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Divided We Fall: America's Two Civil Religions

by Robert Wuthnow

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Americans have always created public myths about our identity as a people. These myths locate us in the world and in history. In election years they provide resources for political rhetoric and they guide us in choosing our candidates.

Robert Bellah has written that America legitimates itself with a dynamic of sacred and secular myths. On the one hand, our civil religion links us to the biblical tradition; on the other hand, the moral and political philosophies of the Enlightenment instill in us a deeply utilitarian orientation. Civil religion portrays a divine order of things, giving us a sense of worth and direction in relation to ultimate purposes. Utilitarianism provides us with proper governmental procedure, legitimates our economic system and underwrites the importance of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Together, these cultural traditions have promoted great national crusades. They have joined forces against the worst excesses of raw political expediency, exposing our short-term policies in the harsh light of more enduring values. The two have also contended with one another for political supremacy.

A decade ago social scientists predicted the demise of civil religion at the hands of the seemingly more aggressive individualistic and materialistic orientations supported by utilitarianism. The "Me Decade," a wave of narcissism and the rise of yuppie-style hedonism seemed to signal the ultimate triumph of secular materialism.

But this was only part of the story. For all our secularism we have remained a deeply religious people. And civil religion continues to play a prominent role in our culture. In recent election campaigns political candidates have often stumbled over one another in their haste to demonstrate loyalty to some branch of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Political speeches, now as in the past, pay ritual obeisance to the divine judge. Prayers at all major political functions invoke God's presence and

blessing. Despite constitutional restrictions much mixing of religious and political practice continues. We are, our civil religion assures us, a God-fearing people, the champions of religious liberty, and in many ways a nation that God has chosen to carry out a special mission in the world.

The civil religion to which we so blithely pay homage has, however, become deeply divided. Like the fractured communities found in our churches, our civil religion no longer unites us around common ideals. Instead of giving voice to a clear image of who we should be, it has become a confusion of tongues. It speaks from competing traditions and offers partial visions of America's future. Religious conservatives offer one version of our divine calling; religious liberals articulate one that is radically different.

On the conservative side, religious leaders argue that America's vitality rests on a distinct, historic relation to God. According to this interpretation, our form of government enjoys lasting legitimacy because it was created by Founding Fathers who were deeply influenced by Judeo-Christian values. Although in their personal convictions they may have strayed occasionally from this standard, Washington, Franklin, Witherspoon and Adams knew the human heart from a biblical perspective and thus understood what kind of government would function best. As the late Francis A. Schaeffer, a popular evangelical author, asserted in *A Christian Manifesto*:

These men truly understood what they were doing. They knew they were building on the Supreme Being who was the Creator, the final reality. And they knew that without that foundation everything in the Declaration of Independence and all that followed would be sheer unadulterated nonsense. These were brilliant men who understood exactly what was involved [(Crossway, 1981), p. 33].

This view has deep roots in conservative thinking. In the 19th century a close relation between America and God was often heralded in millennialist language. America not only was called of God, but existed as a chosen people, brought into being for the final fulfillment of God's purposes on earth. Herman Melville's much-read novel *White-Jacket*, for example, described Americans as "the Israel of our time" and the nation as a "political Messiah" sent as an advance guard to "bear the ark of the liberties of the world." Walt Whitman's epic poem "Passage to India" drew an even more direct connection between the nation's wonders and God's purposes.

In the 20th century, war and economic depressions dampened much of this millennial enthusiasm. Yet as America increasingly found itself in the forefront of world military and economic affairs, some of the traditional zeal continued to be voiced.

A favorite theme was the slogan "One Nation Under God," which signaled not only that America was a unified nation but also an "only," "best," "leading" or "special" nation under God. Norman Vincent Peale, in a book with this slogan as its title, argued that America, at the beginning of its history, had received a unique calling from God which continued to be expressed in a special zeal and spiritual quality of its people. In another book by the same title, evangelical writer Rus Walton arrived at the conclusion that even the U.S. Constitution had been "divinely inspired."

