# Correspondence: Bellah / Frohnen

July 21, 1992

Professor George Carey, Editor
*The Political Science Reviewer*

Dear Professor Carey:

I find the review of myworkby Dr. Bruce Frohnen discouraging. It seems to illustrate the breakdown of any common framework of discourse in the university that Alasdair MacIntyre has recently analyzed so well in his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry.* In a situation of intellectual chaos MacIntyre advocates the patient attempt to find the problems in an adversary's position that he recognizes but cannot solve within his own framework and then show how one's own position can resolve the difficulties in a way even one's adversary could recognize.

Far from so irenic an enterprise, Dr. Frohnen has engaged in an ideological search and destroy mission and produced on the basis of selective quotation and distorted interpretation a "Bellah" so repellant that I would reject him as radically as does Dr. Frohnen. Dr. Frohnen's methodology is a kind of Orwellian deconstructivist hermeneutic in which what I say is "really" to be understood as the opposite of what I say. If I say I believe in God, I *am* really an atheist; if I say I believe in natural law, I am really *a* radical political utilitarian; if I say I favor the family, local community, and various kinds of associations, I really only want to consume them for the sake of utopian political mobilization. Frohnen concludes that "Bellah would purchase human community at the cost of human individuality" and that I would destroy all "institutions, practices and beliefs" for the

sake of "utopian political projects" (p. 218). As one who believes that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God I cannot imagine purchasing anything at the cost of human individuality. Perceptive readers have widely understood that *Habits of the Heart is* a defense of ethical individualism. As far as utopianism is concerned, I wrote in *The Good Society:* "Accepting the tragedies of the twentieth century and the toll they took on all the world's peoples is the beginning of wisdom. Paradise on this earth, we have learned, is beyond our capacities. But we can, if we are modest and hopeful, possibly establish a reasonably livable purgatory and escape the inferno" (p. 51).

Dr. Frohnen is not interested in serious debate. Not only has he never written to me to inquire whether I could recognize his version of my views, he has not taken advantage of the presence of Steven Tipton, one of my co-authors of *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society,* who teaches at Emory University where Dr. Frohnen now is, to discuss his interpretation of my work with a close colleague. Instead he apparently wants only to wield the standard of political correctness as interpreted by The Heritage Foundation, namely do 1 or do I not believe that the free market can solve all of our social difficulties. I plead guilty to the belief that it cannot, though I have nothing against a market economy that operates within its proper sphere.

To refute Dr. Frohnen's interpretation of my work point for point would require another seventy page article, unnecessary since any careful reader of my work will see where he goes wrong. Let me confine myself to two points. From my first article on civil religion I made it clear that I stood with Lincoln's understanding. That means that I cannot believe in the majoritarian political utilitarianism that Dr. Frohnen attributes to me, for Lincoln's opposition to slavery was based not on political utility or majority rule (that is his essential difference with Stephen Douglas) but on the fact that slavery is morally wrong. With Lincoln, throughout my work I have consistently believed in moral standards that transcend politics and stand in judgment over political action.

My second point has to do with the quotation about homelessness

from page 4 of *The Good Society* that Dr. Frohnen believes crushingly shows that I hold that the group overrides the individual since I argue for a structural explanation of homelessness. He derides this expression of "middle-class guilt" and calls for a sterner "selfless service to man" as a more adequate response (pp. 217-218). He ignores the fact that on pages 29 to 33 of the same book, we describe with great sympathy the work of the Open Door Community that is based on just such selfless service. However, such selfless service in countless communities has not solved the structural causes of homelessness. Perhaps Dr. Frohnen is so young that he has grown up with homelessness in America and accepts it as a natural phenomenon. I am old enough to remember an America without the kind of homelessness that has come to afflict our cities in recent years and I am also aware that other industrial societies do not have a problem of the magnitude of ours.

To say that American homelessness has been caused by social and economic policies that are ultimately due to political decisions is not to deny the need to bind up the neighbor's wounds or to place the group above the individual. It is only to ask for more responsible policies. Since Dr. Frohnen claims to believe in the Golden Rule, perhaps in the future he will refrain from treating the work of others in a way I am sure he would not want his own work to be treated.

