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# RELIGION

AND DEMOCRACY

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# America's Civil Religion

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**D**uring the last holiday season National Public Radio presented a special program, "Christmas at Williamsburg," that was an attempt to recreate the celebration of Christmas in colonial and revolutionary Virginia. The producers—and one supposes, most of the audience—assumed that no explanation was required for a format which blended politics and religion and created a special aura by associating the birth of the republic with the birth of Christ. Like Molière's character who didn't realize that he had been speaking prose, NPR was unaware that it was celebrating an American version of "civil religion," a peculiar hybrid that is more ancient than either the United States or Christianity.

The topic of civil religion evoked considerable interest among scholars in the late 1960s, much of it, significantly, centered upon presidential inaugural addresses. The assumption was that civil religion in America, like the civil religions of the past, would be primarily the creation of those who ruled. But by 1971 one scholar, surveying the moral carnage of Vietnam and Nixon's frequent appeals to divine favor, seemed to speak for most scholars when he confessed that "today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell."<sup>1</sup> When the Moral Majority appeared about a decade later, the vast majority of commentators applied almost every category of political interpretation but civil religion.

Civil religion refers to the incorporation of religious practices into the system of governance and control. It is the systematic use of religion for political purposes. The ancient Greeks and Romans understood all religions as civil religions. For centuries political authorities have looked upon religion as a unique, multipurpose resource. Religious observances would help the state by appeasing the gods and winning their favor. Religion would promote common beliefs and values, not least the values of patriotism and sacrifice which were of special in-

<sup>1</sup> Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 142. This volume consists of lectures delivered by Bellah in 1971. Much of the discussion was prompted by his essay of 1967, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1(1967): 1-21.

terest to societies engaged in interminable imperial wars and beset by sharp class conflicts. Surveying religion under the later Roman empire, Gibbon observed that "the various modes of worship . . . were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosophers as equally false; and by the magistrates as equally useful." Dwight Eisenhower made the point about the political use of religion more bluntly: "our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply religious faith—and I don't care what it is."

Religion also taught the people about power and powerlessness. Each of the most influential Western religions—Judaic, Greco-Roman, Catholic, and Protestant—was centered around gods of power whose attributes typically included omnipotence and omniscience. Even the Kingdom of God, St. Paul reminded the early Christians, "does not consist in talk but power" (1 Cor. 4:20). Western religions have taught the powerless to feel transported to a higher plane when told that the power greater than that of any human being is watching over them and cares for even the most humble. God sent servants to suffer for them and only-begotten sons to die for them. The poor and powerless are not accustomed to having great powers of any description solicitous of their well-being. The powerful, on the other hand, knowing that earthly power is an exaction from the toil of the many, are grateful to civil religion for repressing what they are certain is the envy and resentment of the vast majority. Post-biblical civil religions collectivized this theme, borrowing from ancient Israel the idea of a people singled out by God to serve as a special instrument of his providence. "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). The political order becomes exalted, raised to an ontological level. Empires become "holy" as well as Roman; kings become "God's lieutenants"; the settlement at Massachusetts Bay is the "new Israel"; the victory of the American revolutionists is proof that "the Lord shall have made his American Israel high above all nations"; and the inheritors of that revolution will wage a "crusade" against "godless international communism."

**B**efore the idea of civil religion began to be worked out in America, it underwent a crucial modification at the hands of Machiavelli, a man often regarded as representing the Prince of Darkness. Machiavelli's contribution was to demonstrate that a republican form of government stood in special need of a civil religion, "the instrument necessary above all others," to serve as an antidote to "corruption": the malady to which republics were peculiarly susceptible. So obsessed was Machiavelli with republican vulnerability to corruption that he insisted that it was the very nature of republics to lapse from their basic principles. It would periodically be necessary to administer a purge of the body politic, he claimed, a dramatic shock that would restore it to original principles.