During the 1960s and '70s, as the nation's military involvement in Vietnam inspired a mood of questioning and cynicism, defenders of U.S. policy seemed to become even more explicit in their efforts to find divine legitimacy in American history. Edward Elson, writing in *Decision* magazine, asserted that America could not be understood except as a "spiritual movement" with God as its source and the Holy Spirit guiding its development. Christian businessman George Otis, echoing the same theme, wrote: "God's hand was in the founding of this country and the fiber of Christ is in the very fabric of America" (*The Solution to Crisis-America* [Revell, 1972], p. 53). With similar conviction, entertainer Dale Evans Rogers contended that America "was in the mind of God before it became earthly reality" and that it was still "a part of His purpose for mankind" (*Let Freedom Ring* [Revell, 1975], pp. 19-20).

These arguments remain an important feature of contemporary political rhetoric. A recent fund-raising letter from the "Robertson in 88" campaign, for example, asserts that the Ten Commandments are the "bedrock of America. " Then, step-by-step it links each commandment with a political theme (for instance, as Moses received the first commandment, God also "inspired our Founding Fathers to say that all men are CREATED equal"). The letter also asserts that the essential truth on which Pat Robertson's campaign was based is the conviction that "we must never forget -- and always remind those who will forget -- that we are ONE NATION UNDER GOD."

In emphasizing the close historical connection between America and God, evangelicals and fundamentalists assert the importance of religious values which they themselves still uphold. Their version of American history points to a time when such values were evidently taken quite seriously.

To be sure, the distinction between personal convictions and the religious story of the nation remains sufficiently sharp in evangelical teachings that militant religious nationalism is the exception rather than the rule. Priorities generally focus on personal salvation, spiritual growth, biblical knowledge and the affairs of local religious communities instead of God's providence in American history. Even Jerry Falwell alludes only occasionally in his books and sermons to America's collective relation to God. He also asserts flatly that

"America is not the kingdom of God" (*The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* [Doubleday, 1981], p. 212).

Yet conservative civil religion does grant America a special place in the divine order. Falwell goes on to say, for example, that "the United States is not a perfect nation, but it is without doubt the greatest and most influential nation in the world. We have the people and the resources to evangelize the world in our generation." Writer-evangelist, Tim LaHaye, head of the American Coalition for Traditional Values, makes the same point negatively: were it not for America, he asserts, "our contemporary world would have completely lost the battle for the mind and would doubtless live in a totalitarian, one-world, humanistic state" (*The Battle for the World* [Revell, 1980], p. 35).

America evangelizing the world is, of course, a much-emphasized theme in conservative civil religion. God wants America to use its advantaged position to preach Christianity to all nations—a task which in some evangelical eschatologies represents the final work that will hasten Christ's second coming. America's wealth and power are regarded both as the divinely given resources for carrying out this important task and the token of God's good faith to those willing to shoulder the task. This view is particularly prominent among conservative Christians who have a strong missionary emphasis.

Conservative civil religion also voices strong arguments about the propriety of the American economic system. These arguments grant capitalism absolute legitimacy by drawing certain parallels between capitalist principles and biblical teachings. Economist George Gilder, who identifies himself as an evangelical Christian, has argued, "'Give and you'll be given unto' is the fundamental practical principle of the Christian life, and when there's no private property you can't give it because you don't own it.... Socialism is inherently hostile to Christianity and capitalism is simply the essential mode of human life that corresponds to religious truth" (reported in Rodney Clapp, "Where Capitalism and Christianity Meet," *Christianity Today* [February 4, 1983]). Elsewhere he remarks, drawing a calculated reference to the Apostle Paul's teaching on love, "the deepest truths of capitalism are faith, hope, and love" ("Moral Sources of Capitalism," *Society*, September/October 1981).

Falwell has also been an outspoken apologist for American capitalism. "I believe in capitalism and the free enterprise system and private property ownership. . . . people should have the right to own property, to work hard, to achieve, to earn, and to win." For Falwell, this is not simply an assertion of personal opinion, but a position that has divine sanction: "God is in favor of freedom, property ownership, competition, diligence, work, and acquisition. All of this is taught in the Word of God in both the Old and New Testaments" (*Wisdom for Living* [Victor, 1984], pp. 131, 102).

