

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGIONS AND THE
DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the memory of my father, Dr. Arthur A. Atkisson, Jr., whose sudden death when I was 11 gave me a special perspective on life that most people gain far too late in their own lives. I like to imagine the lively and spirited debate we might have had over this thesis, lounging in a boat on Sawyer's Harbor, drinking and laughing long into the night.

*Did I see the shade of a sailor
On the bridge through the wheelhouse pane
Held fast to the wheel of the rocking ship
As I squinted my eyes in the rain*

*For the ship had turned into the wind
Against the storm to brace
And underneath the sailor's hat
I saw my father's face*

Sting

"The Wild Wild Sea"

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“If we could go right back to the elements of societies and examine the very first records of their histories, I have no doubt that we should there find the first cause of their prejudices, habits, dominating passions, and all that comes to be called the national character. We should there be able to discover the explanation of customs which now seem contrary to the prevailing mores, of laws which seem opposed to recognized principles, and of incoherent opinions still found here and there in society that hang like the broken chains still occasionally dangling from the ceiling of an old building but carrying nothing. This would explain the fate of certain peoples who seem borne by an unknown force toward a goal of which they themselves are unaware... The taste for analysis comes to nations only when they are growing old, and when at last they do turn their thoughts to their cradle, the mists of time have closed round it, ignorance and pride have woven fables around it, and behind all that the truth is hidden.”

Alexis de Tocqueville,
Democracy in America

PREFACE

There are two closely related problems that immediately confront any discussion of civil religion. First, there is no one, universally accepted definition. Rousseau, who first coined the phrase in his treatise *On the Social Contract*, described it as “a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it belongs to the sovereign to establish, not exactly as dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociability, without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or a faithful subject.”¹ The artificial nature of Rousseau’s civil religion, however, established like edict by the sovereign, seems more appropriate when applied to a totalitarian state than to a nation like ours, where no statist ideology has ever been imposed upon the citizens. Rousseau’s definition is therefore inadequate in attempting to understand *American* civil religion. The definition I have chosen instead is sociologist Robert Bellah’s, whose scholarship on the subject figures prominently not only in this thesis, but in the academic community at large. Bellah defines civil religion as a *common set of beliefs, symbols and rituals that provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere.*²

The second problem is that the phenomenon called “civil religion” has been discussed in the academic world under a variety of other names, usually through some combination of the words *civil*, *civic*, *public* or *common* with the words *religion*, *faith* or *theology*. Hence, what one author describes as *civic faith* and another author describes as *public religion*

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1987), 226.

² Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *American Civil Religion*, eds. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 24.

more often than not are the same thing. As the title of this work plainly indicates, I have opted to use the more common phrase “civil religion,” if again for no other reason than my indebtedness to Bellah.

That modern Western scholars have had such a difficult time finding a common name and definition for civil religion is not at all surprising. For much of human history, as in some lingering parts of the world today, there was little if any distinction between the civil and religious realms. Indeed, the idea of a civil religion would have perplexed most citizens of the pre-modern era, for they could not have conceived of a completely civil or secular realm outside of the religious world in which they lived, where everything—including their form of government or their “national purpose”—was imbued with some sacred or spiritual meaning.

In the first category one finds ancient Egypt, whose people built pyramids to honor their divine god-kings; the Roman Empire, where “magistrates very frequently were adored as provincial deities, with the pomp of altars and temples, of festivals and sacrifices”; the medieval Byzantine Empire, whose emperor “was himself so much a religious as well as a political figure that he was often treated ceremonially almost as a reincarnated Christ”; and even twentieth-century Japan, where the emperor was revered as a god until post-war reforms after 1945 diminished his divine status.³ In the category of “national purpose” one finds the Hebrews of ancient Israel, who believed they had a special covenant with God to be a “light unto the nations;” the United States, whose earliest settlers saw themselves as the “New Israel” and borrowed the same biblical imagery; and even the recent Islamic theocracy of Afghanistan, where Taliban clerics believed they were setting an example for all Moslems across the world to follow. What this small handful of historical examples illustrates is

³ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 96; Francis Oakley, *Kingship and the Gods: The Western Apostasy* (Houston: University of Saint Thomas, 1968), 41.

nothing more than what scholars like cultural historian Christopher Dawson have long known: that the “complete secularization of social life is a relatively modern and anomalous phenomenon. Throughout the greater part of mankind’s history, in all ages and states of society, religion has been the great central unifying force in culture.”⁴

Significantly, it was during the Enlightenment— the Western world’s revolt against religious tradition and authority— that Rousseau argued for the need of a civil religion. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Rousseau recognized an inherent danger in any attempt to *completely* separate civic and religious life and to ignore the unifying effect that religion provides. Near the end of the *Social Contract* he insisted that no state has ever been founded without a religious basis and praised Hobbes for daring to suggest that church and state be reunited, but at the same time he dismissed the possibility of there ever being a specifically *Christian* republic. True Christianity, he believed, could never be a state religion because it is entirely spiritual, “concerned exclusively with things heavenly... the homeland of the Christian is not of this world.”⁵

Rousseau’s solution to this problem was the “purely civil profession of faith” established by the sovereign, the positive dogmas of which would include the “existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent divinity that foresees and provides; the life to come; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; the sanctity of the social contract and of the laws.” Its negative dogmas Rousseau confined to just one: intolerance. Accordingly, any citizen could profess whatever religious beliefs he pleased “without it being any of the sovereign’s business to know that they are. For since the other world is outside the province

⁴ Christopher Dawson, Religion and Culture (New York: Meridian, Inc., 1958), 49-50.

⁵ Rousseau, Writings, 224.

of the sovereign, whatever the fate of subjects in the life to come, it is none of its business, so long as they are good citizens in this life.”⁶

Good citizenship, therefore, was ultimately the goal of Rousseau’s civil religion. So long as he abided by the central tenets of the civil religion, a citizen’s other religious beliefs were of little consequence to the state, as long as those beliefs contributed to making him a responsible member of society. This sentiment was an integral part of the Roman civil religion, where the various modes of worship in the Roman world “were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrates, as equally useful.”⁷ As their empire expanded to include increasingly diverse populations, the Romans articulated a civic faith, or *Romanitas*, to serve as a substructure for the coexistent faiths within their borders and to promote a sense of unity.⁸ Judaism and Christianity notwithstanding, religions assimilated by the empire were often more than willing “to add to their own devotions the customary civic worship of the old gods of Rome and the requisite ceremonies of the Imperial cult.”⁹

In the twentieth century, American President Dwight Eisenhower famously declared that our “government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.” Sociologist Will Herberg recognized in President Eisenhower’s statement a shade of the old *Romanitas*, an expression of a common religion “undergirding American life and overarching American society despite all indubitable differences of region, section, culture, and class... by which Americans define themselves and establish their

⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁷ Gibbon, *Decline*, 50-51.

⁸ Catherine Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), vii.

⁹ Oakley, *Kingship*, 23.

unity.” He named this common religion the *American Way of Life* and described it as a “civic religion” that both influences, and is influenced *by*, America’s predominantly Protestant, Catholic and Jewish denominations, to which the civic religion “assigns a place of great eminence and honor in the American scheme of things.” But in Herberg’s analysis, the civic religion itself exerted a far greater influence on the public habits of Americans than did their own denominational religious beliefs, as we will see in Chapter One.¹⁰

Despite Herberg’s research and the work of other scholars in the 1950s and early 1960s, the idea of an American civil religion did not receive extensive attention or discussion until 1967, when an article called “Civil Religion in America” appeared in the *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. The author, Robert Bellah, argued that there were “certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share” and that “have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion.”¹¹

Perhaps it was Bellah’s resurrection of Rousseau’s specific term “civil religion” that caught the attention of the media and the academic community, for a host of new articles on the subject began to appear, and soon the existence of an American civil religion was something that most scholars took for granted. More than likely, however, the response to Bellah’s article had a great deal to do with its timing, for the United States of 1967 was a very different place than the United States of 1955, when Herberg’s *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* was published. In the 1950s, America was climbing toward the zenith of its military and industrial

¹⁰ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 84, 77-78, 89.

¹¹ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 24.

power and experiencing a religious revival in a culture still nominally dominated by Judeo-Christian values; it was a time of consensus and optimism. By the end of the 1960s, America was reeling from a costly and unpopular war in Vietnam, witnessing violent civil disturbances on its own streets, and experiencing profound social changes that challenged the nation's predominantly Judeo-Christian moral consensus like never before, setting the stage for a culture war that continues to this day. Bellah himself believed we were entering a new "time of trial," one that "would precipitate a major new set of symbolic forms."¹²

And so it did, though not perhaps in the form that he imagined. It is in fact the central thesis of this paper that there are *two* American civil religions today, one conservative and one liberal, and both are increasingly materialistic expressions of Enlightenment liberalism that threaten the long-term success of the American democratic experiment. The first chapter of this paper will describe these two civil religions in depth, drawing upon the earlier work of authors like Herberg and Bellah who brought the "traditional" or conservative civil religion to light and using the more recent work of authors like James Hunter—and the observations of this author—to present the contours of a newer, more liberal civil religion. The second chapter will examine the intellectual roots that both civil religions share in biblical religion, classical thought and Enlightenment liberalism. The third chapter will show how liberalism became the dominant influence of the three and how this contributed to the rise of a new American civil religion. Finally, the fourth chapter will briefly review the salient points of the first three chapters and explain how America's two civil religions threaten the long-term success of our democracy.

A few qualifications are needed, however. First, I am not suggesting that liberal civil religion is either as powerful or as pervasive as the older, more conservative civil religion,

¹² Ibid., 40.

especially in terms of its influence on political rhetoric and national identity. I am simply arguing that it exists, that if one accepts the existence of an American civil religion as described by scholars like Herberg and Bellah and applies the same criteria to today's culture war, one can clearly discern the contours of a liberal civil religion on the other side of the cultural divide. At least one published author, Robert Wuthnow, has already described the existence of separate conservative and liberal civil religions in America today, though in much less detail than I will describe them in the first chapter of this work.¹³

Second, I have generally opted to use the terms "conservative" and "liberal" when describing these civil religions and corollary viewpoints that the authors I cite sometimes describe as "orthodox" and "progressivist," or "utilitarian" and "expressivist." While the correlation between these terms is not always exact, it is close enough for the purposes of my argument and will, I hope, minimize confusion. It should also be borne in mind, as I emphasize at several points in the following chapters, that "conservative" is a rather inadequate adjective for most *modern* conservative beliefs, which bear little resemblance to the older conservative tradition of Edmund Burke.

Third, these rival civil religions do not necessarily encompass *every* conservative and liberal opinion in American political culture, nor do they accurately represent *all* the views of someone who might properly "belong" in one civil religion or the other. Just as a Baptist or Episcopalian might not agree with every member of his denomination, much less with the rest of Christendom, so too are there wide differences and even contradictions within each civil religion. They are not so much coherent religions or philosophies as they are

¹³ See Wuthnow's *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pages 146-48, for his brief description of conservative and liberal civil religion.

substructures, like *Romantitas*, that cover a wide variety of viewpoints and lifestyles throughout the whole of American culture.

Finally, in my attempt to describe these civil religions, their sources, and their development throughout American history, I necessarily treat some subjects with far less detail than they deserve; the influence of Enlightenment liberalism on American civil religion alone is worth a volume of its own. I am convinced that the full story of American civil religion, both conservative and liberal, is yet to be told. I only hope that this thesis does some justice to a very fascinating— and in light of current events very *relevant*— topic.

CHAPTER I:

CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL CIVIL RELIGIONS

On the evening of September 11, 2002, President George W. Bush addressed the nation from New York City. It was a somber occasion, the first anniversary of terrorist attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center and a section of the Pentagon, claiming more than 3,000 lives. Like most televised presidential speeches, the choice of background was carefully orchestrated to reinforce the president's message: over his right shoulder stood the Statue of Liberty, and over his left shoulder an illuminated American flag fluttered in the night breeze. The president's speech was short, but in seven minutes it managed to evoke some of the foremost symbols and ideals commonly found in American public rhetoric: the existence of a personal God "who intended us to live in liberty and equality" and "to serve each other and our country," America as "the hope of all mankind," and a divinely ordained national mission to "extend the blessings of freedom."¹ Six months later American forces invaded Iraq and deposed the government of Saddam Hussein in what the president and his administration called a "war of liberation." One year after the invasion, in a press conference at which he addressed an increasingly violent insurgency in Iraq, the president reiterated the

¹ George W. Bush, President's Remarks to the Nation, Ellis Island, New York, 11 September 2002, available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020911-3.html>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

American mission there as nothing less than “an historic opportunity... to *change the world for the better*” [emphasis added].²

Whatever else they may have accomplished, the war against Iraq and the larger war against terrorism revealed a continuing rift in public opinion over how Americans viewed their nation and its role in the world. On the one hand there were those like President Bush who believed it was America’s duty as “the hope of all mankind” to take upon itself the burden of removing a dangerous dictator and replacing him with a democratic government. Partisans of this view— mainly conservatives— focused on the historically *liberal* goals of spreading democracy and freedom, dismissing or minimizing any economic factors that may have influenced the war. On the other side of the divide were those— mainly liberals— who viewed the war as an act of naked aggression driven by exaggerated fears, greed for oil and contempt for the Islamic world. Conservatives were inclined to view America as a force for good in the world with a national mission to spread values like freedom, democracy and capitalism abroad; liberals were inclined to view America as a source of resentment and oppression in the world, and they generally opposed any form of American military intervention unless it was sanctioned by the world community.

Nor was this rift limited to debates over foreign policy. At home conservatives and liberals continued to fight legal battles that revealed fundamentally different attitudes about this nation and its history. In 2002, a federal appeals court in California declared the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional because of the words “one nation under God.” In 2003, the Supreme Court struck down a Texas state anti-sodomy law as unconstitutional, and a granite monument of the Ten Commandments was removed from Alabama’s state judicial building because, like the Pledge of Allegiance, it amounted to an endorsement of religion in the eyes

² George W. Bush, White House Press Conference, 14 April 2004, available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040413-20.html>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

of a federal court. In 2004, the state of Massachusetts and the city of San Francisco opened the door for gay marriages, and the president in turn called for a constitutional amendment defining marriage to be “between a man and a woman.” Again and again the rift in these social debates was essentially the same: conservatives tended to invoke Judeo-Christian morality and the importance of religion in America; liberals fought for diversity and freedom of expression, inveighed against intolerance, and were generally hostile to any “intrusion” of religion into public life.

These debates were not entirely new. The deep differences of opinion motivating them have a long history that transcends the legal and political realms; issue after issue they return to fundamental questions about right and wrong, the existence or *non*-existence of the Divine, and the proper ordering of human life. As James Hunter explained in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, each side tends to invoke different sources of moral authority, each side struggles to “monopolize the symbols of legitimacy,” and their public discourse “is almost always framed in rhetoric that is absolute, comprehensive, and ultimate— and, in this case, it is ‘religious’ even when it is not religious in a traditional way, or when those who promote a position are hostile to traditional forms of religious expression.”³

Herberg’s “American Way of Life”

In the early 1950s, the United States seemed to be experiencing another one of its historic religious revivals: in short, more people were going to church and more people were

³ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 147, 62.

talking about God than had been the case for many years prior.⁴ Intrigued, Jewish sociologist Will Herberg began a study of American religiosity that was eventually published as a book entitled *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. Initially, the polls he researched seemed to confirm that Americans were as devoutly religious as ever: 87% affirmed an absolute belief in God, 83% believed the Bible was the revealed word of God, and 75% believed in the importance of religion in American life. And yet Herberg also discovered some disconcerting trends he had not expected: 32% of the same people admitted they had not been to church in the previous three months, 40% confessed they never or hardly ever read the Bible, only 5% had any fear of going to Hell, and about 80% said “that what they were ‘most serious about’ was not the life after death in which they said they believed, but in trying to live as comfortably in this life as possible.” Most significantly, more than half of those polled said their religious beliefs had no real effect on their ideas or conduct in business and politics.⁵

Herberg had discovered a paradox— what he called “pervasive secularism amid mounting religiosity... America seems to be at once the most religious and the most secular of nations.” In this sense, the rise in church membership and religious identification among Americans seemed to have more to do with a sense of belonging than it did with genuine religious faith. In other words, being affiliated with a religion— *any* religion, as far as President Eisenhower was concerned— was an important part of being an *American*, as long as citizens kept their sectarian religious views mostly private.⁶

But if most Americans kept their religious beliefs out of business and politics, what beliefs *did* they follow in the public realm? Clearly *some* ideas or standards governed their

⁴ In 1954, after successful lobbying by the Knights of Columbus and the support of many Americans, Congress added the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance.

