Couto, Richard and Eric Thomas Weber, "Civil Religion," Chapter 57 in Political and Civic Leadership: A Reference Handbook, edited by Richard Couto, Washington, D.C.: Sage Press, 2010, p. 505 - 512.

57

Civil Religion

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For most of human history, the realm of the divine and the political intertwined (Aronoff, 1984; Lewellen, 1992). The sacred contributed to the legitimacy and authority of earthly officials, and the latter were expected to keep themselves and their followers in the good graces of divine figures. The rise of nationalism and the increased emphasis on reason in the modern era, especially during the Enlightenment, severed or weakened the bonds among political authority and specific theologies or church-based religion. Nations separated church and state to varying degrees, and the protection of a pluralism of religious beliefs became a measure of democracy along with freedom of the press and of assembly.

This chapter explains that, despite these changes, politics, even in the most politically developed or secular state, functions like religion, although a civil one rather than sacred. Civil religion can have remnants of specific religious beliefs, but it also has a distinct realm of beliefs separate from any and all religions, constructed around events and important figures in a nation's history. Many countries remain culturally aligned with one religious faith or tradition. Most of Latin America remains Christian if not Roman Catholic in culture, for example. Alongside this abiding influence of sacred religion, however, Simón Bolívar is a political saint of liberation in the civil religion of these same countries. Civil religion has liturgical expression in rites such as holidays, reenactments, inaugurals, and national anthems and symbols. These symbols and rites call forth a common set of beliefs that provides citizens with a cohesive identity and binds them to each other despite differences. For example, even the most rabid fans at a sporting event will stand in unison with an opposing team and its fans to observe the playing of a national anthem before they become pitted against each other. Civil religion, not unlike sacred religion, conveys a sense of being part of something much bigger and more important than just oneself or one's immediate social group. Civil religion, however, also separates one group of people from another with different symbols and rites. At times of conflict, opposing groups may use symbolic action to express their scorn and opposition; a flag might be burned, a leader burned in effigy, or leaders' images caricaturized. In some cases, these differences may be so pronounced that civil religion anoints a nation's actions against another, including war, with charismatic oil.

While this symbolic realm imparts legitimacy to political authority, it may also legitimate dissent within a nation and beyond. Rosa Parks emblemizes the efficacy of individual action to protest injustice within the United States. Aung San Suu Kyi symbolizes opposition to corrupt and unlawful regimes. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela are worldwide icons of civil disobedience on behalf of justice. In time, figures like these sometimes become the saints of their communities' civic religion.

The Civics of Civil Religion

The coming of civil religion in Western Europe in the modern era coincided with the removal of the church from the state, the rise of nationalism, and the integration of culture within national political boundaries. In addition, political theories of the social contract and consent of the governed

gave rise to the need to develop national culture as the secular surrogate for church teachings that provide ordinary people grounds upon which to give their allegiance to political authority.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who combined the social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and the confidence in reason of the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment, coined the phrase "civil religion" in his 1762 book, *The Social Contract.* Rousseau's "civil religion" formed part of the political theory that legitimized state authority apart from the long tradition of a continuum between the sacred and the state. The break between the two was not total. Rousseau suggested that civil religion would encourage people to behave in moral ways as they had historically been directed through religious teachings. It would reinforce the value of faith-based beliefs without religious doctrine. His civil religion stitched together a few very general tenets of faith common to all religions. These included a faith in the existence of a powerful, beneficent, and intelligent God; reward and punishment in the afterlife; and religious tolerance. In addition to this remnant of sacred religion, civil religion had its distinct place and role. It would bring reverence to the state's laws and social contract.

Benjamin Franklin, founding father of the American republic and son of the Enlightenment, anticipated Rousseau's civil religion by more than a decade. In offering an outline for the education of young people in Philadelphia, he wrote of the necessity of "a publick religion" as useful to promoting a religious character and countering superstition; he had Catholicism in mind. Clearly of Protestant Christian origins, Franklin's public religion would show the primacy of Christian religion over all others but, again, only in general ways and devoid of sectarian trappings. He, too, reduced the conflicting tenets of different Protestant sects to a few, similar to those Rousseau promoted.

> The existence of the Deity; that he made the world and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing of good to men; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded either here or hereafter. (Franklin cited in Bellah, 1967/2005)

He envisioned an end to religious sectarianism, although not sects, and the amalgam of the most fundamental beliefs of all sects into the creation of a common morality.

