correct" deviant practices.

Bellah points to a parallel between general civil religion and traditional conceptions of natural law. But where natural law thinkers point to God's Will as the objective basis of a moral truth concerned more with our immortal souls than with our political institutions, Bellah gives a particularly subjectivist and utilitarian reading of natural law; one which intentionally strips away any concept of moral truth beyond the self-defined (and self-willed) needs of societies.' Bellah's religion is an explanatory device by which a community's norms are made to *seem* objectively correct. Even God, according to Bellah, is only a "relational symbol... intended to...bring together the coherence of the whole of experience" (*BB 202*). That is, God Himself is a creature of the human will to self-understanding.

Rather than a follower of Tocqueville, let alone Aquinas, Bellah is a disciple of Rousseau. The basic tenets, necessity, and very name of Bellah's civil religion are taken expressly from Rousseau's *Social Contract*. More generally, Bellah's conception of civil religion is clearly and expressly indebted to a particular, "republican" view of the relationship between religion and politics.' Like Rousseau, for Bellah, religion's utility derives from its promotion of a particularly

6. The Thomistic recognition of three forms of law-Divine, natural, and man-made-leaves ample room for, indeed in each case depends upon, the utilization of man's own reason. But, for Aquinas, if one is to understand these laws, which together rule all of life, one must recognize human limits and the need, in man's very exercise of reason, to look outside the self (to the Divine authority of Scripture, to the natural world explained by both revelation and reason, and to scientific truths necessarily based upon "naturally known, indemonstrable principles") in order to find, as well as mere mortals can, the natural order. One does not explain the world to oneself through religious "symbols" in the Thomistic view, one looks to God, nature and sciences' discovery and utilization of naturally known principles in order to discover the proper course of action. See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Law* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1987) especially 18.

7. The claim that Bellah is, in fact, merely using Tocqueville as a convenient source from which to choose the occasional, eloquent argument apparently supporting his own views, finds support in *The Good Society*. In his latest work, Bellah relegates Tocqueville to a supporting role behind the atheist and socialist John Dewey-

public morality and an overtly *political* virtue. According to Bellah, the Founders felt that religion was "the indispensable underpinning of a republican political order" ("R & CR" 60). General civil religion was necessary for virtue, according to Bellah's Founders, and virtue was "zeal for the public good." Corruption was the opposite of virtue—an "exclusive concern for one's own good," the pursuit of private enjoyments and the accumulation of wealth ("R & CR" 62).

Where general civil religion demands service to the communally defined common good, specific civil religion (e.g. American Civil Religion) defines "the norms in terms of which the common good is conceived" ("R & CR" 62). The moral consensus of a specific civil religion is necessary for society to exist. But this does not mean that civil religion should be used merely as a support for existing institutions and practices. Indeed, given the inevitability of each society's "religious dimension," the "responsible" course of action is "to seek within the civil religious tradition for those critical principles which undercut the everpresent danger of national self-idolization" ("R & CR" 62): Bellah thus seems to set up a curious tension between the need for a moral consensus and the need for continuous national self-criticism. In the end, however, this tension is illusory because civil religion, properly understood, is utopian. A society's "transcendent" values are, in fact, unrealizable *terrestrial* goals according to which man's actions always will be found wanting. The norms of our society, as formulated by Bellah, themselves constitute a wholesale indictment of our existing, "inegalitarian"—and so unjust—institutions and practices.

American Civil Religion calls on Americans to transform the world according to God's design—as divined by Bellah. For our civil religion demands, in Bellah's view, a specific program of terrestrial transformation, from civil disobedience in opposition to such "grave injustices" as the then ongoing Vietnam war to "the attainment of some kind of viable and coherent world order" (BB 185).⁸ The provinciality of our specific civil religion—our selfish attachment to

apparently finding Tocqueville's arguments too troublesome to fit into his own schema at this point in time. See especially GS 8.

8. Bellah's desire for a "credible" world order has become more insistent, and even

our own institutions, practices, and interests-is in conflict with the "transcendent" norms of civil religion itself. Only by transcending itself and becoming part of a "world civil religion" will American Civil Religion fulfill its mission of promoting human equality.

But before we can transcend our specific civil religion, we must put into action its central "truth," that "here on earth God's work must truly be our own" (BB 172). And man's "work" on earth is to follow God, not in living his private life in a Godly way (for that would be selfish) but to, in John F. Kennedy's words, "struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself" (BB 172). Man's "work" is not to prepare for salvation in the next life by living a Godly life on earth, but to achieve salvation in this life by building heaven on earth.

The notion, with its roots in Puritan thought, that Americans are God's chosen people, bound by covenant to do God's bidding on earth and shine as a beacon to all nations, remains with us. And for Bellah our picture of ourselves as God's chosen people lies behind-and morally demands-great projects of political transformation. "The American Israel theme is clearly behind both Kennedy's New Frontier and Johnson's Great Society" (BB 181). In announcing one of his major legislative initiatives, Johnson showed the proper use of civil religious invocation by stating: "God *will* not favor everything that we do. It is rather our duty to divine his will. I cannot help but believe that He truly understands and that He really favors the undertaking that we begin here tonight" (BB 181). God "understands" great political undertakings because they are the product of divinations of His Will; because they, like He, are products of American Civil Religion.

The demands placed on the community by American Civil Religion are well defined-indeed, for Bellah they constitute a political program. American Civil Religion's demands also define the proper character of Americans and American political life.

somewhat more concrete. In *The Good Society* he calls for "a new, more democratic, more peaceful world order under the leadership of the United Nations." GS viii.

Noting Jefferson's opposition to slavery, Bellah argues that "Where is, then, a biting edge to the [American] civil religion. Not just general civil religion, but virtue. Not just virtue, but concern for the common good. Not just the common good defined in any self-serving way, but the common good under great objective norms: equality, life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness" ("R & CR" 64). The "objective norms" of American Civil Religion, then, have at their head equality, and not "merely" the equality Jefferson wrote of and Lincoln sought to realize in proclaiming the self-evident truth that all men are created equal. Our civil religious norms demand that all men be made substantively equal so that they maybe made "truly" free.

But, despite its egalitarian prescriptions, for Bellah there is danger as well as promise in American Civil Religion. Those who oppose our civil religion's mission to bring the world together into one egalitarian community may use it as a "cloak for petty interests and ugly passions" (*BB* 186). According to Bellah, "[t]he civil religion has not always been invoked in favor of worthy causes. On the domestic scene, an American-Legion type of ideology thatfuses God, country, and flag has been used to attack non-conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds" (*BB* 182). American Civil Religion has a dark side, Bellah claims, because it may be used against liberal ideas and groups and in favor of an "ideology" too supportive of a nation dwelling far from its utopian ideals. Indeed, as essential a notion as:

[t]he theme of the American Israel was used, almost from the beginning, as a justification for the shameful treatment of the Indians so characteristic of our history. It can be overtly or implicitly linked to the idea of manifest destiny that has been used to legitimate several adventures in imperialism since the early nineteenth century.... [And w]hen our soldiers are actually dying, it becomes possible to consecrate the struggle further by invoking the great theme of sacrifice (*BB* 182).

According to Bellah, racism and "genocide" spawned by notions of manifest destiny are corrupt products of the myth of Americans as a chosen people. Too exclusive a myth, too "specific" a civil religion,

has produced an often idolatrous American self-view, and with this (by nature misplaced) self-confidence a tendency to dismiss or even exterminate those who are different; who do not share the same "dream" as traditionally powerful groups of Americans (*BC* 37-9; 57-9; 36):

Nonetheless, the republican civil religious tradition, while in need of tempering with substantial doses of self-criticism (the proper function of intellectuals such as Bellah (*BC* 98) is the primary source of what is good in America. America was built "centrally on utopian millennial expectations" (*BC* ix). What is good in America has its basis in these expectations-and in the attempt to bring them to fulfillment in the face of selfish individualism.

"Imperialism" is to be differentiated from that set of utopian, civil religious principles which properly should spread throughout the world. Where one nurtures with its spread, the other destroys. Where one brings "healthy" self-criticism, the other brings "self-idolatry." Yet both may be supported by the rhetoric of our civil religion.

Its apparent support for such wildly diverging expansionist ideologies (one "true" and properly universalized, the other "imperialistic") can only be explained, within Bellah's schema, by the dual nature of American Civil Religion itself; In Bellah's words,

...there have been behind the civil religion from the beginning two great structures of interpretation, the one I shall call biblical, the other utilitarian. The biblical interpretation stands, above all, under the archetype of the covenant, but it is also consonant with the classical theory of natural law as derived from ancient philosophy and handed down by the church fathers. The utilitarian interpretation stands, above all, under the archetype of the social contract and is consonant with the modern theory of natural rights as derived from John Locke. The meaning of every key term in the civil religion-certainly liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but also equality and even life-differs in those two perspectives ("R & CR" 65-6).

Bellah leaves no doubt where he thinks God's favor lies in the

competition between the two competing interpretations of civil religion.

[O]ne can read the great tenets of the civil religion in either of the two perspectives-as Winthrop would have read them, or as Locke would have read them. Is equality a condition for the fulfillment of our humanity in covenant with God or is it a condition for the competitive struggle to attain our own interests? Is freedom almost identical with virtue-the freedom to fulfill lovingly our obligations to God and our fellow men-or is it the right to do whatever we please so long as we do not harm our fellow men too flagrantly? Is the pursuit of happiness the realization of our true humanity in love of Being and all beings, as Jonathan Edwards would have put it or is it, as Locke would contend, the pursuit of those things-notably wealth and power-which are means to future happiness, in Leo Strauss's words, the joyless quest for joy"? Does life mean biological survival in our animal functions or does it mean the good life in which our spiritual nature and our animal nature are both fulfilled ("R & CR 68-9")?

Bellah sees in classical Liberal theory the root of contemporary evils-denial of our duties to our fellow man and of all our "higher" callings in life. Bellah, like Strauss, argues that Locke was little more than an effective popularizer of Hobbesian theory, and that Hobbes corrupted man's vision of transcendent truth. But for Strauss, Hobbes transformed natural law, in the minds of men, from a statement of eternal standards to "a series of 'rights,' of subjective claims, emanating from the human will."⁹ Bellah asserts the "self evident truth" that democratic action-the expression of the (to be sure the *collectivized*) human will is the only proper basis of social, political, and economic right. Thus, "transcendent" rules emanating from outside the human will in reality have their basis only in biological needs-from man's need for food to his need to explain his universe to himself by creating the "symbol" of God.

9. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

For Strauss, it was Hobbes' insistence on the primacy of the human will that marked his (and Locke's) rejection of natural law. But Bellah's hostility toward Locke does not, in fact, stem from the liberal philosopher's supposed rejection of natural law. Indeed, one may argue, *contra* Strauss, that Locke actually was an *exponent* of natural law. Thus, even cursory examination of Locke's argument will show that it is Bellah who rejects such truly transcendent norms. Bellah fords natural law too undemocratic-that is, excessively "private" or insufficiently political (and so malleable) in its moral dictates.

For Locke, natural law is of universal application. And even in the supposedly atomistic state of nature the means of learning the dictates of natural law-the family-are equally universal. Locke argued that familial communities develop from the natural or God-¹⁰given desire for procreation and the requirements of child-rearing (par. 77-86). The family forms naturally, for Locke, and its educative function-arising from the natural duty of parents to care for their offspring until they can shift for themselves-is an essential part of its nature (par. 79).

But the familial relationship is not political (par. 74); while it transcends the particularities of a given social or political state, it does not transcend the moral dictates of natural law. In or out of the state of nature, natural law dictates "peace, good will, mutual assistance and preservation" (par. 13, see also par. 181). Locke's recognition of human imperfections-of men's partiality to their own causes and of the existence of some who will shirk their duties and/or violate the rights of others-does not render the moral character of his thought thin and negative or utilitarian. What Locke's reading of natural law *does* do is recognize that moral standards and political rules are not identical-that, indeed, the former must take precedence over and limit the scope of the latter. The rights and duties of men-the proper nature of their relationships-remain constant expressions of a particular *moral* code according to which all good men must live. To act otherwise is to deserve punishment both in this life and in the next (par. 176).

10. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, ed. by Peter Laslett (New York: New American Library, 1965).

Bellah's hostility toward Locke-and toward natural law in general-stems from the fact that natural law does not reduce the moral to the political. For Bellah, virtue is necessarily political virtue; other conceptions of virtue are mere masks for personal interests. Indeed, in breaking down American history into a conflict between one good (biblical or, more commonly and accurately, republican) and one bad (utilitarian) tradition, Bellah emphasizes the political and so virtuous nature of the former and the private and so corrupt nature of the latter.

For Bellah, the great threat to the American millennial project is (*private*) individualism. From its inception, individualism always has been bereft of "any notion of God or the Good" (BC 26). Lacking in civil religious consciousness, individualism is inherently selfish and serves only to tear apart the community and the ideals necessary for "social justice." By denying that all aspects of life should be arranged according to the dictates of Bellah's political program, individualism has brought about the demise of virtue in American life. It is not surprising, then, that it is to the "republican" political tradition rather than to the natural law tradition that Bellah turns in presenting his own program of action.

