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Review

Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), xii + 356 pages, $7.95.

and

The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion on Trial by Robert N. Bellah (New York: Seabury, 1975), xvi + 172 pages, $8.95.

Central concerns of sociology since its inception in the late 19th century have been to critique modern society and examine the place of religion. These interests apply not only to religion's role in society, but individual searches for meaning, and the related quest for the "good society." Emile Durkheim, one of the "founding fathers" of sociology, was among the first to observe systematically how religion functions in society. He was particularly interested in how it integrates the individual into the larger society, and balances the tension between the individual and society, or between the private and public spheres. He observed that an imbalance results when religion no longer serves this integrative function.

The Broken Covenant and *Habits of the Heart* continue that tradition. The authors draw on a rich array of historical materials; in addition to these, the latter work uses original interviews with a selected sample of Americans. Both volumes give evidence of the links shared by sociology, and the social sciences generally, with philosophy and history. Both studies examine the cultural and social roots of American ideologies and institutions, and describe the deep tensions and ambiguities characterizing modern life.

The observations and critique of American society by the 19th-century French scholar, Alexis de Tocqueville, are used (particularly in *Habits of the Heart*) as an analytical scheme for examining contemporary society and individuals' understandings of their place in it. A century and a half ago, Tocqueville argued that most central to Americans' success in establishing and maintaining a free republic were American mores, which he defined variously as "habits of the heart; notions, opinions and ideas" that "shape mental habits;" and "the sum of moral and intellectual dispositions of men in society." Mores seems to involve not only ideas and opinions but habitual practices with respect to such things as religion, political participa-

tion, and economic life (1985:37).

Contemporary "habits of the heart," and their consequences, are considered and explored explicitly in *Habits of the Heart* and implicitly in *The Broken Covenant*. Sermons, political statements, and literary contributions from prominent American historical figures — such as Winthrop, Edwards, Jefferson, Franklin, Whitman, and Melville — support the authors' contentions that in the past, community[1] and concern for the general good were viable, and, at times, even prominent in American life.

The Broken Covenant's six essays were originally given by Bellah in 1971 as the Weil lectures at Hebrew Union College/Jewish Institute of Religion. The author draws extensively on historical documents and events in order to gain understanding of America's present "time of trial" in the light of social history. This sociological study is also what the authors of *Habits of the Heart* refer to as public philosophy: Bellah attempts to bring the "traditions, ideals, and aspirations of society into juxtaposition with its present reality" in order for it to become "a form of self-understanding and self-interpretation" (1985:301). His thesis is that while Americans believe themselves to be a choice and chosen people settling a new land, they have achieved neither their religious nor their republican objectives. The prerequisite religious and political renewals have not occurred. American society has become entrenched in the tension between utilitarian self-interest and the public good — with greater focus being on the achievement of self-interest.

Habits of the Heart, published a decade after *The Broken Covenant*, argues that America is in the midst of a cultural crisis. It sees the search of individuals for meaning as fundamentally private, separated from the public realm and its religious and republican traditions, and from both public and private discourse. How contemporary Americans understand Tocquevillian themes is considered specifically in *Habits of the Heart:* What is the nature of success? What is the meaning of freedom? And, How is justice to be acquired and maintained in modern society? These themes are consistent with the historical goal of America to be "the ancient biblical hope of a just and compassionate society." They are found in each of the major American cultural traditions: biblical, republican, and utilitarian. The authors argue that contemporary Americans' "habits of the heart" have come adrift from these traditions, and radical individualism prevails.

American society has failed to live up to its objectives, or to meet the moral obligations explicit in being a "chosen" people gathered in a "covenantal" relationship, as described by Bellah (1975). Despite these

failures, until recently the balance between private interest and public good prevailed ideologically and was hard sought, often with social action as well as rhetoric, by various political leaders, preachers, and ordinary citizens. Many Americans recognized and lamented the nation's failures to be a fully just and moral society. The gaining of an ideological stranglehold by the individualistic ethic, which profoundly skewed the relationship between private lives and community solidarity, is a 20th-century phenomenon.

When traditional American society fostered and nourished biblical and republican traditions more easily, the individualist ethic was restrained by the ethic of solidarity. In the past, participation in voluntary associations integrated citizens into small communities and served to mediate between personal and public lives. Today, the autonomous and largely isolated individual sits at the very center of the social world. Isolation and extreme individualism are reinforced by the characteristics of modern society which work to undermine a shared moral base and any discourse about the public good.[2]

Moral concerns are evident, but they are highly privatized and removed from the realm of public discourse, leaving contemporary citizens without even a shared language about the public good and the ethic of solidarity. A deeply-held commitment to the preservation of traditional values and social objectives has been displaced by personal tolerance for diversity and cultural pluralism, although these are only vaguely defined or understood. Expressive individualism, with its focus on affect and the seeking of personal gratification and pleasure, has become dominant, displacing utilitarian individualism, the belief that individuals' pursuit of self-interest including economic interests, will converge and benefit the larger community. Judging by those interviews for *Habits of the Heart*, expressive individualism gained a particular stronghold during the 1970s and 1980s.

Seeking to counter the pervasive sense of inauthenticity and alienation from self and others is a therapeutic model which focuses on communication and interpersonal integrity and sets the tone for the search for meaning. Coexisting with the therapeutic model is the managerial one, with an emphasis on rationality and efficiency. Although greater attention is given to and critique made of the therapeutic model, both are significant: "Between them, the manager and the therapist largely define the outlines of the 20th-century American culture" (1985:47).