Other spokespersons for conservative civil religion also connect Christian doctrines to American capitalism. Ronald H. Nash, arguing against liberation theology, for instance, suggests that capitalism is the preferred system because it is impossible to have "spiritual freedom" without "economic freedom" ("The Christian Choice Between Capitalism and Socialism," in *Liberation Theology*, edited by Ronald H. Nash [Mott Media, 1984]). Pat Robertson draws directly on Gilder's work to arrive at the conclusion that "free enterprise is the economic system most nearly meeting humanity's Godgiven need for freedom" (*The Secret Kingdom: A Promise of Hope and Freedom in a World of Turmoil* [Thomas Nelson, 1982], p. 151).

The liberal version of American civil religion draws on a different set of religious values and portrays the nation in a very different light. Few spokespersons for the liberal version make explicit reference to the religious views of the founding fathers or suggest that America is God's chosen nation. Indeed, the idea of one nation under God is often rejected because of its particularistic connotations and, more generally, because of the way it has been interpreted by conservatives.

A recent letter from Clergy and Laity Concerned, for instance, argues that "this is no longer 'one nation under God.' " Instead, the letter proclaims, there are now two very different views of America: "One based on arrogance and a false sense of superiority. The other based on ethical, biblical principles."

References to America's wealth or power as God's means of evangelizing the world are also rare among Liberals, and religious apologetics for capitalism are virtually taboo.

The liberal view of America focuses less on the nation as such, and more on humanity in general. In this view, America has a vital role to play in world affairs not because it is the home of a chosen people but because it has vast resources, has caused many of the problems currently facing the world, and simply as part of the community of nations has a responsibility to help alleviate the world's problems. Rather than drawing attention to the distinctiveness of the Judeo-Christian tradition, liberal civil religion is much more likely to include arguments about basic human rights and common human problems. Issues like nuclear disarmament, human rights, world hunger, peace and justice receive special emphasis.

The importance attached to these issues is generally not legitimated with reference to any particular sacred mandate, but simply on the assumption that these are matters of life and death. Nevertheless, religious faith often plays a prominent part in the discussion, differentiating liberal civil religion from purely secular or humanist beliefs.

Faith provides a motivating element, supplying strength to keep going

against what often appear to be insuperable odds. The biblical prophets, who spoke out for peace and justice, are often cited as sources of strength and hope. And universal appeals are couched in explicitly religious language. As the Clergy and Laity Concerned letter explains, its goal is "to establish social and economic justice for all of God's children."

Because of its awesome destructive potential, the problem of nuclear arms occupies an especially prominent place in liberal civil religion. Liberal clergy have so often taken the lead in seeking solutions to the arms race that the peace movement has come to be identified in many circles as a religious issue. In a survey of Presbyterian laity, for example, two-thirds agreed strongly with the statement that "peacemaking is not simply 'another political issue' but is a basic aspect of the Christian faith" (Research Division of the Support Agency, *Presbyterian Panel*, January, 1982).

Other crusades in the liberal version of American civil religion include civil rights, international justice and ecology. Liberal religious periodicals have kept these issues in the forefront of readers' attention. For example, a count of headlines in this journal during one six-month period revealed a total of 136 articles on topics such as nuclear weapons, social issues, economic issues and peace, compared with only 22 articles on the Bible, nine on evangelism and nine on prayer.

A survey of Presbyterian clergy further illustrates the priority given such causes. When asked to rate various goals for the nation, respondents gave top priority to having America serve as an example of liberty and justice to all nations. Also ranked near the top were conserving the world's scarce resources and reducing disparities between poor and wealthy nations. Spreading American capitalism ranked at the bottom of the list. The survey also showed that eight of every ten pastors saw national pride as a hindrance to the work of the Christian church in the world, while fewer than a third thought America was currently a blessing to humankind throughout the world (Dean R. Hoge, "Theological Views of America Among Protestants," *Sociological Analysis*, Summer 1976).

The rhetoric of liberal religious leaders, unlike that of their conservative counterparts, has often questioned the value of America's distinctive cultural traditions. Father John Langan of the Woodstock Theological Center, for example, suggests that we make a "clear delineation of the moral claims of the solidarity that binds us together as human beings sharing a common destiny under God." A delineation of this kind, he argues, "necessarilly involves a critique of individualism and self-reliance in our national culture" ("The Bishops and the Bottom Line," *Commonweal*, November 2-16, 1984).

A critique of this sort was a prominent feature of the Catholic bishops' "Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy."

