



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

Robert Bellah

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Robert Bellah

BILL MOYERS: *[on camera]* Good Evening, I'm Bill Moyers. We all know the myth: rugged individualism. And we know the image, Rambo, Shane, the Lone Ranger, Captain Ahab and Horatio Alger, the solitary hero pitted against the world at large. Individualism is a part of our folklore, so American a trait that a young Frenchman who visited here in the 1830s had to define the word for his friends back home in Europe. It's something entirely new, Alexis de Tocqueville told them, something born of this new idea of democracy, and it's not the same as selfishness. But, he warned, it could very easily turn into preoccupation with self, to the exclusion of society and community. The danger is very real, said Tocqueville, that each American may shut himself up in the solitude of his own heart.

The brilliant Tocqueville got a lot of things right. He was in many respects a prophet.

Tonight, you'll hear a leading American thinker talk about the effects of individualism on democracy today. Join me for a conversation with Robert Bellah.

[voice-over] For five years, Robert Bellah and his colleagues listened to Americans talking about the habits of their hearts, about love and marriage, commitment and solitude, private happiness and public good. The result was a best-selling book, and some provocative questions about the American character. Now they're working on a new book on the good society. Bellah is one of the country's leading sociologists, long intrigued by the relationship of religion to politics and society. He teaches at both the University of California at Berkeley, and at the Graduate Theological Union where we talked.

[interviewing] What do you think is the one question that is inescapable as we move toward the fast-approaching 21st century?

ROBERT BELLAH: Well, I think it's a very exciting prospect to be facing a new millennium, and, of course, that raises all kinds of fears and hopes. But to me the most critical question is, "How can we give the interdependence, which is so obvious in connection with everything we do, a moral meaning?"

MOYERS: So many people bridle when they hear the word "interdependence," now, because it has become something of a cliché. It has lost its weight. What do you mean by it?

BELLAH: Well, I think that the problem is that interdependence without moral meaning is terrifying, is upsetting. We don't like the fact that we depend on a lot of other people, or that what people do in other parts of the world can have effects on our lives that we don't like. So it is an ambiguous notion. It is even a frightening notion.

MOYERS: That if the Japanese sold their securities tomorrow, they might drive the prices of our stocks down, down, down.

BELLAH: That's right. We depend on them. Of course, if we can't buy Japanese goods, they're gonna have the worst depression in their history, so it works both ways. But the question is, how can we bring that factual interdependence, which I think is inescapable — it's just part of the world we live in — into some kind of coherence so that we understand it and it has a positive meaning for us. That's our task.

MOYERS: So you want to give it a moral meaning. What do you mean by "moral"?

BELLAH: That is, to think about the institutions and the beliefs, common ways of thinking, that we could develop that could take the fear out of that interdependence. That is, that would operate to make this new global economy less brutal in terms of its effects on people. I know that's not easy.

MOYERS: It isn't easy, in part, because of the description that you draw, you and your colleagues have fashioned, of America as a result of the research into *Habits of the Heart*. I mean, you paint a fairly bleak picture of American culture there — people high on personal gratification, no moderating influences from family, church or community. The only truth is our own feeling about what is true. That doesn't give us much hope for finding some moral purpose in it, or some moral ground in an international economy when you say right here at home we're not acting as if there is a common good.

BELLAH: Well, I think you're describing the first half of the book more than the second, but it is a problem. Americans have come to believe that somehow modern technology will solve all

our problems without preventing the individual from doing whatever he or she wants to do. So the combination of private freedom and technological advance is the answer to all our problems. What I think we're seeing is that that technological advance is real, and it has very positive implications, but without any guidance, without any set of priorities, that technological advance can create the "greenhouse effect," can create a situation where we can't move in traffic in our major cities — all kinds of severe problems. Americans have sort of — would have preferred to not think about the social-political realities that somehow link the technology to our individual lives, but that's what we have to work on.

MOYERS: But how do we go about that in practical ways?

BELLAH: First of all, we have to face the reality, and then we have to talk about it; and I think the people that say we talk too much, we should act, are on the wrong track. The first big job is thinking and understanding, and that means talking together.

MOYERS: There has to be a moral discourse.

BELLAH: Exactly. When we do that we may begin to discover more consensus that we think there is. We may agree on certain priorities. Once we see what those priorities are, then we can realize that if each of us does entirely what we please at all times, we're not gonna, any of us, get those priorities answered. So then we have to figure out what are the social arrangements that will allow as many of us as possible to fulfill those perfectly valid individual wants in a way that's supportive of other people rather than destructive to them.

