3 Revisiting Bellah's Sheila in a religiously pluralist century

Christopher Denny

Scholars of religion only know her by her first name, Sheila, which is just as well because Sheila is a pseudonym, a cipher, a symbol for a phenomenon that has been described in different terms since Sheila came to the attention of readers over 30 years ago. For scholars influenced by the work of Philip Rieff (1987), Sheila's worldview may be judged to encapsulate "the triumph of the therapeutic" in which psychology subverts the older strictures of religiosity. Sheila probably qualifies as one of the baby-boomer seekers profiled in the writings of Wade Clark Roof (1993, 1999). Then again, with her fusion of spirituality and individualism Sheila would be amenable to being typecast as one of those who are "spiritual but not religious" analyzed in the work of sociologist Robert Fuller (2001). Finally, even though she predates the advent of the millennial generation, Sheila certainly seems like one of the "nones," that growing cohort of young adults who in the early twenty-first century self-consciously decline to affiliate themselves with organized religion (Drescher 2016).

To know Sheila Larson is to judge her, because that is how Robert Bellah and his co-authors presented her to readers in their influential 1985 book *Habits of the Heart* – as a person to be judged and found wanting. Recounting the presentation in Chapter 9 of the book, readers are given the following information. Sheila states that she believes in God but cannot remember when she last went to church. She has faith in her own little voice, an internal guide that tells her to love herself and to be gentle with herself. Sheila's little voice urges her to remember that we are supposed to "take care of each other." Sheila describes her faith in the most individualized and self-centered term possible – Sheilaism. In Bellah's telling, Sheila is "sufficiently paradigmatic" to be employed as a composite sketch for the privatization of religion in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. Moreover, Bellah asserted that many churchgoing Protestants and Catholics are "Sheilaists" who do not see either the Christian Bible or church traditions as normative and authoritative in the way in which they live their religious lives.

“How do we, in a pluralist society,” Bellah asked an audience in 1986, “avoid the radical individualism expressed by Sheila?” For Bellah, individualism is a problem, especially for religion:

Just the notion that religious belief ought to be a purely internal thing, and then you go to the church or synagogue of your choice, shows how deeply ingrained a kind of religious privatism is, which turns the church into something like the Kiwanis Club or some other kind of voluntary association that you go to or not if you feel comfortable with it – but which has no organic claim upon you.

(Bellah 1986)

What is interesting is that in *Habits of the Heart* Bellah and his co-authors came to a mixed appraisal of individualism in American life, recognizing it as a social force that had shaped American religion since its founding. For the authors, individualism, with its exaltation of self-reliance and hard work, had a place in our country so long as it is checked by offsetting social trajectories that nurture the afflicted while providing civic unity. In this line of thought, the “biblical tradition” and the religious communities that have fostered it are tasked with orienting their members towards a transcendent reality that gives a moral justification for our national experiment in ordered liberty. The authors of *Habits of the Heart*, then, prescribed a specific cultural role for religion in late twentieth-century American life, and Sheila did not help religion perform that necessary pedagogical role of counterbalancing the rough-and-tumble world of individualistic capitalist acquisition. Given these expectations for religion, Bellah was correct in sensing a threat to the biblical tradition’s place in our national social fabric.

Every crisis presents itself simultaneously as a problem and as an opportunity. Rather than joining in the chorus of those who see religious individualism and the decline of churches’ social influence primarily as a problem, I choose to see the Sheilas of the world as providing contemporary societies with opportunities as well, and the Theology Without Walls (TWW) initiative outlined in this present book’s contributions seconds that hope. It does adherents of traditional religion little good to complain about the rise of individualism if they hope to change this state of affairs in the future. In what follows I offer two personal anecdotes and accompanying theological reflection that illustrate how religious individualism can manifest itself in ways that point groups to a different type of unity than the “civil religion” outlined in Bellah’s (1967) work. In each case my encounter with a student upset cherished scholarly approaches to categorizing religious differences and enabled me to see pluralism in new ways for which I was unprepared.