Bellah's Indictment and Program: *The Broken Covenant*

Bellah gives fullest expression to his views on the roots and implications of American Civil Religion in *The Broken Covenant*. Bellah introduces this work as a reexamination of "American civil religion and the mythological structure that supports it" (BC 3). According to Bellah, the ruling myth of divine order in eighteenth century America-the "austere" general civil deity-caused Americans to dispense with the "specific" myths of Great Britain in favor of those of Rome. In particular, "the Roman attribute that preoccupied the imagination of the founders of the new nation was republican virtue" (BC 23). Quoting James Sellers with approval, Bellah translates the "Montesquieuan" notion of republican virtue into the idea that democracies (apparently including early America) depend for their continued existence on a communalistic "willed initiative":

In a democracy there is no prince furnished with an army to maintain the laws by force. And since the people are established on the basis of parity, there is no pride of rank to exploit. If there is any will or motivation to see that the laws are obeyed and that justice is done, it must come out of the hearts of the citizenry, from the will and ability of the people to act on behalf of the greater community. It is this quality, rather than fear or ambition, that makes things work in a democracy. This quality is *la vertu*.... It conveys the idea that the citizen of a republic finds the beginning of his participation in governance in his own inner spirit, but that this spirit takes the form of action, and especially that kind of action that expresses willingness: initiative (quoted in *BC* 23-4).

Republican virtue, then, for Bellah is based on individual will, as expressed through public action. As democratic politics properly results in the expression of the will of the majority, Bellah's democratic or "republican" virtue is based on the harnessing of individual will to the public good—as defined, of course, by the general will. Only those who see participation in governance as an essential part of their being—and one which their particular community is capable of bringing to fruition—will be capable of virtuous conduct. Only those who see the expression of their will in the actions of the community will attempt to further the communally defined common good.

The common good, for Bellah, was seen at the Founding as being in open conflict with the defense of private property—which he defines broadly as the pursuit of personal, "selfish" interests. The Lockean notion that "government arises out of a contract for the mutual defense of private property" is inimical to virtue. "The conscious conflict between the civil (Calvinist, classical) and utilitarian views came to a head, . . . over the issue of whether virtue or interest was to be the effective basis of the new American polity. In the 1770s most articulate Americans chose virtue." In opposing property qualifications for voting, "articulate" Americans of the Revolutionary era were opposing the politics of interest (*BC* 30-1). Bellah evidently feels his point is so clear as to require no explanation.

It does seem safe to say, given his general hostility toward private property, that Bellah is condemning the notion that those with property will be more likely to serve the interests of the community. Instead it would appear that, for Bellah, property qualifications destroy virtue by denying to those without property the right to vote-to express publicly their political will.

The "myth" to which Bellah seems to appeal is that of Cincinnatus, the Roman dictator who, after saving his people from destruction, returned to his life as a poor farmer. According to Bellah, "[t]he agrarian ideal of Jefferson and others in the early republic-the ideal of a nation of frugal independent husbandmen ready to serve at their community's call-owes much to this notion of republican virtue" (BC 24) . But Roman myths did not provide the only, or even the most powerful basis for republican virtue in America. Rather, what Bellah sees as the

... remarkable coherence of the American revolutionary movement and its successful conclusion in the constitution of a new civil order are due in considerable part to the convergence of the Puritan covenant pattern and the Montesquieuan republican pattern . . . Both patterns saw society resting on the deep inner commitment of its members, the former through conversion, the latter through republican virtue. Both saw government as resting on law, which, in its positive form, was created by the active participation of those subject to it, yet ultimately derives from some higher source, either God or Nature. When Jefferson evoked at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence the "laws of nature and of nature's God" he was able to fuse the ultimate legitimating principles of both traditions (BC 27).

Evidently the revolution was "legitimized" by myths of both the republican version of natural law-with its emphasis on man's public, political nature and society's inherent or "natural" need for public acts in its defense-and traditions more deeply, historically rooted in America. For Bellah finds in Puritan covenant theology the strongest basis of what he sees as our proper civil religious tradition.

It was the myth of an American Israel that, for Bellah, did most to produce virtuous men by tying the individual to society.

This dual emphasis on the individual and on society can be traced in the dialectic of conversion and covenant that was continuously worked over in the colonial Protestant Churches and came to provide a series of feelings, images, and concepts that would help shape the meaning of the new republic. To the early Puritans, conversion was an intensely personal and individual experience of salvation; and the prerequisite of church membership. A public account of such a personal experience, subject to inquiry and examination and the confirmation of goodly moral character, was required from each prospective member. While the Puritans were aware that members of the church, conceived as the Covenant of Grace, were ultimately known only to God and that it was almost certain that there were hypocrites in the visible church, they tried as far as possible to maintain a church of the converted. In addition to the inward covenant there was also the outward or national covenant to which all New Englanders were conceived of as belonging or at least to which they were subject. This was the basis of civil society. Ideally, individual conversion and external covenant should go together and there were those who tried to blur the distinction in practice as well, but there was also a long tradition of concern over the tension that usually exists between the two (BC 18-9).

One was converted through a personal experience with God. According to Bellah, this personal experience imparted, not merely some beatific vision, but an impetus toward, and a code of, good conduct. And the Puritan code of conduct was to be both acted upon and judged in the public sphere. For the Puritans, the good was the *public* good. The individual's faith and conduct were to be subjected to common judgment, itself based upon a public covenant-the community's pact with God. This covenant was intimately concerned with conduct among men; it intended to promote virtuous action. But conversion, while necessary for entry into God's favor,

is disruptive; it breaks down preexisting barriers *as* it forges an intimate, personal link with the Creator. If it is not to destroy man's relations with his fellows, conversion must take place within a strong community rooted in a strong tradition. Thus, there is an inherent tension between covenant and conversion which must be stabilized through communal control.

Conversion, following traditions deeply rooted in both testaments of the Bible, was felt to be a form of liberation. To be converted was to be freed from the bondage of sin and death, emancipated from slavery to the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Reformation emphasized that the converted man is a free man, in certain respects answerable only to God. Evangelical preachers *in* the 18th century often expatiated on the theme of the sweets of liberty. But conversion as a liberating experience was always balanced by the coordinate concept of the covenant, which implied a definite set of obligations between God and man and between man and man (*BC 19*).

What made the tension between conversion and covenant bearable, according to Bellah, was the Puritan code. This code embodied the Puritan commitment to the establishment of a utopian society wherein each man recognized his obligations *to* the community. "Conversion was not just an act of purely private piety. The liberty flowing from it did not mean escape from social obligation. A man's covenant liberty was seen as profoundly social" (*BC 20*). Covenant liberty was the freedom "to know, obey and enjoy his Creator, and to do all the good unto, and enjoy all the happiness with and in his *fellow* creatures that he is capable of" (*BC 20*).

For Bellah, Americans dealt with the tension between covenant and conversion by identifying the individual with the communal will. The *polis* and the Bible were meshed in Puritan life, in Bellah's view, because each emphasized collective responsibility and demanded individual virtue—that is, service to the communally defined public good.

There was, then, a strongly social, communal, or collective emphasis in early New England political thought. That collet-

five emphasis, that understanding of man as fundamentally social, was derived from the classical conception of the *polis* as responsible for the education and the virtue of its citizens, from the Old Testament notion of the Covenant between God and a people held collectively responsible for its actions, and from the New Testament notion of a community based on charity or love and expressed in brotherly affection and fellow membership in the common body (BC 17-8)

Particularly in its early days, Bellah argues, America had a dominant tradition devoted to the common good. But even in its early days, America bore the seeds of corruption in the form of an ideology of individualism imported from Britain. For Hobbes, and here Locke is his true disciple, social concord is still based not on divine justice, not even on a shadow of *caritas*, but on self-interest, on *cupiditas* alone. The idea that society could be based on a mere coagulation of individual interests, that the pursuit of private vice could result in public virtue, was a radically new idea in the 17th and 18th centuries and one that did not sit well with other still powerful traditions" (BC 26-7).

Hobbes, and Bellah's caricatured Locke, preached and spread a doctrine of selfishness. The politics of interest rests upon a denial of the necessity of public virtue; this politics breeds corruption because its doctrine is one of individualism, or the selfish denial of the primacy of the community. And the corrupt and corrupting doctrine of individualism spread quickly, in large part because America already was corrupt.

The tendency of the people to walk not in the ways of the Lord but in their own ways, to think not of the general good but of their own private interests, was discerned and condemned by the Puritan ministers. But, even more than they were aware, the colonists had failed the covenant almost before it had been made, for they had founded their new commonwealth on a great crime—the bondage and genocide of other races. The very exclusiveness of their understanding of the covenant had perverted it (BC 62).

Already stained with sin, Americans soon lost their desire and capacity for virtue. After the reinvigorating effects of the communal struggle for independence-our first national "conversion" experience-had waned, Americans were especially susceptible to the doctrine of selfishness. "The founding fathers as they moved from heroic acts of liberation to the constituting of liberty were aware of the difficulty of maintaining revolutionary zeal as the basis for civil responsibility. Revolution and constitution are as necessarily interlinked as are conversion and covenant, their lineal predecessors, but the tension between them seems as inevitable in the one case as in the other" (*BC* 32).

America's decline became apparent, and accelerated, with the establishment of the "external covenant" of the Constitution. Perhaps inevitable, descent into the "mere" procedural rules embodied in the Constitution marked and encouraged a debasement of the American community and character.

Instead of lamenting the fact that Americans seemed to be more intent on individual happiness than upon public good, some began to argue that just such a principle was the basis of the new American system. The new Constitution, it was felt, harnessed individual acquisitiveness to public order. As James Wilson wrote, in America there was introduced "into the very form of government, such particular checks and controls, as to make it advantageous even for bad men to act for the public good"..
Wilson and others entranced with the new system argued that it would be immune to the corruptions of the classical republic and that it would not suffer a collapse into tyranny (*BC* 31-2).

Arguing that society could better survive on a foundation of vice than virtue, James Wilson and other Framers saw society and its needs in "utilitarian" terms and thereby legitimized selfishness. Thus, according to Bellah, there were two primary traditions motivating political action in early post-Revolutionary America: one devoted to the utopian ideals of a city on a hill, the other concerned solely with providing a stable environment within which, the individual could pursue his own private, selfish interests.

The tension between these two traditions produced a particular dynamic in American public life. Bellah argues that American history is replete with waves of revivals, of "conversions" which have been followed by new covenants. Opposition from the selfish tradition in America caused these new covenants to fall short of our millenarian ideals and so cry out for yet more national "conversions." The post-Civil War Amendments, for example, were the products of "[a] renewed experience of divine salvation [which] led to a heightened sense of the imperfections of the national covenant and demanded a nation purged and renewed after the long travail of slavery" (BC 62). Bellah believes that the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution (and in particular the clause of the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing equal protection of the laws) show the promise of millenarianism to help us "progress" as a community.

Even though the radical meaning of these clauses was undermined for many decades by narrow court interpretations and a regressive political situation, their meaning can hardly be exaggerated. They are the charter under which many of the advances of the *last 20* years have been made. They are the mandate for many more. They altered the role of the national government from one of largely passive observation in the field of individual rights to one of active intervention and responsibility. They give the constitutional legitimation for much that is still to be realized politically. (BC 54-5).

The post-Civil War Amendments were the embodiment of a "conversion" of the American spirit-of a revived and strengthened commitment to political, economic and social equality which was radical given the circumstances of the time. While the extreme egalitarian ideals Bellah claims to be inherent in the Amendments¹¹

11. See Raoul Berger, *Government by Judiciary: The Transformation of the Fourteenth Amendment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977) for a devastating critique of the claim that the Fourteenth Amendment was intended to desegregate American schools, let alone to promote far-reaching egalitarian programs such as those ascribed to the Amendments by Bellah.

were not put into practice, they serve to guide us in their implementation as we come to "know" their import.

Unfortunately, Bellah laments, we are failing in our mission of communal utopianism. The revivals and radical political programs of the post-Civil War era had the potential to bring America closer to its "millenarian ideals." But the second, corrupting tradition of American political practice already was coming to the fore and soon would undermine American principles and character even as it frustrated practical attempts to establish "divinely just" material equality.

Of course we cannot account for the drying up of the Protestant imagination or the rise of single[-minded rationalism] solely in terms of the persuasiveness of the practical utilitarianism, the unconscious Lockianism, that was so appealing to American common sense. Nor can we account for it entirely in terms of the rising prestige of experimental science that the names Bacon and Newton symbolized, important though this was. The fundamental appeal of the practical rationalism that was the grassroots basis for pragmatism, the most American of philosophies, was its fit with an expansive commercial and industrial economy and the technical advances needed to exploit the wealth of a virgin continent (*BC* 72-3).

