

Applied Christian Ethics

Foundations, Economic Justice, and Politics

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Afterword by Ronald H. Stone

LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

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THREE

Toward a Constructive "Religious Realism"

Robert Bellah and Reinhold Niebuhr

Harlan Stelmach

Only a few authors have made the Bellah and Niebuhr comparison. Most notably they have been Bellah's co-authors, especially in their book concerning the role of religion in American political life, *The Good Society*, which I documented in a paper for the Niebuhr Society.¹ In his own writings, Bellah has been more attracted to H. Richard's work, perhaps because of their mutual focus on the sociology of religion. One clear connection is that both Reinhold Niebuhr and Bellah have been notable as "public philosophers" unlike H. Richard Niebuhr who was more of a traditional scholar. Bellah and Reinhold Niebuhr took their public role very seriously. Yet, also in their writings we find the insights for what I call a "constructive religious realism." It is this common agenda which may be their most lasting contribution for our modern world: that is, our need to understand our religious nature. Both men understood that religion is not a separate realm of our humanity. It is an essential part of all our strivings for ultimate meaning, in everything from art to politics. Both Bellah and Niebuhr plumbed the depths of this insight, each arguing in their own way that religion in this sense is "true."² This has profound implications for contemporary religious self-understanding, which is based on an integrated and interconnected self.

Niebuhr and Bellah have been grand re-interpreters of symbols of meaning for our world. They are *mythmakers* in the sense of helping us craft a metanarrative counter to the dominant scientific and materialist

narratives of the twentieth century, at least for the West. Their stories restore religion to the center of our self-understanding as essential to "wholeness" in a world fragmented into competing interests and realities. Niebuhr accomplished this through his approach as a "Christian realist." Bellah organized much of his thinking around what he described as "symbolic realism."

Niebuhr's Christian realism is rooted in his Christian view of human nature as prone to "sin." It is a theological affirmation that we are not God. Yes, we are "created in the image of God," but too often we ignore our finiteness, leading to pride and hubris. Even though there was a dialectical tension between sin and our God nature, Niebuhr felt the need to highlight the sin of pride and self-deception in the context of the twentieth century. Therefore, he spoke to the world as a "political realist." According to Robin Lovin, his moral philosophy and anthropology were grounded in his theology.³ As a Christian, Bellah largely agrees with this theology and its anthropology, but as a social scientist, he most often formulates his position in non-theological language.

Symbolic realism, for Bellah, affirms an epistemology that accepts the methods and findings of modern science where "knowing reality" in any absolute or objective sense is not possible. At the same time, he resists the inference of relativism often drawn because of these findings. Though largely speaking as a sociologist of religion, Bellah understood that there are moral and religious *implications* that must be addressed. This led Bellah to make judgments about contemporary politics and social life. The world of "symbol-making" became a focus of his work. Niebuhr had a similar view about science, philosophy, and symbols. He most often expressed it in political terms, though he was not reticent to explicitly speak in the language of the myth and symbols of his Christian faith.

The heart of my argument is that we can also see Bellah in the tradition of Christian realism and Niebuhr as an early example of symbolic realism. These two profound thinkers are essential to help us to understand the meaning of our religious nature for all realms of our life. Both men believed modern notions of meaning had marginalized religion. They rejected the notion that religion should be relegated to the world of private meaning or seen as a relic of our evolutionary past. Both thinkers moved beyond the literalism of their faith to formulate a mythic and symbolic understanding of the truth and reality of religion, a formulation that spoke to a unity of the human condition.

To understand this deep connection between Bellah and Niebuhr, we look first at their similar understanding of "myth" and "symbol." Realizing that Niebuhr did not explicitly use the concept of symbolic realism, I will explore mutual influences on Niebuhr and Bellah to make this connection. Also, as neither used my term "religious realism," I will suggest how I see this in relationship to both of their work in the tradition of Christian realism.⁴ I will address each thinker separately and then focus

on mutual influences. But first I turn to the concept of symbolic realism, for it is from this idea that I think one can draw the deepest connection between Niebuhr and Bellah.

BELLAH'S SYMBOLIC REALISM

The concept of symbolic realism has been one of the defining features of all of Bellah's work since the late sixties.⁵ Though it is largely implicit in most of Bellah's later writings, his essay "Between Religion and Social Science"⁶ makes an explicit case for symbolic realism. In the second part of the essay, he treats what he calls the "symbolic reductionism" of Marx, Freud, Durkheim and Weber. His major concern is that these theorists, in developing their great insights about symbols and religion, felt that they "believed themselves to be in possession of a truth superior to that of religion."⁷ To address this concern, Bellah begins by arguing for the need to go "beyond" the assumptions of modern philosophical and social scientific thought "where the world of everyday reality is a socially and personally constructed world." The stakes are high for him:

If one confuses that world [the socially constructed world] with reality itself one then becomes trapped in one's own delusions, one projects one's wishes and fears onto others and one acts out one's own madness all the while believing one is a *clearheaded realist*. Christianity, Buddhism and other religions have long known about such delusions. They are a kind of demonic possession, for the man who believes he is most in control of his world is just the one most in the power of demons.⁸ [italics added]

On the one hand, as a social scientist, Bellah acknowledges and "accepts" the modern epistemology of a "socially constructed" world. On the other hand, he draws our attention to how each of these constructed world-views is partial and limited, using religious language to provide the critique. Bellah saw the same error in modern "liberalism" where the self is its own authority and the assumption of human-controlled progress was too easily assumed.