Sincerely yours,

Robert N. Bellah
Elliott Professor of Sociology

## Frohnen's Response to Bellah

Mr. Bellah certainly is correct to point out that there has been a breakdown of any common framework for the conduct of academic debate. This makes all the more troublesome his refusal to address, on its own terms, my review of his work. Apparently, for Mr. Bellah

"serious debate" may take place only on a personal level-his writings cannot speak for themselves, so if I do not choose to chat with him about them, I am not being sufficiently "irenic." What is more, because I am affiliated with a conservative foundation, my work must be an attempt "to wield [against him] the standard of political correctness as interpreted by The Heritage Foundation, namely do I or do I not believe that the free market can solve all of our social difficulties." Thus my affiliation with Heritage means 1) I cannot possibly provide an unbiased, respectable reading of his work and 2) presumably unlike Mr. Bellah, my sole concern in all matters must be that of furthering the caricatured political program he ascribes to a large and varied group of scholars. Such prejudiced, knee-jerk condemnations have cost many good men both job opportunities and tenure, and do nothing to foster honest, serious debate.

For my part, I took seventy pages to review Mr. Bellah's work because I felt it was important to present it in detail and in context. Because my review contains two explicit, damning conclusions-that Mr. Bellah is disingenuous at best in his use of sources and vocabulary, and that his program would produce, in the eyes of his supposed guide, Alexis de Tocqueville, results opposite to those he claims to intend, I felt honor-bound to present numerous lengthy quotations from all of his significant works in making my points. My "Orwellian deconstructivist hermeneutic" is that of gathering together Mr. Bellah's explicit, published statements-for example, on God-and attempting to make sense of them.

It is true that Mr. Bellah at one point *(The Good Society,* 181-2, cited in my review at page *202)* refers to our "ultimate responsibility to a transcendent God." But, as I point out, this reference is to the concern many religious communities "often" may have. God Himself, for Mr. Bellah, is only a "relational symbol. . .intended to. . .bring together the coherence of the whole of experience" *(Beyond Belief, 202,* cited at page 156 of my review). Given God's status as a useful tool of man's will to self-understanding it is not surprising that for Mr. Bellah He may take the form of astrological signs, "New Age consciousness," Eastern spirituality, Earth Goddesses, or, indeed, any form that does not promote "suspicion of the body" *(The Broken*

*Covenant,* 66, cited at page 212) or the "quiet desperation" of private life *(Habits of the Heart,* 79, cited at page 212).

Mr. Bellah clearly is fond of various religious movements. His vision of God, however, is one of a creature that reflects our own will and desires, that is necessary as an explanatory device, that is natural because of the nature of *man* (rather than God-see my review at pages 211-12 where I cite his many references to the utility of various understandings of religious "myth"), but has no independent status. Put succinctly, Bellah's God is not a God in any meaningful sense, so that his use of the word bespeaks either an intention to mislead or a failure to understand the meaning of transcendence-most fundamentally for our purposes, the recognition that it was God who created us, not we Him. If Mr. Bellah has come to believe that man "is created in the image and likeness of God" I congratulate him, and ask him if he would like to reconsider the arguments and proposals he has made throughout his career-up to and including in his latest book, *The Good Society. By* the way, and just for the record, I explicitly refer to Jacques Maritain (at page *203)* as one thinker who was an honest and conscientious religious Socialist. I happen to think that Maritain was tragically misguided on a number of fundamental points, but I recognize and respect his faith, honesty, and forthrightness in presenting and arguing for his views.

Mr. Bellah also misconstrues, for whatever reason, my explicit charge that he is a proponent of utopian political projects. Whatever his disappointments concerning the failure of 1960s-style radicals to set up an earthly paradise, he still wishes to do away with the fundamental institutions, beliefs, and practices constituting our way of life in favor of his own blueprint for the good (or if you prefer the "best possible") society. As I observe (page 184), Mr. Bellah's utopia is not as concrete as some, but nonetheless provides a clear goal: "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 Good Society, 9,* cited at 184). In keeping with his fondness for "commitment," Mr. Bellah seeks to promote collective action itself as man's proper goal. This is why he

presents the movement organizer as hero *(Habits of the Heart,* 212-13, cited at 185-6).

