

Religion and the shape of national culture [*Robert N Bellah*](#).

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Why is it so hard for Americans to understand the idea of the common good, much less engage in conversation about it?

DAVID HOLLENBACH, IN A RECENT PAPER entitled "Is Tolerance Enough? The Catholic University and the Common Good," suggests why the idea of the common good is so important for public discussion in the United States today and why Catholics have a special responsibility for putting it forward. He emphasizes the virtue of solidarity as Pope John Paul II defines it, "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual," and argues that such a position is not one to be merely tolerated, which is to say ignored, in the public sphere, but one that is rightfully central to the common civic project. And he argues that "engaged conversation about the good life," while central to the Catholic tradition, can reach out "across the boundaries of diverse communities" and actually lead to the development of larger, more inclusive communities as well.

I want to take up Hollenbach's suggestion and ask why it is so hard for Americans to understand the idea of the common good, much less engage in conversation about it. Then I want to tackle the really hard question: How could we change this situation so that concern for the common good might become more central in our society and beyond. I will speak frankly about the specifically Catholic contribution to a revitalized commitment to the common good and why Protestants often have a hard time even understanding the idea. Since I am not a Catholic, but a Protestant layman, one raised in the Presbyterian Church but presently an Episcopalian, perhaps I can be forgiven if I put the issue sharply and critically: The dominance of Protestantism, for historical reasons, in what I will be calling the American cultural code, is responsible for many of our present difficulties. We badly need an infusion of what the Rev. Andrew Greeley in *The Catholic Myth* (1991) calls the Catholic imagination if we are to overcome those difficulties. (See also his *The Enchanted Imagination*, forthcoming.) Greeley speaks of a Catholic imagination in a way that is congruent with what I mean by a cultural code and he argues that it is different from the Protestant imagination. He paints the contrast in stark terms:

The Catholic tends to see society as a "sacrament" of God, a set of ordered relationships, governed by both justice and love, that reveal, however imperfectly, the presence of God. Society is "natural" and "good," therefore, for humans, and their "natural" response to God is social. The Protestant tends to see society as "God-forsaken" and therefore unnatural and oppressive. The individual stands over against society and not integrated into it. The human becomes fully human only when he is able to break away from social oppression and relate to the absent God as a completely free individual.

This is not entirely fair, as it overlooks the community forming capacity of Protestantism so evident earlier in our history, but it does help us understand Margaret Thatcher's

otherwise nearly unintelligible remark, "There is no such thing as society," a quintessentially Protestant thing to say.

The Protestant Imagination.

I want to take the argument of *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* about American individualism and put it in the context of a Protestant-Catholic contrast, left implicit but perhaps evident to the discerning reader of those books. But before pursuing this line of argument further I want to make more explicit the general argument about the contribution of religion to the shape of national cultures. David Vogel in an as yet unpublished article argues that, in the formation of a national culture, a historical Protestant heritage may override the presence of a large number of Catholics in the society. As examples he cites Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. Drawing on Ronald Inglehart's values studies for corroboration, Vogel argues that historically Protestant culture overrides religious pluralism. As Vogel puts it, "for the purpose of my analysis all Americans are Protestants regardless of what particular religion they practice, just as are all Germans." Vogel seems to be confirming G. K. Chesterton's famous remark that "in America, even the Catholics are Protestants." Conversely, Vogel quotes Inglehart as saying, "The societies that are historically Catholic still show very distinct values from those that are historically Protestant—even among segments of the population who have no contact with the church today. These values persist as part of the cultural heritage of given nations...." With the help of Andrew Greeley, I will have to qualify the notion that all Americans are Protestants, but it is part of the truth.

To sum up what I think to be the connection between Protestantism and our national cultural code, let me quote the historian Donald Worster: "Protestantism, like any religion, lays its hold on people's imagination in diverse, contradictory ways and that hold can be tenacious long after the explicit theology or doctrine has gone dead. Surely it cannot be surprising that in a culture deeply rooted in Protestantism, we should find ourselves speaking its language, expressing its temperament, even when we thought we were free of all that" (*The Wealth of Nature*, 1993, p. 200). I think what Worster is pointing to here is what Greeley would call the Protestant imagination.