Bellah is looking for an understanding of science that can avoid the reductionism of the past and an understanding of religion that still accepts our modern epistemology. Again, he is seeking a constructive solution to the modern dilemma where our sense of meaning can be more than mere relativism, where all formulations have equal validity, over against nihilism where there is no sense of purpose. The solution for him with symbolic realism was a deeper sense of *realism* than the misguided "clearheaded realism" of the modern epistemology of the so-called "social construction of reality."⁹ In a Festschrift for Bellah in 2002, *Meaning and Modernity*,¹⁰ the co-editors refer to the authors of the articles as exemplars of a "third way" in the sociology of religion that avoids so-called

"post-modernist nihilism" and is a "realistic response to the dilemmas of modernity."¹¹ They see "symbolic realism" as based on the notion that "religious symbols, created by human beings as ways of *grasping* the ultimate conditions of existence, could nonetheless have transcendent meanings that made powerful claims on individuals and communities for moral self-understanding and judgment."¹² [italics added] These symbols are "created" or formulated by humans. These symbols are not the same as the "ultimate conditions of existence." They are attempts to "grasp" these conditions. This is such an important point that Bellah, in reviewing this manuscript before his death,¹³ suggested the following:

I am uneasy with the notion that "man creates his symbols." I would feel happier with the idea of "discovering" symbols. I would link it to the idea of "attention." If we pay attention we may understand things that otherwise we would take for granted as in fact revelatory symbols, telling us something about reality that we hadn't been aware of before. I guess the word "creates" indicates to me too strongly a subjective source of symbols. But symbols are most important where subject and object come together and the distinction is overcome or at least called in question. The literal notion of "revelation" is too objective, and reifies a God who is a being among beings. Yet revelation is part of the story if properly understood. When we recognize something as a symbol we may be astounded as though something had been opened to us, something we hadn't created. Of course our ability to understand the symbol as revelatory is part of the process, as is also how we interpret it. Symbols are not self-interpreting, and one that means everything to us may mean nothing to another. Yet I want to keep open the two-sidedness of symbols that have to overcome the subject/object split to work as symbols.¹⁴

This is a discovery process that humans have always engaged in to establish meaning in their lives.¹⁵ There is a difference today as is indicated by this "meta" discussion about symbols. In the modern world, we are conscious of how meaning comes to be expressed.¹⁶ The power of this understanding could either lead to a sense we are the sole creators of our deepest symbols of meaning or, as Bellah suggests, to a "claim" that is beyond our full understanding. In this sense, the symbols guide us by their moral truth even in our recognition of our incomplete and partial understanding of their truth. Bellah often cites Paul Tillich and Martin Buber who, at their most "ecstatic moments," understood this situation of the modern individual.¹⁷ As seen below, Tillich joins Niebuhr in playing a role in Bellah's development of symbolic realism.

In "Between Religion and Science," Bellah rejects the claims of objective cognitive approaches that even symbolic reductionists, such as Durkheim, seemingly came to acknowledge.¹⁸ He then states boldly, "Symbols too express reality and are not reducible to empirical propositions." This is so because reality for him does not just reside in the object but also in

the subject, "particularly in the relationship between the subject and the object."¹⁹ In a famous passage, Bellah states his most concise case for symbolic realism:

If we define religion²⁰ as that symbol system that serves to evoke what Herbert Richardson calls the "felt-whole," that is, the totality that includes subject and object and provides the context in which life and action finally have meaning, and then I am prepared to claim that as Durkheim said of society, religion is a reality *sui generis*.²¹ *To put it bluntly, religion is true.* This is not to say that every symbol is equally valid any more than every scientific theory is equally valid. But it does mean that since religious symbolization and religious experience are inherent in the structure of human existence, all reductionism must be abandoned. *Symbolic realism* is the only adequate basis for the social scientific study of religion.²² [italics added]

Sections of this famous passage are often quoted, but perhaps none more than, "To put it bluntly, religion is true."²³ True in what sense? By stating that "religious symbolization and religious experience are inherent in the structure of human existence," it logically follows that religion cannot be explained away by new knowledge that discounts any given "historical" formulation of religion. Like religion, even any human-formulated scientific theory (that we consider in some sense "true") remains compelling only up to the next theory that explains more about the physical world, but that theory is not identical with the physical world.²⁴ Bellah made these statements in the late 1960s. He was building on his important essay, "Religious Evolution," written during this fertile period of Bellah's formulation of religious symbolization. Four decades later, Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* book explains from an evolutionary point of view, biologically and culturally, why religion is inherent in the human condition. He sees religion developing out of the human capacity "to play."²⁵

Play occurs on those occasions when survival is not paramount. In this "relaxed field," humans are able to ponder their existence in forms of "serious play," such as the "work" of the various chapters in this book. A religious perspective emerges when we grapple with our finiteness in these moments of deep reflection. When we ponder the fact that we are mortal and will die, we seek "meaning" in a deep and existential way. Therefore it is not too surprising that the theological categories of twentieth-century thinkers such as Niebuhr and Tillich focused on the concept of meaning. In his recent book, *Politics and Faith: Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich at Union Seminary in New York*, Ronald Stone makes the point succinctly when he writes that Tillich and Niebuhr "were trying to provide modern humanity with a sense of meaning and trust equivalent to the church language of faith."²⁶ Stone further quotes from Tillich's volume 2 of the *Systematic Theology*, "where Tillich had argued that the affirmation of meaning is an affirmation of the 'God above God.'"²⁷ As a social scien-

tist, Bellah follows with a broad sense of religion in his *Religion and Evolution* book. Though he starts with Clifford Geertz's definition, he spends a whole chapter called "Religion and Reality" to explain the four "modes of religious representation": unitive, enactive, symbolic, and conceptual.²⁸ Bellah's paraphrasing of Geertz makes it clear that he is focusing on "meaning making" as a task at the heart of religion: "religion is a system of symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence."²⁹

Today, neuroscience is also confirming that our brains seem to be "hard-wired" for seeking meaning after millions of years of evolutionary development. If not "hard-wired," at least we can understand humans as having a "disposition" in our nature not just for survival but also for ethical behavior and religious belief.³⁰ Without delving into this literature, we can assume that Bellah is on solid ground with his formulation that religion is "true" in the sense that it is inherent in who we are and who we have become as humans. Some have also argued that religion has always been part of the solution to our survival as a species. Whether this religious perspective (and its instrumental value) is in jeopardy today is what seems to be at stake in Bellah's challenge to modern forms of meaning that exclude or marginalize religion. This understanding of our religious nature is at the heart of Bellah's significance for our modern world.