Corruption did not primarily mean bribery but the decay of civic spirit among the citizens and leaders. Republics, so the argument ran, depend on the support of the citizens and are designed to be responsive to their sentiments. If the citizens are to provide a firm foundation to the government, they must be "virtuous," that is, place the good of the republic above their personal or class interests. They must respect and obey the laws, pay taxes faithfully, serve in the militia, and devote time to their civic obligations. As a body the citizens of a republic were more likely to be tempted away from their duties than were, say, the ruling groups in an aristocracy, oligarchy of wealth, or a monarchy. In the larger civic body of a republic, most citizens depended on their own efforts for their livelihoods; they could not rely on large inheritances or acquired status. Private interests, therefore, loomed large in their lives and made extensive demands on their time, so, inevitably, the republican citizen was confronted by a perennial temptation either to devote himself exclusively to private affairs and abandon the public realm, or to enter public affairs in order to advance his private fortune. Thus self-interest had to be admitted into republicanism as a legitimate principle and the problem was how to prevent corruption from entering as well.

There were two additional features to Machiavelli's republic that set the terms of civic virtue and of the civil religion whose function it would be to fulfill them. A republic was, by nature, an uneasy compromise between elitism and populism. Like most republican theorists before him, Machiavelli based his system on the support of the people, their material contributions, and their eagerness to fight for their state. Actual rule and leadership would fall to a public-spirited elite, however, most of whom would be drawn from the upper socioeconomic strata. Civic virtue would teach the citizenry to support its leaders and trust them, especially when political emergencies or opportunities forced them to act in defiance of law and customary morality; it would not encourage the citizen to press his judgment as equal to that of his leaders or demand an equal share in public councils. Also, the citizens of a republic had to be constantly ready to wage war for both expansion and defense. For this it needed a citizen-army composed of men with other virtues in addition to trust: an army needed not only bravery and patriotism, but fierceness and an ability to withstand the shocking spectacles of mass slaughter.

Machiavelli rejected Christianity as unsuitable for the needs of civil religion. Its preoccupation with the afterlife, as well as its preference for the virtues of humility and contemplation rather than glory and action, had "made the world weak and handed it over as prey to the wicked." The true model was to be found in the pagan beliefs and ceremonies of republican Rome. The Romans had acquired their fierceness in battle from watching "sacrificial" ceremonies where there was "much shedding of blood and much ferocity. . . . Such spectacles, because terrible, caused men to become like them." The value of religion had nothing to do

with providing some transcendent ground for the republic, but everything to do with shaping the people to accept the actions of their leaders that involved radical innovations and departures that often appeared contrary to the self-interests of the people. "It was religion that facilitated whatever enterprise the senate and the great men of Rome designed to undertake." There had never been "a legislator who, in introducing laws to a people, did not have recourse to god, for otherwise [the changes] would not have been accepted. . . ."

Machiavelli is a vital link in the development of civil religion in America because he was, as recent historians have argued, the founder of the modern idea of republican government which made its way from Italy to seventeenth-century England and eventually to colonial America. What these historians have somehow managed to overlook is that Machiavelli was also the founder of the modern idea of civil religion as it applies to republics. The reason for the oversight is that American civil religion evolved in a way that completely reversed the pattern of antiquity which Machiavelli had copied. Traditionally, civil religion had been shaped by the state and imposed on the society. In America the reverse happened. Civil religion was not the creature of the state but was disguised as its opposite, as a "private affair," a matter of the individual conscience, a voluntary, spontaneous church that belonged to the realm of "society." Civil religion in America was private religion that was shaped by a republican tradition and its needs. Foremost among those needs was the promotion of republican virtue but not of democratic politics: religion would serve republicanism against democracy. To do this religion in America had to undergo a radical change, to become populist in character, even anti-elitist. The change was from Puritanism to revivalism, from a religion of the saints in the seventeenth century to a religion of the people in the eighteenth, from the vision of a religious polity, "a city on the hill," to a vision of a religious "nation."