Flaw in the Cultural Code: Radical Individualism.

Far be it from me to condemn the Protestant cultural code altogether. It has contributed to many of our greatest achievements. But the idea of a deep cultural code is not without its ominous side. A genetic code can produce a highly successful species, successful because specialized for a particular environment. But then, even at its moment of greatest success, because of a dramatic change in that environment, the code can lead to rapid extinction. In the same way, a cultural code that has long enjoyed remarkable success in many fields can lead a civilization into abrupt decline if it disables society from solving central problems, problems perhaps created by its own success. And yet the cultural code, however deep, is not a genetic code: It can be changed, although sometimes it takes a catastrophe to change it.

What, then, is the flaw in the cultural code that could produce, perhaps is already producing, the gravest consequences?

The flaw in our cultural code was really the primary subject of both *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*, although we did not call it that. In *Habits* we used the metaphor of "language" rather than "cultural code," and we argued that America has a first language, composed of two complementary aspects, utilitarian and expressive individualism, and also second languages, namely biblical and civic republican languages. These second languages have tended to get pushed to the margins. Already in the introduction to the 1996 paperback edition of *Habits*, my coauthors and I suggested that the individualism that forms America's dominant cultural orientation was not solely derived from 18th-century Utilitarianism and 19th-century Romanticism, but had roots in both of our second languages as well. In my November 1997 address to the American Academy of Religion, titled "Is There a Common American Culture?" (published in the academy's journal in summer, 1998), I took the argument a step further. There I argued that beyond the homogenizing effect of television, education and consumerism, and deeper even than utilitarian and expressive individualism, there was a still, small voice, a tiny seed, from which our current cultural orientation derives.

Nestled in the very core of utilitarian and expressive individualism is something very deep, very genuine, very old, very American, something we did not quite see or say in *Habits*. Its core is religious. In *Habits* we quoted a famous passage in Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*: "I think I can see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on those shores." Then we went on to name John Winthrop, following de Tocqueville's own predilection, as the likeliest candidate for being that first Puritan. Now I am ready to admit, although regretfully, that we and de Tocqueville were probably wrong. That first Puritan who contained our whole destiny might have been, as we also half intimated in *Habits*, Anne Hutchinson; but the stronger candidate, because we know so much more about him, is Roger Williams.

Roger Williams, banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony by John Winthrop and founder of Providence and of the Rhode Island Colony, was a Baptist. The Baptists in 17th-century New England were a distinct minority, but they went on to become, together with other dissenting Protestants, a majority in American religious culture from the early 19th century on. **As Seymour Martin Lipset has recently pointed out, we are the only North Atlantic society whose predominant religious tradition is sectarian rather than an established church (*American Exceptionalism*, 1996, p. 19-20). I think this is something enormously important for our culture.**

What was so important about the Baptists, and other sectarians such as the Quakers, was the absolute centrality of religious freedom, of the sacredness of individual conscience in matters of religious belief. We generally think of religious freedom as one of many kinds of freedom, many kinds of human rights, first voiced in the European Enlightenment and echoing around the world ever since. But Georg Jellinek, Max Weber's friend and, on these matters, his teacher, published a book in 1895 called *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens*, which argued that the ultimate source of all modern notions of

human rights is to be found in the radical sects of the Protestant Reformation, particularly the Quakers and Baptists. Of this development Weber writes: "Thus the consistent sect gives rise to an inalienable personal right of the governed as against any power, whether political, hierocratic or patriarchal. Such freedom of conscience may be the oldest Right of Man-as Jellinek has argued convincingly; at any rate it is the most basic Right of Man because it comprises all ethically conditioned action and guarantees freedom from compulsion, especially from the power of the state. In this sense the concept was as unknown to antiquity and the Middle Ages as it was to Rousseau...." Weber then goes on to say that the other rights of man were later joined to this basic right, "especially the right to pursue one's own economic interests, which includes the inviolability of individual property, the freedom of contract, and vocational choice."

My fellow sociologist of religion, Phillip E. Hammond, has written a remarkable book, *With Liberty for All: Freedom of Religion in the United States* (1998), detailing the vicissitudes of this sectarian Protestant concern for the sacredness of the individual conscience as it got embodied in the First Amendment to the Constitution and has been given ever wider meaning by the judicial system, especially the Supreme Court, ever since.

