

Reader's Response

An American Communitarian

George Williamson, Jr.

James Sellers's "The Death and Rebirth of American Community" (*Worldview*, July) stirred in me some Maileresque autobiographical reflections regarding "the possibility of simply 'refusing' our history." Please indulge the self-exposure.

Our history, that of my people and me, is the hot and sweaty Baptist ethos of the South. We used to sing "Amazing Grace" on Sunday nights. Nowadays I conduct pantheological worship services in a secular Eastern college for students who think Judy Collins wrote "Amazing Grace," and who sing it only at pot parties, and who can't believe I know it by heart. Until recently I sang "Amazing Grace" only as a self-indulgence, and only with fellow low-church reprobates, and only when well oiled at cocktail parties. It would seem that I had simply refused my history.

But perhaps not. Borrowing Sellers's model, perhaps I can say that a wide slice of my psychological landscape really does resemble the puberty rite or the ancient rite of initiation.

My initiation into American culture began when I got arrested in a 1960 sit-in, and it mostly took place behind the veil of an Eastern, ecumenical divinity school. We never sang "Amazing Grace" in divinity school. In Sellers's words: "The adolescent is separated from his mother, sometimes brutally. The initiate is cut off from his past; he must die to it if he is to emerge in a new identity."

It was as if that heavily mythological and intensely spiritual piety of my childhood was a warm second womb *post partem*, to be forsaken with a vengeance at puberty. From

up East and the other side of segregation laws, our Southern, Baptist ethos gave to me the same dread vibrations that our America gives to my students. I virtually refused it.

But I couldn't be an atheist, and certainly not an Episcopalian, being unable either to renounce transcendence or to smoke incense. And it seemed to me that anything between that and Baptist—say, Methodist or Presbyterian—would require of me a whole battery of offensive qualifying affirmations that the Baptists, by virtue of my having been born one, had never bothered to ask about. So America, despite her initiation rite, had to take me as an unhappy Baptist, a Southern Baptist by default.

Now, as Sellers suggests, America and I are experiencing the community's side of the initiation rite. He does not say so, but that is perhaps especially true now because we have come on a generation that is so resistant to initiation. As initiators, we are being driven "back to our beginnings" to experience a rebirth of our "constituting purpose." For America, as he says, this means a death to its recent, and a rebirth to its archetypal, past. For me, among other things, I find it meaning a plunge backward toward my Baptist heritage.

One could, with some cryptic accuracy, describe my self-image in teaching and the college chaplaincy as that of an initiator. In teaching, for instance, my courses have sought to initiate students to the phenomena of "Secularization" and "Radical Politics." And at this year's graduation, in place of the routinized baccalaureate service, I constructed with them a rite of passage appropriate to their consciousness and

sensibilities. And through it all, to everyone's astonishment, I, the initiator, emerged more of a Baptist than ever I was as a child.

Item: In the history of secularization I discovered some embarrassing sympathies: with the 195 Elizabethan playwrights who included Machiavelli as a major and *diabolical* character in their plays without ever having read *The Prince*; with Bertolt Brecht who, after the bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, rewrote his play to join the Medieval Church in condemning Galileo's theories; and with the Baptist brethren of Dayton, Tennessee, who couldn't live with Darwin. I discovered that my unchurched students are more religious than secular; more *religious*, in the phenomenological sense, than most church people are. And I discovered that secularization has psycho-social "causes," just as religiousness does. This last discovery made me somewhat free of secularization and allowed my own *homo religiosus* to begin coming back to me.

Item: In the study of contemporary American radical politics I found historic parallel not so much in the Marxist thirties or the Gandhian fifties as in the revivals of the Great Awakening and the intensely religious movements toward Abolition and even Prohibition. And I found the most exciting and personally attractive parallels in the religious excesses of the Anabaptist reformation. What that says about radical politics remains to be seen, but it says a lot about me.

Item: In worship, I have begun to rediscover my body, my emotions and my voice. I can once again sing "Amazing Grace" in church, and with a vengeance.