**T**he Puritans rejected civil religion in the form both of a national church controlled by the state, and the separatist principle by which sects, such as the Anabaptists, wanted to break all ties with the political order and to live as self-contained church-communities. To the Puritan, religion and the political order were distinct rather than separate, connected rather than united. Instead of a civil religion crafted by the state, the Puritans raised a holy commonwealth, a political society serving religious ends, more reminiscent of ancient Israel than earlier Christian forms. "It is better," one famous Puritan minister declared, "that the commonwealth be fashioned to the setting forth of God's house, which is his church, than to accommodate the church frame to the civil state."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas, 1558-1794* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, Co., 1965), p. 169.

Although the Puritans founded their churches on the covenantal idea of voluntary consent and provided that ministers would be chosen by the membership, they strongly denied that the church was a democratic group. Like Machiavelli's republic, the members were the basis of the church, not its rulers. "A church government," according to the most renowned minister in the Bay Colony, is not "democratical, though the people choose their owne officers and rulers . . . if it is administered by the governors. . . ."<sup>3</sup> The Puritan's belief in the holy mission of the commonwealth made him obsessed with the importance of insuring that the members would be worthy of God's trust. Given the inherent sinful proclivities of mankind, the Puritan believed, it was vital that corruption be combatted by periodic purges. Among the means which the Puritans developed for purging and reconsecrating the community were the so-called "days of humiliation" and the jeremiad: communal rites of repentance in which the congregations would confess their sins, fast, and promise to reform their ways. Thus the Puritans devised their own version of Machiavelli's principle that a republic must be periodically returned to its first principles.

Eventually the Puritan ideal of a holy commonwealth, with religion and politics closely intertwined and, ideally, complementary, vanished. The direction of events begun by the Revolutionary War and complemented by the new Constitution and its Bill of Rights and by the state constitutions after the war was toward the separation of church and state and the disestablishment of religion so that it was no longer supported or enforced by the state.

With the founding of the federal Constitution in 1789, all of the problems of republicanism that had led Machiavelli to embrace civil religion reappeared. The new republic, too, was ostensibly based upon the people—"the streams of material power ought to flow immediately from that pure original fountain of all legitimate authority," according to the greatest antidemocrat of the day<sup>4</sup>—but its future, according to one of its main architects, would depend on a "small number of citizens . . . whose wisdom may best discern the interest of their country."<sup>5</sup> So the question of civic virtue was reopened: how to get the people to accept a system where they would reign but not rule, support but not continuously participate? How, too, to prevent corruption, when the free politics of group self-interest—"factions"—would inevitably penetrate the innermost processes of government; and when "men of moderate or slender fortune" would rise

3 Ibid., p. 172.

4 Hamilton in *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob Cooke (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), No. 22, p. 146.

5 Madison in Cooke, *The Federalist*, No. 10, p. 62.

to high office where they are tempted to sacrifice "duty" to "interest" and need "superlative virtue to withstand" temptations?<sup>6</sup>

A system which incorporated self-interest into its operations and depended upon "ambition . . . to counteract ambition"<sup>7</sup> would have to look outside itself for the purge that would root out corruption and restore original principles. But the separation of religion from politics decreed by the Constitution posed a seemingly insuperable barrier to the establishment of a civil religion which could perform these needed functions. The dilemma was solved, but only in part. A civil religion had been in the making before the Revolution but it would eventually influence primarily the civic virtue of the people, not that of the elite. It would provide from the mid-eighteenth century on a teaching that would generate patriotism and identification with the nation while providing a cathartic form of mass participation that was totally disconnected from political institutions. It would call for the people to purge themselves of evil influences, to rededicate themselves, and to return to the purer principles of an earlier day, but it would never suggest that the people should demand to rule. It would help to make the people safe for republicanism.