According to Bellah, Americans, and not least the Founding Fathers, have always had a corrupt hunger for land. And the pursuit of economic and material improvement in America always had its basis in a love of experimentation. Bellah does not condemn outright the practical concerns of Americans,

[b]ut the price of concentrating so heavily on the realm of worldly practical achievement was a thinning out of other dimensions of human experience. The end result, which was not evident until the late decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th, was a conception of the meaning of human life, summed up in the word "success," so narrow that Franklin and Jefferson seem giants of complexity in compari-

son. For with the dominance of industrial capitalism after the Civil War, success in America became a singularly literal goal it meant success in business, or more crassly, money (BC 73).

Bellah's reading of the decline of American character is curiously materialistic given his claim to be a proponent and student of spirituality. According to Bellah, the practical concerns of material betterment always prominent in American life came to dominate it and to force its way into the heart of the American character with the rise of industrial capitalism. The "requirements" of a "complex" society based on freedom of exchange turned Americans into self-interested but empty cogs within a machine whose operations they could not control. The struggle to establish a utopian city on a hill progressively gave way to the struggle to buy a mansion on a hill, and so our ability to relate to one another as members of the same community-to do service to the public good-was impaired.

In Bellah's view, one major and tragic product of our selfish individualism has been an "American Taboo on Socialism" (BC 112). Capitalism in America hides behind the ideology of individualism-claiming to fulfill the promise of individual, freedom and to oppose the hierarchical bureaucracy of governmental control, while in fact enslaving us to private hierarchical bureaucracies beyond our control (BC 114-6). The chains of consumerism have blinded Americans to the undemocratic nature of capitalism and so helped the unjust prejudice against socialism survive (BC 134).

Too many socialists are atheists, and this is a "great stumbling block" to socialism's progress (BC 123). But, according to Bellah, there is a more "humanistic" socialism available to Americans, one which remains committed to the good that exists in America while keeping a critical outlook on American life and a "commitment" to a virtuous life stripped of consumerist superfluities. Only the allure of selfish materialism keeps us from recognizing that able of material austerity, of pride and pleasure in the quality of workmanship rather than in the amount consumed. . . would be far healthier for our society, ecologically and sociologically, than our present dominant pattern of ever-accelerating consumption" (BC 135-6). The allure of material success has transformed us from members

of a somehow spiritual, substantively egalitarian community into isolated pursuers and consumers of material goods, separated from one another and from our own "true" goals by our splendid (or at least comfortable) isolation.

Now increasingly less hopeful about the prospects for transcending American "selfishness," Bellah even in his earlier work asserted that "this society is a cruel and bitter one, very far, in fact, from its own highest aspirations" (*BC viii*). And the very realization that American society is "cruel and bitter," along with our inability to formulate a sustained, moral or "transcendently based" critique, has further corrupted our community and ourselves. Bellah lamentingly observes "a decline of belief in all forms of obligation: to one's occupation, one's family, and one's country. A tendency to rank personal gratification above obligation to others correlates with a deepening cynicism about the established social, economic, and political institutions of society. A sense that the basic institutions of society are unjust and serve the interests of a few at the expense of the many, is used to justify the inapplicability of moral obligations to one's self" (*BC x*). Cynicism—"oddly" grown rampant in times of increasing "social justice"—has led to an even further and deeper withdrawal from public life into an increasingly impoverished, amoral and isolated self.

Of course, Bellah nowhere considers the possibility that the "critical" function he claims for intellectuals such as himself may have contributed to (let alone produced) the morally confused and exhausted cynicism of today. Yet it is difficult to see why, following Bellah's reasoning, we should accept the moral imperative of the "millenarian expectations" Bellah ascribes to American Civil Religion any more than the "utilitarian" (or any other) notions he condemns. For, dispensing with the "arbitrary" confines of natural law, Bellah's intellectuals would step outside tradition to a realm-constructed by and for intellectuals-wherein there are no set rules; to a realm in which "arbitrary" constructs such as property (or any other) rights may be replaced by other (intellectually favored but no less arbitrary) constructs such as "economic democracy." Bellah's goals, bereft of any truly transcendent justifications, constitute

nothing more than his own personal preference. And, while men may join in and even support this preference for a time, personal preferences hardly can be expected to inspire a lasting loyalty in the face of contrary personal interests or impulses-particularly when those impulses are pronounced "just" by an ideology asserting the primacy of human will and the demand for political control over the distribution of material goods.

Individualism and Socialism in American Life: *Habits of the Heart* .

Dispensing with the "idolatrous" term "American Civil Religion," as well as overt calls for socialism, Bellah and his coauthors in their recent sociological critique of American public life, continue to consider "critically" the themes Bellah presented in his earliest work on America. The concern remains one of condemning the "selfishness" central to the demise of our community, and praising the political movements Bellah considers necessary for our community's reestablishment. Often quoted though rarely examined at any length, *Habits of the Heart* is in effect a sustained attack on what its authors see as an individualism which has grown "cancerous" in America.

The title *Habits of the Heart* is a literal translation of Tocqueville's term "mores," and in this work Bellah purports to present a Tocquevillean analysis of the habits of belief and action constituting contemporary America's disjointed character or way of life. Indeed, Bellah's work, a series of interviews with individuals-including a Vietnam war deserter, an environmental activist and a nurse who has named her "faith" after herself-"not unrepresentative" of active Americans, is seen by its authors as "a detailed reading of, and commentary on, Tocqueville" (*Habits* 306).

Using Tocqueville as his stalking horse and his own "not unrepresentative types" as his evidence, Bellah seeks to show that selfish materialism has come to rule American life and must be rooted out through local egalitarian political action. Bellah is correct to point out that for Tocqueville the individualistic pursuit of material well-being and private pleasures harms community and indi-

vidual character. But Bellah's curious argument-that we must pursue material equality in order to avoid materialism-is based on an equally curious, inverted reading of Tocqueville. Tocqueville sought to encourage development of the institutions-principally family, church, and voluntary association-which bind the individual to the community through shared interest, belief and sentiment. Bellah seeks to quash the distinctive, independent status of all men and institutions. Asserting their importance he nonetheless seeks to recast our fundamental institutions, beliefs, and practices to make them serve his own egalitarian materialist political program.¹² The result, from a Tocquevillean perspective, is a loss of those forces which bring the individual out of himself and into the various activities constituting public life. The result is a mass of small, weak individuals terrified by and yet worshipful of the indistinct communal whole. The result, in a word, is individualism.

Because utilitarian individualism has triumphed in America, according to Bellah, our traditions no longer give us the means with which to think about and establish "distributive" and "substantive" justice-that is an appropriate sharing of economic resources" (*Individualism* 6). Our preoccupation with private life has put us in danger of destroying the ability of family, religion, and local democratic politics-by dictating which personality traits are legitimate-to inculcate the habits necessary for participation in a "just" public life (*Habits* viii). In place of local institutions we progressively have been substituting the atomizing forces of capitalism, bureaucracy, and technology (*Individualism* 6). If true community is to be possible once

12. The apparent contradiction between Bellah's claims to value and calls to eviscerate our "traditional" way of life is explained by his expansive definition of institutions. While asserting in the introduction to *The Good Society* that we can live only through the institutions that give us our very individuality, Bellah defines institutions so broadly as to include a handshake. This broad definition is convenient, for Bellah, since the "transformation" he seeks would be easier to achieve when it concerns a relatively minor action (the handshake is, after all, a product of manners, subject to change over time as surrounding circumstances change). Men will be less likely to resist changing the handshake than changing the very form of their economic, political and spiritual life-as embodied in the system of family, church and local voluntary associations Bellah aims, in the end, to radically transform.

again, we must establish material equality and democratic political control over economic and other private" and potentially "self-interested" activity (*Habits* 285-7).

The indictment of our "impoverished" political life set forth in *Habits* has spawned, not only a sequel, but also so many classes dealing with its ostensible subject matter that Bellah and his colleagues have published a companion volume of historical readings.³ Bellah says the purpose of the readings in *Individualism and Commitment in American Life* is to further the effort of *Habits* to "look at the mores and institutions today to see whether or not they have the vitality to produce discussion, *vision*, and innovation;" all of which are necessary for the "life of active citizenship" Bellah's Tocqueville advocated (*Individualism*;4).

According to Bellah,

In ways that Jefferson would have understood, Tocqueville argues that a variety of active civic organizations are the key to American democracy. Through active involvement in common concerns, the citizen can overcome the sense of relative isolation and powerlessness that results from the insecurity of life in an increasingly commercial society. Associations, along with decentralized, local administration, mediate between the individual and the centralized state, providing forums in which opinion can be publicly and intelligently shaped and the subtle habits of public initiative and responsibility learned and passed on. Associational life, in Tocqueville's thinking, is the best bulwark against the condition he feared most: the mass society of mutually antagonistic individuals, easy prey to despotism. These intermediate structures check, pressure, and restrain the tendencies of centralized government to assume more and more administrative control (*Habits* 38).

13, It also has been followed by other studies purporting to show that Tocqueville was concerned primarily with public service-and particularly with the political glories of modern republicanism. See for example Bruce James Smith, *Politics and Remembrance: Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke and Tocqueville* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) and Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

For Bellah (and for Bellah's Tocqueville) associations are "civic" groups intended to provide "forums" for the shaping of "public opinion." Associations are inherently political, by nature intended to combat centralized government-the only form of despotism Bellah acknowledges to exist outside the sphere of "commercial" or private life. We interact (or "associate") and form a community only through *political* action. Thus local political life, "common concerns" defined in the political realm rather than through the natural, circumstantial interaction brought about in private life and non-political association, is the essence, and the limit, of Bellah's community.

Bellah's local community depends upon the harmonious functioning of its constituent parts. He cites Tocqueville in arguing that the American town was and should be a "moral grid" channelling "the energies of its enterprising citizens and their families into collective well-being" (*Habits* 39). Bellah's "substantive" notion of collective well-being makes "economic democracy" a fundamental aspect of community. But economic democracy also is necessary to combat the tendency (brought about by corporate economics) of citizens to leave their given communities in pursuit of wealth-a tendency which has fostered individualism.

Free market economics has made communities disposable in the name of increased salaries and so has reduced them, in most instances, to mere "lifestyle enclaves." Leaving home town, old friends, and even family in pursuit of material well-being, Americans have become mere consumers and now *can* only "express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities, . . . [t]hey are not interdependent, do not act together politically, and do not share a history" (*Habits* 335). Lifestyle enclaves, mere conglomerations of private interests, reenforce rather than combat Americans' individualism (*Habits* 286-7).

For Bellah, individualism is *the* cancer infecting the body politic. Indeed, it is Tocqueville's criticism of individualism which serves as the basis for Bellah's "commentary" on his work. The readings in *Individualism and Commitment in American Life* contain only one selection from Tocqueville's two volume work on *Democracy in America*-three pages on individualism. And, while occasionally

making reference to other aspects of Tocqueville's work, Bellah explicitly rejects the idea that Tocqueville might provide acceptable solutions to the problem of individualism. He dismisses Tocqueville's argument that man's benevolence, "embedded in nature," can counter the effects of self-interest as a reliance *on* mere "expressive individualism." "[T]ocqueville's generalized analysis of religion kept him from noticing within some of the religious traditions those 'second languages' ['republican' and 'biblical'] that we have argued provide better alternatives to utilitarian individualism than expressive individualism alone can do" (*Habits* 223-4).

According to Bellah,,Tocqueville failed to recognize the goodness of the egalitarian, communitist tradition in American thought and practice.. Individualism has reduced the good tradition to a pair of "second languages" seeking to be heard. But these second languages ways of speaking and thinking left over from a more virtuous era-hold the proper "alternatives" to our individualistic dilemma. Because Tocqueville himself was tainted with individualism, his usefulness to Bellah ceases with his "posing the problem of individualism and showing us where to look for alternatives" (*Habits* 224). We must turn to Bellah for the appropriate solutions to our spiritual problems.

Bellah generally "speaks" only through the interviewees chosen for inclusion in *Habits*,but it is clear that he rejects the Tocquevillean notion that there can be a "self-interest properly understood." In discussing the Institute for *the* Study of Civic Values (an organization "begun to promote the understanding *of* politics in the civic sense") Bellah points to what he sees as a fundamental dichotomy between necessarily individualistic self-interest and necessarily political community. Edward Schwartz, leader of the Institute,

argues that genuine education for citizenship has never been more crucial for the survival of the United States *as* a democratic society than during the present crisis of what he calls the "antipolitical system." By this he means the network of large corporations that controls most of the wealth *of* the country, that employs a large percentage of our people, but disparages

politics and tries to insulate itself against governmental control" (*Habits* 214).

The "antipolitical system" is inherently unjust because it interferes with the effort "to transform interest politics into a form of civic politics[;]" an effort which requires that we

begin not from a desire for power, but from "concerns for security, for justice and for fellowship." Schwartz argue[s] that the purposes for which an institution or a life practice is established determine its outcome. For this reason he sees political organizing as more than a utilitarian means to the end of power. It is also a context in which to nurture a form of moral development on which democratic self-government depends: the practice of citizenship (*Habits* 216).

