

Reviews

Robert N. Bellah, *The broken covenant: American civil religion in time of trial*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975. xvi+192 pages. Notes. \$7.95.

It is hard to read *The broken covenant* without being moved and stirred. Only on second reading does one gain a degree of repose. And yet, surprisingly, the second reading confirms the validity of the first response, clarifying its source and strengthening the first impression. This is what has happened with me. It reminds me of my response to Bellah's first public lecture following the tragic death of his daughter. It was called "Reflection on reality in America." It began with the condensed and restrained statement "It is winter in America" and ended with a quotation from Isaiah, "Watchman, what of the night?" The tone of the conclusion was somewhat pessimistic, but what Bellah was trying to do was to chart a course for action, as a citizen, father, and social scientist, in the midst of loss and tragedy, personal and national, in this context seeking to interpret the religious meaning of the cultural crisis in America.

The broken covenant also aims at a clarification of the meaning of American culture and the religious dimension of her crisis. It follows and develops "Reflection on reality in America," though in contrast to the lecture, the book is somewhat more optimistic.

Bellah's concern with the religious dimension of culture is fully as persistent and central in his research as indicated in his intellectual autobiography (see the preface to his *Beyond belief*). He is convinced that the central problem in America is ethical and religious. Behind this position lies a particular interpretation of American history: from the beginning, America has been not only a political community but also a religious one. Related to this interpretation of history is a theory as to the relation between "religion, morality, legitimation and criticism." One who has read *The broken covenant* will no longer find it possible to conceive of religious structure as if it were limited only to non-European cultures.

Clarifying his position, Bellah deals with six specific problems. The historical context of these problems is indicated through reference to three historical trials and the responses they evoked, both religious

and political. In each case the religious responses preceded and prepared the way for the political. The first trial was the struggle for independence, and it is emphasized that the revolution of the 1770s followed the first great wave of religious revivals in the 1740s. Today, America faces her third trial, but since this is still in process, nothing conclusive can yet be stated. There are, however, some signs of a new religious awakening, an awakening most needed in America.

The first of the six problems introduced is that of the American myth of origin. This myth is an indication of America's religious self-understanding. Its first public document is the Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776. A series of conscious decisions and acts preparing for the Declaration are taken as constitutive factors of the myth and mythical behavior. The main source of inspiration for these decisions and acts is the biblical message, a minor source being the freedom tradition of Rome. This religious structure took root among the newly settled people through the events leading to the establishment of the Republic. Since the Republic has been sustained by the conversion or inner dedication of its citizens, the role of this myth has been central in American history. Historical tension between conversion and covenant, revolution and constitution, liberation and freedom in America become intelligible in the light of the religious structure of American culture.

The second problem has to do with the belief that America is the land of a chosen people. It deals with the relation between covenant and judgment, and sounds a note so fundamental to American history that it is inseparable from the first problem. The theme of nationwide religious revivals was conversion, covenant, and judgment. These revival movements were decisive in the formation of a national consciousness and in the development of the anti-slavery movement. Lincoln's great interpretation of covenant and judgment as given in his second Inaugural Address and his spiritual position in American history are rightly understood in the light of the American religious tradition. This is a living myth that has been the source of inspiration for continuing demands for social change and reform in America.

The third problem is that of "salvation and success." This is the problem of the so-called "single vision" that denigrated the role of myth. Around the end of the nineteenth century, "success" came to be taken as the meaning and end of human life—as over against sal-

vation. By the beginning of the twentieth century, success, for most people, was identified with wealth. Even within the Protestant tradition, by this time, secular success was considered as equivalent to moral achievement and as a sign of sure salvation. This degradation of myth, this unrestrained competition for wealth and power, is destroying American institutions: family, school, church, the Republic itself.

The fourth problem is a historical consequence following from the concept of the chosen people: the problem of inclusive vs. exclusive identity. The third trial America faces is mainly "the struggle of oppressed racial groups to improve their position in America." In order to overcome "harsh and brutal exclusion," there is serious need for exploration of the common ground that will make mutual relations authentically human, make reconciliation possible, make "cultural pluralism" a promise rather than a threat. The survival of America, perhaps even the world, depends on the outcome of this third trial.

The fifth problem is socialism as a taboo. Socialism was born as a criticism against industrialized society in Europe around the beginning of the nineteenth century and has for the most part been considered taboo. This is due not to the sacrosanct inviolability of capitalism, but to the American tradition of individualism. The capitalism dominating America today and the fundamental American value system are both heterogeneous and involve more conflict and tension than generally understood. Bellah has a strong consciousness of crisis, a sense that all efforts will be in vain unless the economic and political forces in America today are brought under control lest they destroy the foundation of American culture and community.

The last problem raised concerns "the birth of new American myths." The devastating effect of commercial culture, its dominance and success, is felt in every sphere of human and social life. What is needed in this situation is "new American myths" and "imaginative vision" that will fuse new myths and comprehensive reason. This will bring forth a new image of man, a man with humility and a new sense of goal and direction.

The book closes with Winthrop's biblical injunction: "Let us choose life." This injunction echoes within the reader even after finishing the book—and in spite of knowing that the future is beyond human control and depends on "grace."

The problems raised by *The broken covenant* seem to be taken seriously

in America. This suggests a critical understanding of the following points:

1. Civil religion and virtue in America are inseparably related to the Protestant tradition, which in historical perspective has supplied the dynamics of social change. The decline of the Protestant tradition implies the decline of civil religion.
2. Myth is the foundation of American cultural and social life.
3. Myth can reveal what reality is, but is not identical with reality. Living in reality is possible only through conversion, revolution, and liberation.
4. The message of salvation consists of conversion, covenant, and judgment.
5. The devastating effect of the "single vision" is self-destruction and the ruin of society and culture.
6. America continues to be the land of a chosen people.
7. Self-understanding is crucial and central to all problems of culture.

These points, it is true, are problems of American history, but it is also strikingly true that some of them have universal dimensions, especially numbers 2, 3, 5, and 7. In this perspective *The broken covenant* suggests that the more one becomes an American, the more one is aware of being a part of humanity. This is a religious experience.

The broken covenant is one of the most moving interpretations of American history I have ever read—and a sincere human document. I hope it will soon be translated into Japanese and thus become available to the people of Japan.

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