I therefore find Sellers's article illuminating my experience at several important points. First, by penultimately refusing my history I have at last begun recovering its ultimate dimensions. I still shudder at every news release from the Southern Bap-

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list Convention and every "yours in Christ" letter from home. But I have discovered the world-transcending power of the sectarian tradition, and my resonance with it, and the historic and contemporary American urge toward world transcendence that has fed on it. This tends toward a healthy synthesis of the authentically me and the authentically American.

Second, I find myself quite happily coming to this new "centeredness" in my "ethnicity." In Sellers's words: "The American myth of the rights of man . . . has undergone the transforming power of the rite

of initiation and now underwrites a deeper freedom—the freedom to live out the distinctive texture of one's own share of the heritage." Imagine a reinvigorated Baptist at Vassar.

The final point of illumination has to do with Sellers's opening lines about the concept of moral *responsibility*. To be sure, I'm aware of the "Christ against culture" tendencies and pathologies of sectarian religion—existentially, even more aware than Richard Niebuhr. I know the history both of Muenster and of the Southern Baptist Convention. I cannot, therefore, escape the shameful feeling of accountability for both of

them when I spontaneously take up the sectarian, Baptist strand of "our history."

I am nonetheless able to make this ambiguous affirmation, to assume this unwanted responsibility, because there is promise in being a sectarian American. Like the next fellow, if there were something unambiguous to do, I would do it. But there is not. Here I am with my history. Amazing grace! And there is this green shoot of rebirth coming up from the death of this American communitarian. James Sellers has helped me see it and has helped me look for it in American community as a whole.

The American Experience Revised

Herbert Richardson

The most important book in political theology to have appeared recently is James Sellers's *Public Ethics*. Here he documents, with a myriad of evidences, the power of a founding myth to shape and sustain a community. The thesis is not new with him. Henri Frankfort, Robert Bellah and Eric Voegelin have not only shown how myth establishes community but have seriously wounded the rationalist conviction that a community can exist simply in terms of voluntarily contracted relations (i.e., without a founding myth).

In "Death and Rebirth of American Community" Sellers returns to this issue. Community can only be revived, he argues, through America's returning to its beginnings "to experience a rebirth of its constituting purpose." But what constitutes America's beginnings? Did America begin in the eighteenth century with its "revolutionary war"? Or in the seventeenth century when Puritans struggled to establish theocratic justice in society, both by engaging in civil revolution in England and voyaging to found a model theocracy in New England? Or did America really begin in the nineteenth century

when the ideal of the "nation" triumphed over political regionalism (read "federalism") in a bloody putting-down of the South's revolution?

What constitutes the "beginnings" of America is a complex question, for historical periodization is an artistic creation of the human mind and serves the mind's intents. It is not obvious, therefore, that "early American history" is the history of America in the last half of the eighteenth century—as Sellers assumes. "Early American history" might be, according to another method of periodizing and another intent, nineteenth- or seventeenth-century history—and to debate this issue is urgent because it is a debate about what our founding myth and constitutive purpose as a society truly is. But Professor Sellers does not seem to contemplate this particular approach to the problem. Rather, his method is simply to assume the establishment periodization of American history (which places its "earliest beginnings" in the eighteenth century) and then to *re-interpret* this event. "In early American history," he says, "the main issue between the colonists and Great Britain was not at first the struggle

for independence. The issue was the rights of *Englishmen* to govern themselves." Not revolution *per se* nor political independence *per se* were the constitutive purposes of the eighteenth-century war but the right of self-governance—a right that could be institutionalized *without* creating a politically independent nation. This is my overinterpretation of Seller's reinterpretation of the American Revolutionary War.

The problem Sellers is struggling with, the reason why he is trying to reinterpret the conventional understandings of the American Revolution, is that revolutions are very bad "founding myths." One can hardly build a community on the mythic destruction of community—though that is what certain elements in *every* society have tried to do. (For the best analysis of America's attempt to create a society on the myth of revolution see S.M. Lipset's *The First New Nation*.) In his argument Sellers follows the Jeffersonian model—interpreting the revolution as a struggle for a bill of rights. And various other reinterpretations are possible. But there is an alternative way for us to deal with this issue of a founding myth, namely, to periodize American history differently. For the sake of argument let me propose that the "earliest history of

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