MOYERS: We have to reach some kind of consensus about what the problem is, and what our role is in it, but then who makes happen what collectively we decide ought to happen?

BELLAH: Well that is the classic place for the political process. Americans, again, are allergic to politics because we see it as an area of power, influence, probably unfairly exercised, but we have to recover a more classical notion of politics as the place where we decide together about the things we need to do.

MOYERS: What I see is such a growing gap between the rhetoric and the reality. I mean, I listen to the candidates and I don't hear very realistic descriptions of the world out there.

BELLAH: Well, I think part of the problem is the very media, medium, that we are engaging in right now. Television is such a powerful way of presenting immediate images that it tempts the politician to go for whatever will have the most immediate impact, and really corrupts the electorate into thinking about voting only in terms of the most short-term interests or fears or anxieties or whatever. The problem today is for political leadership to think about the larger problems. Even to get to the year 2000 is gonna be tough. We've got a lot of problems between now and the year 2000. And in a campaign, when you're trying to look at the polls every week and see, "How am I doing," you're not thinking about educating the public about the next ten, 15 years, you're thinking about what will get that poll reaction up just tomorrow. So, it's seductive to both the candidate and the electorate to not think about the hard questions, but only talk about what's most immediately effective.

MOYERS: If politicians can, in effect, flatter us, and if we can, in effect, bribe them — give us what we want in the political process and we'll keep you in office — there's not much hope for a larger sense of things.

BELLAH: Well, to take the other side from what I just said, I do think a lot of people are worried about the bigger questions, and they're suspicious of politicians that won't face that. Even though we're in a relatively prosperous period, I think an awful lot of Americans know how thin the basis of that prosperity is, and how many problems would have to be solved to make that prosperity last. So, if you look at it that way — we're in a period of peace, we're in a period of prosperity — the fact that anyone's willing to take on the tough problems and talk about it is really quite remarkable. And I think that is going on in American discourse today.

MOYERS: You said that democratic politics is always dangerous.

BELLAH: Yes.

MOYERS: What do you mean by that?

BELLAH: Precisely because it is leaving the decisions, ultimately, to the people. We have to rely on the people to have both common sense and what would have been called in the 18th century "public virtue."

MOYERS: Public virtue.

BELLAH: And that's a big risk. If people don't have either common sense or public virtue, then

they can easily be seduced into very bad things. After all, the Nazis won the biggest vote in their election campaign in 1932, and that can happen. People intrinsically have to be educated to be "good," and that's a big task. It's a task for a real political leader in that kind of public education for civic virtue.

MOYERS: And by being good, you mean thinking of other people?

BELLAH: Yes, I do. I mean, if a public official is only thinking about his or her own interests, and not about the responsibility to look out for whatever entity that public official is supposed to serve, we think that's a corrupt official. By the same token, a voter that goes to the polls and asks, "which candidate is best for me, I don't care about which is best for the country, or which is best for other people, but just what's best for me," that is a corrupt voter — just as corrupt as a corrupt political official.

MOYERS: If, in fact, politicians can give us what we want in exchange for staying in office, there's a kind of corruption here.

BELLAH: Yes, and to some extent it's the invasion of the market model — which is perfectly okay in the economic sphere — into the political sphere, where I think it's deeply corrupting.

MOYERS: The market model; you give me something, I'll give you something back.

BELLAH: Yes. Maximizing self-interest at all times. That makes a certain sense in the economy, but if you generalize the economy to all of our lives, I mean, it destroys everything. For instance, you can't have a marriage that works that way. If you're only interested in maximizing your own self-interest, how can you think about the other person who you're supposed to be committed to?

MOYERS: And yet there is so much of that, as you report in *Habits of the Heart*. In fact, one of my favorite characters in the book says that his ideal home — he's a Californian — his ideal home is 20 acres and a moat around it with alligators, an island that's inaccessible from the outside. Now I don't mean to pick the most disparaging example, but what I'm saying is, what if many Americans don't want to a common identity, a community? What if they like being apart, living alone, satisfying their own gratification?