Citizenship, for Bellah, by its very nature cannot involve self-interest because it is created by the search, and the struggle, for "social justice." And "social justice" is defined in terms of local community control over and distribution of goods, services, and opportunities-all of which are component parts of the "true" human interest of "human dignity."¹⁴ Work itself, in this view, "should be seen as `a calling, contributing to the common good and responding to the needs of others as these needs become understood'" (*Habits* 218).

Our primary "language" of self-interest masks from us our need for community. Our "biblical" and "republican" "second languages" demand, for Bellah, that we seek "social justice" through local political action. And the search for "social justice" is the essence of community since it shapes the characters of individuals and of their community in accordance with the demands of its egalitarian project.

14. See *ibid.*, 217-8 for Bellah's use of Schwartz to argue that "'people's political development-their capacity to organize their common life-is both an end and a means. It fundamentally conditions their ability to participate in other development, including economic development. Job creation should take place through locally based, cooperative organizations such as community development corporations. . . `to create jobs to meet the neighborhood's needs and to help neighborhoods to meet society's needs. It is a matter of justice.'"

The pursuit of "social justice" in the local community promotes the "public virtue" necessary to combat the "selfishness" so rampant in America today.

Given his view of the need for local "community" control, it is little wonder that Bellah finds prescient Tocqueville's fear that the "inherent tendency of large-scale government toward centralization and the emergence of large-scale industry would lead to administrative despotism, especially where the citizens were divided by the individualistic pursuit of material interests" (*Habits* 209). Bellah also claims Tocqueville's support for the assertion that we must "subject" "the modern economy and the administrative state, to genuine democratic control" or lose our democracy to administrative despotism (GS 81). But Tocqueville's fear was not merely that centralization would weaken the local community-nor even that a vast and distant tyranny would dehumanize men as it coddled them. Tocqueville also feared *local* despotism; he feared the tyranny of majorities *within* localities-tyrannies which might well be instituted and upheld through democratic means. Essential to Tocqueville's analysis of the dangers of "administrative despotism" was his view that the drive toward politicization and egalitarianism within local communities would destroy the bases of real community feeling and action; that the political life Bellah seeks would destroy proper character. The source of individualism is the goal of Bellah's "community."

Bellah's explicit rejection of Tocqueville's concern that the "sacred rights of property and of the family" as well as other "mere" procedural rights not be violated" makes it clear that he is using Tocqueville for nonTocquevillean ends. To be sure, Tocqueville was no social contract theorist, conceiving of the state and even fundamental social institutions like the family as agreements created by and subject to the mere wills of the participants. But where for Bellah "undemocratic" property and family rights prevent commu-

15. *Democracy*, xiv. See also *ibid.*, 237-8 where Tocqueville states: "Next to virtue as a general idea, nothing, I think, is so beautiful as that of rights, and indeed the two ideas are mingled. The idea of rights is nothing but the conception of virtue applied to the world of politics."

nity, for Tocqueville they serve as its very basis because the father's authority in the family is natural, and political associations are proper only to the extent that they partake of the close, affectionate and habitual character of the family; a family which itself is dependent upon the protection of its property for the stability of itself and of the society it forms and maintains (*Democracy* 167). Lacking the links of family (and class) to connect him with society as a whole, man forms no strong attachments. Faced with the unmediated mass (and will) of the community, man sees himself as a small and weak creature facing a powerful majority, and he withdraws from public life into his private world. In short, the democratization of private life breeds individualism (*Democracy* 507-8). And individualism itself breeds the despotism of *local* political majorities which assume the functions of abandoned social institutions.

For Tocqueville, a free and good society must foster proper character in a stable environment so that familiarity can breed affection. To foster proper character even a democratic community must have hierarchy, limits on the scope of independent thought, and limits on the role of political action. Most especially, a good community must be based on a recognition of the dangers of equality in egalitarian times. For in democratic times it is the majority-with its thirst for material comfort and equality-which presents the greatest danger to proper character and well-ordered liberty.

The Dangers of Democracy

Over this kind of men stands an immense, protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate. That power is absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident, and gentle. It would resemble parental authority if, father-like, it tried to prepare its charges for a man's life, but on the contrary, it only tries to keep them in perpetual childhood. It likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided that they think of nothing but enjoyment. It gladly works for their happiness but wants to be sole agent and judge of it. It provides for their security, foresees and

supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, makes rules for their testaments, and divides their inheritances. Why should it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living (*Democracy* 692)?

Perhaps the most famous passage from Tocqueville's work, neither this nor any of Tocqueville's many other references to democratic oppression is included in the readings of *Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Bellah does, however, address the loss of self-rule in *Habits*, where he attributes it to the centralizing programs of the Progressive and New Deal eras—centralizing programs that fostered the rise of the "antipolitical [i.e. capitalist] system" (*Habits* 208-9).

Bellah's lament for the death of Federalism may be well placed. However, to blame oppression solely on centralization, and to view centralization itself as the source of an individualistic "antipolitical system" is to miss the point of Tocqueville's analysis. Democratic oppression is bad, for Tocqueville, because it corrupts and enervates the human spirit. A government which makes all decisions concerning the affairs of its people takes away the very humanity of its subjects. The "citizens" are no longer fully human because they have no independent status; and they might just as well be saved the trouble of living.

Bellah clearly does not share Tocqueville's view of the proper goals of politics. But disagreement between the two men extends even to the nature of proper mores. Tocqueville recommended the inculcation of a personal character quite different from that of Bellah's "virtuous" egalitarian citizen. Indeed, for Tocqueville America protected its well-ordered (and so proper) liberty only by teaching its citizens from their youth the social (rather than overtly political) habits of self-reliance.

The inhabitant of the United States learns from birth that he must rely on himself to combat the ills and trials of life; he is restless and defiant in his outlook toward the authority of

society and appeals to its power only when he cannot do without it. The beginnings of this attitude first appear at school, where the children, even in their games, submit to rules settled by themselves and punish offenses which they have defined themselves. The same attitude turns up again in all the affairs of *social* life. If some obstacle blocks the public road halting the circulation of traffic, the neighbors at once form a deliberative body; this improvised assembly produces an executive authority which remedies the trouble before anyone has thought of the possibility of some previously constituted authority beyond that of those concerned (*Democracy* 189. Emphasis added).

Where governmental action is concerned, men have no choice but to obey; and this servility is hardly ennobling. The road improvement ordered and carried out by government officers is a sign and a reenforcement of the citizens' servility, of their inability to act for themselves.¹⁶ The road improvement instigated and carried out by concerned citizens is a sign and a reenforcement of their independence, of their proper character. Liberty-independence from governmental authority-is taught only through practice. Children, as a group, show their liberty by subjecting themselves to their own rule. Local neighbors show their liberty by removing an obstruction from the public road without calling on the government. Liberty certainly is learned and practiced through social interaction, but its practice does not rest on the use of *political* authority. Indeed, liberty is possible only when overtly political authority is placed in the background. The man who organizes his neighbors is exercising a kind of authority, but it is primarily *asocial* authority in that he relies on his own judgment and initiative rather than on that of the state.

Directly contradicting Tocqueville, Bellah views self-reliance as presenting "a fairly grim view of the individual's place in the social world" (*Habits* 15). Self-reliance is "individualistic." According to Bellah the proper alternative to such individualism is "commitment."

16, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. by George Gilbert (Garden City: Anchor, 1955), see especially 40-1. It is also likely to be shoddy and funded inequitably.

Commitment itself, however, appears to be individualistic. Allan Bloom has noted that, in America, "[p]ersons deeply committed to values are admired." Value-positors are considered heroic because they reject both tradition and calculation about material interest in favor of commitment to "ideals of their own making."¹⁷ Bloom also points out that this self-flattery of egalitarian subjectivism-the notion that "the values I create are just as good as yours"-leads only to the construction of superficial, transitory and individualistic "lifestyles." ▼

Bellah's, prescriptions for America seem to embody Bloom's notion of "commitment." In *The Good Society* Bellah states that "there is no pattern of a good society that we or anyone else can simply discern and then expect people to conform to. It is central to our very notion of a good society that it is an open quest, actively involving all its members." The common good, for Bellah, is nothing more than communal pursuit of the (communally defined) good (GS 9). What is more, after agreeing with much of Bloom's criticism of the "culture" of academic life (at least among today's students) Bellah chides him for failing to recognize the value of the "moral seriousness" supposedly called for in the chaotic revolts of the 1960s (GS 168). Yet the "commitment" of the radicals of the 1960s was to social, religious, and political experimentation-that is, to an open-ended search for gratification of individual and group desires. Such "commitment" has no transcendent element because it rejects all authority outside the individual, or group, will.

Nonetheless, and despite his own protestations, Bellah's "commitment" does have definite, if overtly materialistic, content. For Bellah, the "soullessness" of American higher education must be blamed, as with America's other problems, on the classical liberalism of Hobbes, as embodied in capitalism and institutionalized on campus as the MBA program (GS 168-9). Properly "committed" individuals, then, are those committed to Bellah's project-to the

17. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 142.

18. *Ibid.*, 144.

destruction of the market and the establishment of egalitarian materialism.

If "commitment" is not to feed into the individualism it is intended to combat, it must involve the suppression of individuality itself. The values to which we commit ourselves must be Bellah's socialist values. As with Rousseau's general will, so with Bellah's, we must suppress that part of ourselves which would separate us from the commonality of the citizenry.¹⁹ Virtue is the willingness to subsume our own interests and our own selves into the "democratic" whole.²⁰ Lacking a prevalent ideology of interdependence, Bellah believes, all that is left is selfish isolation. Thus the local community must "democratize" private life because community itself requires communal control over economic and social as well as political life. We must "decide" as a "community"-that is, assuming local bureaucratization does not set in, vote on who gets paid how much to do what, who shall live where, what our "public" associations shall look like.

Specifically citing Tocqueville's concern that individual participation in public life be encouraged through the flourishing of local associations, Bellah goes on to argue that "perhaps the only alternative we as a nation have ever had, or are likely to discover, to the dominance of business leaders or the rule of technical experts" is "the tradition of democratic reform that arose in response to the emerging industrial capitalist order."

This reforming impulse flourished in various embodiments

19. See Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. by G.D.H. Cole, (London: Dent, 1973), 184-5.

20. While Bloom traces our love of "commitment" to Nietzsche's influence on American intellectuals, Bellah, as a representative of the left-Nietzscheanism Bloom notes, owes to Rousseau his conception of the proper role of religion. Rousseau railed against religions (Christianity in particular) which failed to bind "the hearts of citizens to the State[.]" instead "taking them away from all earthly things." (ibid., 273) Rousseau's view of religion-and Bellah is Rousseau's and not Tocqueville's true disciple in this-was that its proper goal was to teach citizens "that service done to the State is service done to its tutelary god." (ibid., 272) Rather than a personal relationship with God, the citizen, for Bellah and Rousseau, is to abandon himself to the religion of the State.

during the great transitional period at the beginning of the century. The motive force of these movements of democratic reform was a fundamentally similar political understanding. It animated the agrarian populism of the Midwest and Southeast, the socialism of eastern industrial workers and western labor, some aspects of Progressivism, and the upsurge of industrial unionism in the 1930s. Suspicious both of the massive private power that was undercutting the basis for independent citizenship and of government without popular control, these movements sought to use government at all levels to bring a degree of public responsibility to the new technologies and the wealth they generated. They strove to adapt the old Jeffersonian republican sense of democratic citizenship to twentieth-century conditions. Politically, of course, the movements failed to do more than place limits, often fragile, on the exercise of private power. But they left a considerable legacy of experience, symbols, and the exemplary type of the movement organizer (*Habits* 212-3).

"Good" associations are those which seek to chain both private and public power to the will of the majority. The heroic "movement organizer" has as his proper goal the organization of citizens into a group committed to subjecting "industrial capitalism" to the general will. Only with such subjection will the true intent of Jeffersonian politics be brought into practice in our contemporary, alienated times. Family, "religious bodies," and voluntary associations are noted in passing, but egalitarian political action is the essential characteristic of citizenship.

Tocqueville praised local associations for combatting despotism, be it distant *or* local. America remained free, according to Tocqueville, because political associations, of whatever geographical basis, are only one small part of the immense number of different types of associations found *there*" (*Democracy* 513). In pursuing public life, Americans formed many different types of associations. The associations of public life were spontaneous and natural—they required no positive political action in order to form themselves and

thereby form the proper character of individuals and local life.

According to Tocqueville, American decentralization and liberty, the lack of governmental influence in most affairs of daily life, produced Americans who independently conceived and carried out projects in the interest of themselves and of their neighbors. Practiced in seeing to his own needs, the American "has conceived an opinion of himself which is often exaggerated but almost always salutary. He trusts fearlessly in his own powers, which seem to him sufficient for everything" (*Democracy* 95). The American's opinion of himself was exaggerated because he was more limited than he knew in his powers of independent reason and action. But, Tocqueville said, the American's opinion of himself was salutary because it served to combat the true cause and embodiment of democratic oppression: the tyranny of the majority.