Calling both Catholics and non-Catholics to a greater commitment to alleviating the suffering of the poor, the bishops were openly critical of America's practices in relation to their understanding of the Christian tradition. "We live in one of the most affluent cultures in history where many of the values of an increasingly materialistic society stand in direct conflict with the gospel vision," they charged. "Our contemporary prosperity exists alongside the poverty of many both at home and abroad, and the image of disciples who 'left all' to follow Jesus is difficult to reconcile with a contemporary ethos that encourages amassing as much as possible. "

The liberal version of American civil religion, it should be noted, taps into a relatively deep reservoir of sentiment in the popular culture about the desirability of peace and justice. Recent public opinion polls, for instance, have shown that more than 90 per cent of Americans would like to see "a sharp decline in the number of people who suffer from hunger," "a decline in terrorism and violence," "a real easing of tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union," "a decline in racial and religious prejudice," and "an end to the production, storage, and testing of nuclear weapons by all countries on earth" (*The Harris Survey* [December 22, 1983], No. 104).

Surveys also indicate, however, that most Americans have little confidence in these goals being realized in the foreseeable future. "The problem," concluded the authors of the study cited above, "is not so much a lack of motivation by the people of this country, but the inability of those vested with power, and responsibility to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the people."

In the face of such difficulties, liberal religious leaders have often presented themselves as a small prophetic remnant, despite the public's support for their causes. This rhetorical stance, critics suggest, may be useful for building solidarity among the faithful, but it can also lead to an isolated mentality in which rituals of solidarity replace more effective appeals.

Both the liberal and the conservative wings of American religion have a vision of where the U.S. should be heading. But the two visions are fundamentally at odds. The conservative vision seems to embody what Max Weber termed the "priestly" function of religion, while the liberal vision expresses religion's "prophetic" function. The conservative vision offers divine sanction to America, legitimates its form of government and economy, explains its privileged place in the world and justifies a uniquely American standard of luxury and morality. The liberal vision raises questions about the American way of life, scrutinizes its political and economic policies in light of transcendent concerns and challenges Americans to act on behalf of all humanity rather than their own interests alone. Each side inevitably sees itself as the champion of higher principles and the critic of current conditions.

The two versions of American civil religion appear to have divided along a fracture line long apparent in discussions of civil religion. That line is the inherent tension between symbols that express the unique identity of a nation and those that associate the nation with a broader vision of humanity. As Bellah noted in his initial essay on the subject, civil religion in America seems to function best when it apprehends "transcendent religious reality . . . as revealed through the experience of the American people"; yet the growing interdependence of America with the world order appears to "necessitate the incorporation of vital international symbolism into our civil religion" (*Beyond Belief* [Harper & Row, 1970], pp. 179, 186).

The two civil religions correspond in a general way with the ambivalent character of the state in American society. On the one hand, the long period during which the nation enjoyed virtual isolation from the rest of the world resulted in a state oriented toward nationalistic concerns. On the other hand, America's rise to global power in this century has forced the state to act not only on behalf of narrow U.S. interests but also as a potential contributor to the common good in global terms.

These dual functions have sometimes been sufficiently different that particular agencies have identified with one or the other. More commonly, policy proposals have vacillated between the two orientations. Under these circumstances, both versions of American civil religion have found proponents within the state who have been willing to exploit them for purely political purposes.

In consequence, the two visions of America have been the subject of disagreement and polarization more than of consensus and mutual understanding. A few leaders have borrowed ideals from both sides, but that is the exception rather than the rule. It is more common for the two camps to take up openly hostile positions.

Given this hostility, neither side can claim to speak for consensual values. Each side only represents a constituency. Since any claim one side makes is likely to be disputed by the other, the public is left to doubt the credibility of both.

Religion, therefore, becomes (as it has often been characterized in the press) a sectarian concern rather than a basis of unity. And in a society that is not only deeply religious but decidedly secular, other values and assumptions stand as ready alternatives to the civil religion. Faced with conflicting interpretations based on religious premises, national leaders can readily turn to other arguments on which there is greater consensus.

As the conflict between religious liberals and conservatives has intensified, the different versions of American civil religion have continued to energize specific policies and programs. But in the eyes of many middle-of-the-roaders, both sets of arguments have lost plausibility by virtue of being too much disputed. Much room has been

left for secular ideologies -- not the least of which are the creeds of material success, radical individual freedom, and an amoral pragmatism.

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