⁵ Herberg, *Protestant*, 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

public behavior; how else could America have achieved such lasting success and civil order? This suggested to Herberg that “over and above conventional religion, there is to be found among Americans some sort of faith or belief or set of convictions, not generally designated as religion but definitely operative as such in their lives in the sense of providing them with some fundamental context of normativity and meaning.” Herberg alternately called this set of convictions the “operative faith” or “common faith” or “civic religion” of the American people. He named it the *American Way of Life* and said that if it had to be defined in one word,

“democracy” would undoubtedly be the word, but democracy in a peculiarly American sense. On its political side it means the Constitution; on its economic side “free enterprise”; on its social side, an equalitarianism which is not only compatible with but indeed actually implies vigorous economic competition and high mobility. Spiritually, the American Way of Life is best expressed in a certain kind of “idealism” which has come to be recognized as characteristically American. It is a faith that has its symbols and its rituals, its holidays and its liturgy, its saints and its sancta; and it is a faith that every American, to the degree that he is an American, knows and understands.⁷

Americans, Herberg believed, did not pursue money or worldly success simply for the sake of it; “such ‘materialistic’ things must, in the American mind, be justified in terms of ‘service’ or ‘stewardship’ or ‘general welfare’... [a]nd because they are so idealistic, Americans tend to be moralistic: they are inclined to see all issues as plain and simple, black and white, issues of morality. Every struggle in which they are seriously engaged becomes a ‘crusade.’” He wrote that the American Way of Life could “best be understood as a kind of secularized Puritanism, a Puritanism without transcendence, without sense of sin or judgment.” That is, Americans still retained the activist zeal of Puritanism, but as the polls suggested they seemed to lack any *real* concern about the life to come, nor did they doubt their own inherent righteousness as *Americans*— any American cause could *only* be a good

⁷ Ibid., 74, 78-79.

cause. And when they said that they “believed in religion,” what they really meant was that they believed in the “indispensability of religion as the foundation of society” or more simply, the “utility of religion.”⁸

Bellah’s “American Civil Religion”

Twelve years later came Robert Bellah’s article in the winter issue of *Daedalus*, in which he began with the statement “that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America... [that] has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does.” Dissecting President Kennedy’s inaugural address of 1961, with his repeated references to God and his call to carry out God’s will on earth, Bellah argued that

the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension. Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion.⁹

The president’s inaugural address, Bellah believed, was one of the important rituals of this civil religion. There was also an “annual ritual calendar for the civil religion” in holidays like Memorial Day, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July. The symbols of the civil religion could be found in places like Arlington Cemetery, with its Tomb of the Unknown

⁸ Ibid., 79, 81, 84-85.

⁹ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 21, 24.

Soldier and the eternal flame of a martyred president. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were the “sacred scriptures” of this civil religion.¹⁰

In Bellah’s account, the American civil religion has always embraced belief in a Supreme Being “actively interested and involved in history with a special concern for America.” Just as he delivered the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, so he delivered America’s Puritan settlers from a corrupt Old World to a new promised land in North America. Americans, in this view, are a chosen people with a divinely ordained mission to “establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all nations.”¹¹

Yet despite the Hebraic imagery, Bellah argued that the God of the American civil religion is not specifically biblical. He is an austere and deistic God, “much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love.”¹² One can detect here a faint echo of Rousseau, whose “positive dogmas” of civil religion included the “existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent divinity that foresees and provides; the life to come; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; the sanctity of the social contract and of the laws.”¹³

While Bellah believed that the American civil religion was a positive force still very much alive in the New Frontier and Great Society rhetoric of the 1960s, he was troubled by the conflict in Vietnam and admitted that the “civil religion has not always been invoked in favor of worthy causes. On the domestic scene, an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag has been used to attack non-conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds.” He conceded that the theme of the *American Israel* had been used “as a

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ Ibid., 28, 29.

¹² Ibid., 28.

¹³ Rousseau, *Writings*, 226.

justification for the shameful treatment of the Indians” and worried that on the international scene the idea of manifest destiny had been used

to legitimate several adventures in imperialism since the early-nineteenth century. Never has the danger been greater than today. The issue is not so much one of imperial expansion, of which we are accused, as of the tendency to assimilate all governments or parties in the world which support our immediate policies or call upon our help by invoking the notion of free institutions and democratic values.¹⁴

In addition, Bellah believed there was a looming theological crisis for American civil religion. Pondering whether an avowed agnostic could ever be elected president, Bellah seemed to acknowledge that a growing number of Americans were uncomfortable about the prevalence of the word “God” in political discourse and preferred that it be removed altogether. “If the whole God symbolism requires reformulation,” he wrote, “there will be obvious consequences for the civil religion, consequences perhaps of liberal alienation and of fundamentalist ossification that have not so far been prominent in this realm.”¹⁵

In sum, Bellah believed that Americans were entering a “third time of trial.” Their first trial had been the “question of independence” and their second trial had been the “issue of slavery”; both trials provided “the major symbols of the American civil religion.” The third trial Bellah described as the “problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world, a world seeking to attain many of the things, material and spiritual, that we have already attained.” He wondered if a successful negotiation of this trial might create a “major new set of symbolic forms” and result in a form of “world civil religion” that would “draw on religious traditions beyond the sphere of Biblical religion alone.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38, 40.

Hunter's "Orthodox Moral Vision"

Unlike Herberg and Bellah, James Hunter did not specifically undertake a study of "civil religion" but instead described the same phenomenon in terms of a war for the "public culture," which he defined as "the symbols and meanings that order the life of the community or region or nation as a whole" and which "embraces the collective myths surrounding its history and future promise":

Such myths elaborate the moral significance of the nation's founding in the context of global history; they guide the selection of its heroes and villains; and they interpret the content of the founding documents— its Declaration of Independence, its Constitution, its Bill of Rights. By providing an interpretation of the past in this way, these myths also articulate the precedents and ideals for the nation's future. They set out the national priorities and tasks yet to be accomplished, and they envision the mission yet to be fulfilled.¹⁷

Hunter believed the public culture was being contested by two competing moral visions or public philosophies that "do not always take form in coherent, clearly articulated, sharply differentiated world views. Rather, these moral visions take expression as *polarizing impulses* or *tendencies* in American culture... *the impulse toward orthodoxy* and *the impulse toward progressivism*." The impulse toward orthodoxy, he argued, manifests itself in the more conservative religious denominations of Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism as well as purely secular organizations that share a similar agenda, and together they tend to take conservative positions on the various political, social and economic issues of the culture war: for example, "they oppose the Equal Rights Amendment, gay rights, liberal pornography

¹⁷ Hunter, Culture, 55.

laws, and abortion on demand; they support tuition tax credits, a voluntary prayer amendment to the Constitution, and a strong national defense.”¹⁸

The beliefs motivating these political views closely mirror the beliefs of the civil religion described by Herberg and Bellah. First there is the acceptance of an historical God and a conviction that America, as the “embodiment of providential wisdom,” is based on Christian or at least *biblical* principles. This view emphasizes the intention of the Founding Fathers to create a government based on God, the laws of the Old Testament, and the “divinely inspired” Constitution and Bill of Rights. Because of their belief in the special role God has chosen for our nation, the orthodox are obviously more inclined to view America as “a force for good in the world.”¹⁹

Second, there is a strong belief in *freedom*. In this case, the “meaning of freedom, as it is emphasized within the various orthodox communities, is the freedom enjoyed by a society when it does not live under despotism; the freedom of a *society* to govern itself.” There is also a strong tendency among the orthodox to define freedom in a way that “highlights the importance of economic self-determination, as in ‘free’ enterprise.”²⁰ Indeed, some of the more prominent evangelicals Hunter cites frequently link capitalism and free enterprise with the values of the Old Testament and even of Jesus Christ. Jerry Falwell, for example, wrote that “the free enterprise system is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs in the Bible. Jesus Christ made it clear that the work ethic was a part of His plan for man. Ownership of

¹⁸ Ibid., 43, 91.

¹⁹ Ibid., 109, 110, 116.

²⁰ Ibid., 110.

property is biblical. Competition in business is biblical.”²¹ Underlying statements such as these is a “conviction that economic and spiritual freedoms go hand in hand.”²²

Finally, the orthodox have a deep commitment to the idea of *justice*, which they generally define “in terms of the Judeo-Christian standards of moral righteousness.” In this view, a just society is therefore a “morally conscientious and lawful society” that strays from standards of biblical morality only at great peril.²³ When a society becomes too permissive on issues like pornography and homosexuality, it risks the same kind of divine wrath that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Had he written *Culture Wars* after the terrorist attacks of September 11, Hunter might have again cited Jerry Falwell, who blamed the calamity on “the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way— all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say ‘you helped this happen.’”²⁴

In many ways, Hunter’s description of the orthodox moral vision sounds a lot like the “American-Legion type of ideology” that repelled Bellah, the kind that “fuses God, country, and flag... to attack non-conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds.” In fact it may very well represent the “fundamentalist ossification” of the American civil religion that Bellah feared in 1967. For now it is sufficient to note that from the release of *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* in 1955 to the release of *Culture Wars* in 1991, there exist the clear contours of a conservative vision of America with visibly religious characteristics. Whether it

²¹ Jerry Falwell, *Listen America!* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 13.

²² Hunter, *Culture*, 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁴ Falwell later apologized for his remarks and clarified that he blamed only the terrorists. Quoted from <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/index.html>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

is called a civil religion or an orthodox moral vision is less important than the fact that a substantial number of American citizens profess it in their words and deeds, particularly in the public square where their own sectarian religious beliefs may not always be as vocal or visible.

Conservative Civil Religion

At this point it is worth combining the observations of Herberg, Bellah and Hunter into one concise description of conservative civil religion. In doing so I will use the categories of “beliefs, symbols and rituals” proposed by Bellah with additional subcategories like “saints, heroes and liturgy” that have been drawn from Herberg and Hunter. In presenting these I will include some that are the product of my own observations—observations that benefit from the passage of time and thus a more contemporary vantage point on the state of American civil religion today.

It may be helpful to clarify at the outset that what I mean by “conservative” is nothing more than what most Americans today *think of* as conservative: someone typically of Republican party affiliation who is either an avid capitalist, a culturally conservative Christian, an advocate of militant foreign policy, or some combination of the three. What may be obvious to the discerning reader in the pages ahead is that conservative civil religion in America today bears only the most occasional and superficial resemblance to the larger conservative intellectual tradition which authors like Russell Kirk trace to English philosopher-statesman Edmund Burke and American disciples like John Adams and John Randolph. These men were conservatives of an entirely different breed; they took tough stands against the arbitrary use (and abuse) of government power, they were deeply

concerned about the impact of industrialization and capitalism on traditional values, and they much preferred a republican system of strong local governments and communities against the tyrannies of centralized government, mass society and popular democracy. Their kind of conservatism died during the Gilded Age of economic expansion that followed the Civil War, and despite some infrequent concessions to its memory, modern American conservatives operate from within a completely different tradition: the tradition of Enlightenment liberalism. They are as deeply influenced by its values as today's "liberals," albeit in different ways. As Ken Grasso noted in *The Moral Enterprise*, "Enlightenment liberalism today supplies both the conceptual framework within which we think about politics and the idiom in which our civil conversation is conducted."²⁵

Beliefs

Of the conservative civil religion's beliefs, the first and most deeply ingrained is the *chosenness* of America: the belief that we are a special nation with a special purpose in the world. Whether that purpose is to serve as a virtuous model of biblical rectitude or to spread the benefits of democracy and capitalism (or both), the strong sense of national purpose has remained constant, from John Winthrop exhorting his Puritans to create a "city upon a hill" to John Kennedy calling his nation to "pay any price, bear any burden... to assure the survival and the success of liberty" to George W. Bush promising to "change the world for the better." As a result Americans are always searching for a new crusade, and among conservatives this need increasingly manifests itself at home in legal battles against issues like

²⁵ Kenneth L. Grasso, "The Triumph of Will: Rights Mania, the Culture of Death, and the Crisis of Enlightenment Liberalism," in *A Moral Enterprise: Essays in Honor of Francis Canavan*, eds. Kenneth L. Grasso and Robert P. Hunt (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 223.

homosexuality and abortion, and abroad in diplomatic and military battles against the last remnants of communism and the rising threat of global terrorism.

Second, this sense of chosenness leads to a kind of national hubris that anything American is obviously better than any alternatives. Where this is most evident is in the conviction that American democracy is the best form of government available. To suggest otherwise in America is tantamount to heresy. Even the most religiously conservative members of American society hold this conviction; you would be hard-pressed to find a single American clergyman seriously advocating government by theocracy, just as you would search in vain for anyone seriously demanding the abolition of one or more political parties. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited these shores in the 1830s, he marveled that “there is not a single religious doctrine in the United States hostile to democratic and republican institutions.”²⁶ A modern observer could easily go one step further and conclude that there are *no* serious doctrines of any sort— religious or secular— overtly hostile to democratic and republican institutions in this country.

Similarly, American conservatives almost universally support our capitalist economy as the best in the world, though there are more than a few who prefer less government regulation of private enterprise. As Hunter observed, conservatives have a strong tendency to define freedom in terms of political and especially *economic* self-determination. America is a land of limitless opportunity, and most conservatives argue that there is no reason other than laziness or mental incapacity why someone should remain poor in this country. Wealth is considered a measure of success and hard work, a fulfillment of the American Dream. Government attempts to limit wealth are considered un-American. Making money is, in effect, a patriotic duty in the conservative civil religion.

²⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 289.

Conversely, conservative civil religion tends to be Christian in its moral orientation. Even the “capitalist conservatives” who do not necessarily consider themselves religious tend to frown upon the social agendas of groups like feminists and homosexuals who threaten, in their view, to disturb the natural social order. Like Rousseau and President Eisenhower, they believe more in the *utility* of religion than in any particular religion itself, or in what J. Budziszewski calls *instrumentalism* the idea that religious faith should be used as a tool for the ends of the state, or the maintenance of society.²⁷ One hears from their lips less a genuine belief in God than in a divinely ordained mission to spread democracy and capitalism—curiously secular goals that by most objective standards have little to do with God or Judeo-Christian morality.

Altogether the beliefs of the conservative civil religion might be described, as they were by Stephen Carter, as a theology of “America First.” Echoing Herberg’s concern that they comprise a kind of secularized Puritanism with no sense of sin or judgment, Carter wrote the following:

It may be that we are comfortable with them precisely because they demand nothing of us. Not only are they easily ignored by those who happen to have no religious beliefs, but they make virtually no demands on the conscience of those who do. God is thanked for the success of an enterprise recently completed or asked to sanctify one not yet fully begun. God is asked to bless the nation, its people, and its leaders. But nobody, in the civil religion, is asked to do anything for God.²⁸

Symbols

The symbols of the conservative civil religion can be divided into four broad categories: scriptures, saints, heroes and physical symbols. The holiest of this first category is

²⁷ J. Budziszewski, “The Problem with Conservatism,” *First Things* 62 (April 1996): 38-44.

²⁸ Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 51-52.

of course the Declaration of Independence, which conservatives tend to interpret as a *divine* sanction for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to include, for example, the right of the fetus to be born and to enjoy the liberty of being *alive*. Second to the Declaration is the Constitution with its Bill of Rights, which conservatives and liberals alike tend to interpret somewhat selectively as inviolate. Both documents might be said to serve as *sacraments* as well as scriptures in the conservative civil religion, as Catherine Albanese argues, though they “did not possess nearly the sacramental power for their own time that they did in the subsequent history of the republic.”²⁹ Then there is the Gettysburg Address with its reminder that this nation was “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” and its rededication to that noble purpose: “that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”³⁰

The conservative civil religion has a pantheon of saints with a trinity at its core: George Washington, the conquering general and god-like father of the nation; Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration and the embodiment of Enlightenment reason; and Abraham Lincoln, the martyr who abolished slavery and saved the Union from dissolution. The faces of all three are enshrined upon Mount Rushmore, and our currency features the portraits of other American saints such as Benjamin Franklin, the inquisitive scientist and quintessential entrepreneur, and Alexander Hamilton, the spiritual father of our industrial economy. Though he may never enjoy quite the same historical status, Ronald Reagan was in many ways the ultimate personification of today’s conservative civil religion, from his faith in *laissez-faire* capitalism, to his belief in America as a beacon of freedom in the world, to his

²⁹ Albanese, *Sons*, 182-83.