Roger Williams was a moral genius, but he was a sociological catastrophe. After he founded the First Baptist Church, he left it for a smaller and purer one. That, too, he found inadequate, so he founded a church that consisted only of himself, his wife and one other person. One wonders how he stood even those two. Since Williams ignored secular society, money took over in Rhode Island in a way that would not be true in Massachusetts or Connecticut for a long time. Rhode Island under Williams gives us an early and local example of what happens when the sacredness of the individual is not balanced by any sense of the whole or concern for the common good.

Predestination and the Divinization of the Self.

Let me make two suggestions about how certain central Protestant beliefs have strengthened our radical individualism. The Reformers, fearing idolatry and magic, attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation and other Catholic practices. Afraid of the idea of the sacred in the world, they, in effect, pushed God out of the world into radical transcendence. With the doctrine of predestination Calvin (or if not Calvin, as some scholars now believe, then some of his followers) described a God who had preordained everything that can occur before the beginning of time. It was natural for some philosophers and scientists to move from that idea to a deterministic physical universe without a personal God at all: "I have no need of that hypothesis," as one of them said. So Calvin's powerful doctrine of divine transcendence paradoxically opened the door to atheistic naturalism. Even more ominously, into the empty space left by the absence of God came an understanding of the self as absolutely autonomous that borrows an essential attribute of God to apply to the self. Since Calvinism as a consistent doctrine hardly survived the 18th century, I am arguing that this aspect of the Protestant cultural code made its ambiguous contribution quite some time ago.

There is a second Protestant religious source of our problem that is, however, very much alive and well today. This is the near exclusive focus on the relation between Jesus and the individual, where accepting Jesus Christ as one's personal lord and savior becomes almost the whole of piety. When this happens, then the doctrine of the God-Man easily slips into the doctrine of the Man-God. The divinization of the self is often called Gnosticism, and Harold Bloom, in *The American Religion* (1993), sees Gnosticism as the quintessentially American religion. He says so not as a critic but as a believer, for he proclaims himself a Gnostic. He sees the Evangelical Protestant focus on the personal relation of the believer to Jesus as one of the major sources of American Gnosticism.

If I may trace the downward spiral of this particular Protestant distortion, let me say that it begins with the statement, "If I'm all right with Jesus, then I don't need the church," which we heard from some of the people we interviewed for *Habits of the Heart*. It progresses, then, to the "Sheilaism" that we described in that book. A woman named Sheila Larson defined her faith thus: "It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." But Sheilaism seems positively benign compared to the end of the road in this direction that comes out with remarkable force in an interview recounted in Robert Wuthnow's *Loose Connections* (1998). A man in his late 20's who works as a financial analyst describes the individualism that "you're just brought up to believe in" as follows: "The individual is the preeminent being in the universe. There's always a distinction between me and you. Community, sharing, cannot truly exist. What I have is mine, and it's mine because I deserve it, and I have a right to it." Let us hope he knows not what he says. The general tendency of American Evangelicalism toward a private piety pulls everyone influenced by it very much in this direction. Some may think that Jesus-and-me piety is quite different from the individual as the preeminent being in the universe, but I am suggesting that they are only a hair apart.

Loose Connections and Porous Institutions.

The flaw in our cultural code becomes most evident when the radical religious individualism I have just described is joined with a notion of economic freedom that holds that the unrestrained free market can solve all problems. Through much of our history a variety of associations, often created by Protestant or Catholic initiative, together with still vibrant extended families, provided a protective barrier against the creative destruction of the market economy. But since the early 70's many of these groups and associations have fallen into sharp decline, the churches themselves holding out the longest, but even they are now beginning to show signs of weakening. One recent study reported by Wuthnow found that 75 percent of the public said that the "breakdown of communities" is a serious national problem. Although 90 percent said it is important to participate in community organizations, only 21 percent said they did so, according to Wuthnow. What has been happening to us can be summed up in the title of Wuthnow's book: *Loose Connections*. People are not plugged in very tightly to groups and associations. They may volunteer a few hours a week for a while, but they will not join an organization that expects their loyalty and commitment for the long haul, or at least they are much more reluctant to do so than they once were. Loose connections is a

powerful metaphor and I cannot help drawing a conclusion from it that Wuthnow does not stress: Loose connections can be dangerous, can lead to a fire, can lead to catastrophe.