First encounter: moving beyond positions to people

Years ago during my first year in graduate studies I worked as a research assistant and was asked to proofread and review a very long dissertation on

the recent history of ecumenical dialogue in the United States between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and a mainline Protestant denomination that I will not name now in order to keep the dissertation's author anonymous. Over the course of hundreds of pages, the author detailed the times, places, delegation members, and program titles of successive meetings between the theologians designated to carry out a particular rapprochement in the years immediately succeeding the Second Vatican Council's close in 1965. In workmanlike prose, the dissertation included details about hotel venues, meeting schedules, and alternating responses to conference prompts. After reading halfway through the dissertation, I noticed that many of the Catholic participants in these meetings either left the priesthood or the Catholic Church over the years during which the dialogue proceeded in the 1960s and 1970s, to be replaced by other representatives. I began to ask myself why in this dissertation there was no direct reference to this trend and no examination of the reasons for the systemic departure of many of the Catholic participants in this series of ecumenical dialogues.

To fault the student for this omission would be short sighted, for both the genre of the dissertation itself and the assumptions undergirding most interreligious dialogues justified this caesura. The dominant framework of most formal ecumenical and interreligious dialogues conducted since the start of the ecumenical era in the early twentieth century posits the stable existence of two or more reified religious communities whose goal is to achieve at least tolerance, hopefully respect, and maybe – if the dialogue is really ambitious – intercommunion or an institutional merger. Each side in these dialogues comes to the table in order to reconcile past traditions and normative doctrines, assumed as a given, with openness to new developments and the experiences of others outside the home church. The participation of dialogue partners is sanctioned by authorities within their respective communities. When seen in this manner, interreligious dialogue is basically analogous to a summit meeting between leaders and ambassadors of two sovereign nations, with a heavy dollop of public relations and face-saving techniques required. When one or more of the dialogue groups in such activity is Christian, ecclesiocentric interpretations of religious and theological traditions are privileged as a matter of course. As an example of this “summit” understanding of interreligious dialogue, consider Roman Catholic magisterial documents such as *Dialogue and Mission* and *Dialogue and Promulgation*, published in 1984 and 1991 by the Secretariat for Non-Christians, which promote interreligious dialogue. These texts, however, are mostly focused upon developing the Catholic Church's own self-understanding. When the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published *Dominus Jesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* in 2000, this inward-looking ecclesial trend became even more apparent (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1984, 1991; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000; Denny 2017).

An examination of dialogue from the standpoints of the existential experiences of the partners, maybe even a partner like Sheila, however,

would yield a very different account of such dialogues. Granted, such dialogues would no longer qualify as official ecumenical conversations, given that the Sheilas of the world generally abjure representing any spiritual view other than their own. Structuring dialogues instead around the axes of individual persons' search for truth and ultimacy, deliberately subordinating concerns about institutional boundaries and doctrinal consistency with the past, removes the need to save face. Or to put the matter in a different frame of reference, dialogue in a TWW does not begin by presuming the theological stability of competing doctrinal boundary markers as *a priori* obstacles that need to be reconciled through logical consistency. This is not because the TWW initiative shuns logic or the need for clear thought. Rather, the issue that TWW chooses to begin with is relevance, not consistency. In a world marked by religious individualism, ensuring that ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is relevant to the lives of people today must be the initial issue in learning to converse across religious boundaries. Not to begin with the concrete existential situations of contemporary people risks creating more dialogues like the one I encountered in the dissertation draft decades ago: officially structured formal conversations whose value becomes less compelling, even to those taking part in the dialogue.

Kurt Richardson has identified the necessity within our current interreligious situation very well. He writes:

Heightened by our current deinstitutionalized situation, a central place is taken by religious experience – the experience of faith disengaging more than ever from institutional forms and ritual structures in favor of authenticity – something approaching “first-order” experience of God . . . This situation of disaffiliation is a hermeneutical condition for “theology without walls” or “trans-religious” theology.

(Richardson 2016, 508)

Much of the impulse for beginning interreligious dialogue with doctrines and institutional prerogatives stems from the Enlightenment-era development, termed confessionalization by historians, by which different Christian churches distinguished themselves from one another by developing creedal formulations and competing structures of ecclesial authority. Within the milieu of early modern Europe, uniform definitions of belief were the intellectual currency of the age, and personal religious experience was denigrated as idiosyncratic, superstitious, and backward. When Gotthold Lessing (1956, 53; emphasis in original) could levy his famous charge, “*accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason*,” the unrepeatable singularity of personal experience was discredited as well, as post-Cartesian Western religion sought to pattern itself after the recurring standardized proofs of mathematics and the measurable laws of natural science.¹ Bellah's Sheila does not expect anyone else to replicate her own

spiritual worldview, but there are others who haven't given up hope that religious experience may be something more than a noncognitive realm. Richardson asserts, "The self as locus of truth is not of necessity relativistic at all," and he makes this claim in light of his additional position: "The self as locus of truth does not mean the self as the source of truth" (Richardson 2016, 511, 512). Perhaps Sheila's personal credo emanates from a source outside her? Adjudicating this issue leads me to the next turning point in my religious conversion.