The crucial change that was to set this new pattern in American civil religion occurred around 1740 with the extraordinary religious "revival" known as the Great Awakening. It was the beginning of an evangelical form of religion that saw ministers travelling up and down the land, rather than waiting for the congregation to assemble on the sabbath; converting souls and preaching a passionate, intense gospel of salvation about "the threatening of the law, man's insufficiency, and God's sovereignty,"<sup>8</sup>—rather than expounding the scriptures rationally and learnedly; and it gathered believers together in large crowds outside the church. "The town seemed to be full of the presence of God," Jonathan Edwards said of his native Northampton. "It never was so full of love, nor so full of joy, yet so full of distress. . . ." The climax came at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801 where 20,000 people assembled and, according to reports, by evening 3,000 had fallen in a trance to the ground and hundreds were "jerking, rolling, running, dancing, and barking. . . ." The religious awakening for America was, as one religious historian put it, "a new beginning; it was our national conversion."<sup>10</sup>

6. Hamilton in Cooke, *The Federalist*, No. 75, p. 505.

7. Madison in Cooke, *The Federalist*, No. 51, p. 349.

8. Solomon Stoddard, "A Guide to Christ" in *The Great Awakening*, ed. D. B. Rutman (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1970), p. 19.

9. Edwards, "Letter of 1736," in Rutman, *The Great Awakening*, p. 26.

10. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 126.

It was a beginning based on enthusiasm and fervor rather than solemn covenants, and attracted the masses rather than the elites. The new teaching appealed directly to the experience of the believer or convert, calling him to deny the primacy of the objects toward which the will hungered—material, social, and political—and to repent of these things that are, as the greatest theologian of the movement put it, “allowed to usurp the place that should be given to God. . . .”<sup>11</sup> Humility was the crucial virtue. It came as the fruit of sincerity, of honesty about the self and its infinite ingenuity in hiding its devious ways of self-love. Sincerity was quickened by the close presence of a sovereign God in whose eye the sinner was an abomination:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns like fire. . . . It is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.<sup>12</sup>

There were other awakenings—in 1800 and many times during the nineteenth century. The evangelical, revivalist moment became a tradition of American religion. In the twentieth century it was joined by fundamentalism. From its earliest appearances, however, it symbolized the new form of civil religion in America, a religion that discharged its political function not by a Puritan solution of linking church and state but by separating them, and not by goading believers to use the power of the state to create a holy commonwealth, but by calling them away from the structures of political and economic power, urging them to repent. “The minds of people were wonderfully taken off from the world,” Edwards noted approvingly.<sup>13</sup> Yet their minds were not entirely taken from the world, only from a part of it. In all of his voluminous sermons and writings Edwards made few references to politics. However, in the millenarian expectations of “new heavens and new earth” that promised “the greatest temporal prosperity,” he aroused visions of an otherworldly utopia that tacitly justified the visions of material plenty that would soon become the badge of American identity.<sup>14</sup>

Revivalism was significant not only for encouraging political indifference, but for turning mass participation against the believer. The believer discovers within himself such a cesspool of sin and perversity that his will for collective action is exhausted, drained by self-examination. The new civil religion substituted a democracy of emotion whose climax was not a call for justice, equality, com-

11 Edwards cited in Niebuhr, *Kingdom of God*, p. 103.

12 Edwards cited in Niebuhr, *Kingdom of God*, p. 138.

13 Edwards, “The Surprising Work of God,” in Rutman, *The Great Awakening*, p. 31.

14 Edwards cited in Niebuhr, *Kingdom of God*, p. 145.

munity, or participation, but individual salvation combined with a collective mission: "the most glorious renovation of the world shall originate from the new continent. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

When the Moral Majority first emerged, most commentators focused upon the specific and highly publicized issues with which the movement became quickly identified—anti-abortion, anti-ERA, anti-gay, prayers in public schools, and censorship of school textbooks—and then discussed the phenomenon in the context of conventional conservative-liberal dichotomies. The widespread belief that the Moral Majority was essentially a phenomenon of "extreme" conservatism was the result of a conscious effort by political professionals to promote that impression. In 1979 they created the Moral Majority Inc. as part of an effort to unify a large number of single-issue groups on the far right. In trying to do justice to the solemnity of religious themes, one should remember that it is not without an element of native American hokum. Highly skilled con men are at work who have discovered two constantly renewable resources: the pocketbooks of trusting believers, and the rhetorical genius of Southern preachers who have transformed the old-time religion into the electronic church. But beneath the slick operations created by the direct-mail-men and the rhetoric of the Reverend Falwell "to get people saved, baptized, and registered to vote" was a large body of religious fundamentalists who are the inheritors of the republican tradition of civil religion.