The implication for Bellah of this position in the 1960s was that "symbolic realism is the only adequate basis for the social scientific study of religion." The implication for theologians is that *literalism* of symbols was no longer possible given modern epistemology and critical scholarship. But, more importantly, they should not accept that religious meaning is purely subjective and only one meaning among many formulations of reality. Religion is part of all realms of human existence.

NIEBUHR'S SYMBOLIC REALISM

To understand Niebuhr's formulation of realism, Stone's work is a helpful starting place. Stone draws our attention to what he thinks is Niebuhr's concept of God: "God [for Niebuhr] is a *hypothesis* without which Niebuhr's analysis of the human condition is inadequate. God is the *symbol* of unity, purpose, moral seriousness, and graciousness as being *constitutive of reality itself*. Only in God is the ideal and the real united [*italics added*]."³¹ God is a "hypothesis," a "symbol," yet "constitutive of reality itself." A Christian theologian speaking in these terms in the early twentieth century and throughout his lifetime must have sounded strange to the average Christian but perhaps less so to the intellectual circles of which he was a part. Stone proposes that this "sense of the presence of

God" gave Niebuhr a freedom to re-interpret the Christian tradition from the perspective of a modern thinker. As we will see later, this is not only compatible with Bellah, but if God is "constitutive of reality itself," so must religion be, in the deeper sense that Bellah suggests, "true."

In a 1968 volume of Niebuhr's political writings edited by Stone, there are two essays that describe how Niebuhr's profound use of myth and symbol guided the reconciliation of his faith with the modern world of science: "The Truth in Myths" (1937) and "Faith as the Sense of Meaning in Human History" (1966).³² In the 1937 essay and in his 1939 Gifford Lectures, Niebuhr was squarely dealing with many currents of thought at the time, religious and scientific, and formulating his approach to theology in response to this new sense of reality. In his article, "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography," Langdon Gilkey directly addresses Niebuhr's understanding of symbols:

In it [Vol. 1 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*] Niebuhr "reconceives" and so "retrieves" with tremendous insight and originality an important cluster of "important doctrines" from the tradition, setting them squarely into the modern context so that thus conceived these doctrines of symbols might illumine as can no others the deeper levels of modern experience. To do this complex task he reinterprets the "biblical" view of the creation of men and women as creatures, as made in the image of God, and as sinners in two quite different and yet interrelated modes or contexts. First of all, he "deliteralizes" the concepts of creation and the fall into what he then calls "myths" or, later, "symbols" capable of describing or "disclosing" the structure and actuality of our experienced human existence without repudiating modern cosmology, biology, sociology, and psychology. In fact he uses in this reconstruction of a contemporary biblical or Christian view of history most of the insights of the "secular" social sciences and philosophies he had previously criticized. It is here that this seminal use of the category of myth enters: myth is the way that biblical stories and concepts can be retrieved as true and yet not as literal; as expressing our experienced relation to ultimacy and transcendence, and yet as relevant to our historical existence. Few things have been theologically more important in our own century than this first effort to reinterpret a classical doctrine in terms of myth or symbol, nor his insight that "secular religions," such as Marxism and liberalism, also express their visions of reality as "myths."³³ [italics added]

Gilkey claims Niebuhr was the first to do this in theology in the twentieth century. He also claims that Niebuhr did this without repudiating modern science. Therefore, Gilkey maintains that Niebuhr both "accepted" the modern epistemology of our "constructed reality" and also made sense of a religious perspective compatible with this epistemology. How was he able to do this? It was by his "seminal use of the category of myth." As Gilkey states: "myth is the way that biblical stories and concepts can be retrieved as true and yet not as literal." The "truth" in these

myths works in two ways. First, they express our "experienced relation to ultimacy and transcendence." Second, they are relevant to our "historical existence." In a passionate defense of Niebuhr against Richard Fox's treatment of Niebuhr, Gilkey states that "Niebuhr accomplished what hardly any other dialectical or existential theologian did, uniting the classical Christian account of creation and fall, of sin and grace, interpreted existentially, with the social concerns of liberalism for justice and liberation in history."³⁴

The significance of this formulation was very personal for Gilkey. While in China in the early 1940s he received a copy of the first volume of Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man* from his father. Before leaving for China he had attended lectures by Niebuhr at Harvard and was primed to take Niebuhr seriously. He reports that this book helped him reconcile modern intellectual thought with his Christian faith.³⁵ He went on to eventually study with Niebuhr at Union Seminary in New York. In his book, *On Niebuhr*, Gilkey gives us more insight on the topic of Niebuhr's incorporating modern views of science and cosmology.³⁶ Gilkey explains the reason Niebuhr understood that original biblical myths could not be read as literal was because he "accepted," like every important theologian of the twentieth century, the scientific, the evolutionary understanding of the past. However, Gilkey seems to think that Niebuhr never explicitly explained his thinking because, "like most of his neo-orthodox colleagues, Niebuhr seemed quite unaware of the great influence of modern science on his theological understanding."³⁷ Yet, Gilkey still states that the ability of Niebuhr to make the move to *myth as true* was in fact at least his implicit "acceptance of these developing scientific concepts of our human past."³⁸ However, from a closer reading of the essays to which Stone has drawn our attention, it appears Niebuhr is self-aware of the influence of modern science on his thought. For example, when expressing the limitation of modern science as an adequate basis for a complete understanding of the human condition and meaning, which for him should instead come from his view of religion, he still gives science its due:

The question is whether modern empirical sciences, Darwinian theories of causal sequences, and theories of evolving forms and structures have not made the temporal order self-explanatory, and therefore the traditional conception of god irrelevant, and implausible. *Modern science certainly has made obscurantist views of special acts and events in creation implausible*, even as it has refuted orthodox conceptions of "special providence," which presuppose an arbitrary monarch whose caprice accounts for specific events in the whole variegated drama of human history.³⁹ [italics added]

In this quote, we certainly see Niebuhr accounting for the impact of science on his understanding of "events of creation" and "conceptions of

God." Giving science its due and making a case for the role of religion was one thing; suggesting "symbols as *true*" for our everyday existence was, perhaps, an even bigger task. That is, how are we to understand Biblical stories as *true* and not as the "average modern" sees them: as "fiction"? Gilkey's general argument about Niebuhr's brilliance in this symbolic-interpretation-task appears to be confirmed when we look directly to Niebuhr for confirmation. Niebuhr ends the essay, "The Truth in Myths," with his basic assumption and constructive position on the matter:

The transcendent source of the meaning of life is thus in such relation to all *temporal process* that a profound insight into any process or reality yields a glimpse of the reality which is *beyond* it. This reality can be revealed and expressed only in *mythical terms*. These mythical terms are the most adequate symbols of reality because the reality which we experience constantly suggests a center and source of reality, which not only transcends immediate experience, but also finally *transcends the rational forms* and categories by which we seek to apprehend and describe it."⁴⁰

It is the "transcendent source of meaning" beyond these temporal processes, glimpsed in "mythical terms," that is, the real "center and source of reality." This is what is true for Niebuhr. What is also important in this passage is that Niebuhr demonstrates an understanding of the modern differentiated world with multiple meanings, here referred to as "temporal processes." As with Bellah, religion for Niebuhr is not a separate realm of existence: it is part and parcel of all realms.

In the 1966 essay, "Faith as the Sense of Meaning in Human Existence," Niebuhr's understanding of the truth in symbols is the basis for his critique of, on the one hand, misguided, yet understandable, attempts by religious literalists to make their case for religion in the face of modern knowledge. He begins by making it clear that creation or the genesis of evil story or myth cannot be sustained as literal with the concept of evolution. The essay is both a statement about where symbols come from and a reinterpretation of the Christian doctrines—a reinterpretation set against the inadequacies of modern thought. On the other hand, just as importantly, Niebuhr reminds the so-called "death of God" theologians that all "religious affirmations are an expression of a sense of meaning and that a penumbra of mystery surrounds every realm of meaning . . . avail[ing] themselves of symbols and myths."⁴¹ Then he argues that their observation that "God is dead" will be futile if they do not attend to the task of "projecting alternative frames of meaning for discarded faith."⁴² While written in 1966, this was consistent with the approach to symbols that he laid out in the 1930s. This essay is certainly a product of Niebuhr's many years of grappling with the "reality" of myth and the "reality" of science, evolutionary theories in particular.

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To even better understand Niebuhr and Bellah's grounding in symbolic realism, we should turn to one of their key intellectual conversation partners, Paul Tillich.

THE TILlich CONNECTION: BELLAH AND NIEBUHR

Reinhold Niebuhr

The work of Paul Tillich surely had an influence on Niebuhr's version of symbolic realism. Perhaps it is best to say that there was a continued conversation where they both learned to express the general significance of symbols. We see similar insights about myth and religion being expressed in Tillich's *Theology of Culture*. An essay in this book, "The Nature of Religious Language," though written in 1955 parallels in content Niebuhr's 1937 essay on the "Truth in Myths." According to Stone, Niebuhr's essay on myth, "Faith as the Sense of Meaning in Human Existence," written in 1965 (the year of Tillich's death) had "its origins in his helping to translate Paul Tillich's *Interpretation of History* in 1936.⁴³ This book included a section on "Myth and History." Stone also states that in 1934 Niebuhr used the "concept of Myth in his publication of *Reflections on the End of an Era*."⁴⁴

Unraveling who had these thoughts "first" may not be the most important point. Certainly, as Stone suggests, much can be said about Tillich's early influence on Niebuhr, especially theologically. Further, Fox in his biography on Niebuhr reports that in 1934, Tillich's *The Religious Situation*, along with all of Tillich's untranslated writings, were taken by Niebuhr to "the hills of Sharon, Connecticut" to "revise his Rauschenbusch lectures for publication as his *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*."⁴⁵ Even though Tillich is not mentioned in the book,⁴⁶ perhaps the following quote gives some sense of Tillich's influence when drawing comparison between religions based on mysticism and those based on myth, like Christianity. "The religious myth, on the other hand, points to the *ultimate ground of existence* and its ultimate fulfillment [*italics added*]."⁴⁷ The concept of "ultimate ground of existence," if not Tillichian in origin, was perhaps at least a concept that they shared. Fox makes this case even more forcefully and explicitly. In Niebuhr's *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Fox says, "Tillich's vocabulary shone from virtually every page. . . . The mythical symbols of transcendence in 'profound religion'—God as both Creator and Redeemer—pointed to the 'ultimate ground of existence and its ultimate fulfillment.'"⁴⁸ According to Fox, these statements clearly have language that Niebuhr inherited and absorbed in his theology, both substantively and methodologically from Tillich.