Democracy is a fact which must be accepted as the obviously victorious and therefore divinely sanctioned circumstance of the age (*Democracy* 12). But democracy itself—wherever it rules—could make any form of liberty altogether impossible. Tocqueville's fear that the tyranny of the majority would strangle liberty in America—an aspect of his thought completely ignored by Bellah—is central to his analysis of the promise and the danger of democracy. And the majority, for Tocqueville, already held excessive power in the United States.

When a man or a party suffers an injustice in the United States, to whom can he turn? To public opinion? That is what forms the majority. To the legislative body? It represents the majority and obeys it blindly. To the executive power? It is appointed by the majority and serves as its passive instrument. To the police? They are nothing but the majority under arms. A jury? The jury is the majority vested with the right to pronounce judgment; even the judges in certain states are elected by the majority. So, however iniquitous or unreasonable the measure which hurts you, you must submit (*Democracy* 252).

Exercising control over all public functions and *forums-within the*

local community-*"the majority is invested with both physical and moral authority, which acts as much upon the will as upon behavior and at the same moment prevents both the act and the desire to do it"* (*Democracy* 254). Those who nonetheless oppose the will and opinion of the majority may retain their official rights, but are cut off from the only public life available. The tyranny of the majority produces a society in which there is little diversity, and in which great writers and statesmen are almost nonexistent (*Democracy* 256-7).

When, in addition to its concern with material goods and with uniformity of condition, one adds the majority's desire for uniformity of opinion, its dangers become extreme. Thus, in democratic times, "it might happen that, having broken down all the bonds which classes or men formerly imposed on it, the human spirit might bind itself in tight fetters to the general will of the greatest number" (*Democracy* 436). If given full sway, the majority will destroy its own liberty; its own society; itself.

In democratic times, social mobility breaks down the old aristocratic ties of class and extended family. What is more, the economic prosperity of democratic peoples loosens the bonds of economic need. "Aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain and frees each link." In short, equality and the democracy with which it is linked bring a tendency toward individualism (*Democracy* 507-8). Lacking the ties of family and class to connect him with society as a whole, man forms no strong attachments; faced with the unmediated mass (and will) of the community, he sees himself as a small and weak creature facing a powerful majority and so withdraws from public life-into individualism.

Democracy is just, argues Tocqueville, because it favors the well-being of all over the prosperity of the few. In democratic times rewards more closely follow on merit, and the result is a more just (and also a more even) distribution of material goods (*Democracy* 704). But democracy must be moderated lest the passions of the majority destroy the greater good of liberty. Local democratic control must be tempered and limited to its proper objects or it will produce slavish individualism. If egalitarian passions come to rule

local life, the intervening institutions which make well-ordered liberty possible will cease to function and man himself will be degraded.

The Structures of Well-Ordered Liberty

Bellah seeks to allay his readers' fears that the "community" he advocates, with its sense of "shared memory" or tradition, will stifle liberty or, more precisely, "innovation." In "assuring" us that traditions (properly understood) are not backward-looking, Bellah argues that "[a] living tradition is never a program for automatic moral judgments. It is always in a continuous process of reinterpretation and reappropriation. Such a process assumes, however, that tradition has enough authority for the search for its present meaning to be publicly pursued as a common project" (*Habits* 140-1).

It is the "common project" of finding (or appropriating) a "present meaning" for tradition that is the central concern of Bellah's "good community.

Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past. . . . In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community.. . . But the stories are not all exemplary, not all about successes and achievements. A genuine community of memory will also tell painful stories of shared suffering that sometimes creates deeper identities than success, ... And if the community is completely honest, it will remember stories not only of suffering received but of suffering inflicted—dangerous memories, for they call the community to alter ancient evils. The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger

whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good (*Habits* 153).

Only by remembering the evils it has perpetrated can the community maintain its millenarian zeal to pursue the "social justice" which is essential to its very existence.

Dismissing "[t]he moral language of the town father [that] was the dominant language of the era Tocqueville described" as obsolete in an era of "urbanization and industrialization" (*Habits* 177), Bellah focuses instead on the contemporary need for communal innovation. Bellah laments the inability of the "multiversity" to truly educate students-to give them "some general sense of the world and their place in it" (*Habits* 279). But the disjointed atmosphere of the multiversity is merely a symptom, for Bellah, of Americans' pervasive cynicism. Americans value nothing for its own sake because they are capable of seeing nothing that is honest and worthy. Yet Bellah is not retreating from the position he staked out in *The Broken Covenant*, namely, that the proper task of intellectuals is to prevent "self-idolatry" in the community (*BC* 104) and that community requires active experimentation with new and exotic cultures and religions (*BC* 110). Instead, Bellah is proposing, once again, the joining of Americans in utopian political projects. The community of memory must dwell on its injustices so that it will be spurred to action. Intellectuals must debunk pleasant myths so that this spur will not be blunted. And experimentation must be undertaken because innovative spirit and habits are inherently good and because our own religion and culture are badly in need of radical reform.

Such utopian projects and impulses are, of course, quintessentially unTocquevillean. Tocqueville argued that innovation, and excessive liberty in any form, is dangerous to liberty itself and to society as a whole. Excessive liberty, the habits of change, leave the appetites of the majority free to rule and destroy the community. Thus, it was their recognition that liberty must be well-ordered if it is to survive that saved Americans after the break with Great Britain. Americans chose their lawgivers, not because they were well liked but because they were held in high esteem. Surveying the state of their new

nation, the Founders "called a halt; they looked at their country more calmly and with greater penetration [than the people at large]; they were aware that a final revolution had been accomplished and that henceforth the perils threatening the people could only spring from abuses of liberty" (*Democracy* 152).

Recognizing the need to counteract the "passions and whims of the majority," the Founders balanced the directly elected House of Representatives with a more "refined" indirectly chosen Senate, as well as with Executive and Judicial Branches (*Democracy* 152-3). While too passionate to rule directly, the majority was capable of choosing their better citizens to serve in the state legislature. And state legislators in turn chose those whom their more refined reason deemed their own betters to serve in the Senate. Thus, Senators "represent only the lofty thoughts current [in the majority] and the generous instincts animating it, not the petty passions which often trouble or the vices that disgrace it" (*Democracy* 201). By moderating democracy-by forcing the people to submit to calm and rational decision-making in their choice of representatives in at least one house of the legislature-the majority's tendency toward "petty" materialism and instability was moderated and its nobler aspects were brought out.

In claiming Tocqueville's support for his program of democratic innovation, Bellah argues-referring to a footnote in *Democracy*-that Tocqueville's view of "intellectual revolutions" is a strictly positive one. Bellah goes so far as to claim that Tocqueville gives suggestions" as to how the creative moment might be prolonged by cultivating the right mores and building the right institutions" (*Individualism* 3). On examination, the footnote proves to be a dispassionate analysis of the "state of society most favorable to great intellectual revolutions[;]" a state somewhere between complete equality and complete separation of classes; a state of "glorious yet troubled times" in which "a few can modify the beliefs of all" (*Democracy* 642).

Tocqueville did not believe that "substantive equality" breeds "innovation"-for him it breeds stultifying uniformity. As important, Tocqueville made no unqualified endorsement of "great intellectual revolutions." Tocqueville's work is, in fact, replete with criticisms of

the dangerous, French propensity to appeal to grand revolutionary theories and with criticisms of the excessive mutability of American laws.²¹ Ruled by their passions, the majority is incapable of looking after its own interests in a calm, prudent manner; its laws show an "unenlightened mutability" (that is, *excessive* and aimless innovation) and a dangerous drive for material equality and comfort (*Democracy* 258). All too often in America, laws changed at the whim of the majority—for all instruments of authority were under its control and any who opposed its will, who would have added manly variety to life, were cast out from society.²²

Unlike Bellah, Tocqueville recognized both the allure and the danger of innovation, and sought to allay both. Intellectual innovation is in fact inherently dangerous to liberty and civilization itself if it is allowed too great a scope. According to Tocqueville, certain fundamental beliefs must be accepted unquestioningly or the basic structure of society will be subverted. Indeed,

it can never happen that there are no dogmatic beliefs, that is to say, opinions which men take on trust without discussion.... [W]ithout ideas in common, no common action would be possible, and without common action, men might exist, but there could be no body social. So for society to exist and, even more, for society to prosper, it is essential that all the minds of the citizens should always be rallied and held together by some leading ideas; and that could never happen unless each of them sometimes came to draw his opinions from the same source and was ready to accept some beliefs ready made (*Democ-*

21 On the dangerous use of general ideas see especially *Democracy*, 268-9. On the dangers of revolutions—their production of excessive equality and its concomitant individualism—see *ibid.*, 508-9. See also *ibid.*, 395 where Tocqueville states that "what is meant by 'republic' in the United States is the slow and quiet action of society upon itself. It is an orderly state really founded on the enlightened will of the people. It is a conciliatory government under which resolutions have time to ripen, being discussed with deliberation and executed only when mature."

22. *Ibid.*, 256-7. See also *ibid.*, 614, where Tocqueville comments on America's monotonous movement. While everything changes in America, its people and activities remain the same in their essential, malleable character.

racy 433-4).

The very existence of society depends upon the acceptance of beliefs whose origins and veracity are perhaps unknown and definitely unquestioned.

Well-ordered liberty requires that the people accept the prescriptive nature of past practice as well as of established belief. Lawyers in America, as in England, shared the same habits and social position and so formed a class separate from the majority. Lawyers were able to use their common social standing to enforce the inherently conservative use of precedent upon the impetuous majority (*Democracy* 268-9). Further, because American judges could examine laws only when a specific case had been brought before them, involving the specific rights of specific individuals, they were not parties to political debates over grand theories of law and rights as their French counterparts had been. While grand theories had called the rule of law itself into question in France, Americans had developed, through the influence of lawyers, the habit of looking backward to pre-existing law and practice in ordering their lives, and thereby had developed stable characters and a stable community (*Democracy* 269).

The separate class of lawyers was aided in its task of moderating majority passions by properly trained members of the majority itself—that is, by juries. "Juries, especially civil juries, instill some of the habits of the judicial mind into every citizen, and just those habits are the very best way of preparing people to be free" (*Democracy* 274). Faced with the same particular cases and circumstances as lawyers and judges, acting within the same judicial system, jurors formed the same habits of mind. And it was the judicial habit of mind that tempered the mind of unlimited liberty and so made true, well-ordered liberty possible.

Bellah calls for the formation of new political structures and beliefs to fight "cancerous" individualism; Tocqueville praised Americans for their maintenance of pre-existing beliefs, institutions and practices. For Tocqueville, Americans had developed the useful and praiseworthy habit of judging present conduct according to past

practice. Americans also had developed the habit of accepting without question the general ideas on which any society necessarily is based. The habits of their legal and religious systems produced a moderate disposition among Americans-in part by encouraging a particular frame of mind, but also in part by helping to sustain the institutions and practices necessary for the formation of proper mores.

Bellah's concern for "proper" mores is embodied within a critique of the fundamental institutions of American society. According to Bellah, a man's "devotion to marriage and children-seems as arbitrary and unexamined as his... pursuit of material success" if it is not justified "as representing a larger sense of the purpose of life" (*Habits* 6). The institutions which form our character, which bring Americans out of themselves, are "arbitrary" if valued by their members for themselves rather than for their place in a broad, utopian vision of life. Whereas Tocqueville viewed society as being constructed from the locality, from basic attachments upward, Bellah's vision encompasses local, intervening institutions only as derivative tools for the achievement of great communal projects.

Community requires, according to Bellah, a unity of purpose, function and interaction which is missing in "anti-political" America.

The most distinctive aspect of twentieth-century American society is the division of life into a number of separate functional sectors: home and workplace, work and leisure, white collar and blue collar; public and private. This division suited the needs of the bureaucratic industrial corporations that provided the model for our preferred means of organizing society by the linking of sectors as "departments" in a functional whole, as in a great business enterprise. Particularly powerful in molding our contemporary sense of things has been the division between the various "tracks" to achievement laid out in schools, corporations, government, and the professions, on the one hand, and the balancing life-sectors of home, personal ties, and "leisure," on the other. All this is in strong contrast to the widespread nineteenth-century pattern in which, as on the often-sentimentalized family farm, these functions had only indistinct

boundaries. Domesticity, love, and intimacy increasingly became "havens" against the competitive culture of work (*Habits* 43).

Men's roles were, and once again should be, indistinct. According to Bellah only the driving logic and power of capitalism destroyed a community which was uniform in its emphasis on the importance of the public good, and on the role of each member of the community as a participant in the utopian communal project.

Tocqueville's American community was based upon, as the proper characters of its participants were based upon, a balancing of roles and institutions to create well-ordered liberty. Liberty requires an ordered polity; and an ordered polity consists of ordered political institutions and an ordered character in the people. But order is not the same thing as uniformity. Tocqueville's associations were neither "innovative nor chained to any utopian "communal project." For Tocqueville, "secondary powers" or natural intervening institutions (*Democracy* 668)-principally family, church, and local voluntary association-teach the habits of well-ordered liberty. And it is to preserve -these essential character-forming institutions that we must avoid extremes of both liberty and servitude.