There is an entire political theory encapsulated in the role of evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism as a civil religion. Its significance extends far beyond the present and uneasy alliance with the Reagan administration to what can be called the foundation myths of the republic itself. Its archaism may be the last reminder of a theory that a republic could not survive the loss of civic virtues among its citizens, and that republics were prone to corruption and hence in need of periodic renewal. As the civil religion of a republic fundamentalism is implicated in the most basic tension within American political history: between republicanism, with its elitist and antimajoritarian convictions, and democracy, with its anti-elitist and participatory commitments. Evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism remains an essentially popular religion, a religion of preaching and exhortation cast in the idiom of ordinary people, not in the language of theology or seminary erudition; a religion reflective of the experiences of common people rather than of saints and scholars. It is a historical registry of the yearnings, travails, fears, hopes, and prejudices of ordinary citizens. It is also an

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion," in Rutman, *The Great Awakening*.

object lesson in how ordinary people contribute to their own victimization—not because they believe in God but because they have come to distrust themselves.

“Fundamentalism”—the term and the movement—appeared in the early twentieth century. It was shaped as a direct response to “liberal” Protestantism’s efforts at modifying religious teachings to harmonize them with the findings of modern science, and attempts to preach a “social gospel” that would adapt Christianity to the practical problems of industrialism, the condition of the workers, and social justice.<sup>16</sup> Fundamentalists set themselves firmly against subordinating the Bible to science and entangling their churches in social questions. They were resolutely anti-political from their beginnings up to the 1970s. The great qualification is that during World War I and thereafter fundamentalists were zealous patriots. Their political commitments were limited to defending the nation and the state. This they did by attacking internationalism, communism, and Jewish conspiracies.

Fundamentalism is not a religion of the oppressed or deprived, or of the working class, but of the threatened. The fundamentalist is threatened in part because he or she believes in separatism—“We practice separatism from the world and all of its entanglements. We refuse to conform to the standards of a sinful society”<sup>17</sup>—and yet they remain in the world, living as others do in the midst of a technological and a grossly material culture. They are threatened not by persecution, but by a relentlessly modernizing society that exposes their most cherished beliefs as archaic and reminds them of it daily. They are not only rigid biblical literalists who believe that every word of the Bible is inspired and therefore inerrant, but they believe as well in an inflexible social morality, a demanding work ethic, an unchanging political constitution, and all of the virtues associated with patriotism: loyalty, self-sacrifice, and unswerving devotion. They are perfect grist for the Machiavellian mill of civil religion, for they hunger for nothing so much as a return to the original principles of the republic and a revitalization of the nation’s power.

Purity and power are the two grand themes of Reverend Falwell’s bestseller, *Listen America!* “Moral decay,” he warns, “always precedes political turmoil, economic instability, and military weakness in a country.”<sup>18</sup> “It is time,” he declares, “to rise up against the tide of permissiveness and moral decay that is crushing in on our society from every side.”<sup>19</sup> That the movement chose to call itself

<sup>16</sup> See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> Jerry Falwell, ed., *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 220.

<sup>18</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Listen America!* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the “moral” rather than the “religious” majority reflects a conviction that the American condition is one of corruption, even of filth, that only a moral crusade can root out. *Listen America!* is crammed with appeals to morality, “moral decisions,” “integrity,” “decency,” “hard work,” and to the urgent need “to clean up America,” to rid it of pornography, drugs, homosexuality, sex education in the schools, and sexual license outside marriage. The middle part of the book is entitled “Morality: The Deciding Factor,” while the volume’s last chapter is headed “Imperative Moral Involvement.”