³⁰ Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address,” 19 November 1863, available online at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gadd/>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

revival of Christian references in public rhetoric. Reagan was fond of the idea of America as the “city upon a hill” and used it frequently in his speeches.

There are also *types* of people who do not necessarily belong in the category of saints but nonetheless symbolize important characteristics of American life, especially the rugged individualism and frontier spirit so central to national identity. Perhaps the most eloquent testament to these American qualities came from Edmund Burke in his 1775 speech on conciliation with the colonies, in which he admiringly described New England’s whale fishermen as follows:

Whilst we follow them among the tumbling mountains of ice, and behold them penetrating into the deepest frozen recesses of Hudson's Bay and Davis's Streights, whilst we are looking for them beneath the Arctic Circle, we hear that they have pierced into the opposite region of polar cold, that they are at the antipodes, and engaged under the frozen Serpent of the south. Falkland Island, which seemed too remote and romantic an object for the grasp of national ambition, is but a stage and resting-place in the progress of their victorious industry. Nor is the equinoctial heat more discouraging to them, than the accumulated winter of both the poles. We know that whilst some of them draw the line and strike the harpoon on the coast of Africa, others run the longitude, and pursue their gigantic game along the coast of Brazil. No sea but what is vexed by their fisheries. No climate that is not witness to their toils. Neither the perseverance of Holland, nor the activity of France, nor the dexterous and firm sagacity of English enterprize, ever carried this most perilous mode of hardy industry to the extent to which it has been pushed by this recent people; a people who are still, as it were, but in the gristle, and not yet hardened into the bone of manhood.³¹

Hunters, pioneers, astronauts, even successful entrepreneurs— all of them embody to some extent this Burkean image of the hardy, enterprising, industrious American boldly pushing into new frontiers, and all of them can be found among the images that many Americans, and especially conservatives, invoke when describing their national character. In other words they constitute a sort of “heroes gallery” among the other symbols that animate conservative civil religion. Within this gallery there is one American hero whose prominence

³¹ The Selected Works of Edmund Burke, Vol. I, ed. Francis Canavan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 234-35.

easily eclipses the others: the cowboy. An icon of our mythic and romanticized Wild West, the cowboy is the quintessential individualist; he has

a special talent— he can shoot straighter and faster than other men— and a special sense of justice. But these characteristics make him so unique that he can never fully belong to society. His destiny is to defend society without ever really joining it. He rides off alone into the sunset...³²

Hollywood gave this mythic figure a face in men like John Wayne, and recent presidents like Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan (who portrayed cowboys in Hollywood before entering politics) and George W. Bush embraced the cowboy archetype not only in photo opportunities on their Western ranches, but even in the bravado of their public rhetoric. It is not unusual to hear American military actions like those against Libya in 1982 and Iraq in 2003 criticized (or praised) as “cowboy diplomacy” — America rides into town, shoots up the bad guys, and then rides into the sunset ready for another adventure. In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, President Bush called for Osama bin Laden “dead or alive,” expressed a willingness to “go it alone if necessary” in Iraq, and dared the terrorists there to “bring it on” when the occupation began to encounter violent resistance.

Of the physical symbols that represent the conservative civil religion, the Stars and Stripes has nearly the same stature as the cross in Christianity. The nation’s capital has its holy shrines: the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, Arlington Cemetery, and the various memorials to the wars of the twentieth century. Philadelphia has the Liberty Bell, South Dakota has Mount Rushmore, and New York City has the Statue of Liberty and until recently the World Trade Center, which represented America’s enormous wealth and was targeted by terrorists at least in part for its symbolic value. Then there is our national bird the bald eagle, always stern and vigilant, always soaring majestically on the wind or perched on

³² Robert N. Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 145.

high in noble profile.³³ And finally there is the Great Seal of the United States with its grandiose Latin pledge for a “New Order of the Ages.”

Rituals

When it comes to rituals, conservative civil religion has a liturgical Pledge of Allegiance dutifully recited by young students every school day, a National Anthem communally sung at large public events, and other songs like “America the Beautiful” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic” that are familiar and deeply stirring to many citizens. There are also ritualistic holidays that commemorate important national events, persons or ideas: Memorial Day and Veterans Day with their homage to the fallen soldiers; the Fourth of July with its wild displays of fireworks; Thanksgiving with its ritual dinner of turkey and school pageants honoring the nation’s Puritan heritage; and even Christmas, in a peculiarly commercialized and secularized American form—less an occasion to celebrate the birth of Christ than to buy gifts for others, and with the expectation of receiving gifts in return.

Liberal Civil Religion

Many of these beliefs, rituals and symbols are still very much alive in American public life, particularly in the political realm where they are invoked so often they may seem trite or insincere. Indeed, if we were to judge the vitality of the conservative civil religion by the words and deeds of politicians alone, then certainly it would seem that little has changed

³³ Benjamin Franklin vigorously opposed the choice of the bald eagle as the national bird, complaining that it was a “bird of bad moral character” and a “rank coward.” Instead he proposed the turkey as a “much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America . . . a bird of courage.” Quoted from <http://www.baldeagleinfo.com/eagle/eagle9.html>. Accessed 29 July 2004.

since the 1950s. Even outside the halls of government there is still a firm belief across America that the United States is a special nation, and many of the symbols and rituals of the conservative civil religion can easily be found wherever one looks for them. It is difficult to imagine that the Statue of Liberty will ever fall into disuse or that Americans will ever cease to observe the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving.

And yet there is growing evidence that a substantial number of Americans reject key elements of the conservative civil religion; not everyone agrees, for example, that capitalism is the best economic system available or that America is in any way a model nation with a divinely ordained mission. Sometimes this discontent manifests itself innocuously as when the “saintliness” of figures like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson is called into question because they owned slaves, or when a national holiday like Columbus Day is criticized for glorifying the European conquest of North America and its natives. But increasingly the discontent manifests itself quite visibly and emotionally in the legal realm over the kinds of controversial social issues mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, issues that call into question how we as Americans ought to live our lives.

James Hunter described this discontent in depth when he turned his attention from the orthodox moral vision to a “dissenting vision” rising from the impulse toward progressivism found in the liberal denominations of Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism and secular organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women and People for the American Way. Progressivist beliefs about America and its role in the world differ starkly from the orthodox vision. First and foremost they “rarely, if ever, attribute America’s origins to the actions of a Supreme Being” and they reject the idea of America as a Christian nation. Instead “the founding myths advanced in progressivist circles tend to focus on the struggle of the founders to establish and preserve ‘pluralism and

diversity.” In this view, America tends to be defined and portrayed as a product of the Enlightenment, a secular experiment in freedom and democracy, and the founding documents “are not seen as reflecting absolutes either given by God or rooted in nature.”³⁴

When it comes to America’s role in the world, there is much more ambivalence in this dissenting vision. Hunter noted from a 1987 survey that religious progressives had far less faith than their orthodox counterparts that the United States could deal wisely with world problems and they were much less inclined to believe America was “a force for good in the world.”³⁵ The Americans for Democratic Action put a voice to that same sentiment after September 11 when they cautioned that Americans “must always reflect upon how this country flaunts and exercises its power and wealth around the world in ways that may focus the frustrations and anger of many people against the United States.” The occupation of Iraq brought such views into even sharper relief, with critics constantly lamenting America’s “loss of moral authority” on the world scene.³⁶

Similarly, there is far less passion for capitalism among progressives and much more concern about the inequalities of wealth both in America and around the rest of the world. Hunter made a very perceptive observation that while cultural conservatives tend to define freedom *economically* and justice *socially*, progressives tend to define freedom *socially* and justice *economically*. In other words, when it comes to economics conservatives tend to champion laissez-faire capitalism while liberals tend to champion varying degrees of socialism that promise a more “equitable distribution of wealth.” At the same time, conservatives are inclined to view justice as morally righteous living while liberals are

³⁴ Hunter, *Culture*, 113-14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁶ Americans for Democratic Action Resolution No. 478, “War Against Terrorism,” available online at <http://www.adaction.org/pubs/478warterror.html>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

disposed to view it in terms of being able to live their lives however they please, free of social coercion and even moral judgment.³⁷ Yet another way to describe it is that conservatives tend to be economic libertarians while liberals tend to be social libertarians.

The differences between Hunter's two moral visions were far more than rhetorical.

He believed they represented

the institutionalization and politicization of two fundamentally different cultural systems. Each side operates from within its own constellation of values, interests, and assumptions. At the center of each are two distinct conceptions of moral authority— two different ways of apprehending reality, of ordering experience, of making moral judgments. Each side of the cultural divide, then, speaks with a different moral vocabulary. Each side operates out of a different mode of debate and persuasion. Each side represents the tendencies of a separate and competing moral galaxy. They are, indeed, “worlds apart.”³⁸

The key phrase in this passage is “two different ways of apprehending reality, of ordering experience, of making moral judgments.” Bellah described civil religion in almost the same terms when he wrote that it was “at its best a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people.”³⁹ If we consider Hunter's definition in conjunction with his idea that these moral visions are competing for the “the symbols and meanings that order the life of the community or region or nation as a whole” and “the collective myths surrounding its history and future promise”— that their public discourse “is ‘religious’ even when it is not religious in a traditional way, or when those who promote a position are hostile to traditional forms of religious expression”— it seems that Hunter was in effect describing two different *civil religions*. Following this line of thought, it is worth examining the progressivist moral vision as a civil religion, using the same categories of beliefs, symbols and

³⁷ Hunter, *Culture*, 115-16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁹ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 33.

rituals applied to the orthodox vision. Again, I will offer some of my own observations in filling these categories, since there is very little published material available on the idea of a liberal civil religion separate and distinct from traditional, or conservative, American civil religion.⁴⁰

Beliefs

If the liberal civil religion had to be described in one word it would probably be *tolerance*: the tolerance of other people, their ethnicity, their religion, their sexual orientation and their lifestyles in general. But tolerance in this case is not so much the central *belief* of the new civil religion as it is its most predominant quality. It is in effect the *product* of this civil religion's deepest beliefs, one of which is that America is or ought to be a secular nation. While conservative civil religion accepts the existence of a deistic God actively involved in our history, liberal civil religion does not; or at least it rejects the conservative interpretations of our nation's origin and the idea of America as a Christian or even religious nation. Religious liberals may acknowledge the existence of a God or Godhead, but they tend to believe there is "no objective and final revelation from God, and Scripture (of whatever form) is not revelation but only, and at best, a *witness* to revelation." Most liberals simply agree that religion is a private matter that has little or no business in the public realm at all.⁴¹

From the view that there is no direct revelation from God follows a second and closely related belief that "moral truth is a human construction and, therefore, is both conditional and relative; and that moral truths should reflect ethical principles that have the

⁴⁰ Hunter, *Culture*, 147, 62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

human good as their highest end.” These moral truths can be arrived at in one of two ways: empirically using the scientific method, or experientially using subjective intuition and understanding. Of these two methods, Hunter believed the latter to be “the dominant basis of moral reasoning” on the liberal side of the culture war, and it will be examined in the next chapter.⁴²

Critical to this subjective mode of experiential reasoning is the act of free expression, or the *social* freedom that we have already seen contrasted with conservatism’s *economic* freedom. This social interpretation of freedom is often described in terms of the individual’s right to say or do whatever he pleases, short of harming others or their property. Also known as “expressive individualism,” it will be described in greater detail in Chapter Three. For now it is sufficient to note that free expression is one of the central beliefs in the liberal civil religion.

Finally, the new civil religion celebrates *equality* as one of its deepest and most cherished beliefs; not just equality in the legal or political sense of equal rights, but equality in a more all-encompassing sense that *almost everything* is equal— men, women, ethnicities, cultures, religions, sexual orientations and lifestyles in general. Following from the idea that truth is ultimately a subjective and relative construct, most things are simply equal because no one ultimately has the right to judge them otherwise. To do so is an act of intolerance. It is this line of thought that motivates among other things the pervasive spirit of multiculturalism and political correctness throughout American education and the criminalization of intolerant *motives* in the form of hate crimes.

All of which leads to one of the most striking differences between conservative and liberal civil religion: while the former is distinctly nationalistic, the latter is not. It does not

⁴² Ibid., 124-25.

place any special emphasis on the soil of North America, the *chosenness* of the American people, or even the historic accomplishments of Western or American civilization. Instead it envisions America as just another equal member of the world community, no better (though sometimes *worse*) than any other nation, too often arrogant and reckless in its role as the world's superpower. In its elevation of *other* nations and cultures, liberal civil religion shows signs of realizing Bellah's dream: "the incorporation of vital international symbolism into our civil religion, or, perhaps a better way of putting it... American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion of the world."⁴³

Symbols

The liberal civil religion shares the same scriptures as conservative civil religion but with important differences of interpretation and emphasis. For example, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution "are not seen as reflecting absolutes either given by God or rooted in nature" but as rational products of enlightened reason, and the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" takes on a more *social* than economic or political meaning. One frequently hears, from the liberal side of the culture war, the Constitution referred to as a "living, breathing document." The First Amendment might be considered the centerpiece of this civil religion since its protection of free speech— and more importantly free *expression*— safeguards the experiential forms of moral reasoning that allow *intuition* and *feeling* to guide one's political positions, free from the coercive power of religious or moral judgment.

⁴³ Bellah, "Civil Religion," 40.

With the liberal interpretation of our nation's origin comes a different selection of saints and heroes. Hunter mentions men like "George Washington, John Adams, Tom Paine, James Madison, and Frederick Douglass" but one could easily compile a much longer list including later presidents like Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, social activists like Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, and any number of famous writers like Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson, or modern artists who champion free expression through the creation of controversial artwork.

Where the conservative civil religion tends to exalt rugged individualists and entrepreneurs, the heroes of liberal civil religion tend to be the downtrodden and those who help them. This first category includes those perceived to be historically marginalized by Judeo-Christian morality (women, homosexuals and other religions), by capitalism (laborers, the poor, the homeless and underdeveloped nations), and by racism (most non-whites). In 1975, Bellah noted that to the younger generation the WASP⁴⁴ had become a negative image while the black, the Indian and the Asian had become heroes, with the Indian in particular serving as a "symbolic focus of the counterculture."⁴⁵ Such opinions are part of the larger liberal trend of rejecting the symbols of Western civilization in favor of those drawn from other cultures.

The heroes who help the downtrodden include social activists, therapists, psychologists, and civil servants working for agencies that are oriented toward the common welfare. One might even say that the government itself, when properly led by activist presidents like FDR and LBJ, is a hero in the liberal tradition. For only the government has

⁴⁴ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

⁴⁵ Robert N. Bellah, The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial (New York: The Seaberry Press, 1975), 105-06.

the power in their view to effectively help the downtrodden and rigorously enforce liberal values like tolerance and equality throughout most areas of American life.

Where conservatives see the Stars and Stripes as a beacon of liberty and justice in the world, liberals are more inclined to view it with feelings that range from ambivalence to hostility, citing the suffering it has caused over the centuries— from the slave trade, to the Indian Wars, and to a myriad of military conflicts, including the war against Iraq, precipitated by American imperialism. The very idea of the Great Seal's "New Order of the Ages" smacks to them of imperialistic hubris. The national shrines that fit more comfortably into the liberal civil religion include the Statue of Liberty, with her soothing call to the world's tired, poor, and "huddled masses yearning to be free"; and the Lincoln Memorial, where in 1963 the Reverend Martin Luther King stood in the shadow of the Great Emancipator and cried out his dream "that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal'..." As Bellah wrote in the *Broken Covenant*, "America as an asylum for the oppressed is one of the oldest elements of the national myth, part of the millennial meaning of the American experiment."⁴⁶

Rituals

Many liberals do not feel comfortable about something as nationalistic and potentially religious as the Pledge of Allegiance. On the same day that a federal appeals court in California declared the Pledge to be unconstitutional for its use of the words "under God," the ACLU issued a press release agreeing with the court's decision and adding that

⁴⁶ Ibid., 88.

the United States “is the most religiously diverse nation in the world because of, not in spite of, the fact that we do not allow government to become entangled with religion... *Schools can and should teach tolerance and good citizenship, but must not favor one religion over another or belief over non-belief*” [emphasis added].⁴⁷

Which is not to say that the liberal civil religion does not have its own liturgy of sorts. On the battleground of the culture war one often hears statements of belief that are so familiar and repeated so often that they have taken on an almost liturgical quality; statements like *you can't legislate morality, it's a woman's choice, it's a valid lifestyle choice, and all religions say basically the same thing* are among the more common, and they reflect the liberal aversion to most forms of traditional morality, as well as the tendency to view most lifestyles and worldviews as essentially equal— Christian and conservative views notwithstanding.

