A Religious Journey With Twists and Turns

Moral Foundations - Part 4 of 6

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Author: Barton Gellman, Dale Russakoff
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Late one night in the most tumultuous summer of his youth, Bill Bradley drove with a preacher up a mountain ridge into the darkened Colorado sky. He was 21 years old and had a lot on his mind.

Between a waxing half-moon and a carpet of lights from Estes Park below, Bradley spoke for hours with the Rev. Richard S. Armstrong. He talked of the coming test of his nerve and skill in Tokyo, the intrusions of fame, the kinetic rush of new challenges. What Bradley longed for, he told Armstrong that night, was to maintain his focus on Jesus Christ and to spread the Gospel truth by word and deed.

Many ambitions burned in Bradley, then as now. The following morning, Aug. 18, he would board a flight to Los Angeles en route to the 1964 Olympics. Senior year beckoned after that at Princeton, and Bradley looked ahead to postgraduate goals he had written out in longhand: a Rhodes scholarship, a political career. He was well into his research for a thesis on Harry Truman's 1940 Senate campaign, approaching it as a kind of primer.

No goal, as Bradley recounted them in conversations and correspondence at the time, meant more to him than the one he declared on the mountaintop. Armstrong, a Princeton seminarian and a leader of that year's gathering of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, kept a diary of his encounter with Bradley.

"I'd give anything to know I had helped just one person commit his life to Christ," Bradley said, according to Armstrong's typescript notes. Laughing, Bradley said he knew that hero-worshiping kids would "agree with anything I say, just because I'm a basketball player. But I'm talking about the person who doesn't know Christ, who's never committed his life to anything or anyone. That's the kind of person I'd like to reach, the way I was reached when I was a junior in high school."

Before descending, the two men bowed their heads and asked God to make them instruments of his will. "We talked for a long, long time about faith, life, his life," Armstrong recalled recently. "It was a marvelous time."

For Bradley, the summer of 1964 marked something close to the peak of a six-year evangelical sojourn. At first coolly intellectual in his faith, Bradley went on to embrace many of the competing strains of missionary Christianity, by turns apocalyptic, exemplary and hortatory.

As his basketball skills transformed him into a national celebrity, Bradley made a considered choice to lend his athletic glory to the church. He wrote testimony for the American Tract Society and Norman Vincent Peale, spoke to scores of church and youth groups, and answered hundreds of letters from teenagers seeking moral guidance. He witnessed for Christ in Hong Kong, Tokyo and London.

Though he developed a name among fundamentalists, Bradley's calling as witness received no broad renown beyond the sports page reports that he taught Sunday school. In later adulthood, Bradley walked away from the mission of his teens and early twenties. He has seldom spoken of it since and declines resolutely to do so in his presidential campaign.

How much his faith has changed is hard to discern. Certainly he no longer takes the view, exhorted to 2 million readers of Guideposts magazine in 1965, that "being Christian is an 'all or nothing' proposition." In "Time Present, Time Past," his 1996 memoir, he wrote that he now seeks "my own individual faith." He described it allegorically in the book's shortest chapter – nine pages – as "a river that still runs."

The river's course has shifted. Bradley brought the habit and language of moral judgment to his politics, beginning with a series of profoundly disenchanted speeches in the 1970s. Those early forays in public commentary, deliberately out of sync with their establishment settings, aligned Bradley more closely with society's radical critics than with its leading institutions.

In 18 years in the Senate, Bradley gave precedence to his moral sensibility over conventional definitions of legislative success. Today that sensibility infuses campaign themes of racial healing, serving the neglected and uniting "good people who work in a bad system" to raise the nation nearer its potential.

Without exploring his sacerdotal turns, according to some of Bradley's closest friends, it is not possible to understand his political career or the shape his presidency might take. "I think he's always had a sense of the transcendent in life," said Tom Singer, a California psychiatrist and lasting friend since Princeton. "Early on, he experienced it in Christian terms. Later, I think he has expressed it through political and civic life."