Wuthnow pairs the metaphor of loose connections with another metaphor that partly explains it: porous institutions. Porous institutions are institutions that do not hold individuals very securely; porous institutions leak. In a world of porous institutions it is hard to have any connections that are not loose. One thinks of the family. Whereas in 1960 one in four marriages would fail, today one in two will. And a lot of things go along with that. The fastest growing category of households is those with one member, which now amount to 25 percent of all households. Families, as we know, do not necessarily consist of two parents and their children. Husbands and wives drift in and out, often bringing children from a former marriage with them, resulting in what is called "blended families." However successfully families are coping with these conditions, there is always the uncertainty: Will this marriage last? Will my parents divorce?

Work, the other great source of personal identity besides family for most Americans, has also become increasingly porous. Arlie Hochschild, in her book *The Time Bind* (1997), reports the statement of a factory worker in a corporation she studied: "In the last 30 years while I've had this job, I have had two marriages, both of which broke up, and several girlfriends in between. This job is my family." Unfortunately, Hochschild reports, this man was about to be downsized. In *Habits of the Heart* we talked about jobs, careers and callings as three increasingly engaged ways of thinking about work. But not only have jobs become transient and insecure; careers are increasingly vulnerable to change. Wuthnow writes: "The median number of different careers listed by people aged 45 or over in the U.S. labor force is now three; the traditional pattern of working in only one career now typifies only 21 percent of all workers aged 45 or over." If job and career are uncertain, then we may wonder how many people actually find a calling.

These symptoms suggest that there may be aspects of our deep cultural code that are a significant part of the problem. Just when we are in many ways moving to an ever greater validation of the sacredness of the individual person, our capacity to imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together is vanishing. This is in part because of the fact that our ethical individualism, deriving, as I have argued, from the Protestant religious tradition in America, is linked to an economic individualism that, ironically, knows nothing of the sacredness of the individual. Its only standard is money, and the only thing more sacred than money is more money. What economic individualism destroys and what our kind of religious individualism cannot restore is solidarity, a sense of being members of the same body. In most other North Atlantic societies, including other Protestant societies, a tradition of an established church, however secularized, provides some notion that we are in this thing together, that we need each other, that our precious and unique selves are not going to make it all alone.

The Catholic Contribution: Solidarity/Communion.

It is in this context that, I believe, we can turn to a Catholic cultural tradition in America that has never been completely Protestantized after all. If our deep cultural code in its

Protestant version combines privatized piety with economic freedom in a way that leads to loose connections and porous institutions and has inundated us with the incessant language of freedom and responsibility but is virtually inarticulate about the common good, how can an alternative Catholic code help us? The resources of the Catholic tradition of the virtues and Catholic social teaching as embodied in papal encyclicals are invaluable. David Hollenbach and other Catholic ethicists are right to bring these traditions into public discussion. But the cultural code that we need to change is deeper than ideology or policy analysis; it is rooted in what Greeley calls the religious imagination, which operates on a partly unconscious level. I believe we need at this moment to reconstitute our cultural code by giving much greater salience to the sacramental life (Greeley uses the terms Catholic imagination and sacramental imagination interchangeably), and, in particular, to the Eucharist.

The most fundamental practice that tells us who we are as Christians is worship. The very concreteness of the sacramental tradition is difficult for free-floating middleclass Americans, even Catholics, to understand. If I find that I live in porous institutions with loose connections, how can I understand that this bread and this wine is the actual body and blood of Christ and that by participating in the Eucharist I become immediately and physically one with the body of Christ, and so one with the whole of God's creation? Yet for Protestants, as for Catholics, not only the word but the sacraments are necessary for our salvation. The sacraments pull us into an embodied world of relationships and connections, a world in which, to quote Greeley, "humans [are] integrated into networks, networks that reveal God," rather than a world in which individuals attempt to escape from society.