When it comes to holidays, liberals tend to put more emphasis on those that are often marginalized or overlooked by conservatives: Martin Luther King Day, Labor Day and Earth Day, to name a few. Even the anniversary of *Roe v Wade* seems to qualify as a holiday in this respect, with its ritualistic speeches and marches in support of abortion rights. Among the advocacy groups on the liberal side of the culture war, one even finds an ever-expanding list of weeks and months of the year that have been designated to commemorate liberal causes or values, like Church/State Separation Week, Diversity Month, Gay Pride Month and OneDay, an international holiday whose practitioners hope will “encourage greater

⁴⁷ American Civil Liberties Union Press Release on June 26, 2002, available online at <http://archive.aclu.org/news/2002/n062602b.html>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

efforts on the part of our leaders to avoid the tragedy of war and to end the hate, hunger and violence that so afflicts our human family.”⁴⁸

One could even argue that almost any form of free expression is a ritual in the liberal civil religion, to include artistic endeavors like painting, writing and music to acts of civil disobedience like marches, rallies, sit-ins and teach-ins. To be sure, such displays are not unheard of among conservatives— mainly on the issue of abortion— but they tend to be the exception rather than the rule on the conservative side of the culture war.

Altogether these important figures, myths, symbols and rituals suggest the emergence of a liberal civil religion vying with the older, more conservative civil religion that Herberg called the American Way of Life. Indeed, those liberals inclined to even acknowledge its existence would undoubtedly feel just as comfortable calling *their* civil religion the American Way of Life as a pointed reminder that there is more than one opinion about what it means to be “American.” The important question is how, when and why did a liberal civil religion emerge? In order to answer that, we need to first examine the roots that both civil religions share in biblical religion, classical thought and Enlightenment liberalism. Only then can we fully understand how one of these sources became the dominant intellectual influence on American life and how this contributed to the rise of a liberal civil religion.

⁴⁸ Quoted from <http://www.onedayholiday.org/history.html> in 2003. Site no longer accessible, but similar information can be found at the One Day Foundation’s official website: <http://www.oneday.org/>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

CHAPTER II:

THE SOURCES OF AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

In order for a society to exist and prosper, Tocqueville believed it was “essential that all the minds of the citizens should always be rallied and held together by some leading ideas; and that could never happen unless each of them sometimes came to draw his opinions from the same source and was ready to accept some beliefs ready made.”¹ In America these ready-made beliefs came primarily from a confluence of three sources: biblical religion, classical thought and Enlightenment liberalism. Any attempt to understand or explain American civil religion is simply impossible without examining these three sources; not only did they produce many of the beliefs, symbols and rituals outlined in the last chapter, they are critical in understanding the schism between conservative and liberal civil religion and the sharply materialistic worldviews that both civil religions came to embrace.

The Biblical Influence

The biblical influence on American civil religion should already be familiar from the previous chapter, which described the conservative vision of America as a model nation and Americans as a chosen people with a divinely ordained mission. At the time of the American Revolution it was the general sentiment “that America was a land blessed of Divine

¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 434.

Providence, inhabited by a Chosen People, and led through Divine Grace by Christian men of heroic stature.”² Foremost among these Christian men was George Washington, who had “the popular image of a *theios aner*, or divine man” and was alternately viewed by many Americans— particularly *after* his death— as both a Moses and a Joshua, an emancipator and a prophet appointed by God himself to save America from its oppressors. Like the ancient Hebrews they believed their nation had a special covenant with God, and this idea of America as a chosen nation helped promote a strong sense of civic unity among the wider population.³

Tocqueville frequently encountered such lofty sentiments in his travels, and he returned to the religious aspects of American life again and again in *Democracy in America*. He considered religion to be the first of America’s political institutions because it “gave birth to the English colonies in America” and was “mingled with all of the national customs and all those feelings which the word fatherland evokes. For that reason it has peculiar power.” He regarded the religious origin of the Americans as “the first and most effective of all the elements leading to their prosperity” and marveled that he could “see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on those shores, as that of the whole human race in the first man.”⁴ Understanding Puritanism is therefore an important first step in understanding American civil religion.

There are primarily two aspects of Puritanism that influenced American civil religion and the conflicting moral visions of today’s culture war: its egalitarianism and its individualism. The egalitarian nature of Christianity appeared first in the gospel accounts of

² Ellis Sandoz, *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 86.

³ Albanese, *Sons*, 147, 154.

⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 432, 288.

Jesus, whose ministry focused almost exclusively on the most marginalized members of his society, but it found its clearest expression in the Epistles of Paul, who preached a radical form of equality through baptism into Christ. To the Galatians he wrote, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁵ Tocqueville believed that “Jesus Christ had to come down to earth to make all members of the human race understand that they were naturally similar and equal” because the ancient philosophers of Greece and Rome, in all their wisdom, “never managed to grasp the very general but very simple conception of the likeness of all men and of the equal right of all at birth to liberty.”⁶ England’s Puritans certainly grasped it, and in fact it “became the central force of revolutionary Puritanism. Over against the inequalities of an indurated social system and an obsolete form of government, the people learned from preachers inspired by Paul to bear in mind the equality of all men before God and presently to draw the obvious practical inference that God before whom all men are leveled is sure in his own time to uplift the low and humble the great.”⁷

Puritanism was thus inherently egalitarian and even revolutionary by nature; Tocqueville believed it was “almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine.”⁸ In addition to their anti-Stuart politics, the Puritans who first settled New England were almost exclusively middle class, and “when they came together on American soil, they presented the unusual phenomenon of a society in which there were no great lords, no common people,

⁵ Gal. 3:26 (NIV).

⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 439.

⁷ William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 86.

⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 38.

and, one may almost say, no rich or poor.”⁹ They also brought with them a Christian doctrine of conversion that anyone “could become the spiritual equal of anyone else and the spiritual superior of those unconverted who held power and prestige in the world.”¹⁰ Supporting Christopher Dawson’s claim that religion normally exerts a conservative influence on culture but also provides the most dynamic means of social change, Puritan “definitions of men and women in terms of individual spiritual qualities instead of solely by group status planted seeds for later demands for social equality.”¹¹ The Abolitionist movement drew heavily upon these notions of spiritual equality, and a hundred years later the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. made it quite clear that “Christ furnished the spirit and motivation” of the Montgomery bus boycott.¹² Throughout his career he repeatedly described the civil rights movement in biblical terms, likening it to the exodus of the ancient Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, just as the Puritans had likened their own exodus from England to America. Even if most of today’s civil rights rhetoric is increasingly devoid of religious language, the original civil rights movement in this country had a clearly religious and specifically *Christian* motivation that helped win many converts among the white population.

And yet despite its egalitarian qualities, Puritanism had a notably individualistic side that played an equally important role in shaping American culture. “To the early Puritans,” Bellah wrote, “conversion was an intensely personal and individual experience of salvation,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

¹⁰ George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers, 1990), 25.

¹¹ Dawson, *Religion*, 59; Marsden, *Religion*, 25.

¹² *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 17.

and the prerequisite of church membership.”¹³ It was a form of liberation that led the individual out of bondage into a new, more personal relationship with God— a relationship that did not require the intermediary role priests provided in the Catholic faith. Puritans and other Protestant denominations strongly encouraged their members to personally study and reflect upon the Bible as part of their intimate, individual relationship with God, and accordingly they placed a high value on the freedom of worship; so high that American Protestants increasingly formed new denominations over the slightest of theological disagreements or to accommodate different types of people, creating even in Tocqueville’s time “an infinite variety of ceaselessly changing Christian sects.”¹⁴

By “freedom of worship,” Puritans did not, however, believe that one had a strictly *private* relationship with God. On the contrary, salvation entailed a host of social obligations toward others, and the purely Christian notion of liberty was closely entwined with a strong sense of social responsibility. The authors of *Habits of the Heart* described this as *biblical individualism* and they used John Winthrop as its exemplar. Winthrop, who exhorted his fellow Puritans to build the “city upon a hill,”

decried what he called “natural liberty,” which is the freedom to do whatever one wants, evil as well as good. True freedom— what he called “moral” freedom, “in reference to the covenant between God and man”— is a liberty “to that only which is good, just and honest.” “This liberty,” he said, “you are to stand for with the hazard of your lives.”¹⁵

This attitude, too, can be traced back to the apostle Paul, who wrote, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love

¹³ Bellah, *Broken*, 18.

¹⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 432.

¹⁵ Bellah, *Habits*, 29.

your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁶ Christians are therefore called to reject liberty as mere licentiousness and to view it as a freedom from sin that requires them to serve others, particularly the most needy and vulnerable members of society. In this respect their religious faith, far from being private, was meant to be eminently *public* in the form of good works.

For the Puritans, there was an economic dimension to this impulse as well. Creating a new society in the untamed wilderness of North America was no easy task, as the earliest European settlers often realized to their peril. It required remarkable thrift and fortitude to survive and prosper in the New World, so it is no great surprise that the Puritans turned to those parts of the scriptures that offered them the greatest encouragement and solace, particularly proverbs that praised hard work and common sense, denounced idleness and dependence, and assured believers that the righteous would reap success in *this* life as well as the next. Such sentiments formed the basis of what is commonly called the Protestant ethic: a work ethic that viewed worldly success as “a matter essentially of self-improvement.”¹⁷ One worked hard not for selfish gain, but for the greater good of the community and as an offering to God. To pursue success or material wealth merely for the sake of it would be a sinful act of pride and idolatry. Jesus warned his followers that they could not “serve both God and money,”¹⁸ but as we will see in the next chapter, most Americans— even devout Christians— have never taken this injunction seriously, seeking instead the path of accommodation that prominent evangelicals like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson follow, rationalizing capitalism as something that is perfectly compatible with Christian faith.

¹⁶ Gal. 5:13-14 (NIV).

¹⁷ Andrew Bard Schmookler, *The Illusion of Choice: How the Market Economy Shapes Our Destiny* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 146.

¹⁸ Matt 6:24 (NIV).

Altogether these Puritan beliefs “singularly favored the establishment of a temporal republic and democracy” because they promoted equality, religious freedom, social activism, and a moral climate of hard work and responsibility. Unlike Europe, where the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom were often at odds, Tocqueville wrote that “there is not a single religious doctrine in the United States hostile to democratic and republican institutions.” Everywhere American clergy could be heard praising democracy from the pulpit, and the people seemed to agree— foreshadowing President Eisenhower’s sentiment more than 100 years later— that religion was indeed “necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions.”¹⁹

The Classical Influence

The architecture of our nation’s capital, as well as our government’s Latin distinction as a *republic* with a *president* and *senate*, offers the most visible testament to the influence of classical thought in the founding of the American republic. George Washington rode to his first inauguration under arches of laurel “in what resembled the victory procession of a Hellenistic divine emperor” but humbly retired after two terms in office and was often viewed as a modern *Cincinnatus*, the Roman general who returned to his farm after saving Rome from its enemies. Thomas Jefferson and others looked to the democracies of antiquity for inspiration, and they consciously borrowed Greco-Roman symbols and ideas while forging their new republic.²⁰

¹⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 288-89, 293.

²⁰ Bellah, *Broken*, 23; Albanese, *Sons*, 151.

The most important contribution classical thought gave to traditional American civil religion was the notion of republican virtue. Aristotle wrote that the “end and purpose of a polis is the good life,” that “any polis which is truly so called, and is not merely one in name, must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness.”²¹ Two thousand years later the Baron de Montesquieu, among others, helped revive this idea. In his *Spirit of the Laws* the Baron argued that democracies require public virtue in order to survive, and he pointed to the Greece and Rome of his day (in the mid-eighteenth century) as examples of how the loss of public virtue led to conditions where democracy could no longer be sustained:

When virtue is banished, ambition invades the minds of those who are disposed to receive it, and avarice possesses the whole community. The objects of their desires are changed; what they were fond of before has become indifferent; they were free while under the restraint of laws, but they would fain now be free to act against law; and as each citizen is like a slave who has run away from his master, that which was a maxim of equity he calls rigour; that which was a rule of action he styles constraint; and to precaution he gives the name of fear. Frugality, and not the thirst of gain, now passes for avarice. Formerly the wealth of individuals constituted the public treasure; but now this has become the patrimony of private persons. The members of the commonwealth riot on the public spoils, and its strength is only the power of a few, and the licence of many.²²

America’s founders were intimately familiar with Montesquieu’s work and were well aware that the republics of Greece and Rome had declined from within as well as without, only to see democracy replaced by tyranny. But their notions of rule from antiquity were informed by more than just the mediating commentary of writers like Montesquieu, Bolingbroke and Harrington; the framers, according to Ellis Sandoz, “knew not only the mediators but also the originators themselves, thoroughly and often in the original languages. Madison’s repeated clarification of the ‘ends’ of man and government as happiness and

²¹ Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Ernest Baker, book 3, chap. 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 119.

²² From Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*, Chapter III, at http://www.constitution.org/cm/sol_03.htm#003.

justice, and the echoing agreement with him on all sides trace to the headwaters of Plato and Aristotle as confirmed in Cicero and Polybius.”²³

Consequently, the notion of public virtue loomed large in the thought of America’s founders. “To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people,” Madison wrote, “is a chimerical idea.”²⁴ George Washington believed that virtue was a “necessary spring of popular government” and that morality and religion were the “indispensable supports” for political prosperity.²⁵ More to the point, Patrick Henry argued that bad men

cannot make good citizens. It is when a people forget God that tyrants forge their chains. A vitiated state of morals, a corrupted public conscience, is incompatible with freedom. No free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue; and by a frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.²⁶

Such sentiments were central to the republican theory of liberty, or what the authors of *Habits of the Heart* describe as *republican individualism*. Where the biblical tradition emphasized active religiosity, the republican form of individualism emphasized public virtue in the form of active *citizenship*, because “the best defense of freedom was an educated people actively participating in government.”²⁷ Such concerned involvement need not be limited to public office or participation in electoral politics, but could include any of the intermediary institutions of what we now call *civil society*: churches, schools and any variety of

²³ Sandoz, *Laws*, 102.

²⁴ James Madison, speech at the Virginia Ratifying Convention on 20 June 1788, available online at <http://www.sovereignfellowship.com/tos.php?sec=59>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

²⁵ George Washington, farewell address on 19 September 1796, available online at <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/49.htm>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

²⁶ Patrick Henry, speech to the Virginia Convention on 23 March 1775, available online at <http://www.conservativeforum.org/authquot.asp?ID=51>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

²⁷ Bellah, *Habits*, 31

other organizations dedicated to civic purposes. It meant “sharing in self-government” by “deliberating with fellow citizens about the common good and helping to shape the destiny of the political community.”²⁸ Without this kind of concerned and active citizenship, republicans like Jefferson believed freedom would quickly destroy itself and lead to the kind of tyranny that Montesquieu and others prophesied.

Tocqueville witnessed this republican principle in action and it deeply impressed him. He remarked at length on the extraordinary aptitude New England’s first settlers showed for self-government and the seriousness with which they undertook it. As we saw in the previous section of this chapter, Tocqueville believed Puritanism was as almost as much a *republican* as a religious doctrine. “When one studies in detail the laws promulgated in this early period of the American republics, one is struck by their understanding of problems of government and by the advanced theories of the lawgivers... Clearly they had a higher and more comprehensive conception of the duties of society toward its members than had the lawgivers of Europe at that time, and they imposed obligations upon it which were still shirked elsewhere.”²⁹ This civic mindedness was not limited to a handful of elite citizens but seemed to permeate the very social fabric itself; first of New England, and then gradually the rest of the country. Tocqueville constantly remarked on the “restless spirit” and “passion” with which Americans threw themselves into civil associations

of a thousand different types— religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Americans combine to give fetes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. Hospitals, prisons, and schools take shape in that way. Finally, if they want to proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association. In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the

²⁸ Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 5.

²⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 44.

government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association.³⁰

In addition to the obvious material benefits of such a dynamic civil society, Tocqueville recognized a more important benefit and a deeper truth about human nature: that “[f]eelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another.”³¹ That is, humans benefit morally and intellectually from being fully engaged in civil society, working hand in hand and face to face with other human beings rather than through impersonal government bureaucracies. By sharing in self-rule they come to acquire “certain qualities of character, or civic virtues” without which republican government cannot long survive. Ultimately this means that “republican politics cannot be neutral toward the values and ends its citizens espouse. The republican conception of freedom, unlike the liberal conception, requires a formative politics, a politics that cultivates in citizens the qualities of character self-government requires.”³²

Tocqueville recognized that the “more government takes the place of associations, the more will individuals lose the idea of forming associations and need the government to come to their help.” In this “vicious circle of cause and effect”, the government grows more expansive and intrusive and a soft form of despotism spreads across the land, smothering the people with a host of petty laws and regulations, enervating the public virtue and initiative necessary for republican government. While Tocqueville believed that democracies were particularly susceptible to such despotism, he also believed that America’s religious piety and work ethic helped keep it at bay, and everywhere he traveled he encountered the

³⁰ Ibid., 513.

