



Serious Play

The civil religion of Robert Bellah

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Bellah argues that America's civil religion is the "sacred center" upon which the nation's institutions and the legitimacy of its ideals depend. How does this sacred center unite Americans? Does its "moral grammar"—its celebration in speeches, holidays, and elections—reflect the values of Bellah's civil religion?

2. What is your understanding of secularism? Do you think that the United States is a secular country? Is it a Christian country? Is secularism a doctrine in and of itself?

3. Do you agree with Bellah's assessment that modernization is always a "moral and religious problem"? What kinds of freedom did Western modernity bring? In what ways has it aided in the formation or dissolution of communities?

4. What are the two observations Bellah makes concerning the dissonance between Americans' lived actions and their words? How have you seen these borne out in your own experience, if at all? Can a degradation of language truly result in a degradation of character?

5. Should belief begin with community and ritual rather than with dogma and philosophy? How do community and ritual elevate your understanding of God and the sacred? How does a decline in religious practice contribute to the growing isolation that preoccupies Bellah?

6. In a liberal democracy, how do we balance the virtues of pluralism (including tolerance and rationality) with the virtues of religion (including symbol, myth, and ritual)? How can we avoid the pitfalls of individualism Bellah identifies in both liberal and conservative perspectives?

7. How can we consciously incorporate ritual and play into our everyday lives to break up the monotony of work and survival? Do your cultural or religious communities incorporate disruptive rituals into daily life in order to remind us of the sacred? Are these rituals effective, or could they be improved? Is there space for play in our religious or civic spheres, and, if not, where could we incorporate it?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

"The Rules of Engagement," Robert N. Bellah, September 2008: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/rules-engagement>
"Strange Gods," William T. Cavanaugh, January 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/strange-gods>
"Failure to Thrive," Viva Hammer, November 2022: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/failure-thrive>
"Awakening," Marilynne Robinson, October 2015: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/awakening>