BELLAH: Well, I think reality is going to impinge on those people and show them that they can't have that; that the price is too high, even in terms of their private gratification; that the only people that can really live like that are the super-millionaires or the billionaires; that most of us simply have to live in a world with other people. We don't have the resources to set up these immense structures that would defend us against what's going on in the society around us. When we realize that we may think that doing something about the public good is essential even if we're going to maintain a decent private life.

MOYERS: What do you mean by "the public good"? I've heard it all my life. Walter Lippmann wrote a book on the subject, *The Public Good*.

BELLAH: Yes.

MOYERS: I hear "the common wealth of America." What do you mean by it?

BELLAH: I think the public good is something that we move toward, together, in conversation. We define it as we go along. Recently, I think it's been very well said that the common good is the good we seek in common. When we come up against these questions of traffic, of pollution, of nuclear war, then we begin to specify what the public good is. The public good is what's good for us as a whole, not just what's good for one or another individual.

MOYERS: You write and talk a lot about the meaning of life, and this public good. What do you think gives meaning to life?

BELLAH: I think the things that really give meaning to life are the things that are good in themselves, not the means to something else, but the things that are intrinsically good.

MOYERS: Example?

BELLAH: Those can be very simple things, like a common meal. We just enjoy being together, we enjoy the food, we enjoy the fellowship. I think the deepest level of the things that are good in themselves inevitably move in the direction of religion, and they are the shared fellowship of worship. As you know, I'm a sociologist of religion, and I'm also a religious person. I think that's where we find the deepest meaning about life, but I'm not saying that's the only place. I think wherever we find activities that are really deeply, intrinsically valuable not as a means, not to prove something, not to show that we're better than someone else, but just good in themselves, we're close to that heart of what the meaning of life is all about.

MOYERS: To what extent do you think your own faith, your Christian faith, has shaped your politics. Your view of the world, your sociology?

BELLAH: I think very deeply, and I think perhaps the deepest way is that when people say to me sometimes, "I don't see how you can be so optimistic," they don't really understand that I'm operating out of what I would call Christian hope, which is not that the odds are in my favor — because if you look at the odds, they don't look too great — but you hope, in spite of the odds, hope against hope. That's what I think religious faith gives you, and then you can go on. When you fail, you don't feel it's all your fault. You have a belief that transcends your own weakness and incapacity, and that allows you to sustain a commitment to a common, moral life.

MOYERS: But it is an act of hope, because the evidence is often to the contrary.

BELLAH: Absolutely. I wouldn't say that as a sociologist I can prove to you that any of the things that I'm arguing for are gonna happen; but I think they're the right direction, and I think I have good arguments why they're the right direction, and in back of that is a faith and a hope.

MOYERS: And that's based on?

BELLAH: Well, it's certainly based on my religious belief; on the fact that every week I participate in the communion, partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in common with all the others around the world that are doing that. That tells me who I am in the deepest sense.

MOYERS: It says that you belong to a community, but it also sets you apart from many, many others.

BELLAH: Well, I don't know if you realize this, but I've also spent half my life studying Japan, and I've studied Buddhism very deeply. I don't believe my Christian faith excludes a sensitive understanding and sympathy for all the religions of the world. And certainly I think in working out the solution to our problems, a sense that we are members, one and another, we are all part of a common body, is above all what we need to keep in mind. It doesn't overcome the difference in interests; it doesn't mean we won't fight, but it gives us that sense that, in the end, we are all part of each other. And so, I think faith does apply, even in the nitty-gritty of politics.

MOYERS: But, politically, religion is often, and increasingly has become, a divider — an obstacle to common worship and to linking. So, religion isn't shared in common, is it?

BELLAH: I think we do share something, however difficult it is. I suspect that when the new president is inaugurated in January, he will use the word "God" in the inaugural address. Every president so far has. Now that can be considered very shallow, but I think it does mean something. The fact that most Americans, something like 96% of Americans, find that word has some meaning to them is something we share. Now the fact that the churches are divided, and religious groups are on all sides of the important issues, painful though it is, is nothing new. I mean, that's been the case since the Year One, certainly in the United States. The best defenders of slavery were the Southern clergy. The strongest proponents of abolition were some of the other clergy. That's part of our life. We have to deal with that. But the good thing about it, in spite of the controversy, in spite of the brokenness that that indicates, is that, being a religious people, religion has again and again reminded us of what the moral problems are.

MOYERS: In what sense?

BELLAH: By raising the tough issues. Martin Luther King was the one that made us face the injustice to blacks. The Vietnam war was questioned by people like William Sloan Coffin. The tough, moral issues that society has to face again and again have been raised, first of all, from the clergy and from religious people. Then the politicians pick it up.