According to Tocqueville, slaves in America had been stripped of the forces which naturally form the human character. The slave-owner had assumed all power and eliminated the intervening institutions of religion and family-as well as the slave's language, his pre-existing mores and the- necessarily hierarchical distribution of authority to religious leaders, husbands and fathers (*Democracy* 318). Bereft of the natural structures of family and society and bereft of the natural need to provide for himself and his family, the slave learned neither to follow nor to lead, he learned only to acquiesce to the actions of his master. "[H]e sees that care for his own fate has not devolved on him; the very use of thought seems to him an unprofitable gift of Providence, and he peacefully enjoys all the privileges of his humiliation" (*Democracy* 319). Rendered helpless and irresponsible, his intelligence "degraded to the level of his soul[,]" the slave suffered a degradation from which he would have much trouble

recovering.²³

As the slave had been degraded by the habits of servitude so, for Tocqueville, had the American Indian been degraded by the habits of excessive freedom—that is, by the lack of moral or institutional restraints. While the slave reached the limits of servitude, the Indian "lives on the extreme edge of freedom" (*Democracy* 318). And the one condition proved as fatal as the other.

While the slave was in a state of complete dependence,

the savage is his own master as soon as he is capable of action. Even his family had hardly any authority over him, and he has never bent his will to that of any of his fellows; no one has taught him to regard voluntary obedience as an honorable subjection, and law is unknown to him even as a word. He delights in this barbarous independence and would rather die than sacrifice any part of it. Civilization has little hold on such a man (*Democracy* 318-9).

This, Tocqueville said, was the tragedy of the Indian. His love of excessive freedom, his refusal to cooperate in a civilized, social manner condemned him to defeat in his contest with the white man's civilized arts and designs (*Democracy* 319-20).

Bereft of family, intervening social institutions and the habits of obedience to community dictates, man becomes a "slave." Without society to mold his character, man is something less than fully human: he is a "savage." Excessive liberty left the Indian without discipline; never having had occasion to accept authority, he lacked the habit of accepting and so the willingness to accept authority even when his very survival required it.

Bellah seeks to chain the individual to what he sees as the community's proper educative moral structures. But Bellah does not offer his support to *inegalitarian* structures and beliefs—whatever

23. Ibid. It should not be necessary to point out that the observations made by Tocqueville; questioned by a number of later studies on both slave and Indian culture (see especially John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Antelope*, Berkeley, University of California Press) are not necessarily those of this writer. Since it may nonetheless be necessary to disavow Tocqueville's factual statements, I do so herewith.

their source or educative role. The enjoyment of family life itself may be "arbitrary." And, more generally, "a dangerously narrow conception of social justice can result from committing oneself to small town values" (*Habits* 13). Bellah accepts neither traditional values nor moral relativism. Instead, the recognition of "innovations such as homosexual marriage and the elimination of sex roles are required so that truly egalitarian principles may rule local life (*Habits* 110-1). We must not merely allow deviations from traditional practice on the grounds that marriage and sex roles are "private matters" about which no morally objective Truth can be established. We must positively legitimize homosexual marriage and the elimination of sex roles on the grounds that such practices recognize-as traditional practices do not-the inherent equality of all human beings.

Even traditional notions of equality before the law, the basis of "procedural" rights such as freedom of speech, are unacceptable to Bellah because they implicitly accept inequality and moral relativism. Recognition of the right to hold contrary opinions is legitimate only if based on-and in the service of-the recognition that men are fundamentally equal in their rights, in their duties and in their substantive natures. Procedural rights succeed in serving the community only when each man is made to recognize and act upon his "responsibility" to both the environmental and the social ecology (*Habits* 192-4).

Equality is of far more concern to Bellah than "mere" liberty, or the structures and character necessary for liberty. A just community is one which uses democratic means to establish material equality. Poverty is bad, for Bellah, because it denotes inequality and creates "powerlessness" (an inherently political notion) in our society. Yet even poverty is a good, he argues, if chosen in pursuit of egalitarian, utopian and communal ends (*BC* 135).

Writing in the 1970s, Bellah expressed hope that the counterculture would produce political innovation furthering the cause of utopian communalism.

In the great welter of urban and rural communes, political and religious collectives, sects, cults, and churches that have sprung

up in recent years, there are many interesting developments. A new balance of manual and mental labor, work and celebration, male and female traits have been experimented with, Harmony with nature and one's own body, a more "feminine" and less dominating attitude toward one's self and others, an ability to accept feelings and emotions-including feelings of weakness and despair-a willingness to accept personal variety, have all been valued and tried in practice (*BC* 159).

In expressing his limited hope for the future in *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah looks to experimental "communities" (or "collectives") and the "innovative way of life" there being lived. ; In the process, Bellah calls into question his own commitment to the "good" tradition of republicanism in America. For Bellah's values-and his beliefs-seem so far afield from as to be incompatible with those of the Puritans on whom his earliest work on American Civil Religion so heavily relied. Not the past, but the forward-looking communal egalitarian project is the focus of Bellah's "traditional" community. Traditional social norms-and fundamental social structures such as the family-are. to be discarded in favor of a "personal variety" situated within an explicitly and materially egalitarian community.

The habits of liberty are learned, for Tocqueville, neither through egalitarian political action nor through purely individual action, but through social interaction. And the natural environment for the learning of social interaction is the local community-the natural, spontaneously (and not "politically") generated source of mores. "The township[,] "Tocqueville said, "is the only association so well rooted in nature that wherever men assemble it forms itself. . . man creates. kingdoms and republics, but townships seem to spring directly from the hand of God" (*Democracy* 62).

The more local an institution, the more natural; the more distant, the more conventional. "The sovereignty of the Union is a work of art. That of the states is natural; it exists on its own, without striving, like the authority of the father in a family" (*Democracy* 167). Thus, the American Founders were wise in protecting the liberty of the local community since,

[i]t is difficult to force a man out of himself and get him to take an interest in the affairs of the whole state, for he has little understanding of the way in which the fate of the state can influence his own lot. But if it is a question of taking a road past his property, he sees at once that this small public matter has a bearing on his greatest private interests, and there is no need to point out to him the close connection between his private profit and the general interest (*Democracy* 511).

American decentralization allowed the formation of numerous local communities with the responsibility and ability to look after their own affairs. This was fortunate because "[l]ocal institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it" (*Democracy* 62-3). It is more important to have voluntary associations in public (that is, primarily social) than in overtly political life, since "[a] people in which individuals had lost the power of carrying through great enterprises by themselves, without acquiring the faculty of doing them together, would soon fall back into barbarism" (*Democracy* 514-5). And the sphere within which the faculty of doing things together is acquired is that of local public life.

Contra Bellah, Tocqueville argued that political associations had a crucial but limited constructive, social purpose: to train men to participate in the fundamental voluntary associations making up the bulk of public life. The only strictly *political* purpose of political association is a purely negative one: to check the ambitions and passions of central authorities and local majorities—to protect well-ordered liberty from the *excesses* of democratic majorities too inclined to value and seek material equality.²⁴ True liberty requires that the natural character-forming institutions of religion, family, and voluntary association be allowed to operate and habituate the citizen to the proper forms of behavior and therefore mind. It is the

24. See especially *ibid.*, 513 where Tocqueville explicitly refers to political associations as those "by means of which men seek to defend themselves against the despotic action of the majority or the encroachments of royal power." See also the

nature of man to seek interaction with the natural socializing forces which in turn principally form his civilized character. It is the lack of natural *social* structures intervening between the individual and the community as a whole which degrades man.

The American emphasis on social rather than political structures, the American distinction between the social and the political sphere, causes Bellah to reject our "individualistic" society. For, at its heart, Bellah's project is one of utopian political action—a project aimed at the destruction of contemporary social structures. In calling for the elimination of our "anti-political system," Bellah necessarily is involved in an attack upon the "self-interest" which socialists see at its base. Yet Bellah's argument for separating private interest from social life in general—for denying what Tocqueville saw as self-interest's central and unchanging *place* in human nature—is unconvincing in large part because it is, in the end, not serious. Bellah's program rejects : the label "self-interest" while embracing its most base manifestation: the pursuit of material equality. Tocqueville argued that it was this latter pursuit, and not man's natural attachment to himself, that degrades the human character.

According to Tocqueville, mere self-interest leads to materialistic politics, that is, to the tyranny of the majority. But self-interest, while it must be transcended, cannot be dismissed. Tocqueville asks, "[d]o you not notice how on all sides beliefs are giving way to arguments, and feelings to calculations? If amid this universal collapse you do not succeed in linking the idea of rights to personal interest, which provides the only stable point in the human heart, what other means will be left to you to govern the world, if not fear" (*Democracy* 239)?

With the collapse of old beliefs, self-interest provides the only basis upon which liberty may be built. It is important to note what Tocqueville is *not* saying about self-interest. He is not claiming that self-interest is the only motivating factor of human action in demo-

cratic times-let alone of human action in general. Self-interest is "the only stable point in the human heart." That is, the only firm and *unchanging* aspect of human nature is man's concern with his own well-being. Self-interest provides a firm and well-known basis upon which to build something which transcends self-interest-benevolence. Tocqueville also is not saying that he views self-interest as the only *proper* motivator of human action. Self-interest is a fact, not a goal. It must be used as a tool, not pursued as an end.

Self-interest means taking care of one's own interests, but it also means taking care of those with whom one is intimately connected-whose interests one takes for one's own. Community necessarily is based on the self-interested desire to take care of one's own, one's family, one's friends-all those with whom one feels an intimate connection. And the attachments formed through association go beyond mere self-interest to "self-interest properly understood"-even to a kind of virtuous and benevolent sacrificing of one's own for the public good.

Man possesses a natural benevolence. By allowing the natural social structures of the locality to operate, Tocqueville argues, "[t]he Americans have used liberty to combat the individualism born of equality; and they have won" (*Democracy* 511).

The free institutions of the United States and the political rights enjoyed there provide a thousand continual reminders to every citizen that he lives in society. At every moment they bring his mind back to this idea, that it is the duty as well as the interest of men to be useful to their fellows. Having no particular reason to hate others, since he is neither their slave nor their master, the American's heart easily inclines toward benevolence. At first it is of necessity that men attend to the public interest, afterward by choice. What had been calculation becomes instinct. By dint of working for the good of his fellow citizens, he in the end acquires a habit and taste for serving them (*Democracy* 512-3).

The individual citizen, seeing his own interest and that of his neighbors at stake in local affairs, gained the habit of cooperating

with those around *him*. Living in *a* free, well-ordered community, the American could see how his efforts affected both himself and his community. He was able to see how his own interests were served and also to take a certain pride in his ability to aid his community. His feelings for his community came to resemble those one has for one's family-the primordial social group in whose interests sacrifice is natural and habitual.

Bellah does not reject, but rather reverses the Tocquevillean ordering of self-interest and public spirit. Where for Tocqueville affection and service grow from the locality upward-from the natural to the conventional-for Bellah affection properly must descend from the political project of the community down to its component parts. From communal political action to more local, for Bellah derivative institutions, attachments must find their justification in "transcendent" principles. But these principles are, in the end, not transcendent at all. Rather, Bellah's community is the embodiment of a materialistic project, intimately linked with the inherently selfishgoal of material well-being-the politics of egalitarian envy which Tocqueville feared would destroy community and man's very humanity. For Bellah's "transcendent" or "religious" guiding principles themselves, despite his stated desire to "save" Americans from their materialistic selfishness through transcendent commitment, are, according to Bellah himself, nothing more than the projections of individual will and desire.

Religion

In *The Good Society*, Bellah and his coauthors criticize the Founders, and many contemporary sociologists, for treating religion as a falsehood necessary for the inculcation of morality. Bellah and company, on the other hand, understand that "religious loyalty transcends the nation: So... religious communities are often concerned... with the common good of all human beings and with our ultimate responsibility to a transcendent God" (*GS* 181-2). Thus, Bellah claims to have transcended provincial, material concerns and reached *a* realm of true spirituality to which we all should aspire. But this spirituality is oddly bereft of spiritual content.

In one form or another, Bellah throughout his career has called for localized democratic socialism. And Bellah always has seen religion's proper role as that of aiding the cause of radical, transformative democracy-or the process of "communal re-creation through public worship" (GS 209). From his earliest to his most recent work, Bellah has insisted that only a "public church" emphasizing "Malls for sweeping cultural and institutional transformation," embodying egalitarian values can foster community and spiritual fulfillment (GS 209). From Zen Buddhism to New Age "religion" to feminist theology, all proper religions share in the "consensus" critical of, if often "succumbing to" the "economic individualism" of capitalist America (GS 183). As to those who believe in the more traditional notion that God's Will is revealed in the Bible, such believers must recognize that "[t]he Bible is the collection of texts that Jews and Christians have used through history to make meaning" (GS 209). Religion is a means by which we make (that is create by our own will) our own morality. And, for Bellah, we "make" morality through participation in democratic political life. Soon after asserting his commitment to a transcendent God, Bellah begins "studying" the role of religion in American life by looking at conflicts among religious lobbying groups in Washington (GS 184).