More evidence of Tillich's influence on Niebuhr could be found in Niebuhr's brother's interest in the thought of Tillich. In his "Preface" to

the English published version of *The Religious Situation*, H. Richard went to great lengths to summarize Tillich's thesis for the readers, particularly the concept of "belief-ful realism." It seems likely that it represents how Reinhold also understood Tillich and perhaps incorporated it for his own work in the 1930s.

The term ["belief-ful realism"] is strange and paradoxical and it is intended to be so. Religion for Tillich is "direction toward the Unconditioned." It is the reference in all life to the ultimate source of meaning and the *ultimate ground of being*. This ultimate transcends experience and knowledge, it is that to which all experience and knowledge refer. It is apprehended only indirectly through *symbols* of the finite world. Nothing temporal, nothing finite, no one object among other objects, or no one value among other values can be designated as ultimate. It is always transcendent and therefore unknown, yet the reference to it is implicit in life and wherever there is any meaning this reference to an ultimate source of meaning is present. *The religious reference may be present in culture, in art, in science, politics, education and the economic life, but in these spheres it does not become explicit. It is taken for granted; it is an unacknowledged presupposition.* In religion in the narrower sense of that term the reference to the Unconditioned becomes explicit. Since the Unconditioned is forever hidden, transcendent and unknowable, it follows that all religious ideas are symbolical. They are good symbols when they point unambiguously to the transcendent; they become false symbols when they are regarded as possessing an intrinsic meaning or when they claim absolute value for themselves. A belief-ful realism is first of all an attitude in which the reference to the transcendent and eternal source of meaning and ground of being is present. This reference has been absent from capitalistic society with its reliance on intraworldly, intra-temporal sources of meaning, its exaltation of the finite into an absolute.⁴⁹ [italics added]

Much of what we typically understand as some of the key principles of *Christian realism* is made explicit in this summary of "belief-ful realism." The transcendent is only partially available through religious symbols. Meaning in the modern world is complicated by multi-realities competing for meaning. Here is a concept of religion that is assumed to be part of all dimensions of life, not a separate realm and not an "object." This notion, as already mentioned, is central to Niebuhr. Not present in this quote, but clearly stated in this manuscript, is also a focus on the Christian concept of sin that the modern world needs to better understand.⁵⁰ What is most present here is the philosophical grounding of the Niebuhrs in what I consider a version of *symbolic realism*.

In Niebuhr's 1937 essay mentioned above, "The Truth in Symbols," we can see some of the language and concepts that confirm Niebuhr's and Tillich's emerging mutual influence. Further, if Gilkey is right that Tillich's writings influenced Niebuhr's understanding of a "non-literal" interpretation of Christian symbols two years later⁵¹ in the first volume

of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, then it is impossible not to see Tillich's influence in terms of *symbolic realism*.

A systematic treatment of Tillich's own "symbolic realism" appears in 1959 in his collection of articles assembled in the book, *Theology of Culture*. In one of the chapters, the 1954 article, "Religion as a Dimension in Man's Spiritual Life,"⁵² Tillich makes the case that "religion is the substance, the ground and depth of man's spiritual life. . . . [religion] is an aspect of the human spirit."⁵³ It is not a "special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of *depth* in all its functions."⁵⁴ In a 1955 piece, "The Nature of Religious Language", he explains how "the truth of religious symbols" function: "the role of symbols becomes important as humans *participate* in this ground and depth."⁵⁵ In his book *On Tillich*, Gilkey further explains why Tillich will also say that a "symbol is true" in a religious sense:

Most important, the *participation* by the symbol itself is what enables it to manifest power and grace outward to others and to establish communication between these other creatures and their divine ground. Here the symbol becomes a *medium*, hierophany, or "sacrament," a visible sign of an invisible grace.

Granting this range of meanings for "symbol" it is clear why Tillich says that a symbol is "true" in this religious usage when, and only when, it thus communicates the divine ground in which it participates and communicates it to someone.⁵⁶ [italics added]

This essay directly parallels both Niebuhr's 1937 essay on religious myths and his 1935 *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. In the latter, he states:

In this sense the myth alone is capable of picturing the world as realm of coherence and meaning without defying the facts of incoherence. Its world is coherent because all facts in it are related to some central source of meaning; but [it] is not rationally coherent because the myth is not under the abortive necessity of relation all things to each other in terms of immediate rational unity.⁵⁷

Clearly there was fundamental agreement between Tillich and Niebuhr on the role of religious language and the need for symbols and myths to convey the meaning that comes from the depth of our human experience.

Perhaps what is most crucial in the significance of Niebuhr's version of symbolic realism is what Stone suggests: if God or religion is "constitutive of reality itself," and as humans we can experience this reality in some profound, if not complete way, this allowed Niebuhr freedom and confidence to interpret Christian symbols for the modern world. It was a world that he thought would be open to a new formulation of religious meaning. Perhaps this conviction is expressed in the first paragraph of the second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*:

Man is, and yet is not, involved in the flux of nature and time. He is a creature, subject to nature's necessities and limitations; but he is also a

free spirit who knows of the brevity of his years and by this knowledge transcends the temporal by some capacity within himself.⁵⁸

When this deep self-understanding is expressed in symbols, they become the medium by which we see ourselves arising beyond the "flux of nature and time" for Niebuhr.