Bradley's sense of mission, according to Princeton roommate and close friend Daniel I. Okimoto, took on greater importance with his near-defeat for reelection in 1990.

"He became enamored of the idea he could play a truth teller's role – in the Old Testament sense of a prophet," Okimoto said. "I remember him saying, 'I'm going to speak on certain issues that may be the ugly underbelly of American society. If my career evaporates, so be it.'"

Bradley will have no part of a conversation these days about faith and politics, rejecting attempts to cross what he sees as a private line. "Everything I'm going to say about it, I've said in writing," he repeated four times, with slight variations, during interviews for this series.

For all Bradley's silence on religion now, there are still echoes of his devotional writings in the language of his presidential campaign. When Bradley forecast his future in his 1964 application for the Rhodes, he dwelt on his religious convictions and said voters who chose his brand of politics would "stand for moral as well as material progress." That is a line he still uses, 35 years later, on the stump.

'Pentecostals and Holy Rollers'

Crystal City's Grace Presbyterian Church, where Bradley's parents baptized him and where he laid them to rest, takes a somewhat cerebral approach to faith. Church secretary Aline Spence summed up the ethos as "sprinkle, immersion by request," a neglect of rigor that leads her elsewhere to worship on her days off.

Warren Bradley, Bill's father, joined the church as a charter member in 1926. Susie Bradley, raised a Methodist and inclined to a more passionate conversation with God, joined her new husband's church in 1941 but brought some of her childhood fervor to its choirs. When the Baptists held summer tent revivals in a sultry parking lot a mile down Bailey road, she often brought her boy.

"I think she just wanted Bill to hear the Gospel preached in a different way than the Presbyterian minister preached it," said Grace Trautwein, Warren's cousin, who attended the revivals. "You'd get people from every religion, Pentecostals and holy rollers, a lot of people walk off the streets. And if they seem to feel

the power of the Holy Spirit working in them, then they will shout."

Writing from a 12-year-old's perspective two decades later, Bradley described those meetings as occasions of dread.

"The preachers frightened me," he wrote in his 1976 book, "Life on the Run." "I couldn't carry a tune. The tents were dry and the wooden folding chairs pinched my behind. During the excessively long prayers, I kept thinking of baseballs, basketballs, and tigers in cages."

What seized Bradley's attention, not long afterward, was an appeal to his competitive drive. In Red Bryant's Boy Scout Troop 549, Bradley and six friends rose to the challenge of what Bryant called the hardest honor they could earn, the maroon and white badge of God and Country.

The teenage friends met in Bryant's basement on Thursday nights for 2 1/2 years to master the badge's syllabus of civics and theology. "Our church has two catechisms, the short catechism and the long catechism," Bryant said. "They did the long one." Bradley memorized 107 refrains. Reciting the requirements to escape God's "wrath and curse," for example, Bradley had to furnish citations to Mark 1:15, Acts 20:21, Acts 2:38, 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 and Colossians 3:16.

John Schwent, another competitor for the badge, recalled recently that "we were finding God in our own way, and rediscovering him."

Bradley's way followed the head, not the heart, a path of will and self-control. Susie Bradley aimed to amend that. When her son finished his junior year at Crystal City High in 1960, she placed a call to Kansas City.

She reached associate secretary Gary Demerest of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and asked for information about sending her son to an FCA conference. At a six-day program that August in Lake Geneva, Wis., Bradley, 17, found a program of "inspiration and perspiration" that set him on a new spiritual course. The conference featured athletic heroes the likes of Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Feller and West Point coach Paul Dietzel. The men sang "Onward Christian Soldiers" and "Rise Up, O Men of God." Football pros Fran Tarkenton and Don Moomaw gave testimonies of their intimate encounters with Jesus.

"I was not prepared for the flow of emotion that hit me," Bradley wrote in 1996. "...I knew I was yielding to the moment in a way that I never had before. I felt that I would never be the same."