Almost two centuries after Franklin, John Dewey, one of America's most influential philosophers, articulated a common vision of faith and democratic action in America and a role for schools within it. In 1934, he published *A Common Faith* and attempted to inspire people to shed the unnecessary encumbrances of particular religions and to note the ways in which our common national experience has a religious aspect, which we share. He believed we could find great meaning in a shared effort to advance human happiness and morality together, with a focus on the natural world and our common history and needs. Dewey saw in civil religion an opportunity to sharpen our ideas and tools, letting go of unnecessary hindrances—sectarianism—to form a common faith in moral ideals.

Several decades after Dewey, Robert Bellah brought a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to U.S. civil religion. Bellah carefully portrayed an elaborate and well-institutionalized set of myths, symbols, and rituals of the nation-state (Bellah, 1967/2005). He focused on political leaders, such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Lyndon Johnson, and their rhetoric, with special attention to the inaugural address of John F. Kennedy in 1960. He noted the ways in which we get a religious feeling from these historical figures, yet they do not appeal to a particular religion. He finds a quintessential expression of U.S. civil religion in the closing line of Kennedy's inaugural address: "Here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

What gives American civil religion this transcendent mandate is its frequent reference to bold moral principles of expanding freedom and respect for persons. In this light, Bellah notes three times of trial in American history. The first took place during the colonists' fight for independence from Britain. Some of the nation's most universal moral proclamations were written then, even if not truly applied to all persons. The second time of trial, the Civil War, came when the matter of America's civil religious identity could not be maintained alongside the oppressive practices of slavery. Bellah finds a parallel between these times of trial and Judeo-Christian tradition that provides an enduring base for U.S. civil religion. "The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were the sacred scriptures and Washington the divinely appointed Moses who led his people out of the hands of tyranny," he writes (Bellah, 1967/2005). The Civil War brought a new testament in the Gettysburg Address. It explained the war and the many fallen soldiers as a test of whether a government conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, "can long endure." Lincoln called for "a new birth of freedom" and increased devotion "that this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln provides U.S. civil religion the martyred redeemer of freedom as Washington provided it its Moses. The preternatural purpose of the nation, enshrined in its civil religion, is the continual fight for liberation and the preservation of liberty. The blessings and costs of this struggle are commemorated annually in two unique American holidays—holy days of civil religion—Thanksgiving and Memorial Day, respectively.

The third trial, Bellah explained, entails the problem of "responsible action in a revolutionary world." The United States emerged from World War II a great power in world affairs. Bellah saw the United States as at a crossroads. It could fall into traditional patterns of great powers and find an endless stream of enemies and threats to national security, or it could provide leadership against what Kennedy

called "the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself." In 1967, Bellah argued that the Vietnam War and the civil disobedience of the civil rights movement and antiwar protests were the prophets of the arrogance of power and "a less primitive conception of ourselves and our world." Bellah probably understates the continued and abiding presence of these prophets who spoke against the arrogance of power and for a more developed sense of what the United States stood for—"the better angels of our nature," as Lincoln expressed it. Howard Zinn traces this tradition all the way back to the colonies at Jamestown and Plymouth (Zinn, 1995; Zinn & Arnove, 2004).

Bellah also deals with a major component of civil religion—the relationship of church and state. Whatever the virtues of civil religion, the question remained about what was to be done with other forms of religion so that one did not encroach on the others' unique role. Rousseau noted that no state in history had ever been founded without a religion, but in a "stunning innovation" the United States begins without a mention of God in the Constitution or an official position against the establishment of any religion, the only original part of the Constitution (Wills, 2007, p. 6). While the Declaration of Independence did mention the divine in most general terms—"Nature's God" and humankind's creator—it invoked the social contract and consent of the governed, not the divine will, to explain the rebellious actions of the colonies.

This early form of civil religion in the United States created a vague consensus about the deity that made possible the acceptance of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights (Marty, 1984, pp. 155–158). Shortly thereafter, Bellah points out, de Tocqueville styled the Christianity he observed in the United States he visited as "a democratic and republican religion" (Bellah, 1967/2005, p. 48). The benign catechism of Franklin's civil religion did not attract lightning. Bellah makes the point that the U.S. civil religion was never anticlerical or militantly secular, in contrast to the French Revolution and its "continuing chasm between traditional Catholic symbols and the symbolism of 1789." Likewise, the Russian and Cuban revolutions were much more adversarial because clerics and religious faiths were deeply engrained in their cultures. The Chinese Revolution could attack Christian faiths as part of the colonization and oppression of Western powers. It accommodated revolutionary ways with Confucianism, eventually, by co-opting it.