America is also to be renewed by returning to the original constitutional basis. “Our great nation was founded by godly men upon godly principles to be a Christian nation.” America “reached the pinnacle of greatness” because the Founding Fathers based the system on “the laws of God,” and in return for this “God has blessed this nation.”<sup>20</sup> The true principles of the founders, “predicated on Holy Writ,” were aimed at freedom, and the system of freedom is identical with the system of free enterprise that “is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs in the Bible” and requires that we “defeat welfarism in America.”<sup>21</sup>

The redeemer nation that appears in Reverend Falwell’s writings has retained the Hebraic notion of a holy nation that is destined to triumph, a notion that links polity to victory and victory to power.

... we have a “will crisis” in this country today. We are not committed to victory. We are not committed to greatness. We have lost the will to stay strong and therefore have not won any wars we have fought since 1945.<sup>22</sup>

This is accompanied by repeated attacks on the “no-win” mentality among policy makers and the “lack of nerve” among politicians. Nor in an age of nuclear fears is Reverend Falwell hesitant to declare that “a political leader” who uses the weapons of war is “a minister of God . . . a revenger to execute wrath upon those who do evil.”<sup>23</sup>

The mission of America and the extension of its power throughout the world is visualized as providing the basis for the conquest of the world by fundamentalist Christianity. Pastors, according to Reverend Falwell, have a divine mandate to

capture our Jerusalem for Christ . . . capture our surrounding province, or state, our Judea for Christ . . . capture the adjacent nations, our Samarias . . . [and] touch the uttermost part of the earth, and likewise

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 11, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

capture it for Christ. . . . [America] is the only logical launching pad for world evangelization.<sup>24</sup>

Like those early Christians who welcomed an alliance with the expanding power of Rome, the Moral Majority is dazzled by the prospect of an imperial civil religion.

**T**here is a touch of pathos to the current situation. The Reagan administration tries to keep the Moral Majority at arm's length, hoping it can be dissuaded from paralyzing the legislative process by pressing its contentious measures on abortion and school prayers. The Moral Majority, however, wants nothing so much as to be allowed to expend its fervor and devotion in support of the system, sanctifying it, accepting all of the inequalities—the structure of unequal wealth, power, and advantages—asking only that those in power defend the basic patriotic, familial, moral, and religious values on which the country was founded. It wants nothing so much as to be allowed, literally, to idolize the state and the economy, to make patriotism and loyalty vibrant with the same fervor that animates its religious faith, and to overwhelm the critics and doubters who question the right and even the capability of restoring America to its former status as the unchallenged master of the world.

The value of some of the fundamentalist and evangelical groups is too great to permit the administration to dismiss them. They ask for nothing that cuts at the heart of any of the President's programs for reshaping the state, disciplining the work force, clamping down on civil liberties and access to information, or reordering economic structure and priorities in the name of defense. What they offer is a semblance of moral legitimation to a system based on self-interest and acquisitiveness. More specifically, they provide a new version of the Protestant ethic that is better adapted to the continuing crisis of capitalism. The old Protestant ethic, with its values of frugality, zeal, saving, devotion to work, and postponed gratifications, met the needs of developing capitalism. Today, however, an ethic is needed for an age of slow growth and contraction, scarcities, lowered expectations, fewer opportunities, and the decline of American economic hegemony. The governing groups need not only a Protestant ethic to encourage worker motivation and capital accumulation, but a civil religion that will reinforce acceptance by the powerless of unequal sacrifices, reduction of standards of living, increasing unemployment and replacement of workers by new technology, and the sheer superfluity of large numbers of the population. The Moral Majority holds out the promise of a Protestant ethic geared to the spirit of capitalism in the age of robots.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Frances FitzGerald, "Reporter at Large: The Reverend Jerry Falwell," *New Yorker*, May 18, 1981, p. 108.