Mr. Bellah's goal is the empowerment of amorphous local political units to determine the distribution of goods, services, status, and opportunities. It is true that commitment to collective action may be anti-majoritarian, but Mr. Bellah's claim to stand with Lincoln on this issue is hardly credible. Lincoln's opposition to slavery was based on his recognition that the principles of the American Founding were *holy* -not useful myths, not explanatory devices best manipulated by intellectuals, but holy as the attempt to follow the Will of God as expressed in a Puritan covenant having little to do with the "communities of memory" Mr. Bellah seeks to promote. Where Lincoln saw promise in advancement, free enterprise, and the varieties of voluntary association (see his address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, September 30, 1859), Mr. Bellah sees the need to "use government at all levels to bring a degree of public responsibility to the new technologies and the wealth they generated" *(Habits of the Heart,* 212-13, cited at 186). Where Lincoln saw society as in need of redemption, and our most important task as that of preserving and passing on the legacy of our forefathers (see the second paragraph of his Lyceum speech, January 27, 1838), Mr. Bellah sees a community in need of political power over all aspects of life-under the spiritual guidance, to be sure, of the transcendent intellectual.

Lincoln understood that "majoritarian political utilitarianism," as Mr. Bellah claims I describe his views, was not the only danger to well-ordered liberty. Also dangerous was the notion that man's equality is to be determined, and imposed, in materialistic terms-that man, as Mr. Bellah argues, should be made free and equal through schemes of social engineering (see Lincoln's speech at Peoria in response to Douglas, October 16, 1854). It is true that Mr. Bellah does not state that "whatever the majority decides is proper"-this would negate his own political program, since this program has been rejected everywhere outside the American academy. But Mr. Bellah does claim that local political action is the only proper means by which to order the lives of Americans. And his reduction of God

to a reflection of the human will means that the sole arbiter of human conduct and morality will be whatever results from the local democratic processes he seeks to establish. The only other choice would be the whim of Robert Bellah and other expositors of "caringness." Whatever his desires on this front, Mr. Bellah will not achieve such a status even in his own utopia.

One cannot, of course, avoid the appearance of launching a biased attack when one is as critical of a body of work as I am of Mr. Bellah's. One risks being labeled a breaker of the Golden Rule (with the veiled threat thereby implied) and one risks being labeled "unfair"-or even "uncaring." But it is more than somewhat difficult to appear fair when reviewing the work of a man who insists on presenting his own ideas in the guise, and often the words, of others. From his use of Tocqueville to argue for socialism to his presentation of a Vietnam war deserter, an environmental activist, a therapist, and a nurse who has named her "faith" after herself as "not atypical" Americans, Mr. Bellah's presentation of his ideas has been disingenuous at best.

We now come to the charge that I am too young to remember better times and therefore am callous concerning the plight of the homeless. It is true that I was not there to argue for the middle class guilt programs like "urban renewal" that tore down hundreds of thousands of (still-unreplaced) affordable housing units found "unsightly" by right-thinking liberals, or to "free" from institutions the unfortunate mentally disturbed transients making up the bulk of the homeless population today. In both cases, poor and/or mentally disturbed Americans, powerless to defend themselves from the ideology of "progress," were sacrificed to the hygienic prejudices of the same liberals who now are offended to see them in the streets. Perhaps we could do with a little less of this kind of sensitivity.

Mr. Bellah is not fond of my review of his work. This is not surprising. But he has succeeded for many years in presenting himself as a scholar and ethicist. It is not too much to ask that he account for, and make sense of, his voluminous statements concerning God's proper submission to localized social democracy if he is to continue to make the claim that there is a spiritual content to his

socialism. And even on the question of his socialism Mr. Bellah continues to be less than forthcoming, claiming "I have nothing against a market economy that operates within its proper sphere"- What sphere? That of traditional America, or that of the numerous petty socialist dictatorships around the globe that allow for the occasional peasant market day? Who shall determine what is "proper"? The people, or intellectuals such as Mr. Bellah?

I would welcome serious debate. But serious debate requires that each party listen to the other-whatever his affiliation-and that each party say what he means. Only on this basis can we construct a more conciliatory approach to the problems of our society.

Bruce Frohnen