Other nations approached their religions in the spirit of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and his account of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov.* The aged Inquisitor represents the actions of the Roman Catholic Church ostensibly to purge heresy but incidentally to maintain the political power of the Church in the 16th century at the cusp of the emerging political theories of Hobbes and Locke. This effort to maintain the spiritual and secular authority of the Church expressed, in Dostoyevsky's view, an exceedingly low opinion of humans. When the Inquisitor recognizes Christ come to earth again in one of the prisoners, he explains that the Church cannot abide his presence. The freedom that Christ preached was an illusion that the Church had "corrected" with "*miracle, mystery,* and *authority*" (Dostoyevsky, 1880/1948, p. 36). For 1,500 years, the Inquisitor explains, the Church had wrestled with Christ's freedom, and finally that struggle had ended: "Today, people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet" (p. 26).

To free humans from the bonds of religion, some revolutions sought to separate church and secular authority. Despite these changes, the Inquisitor's words strike a chord central to understanding civil religion within, separate, or in conflict with faith traditions. "So long as man remains free he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship" (p. 31). If Dostoyevsky's statement is too strong, we could soften it to say *something to believe in* rather than *someone to worship.* In Bellah's view, civil religion provides that something to believe in: "powerful symbols of national solidarity and . . . deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals" (Bellah, 1967/2005, p. 50).

The Religious Nature of Civil Religion

Distinct from the evolution and myriad expressions of the relationship of church and state and of religion in politics, and despite the increased secularization of politics, politics often shares qualities with religious belief. It, like religion, provides its adherents with a sense of order in a chaotic world and meaning in a world that defies rationality. Even in purely secular states, politics has a system of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that explains the attitudes and behaviors of a "good," that is, virtuous, party member, patriot, or revolutionary and a "bad" one. As Chapter 16, "Political Violence and Discourse Theory," in this volume explains, the pursuit of transformational political outcomes, such as those of the fledgling and fleeing Chinese Communist Party, invokes social texts that become doctrinal authority in words as well as deeds. In cases such as these, there continues to be a preternatural element to public life apart from specific religious belief but akin to it; a civil religion rather than sacred religion.

Franklin and Rousseau may have uncoupled one link of the sacred and the state, but this did not prevent nations, officials, and citizens alike from forging other links in the chain of civil religion that "tore the old drama of heaven and hell from the sky and the netherworld and instead anchored religions in earthly behavior" (Marty, 1984, pp. 155–159). Political legitimacy no longer descended from above, but civil religion still permitted members of a nation to seek the blessings of the divine, to see its hand in earthly affairs of the state, and to stir within the soul a sense of transcending self, as the patriotic chords that Sir Walter Scott (1805) wrote about express:

Breathes there the man with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
"This is my own, my native land!"
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd
As home his footsteps he hath turn'd
From wandering on a foreign strand?
If such there breathe, go, mark him well;
For him no Minstrel raptures swell;
High though his titles, proud his name,
Boundless his wealth as wish can claim;
Despite those titles, power, and pelf,
The wretch, concentred all in self,
Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
And, doubly dying, shall go down
To the vile dust from whence he sprung,
Unwept, unhonour'd, and unsung.

William James, American pragmatist philosopher, attempted to capture the phenomenon of religion apart from a specific religious faith or doctrine. Like others who would follow him, James rejected as unreasonable the science/faith dichotomy, the context of the earliest thought on civil religion. His study of the lives of mystics convinced James of the scientific reality of religious experience. For James, the religious experience entailed a willingness to subjugate self to something greater and beyond our ordinary self and to place one's life in the context of historic and transcendent purposes. "Not God," James states, "but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion" (James, 1902/1994, p. 392).

For James, the psychological and philosophical dimensions of religious experience covered "any total reaction upon life." In the prose of philosophy, James's explanation of religion echoes the poetic expression of Sir Walter Scott on patriotism and suggests that other experiences, such as civil religion, may provide a total reaction that gives our lives meaning and purpose.