Some concrete examples and the voices of Catholic believers will illustrate my point better than abstract analysis. I would like to turn first to a parish where the sacramental imagination has been enacted. David Roozen and his associates in their book *Varieties of Religious Presence* describe a Catholic parish, St. Margaret's, largely made up of Puerto Ricans, in the poorest neighborhood of Hartford, Conn., which was deeply involved in a justice ministry. Here a sacramental theology has formed the life and worship of the whole parish. As one of the members put it:

The Mass is the reenactment of the moment of Redemption. In every Mass, the Cross of Calvary is transplanted into every corner of the world, and humanity is taking sides, either sharing in that Redemption or rejecting it, by the way we live. We are not meant to sit and watch the cross as something done and ended. What was done on Calvary avails for us only in the degree that we repeat it in our lives. All that has been said and done and acted during Holy Mass is to be taken away with us, lived, practiced, and woven into all the circumstances and conditions of our daily lives. (p. 161)

"Life at St. Margaret's," in the words of a deacon, "begins and ends with the Mass." Priests and parishioners share a common eucharistic theology. "Mass is the center of everything," the senior priest states emphatically.

The Eucharist is the living presence of Christ. In sharing that presence, the call is to go out to make that presence operational, living in the world. That going out wears us out, so the Eucharist is both the beginning and the end. It draws us to it, pushes us out into the world, and then draws us back. It is an overflow of the Lord's presence. The Mass is part of the world and the world is part of the Lord. (p. 162)

Roozen sums up his account of this parish as follows:

The expressed goal of the leadership-clerical and lay-is to work within the world to make it Christian, a world in which love toward God and neighbor is the maxim. Energy for this task, in the St. Margaret's view, comes from the Mass. The model is Christ on the cross, and there is a firm belief that human nature can be shaped into the formations of love. (p. 176)

The Roozen book is some 20 years old now, but just last year I learned of things going on near my home that confirm the current vitality of that sacramental understanding of life. I was fortunate to sit on the Graduate Theological Union doctoral dissertation committee of a Jesuit from India named Matthew Jayanth,, whose thesis was entitled "Eucharist and Social Ethics." While conducting interviews in several East Bay communities, he found lay persons whose understanding was quite similar to that of the parishioners at St. Margaret's. A number of them, not necessarily aware of one another, had adopted a simple mode of life in which they worked only to maintain their necessities and spent most of their time in the voluntary service of the destitute. They are a kind of contemporary third order Franciscans without the formality of it. Several of them used a phrase with which I was not previously familiar: They spoke of "being eucharist for others." One of them said, "That's what life is for me, being eucharist for others. It is not about martyrdom, it's about life; it's about giving life to others." Another put it this way:

The commission to "go in the peace of Christ to love and serve one another" means that this is what the Mass has nourished us to do. And yet, when he says the Mass is ended, that is only true in one sense.... It is not ended, it is continuing. It is an invitation to go out and put it into practice now. To do what you said you were going to do. What you tried to focus yourself on so that you can function as a whole person, united with Christ and then as the whole body of Christ. So now you have to go out and incarnate that, that is what life is about.

And a final voice:

To become eucharist. I mean to become willing to give ourselves, to be willing to risk all that we have, willing to bring new life to others, willing to break open our bodies.... The full sense of the Eucharist would be to understand the totality of our lives as eucharist.... The major connection between Eucharist and the life of commitment to justice is that in the eucharistic celebration we are nourished and empowered and we are sent forth to become eucharist for others.

What these people are talking about is that tangible, physical act of participating in the body and blood of the crucified and risen Christ. It is in that moment that we become members one of another, that we not only partake of the Eucharist but can actually become eucharist, ourselves completing "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions," as Paul says in Colossians, by self-giving love for the whole world.

Because the Catholic and the Protestant imaginations are rooted in a common tradition, they are both available to all American Christians. But our most urgent need at the moment is to open up our deep cultural code so that the sacramental imagination will have a more pervasive influence over our lives. That would probably require a severe reality-challenge to our present apparently successful way of life, something like a major depression, and, in response, a combination of the Catholic imagination with a kind of Evangelical revivalism, Catholic content in a Protestant form if you will. It is that improbable but not impossible scenario that I have attempted to describe.

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