Robert Bellah

Bellah has often written about Tillich's influence on his "re-commitment" to his Christian faith. This was stated in *Beyond Belief*.⁵⁹ The direct connection of Bellah to Tillich's formulation of symbols and myth has been less addressed.⁶⁰ Bellah's parallel to Gilkey's "re-commitment" to his faith via a profound Christian symbolic realist is striking. Even if we only suggest that Niebuhr and Tillich were influencing each other, rather than who got it first, Bellah is clear that he "got it from Tillich." Tillich was at Harvard for the last part of his career when his influence on Bellah would have been most profound. However, there were other influences that led to Bellah's symbolic realism. Bellah's intellectual biographer, Matteo Bortolini, describes the "conversion" to "symbolic realism" at least going back to the late 1950s when he was still working within the framework of his mentor Talcott Parsons's "four-function paradigm."⁶¹ Bortolini writes, "Following Parsons' lead, Bellah considered religion as the most abstract subsystem of the cultural system, its two main functions being the maintenance of meaning systems and the management of tensions."⁶² Parsons's commitment to grand theory allowed Bellah to see all human spheres of life as a whole rather than as isolated parts. It was important to Bellah to see culture and religion in an integrated way, as part of an integrated whole if not eventually as the foundation of the whole.

But the climax of Bellah's "conversion" was his public presentation in 1969 at a joint session of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the American Academy of Religion at Harvard. Summarizing his talk, Bortolini states:

Bellah attacked both the historical realism of the seminary and the reductionistic rationalism of Enlightenment-inspired social science, which considered religion a projection of some underlying reality supposed to be "more real" than religion itself. He proposed to leave both perspectives behind and embrace a new framework, termed "symbolic realism," which considered religious symbols as "constitutive of human personality and society" and thus "*real* in the fullest sense of the word."⁶³ [italics added]

The full story of Bellah and Niebuhr's relationship to symbolic realism (and the classic view of Christian realism) needs to be delved into by other scholars. There is certainly much to be mined from this connection.

According to Bortolini, Bellah felt "Symbolic realism could be fruitfully used by theologians and social scientists alike, thus eliding one of the most harmful distinctions in the modern organization of scholarly disciplines."⁶⁴ This chapter will have served its purpose if others would pursue the connection between Bellah and Niebuhr, integrating a religious perspective into their thinking while giving modern science and modern epistemology their due.

The significance of the Bellah-Niebuhr connection only starts with their grounding in a symbolic realism expressed in their versions of Christian realism. What are the implications of this profound foundation in their understanding of myth and symbol for religious commitment and expression? For Bellah, it was to define a new way to "interpret" religion in modernity. For Niebuhr, it was a new way to relate to the modern political world as a religious thinker. Both did this as persons of "faith." It was logical, therefore, from Bellah's standpoint, to call for theologians to do exactly what Niebuhr was doing: to foster new symbols of meaning, though perhaps Bellah never fully acknowledged this. Taking his own advice to combine theological insights with social science led Bellah to not only "interpret" religion but in fact to "teach religion" as a social scientist.⁶⁵ He has often recounted that if we only teach *about* religion we are in fact teaching from a non-religion or anti-religion standpoint.⁶⁶ Only by *teaching religion* are we able to sympathetically interpret religion. It has been a long personal journey for me to understand what this means in my own teaching. In the most basic terms, unless you have a profound appreciation for religion as an experience of our full humanity, you cannot teach religion: you will only teach *about* religion. Religion in this sense is not just a part or segment of our humanity. For example, by analogy, if you do not have a deep appreciation of poetry, you cannot *teach* poetry. You are at best only teaching *about* poetry. You cannot inspire an understanding of poetry or properly express it if it becomes an "object." The subject/object split must be overcome.

Assuming there is merit to the insights of Bellah and Niebuhr, how do we understand their mythmaking as the foundation for what I call a constructive "religious realism"? How does this perspective guide our role as responsible mythmakers, as public intellectuals, beyond the classroom, in the spirit of Niebuhr and Bellah? I choose the concept *religious realism* for several reasons. First, I assume it to be inclusive of both Christian realism and symbolic realism. Second, I also see it inclusive of most historic expressions of religion we have come to know, from the earliest humans to today. Of course, my underlying assumption is that we are fundamentally religious beings at the deepest level of our self-understanding.

We might summarize the key elements of this perspective in the following ways: Bellah and Niebuhr, consistent with Tillich, are clear that religion is not just a sphere of reality but the fundamental ground of all

the spheres of human endeavor. In this grounding is a "power" that makes us truly human, leading to our capacity to "love and care for others." Furthermore, they agree that modern science, in the final analysis, does not demythologize our world, or strip from us the religious dimension but only puts us into a different relationship, a conscious relationship, to the religious symbols that we discover and give expression to. They want us to pay attention to our traditional myths that, though not literally true, can express profound truths that give us a sense of the transcendent. Bellah and Niebuhr are clear that these symbols are not objects in themselves to be worshiped as the transcendent but to be understood by *participating* in them while we also *participate* in community within the living tradition that sustains them. It is in this sense that they are true. They agree that we try to find and express symbols for meaning in all the realms of our existence that vie for our attention and allegiance—from politics to art—in an attempt to unify and express our essential humanity. These are realms that they reject as insufficient for wholeness. Fundamentally, though in varying degrees, Niebuhr and Bellah had a sense of a human anthropology that needed to be understood, on the one hand, in its finiteness and propensity to pride and hubris (for example, the illusion that we are our own creator), and, on the other hand, in freedom that arises almost ironically from this finiteness. It is from the perspective of these insights that both Bellah and Niebuhr found a radical freedom to be the conscious mythmakers they became.

The question for them was how to move beyond a relativism that arises in our modern circumstance, which suggests that each realm is equal in giving meaning to the fullness of what it means to be human. We are living in a fragmented world in need of a greater sense that we are part of a wholeness of meaning. Will these same symbols that moved Niebuhr and Bellah be adequate for this task today? What is the role and responsibility today for those of us who see ourselves as part of the legacy of symbolic realism to continue to interpret and reinterpret religious symbols? The connection between Niebuhr and Bellah, I maintain if further pursued, will produce many answers for a constructive religious realism. This is a challenge for all of us who understand the significance of these insights.