³¹ Ibid., 515.

³² Sandel, *Discontent*, 6.

same idea expressed by the founders: that religion and morality were “necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions. That is not the view of one class or party among the citizens, but of the whole nation; it is found in all ranks.”³³

Critics have often derided these republican sentiments as hypocritical. After all, some of the founders and the people Tocqueville met countenanced to varying degrees the institution of slavery and the subjugation of the North American Indians, and there would not have *been* an American republic without the oppression of these two groups; tragically, they were denied the fruits of republican liberty so that others of greater privilege could enjoy them. But at the same time, there is ample evidence that Jefferson and some of his more enlightened colleagues believed the proposition that “all men are created equal” would one day encompass more than just Anglo-Saxon men, and the republican form of individualism— in conjunction with Puritan and thus *Christian* egalitarianism— was a powerful force in the growing realization of that proposition throughout American history. If Jefferson and his colleagues merit criticism for lacking the moral courage to directly confront these issues in their lifetimes, they also deserve credit for planting the seeds of powerful ideas that took root and bloomed in the fullness of time.

The Liberal Influence

James Hunter argued that the “politically relevant world-historical event... is now the secular Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and its philosophical aftermath. This is what inspires the divisions of public culture in the United States today.”³⁴ Since I am arguing

³³ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 515, 293.

³⁴ Hunter, *Culture*, 132.

that these divisions of public culture are in fact rival civil religions, one conservative and one liberal, understanding the philosophical aftermath of the Enlightenment is critical in understanding the fractured state of American civil religion today. While it is not possible to adequately treat the full scope of liberal influence on American civil religion within the confines of this thesis, a brief examination of both the nature and historical decline of liberalism should help illuminate the state of our civil religions today.

The Enlightenment, it is important to emphasize, was not a spontaneous secular phenomenon but actually a continuation of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, both of which were products of a Christian civilization. The most unique quality of Enlightenment thought was a concept of individuality that “emphasized several things: the inherent moral worth and spiritual equality of each individual, the dignity of human personality, the autonomy of individual will, and the essential rationality of men.”³⁵ Like the Protestantism from which it emerged, this concept of individuality was premised upon the idea that citizens no longer need accept unquestioned authority in religious and intellectual affairs, and in the aftermath of war sparked by the Protestant Reformation there was a strong desire to more fully separate the political and religious realms in the interest of what many *hoped* would be greater peace and individual freedom. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, while not universally antagonistic to religion, aspired nevertheless to free the human mind from its religious shackles and thereby set the stage for potentially limitless improvements to the human condition.

Such hopes presented an immediate problem, for as mentioned in the preface to this work, there was no historical precedent of a state, city-state or society divorced of religious meaning from which Enlightenment philosophers could draw any guidance. The problem

³⁵ John Hallowell, The Decline of Liberalism as an Ideology (New York: Howard Fertig, 1971), 5.

was especially acute because of the growing concentration of power in the modern nation-states of Europe, power no longer checked by the role of the church. As John Hallowell described, the “medieval problem of the relationship between ecclesiastical and secular authority was replaced in importance by the problem of the relationship between state and society, between the spheres of political authority and individual autonomy. Liberalism emerged as a specific answer to this problem.”³⁶

Individual freedom was the major premise of philosophical liberalism, and the freedom it sought was “the freedom from all authority capable of acting capriciously or arbitrarily.”³⁷ This included ecclesiastical as well as political authority. Both a “mode of thought” and a “way of life,” liberalism “reflected the political, social, religious, and economic aspirations of the rising commercial class.”³⁸ These aspirations were not in conflict as they often are today. As Hallowell explains,

the early liberals did not separate, as some modern interpreters of their philosophy are inclined to do, their social and economic motives and aspirations from their intellectual convictions. Liberalism was not simply, as it is sometimes said to be, the embodiment of a demand for economic freedom but the embodiment of a demand for freedom in every sphere of life— intellectual, social, economic, political, and religious— and it is doubtful whether the early liberal prized one more highly than the other or even considered that he might enjoy one kind of freedom without the others.³⁹

Despite its aspiration toward religious freedom, classical liberalism, or *integral* liberalism as Hallowell called it, still retained key elements of the Christian tradition; “[n]ot only were individuals thought to be equal entities, equal in moral worth by virtue of God-given souls, but also they were thought to possess a reason, divine in origin, that was capable

³⁶ Ibid., 6.

³⁷ John Hallowell, The Moral Foundation of Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 70.

³⁸ John Hallowell, Main Currents in Modern Political Thought (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1950), 84.

³⁹ Hallowell, Foundation, 71.

of restraining passion and emotion through the realization of a potential, rational, universal order.”⁴⁰ This order contained an “objective moral law discoverable by reason” that embodied “eternal truths and values” and provided the limits within which human beings could explore their own individual autonomy, as well as the limits within which human governments could assert their power.⁴¹ The keystone of integral liberalism was the human conscience, which early liberals took for granted as a *Christian* conscience; “so long as men believed in objective truth and value transcending individuals, independent of individual wills and interest, so long as conscience was given a valid role in realizing the potential order embodied in reason, liberalism remained integral... because there existed some objective and substantial limitation to individual will.”⁴²

Unfortunately for Western civilization, integral liberalism was not long for the world. Like all such ideologies “born of a particular historical period in a specific sociological environment” it was subject to “development, decline, and death.”⁴³ As Thomas Spragens argues, liberalism “developed within itself tendencies that threaten humane values. These self-destructive tendencies in turn stem from failures within the larger philosophical tradition that undergirds liberalism— especially from failures related to this tradition’s conception of human reason.”⁴⁴ There are essentially two conceptions of reason that ultimately undermined the noble aspirations of liberalism: rationalism and subjectivism. Both will be considered in turn.

⁴⁰ Hallowell, Decline, 4.

⁴¹ Grasso, “Triumph,” 226; Hallowell, Decline, 7.

⁴² Hallowell, Foundation, 73; Hallowell, Decline, 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁴ Thomas Spragens, Jr., The Irony of Liberal Reason (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), vii.

Liberal Rationalism

The rational tradition began most visibly in Descartes' *First Meditation*. Wanting to bring the same certainty to philosophy that he found in mathematics, Descartes claimed that there was only one thing of which he could be certain: *cogito, ergo sum*, or "I think, therefore I am." Sensory data could not be relied upon in acquiring knowledge; only rational deduction could suffice. He wanted a "practical philosophy, by means of which, knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, of the stars, of the heavens, and of all the bodies that surround us— knowing them as distinctly as we know the various crafts of the artisans— we may in the same fashion employ them in all the uses for which they are suited, thus rendering ourselves the masters and possessors of nature."⁴⁵ Thomas Hobbes summarized this rationalist view more bluntly when he wrote, "The end of knowledge is power."⁴⁶

In the nineteenth century this attitude crept from the natural sciences into the social sciences in the form of what became known as *positivism*. Auguste Comte, who is considered to be the founder of sociology, believed that human thought was entering its third, or *positive* stage, "the age of Science when man discards all abstractions and metaphysical concepts and confines himself to the empirical observation of successive events from which he induces natural laws... the stage in which mankind may look forward with confidence to the establishment, with the aid of scientific methods, of perfect order and social harmony."⁴⁷ In this tradition, "moral positions and influence are justified solely on the grounds of evidence about the human condition and the coherence and consistency of the arguments adduced.

⁴⁵ Steven Cahn, ed., Classics of Western Philosophy (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), 404.

⁴⁶ Thomas Hobbes, Elements of Philosophy, quoted at <http://wwwphilosophy.ucdavis.edu/phi022/hoblec.htm>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

⁴⁷ Hallowell, Currents, 291-92.

Not only are the nature of reality and the foundations of knowledge established by the adequacy of empirical proofs uncovered and the quality and coherence of the logic applied, but in this frame of reference, *autonomous rationality and the empirical method become the decisive criteria for evaluating the credibility and usefulness of all moral claims as well*” [emphasis added].⁴⁸

This rationalist-positivist strain of liberal thought led to several important theories that would become central to “conservative” civil religion in America.⁴⁹ The first can be found in the writings of John Locke, who believed that man began in a state of nature where he was free to order his life and possessions as he saw fit. God commanded him to “subdue the earth, i.e., improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour... his *property*, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him.” But because of unscrupulous men, the state of nature is full of “fears and continual dangers” and the “great and *chief end*, therefore, of men’s uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, *is the preservation of their property*.”⁵⁰ In contrast to the ancient conception of government as a natural institution by which a people conserve their finest traditions and which cultivates their virtue as its highest goal, the Lockean conception that influenced America’s founding viewed government as a regrettable but necessary burden designed almost exclusively for the protection of life and property.

Closely related to this property-centered theory of human affairs is the Hobbesian view that humans act only out of self-interest and that society can in fact benefit from allowing citizens the maximum possible freedom to pursue their own “enlightened” self-

⁴⁸ Hunter, *Culture*, 125.

⁴⁹ Again, one must remember that modern conservatism is really part of the larger *liberal* tradition that emerged from the Enlightenment, with its zeal for limited government and *laissez-faire* economics.

⁵⁰ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1982), 21, 75.

interest. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith refined this notion into an economic theory. “Man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren,” he wrote, “and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and show them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them... It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” Indeed, by an individual’s pursuit of his own self-interest he is “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.”⁵¹ In contrast to the Christian “city upon a hill” envisioned by Winthrop or the virtuous republic of Greek philosophy, the conception of society that emerges from these doctrines of liberal rationalism is a materialistic paradise where wealth and comfort are the ultimate ends of society. All other concerns are entirely subordinate to these ends.

At the end of the eighteenth century “such views became widespread among both educated and uneducated Americans. The American Revolution came just at the time when the vogue of such ideas was at its height, so the popular definitions of the new nation were undeniably shaped by these ideas.” Leading American figures like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin in many ways *personified* this influence; both were inquisitive scientists with a long list of inventions and both believed science “was the key to solving many of humanity’s long-standing problems, whether they concerned how to make life more comfortable or how to build a better society.” Their rationalist faith in property rights and

⁵¹ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Books I & IV, quoted at <http://www.adamsmith.org/smith/quotes.htm>. Accessed 28 July 2004.

enlightened self-interest helped shape the emerging American civil religion to an extent that cannot be overemphasized.⁵²

Liberal Subjectivism

Ultimately, however, liberal rationalism failed to create the moral science that Descartes and those who followed in his footsteps had envisioned; as Spragens argues, the norms they ascertained “were not the traditional values of the classical and Christian tradition. They were instead conceptions of order that had been trimmed down substantially— conceptions of majority interest rather than common good, of pleasure rather than happiness, of utility or equilibrium or smooth functioning rather than justice.” They had relied on the assumption that moral truth was a part of the natural order, but their

empiricist epistemology— given the implicit model of sensation— was incapable of coming up with any moral “facts.” A truly positive science could never apprehend moral truths because its own premises had eliminated their ontological foundations. In a world of primary qualities, “is” and “ought” simply fell apart. And despite talk of an experimental moral science, which even Hume engaged in, all the empirical investigation in the world could not overcome this fundamental problem.⁵³

This left only two options: qualifying moral truths as part of science while rendering them as “naturalistic” as possible, or simply discrediting the whole idea of moral knowledge altogether, focusing one’s efforts on the purely “factual” or logical domains and abandoning “ethical and political norms to demonic caprice, to the passions, or to other extrarational determinants.” Spragens called this latter option the “value noncognitivist” approach, but its

⁵² Marsden, *Religion*, 40-41.

⁵³ Spragens, *Irony*, 200-201.

more common name is *subjectivism*: the belief that there are no moral absolutes and that truth is ultimately a relative human construct.⁵⁴

This subjectivist quality of liberal thought appeared in the previous chapter, in what Hunter described as the progressivist appeal to moral authority. He believed that “personal experience” was the dominant basis of moral reasoning on the liberal side of today’s culture war, that

experience is ordered and moral judgments are made according to a logic rooted in subjective intuition and understanding... reason linked with a keen awareness of subjective orientation provides the ultimate crucible for determining what is right and wrong, legitimate and illegitimate— and ultimately what is good and evil. The cliché that beauty is in the eye of the beholder is expanded and elevated to the status of a fundamental moral principle— that what people view as ultimately true... resides wholly in the private whim or personal perspective of individuals.⁵⁵

Value judgments were thought to be expressions of subjective preference rather than objective truth, and they were judged increasingly on their utility or expediency. In such an intellectual climate, the pursuit of freedom in all realms of life led inexorably toward unrestrained hedonism and materialism, and liberalism shifted “from an ethic based on the doctrines of revealed religion and natural law to a new ethic that makes fewer and less exacting demands on the individual, and aims only at goals that contribute to the pursuit of happiness in this world.”⁵⁶ The profound implications of this “new ethic” will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁵⁵ Hunter, *Culture*, 125-26.

⁵⁶ Hallowell, *Decline*, 53; Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 86.

The Irony of Liberal Reason

Liberal rationalism and subjectivism are not unrelated; they have what one might call a cyclical “cause and effect” relationship. The early rationalists believed they could create a moral science independent of revealed religion, but with no ontological foundation to their endeavor, the norms they ascertained were merely “conceptions of majority interest rather than common good, of pleasure rather than happiness, of utility or equilibrium or smooth functioning rather than justice.”⁵⁷ Early liberals believed society was a mechanical object, and the less one interfered with it the better; enlightened self-interest would continue to fuel the machine, and the government that “imposed the fewest restraints upon individual activity was the best.”⁵⁸ The first subjectivist backlash against such views was the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth century, which felt “this conception of a fixed mechanical order to be a constraint upon individual activity” and which

stressed the importance of particular personalities rather than the common humanity of individuals. It stressed emotion rather than reason. It emphasized the collective mind, or *Volkgeist*, rather than individual reason. It focused attention on the nation, on national culture, rather than on the universal community of mankind.⁵⁹

Romantic minds like Rousseau’s imagined a fantastical past where humans were better off as noble savages than as corrupt and effeminate products of modern civilization. With such distorted views of history, Romantics envisioned law as “relative to time and place, no longer universal, eternal, and absolute.” This prepared the way for positivism, which “saw law as the product of will and distinguished law by the coercive force behind it.

⁵⁷ Spragens, *Irony*, 200.

⁵⁸ Hallowell, *Decline*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Coercion, rather than content, became the distinguishing characteristic of law.” Men were encouraged to “abandon a belief in objective values and thus to remove the limitation upon individual will which integral liberalism posited.” The ominous implication of such logic is that “individual rights no longer appear as objective, human attributes but as formal, legal concessions [of the state]... By denying the existence of values as facts, by regarding value judgments as expressions simply of subjective, individual preference or choice, positivism fosters intellectual anarchy and nihilism. It is just such a milieu that breeds fascism.”⁶⁰

This, then, is the “irony of liberal reason” as Spragens calls it: that ultimately liberalism is unable to sustain its highest aspirations and produces, instead, illiberal results.⁶¹

Once positivism infiltrates

into all realms of thought, belief in the existence of eternal truths and values is lost and conscience is denied a valid role in the scheme of things the “liberal” is driven by his own logic to either one of two conclusions: to make the sovereign absolute (tyranny) or to make the individual absolute (anarchy). The acceptance of the positivistic point of view drives the liberal to an espousal of irresponsibility either on the part of the state or on the part of the individual... Ultimately his own logic forces him, whether explicitly or not, to an espousal of tyranny or unbridled subjectivism.⁶²

Instead of the minimal government classical liberals desired, a technocratic government in which law is merely the product of individual wills and the expression of subjective interest is needed to administer whatever liberal values are left. Ironically, from the view of classical liberalism, these values are increasingly administered by the coercive power of the state rather than through the voluntary actions and free will of rational and morally conscientious human beings. In some nation-states of the twentieth century the failure of liberalism led to the rise of Fascism and Communism with terrible results. In other

⁶⁰ Ibid.; Ibid., 18, 20.

⁶¹ Spragens, *Irony*, 5, 10.