Whatever one thinks of the wisdom of their proposals, the world has known many deeply religious social democrats. One need only mention the name of Jacques Maritain to make this point clear. But Bellah's commitment, at least as shown in his writings, is not to any transcendent God, but to his vision of the proper egalitarian community. Bellah finds religion useful, whatever its form, to the extent that it brings the individual out of his individualistic isolation and into the sphere of common political action. Religion is counterproductive and bad, for Bellah, to the extent that it encourages or embodies America's selfish individualism.

It is odd that Bellah does not refer to Tocqueville in criticizing religious individualism. For both men agree that individualism's religious *reductio ad absurdum* is, essentially, self-deification. Whether by "founding" his own religion or by joining in the "religion" of pantheistic nature worship, man deifies himself by confusing his

own will with transcendent standards of right conduct. Tocqueville recognized the common democratic impulse to divinize the whole of existence (and thereby man as a part of that whole) as a great evil—as individualism's spiritual counterpart to man's social and political degradation. But, while Bellah argues that we can combat religious individualism only by joining in public religious ceremonies intimately linked with egalitarian political action, for Tocqueville both individualism and pantheism stem from the politicized drive for equality. Where for Bellah religion may serve man only if brought "down to earth" to serve terrestrial, political goals, for Tocqueville the attempt to harness religion to a particular political program destroys its ability to show man his true nature—his limits, his importance and his distinct, individual humanity.

It is its ability to promote egalitarian community in this world that makes a religion good, in Bellah's eyes. And the status of established religions in the face of this project is, for him, at best open to question. Note, for example, Bellah's praise for the egalitarian religious "tradition" of the 1960s.

Unlike the religions of the sky father this tradition celebrates Nature as a mother. The sky religions emphasize the paternal, hierarchical, legalistic and ascetic, whereas the earth tradition emphasizes the maternal, communal, expressive and joyful aspects of existence. Whereas the sky religions see fathers, teachers, rulers and gods exercising external control through laws, manipulation or force, the earth tradition is tuned to cosmic harmonies, vibrations and astrological influences. Socially the [earth tradition] expresses itself not through impersonal bureaucracy or the isolated nuclear family but through collectives, communes, tribes and large extended families (BC 159-60).

According to Bellah, the religions produced by the 1960s—pastiches of oriental mysticism, Marxist politics, psychoanalysis and remnants of the Western Tradition—themselves constituted a "tradition." These new religions somehow formed themselves into a "community of memory" in the space of a few years. The "earth

mother" religion was radically divorced from, indeed explicitly rejected the Puritan-influenced tradition-with its paternalistic hierarchy and commitment to established social norms and structures-Bellah claims to value. Yet this new and radically different community' gave Bellah hope for the future because it was centered, in its "religious" and political principles, around terrestrial concerns with well-being and the collective or tribal unit. Bellah found hope in the experimental "communities" of the hippie movement because they presented, in his view, an alternative to American individualism.

With the fizzling of the communes of the 1960s, according to Bellah, Americans have come to reject all external codes of conduct. The result is the divinization of the self or, as Bellah calls it, "Sheilaism." Sheila Larson, one of the subjects interviewed for *Habits*, exemplifies for Bellah the extent to which Americans have divorced themselves from one another and from transcendent values and standards. Sheila "named her religion:.. after herself." She literally made herself her own God. According to Bellah and his coauthors, Sheilaism is "significantly representative" of American mores: It "suggests the logical possibility of over 220 million American religions, one for each *of us*" (*Habits* 231). Bellah finds this particular version of religious diversity to be, in the end, selfish.

Sheila calls her religious beliefs a "faith"-indeed one which has "carried me a long way." But this faith seems to be deposited rather close to home. Sheilaism entails no particular church religion, and has very few tenets: "Just my own little voice." And Sheila's own little voice bears a constant message: "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself." Only after this self-love is made clear as the basis, of her religion does Sheila add, as a derivative afterthought, "You know, I guess, take care of each other" (*Habits* 231).

Unwilling to formulate any other rules or tenets of her "faith" Sheila is uncomfortable even in expressing the call to "take care of each other"-although she does add "I think He would want us to take care of each other." Just who the "He" is seems problematical in this expression of faith, but perhaps it is best to assume the "He" is God. Indeed, Sheila and "He" may be different aspects of the same

Being-at least for Sheila.

According to Bellah,

"Sheilaism" is rooted in the effort to transform external authority into internal meaning. The two experiences that define her faith take [such a] form. One occurred just before she was about to undergo major surgery. God spoke to her to reassure her that all would be well, but the voice was her own. The other experience occurred when, as a nurse, she was caring for a dying woman whose husband was not able to handle the situation. Taking over care in the final hours. Sheila had the experience that if she looked in the mirror" she "would see Jesus Christ" (*Habits* 235).

By acting in a manner which could be characterized as Christ-like, Sheila, in her own eyes, became Jesus Christ. Unable to comprehend the duties and meaning of life as expressed through external authorities-such as a church with an established dogma-Sheila interprets her experience in the most personal way imaginable: she becomes the source of the goodness she exhibits. External codes of conduct-a transcendent God-entail man's surrender of ultimate judgment and his admission that he owes duties to his fellow man. Far better, for the "true" individualist, to create God out of oneself and command oneself to do one's own bidding-which may include caring for others if one so chooses.

Sheilaism, with its 220 million potential varieties, closely resembles another, more general phenomenon of American religious experience discussed in *Habits*: pantheism. In criticizing certain religious environmentalists, who identify the earth with God and living "in harmony with nature" with a Godly life, Bellah argues that value systems based on a rejection of man's special status "lack a notion of nature from which any clear social norms could be derived. Rather, the tendency in American nature pantheism is to construct the world somehow out of the self" (*Habits* 235). Nature religions represent the deification of nature without presenting any code of conduct dictated by that deity. In effect nature religions-like Sheila and Americans in general-have a tendency to deify themselves and

call holy that which they happen to fancy.²⁵

Pantheism describes much of American religious practice. We have lost those principles according to which we once ordered our lives, our interactions with one another, our morality. Unwilling to follow external (for Bellah generally "oppressively conformist") principles, we "create" our own. Thus we fall back on our own unguided will (which we often term our "reason") as the sole arbiter of the holy as well as the useful-destroying community and any coherent role for religion in our lives.

At this point Bellah asks "[Now did we get from the point where Anne Hutchinson, a seventeenth-century precursor of Sheila Larson's, could be run out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to a situation where Anne Hutchinson is close to the norm" (*Habits* 221)? The answer for Bellah is, of course, individualism. Americans have come to accept only their own individual reason as the arbiter of moral truth because they have come to be concerned only with themselves as beings-moral or otherwise. As in all else, the "anti-political system" has destroyed religious community by taking away its proper role as a political force (or "social movement") thereby relegating it to the role of "therapy."

Bellah's lament over the fate of religion must not be taken too literally, however, for he is no enemy of the therapeutic imperative—rightly understood. Bellah is quite willing to rely on the psychiatric authority of Sigmund Freud in discussing the need to remember so that "unhealthy" suppressed memories will not continue to haunt us (*Habits* 153). What is more, the very model of a "basic Christian community" consists of an adult education group wherein you begin to go around the group, naming one's oppression," be it alcoholism, cultural alienation, divorce or familial inequalities. The "community" achieves its goal as one "puts oneself in a broader context and comes to see how one is caught in a web that binds us all." Having

25. It is interesting to note in this context that Bellah accepts without question the moral imperative of "Green" environmentalist politics. The "Earth Mother" is an acceptable god, for Bellah, so long as we develop a communal way of life reflecting a common commitment to her needs. And the dogma of the new religion need not be narrow-mindedly anthropomorphic. It is good, for Bellah, that nature shows on television have "shown" us that "wonder is a gift not monopolized by humans." GS 14.

come to this realization, group members further realize that they must work to eliminate "institutional" as well as personal sin through group consciousness-raising and political action (GS 208). "Therapy," then, is bad only to the extent that it is not shared, and not aimed at producing substantive equality.

Bellah refers to Tocqueville, as elsewhere, in arguing that religion-based political activism is an inherent and vital aspect of American life—one properly devoted to the achievement of "social justice." But Tocqueville did not discuss only individualism, political or religious. Tocqueville also discussed pantheism—which stemmed from the same source as individualism. And that source was neither capitalism nor economic inequality. In fact, individualism and its religious *reductio ad absurdum* both had their source, for Tocqueville, in the very impulses Bellah seeks to harness and the very politicized egalitarian materialism he seeks to achieve. Both are the products of equality, the drive for equality; and equality's curious twin progeny: inordinate belief in the power of mankind, and enervating belief in the weakness of the individual in the face of the group.

As conditions become more equal, each individual becomes more like his fellows, weaker, and smaller, and the habit grows of ceasing to think about the citizens and considering only the people. Individuals are forgotten, and the species alone counts.

At such times the human mind seeks to embrace a multitude of different objects at once, and it constantly strives to link up a variety of consequences with a single cause.

The concept of unity becomes an obsession. Man looks for it everywhere, and when he thinks he has found it, he gladly reposes in that belief. Not content with the discovery that there is nothing in the world but one creation and one Creator, he is still embarrassed by this primary division of things and seeks to expand and simplify his conception by including God and the universe in one great whole. If one finds a philosophical system which teaches that all things material and immaterial, visible and

invisible which the world contains are only to be considered as the several parts of an immense Being who alone remains eternal in the midst of the continual flux and transformation of all that composes Him, one maybe sure that such a system, although it destroys human individuality, or rather just because it destroys it, will have secret charms for men living under democracies. All their habits of mind prepare them to conceive it and put them on the way toward adopting it. It naturally attracts their imagination and holds it fixed. It fosters the pride and soothes the laziness of their minds.

Of all the different philosophical systems used to explain the universe, I believe that pantheism is one of the most fitted to seduce the mind in democratic ages. All those who still appreciate the true nature of man's greatness should combine in the struggle against it (*Democracy*, 451-2).

Democratic man deifies the universe and everything in it, in part because in democratic society man himself seems so small, and in part because he sees mankind as an entirety of which he is an indistinguishable part. His laziness, his aversion to distinctions and his fear of personal responsibility (and the majority) lead him to deify everything that is outside himself, as his residual pride in his independence and status as the equal of all others leads him to declare himself to be at least a part of God.

Democratic man comes to believe in infinite human perfectibility (*Democracy* 453). But the means-and the ends-of perfection, of man's self-deification, are as ghastly as they are enervating. Bellah clearly disagrees with Tocqueville's conception of the proper ordering of society. His rejection of Tocqueville's fears of soft despotism and the tyranny of the majority, along with Tocqueville's fundamental commitment to the "sacred rights of property and of the family" make this clear. But Bellah disagrees with Tocqueville on a more basic point: on the requirements for *any* community properly so-called.

For Tocqueville community requires as it fosters well-ordered liberty. Liberty is protected by an order which is in turn sustained by the authority of tradition. For Bellah community requires mass

political participation in egalitarian programs (the "innovations" Bellah claims Tocqueville also recommends) overtly hostile to "oppressively conformist" preexisting beliefs and practices.

The promotion of "non-traditional" family units, the elimination of sex roles and, especially, active "experimentation" with new and exotic forms of religious experience are at the heart of Bellah's moral universe. The politicized "social movements" Bellah advocates undermine the dogmatic beliefs on which Tocqueville argued community, as well as transcendent salvation, are based. And Bellah's religious belief itself smacks more of Sheilaism than of the Puritanism on which his early work so heavily relied.

According to Bellah religion concerns itself and must concern itself with establishing "social justice" in the only world available—this world. While religious experimentation is necessary for community, its purpose is not to find God (BC 110). The purpose of religion is purely terrestrial because there is no transcendent sphere available to man. Further, since man creates his own religious reality, religion properly speaking is instrumental. Indeed, as the Bible is "a working document" for the "re-creation" of our communal lives (GS 209), so religion itself is "true" for Bellah precisely because it is "inherent in the structure of human experience" (*BB* 253).

Bellah places "conservative or fundamentalist religion" and Sheilaism at opposite poles of an antipolitical spectrum. According to Bellah, both those religions which concentrate on the need to live a good life in one's private endeavors (and within a particular religious community) and the religious individualism or self-deification represented by Sheilaism, share a destructive opposition to political life. "One seeks a self that is finally identical with the world; the other seeks an external God who will provide order in the world. Both value personal religious experience as the basis of their belief" (*Habits* 235).

Both "conservative" religion and Sheilaism are individualistic and therefore alienating because they are focussed upon individual character and behavior, and are faith-based and so "unreflective" (*Habits* 237). The proper, indeed the only alternative to "individualistic" religion is, for Bellah, religion which is intimately involved in

political life. Bellah's praise is reserved for "mainline," "liberal" Protestant churches "able to combine a sense of continuity with the past and an engagement with the public world of the present" (*Habits* 239). Continuity with the past consists of public religious ceremony. Engagement with the public world of the present consists of community work, involvement with organizations such as Amnesty International, attempts to work out "family patterns" among homosexuals and the sheltering of illegal aliens from chosen nations (*Habits* 239-41).