However, Ronald Stone should have the last word, for this project bears his stamp of inspiration. In *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, the recent 2009 retrospective on Niebuhr edited by Daniel Rice, Stone comments on Niebuhr's notion of "empire." Stone points to Niebuhr's understanding of symbols when Niebuhr analyzed the fall of the Roman Empire, which lost its sense of justice when its rulers equated the power of Rome with their power. In his analysis of Niebuhr, Stone refers to Charles Norris Cochrane's 1939, *Christianity and Classical Culture*,⁶⁷ a book that Stone said shaped Niebuhr's thinking. It also had special meaning for Stone. Niebuhr's son gave Niebuhr's copy of the book to Stone. While visiting

Rome, Stone had this copy with him. In his retrospective, Stone again draws our attention to the two essays in *Faith and Politics*, which affirm Niebuhr's basic conviction "about the necessity of religious symbolism." Both Niebuhr and Cochrane understood Christian faith as the *living* of the commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor. They saw Christianity as a militant force with an eschatological vision. Affirming Christian symbols of eternal life, resurrection, the Kingdom of God, and the judgment of God have strengthened those who struggle for justice.⁶⁸ If these symbols will once again come alive, they will depend on the continued conversation among religious realists, in both the symbolic realist tradition and the Christian realist tradition. Today, there is not just the "fall of Rome" or even the "fall of the democratic experiment in the world" that is stake. There is the "fall of the planet." The good news is that there are many vibrant branches to this conversation.

The mentorships and community of scholars represented by this book are a testimony to this tradition being alive and well. The many books on Niebuhr are another illustration. The institutions guided, even if not fully conscious of their grounding, by symbolic realists are significant, ranging from Fuller Seminary to many liberal seminaries. But perhaps most significant is the fact that this tradition remains institutionalized in the project of American democracy. This experiment did not begin with us, but we have a responsibility to it, just as we have responsibility to our planet and species. On the political side, when the likes of David Brooks, John McCain, and President Barack Obama look to Niebuhr for insights, there is hope. When Bellah is invited to the White House by two different presidents, Carter and Clinton, for his contribution to the meaning of our nation, we have hope. On the ecological side, there are many voices. It is our role to make these assumptions and symbols more visible in our political and cultural life. We must continue to assume the mantle of public philosophers modeled so well by Niebuhr and Bellah.⁶⁹

In the last chapter of *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah calls for the "birth of new American myths."⁷⁰ I believe that if we continue to plumb the depths of the work of Bellah and Niebuhr as part of a living community of scholars and colleagues and mentors in our day, we will see the symbols of the great axial religions finally bearing fruit. Maybe we will even avoid the ecological catastrophe by living with an eschatological faith and humility. Though our efforts will only be partial, we live in the hope that others will follow and continue the journey, guided by the same profound understanding of our religious nature, one that unites all of creation.

POSTSCRIPT

I essentially finished a complete draft of this chapter on the date of Barack Obama's second inauguration. This coincided with the national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. *Paying attention* to signs and symbols, it was easy to read the day through the lenses of Niebuhr and Bellah. Obama, who has stated, "Niebuhr is one of my favorite philosophers"⁷¹ and Martin Luther King, Jr., who was also inspired by Niebuhr,⁷² were on stage as profound symbols of the impact of Niebuhr's influence. Obama's inaugural address had both the measured ethic of responsibility and the religious ethic of conviction, especially when alluding to historical struggles to perfect our Union. He also invoked the memory of Reverend King in one of his most powerful statements, "We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone; to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on earth."⁷³

Through the lens of Bellah, we could see that the whole inaugural ceremony was replete with "civil religious" symbols, from church attendance, prayers, and hymns to the theological language of our Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights." But Obama did not stop with just *proclaiming* these rights: "Today we continue a never-ending journey, to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time. For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they have never been self-executing; that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on earth." Obama, in Niebuhrian fashion, said we "cannot mistake absolutism for principle." Incorporating Bellah's challenge, he addressed the issue of climate change. Barack Obama has joined King as the symbols of our nation's "third time of trial" as formulated by Bellah, the continued test of our institutions to "execute" our highest ideals in the modern world. Perhaps, in the end, it will take a realist to understand the power and hope of Obama's idealism. Bellah and Niebuhr would applaud Obama's brand of idealism. I believe Niebuhr would agree with Bellah when he says:

The history of nations shows that segmentary rational politics is not enough. No one has changed a great nation without appealing to its soul, without stimulating national idealism, as even those who call themselves materialist have discovered. Culture is the key to revolution; religion is the key to culture.⁷⁴