MOYERS: Are you to any degree troubled by the fact that politicians, when they bring ultimate things into the public square, often do so in a way that undermines the very values they are invoking. I mean, no one has talked more about traditional values than Ronald Reagan. In fact, sometimes he sounds as if he's taken a page out of Robert Bellah's book. But he doesn't live in a small town. He's divorced. He's not close to his kids. He contributes a pittance to charity, and he never goes to church.

BELLAH: Well, hypocrisy is, again, nothing new on this earth. And politicians are often tempted to be hypocritical — to appear to be something they are not. Even there though, I think, better that the politician pretends to virtue and fails, than that the politician publicly support things that are intrinsically bad.

MOYERS: Why?

BELLAH: Because someone has said that hypocrisy is the tribute that vice makes to virtue. It at

least upholds the standards. We then can criticize the person for not acting on those standards, but if one attacks the standards, then we have no place. We're really lost. We don't know what right and wrong are any more. That to me—that's nihilism; that's the deepest danger that a society faces. But I certainly don't mean to say that going to church is gonna solve our problems. We'll only solve our problems through the hard, tough process of becoming involved in our neighborhoods, in our local communities, in the larger public issues and even in the world issues that face us.

MOYERS: You're not calling for a return to the small town of American 100 years ago that can't be recreated?

BELLAH: No, I'm not. Although many Americans, probably most Americans, are nostalgic for that.

MOYERS: They are nostalgic.

BELLAH: But I think our real task is how to recreate—not by going back to the small town, which is obviously impossible—some of that sense of moral community that the small town had. Only now we have to think about, what is our relationship to the people in Africa, and India, and China, not just in another state in the United States. I mean, we live in a world community, and one of our biggest problems is to make that come alive, ethnically and politically.

MOYERS: There is a case to be made, is there not, that for 200 years Americans have demonstrated an anti-community, anti-political, anti-common bias. That we've been on the run, for 200 years, from suffocating family ties, from nagging neighbors, from boring civic rituals, and that America is about the very opposite of what Robert Bellah and his colleagues are saying is the need for community. That America is essentially an anti-community society; a dynamic, individualistic society.

BELLAH: I think that's a half-truth. For one thing, to the people we talked to, including the most individualistic, "community" is still a good word. They want community. Sometimes one feels it's a little bit superficial, kind of a meeting of the feelings on a momentary basis, but I think there's a great hunger for that. I don't think people feel entirely thrilled with the idea of being all alone. I think people are worried about the family. We know, for instance, that most Americans say, I think something like 90% of Americans say, they wish they could live their whole lives with one other person. Then you ask them, "Do you expect to?" and about half of them say they don't really expect to. So there's this gap between what we wish, which is really not so radically individualistic as sometimes, to listen to our talk, you might think, and the problems we have with making community come alive today.

MOYERS: What about all of those people who, for many, many reasons, cannot create, recreate or do not wish to share in a traditional definition of family or relationship?

BELLAH: There I think we can still uphold the kind of model of a normative family. The reason I think that's important is because it is through the nuclear family, husband and wife, that children come into the world, at least for most of our population. But I don't think that means we need to put down other kinds of relationship. I think we can affirm all kinds of relationship where there is a moral commitment to sustain and support each other, whether it's same sex relationships or whether it's networks of people, of single people, or whatever it is. For whatever reason, where there's only one parent in the family, that needs to be affirmed and supported. My belief is we can support the traditional family in a non-traditional way, that is a more egalitarian way, and also affirm other kinds of social commitments. I think they go together, I don't think they're competing.

MOYERS: But those adherents of Jerry Falwell will separate from you right there.

BELLAH: Well, if we hope for a situation where there's not going to be any conflicts and we're all going to agree and live happily ever after, we're not going get that. But I think we can do better than we're doing now. We're not gonna agree about the family or anything else in any total way. And I think—for instance, I think it's possible in this society to develop a family policy like most societies in the world have that would be more supportive of people sustaining their commitments to each other. There'll be controversy every step of the way, but I think we're actually beginning to move in that direction. So, peace and quiet we're not gonna get. But perhaps a higher level of life together, I think, is possible.

MOYERS: [voice-over] From the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, this has been a conversation with Robert Bellah. I'm Bill Moyers.

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