In a 1967 interview recorded for a documentary film, Susie Bradley urged filmmaker Michael Ahnemann to include that transformation in his portrait of her son. She described a scene in his high school senior year in which he said bedtime prayers ("He doesn't know I watched him, but I did") even on the day his Hornets lost the state basketball championship by a point.

At Lake Geneva, Bradley learned the fellowship's central aim – to launch "a conquering Christian offensive" against "atheistic materialism and world revolution," as Demerest put it.

"I first met Jesus Christ at an FCA conference when I was a junior in high school," Bradley told 800 assembled athletes at his third conference in 1964, according to the minutes. "I went away saying I want to believe, but I thought I had to have a bolt of lightning or something to really know Christ."

One place he looked, in his senior year of high school, was the Book of Revelation.

“We grew up knowing the atom bomb would drop on us one day,” Schwent said, recalling that Bradley sketched a design for his own backyard fallout shelter – a mound of earth, a vault below, a basketball and a stack of National Geographics to pass the time. Bradley’s discussion of the Bomb referred to Revelations, Schwent said, “and he could quote verses.”

The Bear found in that book, young Bradley told friends, represented the Soviet Union. The Eagle – crying “woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth” – referred to the United States. As for “the Lion of the tribe of Judah,” who pried loose the seven seals and opened the scroll on Judgment Day, Schwent said: “The lion was Israel. That was going to be where the war would be, like Armageddon.”

What came next did not require much exegesis: death astride his pale horse and a great earthquake that blacked out the sun. “We talked about the end of the world,” Schwent recalled. “He was really kind of gloom and doom.”

Bradley, searching for a more direct sign from God, wrote in 1964: “I was still waiting for that big moment when I went to Princeton.”

Crisis and ‘Conversion’

Seized with small-town doubts about his place in the Ivy League, Bradley struggled with fear of failure in his freshman classes at Princeton. A broken foot slowed him in basketball. Then his coach and confidant, Frank Cappon, fell dead of a heart attack in the field house shower.

All Bradley’s insecurities spilled out after a bungled oral exam in French, his bugaboo. “The professor couldn’t seem to make a question simple enough to get an answer out of me,” Bradley wrote in the March 1965 edition of Guideposts, the inspirational Christian magazine published by Norman Vincent Peale. Dejected, Bradley flopped down on his bed in Henry Hall and cried.

Unwilling to discuss his despair with parents or friends, Bradley picked up a record album he had lately received from the Christian athletes. The dust jacket titled it “Under the Master Coach,” and it preached a life in which Jesus calls the plays.

From Bradley’s dormitory phonograph, Ray Hildebrand sang the reverent melody of “How Great Thou Art,” a theme song of FCA retreats and a favorite of Bradley’s father. West Point’s Paul Dietzel pitched in. “We must be like the great athlete who just can’t get enough coaching, who does everything possible to improve himself,” he preached. “That’s the way we ought to play the game of life, under the Master Coach, Jesus Christ.”

From the record came the voice of Bob Pettit, Bradley’s basketball hero, then the NBA’s lifetime scoring leader: “It’s the same kind of feeling I had when one of my teammates told me one time, ‘I’m right behind you, Bob, all the way, no matter what.’ That’s the kind of relationship I feel I have with God, only it’s much better.”

Bradley gave himself over entirely to emotion, crying this time more in judgment than despair. “Here I am – self, self, self, I, I, I. I’m worried only about me; worried about grades; worried about athletics,” Bradley told the Christian magazine Teen Power not long afterward. For the first time, he spoke directly – personally – to Jesus.

In that moment, Bradley began constructing a testimonial of his own. The dying coach, the French debacle, Pettit’s lifeline from the phonograph – all these would be weaved into a parable that Bradley used in inspi-

rational talks and writings for the next four years.