NOTES

1. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven Tipton, *The Good Society*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992 [1991]) 306.
2. I will argue that this notion of "truth" will be one of the keys to the connection between Bellah and Niebuhr. It will also be the solution to what Max Weber referred to as the "polytheism" of our time where experience of "religious meaning" has been marginalized and is no longer a contributor to the integration of the various dimensions of life, such as politics, science, or economics, which have become "non-integrated" replacements for meaning. This is as close to a thesis statement of this chapter, which will unfold in more detail in my future writings.
3. Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 5–11. Here Lovin explains the inner-relationship among theological, moral, and political realism as it relates to Niebuhr's and other's view of Christian realism.
4. See also Robin Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 181–221. This is where Lovin lays out his systematic "new directions" for Christian realism in a chapter titled, "Human Goods and Human Dignity."
5. A close reading of much of his early work could also see the importance of this perspective guiding his work. See essays in *Beyond Belief*.
6. Robert Bellah, "Between Religion and Science," in *Beyond Belief, Essays on Religion in a Post Traditional World*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1970), 237–259.
7. Bellah, "Between Religion and Science," 250.
8. Ibid. 244–245. One might conclude that Bellah's use of the language of "demons" in an indication of Tillich's influence. The full significance of this passage demands much more attention in Bellah's thinking.
9. Bellah, "Between Religion and Science," 244.
10. Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, eds. *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Some of the scholars in this volume who self-identify as part of this tradition are: Harvey Cox, Charles Taylor, Stanley Hauerwas, and Robert Wuthnow.
11. Madsen, *Meaning and Modernity*, xi.
12. Ibid.
13. Bellah died July 30, 2013 due to complications from heart surgery. He was eighty-six years old. The first draft of this chapter was completed in January of 2013.
14. Bellah, January 26, 2013 email comments.
15. Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, 195.
16. In Bellah's magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution, From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belnap Press of Harvard University, (2011), he makes this argument with a more complex thesis.
17. Bellah, "Between Religion and Science," 250.
18. Bellah, "Between Religion and Science," 240.
19. Ibid. 252. We will see a similar position articulated by Niebuhr that I argue below.
20. Bellah often returns to this notion of religion as a felt whole, especially in *Religion and Human Evolution*.
21. See an interesting treatment of the implications defining religion as *sui generis* in Anne Taves. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
22. Bellah, "Between Religion and Science," 252–253.
23. Bellah recounts his religious journey leading up to making this statement at the time he was awarded the "C. S. Lewis Faculty Forum Award," in 2003.
24. Bellah, "Between Religion and Science," 252–253.
25. See Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 109–116.
26. See Ronald H. Stone, *Politics and Faith, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich at Union Seminary in New York*, Macon, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 2012, 357.

27. Ibid.
28. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 1–43.
29. Ibid. xiv.
30. See Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain, The Science of Our Dilemmas*, (New York: Harper, 2005) and his Gifford Lectures book: *Who's in Charge? Free Will and the Science of the Brain*, (New York: Harper, 2011). Also see Andrew B. Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology*, (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010) and his *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001). A more popular book and accessible book that also addresses the reductionist bent of neuroscientist is David Eagleman, *Incognito, The Secret Lives of the Brain*, (New York: Pantheon, 2011) especially chapter 7: "Life After the Monarchy." Also see David Sloan Wilson's *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.
31. Stone, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr to the Late Twentieth Century," in Kegley, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 52.
32. "Faith as the Sense of Meaning in Human History" (1966) and "The Truth in Myths" (1937) in Ronald H. Stone ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, A Commentary on Religious, Social and Political Thought in a Technological Age*, (New York: George Braziller, 1968): 3–31. See Ronald Stone's chapter, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr to the Late Twentieth Century," pp. 43–80, in Charles Kegley, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984) where he alludes to these two articles.
33. Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography: A Critical Review Article" *The Journal of Religion* 68, no. 2 (April 1988): 272.
34. Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography: A Critical Review Article," 273.
35. Ibid. 264.
36. Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 233–234.
37. Ibid. 233.
38. Ibid. 234.
39. Niebuhr, "Faith as the Sense of Meaning in Human Existence," in Stone, *Faith and Politics*, 6.
40. Niebuhr, "Truth in Myths," in Stone, *Faith and Politics*, 31.
41. Ibid. 3.
42. Ibid. See also Stone, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr," 50, in Kegley, *Reinhold Niebuhr*.
43. Stone, *Politics and Faith*, 355.
44. Ibid.
45. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 160–161.
46. Ronald Stone notes that in the preface to the original publication of *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* in 1935, "Niebuhr expressed his gratitude to his new colleague." See Stone, *Politics and Faith*, 355.
47. Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, New York: Living Age Books, 1959 [First published in 1935] 21.
48. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 164.
49. Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956 [1932]), 11–13.
50. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, A Christian Interpretation, Volume II*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949) 217–218, for Niebuhr's long quote acknowledging his debt to Tillich "arrives at a formal transcendence over the ambiguity of all history. . . ." This position helps Niebuhr with his articulation of sin that is the result of not acknowledging our finiteness.
51. Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*. Reading Gilkey's book is like reading a conversation between Tillich and Niebuhr.
52. Paul Tillich, "Religion as a Dimension in Man's Spiritual Life," in *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959). Digital copy on Kindle e-reader.
53. Ibid. 5.

54. Ibid. 7–9.
55. Tillich, "The Nature of Religious Language," in Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 59.
56. Langdon Gilkey, *On Tillich*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1990), 77.
57. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 22.
58. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1, Vol II.
59. Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, xx, 255. Also this was later expanded as mentioned above in Bellah, "C.S. Lewis Foundation Faculty Forum."
60. See the interview in the *Berkeleyan*.
61. Bortolini, "Blurring the Boundary Line," 8 (pre-publication manuscript). The four-function paradigm was Parsons's attempt to show the relationship among all spheres of life: personal, social, economic, and political.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid. 9–10.
64. Ibid. Bortolini is referencing Bellah, "Christianity and Symbolic Realism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 9: 89–96, 1970. This later appeared as one of the two essays that comprised Bellah's "Between Religion and Science," in *Beyond Belief*.
65. See Bellah's "C. S. Lewis Foundation" lectures.
66. Bellah, "C.S. Lewis Foundation," 5.
67. Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture, A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).
68. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Reconsidered*, Location 2379 of 5175 of digital text.
69. See the "Event Transcript of the Pew Forum's biannual, Faith Angle Conference on Religion, Politics and Public Life, 'Obama's Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr,'" May 4, 2009 on line at: <http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Obamas-Favorite-Theologian-A-Short-Course-on-Reinhold-Niebuhr.aspx>
70. Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 139.
71. See David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *New York Times*, April 26, 2007.
72. King credits both Niebuhr and Gandhi for his approach to social change. See, Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* for his account of their influence.
73. Text of Obama's inaugural address as provided by the White House, *Washington Post*, January 21, 2013.
74. Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 162.

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