Bellah's stand on the proper role of religion in American life is made most clear by his asking one clergyman "whether the Episcopal church, which has traditionally stood close to the centers of power in our society and attempted to influence the power structure from within, should continue that policy or perhaps take a position closer to the margins of society, protesting against it[.]" The clergyman in question responded by pointing out his attempts to address problems of the "peasant" church and the problems of Central America and "southern Africa" (*Habits* 242). That religion is properly political in nature—that the church has a duty "to influence the power structure" in a particular, political direction was assumed without question.

The proper role of religion, then, is to bring the individual out of his isolation by involving him in public ritual and political action. Belief in God and an immortal soul have necessarily and properly declined with man's "enlightenment." But religion, according to Bellah, has not declined because it is "that symbolic form through which man comes to terms with the antinomies of his being" (*BB* 227). God Himself is a "relational symbol.. intended to... bring together the coherence of the whole of experience" (*BB* 227). "Church" (or perhaps "movement") religion is the product of the human will to self-understanding. And this self-understanding must come about through involvement in what is, for Bellah, the primary sphere of human action: politics.

Following Emile Durkheim, Bellah argues that all men by nature have religion. Bellah further argues that all religions are identical in their essential ("explanatory") character and purpose.

Men are confined by their; particular prejudices and sociological structures. But with the emergence of a *new* world order and the breakdown of Western "dominance," we must recognize that it is time *to* stop having dialogues among religions-for such dialogues admit the existence of chasms between us. In fact, for Bellah, there exist no fundamental differences; we must welcome all men to the body of Christ, however they "symbolize" the particular myth we call Christ (*BB* 228). Public religious ritual is significant as an expression and reenforcement of human community, not of devotion to God. Sheilaism is a bad religion, for Bellah, because its God is the creation of an individual and not of a group and because it does not aim at millenarian communal ends.

The only religious doctrines Bellah overtly criticizes are those which show a "suspicion of the body" (*BC* 66) and which promote the "quiet desperation" of private life (*Habits* 79). Tocqueville argued that it is precisely its teaching that the body is "the secondary and inferior part of our nature" and that the body should be despised in favor of the immortal soul that renders religion most useful to man. By taming man's (and especially democratic man's) "taste for physical pleasures" religion brings him closer to *his* true, immortal end, an end concerned with an ideal, immaterial world which cannot be purchased in the marketplace (*Democracy* 542-5). But, thanks to the efforts of intellectuals like Bellah, such oppressive religious beliefs are on the decline. What is left is "commitment" to the "transcendent" principles of egalitarian materialism-but expressed. with "symbols" subject to the whims (or wills) of religious actors.

Tocqueville, like Bellah, argued that religion is natural. But religion is natural because "faith is the only permanent state of mankind." Religion is a form of hope, and man's hope necessarily rests with the next life (*Democracy* 296.7). Religion is "true" because man is limited while God is not. Conversely, while the truths of religion are eternal, "there has never been a government supported by some invariable disposition of the human heart or one founded upon some interest that is immortal" (*Democracy* 297). Utopianism is inherently false because man himself changes-the "perfect" society at one point in time will be hellish at another, or at the same time for

different men-because man's nature, his interests and desires, change.

Thus, for Tocqueville religions must avoid connection with government, or with overtly political action, lest they lose "respect" and so their ability to inculcate proper mores and teach men how to live good lives. There are two great dangers to religion's existence: schism and indifference (*Democracy* 298-9). Schismatic fervor will lead to violent swings in religious allegiance and violence in the temporal sphere; but will not destroy faith itself. Far more dangerous is the indifference to religion engendered by "negative" doctrines which undermine certain religions without promoting others. The spirit of rational skepticism, which Bellah criticizes in others yet seems to embody in his reduction of religion to social utility, is the true enemy of religion because it destroys faith, leaving in its place only a longing emptiness (*Democracy* 299).

Religious ideas, for Tocqueville, must be accepted dogmatically.

Fixed ideas about God and human nature are indispensable to men for the conduct of daily life, and it is daily life that prevents them from acquiring them.... General ideas respecting God and human nature are therefore the ideas above all others which ought to be withdrawn from the habitual action of private judgment and in which there is most to gain and least to lose by recognizing an authority.

When there is no authority in religion or in politics, men are soon frightened by the limitless independence with which they are faced. They are worried and worn out by the constant restlessness of everything. With everything on the move in the realm of the mind, they want the material order at least to be firm and stable, and as they cannot accept their ancient beliefs again, they hand themselves over to a master (*Democracy* 443-4).

Liberty requires that horizons be drawn-that men be provided with limits to their view of the universe. If the religious world is not properly and dogmatically ordered, the material world will degenerate because man is immobilized without limits. "[O]ne cannot establish the reign of liberty without that of mores, and mores cannot be firmly founded without beliefs" (*Democracy* 17). If men are left

without controlling beliefs and institutions they will fall prey to the first tyrant to come along who is willing and able to mold them into his slaves.

Religious belief *shows* man that *his* place in the universe is neither limitless nor isolated. Faith in God provides knowledge that there is a natural hierarchy *in* the universe, one in which man is neither at the top nor *the* bottom, but in a middling position, as "the beast with the angel in him,"²⁶ with his own dignity, dangers and limits. Religion teaches that there are proper limits to egalitarianism-and even to democracy itself. While Bellah praises changing religious notions *of* God, according to which He now is no longer a "tyrant," for Tocqueville the infinite truth of God and God's Will has its source, outside the human will.

Religion, for Tocqueville, is a matter of Truth and God's Will, not solely concerned with temporal matters.²⁷ But religion's role, even as a *temporal institution* is not for Tocqueville, as it is for Bellah, to quicken the pace of "needed changes" so that economic equality or "social justice" may be attained (*Habits* 248-9, 285). Religion has three purposes for Tocqueville: to help in the pursuit of salvation, to help in securing the great but temporal good of well-ordered liberty and, resting in large part on success in securing its second purpose, to preserve man's individuality or distinctiveness (*Democracy* 296-7; 443-4; 17). Religion promotes liberty because it provides a firm context-a stable atmosphere of accepted beliefs-within which proper "habits of the heart" may form and operate. Bereft of this atmosphere, "social justice" becomes the *whim* of Sheila, or of the next tyrant to come along.

Bellah's pursuit of an earthly paradise leads to pantheism because his egalitarian materialist project depends upon the motivation of unmediated masses of conforming men. The individual in such times becomes convinced of his own powerlessness-and also of the

26. This paraphrase of Tocqueville appears in Peter Augustine Lawler, "The Problem of Democratic Individualism," *University Bookman*, 28, (1988).

27. For a discussion of Tocqueville's religious views and personal conflicts see especially Doris Goldstein, *Trial of Faith: Religion and Politics in Tocqueville's Thought* (New York: Elsevier, 1975).

omnipotent power of his species. His fear of the majority (fostered by excessive democratic power), his laziness (fostered by the majority's self-coddling "compassion"), and his unquenchable pride (fostered by the grand projects of the majority) all lead *him* to imagine himself as part of an all-encompassing divinity. All he sees leads man to dispense with notions of proper limits and to declare "I am God" or more precisely, "I am man, and man is God. "

Conclusion

George Armstrong Kelly argues that Bellah's American Civil Religion seems to be an artifact of the secularizing process, cloaking profane practices with a sacred terminology and mock-sacred justifications and repudiations."²⁸ Kelly's charge is somewhat harsh because it implies that Bellah is dishonest, or that Bellah *intends* to trivialize and "mock" religion. Bellah is quite clear *on* what he sees as the purely terrestrial nature of religion and of religious goals.

Bellah's civil religion amounts to the divinization of politics. It requires the establishment of an egalitarian economic, political, social and "religious" structure. Bellah's religion is *not* a "mock sacred" clothing profane desires, for even his sacred is profane. Bellah's "religion" is a translation of the sacred sphere into the purely temporal world, with overtly political goals. According to Bellah, we must attempt *not* just to do God's Will on Earth, but *to* interpret God's Will as the establishment of heaven *on* earth-logical enough since this world is the true and only heaven.

It is the belief that everything important lies *in* this world that leads to egalitarian individualism's *reductio ad absurdum*: abolition of the distinction between man (and indeed all of existence) and God. The reduction of religion to political movement, with religious ceremony itself merely a component part of communal life, is in the end the basis, and the expression, of the claim that man may be the master of all the world's miseries. It represents the claim that man *may* not only *act in* accordance with God's Will (to the limits of his capacity) but that he may take the place of God. It represents the

28. George Armstrong Kelly, *Politics and Religious Consciousness in America* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1984), 247.

claim that man may transform this world into the heaven that is, after all, just another relational symbol by which he explains the world to himself.²⁹

Tocqueville argued that man, and especially modern man, is too conscious of his limits and his own mortality really to believe in his own divinity.³⁰ But man need not truly believe in his own divinity in order to destroy his ability to follow God's Will. Man need not act rationally in order to deny his faith and destroy his ability to act on faith-for it is not truly rational to deny faith.

If we believe that we "create" God to explain our own experience, why should we create Him and not merely proclaim ourselves deities?³¹ Tocqueville responded to this fundamental question of our "secular" age by attempting to recall us to the dignity of our proper limits. Intellectuals today more often respond with a paean to "diversity" of belief. But the answer to this hubris-laden question does not depend upon the sincerity of what is after all the rather petulant and unthinking denial of God in favor of an illusory absolute freedom and power of human will.

Pantheism itself is a corruption rather than a destruction of faith; this is what makes pantheism so seductive and dangerous in democratic times. Man deifies the universe, and deifies himself along with it, in order to save his pride from destruction at the hands of the already-deified majority. But the god universe remains infinite, and the god man remains merely an infinitesimal part of the whole-a part which loses its individuality, its self-responsibility and its ability to act properly when faced only with the unmediated mass around it.

Bellah's most recent formulation of his concept of human variety

29. The role of democratic "reason" in destroying fundamental distinctions and so paving the way for pantheism is the theme of Lawler, "Democracy and Pantheism," in Ken Masugi, ed. *Tocqueville Observes the New Order* (Savage, MD: Brown & Littlefield, 1991).

30. For discussion of this aspect of Tocqueville's thought, and its relation to Bellah's economic democracy, see especially Lawler, "The Problem of Democratic Individualism," p. 14.

31. The irony of this question is that, by reducing God to "explanation" Bellah affirms the "truth" of atheism-that there is no true God-and therefore affirms the untruth of human divinity.

and communal interaction is called "global localism" (GS 275). Ethnic variety and "openness" are to be fostered on a world scale through the "democratic" elimination of the individualistic, capitalistic and traditional forces which prevent their flourishing. "Institutional change comes only as a result of the political process" (GS 275). As community itself is inherently political, so the bases for community must be established through political action. And what community requires is the separation of man from his accustomed, "private" way of life in the family, church and voluntary association to which he once was attached. As capitalism, for Bellah, has destroyed one form of community (itself too inequalitarian to lament) so capitalism must be destroyed so that we may achieve our natures through local political action. Only by exercising our political will, according to Bellah, can we be fully human. Only by exercising our political will in the enforcement of egalitarian materialism can we act virtuously, protecting Bellah's common good and our own 'spiritual' natures.

Bellah encapsulates his own moral vision in a telling vignette.

Walling in any American city today one participates in a ritual that perfectly expresses the difficulty of being a good person in the absence of a good society. In the midst of affluence, perhaps with a guilty sense of the absurd wastefulness of the expensive meal, new blouse, or electronic gadget that has brought us to town, we pass homeless men or, often, women with children asking money for food and shelter. Whether we give or withhold our spare change, we know that neither personal choice is the right one. We may experience the difficulty of helping the plight of homeless people as a painful individual moral dilemma, but the difficulty actually comes from failures of the larger institutions on which our common life depends (GS 4).

No doubt many of Bellah's readers (intellectuals prominent among them) suffer from the same shallow, middle class guilt expressed in this lament. Certain that street people are by nature victims of institutionalized oppression, Bellah wishes "society" could be made more "just." It apparently does not occur to him that he

might sacrifice more than his pocket change-that he might expend the time and personal effort necessary to change the habits and so life of his fellow man. Such selfless service to man, and to God's Will as expressed in the Golden Rule, is as rare as it is virtuous. But to dismiss without question the possibility of such personal sacrifice and virtue is to defend one's own leisure and comfort by dismissing man in favor of the group. The group, then, becomes the sole depository of justice, virtue, and individuality itself-save as expressed through consumption of "expensive electronic gadgets."

Bellah would purchase human community at the cost of human individuality. Tocqueville showed that this exchange is not only undesirable, but also impossible. Community requires the participation of distinct *individuals* in public life. When man is made the creature of utopian political projects he is degraded. He becomes in fact the cog (or the faceless, soulless political "participant") the intellectual's program assumes him to be. Stripped of the institutions, practices, and beliefs enabling him to interact with others and to recognize his own limits and importance, man sinks into the indistinct mass around him, his existence evidenced only by the occasional demented cry of "I am God."

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