> This sense of the world's presence . . . and our reaction, involuntary and inarticulate and often half unconscious as it is, is the completest of all our answers to the question, "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?" It expresses our individual sense of it in the most definite way. Why then not call these reactions our religion, no matter what specific character they may have? (James, 1902/1994, p. 45)

Shortly after James's work, Émile Durkheim brought religion under the sociological lens. Like James, Durkheim sought to explain religion apart from any particular set of beliefs and in scientific terms. Unlike James, Durkheim was concerned not with the individual experience of religion but with the social function of religion as a bond of moral cohesion. He wrote that "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, i.e. things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community . . . all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim, 1912/2001, p. 62). Durkheim calls this a church, but his primary concern centered on the moral community that religious beliefs supported. He focused on elementary forms of religious expression among aboriginal groups that anthropologists of his day were reporting. The social fact of God, for Durkheim, "is society, writ large," no less than civil religion is for our analysis. Durkheim, like Rousseau, even promoted a civic morality as the bonds of social cohesion to replace the dwindling influence of the church. Like James, Durkheim sought to explain scientifically the human dimensions of religion, albeit in its social form rather than its individualized form. For Durkheim, religion's explication of the relationship of the profane and the sacred reflected the relationship of individuals and the community of which they were a part.

Symbols, Rituals, and Myth

Bellah, a sociologist of religion, contrasted Durkheim's premise that every group has a religious dimension with a Western concept of "religion" more akin to a church or sacred religion to explain why civil religion escaped more analytical attention. Others attribute this lack of attention to the assumption, Western again, that the blend of sacred and civil religion seems dominant in traditional societies, not modern ones. Yet another reason for the inattention to civil religion stems from the assumption that the surrogacy of civil for sacred religion among modern societies seems characteristic of totalitarian and authoritarian states, not democratic ones.

While all these views of religion may have contributed to the inattention to civil religion, the concept of "politics" may have hindered analytical attention to politics as a symbolic realm and hence civil religion within politics. Murray Edelman, one of the earliest and few political scientists to approach politics as symbolic action, explained that approaching politics as symbolic action challenges the assumption that political decisions "are logical, defensible, and wholly rational." In contrast, Edelman (1985) suggests that politics, even the most democratic institutions, are largely symbolic and expressive in function with a religious factor aligned with Durkheim's emphasis on the religious dimensions of groups (pp. 76, 167).

These matters have received much more attention in discussion of corporate cultures than civil religion. Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy, for example, talk about corporate culture as "a cohesion of values, myths, heroes, and symbols that . . . [comes] to mean a great deal to the people who work there" (Deal & Kennedy, 2000, p. 4). They go beyond the dictionary definition of culture and its emphasis on the construction of social meaning to include

values as well as knowledge and the role of rites and rituals in expressing the values of a corporation. In another work, Bolman and Deal (1997) explicitly characterize myth as a central part of the symbolic frame of corporate culture.

Edelman goes much further in his work on politics as symbolic action than Deal and his colleagues do in their writings on corporate culture. Politics, according to Edelman, provides cues to the mass public about their status and threats to their security. Government actions, for the majority of people, evoke expectations of welfare or deprivation, peace or war, détente or threat (Edelman 1985, pp. 8–9). He writes,

> The very question of what a man *is,* let alone what he wants, is in part a product of the political system, and in turn conditions the system. The nature of man and the functioning of the system are part of a single transaction. . . . Politics influences what [people] want, what they fear, what they regard as possible, and even who they are. (pp. 19–20)

The answers to these grand metaphysical questions come from political myth, "a belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning" (Edelman, 1971, p. 14). Edelman outlines some foundation myths of the U.S. civil religion that "are taught at home, in the schools, and the pervasive political rhetoric" (p. 55):

- America is the land of equal opportunity.
- There is equality before the law.
- Government accurately reflects the voice of the people, but does not shape it.
- Political and economic values are allocated fairly.
- Given these conditions, poverty and affluence are related to individual ability and effort.

The myths of civil religion have important political consequences. They legitimate authority and give credence to official statements; crucial factors when political leaders declare another nation a threat and go to war or when a judicial system punishes a person or group for a crime. The decision of the 2000 U.S. presidential race by a 5 to 4 decision by the Supreme Court demonstrated the incredible power of the nation's belief in the rule of law, the legitimacy of the Supreme Court as arbiter of the law, and the value officials place on stability and solidarity derived from the beliefs of our civil religion. Although there were reasonable grounds upon which to argue that the Court's decision was all too human and partisan, there were grounds based in the faith of civil religion upon which to accept it.

Myth, of course, does not mean that the system of beliefs it supports is unfounded, despite its popular and disparaging connotation as an inaccurate and mistaken belief.[1] On the contrary, myth provides the contours, boundaries, and access points for the plane that is higher than actual life and in which we believe and to which we aspire. Joseph Campbell, the sage of myths, explains that myths "are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life" (Campbell, 1991, pp. xvi, 4) for individuals, groups, and nations. Myths, like religion, exceed rational explanation, scientific precision, and factual accuracy. As Edelman points out, they are "typically socially cued rather than empirically based" (Edelman, 1985, p. 20).