More recently, in his 1996 memoir, Bradley described the experience in a skeptical tone and did not elaborate: “I had convinced myself that this was my ‘personal experience’ with Jesus. I had ‘converted’ to Christianity.”

Witness

Bradley set quietly about finding more converts. To Princeton teammates or friends who lacked interest, he showed no more than a positive example – generosity, humility, discipline. To those who seemed receptive, he spoke more directly.

“He gets dozens of letters a week, from all over the country,” roommate Coleman Hicks said during their senior year. “For example, he showed me one a while ago from a high school boy who asked Bill to decide for him whether it was right to go steady and still play basketball.”

In his sophomore year, Bradley walked into the spare stone First Presbyterian Church on Nassau Street and expressed an interest in teaching Sunday school. A telephone call to the Rev. Otis L. Graham in Crystal City proved reassuring, and William S. Sword Sr., a church elder, gave the young man a try.

When a snow-delayed away game at Dartmouth kept Bradley past midnight one Saturday in Hanover, N.H., Sword made arrangements to cover Bradley’s class the next morning. “Next morning...frozen snow, and the team bus pulled in,” Sword said. “It stopped at the church, and one guy got out. There was Bill Bradley, and he had his Sunday school books under his arm.”

At Bradley’s third visit to the Christian fellowship conference, he came as a featured speaker, just after weightlifting champion Paul Anderson demonstrated how faith *(and 22-inch biceps)* enabled him to drive a nail through a one-inch board with his fist. Every man had to make a choice, Bradley said, between a “materialistic, egocentric life or a godly life.” The first built a pyramid “doomed to crumble.” The second, a lasting role “in the battlefield for Jesus.”

To teenagers gathered back home, Bradley preached an unflinching hierarchy of values.

“It’s not the places you go, or the people you know, or the clothes you wear, or the school you attend, or the money you make that is the important thing in life,” Bradley told one church audience in Princeton Township, according to notes made there by Christian writer James R. Adair. “Are you serving Jesus Christ? Are you living a life that’s for Him and making this your aim, your goal, your whole life?”

An essay for the FCA magazine Christian Athlete offered readers this scenario: “Suppose you are on the bus, or in the locker room discussing plans for the weekend with a group of your buddies. They suggest doing this or that which is wrong in your thinking, and you say so. They ask you ‘Why?’ You say, ‘Because I don’t think that Jesus Christ would want us to do that and that’s why I’m not going to do it.’”

Though Bradley did not dwell on fire and brimstone, he alluded to it in terms that were plain enough. In an evangelist tract titled “The Big Victory,” he returned to the Book of Revelation: “Jesus told us what he thought about tepid followers when He said, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. I find wide application in this verse.”

The effects on Bradley’s audience could be powerful. One testament to that came by letter from Princeton’s First Presbyterian Church to Susie Bradley on April 22, 1965.

“Dear Mrs. Bradley,” wrote Eleanor Meisel. “Please let me introduce myself – I am the wife of the minister of the church that Bill Bradley has made famous. My husband has received calls from ministers from all over, asking about Bill, and Tuesday evening he was invited to introduce Bill, who was to speak at the YMCA in Westfield, N.J., where a thousand people had gathered.”

“It is so overwhelming and almost frightening to see a boy of 21 project the image he does,” Meisel wrote.

‘A Christian Sage’

On Career Day, in Bradley’s last winter at Princeton, he spent an hour in a classroom session on becoming a minister. Armstrong, who had not seen him since their long talk in Colorado, smiled when Bradley walked in. “He was asking me questions. He was thinking about it,” Armstrong said.

The late Arthur S. Link, the historian who was Bradley’s thesis supervisor, shared that view. That winter Link wrote a reference in support of Bradley’s candidacy for a one-year scholarship to seminary.

“I believe very firmly that Bill Bradley ought to give serious thought to vocation in the Church, and I have urged this point of view on him several times,” Link wrote. “I know that he is genuinely undecided and I am sure that he will find his true vocation, whatever that might be, only if he does try a year in seminary.”