⁶² Hallowell, *Decline*, 11-12.

cases, as in America, the failure was much less extreme, producing instead the “softer” kind of despotism to which Tocqueville believed democratic nations were particularly susceptible, one that degrades men rather than torments them and creates a new “brand of orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery.” Withdrawn into themselves in a constant pursuit of “petty and banal pleasures,” the citizens submit to an “immense, protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate... It would resemble parental authority, if, father-like, it tried to prepare its charges for a man’s life, but on the contrary, it only tries to keep them in perpetual childhood.”⁶³

The response of modern liberalism to such developments has been somewhat divided. While some continue to chase the elusive phantom of total equality through the power of the state, others succumb to the disappointment that inevitably follows any attempt to cure all social and economic ills through the power of centralized government. Spragens mentions that the response for some liberals

has been to depoliticize the aspirations of liberalism. Since it has failed to live up to the promises made in its behalf, the political realm is shunted aside in favor of other forms of human activity. The passions that fueled liberal political enterprises are devoted instead to other kinds of pursuits: to art or to religion or to personal and family life... In part this trend is salutary, for the tendency of liberalism was to overpoliticize the world—to expect more from politics that it could possibly give.⁶⁴

In American history this trend was most pronounced during the countercultural revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Dismayed by the failure of liberal politics and politicians, many modern liberals sought an escape in new forms of personal freedom and expression that were gaining more social acceptance than ever before. Like the Romantics of

⁶³ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 692.

⁶⁴ Spragens, *Irony*, 4.

the eighteenth century and the Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century, they would look more to emotion and intuition than to reason and tradition in forming their personal values.

But that is a story for the next chapter.

The Synthesis

It is not difficult to see how the biblical and classical influences on American civil religion complemented each other; like the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Puritan settlers of North America were determined to create a “republic of virtue,” albeit a specifically *Christian* republic founded on biblical virtues. Ellis Sandoz has argued that *Americanism* as a form of political thought *is* a synthesis of Christianity and classical theory and that the “meaning of equality and happiness as held by such *aristoi* as Jefferson and Adams, and the esteem in which the *people* are held in the repeated references to them in the Constitutional Convention are quite mystifying unless the classical and Christian notions of a common human nature present to all men *qua* men and the dignity of man as created in the divine image and loved of God are borne in mind.”⁶⁵

If this virtuous republic were to survive and achieve Winthrop’s dream of a shining “city upon a hill,” it would by necessity require the kind of active citizenship venerated in the republican tradition. Indeed, the Puritans provided one of the most dynamic examples of civil society known to history, playing no small part in the associations “of a thousand different types” mentioned by Tocqueville, and their legacy of energetic social activism lived on well into the twentieth century— long after waves of immigration had substantially changed the ethnic and religious composition of American society.

⁶⁵ Sandoz, *Laws*, 100-01.

What is more remarkable, however, is the synthesis that biblical and liberal thought achieved in the early days of the American republic— a synthesis very unique in Western civilization at that time. In his own work on the American Enlightenment, historian Henry May noted that both “reason and science, properly defined, had always been welcomed by Puritans. For most purposes, the Newtonian universe and the Christian miracles could still be reconciled.”⁶⁶ Tocqueville observed that “America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men’s souls; and nothing better demonstrates how useful and natural it is to man, since the country where it now has widest sway is both the most enlightened and the freest.” For Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty were so completely mingled “that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of one without the other.” He described Anglo-American civilization as

the product (and one should continually bear in mind this point of departure) of two perfectly distinct elements which elsewhere have often been at war with one another but which in America it was somehow possible to incorporate into each other, forming a marvelous combination. I mean the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom*... Religion regards civil liberty as a noble exercise of men’s faculties, the world of politics being a sphere intended by the Creator for the free play of intelligence... Freedom sees religion as the companion of its struggles and triumphs, the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its rights. Religion is considered as the guardian of mores, and mores are regarded as the guarantee of the laws and pledge for the maintenance of freedom itself.⁶⁷

In contrast to the radical brand of Enlightenment liberalism that characterized the violently anti-religious French Revolution, the Americans experienced what May called the “Moderate Enlightenment,” characterized by the kind of careful compromise that went into the crafting of the U.S. Constitution. America, where churches remained the most important institutions in the country, was ultimately too religious for the radical Enlightenment to

⁶⁶ Henry F. May, The Enlightenment in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 48.

⁶⁷ Tocqueville, Democracy, 291, 293, 46-47.

make much headway. In New England, the “Enlightenment, Protestantism, and patriotism still seemed almost interchangeable terms” and even the most radical American Enlightenment figures like “Jefferson and Paine were as religious as any New England Congregationalist” in the sense that they “seldom thought about any branch of human affairs without referring consciously to some general beliefs about the nature of the universe and man’s place in it, and about human nature itself.”⁶⁸ Jefferson and Franklin, both revolutionaries and scientists, nonetheless “retained faith in a creator deity since they believed it was unreasonable to think that the wonderful machine of the universe appeared without a designer. They also believed in a created moral order, reflecting the wisdom of the Supreme Being and necessary for the practical ordering of society.”⁶⁹

Which is not to say that they were necessarily Christians in the strictest sense of the word. Jefferson claimed he was opposed to the corruptions of Christianity “but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian in the only sense he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to His doctrines in preference to all others; ascribing to Himself every human excellence; and believing he never claimed any other.”⁷⁰ Franklin shared this same sentiment when he wrote to a friend, “As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting

⁶⁸ May, Enlightenment, 99, 181, xiv.

⁶⁹ Marsden, Religion, 41.

⁷⁰ Maureen Harrison, Steve Gilbert, eds. Thomas Jefferson: In His Own Words (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996), 364.

Changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity... ”⁷¹

These were certainly not views that a majority of Americans shared at the time, but they were not uncommon among the educated elite who led the Revolution, helped draft the Constitution, and served the new government in high office. Despite their pivotal role in shaping American civil religion, the Enlightenment modes and ideas they expressed “were obviously becoming less useful and appropriate in America” in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Interest in Europe in general was on the wane; “[f]rontier expansion, mass immigration, the continental market, and even manufacturing were set free to create nineteenth-century America, with all its chaos, turbulence, unsolved problems, and gathering power. Eventually, these forces were to be expressed in fresh and appropriate cultural symbols.”⁷²

The next chapter will examine these new forces and their impact on American civil religion.

⁷¹ Benjamin Franklin: Autobiography and Other Writings, ed. Kenneth Silverman (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 259-60.

⁷² May, Enlightenment, 309.

CHAPTER III:

THE ROAD TO SCHISM

It should already be obvious that American civil religion did not spontaneously appear, fully formed, when the United States became a nation in 1776. Some of the key elements discussed in Chapter Two were already there, like Winthrop's vision of the "city upon a hill" and the founders' vision of a virtuous republic, but many others did not appear until later in American history. As Daniel Boorstin observed in *The Americans*, the civil religion's "galaxy of lesser demigods who, in 20th-century retrospect, seem always to have been there, did not rise above partisanship to become canonized until the mid-19th century or later [and] the making of other patriotic symbols and rituals for the new nation was slow and halting." In fact, it was not until after the Civil War that a national perspective on American history would begin to seem normal.¹

Accordingly, some authors have attempted to trace the development of American civil religion through several historic stages. Bellah saw these stages in terms of epic "trials" out of which new national symbols were formed. Another analogy was proposed by Jose Casanova, who saw these stages in terms of "disestablishments" that systematically removed Protestantism as the de facto "public religion of American civil society." In his analysis, the first disestablishment was the constitutional one that created a "wall of separation" between the Protestant churches and the American state, while the second disestablishment—

¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 356, 373, 367.

spanning a much longer period of time that included the Civil War, reconstruction, industrialization and urbanization— led to “the secularization of American higher education and the loss of Protestant cultural hegemony over the public sphere of American civil society.”²

Before this second disestablishment, and at least as late as the 1830s, American civil religion was still heavily influenced by the biblical and republican traditions of individualism. It was a synthesis of biblical and classical thought that admitted, but tempered, liberalism’s revolutionary zeal for freedom in all realms of life. But after the Civil War, new forces emerged to challenge this synthesis and change the cultural landscape of America, adding new beliefs, symbols and rituals to the civil religion and laying the groundwork for a third trial or disestablishment. This chapter will examine these forces and attempt to show how they led to the rise of a separate, *liberal* civil religion in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

A New Gospel of Wealth

While the story of our national origin usually focuses on the New England Puritans and their religious exodus from Europe, there were other immigrants who arrived on the shores of the New World for less exalted reasons. Tocqueville observed that early settlements like Virginia tended to attract adventurers, gold-seekers, greedy speculators and industrial entrepreneurs, “men without wealth or standards whose restless, turbulent temper endangered the infant colony and made its progress vacillating... no noble thought or conception above gain presided over the foundation of the new settlements.” Their lust for

² Jose Casanova, Public Religions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 135-37.

wealth was by no means unique, and it would be inaccurate to suggest that such sentiments existed only in Virginia or the South. Tocqueville confided that he knew “of no other country where love of money has such a grip on men’s hearts... [it] is either the chief or a secondary motive at the bottom of everything the Americans do. This gives a family likeness to all their passions and soon makes them wearisome to contemplate.”³

Tocqueville had discovered one of the earliest and most enduring contradictions at the heart of American civilization: that it is both intensely religious and intensely materialistic, or as Herberg wrote more than a century later, “America seems to be at once the most religious and the most secular of nations.”⁴ In considering this contradiction and the other extreme polarities of America’s national character— that we are “extravagantly praised and blamed as idealists or materialists, anarchists or conformists, the world’s most openhanded philanthropists or the world’s most efficient killers”— Bellah argued in *The Broken Covenant* that these

apparent contradictions may be rooted in the basically different motives that brought individuals to America in the first place. They came to find salvation or they came to get rich, or, often enough, for both reasons in some combination not even clear to the individuals themselves. However sharply contradictory these motives might appear, and they often have seemed utterly contradictory, a choice between God and Mammon, or God and the devil, they are at some deep level not unrelated. They can both be considered versions of the same mythic archetype: the quest for paradise; *one for an earthly paradise in which impulses are gratified here and now, one for a heavenly paradise at some future time*” [emphasis added].⁵

Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” was the earliest paradisaical vision in American civil religion, though Winthrop himself did not confuse the distinction between Heaven and Earth and only meant to exhort his followers to build a model Christian society in a fallen,

³ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 34-35, 54, 615.

⁴ Herberg, *Protestant*, 2.

⁵ Bellah, *Broken*, 63-64.

sinful world. Such attitudes lingered long after Winthrop and the Puritans passed away, but even at the time of Tocqueville's travels he found that despite the lust for money and physical comfort that preoccupied so many Americans, "materialist philosophy is practically unknown to them, although the passion for prosperity is general." The influence of religion in America kept materialistic impulses in check, and this he believed was extremely valuable and important, for materialism

is a dangerous malady of the human spirit, but one must be particularly on guard against it among a democratic people, because it combines most marvelously well with that vice which is most familiar to the heart in such circumstances. Democracy favors the taste for physical pleasures. This taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that nothing but matter exists. Materialism, in its turn, spurs them on to such delights with mad impetuosity. Such is the vicious circle into which democratic nations are driven. It is good that they see the danger and hold back.⁶

In early nineteenth-century America, religion served as a very simple but effective check upon such impulses. Every Sunday business ceased and the average American went to church, where he was "told of the countless evils brought on by pride and covetousness [and] reminded of the need to check his desires and told of the finer delights which go with virtue alone, and the true happiness they bring." Given time to reflect on "the greatness and goodness of the Creator, of the infinite magnificence of the works of God, of the high destiny reserved for men, of their duties and of their claims to immortality", he was afforded momentary respite from "the petty passions that trouble his life and the passing interests that fill it." Tocqueville admired this salutary restraint that American religiosity provided in an otherwise materialist society, and he concluded that it was "ever the duty of lawgivers and of all upright educated men to raise up the souls of their fellow citizens and turn their attention toward heaven... to propagate throughout society a taste for the infinite, an appreciation for greatness, and a love of spiritual pleasures." With perhaps a certain amount

⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 538, 544.

of hyperbole, he argued that men who teach that everything perishes with the body “must be regarded as the natural enemies of the people.”⁷

As long as America remained a predominantly agrarian nation, the temptations of wealth and comfort remained comparatively mild and mundane, and a God-centered work ethic prevailed in the heavily Protestant culture. But this work ethic was not exclusively biblical, and indeed it became less so as America’s economic power grew. Foreshadowing the conservative beliefs described in Chapter One, the view that

was still taught both in college economics texts and in popular literature after the Civil War, was built upon the premise that God created the world with a system of rewards and punishments. People who worked were rewarded, while lazy or profligate people suffered from poverty. The right to own private property was considered a sacred right since it was essential to the operation of the reward system. It was important also not to interfere with the natural mechanism, as in strikes or government interference. Charity was an important duty toward the truly needy, such as the disabled, widows, and orphans, who could not help themselves. To artificially aid the able-bodied, however, was simply to destroy individual initiative. The logic of the system made it seem God ordained.⁸

Whether or not it was ordained by God is debatable, but what is important to note in this passage is the beginning of the fusion between biblical values and capitalism characteristic of conservative civil religion. Private property, in the Protestant ethic as much as the Lockean tradition, is a “sacred right.” God’s “system of rewards and punishments” in this view is literally equated with laissez-faire economics. In effect the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith is the very hand of God Himself, and therefore it would be heresy to interfere with His will. Capitalism, as modern evangelicals like Falwell and Robertson believe, is God’s economic plan for mankind— a curious position considering Christ’s memorable warnings that men “cannot serve both God and Money” and that “it is easier for a camel to go

⁷ Ibid., 542-544.

⁸ Marsden, Religion, 119.

through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”⁹ The letters of Paul echo Christ’s warnings and include a denunciation of “men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.”¹⁰

Andrew Bard Schmookler described the growing marriage of biblical values and capitalism as a “transformation of the values of the nineteenth century American” from the old Protestant ethic to a worship of success, and a “tendency to enshrine *wealth* as the essence of value.” Cherished Protestant virtues like diligence, discipline and frugality went hand in hand with an attitude that regarded worldly success as “a matter essentially of self-improvement.” But as “the power of the market mushroomed during the nineteenth century... the moral and religious restraints against the single-minded devotion to moneymaking fell away.” By the second half of the century, success was more commonly defined as “getting ahead in the competitive market” and material wealth was the measure of that success. As Schmookler lamented, the spiritual core of the Protestant ethic had “broken down, leaving but the dry husk of material success to define the purpose of human existence.” Prominent Christians like Charles Perkins, the head of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad, accordingly preached a “new gospel of the morality of wealth” that equated worldly riches with godliness, the logic of which held that wealth was a virtue. Thus the wealthier you were the more virtue you possessed, while the poorer you were the *less* virtue you possessed. Not everyone shared this view of course, but the relentless pressure of the market, shaped in no small part by the influential captains of industry, increasingly reinforced such opinions from the top down in American society.¹¹

⁹ Matt. 6:24, 19:24 (NIV).

¹⁰ 1 Tim. 6:5 (NIV).

¹¹ Schmookler, *Illusion*, 145-48.

The Social Gospel and Expressive Individualism

While many Americans embraced this union of Protestantism and capitalism, enthusiasm among Protestants themselves was far from universal. Some believed that laissez-faire economics not only perpetrated social and economic injustice, but that it was also distinctly *un*-Christian. Clergymen like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch believed that truly Christian ethics— i.e., those derived from the teachings of Jesus— would lead to economic theories that were more just to *all* members of society, and they feared that capitalism distracted Christians from their social obligations. Gladden, “sometimes called ‘the father of the Social Gospel,’ was especially sympathetic with the emergent labor movement... was a strong supporter of interdenominational and interracial fellowship, was an early advocate of the cause of black rights, and regarded Jews and Catholics as potential allies rather than antagonists.”¹² Altogether, he and other religious liberals of the day advocated a Social Gospel that reinterpreted the “Kingdom of God” as a millennial reform of the social order here on earth, rather than an otherworldly life to come. That is, they believed Christians should direct their energies less toward personal salvation and more to reforming American institutions and society for the moral betterment of mankind— a position equally as curious as the accommodation between American Christianity and capitalism, considering the otherworldly detachment from politics encouraged by Jesus and his apostles.¹³

¹² Peter W. Williams, America’s Religions: From their Origins to the Twenty-First Century (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 260.

¹³ Marsden, Religion, 129-30.