It is somewhat simplistic assertions regarding the pervasiveness of expressive individualism and the therapeutic model which raise ques-

tions about generalizability of the authors' arguments. Whether expressive individualism and the therapeutic model dominate all of contemporary culture because they appear to do so among the sample studied (who were members of the relatively secure white middle-class) is not clear. The objection stands despite the authors' contention that the middle-class sets the dominant cultural tone. Large, even vast, societal differences are obscured in their assertions. Furthermore, in their efforts to critique modern society, these authors have perhaps created a straw dummy: the therapeutic model.[3]

Philosophers, theologians, among others, have long recognized the "need to know thyself." More importantly, Americans are not alienated from themselves, others, and a lively moral discourse simply because they have consciously and selfishly moved toward expressive individualism. Movement in this direction comes, at least in part, out of frustration and a sense of powerlessness to alter or affect the seemingly impersonal and unknowable secular world which confronts them. These studies give inadequate attention to the structural factors which foster alienation, inauthenticity, and privatization.

Specifically, greater analysis is needed of the structural arrangements and ideology of capitalism. Excessive competition, intrinsic to the capitalist economic system, fosters and reinforces radical individualism and inauthenticity. As numerous analysts have shown, the needs of capitalism often contradict the needs of a democratic, participatory community. For example, even though Tocqueville's analysis preceded the onslaught of advanced industrial capitalism, Tocqueville recognized that the pursuit of private economic interests sometimes undermines citizenship. A democratic republic requires voluntary participation and involvement in pursuit of the public good. However, the common good is often obscured by the forces of capitalist ideology.

Are individuals to be so sharply judged for seeking to acquire autonomy and power where they perceive it possible: namely, in their private lives? The search for personal fulfillment is not only consistent with the radical individualism perpetuated by the capitalist market economy, but it is reinforced by the largely capitalist notion that the private and public spheres are separate and distinct. And the notion that respite from the impersonal and alienating effects of the public world lies in the private is widely supported, ideologically and institutionally.

Bellah recognizes more adequately the role of the economic system and its ideology in *The Broken Covenant*. As a result, the earlier work

offers some glimmerings of hope and direction for social change, rather than the despair which is the ultimate residue from a critique of modern society which focuses primarily on the ethic of individualism as if it were separate and distinct.

Critiquing of ideologies — however valid — without a corresponding critique of primary social arrangements only fosters immobilization. Ideology is not separate and distinct from social structural arrangements: to alter the culture and its ideological assumptions, to reintegrate pursuit of the public good with private interests, necessarily requires critique of the economic system and its relationship to the polity. Without such an analysis, we only promote regrets for the past and anxieties about the present and future. Paradoxically, the despair that such a limited analysis fosters only further encourages social isolation and alienation as the search for fulfillment and answers to existential questions are sought at the personal level.

Further, more than an analysis of secular institutions and processes is required. As Bellah observed, the problems of contemporary society are "centrally moral and even religious" (1975:ix). Civil religion alone does not provide enduring vision, promote moral commitment, or enable history to be transcended: "Today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell" (1975:142). The external covenant must be made an internal one. How to achieve that remains the question. In its functional role as legitimator of society, as described by Durkheim, institutionalized religion offers little, if any, alternative vision. Rather religion as institutionalized in the mainline churches, serves principally to maintain and perpetuate the status quo.

A new or renewed vision for spiritual renewal is urgently needed — of that there can be little doubt even among the least reflective and thoughtful Americans. Unfortunately, these studies do little more than observe the need. They seek to open a sustained public dialogue, but they do not offer direction or strategies for future action. Just as Durkheim, more than a century ago, was able to offer little besides a return to "moral integration" in response to his dismal observations of modern society's tendency to foster anomie, these authors also offer little besides lament for a time gone by.

Unlike institutionalized religion's integrative social role, the sects (including the Religious Society of Friends) can offer voices of dissent and challenge to social orders and the processes which further alienation and brokenness. They stand on the periphery of society, are often marginalized, and at this more critical distance from the culture can attempt to "speak truth to power."[4] Even if they do not succeed fully,

or quickly, at creating the kind of society desired, the sects can still play a significant part in promoting social change. They can offer alternative examples of what it means to be a community gathered together on the basis of shared perceptions of transcendent and immanent power.

These communities *can* offer a lively moral discourse based on a shared language and critiques of the failures to secure just and compassionate social orders. And they can provide imaginative visions for the future and the means for achieving social transformation.

Notes

1. Bellah et al. (1985:333) define community as "a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share 'practices' ["practices are shared activities that are not undertaken as means to an end but are ethically good in themselves" op. cit.:335] "that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community . . . almost always has a history and so is also a 'community of memory,' defined in part by its past and its memory of its past."

   Parker J. Palmer, "Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing." *Change* (Sept/Oct 1987): 32–36 defines community as: simply, if partially, "a capacity for relatedness within individuals — relatedness not only to people but to events in history, to nature, to the world of ideas, and yes, to things of the spirit."
2. These characteristics include: the large-scale organization of communities, agencies, and workplaces; urbanization; and industrialization with its advanced technology, bureaucratization, rationalization, extreme specialization, fragmentation, and differentiation.
3. The critique of the therapeutic model is not present in *The Broken Covenant;* indeed, Bellah often uses psychoanalytic arguments and psychological findings to support his interpretations.
4. I am indebted to Douglas Gwyn for his observation that early Friends had a good understanding of this role.

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