Bradley, in an interview, said he had no memory of making the application or considering a career in the clergy.

Bradley pursued his mission without abandoning the fierce competitiveness he exhibited on the basketball court.

At the Tokyo Olympic Games, where he captained the U.S. team, he badly wanted to defeat the Soviet Union and expected – correctly – a very rough game. He also knew the Soviets liked to call out their plays in Russian, expecting no one to understand them. Bradley asked Princeton’s Slavic Languages department to give him a warning phrase in street Russian to use while throwing back an elbow or a knee. Early in the bruising battle for the gold, Bradley hissed, “Bud’te ostorozhno” – roughly, “Watch it, be careful.”

Flustered, the Russians stopped calling out plays and lost some of their harmony on the court.

After he helped beat them, Bradley struck up a friendship with guard Uris Kalninish. He gave him “the Russian translation of a book which is the most important thing in the world to me: the Bible,” Bradley wrote a few months later. “If he reads and studies this Book I think he may come to understand why I feel so strongly about it.”

Bradley testified on the grandest scale in London on Jan. 21, 1966, where evangelist Billy Graham had brought a four-week campaign he termed a crusade. Promoters described it as “the largest evangelical gathering in the history of England.” The rally where Bradley spoke, as one of several warm-up speakers for Graham, drew a crowd of 21,000. He gave a rendition of his familiar conversion story, but his heart no longer was in the tale.

Bradley had been struggling with his conscience, he wrote in his memoir 30 years later, as he came to see a downside to “my Christian fundamentalism.” It did not tolerate debate, and many of its adherents did not sympathize with the civil rights movement that Bradley had come to see as the primary moral question of

the day.

“As I stood on the platform...I did not respect myself,” Bradley wrote. “I was speaking as if religious fervor continued to dominate my life.”

Disillusionment

In the clash between church and social justice, as Bradley saw them, church lost. The passions he withdrew from one he transferred, in large measure, to the other.

While at Oxford, Bradley, at the suggestion of Link, who knew the pastor John Thornton had worshiped mainly at St. Columba Presbyterian Church. While he did not mention the church by name, Bradley writes in his memoir that the minister of his regular church preached a sermon one Sunday “that blatantly defended white Rhodesian power. I walked out, never to return.”

What he felt in those days, his wife, Ernestine Schlant, said in an interview, is that “all of us are better” for the civil rights laws that were enacted in response to the violence that met the struggle for equality waged by American blacks in the South. “That’s maybe a positive way of phrasing the anger: We are all a better country, meaning we really need to be a better country – badly.”

This line of thinking started earlier. At Princeton, Bradley told the writer John L. Phillips, he had taken an American politics course “taught by H.H. Wilson, who had been attacked by McCarthy in the witch hunts of the ‘50s. A lot of stuff I read under him – ’The Politics of Oil,’ Eisenhower’s speech on the military-industrial complex – outraged me. The American people were getting screwed. I’d leave class and wander around campus in a fog.”

Between academic years at Oxford, Bradley took a 2,300-mile drive through the western Soviet Union. Two of the three men who went with him spoke Russian, and they camped with Russian tourists for a more natural encounter with the society. “The pride they held for their country and their system was obvious,” Bradley wrote to Link in the fall of 1966. “If I get started now I might write too much. Suffice it to say that the trip gave me a truer picture of Soviet life, challenged my spirit of patriotism, exposed some previously unnoticed ills in our own society.”

Bradley’s return to New York to play for the Knicks coincided with the struggles over civil rights, Vietnam and the environment. He began to speak out, most often in jarring counterpoint to the occasion.
In 1971, the sponsors of a banquet for St. Louis scholar-athletes invited Bradley to help celebrate. He gave a long exposition of the maladies, personal and public, that the new high school graduates would face.