This division between conservatives who placed Christianity on the side of capitalism and liberals who placed Christianity on the side of laborers and the poor was an early precursor of the divisions between the “orthodox” and the “progressivists” of the culture war. Another important early precursor was the rise of what the authors of *Habits of the Heart* described as the “expressive tradition” of individualism. Like the Social Gospel, expressive individualism was in many ways a backlash against the nineteenth-century transformation of Judeo-Christian values to a gospel of wealth. In the expressivist view, a “life devoted to the calculating pursuit of one’s own material interest [left] too little room for love, human feeling, and a deeper expression of the self.” Embodied in the poetry of Walt Whitman, the expressive tradition held that a successful life was one “rich in experience, open to all kinds of people, luxuriating in the sensual as well as the intellectual, above all a life of strong feeling... for Whitman, the ultimate use of the American’s independence was to cultivate and express the self and explore its vast social and cosmic identities.”¹⁴

In his famous 1859 tract *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill attempted to establish a utilitarian argument for this view:

As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself. Where, not the person's own character, but the traditions and customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress.¹⁵

Essentially, Mill applied the same logic to the social realm that Adam Smith applied to the economic realm: that allowing individuals to pursue their own enlightened self-interest

¹⁴ Bellah, *Habits*, 33, 34-35.

¹⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1947), 56.

would lead to progress. In Mill's case he believed that allowing as many different "modes of life" as possible would inevitably lead to *social* progress, because some modes of life would be "proven" and some would be "disproven" in terms of their usefulness. Then, in the marketplace of ideas, people would clearly choose the proven modes of life over the disproven and in the process exercise their "human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference." It is worth emphasizing Mill's distinction between "proven" and "disproven," for he clearly did *not* submit to the subjectivist belief that all lifestyles are morally equal. On the contrary, he repeatedly asserted his belief in objective moral truth and complained about

the fashion of the present time to disparage negative logic— that which points out weaknesses in theory or errors in practice, without establishing positive truths. Such negative criticism would indeed be poor enough as an ultimate result; but as a means to attaining any positive knowledge or conviction worthy the name, it cannot be valued too highly; and until people are again systematically trained to it, there will be few great thinkers, and a low general average of intellect, in any but the mathematical and physical departments of speculation.¹⁶

In the end Mill's beliefs rested on the optimistic assumption that intelligent men and women could evaluate competing opinions or modes of life and select the "right" ones over the "wrong" ones, thus arriving at sound moral truths. He was not opposed to the role of Christianity or any other religion in ascertaining these truths, but he argued that "other ethics than any which can be evolved from exclusively Christian sources, must exist side by side with Christian ethics to produce the moral regeneration of mankind... that in an imperfect state of the human mind, the interests of truth require a diversity of opinions." The apparent contradiction in these statements— that humans could intelligently evaluate a diversity of

¹⁶ Mill, *Liberty*, 58, 44-45.

opinions and arrive at the truth *despite* their “imperfect” state of mind— would manifest itself in due course with tragic results for American culture.¹⁷

Consumerism

In fairness to Mill, however, he did not live to see the twentieth— or what Gary Cross calls the “All-Consuming”— century. Had he, his optimism might have been dimmed by America’s obsession with a growing cornucopia of hitherto unimagined material goods. The obsession itself was not entirely new, as Tocqueville had earlier discovered. He remarked on the “passion for physical comforts” that prevailed in America and observed that “Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them. They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight.”¹⁸

What *was* new at the turn of the century was the amount and availability of mass-produced goods in an era of industrialization. After the Civil War this process began to dramatically change not only the American economy, but American society and religion with it in ways that had far-reaching implications for the future of American civil religion. As William Leach explained,

[i]n the decades following the Civil War, American capitalism began to produce a distinct culture, unconnected to traditional family or community values, to religion in any conventional sense, or to political democracy. It was a secular business and market-oriented culture, with the exchange and circulation of money and goods at the foundation of its aesthetic life and of its moral sensibility... The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 531, 536.

and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money as the predominant measure of all value in society.¹⁹

This new “secular business and market-oriented culture” took no account of religious beliefs and in fact embraced values directly contrary to biblical morality; values such as *money, acquisition, consumption* and *desire*. While some Christians resisted the new culture and spoke out against its excesses, many more sought for a way to accommodate the two, just as the Protestant ethic had accommodated the laissez-faire principles of capitalism. In urban America in particular the trend “was toward a new religious accommodation, a new ethical compromise that tried to integrate consumer pleasure and comfort and acquisition—the American ‘standard of living’— into what was left of the traditional Christian world-view.”²⁰

The old Protestant values of discipline, frugality, self-denial and ultimately salvation were being displaced by consumerism, and by the early 1900s the millennial myth of America as a New Jerusalem “was being transformed, urbanized and commercialized, increasingly severed from its religious aims and focusing ever more on personal satisfaction and even on such new pleasure palaces as department stores, theaters, restaurants, hotels, dance halls, and amusement parks... this new era heralded the pursuit of goods as the means to all ‘good’ and to personal salvation.”²¹

And religious belief was not the only victim of consumerism; the kind of expressive individualism espoused by Whitman— with his dream of people exploring their “vast social and cosmic identities”— was subverted and co-opted by the consumer culture, in which “manufactured objects, designed to maximize physical satisfaction and to intensify pleasure

¹⁹ William Leach, Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 3.

²⁰ Leach, Desire, 194.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

and excitement, created new understandings of personal freedom.” Increasingly “the self in society came to be defined by consumption” and “[c]onsumer goods allowed Americans to free themselves from their old, relatively secure but closed communities and enter the expressive individualism of a dynamic ‘mass’ society.” In this context, liberty was no longer “an abstract right to participate in public discourse or free speech” but a means of “expressing oneself and realizing personal pleasure in and through goods.” In other words, the average American was more likely to exercise his liberty and express his “vast cosmic identity” by proudly purchasing a Model T Ford than by some more civic or ennobling use of his faculties.²²

In short, by elevating materialism as a virtue, consumerism attacked the foundations of religious and moral belief that Montesquieu, the Founding Fathers, Tocqueville and the older conservative tradition all believed essential to the long-term success of democracy; it subverted the Protestant ethic of discipline, frugality and production to one of unbridled consumption and desire, and it co-opted the expressivist search for meaning by at least partially filling that need with material goods. In addition, Cross argues that consumerism “partially replaced civil society” by countering the kind of “political and cultural solidarities that produced Nazism and contemporary ethnic or religious bigotry.” Capitalism and consumerism in this analysis are what historically made America a “melting pot,” dissolving away the differences that separated people of different ethnicities and religions in their search of an “American Dream”; a dream inevitably cast in the economic and materialistic terms of how much money someone earned and how many things they owned.²³

²² Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 2, 6, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

Pluralism, Secularism and Consensus

At the same time America was becoming an ethnic “melting pot,” religious pluralism was a growing reality. Originally this pluralism had consisted primarily of Protestantism and deism, the latter being held mainly by the educated elite. While the Protestant denominations may have had their differences, Protestant views in general still dominated public life and “within the boundaries of a broadly Judeo-Christian moral consensus, some views were tolerated and civil government was not based explicitly on religion. So long as the national heritage was predominantly homogeneous and Protestant, religious and secular views could be easily blended together without great conflict.”²⁴ The non-sectarian religious language of the nation’s founding documents and the deistic beliefs of men like Jefferson and Franklin provide ample evidence that they were keeping *traditional* religion at arm’s length even as they acknowledged the existence of a Creator and a created moral order underlying their efforts at building a *novus ordo seclorum*.

But America’s economic growth in the late nineteenth century increasingly added Catholics and Jews to the religious landscape. This created a push not only by those traditionally hostile to religion but even by many of the faithful themselves—Protestants, Catholics and Jews alike—for an increasing secularization of public institutions in order to accommodate a wider range of religious and non-religious beliefs. In discussing the Supreme Court’s public school prayer and Bible-reading cases of 1962 and 1963, Francis Canavan wrote:

We must recognize that the problem posed by the prayer cases is one that is inherent in the idea of public education. The root of the problem is the notion that the state must offer all its citizens a *common* education. That is why Protestants, when they set up the public school system in the nineteenth

²⁴ Marsden, Religion, 178.

century, vetoed the teaching of sectarian doctrines on which they differed among themselves. Catholics then vetoed Protestantism; Jews vetoed Christianity; and secularists have now succeeded in vetoing religion altogether in public education. This was the inevitable result of trying to give a common education to a religiously divided society. The attempt tends necessarily to an education whose principles and values are wholly secular.²⁵

If, as the proponents of secularization believed, the government should remain “neutral” on moral issues, how then could it competently educate children? Shouldn’t at least some of their education be directed toward distinguishing between what is “right” and what is “wrong”? Was it even possible to teach children about subjects like human sexuality without touching upon issues that address how we as human beings *ought* to live? Canavan argued that the moral neutrality secularists advocated might have been possible under the kind of minimalist government that briefly existed in America in the nineteenth century, but with

the advent of the welfare state, the problem of government neutrality clearly becomes more acute. A state that acts vigorously on a number of fronts to promote people’s welfare must have some idea of what their welfare is. That necessarily implies some conception of what is good for human beings and what is bad for them. Having such a conception, the state cannot pretend to be neutral about it.²⁶

Richard Neuhaus made the same point when he argued that if the public square is not “clothed with the ‘meanings’ borne by religion, new ‘meanings’ will be imposed by virtue of the ambitions of the modern state.”²⁷ The reality, of course, is that the modern welfare state is *not* neutral. When it pretends to be neutral on moral issues like abortion and homosexuality, it simply “favors those of its citizens who regard religion as irrelevant to life

²⁵ Canavan, *Pluralist*, 1-2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷ Richard Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), ix.

and believe that all human problems have purely human and secular answers.”²⁸ This may very well be a legitimate opinion, but it is *not* neutral, and that is one of the central problems with American pluralism. In legal battle after legal battle, it was more often than not the liberal values of secularism that carried the day. No matter what they said about “pluralism” and “diversity,” secularists were simply imposing their own values upon the rest of society—a society that was still widely religious. As Peter Berger once remarked, if India is the most religious nation in the world and Sweden the most secular, then America could best be described as a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. That is, America’s increasingly secular government does not accurately represent the views of its still predominantly religious citizens.

For despite the growing trend of religious pluralism and the secularization of society, most Americans *did* still seem to share a common religion. The widespread enthusiasm for the First World War, for example, “had causes closely related to the nation’s religious heritage. The enthusiasm for the war was of the same ilk as the simultaneous enthusiasm for Prohibition, progressive reform, or world missions. All these were part of an increasingly popular zeal for an American democratic way of life, a somewhat secularized form of the old ideal of Christian and republican civilization.”²⁹ On the evening when Allied troops landed at Normandy in the Second World War, President Franklin Roosevelt asked the nation to join him in a prayer that began, “Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity.”³⁰ As late as the 1950s, Americans

²⁸ Canavan, Pluralist, 2.

²⁹ Marsden, Religion, 187.

³⁰ Quoted from <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/fdr-prayer.htm>.

increasingly subordinated their own traditional beliefs to the tenets of a civil religion which held that America was a chosen nation with a special mission in the world to spread secular values like democracy and capitalism. America's successful role in both world wars could only confirm what most Americans already believed, that theirs was a *good* nation clearly favored by God or fate. It was in this heady atmosphere that President Eisenhower confidently declared the essential irrelevance of a citizen's specific religious faith, so long as it contributed to his civic duties and to the success of American government.

The subsequent election of John Kennedy in 1960 seemed, at least to some American Catholics at the time, to prove that non-Protestant religious affiliation was no longer the barrier it once was to serving in even the highest office of the land. Kennedy's inaugural was the catalyst for Bellah's famous article on the American civil religion, in which he argued that Kennedy referred to God rather than to Christ in his speech because his own specifically Catholic beliefs

are matters of his own private religious belief and of his relation to his own particular church; *they are not matters relevant in any direct way to the conduct of his public office.* Others with different religious views and commitments to different churches or denominations are equally qualified participants in the political process. The principle of separation of church and state guarantees the freedom of religious belief and association, but at the same time *dearly segregates the religious sphere, which is considered to be essentially private, from the political one*³¹[emphases added].

Marsden believed that Kennedy was the "last great symbol" of consensus America, which "was based on a largely secular ideology." Like Herberg, he maintained that "most Americans held to two faiths, or some amalgam of the two: one traditional and one largely

³¹ Bellah, "Civil Religion," 24.

secular” and that in the public sphere it was the secular faith that was triumphing, because it “seemed to provide the best hope for bringing people of various faiths together.”³²

This secular faith was the American civil religion in its “traditional” or conservative form—not without its own internal tensions and contradictions, but still a largely unified faith that held some generic deistic beliefs about a Creator and his curiously secular plan for America to spread the benefits of capitalism and democracy throughout the world. The nation’s secular and materialistic goals were thus given divine sanction by a generic God whose existence most Americans could still accept.

Culture War and the Demise of Consensus

As Americans know all too well, the optimism and consensus of the 1950s and early 1960s were short-lived. Kennedy himself was assassinated and the grandiose visions of a “Great Society” and a “War on Poverty” that his successor put forth not only proved unsuccessful in the long run, they were more immediately compromised by a *real* war in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Americans found themselves increasingly torn apart by political differences at home over issues like poverty, civil rights and the vast expansion of the federal government; and abroad over the painful issue of the Vietnam War and American “imperialism.” As the toll in American and Vietnamese lives continued to climb, agreement was far from unanimous that Kennedy’s pledge to “pay any price” and “bear any burden” was worth honoring in a conflict that seemed to have no end in sight and in which neither America’s survival nor the “success of liberty” were clearly at stake.

³² Marsden, Religion, 238.

It is not surprising that in a time of such doubt and conflict, American civil religion became a subject of more intense scrutiny. If in fact the civil religion seemed to justify the war in Vietnam as some like Bellah argued, then it was only natural that Americans opposed to the war would question the civil religion itself while those who supported the war looked to the civil religion for strength and inspiration in a time of doubt. As scholars like Bellah consequently examined the civil religion with new interest, so too did the different groups of the “countercultural revolution.” As Donald Jones and Russell Richey explain,

as activism turned to conflict, civil religion gained further appeal and opprobrium. Both the antiwar movement and the black movement were hostile to the civil religion insofar as it seemed to legitimize the “imperialism” and “racism” of American society. But each in its own way also seemed to draw upon resources that well might be termed civil religious. The appeal of the concept had much to do with *the appropriateness of civil religion to both status quo and dissent*. It probably also appealed to those searching for some consensus amid the conflict, for some unitive resources to heal the wounds and bridge the divisions in American society [emphasis added].³³

As part of this search, the counterculture drew upon several “resources” from the wellsprings of American civil religion. From the biblical tradition it drew a strong concern and empathy for the socially and economically disenfranchised, which manifested itself in a zealous brand of social activism that could almost be described as *Puritan*, were it not for the counterculture’s disdain for most other elements of Judeo-Christian morality.³⁴ In this respect the activism of the counterculture seemed to retain part of the classical or republican tradition, with its emphasis on citizens being deeply and actively involved in the affairs of the republic as the best means of sustaining its survival, but without the corresponding republican conviction in religion as the necessary foundation for democracy.

³³ Donald Jones & Russell Richey, eds., American Civil Religion (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 5.

³⁴ Herberg’s description of a “secularized Puritanism” without any sense of sin or judgment seems as aptly applied to the social activism of the counterculture as to the modern conservative fervor for spreading capitalism and democracy.

But the counterculture's most visible inheritance was from the tradition of liberal subjectivism, with its rejection of religious authority and moral absolutes in favor of intuition and emotion. In its enthusiasm for social taboos, as well as its rejection of both capitalism and consumerism, it seemed to be the fulfillment of expressive individualism, the realization of Mill's advocacy for "different experiments of living," but *without* his concern for objective moral truth. From the various forms of sexual freedom it embraced to experimental drug use, nature communes and Eastern mysticism, the counterculture took the idea of personal freedom to new extremes. It offered what Marsden described as

a new religious world-view and value system. This millennial philosophy of a new age or the "age of Aquarius" was built around "the monistic assumption that all life is united and all existence is one." Its truth system was built on trusting immediate intuitions. While its expressions of public morality were almost biblically prophetic, its private morality was built around individual expression and fulfillment. "Do your own thing," "let it all hang out," "express love and awareness for all beings" and "get the most good vibes" were typical moral maxims.³⁵

At the heart of the countercultural revolution was therefore a critical tension; on the one hand it espoused a social conscience that relied upon an active and concerned involvement in the democratic process, and on the other hand it embraced a morally subjective worldview that elevated personal pleasure and fulfillment to the near exclusion of all other concerns. While the immediate fervor of this "revolution" would subside in the course of the 1970s, the legacy of self-destructive behavior it left endures to this day and can be statistically traced in any variety of social indicators like drug use, pre-marital sex, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and the casual availability of even the most extreme pornography for mass consumption. Many public schools today teach views about human sexuality that can be traced directly to the countercultural views of the 1960s and 1970s, views that emphasize most forms of sexual behavior— even those historically considered

³⁵ Marsden, Religion, 251.