Second encounter: embracing one's inner religious consumer

The second major turning point in my spiritual journey involving an encounter outside my home tradition was at first glance a very prosaic one and didn't involve any famous thinkers or profound world-historical transformation. In fact, it did not entail an encounter with another religious tradition in the familiar sense, but rather an experience that I think marks a challenge to all religious traditions as we have known them. The year was 2004, and I was in my first semester teaching at St. John's University in New York City. I had been assigned to teach Theology 2210: Perspectives on the Church before my arrival, and as a freshly minted PhD I came armed with a detailed lesson plan for the course. Much of our time was devoted to examining the role of the Church in salvation and ecumenism. Towards the semester's end we studied different soteriological typologies along the lines of the now well-known schema set forth by Alan Race and followed by many others in the theology of religions – exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (Race 1983). Those familiar with the Roman Catholic magisterial approach to these paths since Vatican II know that its overall judgment on these positions is exclusivism, bad though dominant through most of the Church's history; inclusivism, good; pluralism, very, very bad, especially if you are a Catholic theologian teaching at a Catholic university. Eager to have students weigh in on this debate in the latter half of the course, I gave them the following assignment:

Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism states that division among Christians should be a cause for scandal, as it is a contradiction of God's plan of salvation. For your **final paper** I would like you to enunciate what you yourself identify as the principal causes of religious division, not merely among Christians, but among all peoples. Do you think that the multiplicity of churches and religions is a good thing? Or do you perceive it to be a stumbling block that we must overcome? Do you have any concrete ideas as to how religious divisions can be healed? As a student in New York City three years after September 11, in what ways do you think greater cooperation and harmony between peoples of different religions can be achieved?

There was a student in this course whom I will call Derek (not his real name). Derek was, by conventional standards, anything but a model student – his attendance was sporadic, he failed exams, and his essays were poor. During most classes he sat by himself near a window with his feet propped up on an adjacent chair. He ended up failing the course. Yet Derek transformed the trajectory of the class through his participation in our discussions on this assigned topic. Not having applied the insights I gleaned from my reflections on the very long dissertation on ecumenical dialogue I've already mentioned, I burst onto the teaching scene in my new academic home expecting students to have a personal stake in arguments pitting inclusivism against pluralism. I expected the students to assess the ecumenical landscape from the well-worn perspective of institutional unity vs. diversity. Rahner vs. Hick. Robert Bellarmine vs. Paul Knitter (Bellarmine 2016; Rahner 1966, 1976, 1979; Hick 1982; Knitter 1985). Derek, and the students whom he managed to persuade in the course of the semester, torpedoed my assumptions about ecumenical and interreligious relations and convinced me that much of the scholarship on the theology of religions from the 1970s and 1980s was not only dated but also obsolete.

So, what was Derek's trailblazing contribution to Theology 2210? Derek didn't see the unity or diversity of religions or their soteriological efficacy as an issue. That is not simply to say that he didn't understand religious unity or religious pluralism as the *primary* issue in interreligious dialogue. Rather, Derek judged that this issue was downright irrelevant; what mattered instead according to Derek was each individual's preferences in religious belief and practice, nothing more. Ecumenical efforts to achieve religious unity were a waste of time for him and those peers adopting his articulated stance. If everyone wanted the same religion, so be it. If no one preferred a religious path, hey, who was to judge anyone else? Prodding the class in our final few weeks of the semester, I asked them if such a stance reduced religion to the level of a commodity or a consumer good, and I hoped that by phrasing the issue in this way they might reconsider. But, lo and behold, they seized upon this analogy, which I had intended to be derogatory, and agreed enthusiastically with this comparison: yes, professor, that's it, religion is a lifestyle choice just like that.