After quoting song lyrics from Bob Dylan – ”the curse, it is cast” and “the order is rapidly fading” – he gave the students this tour of the horizon: “We live in a world where survival becomes more precarious every day. The basic racial antagonism of our American history remains festering without sufficient attention; 18-year-old Americans are sent – unconstitutionally – to die in the civil war of an underdeveloped country on the other side of the world for the espoused purpose of protecting America; political fugitives compose one-half of the FBI’s most-wanted list; hollow men in windowless skyscrapers make private investment decisions without concern for man or nature; mass education programs students to fit into categories of mediocrity where imagination falls before the sword of efficiency.

“We learn our myths early and see the world through them – the myth of America’s moral superiority, our manifest destiny, the melting pot, and the deceptive belief in progress; and hovering behind the myths lie the frightful possibilities of nuclear war where man can return himself to ashes.”

He added: “I fear for the future of our country.”

Two years later, in 1973, Bradley gave the commencement speech at St. Peter’s College, a Jesuit institution with 871 graduates. The Knicks had just won their second championship, and the students broke into the season’s signature cheer: “Deee-fense, deee-fense.” Bradley, by contemporary accounts, did not crack a smile.

What he did was to note that the nation’s $2 billion annual bill for jewelry exceeded its anti-poverty budget; $3 billion spent on pleasure boating surpassed foreign aid; $2 billion for golf – his mother’s athletic passion – doubled expenditures on municipal water supplies.

Then he added language drawn directly from his missionary sermons: “If you want no more Vietnams and Watergates, you must commit yourself to something larger than yourself....We must escape the materialistic habit of defining ourselves by our possessions, titles and honors.”

So it went for Bradley – at a Boy Scouts of America fund-raiser at the Waldorf Astoria, even at a 1976 Jaycees award dinner in which he spoke as one of the honorees. There he took as his text Leo Tolstoy’s novella “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” a radical critique, with religious overtones, of Russia’s 19th century establishment.

In an interview last month, Bradley summarized what he was trying to say in the speech. “What if the right things, considered by the highest people as the things to do, were really false, and all the other impulses one had that were scarcely perceptible, that were immediately repressed – whatever the language is – were true?” he said. “At that moment of great public being honored I was saying, ‘Now, wait a minute now, there is a whole different dimension to this. You can’t just take the values that are placed before us.’

“Today Bradley’s verdict is that his 1970s commentaries “were all fairly simplistic,” the efforts of a young man “to struggle through who we were, facing the dark chapters, the bright chapters of our history.” He cited as motivations “the ordeal of the war, maybe the diminishment of the zeal and optimism of the civil rights movement. And the continuing inequities that one saw – apartheid and other things.”

“I don’t think that there was ever a time when I was in despair,” he added.

Politics as Calling

Running for Senate in 1978, Bradley traced his political impulse directly to the religious traditions of his youth. “I was raised a Presbyterian and became much more evangelical,” he said then. “I’ve always believed it’s one’s job to serve one’s calling. My view of politics derives from that.”

Politics as calling gave Sen. Bradley an aura of moral certainty that annoyed some of his colleagues. He became known, among other things, for offering hopeless amendments just to make a point.

On the stump, Bradley often conveys a sense of mission with a parable. Three stonecutters in medieval times are working side by side. The first says he is cutting identical blocks, one after the other, in back-breaking tedium. The second says he is earning a living to feed his family.

“Third stonecutter: What are you doing? ‘Oh, I’m building a holy lighthouse that will last one thousand years,’ “ Bradley said in one rendition of the story last summer.

Then he turned to his audience in Chicago: “And the question is, which of those stonecutters are you? If

more of us could realize that, multiracial coalitions could come together to serve people who are underserved in this country. To provide them with health care, to reduce child poverty, to increase participation in politics."

But that was not all. His campaign, he said in closing, "is also about building that holy lighthouse that will last for a thousand years."

Staff researcher Madonna Lebling and special correspondent Christine B. Whelan in Oxford contributed to this report.

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