“aberrant” or “immoral”— as healthy expressions for adolescent men and women, as long as they are conducted “safely.”

A cultural backlash against such permissive attitudes began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when growing numbers of Americans and conservative organizations like the “Moral Majority” began to fight back. The culture war that continues to this day has already been described in detail in the first chapter, and there is no need to repeat it here. What does merit repeating is Bellah’s fear, which he first articulated in 1967, that if the centrality of God in the American civil religion were removed or reformulated, there might be consequences of “liberal alienation and of fundamentalist ossification.” The culture war is of course precisely that: the alienation of liberals from key elements of the American tradition, and the hardening of conservatives into more rigid positions stemming from that tradition. In effect the countercultural revolution and the culture war that it created represents a schism in American culture between conservatives and liberals, and thus a schism within American civil religion itself.

But this schism is by no means complete. If Bellah was right that there is a quest for paradise at the heart of the American experiment — “one for an earthly paradise in which impulses are gratified here and now, one for a heavenly paradise at some future time”— then one can fairly say that the cultural changes described in this chapter steadily reshaped Winthrop’s vision of a morally virtuous “city upon a hill” into a materialistic paradise in which every human desire *can* and *should* be satisfied in the here and now. Today there are essentially two sides to this materialistic vision: a conservative side that sees unfettered capitalism as the path to wealth and happiness, and a liberal side that embraces paternal government and freedom from almost all social and moral norms. Both sides of this vision are acutely individualistic, materialistic and hedonistic in orientation. Both sides are

inherently liberal in the larger historical meaning of the word; that is, they are primarily concerned with the rights, comfort and pleasure of the *individual* at the expense of any larger moral concerns.

As for what this portends and why it matters, that is the subject of the final chapter.

CHAPTER IV:

THE THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

*"We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."*¹ – John Adams, 1798

Human history, of which far too many people in the modern world are inexcusably ignorant, reveals several important truths about human nature. The first is that man is imperfect; whether Created in God's image or evolved from the primordial ooze, the fact remains that he is subject to instincts, passions and emotions that run the gamut from loving and compassionate to hateful and murderous, not usually in the same person of course, but always in the same species, and certainly in every nation; there is no society on earth that does not experience violent crime, and there are few humans who can honestly claim that they *never* succumb to behavior that is harmful either to themselves or to others. The second important truth is that man is imperfectible; he cannot be perfected by laws or programs or any act of government, which after all is a *human* institution with *human* failings, and one that must ultimately exercise its power through that least enlightened and liberal of all methods: force. Finally, the third and most important truth history attests is that man is a spiritual creature. In the words of Will Herberg, man is "*homo religiosus*, by 'nature' religious: as much

¹ John Adams, The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1854), Vol. IX, p. 229.

as he needs food to eat or air to breathe, he needs a faith for living.”² Religion is one of humanity’s oldest endeavors: older than agriculture and industry; older than cities, empires and republics; older than any philosophy or political party ever created by man; and older than science. Despite the stunning scientific and technological advances of the twentieth century, despite the dreamy hopes of Enlightenment philosophers and the generations of skeptics, atheists and agnostics they created, religion is still practiced in every society on Earth, even in the wealthy, industrial democracies of the West. As Christopher Dawson reminds us, “man has a natural tendency to seek a religious foundation for his social way of life and”—more to the point of this chapter—“when culture loses its spiritual basis it becomes unstable.”³

As the examples in the preface to this work illustrate, civil religion is but one of many proofs that man is a spiritual creature and that even today, in different cultures across the world, he has a tendency to imbue the civil order of his society or nation with visibly religious characteristics. There may be secularists who, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, believe that humans will one day outgrow such inclinations and learn to rely exclusively upon “reason” and “science,” but the prospects for such hopes are not good. Some of the most overtly anti-religious regimes in history, like Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, proved through their own elaborate and frightening civil religions that even when human societies reject religion and spirituality in favor of reason and science, they inevitably create some form of secular religion that replaces God with the State, often with catastrophic consequences to life and liberty alike. It should always be remembered that the

² Herberg, Protestant, 254.

³ Dawson, Religion, 132, 217.

terrible armed conflicts of the twentieth century were not wars of religion, but wars of secular states.

There are plenty of religious scholars, be they Jews like Herberg or Christians like Neuhaus, who for this very reason believe that civil religion is inherently idolatrous. Herberg argued that “[t]o see America’s civil religion as somehow standing above or beyond the biblical religions of Judaism and Christianity, and Islam too, as somehow including them and finding a place for them in its overarching unity, is idolatry, however innocently held and whatever may be the subjective intentions of the believers.”⁴ Neuhaus was less generous, dismissing civil religion as “*ersatz* religion” that simply arises or is imposed by the state when the public square is stripped of genuine religious belief.⁵

In contrast to these views stands Bellah’s more optimistic interpretation of civil religion not as “the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality... a vehicle of national religious self-understanding.” Unlike the virulently anti-religious civil religions of socialist and fascist regimes,

American civil religion was never anticlerical or militantly secular. On the contrary, it borrowed selectively from the religious tradition in such a way that the average American saw no conflict between the two. In this way, the civil religion was able to build up without any bitter struggle with the church powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals.⁶

While someone’s personal view of civil religion will inevitably be influenced by his own religious, irreligious, nationalist or internationalist beliefs, one can fairly argue that to a

⁴ Will Herberg, “America’s Civil Religion: What It Is and Whence It Comes,” in American Civil Religion, eds. Russell Richey and Donald Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 87.

⁵ Neuhaus, Naked, 99.

⁶ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 40, 29.

large extent Herberg and Bellah were *both* right; that is, Bellah was correct in 1967 that the average American “saw no conflict” between the tenets of his civil religion and those of his biblical faith. For this very same reason, Herberg was right that civil religion *can* be idolatrous, for in the Judeo-Christian tradition the claims of God must ultimately supercede the claims of the state. They cannot exist on an equal basis, nor should they be conflated so that a citizen believes his state alone has some kind of divine sanction over the rest of the world. The dangers of such belief, especially in a nation as powerful as the United States, should be self-evident.

But whether it is possible for a citizen to always place the demands of his god above the demands of his state is doubtful at best. Rousseau’s assertion that “the homeland of the Christian is not of this world” may be true in a strictly theological sense, but as most Christians today would be the first to admit, on any given day a large percentage of their attention is understandably focused more on the more mundane demands of living, working and raising families in the modern nation-state than on their God and the life to come. Certainly Herberg’s studies in the 1950s strongly indicated this, and there is no evidence to indicate that attitudes have changed significantly in the past fifty years. Indeed, every poll conducted since then has confirmed that an overwhelming majority of Americans still believe in the existence of a God, even if they do not actively practice any specific religion. It seems likely, therefore, that if the demands of living in a modern, industrial nation-state like the United States continue to eclipse the importance of religion in the average citizen’s daily life, then the citizens of modern nation-states will continue to define themselves in varying degrees of what might be called *civil-religiosity*.

Several implications follow. One is that civil religion *matters*, that it really does have an impact on the actions of a people. It is the “first cause,” as I quoted Tocqueville at the

very beginning of this thesis, of a people's "prejudices, habits, dominating passions, and all that comes to be called the national character"; it is the "unknown force" that carries them toward a goal of which they may not even be aware.⁷ Herberg believed it exerted a greater influence on the public habits of Americans than did their own *traditional* religious beliefs, and Bellah, as quoted on the previous page, believed it was a "vehicle of national religious self-understanding." If one accepts the validity of these statements, then to the extent that they actually care about their collective future as a nation, citizens have a legitimate interest in guiding their civil religion toward what they deem to be noble and worthy goals, or conversely, to avoid *being guided* toward what they deem to be ignoble or unworthy goals.

Today, this is no easy task. Statements like "noble" and "worthy" imply value judgments, value judgments in turn imply morality, and morality in turn implies religion. To be sure, someone can "have values" or "be moral" without being religious, but history provides scant evidence of compelling value systems or moral codes that did not have a religious or at least spiritual basis, and the reason is simple: any belief system which views the human race as a mere cosmic accident will ultimately have a difficult time compelling humans toward acts of morality that go above and beyond mere self-preservation, much less restraining their most hedonistic and self-destructive tendencies. As Carl Becker neatly summarized the predicament:

Edit and interpret the conclusions of modern science as tenderly as we like, it is still quite impossible for us to regard man as the child of God for whom the earth was created as a temporary habitation. Rather must we regard him as little more than a chance deposit on the surface of the world, carelessly thrown up between two ice ages by the same forces that rust iron and ripen corn, a sentient organism endowed by some happy or unhappy accident with intelligence indeed, but with an intelligence that is conditioned by the very forces that it seeks to understand and to control. The ultimate cause of this cosmic process... appears in its effects as neither benevolent nor malevolent,

⁷ Tocqueville, Democracy, 31-32.

as neither kind nor unkind, but merely as indifferent to us. What is man that the electron should be mindful of him!⁸

It is not so much the old argument of Creation versus Evolution but of the meaning or *non*-meaning of human existence. Values like *peace*, *love* and *compassion* ultimately ring hollow when predicated upon a worldview that deprives human existence of any meaning, save perhaps that it is some sort of pleasant accident. As George Marsden wrote, it is one thing to profess such a worldview, but entirely another thing to live consistently with its implications.⁹ To state the matter bluntly, values must ultimately rest upon firmer foundations than subjective preference if they are to have any influence beyond the person who holds them. And in the current state of culture war that permeates American society, in which there are two “distinct conceptions of moral authority” that are “worlds apart,” there is no easy way to discuss values and morality without encountering the inevitable objection, “*Whose* values and *whose* morality?”¹⁰

The conservative civil religion answers with “*Judeo-Christian* values and morality,” though the more one evaluates this claim the more one is led to the conclusion that conservative values in this country are so heavily conditioned by capitalism and consumerism that they cannot honestly be described as authentically biblical much less truly conservative, and that Christian conservatives have a strong tendency to mix their civil religion with their *actual* religion, legitimizing charges of idolatry in what Bellah called the “American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag... used to attack non-

⁸ Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932).

⁹ Marsden, *Religion*, 210.

¹⁰ Hunter, *Culture*, 128.

conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds.”¹¹ Such liberal groups consequently tend to take a dim view of what they *believe* is Christianity, though in fact their issue is probably not with the genuine teachings of Christ, but with the values of conservative civil religion that distort those teachings.

On the other hand, the answer from liberal civil religion is that *no one's* morality should have the ultimate say— a dubious position at best, because nature abhors a vacuum and ultimately some particular value system *will* impose itself on the public sphere, and as many modern critics of pluralism contend, this value system seems to be one that is increasingly secular and liberal. Therefore, when they *say* that no one's morality should have the ultimate say, what they really mean is that *liberal* values should have the ultimate say. And because liberal values are inherently hostile to religious belief— as evidenced by the daily legal battles against religious symbols and institutions in American public life— this does not provide much hope for any long-term closure to the culture war short of complete capitulation by one side or the other.

Tocqueville believed it was “ever the duty of lawgivers and of all upright educated men to raise up the souls of their fellow citizens and turn their attention toward heaven” and that there “is a need for all who are interested in the future of democratic societies to get together and with one accord to make continual efforts to propagate throughout society a taste for the infinite, an appreciation of greatness, and a love of spiritual pleasures.”¹² Though the liberal utilitarian Mill did not care much about “souls” and “heaven,” he did share an equally lofty goal that free citizens would exercise their moral and mental powers to the utmost and become better, more fully developed human beings in the process. Surveying

¹¹ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 36.

¹² Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 543.

American culture today, one cannot help but feel that both Tocqueville and Mill— as well as anyone who ever shared such elevated hopes— would be sorely disappointed, if not outright appalled, by the relentless downward spiral toward a lowest-common-denominator culture that places a much higher value on crude entertainment and consumption than on the moral and intellectual development of its people. American society seems determined to produce Mill’s nightmare of citizens who are “but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce.”¹³

Both of America’s civil religions share a good deal of blame for this since they both tend to reinforce a view that the highest goal for Americans, ultimately, is to reap the maximum possible amount of physical comfort and pleasure out of this life, whether through the pursuit of money or through hedonistic indulgence in the various forms of “free expression” that proliferate in modern liberal culture. Any attempt to find common ground between our civil religions must therefore proceed from the assumption that no matter how religious one side of the debate may *seem* and how irreligious the other may *seem*, both sides are markedly individualistic and materialistic; both sides, in fact, are simply different expressions of the liberalism that today, as Grasso wrote, “supplies both the conceptual framework within which we think about politics and the idiom in which our civil conversation is conducted.”¹⁴

If there is a silver lining to this dark cloud, it is that most Americans still agree that democracy is a *good* thing. Partly this is for the individualistic reason that democracy allows common individuals more political power than they might otherwise have, and partly this is for the materialistic reason that democracy facilitates the pursuit of physical pleasures, as

¹³ Mill, *Liberty*, 59.

¹⁴ Grasso, “Triumph,” 226.

Tocqueville noted. In either case, the logical implications from a belief that democracy is good is that a) democracy is worth preserving, and b) anything which threatens or harms democracy should be considered *bad*. As simple as that may sound, it does provide some hope for at least a partial closure to the culture war and thus to the schism between conservative and liberal civil religion. The reason is also simple: history provides a clear prescription for the maintenance of a healthy democracy, and we are not following it.

As we saw in Chapter Two and in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, the Founding Fathers and the philosophers who influenced them believed that virtue and morality were the indispensable ingredients of a successful democracy. Tocqueville reached the same conclusion during his own travels through the United States a half-century later, remarking in wonder that the one place “where the Christian religion has kept the greatest power over men’s souls... is both the most enlightened and the freest.” Here religion did not influence “the laws or political opinions in detail, but it does direct mores, and by regulating domestic life it helps to regulate the state.” Addressing his more radical and liberal contemporaries who wished to “prepare mankind for liberty” Tocqueville wrote:

When such as these attack religious beliefs, they obey the dictates of their passions, not their interests. Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot. Religion is much more needed in the republic they advocate than in the monarchy they attack, and in democratic republics most of all. How could society escape destruction if, when political ties are relaxed, moral ties are not tightened?¹⁵

This question is an eminently relevant one for twenty-first century Americans, who live in an increasingly individualistic and hedonistic culture that does not cultivate the kind of mores the founders believed were necessary for the survival of democracy. If an American says that he “believes in democracy,” that he thinks it the best form of government available, then it logically follows that he is (or should be) concerned about fostering a moral climate

¹⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 291-92, 294.

favorable to the maintenance of democracy. As Neuhaus argues, “the American experiment, which, more than any other, has been normative for the world’s thinking about democracy, is not only derived from religiously grounded belief, it continues to depend on such belief.”¹⁶ History provides unambiguously grim examples of what happens to democracies when their cultures become decadent. Those who cherish freedom but attack religious belief in this country are, as Tocqueville claimed, harming their own interests by undermining the moral foundation upon which American democracy rests. At the same time, those who profess religious belief but subordinate it to, or mix it with, worldly economic and material interests— particularly when those interests foster a “passive society of consumption,” as is the case with modern conservatism— do just as much harm to this foundation.¹⁷

If the American democratic experiment is to survive, American civil religion must convey civic values favorable to the maintenance of democracy: values like frugality, discipline, self-control, generosity, compassion, and most importantly, active citizenship. It must revive the idea of a “virtuous republic” that the founders took for granted, one that values the role of religion and morality as the “indispensable supports” of democracy. By creating a climate of *genuine* pluralism that welcomes religious believers into the American democratic experiment— not as silent participants who must keep their beliefs private, but as valuable partners whose religious faiths can collectively enhance the moral foundation of the democratic process— American civil religion could lift the gaze of our citizens above an increasingly debased culture that does not produce the public mores, or “habits of the heart,” vital to successful democracy.

¹⁶ Neuhaus, *Naked*, 95.

¹⁷ Cross, *Century*, 1.

It is unlikely that the schism within American civil religion will ever fully heal, but if today's conservatives and liberals agree that democracy is worth preserving, then ultimately there is no choice but to acknowledge the necessity of morality and virtue in American public life. If we do not have a civil religion that aggressively promotes this belief, then the future of American democracy is a bleak one.

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