Now for those familiar with the sociological work of Christian Smith, whose recent work has traced the path by which Protestant Christianity in the United States has moved from post-Reformation denunciations of works-righteousness to what Smith calls "moralistic therapeutic deism," Derek's assertion will be familiar. Smith, along with William Cavanaugh and others, have derided this development over the past two decades (Miller 2003; Smith and Denton 2005; Cavanaugh 2008). There are many Dereks now, and the consumerist approach to religion calls into question basic assumptions about religious unity and diversity that governed academic research in these fields right up until the end of the last century.

It may be offensive to religious studies scholars and practitioners of religion to suggest that there is a positive side to the marriage between consumerist ideology and interreligious dialogue. I understand that, and I emphatically reject any necessary connections between this recognition – and the near-inevitable trajectory of this development in secular capitalist postmodern societies – and prescriptive consequences for political and economic practice. But I ask you, doesn't Derek have a point? If we are to appreciate the value of individual autonomy in religious inquiry, shouldn't we recognize that there is a common denominator between choosing a religion and choosing a brand of cereal – namely, that in both cases there is a human agent making the choice? This is the point at the heart of the rational-choice theory of religion offered by scholars such as Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1996; Iannaccone 1998; Finke and Stark 2005). And if we acknowledge the inescapable reality of agency and transformative constructions of religious worldviews in light of human choice, might the turn to the consumer in late modernity prompt us to invert the *ordo* of much comparative theology? Why do people who are able to do so choose one spiritual path over another? Why do they choose to follow one route on their spiritual map and not others that might lead to the same destination? Sincere guardians of tradition like Smith and Cavanaugh bemoan this consumerist development, but we must recognize that all the so-called great religious traditions are in large part the result of choices made by influential leaders and their followers. Now more democratic forms of politics and more egalitarian social structures make these choices less constricted for a wider segment of the human population, including people like Robert Bellah's eponymous Sheila.

Unlike relativism, TWW need not concede that all religious preferences are equal in existential value or, if we choose to introduce this framework, soteriological efficacy. Participants in a theology without walls can come to think that certain theological options are dead-ends or meandering one-lane roads that are unhelpful or inefficient in spiritual journeys. By not precluding the possibility that a participant in religious dialogue can come to the table without representing any group or institution beyond himself or herself, however, TWW need not be threatened by the metaphor of the spiritual marketplace. We can see the marketplace as a place of possibility, not as a prison governed by ironclad rules of determinism or economic efficacy. In a 1974 address, "Map Is Not Territory," the late Jonathan Z. Smith called for a critical reassessment of reified notions of sacred space, claiming that an earlier generation of scholars in the history of religion had often uncritically conflated experience and interpretation (Smith 1978). A map may be all we have to find our way, Smith said, but all maps are necessarily interpretive documents.

If this is so in the realm of geography, it is all the truer in matters of religious agency. No religion has ever existed upon earth without religious adherents constructing its traditions, rituals, and doctrines; appealing to

divine or superhuman origins for such facets of religion does not obviate this assertion, as whatever origin to which religious practitioners appeal is inevitably mediated through human interpretation. Adapting Richardson's formulation noted earlier, the self is a locus of truth even when the source of truth may lie elsewhere. To formulate a theology of religions without foregrounding human choice is to regress to a naïve religious era in which the role of human subjectivity was often passed over in silence and in which religious traditions were reified without an appreciation of historical consciousness and the processes of sociological change. Because one's "spiritual map" is not composed from a God's-eye perspective surveying the whole of reality, the recognition of preferences provides theology with a new starting place from which to engage the bewildering array of religious options available to us as we push our existential shopping carts through the aisles of reality. We can even, to extend the metaphor, push our carts through the walls of existing traditions. In doing so, there is no guarantee our spiritual choices will be intellectually coherent, morally defensible, or spiritually attractive to others. My metaphor of the shopping cart is not designed to defend the content of our spiritual choices, but rather to acknowledge that the spiritualities we carry forth in our lives are there because we placed them in our carts. This is true whether we choose to adopt a classic religious tradition or forge a new idiosyncratic path. Whatever mistakes we make, they will be our own. In that sense, we are all Sheilas.

Note

- 1 For an argument that identifies diminishing theological returns on the strategy of confessionalization, see Buckley (2004).

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