Myths' social cues include symbols—anthems, flags, pictures, statues, memorials—and rituals—holidays, political assemblies, presidential addresses, inaugurations and other swearing-in ceremonies, and so on. Tangible symbols provide access to the intangible beliefs of civil religions. Symbols, according to Houston Smith, are to religion what numbers are to science. He writes, "In using visible objects to speak of invisible things, symbolism is the language of religion generally" (Smith, 1992, p. 262).

Martin Marty (1984) picked up on the socially cued nature of political myths and worried that politicians and interest groups appeal to commonly held ideas whenever convenient in helping them gain power or influence. Marty looked through the lens of political realism and saw that politicians often seem to use symbols and rituals not to build some grand, inclusive public religion, as Franklin and Dewey envisioned, but instead make use of whatever tools they can find to win and remain in power. The few political scientists who give attention to politics as a symbolic realm agreed: Political leaders are priests and prophets who invoke symbols and use rituals to highlight a particular set of beliefs to mobilize constituents for or against a specific policy or change effort. These perspectives underscore the points that several chapters in this collection have made. Within any belief system, contradictory values such as individual freedom and social order are in tension. Narrative draws upon symbols and rituals to evoke elements of myths that express the solidarity of the group. Political leaders shape their narratives to evoke emotional responses—fear, pride, determination—to complement whatever rational analysis they might also provide for their preferred policies.

Thus, symbols and rituals may be used to express very different beliefs bound within the myths of civil religion. The first President Bush used his inaugural address to invoke a "kinder and gentler" United States, sparkling with "1,000 points of light" of voluntarism. This signaled a change from the previous administration of Ronald Reagan to not only a different and softer tone in administration but a new emphasis within the American belief system on compassion. In totalitarian states, myths about benevolent despots may be dramatically rewritten and revoked by the destruction of statues, changing the names of cities, streets, and other public facilities, and the use of rituals, such as a national address, to denounce a formerly revered national leader. The former Soviet Union purged the paternal image of Joseph Stalin from its belief systems; for example, even the city of Stalingrad was renamed Volgograd. This purge itself was highly symbolic because, although the images and names changed, it

would be three decades before social and political change came to the Soviet Union. Often the destruction of one symbol becomes a symbol of another set of beliefs and values. When the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in Baghdad was toppled in April 2003, it became an icon of the U.S. role in the liberation of Iraq. This transformation followed several others. In the Iran-Iraq war, Hussein represented a bulwark against a militant theocracy in Iran, and the United States supplied him with weapons. In August 1990, however, in the wake of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Hussein, in a single month, became not a sometime ally but the Hitler of the decade. Hitler and the Munich Agreement remain potent symbols, in the West, of public evil and the dangers of appeasement. Public officials routinely invoke symbols at rituals, such as inaugurations and major speeches, to provide citizens narratives about their safety and well-being, the meaning of past events, and the values to which the school system, party, or nation aspire.

Public officials are joined by unconstituted leaders who also invoke symbols and rituals. In some cases, they offer counternarratives to the official one. In Tiananmen Square in early June 1989, for example, protesting students and workers made general demands: an end to official corruption; political reform; respect for personal freedoms, such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press; and better treatment of intellectuals. The symbols they used provided meaning to these demands, often written in English to reach an international audience. Placards read, "Give me Liberty or Give me Death"; "Government of the people, by the people, for the people"; and "We Shall Overcome"; inadvertently three symbolic representations that invoked the three trials of the U.S. civil religion to deliver on the promises of liberty, equality, and freedom. A replica of the Statue of Liberty made a dramatic and significant appearance during the protest. When the students finally left the square in the face of a brutal and deadly crackdown by the state, they sang "The Internationale," an anthem of the idealistic origins of communism. These narratives no less than the narratives of public officials reenacted "the old drama of heaven and hell" on earth, which Marty depicted earlier in this chapter, and substituted a depth of feeling for detailed political analysis.

The students made their own icons as well. In particular, videos and photographs of the 3-minute standoff of a single man, perhaps a student, and a column of four tanks are now among the symbols of the power of individual acts of resistance. The emotive power of that dramatic episode of man confronting machine and the resistance of a solitary individual in the face of overwhelming odds obscures the reality that the tanks were exiting the square with celebratory gestures following the violent suppression of the student protest the night before.

Far from cynical manipulation, the invocation of symbols and rituals to make real the abstract beliefs and values embodied in myths is the body of politics; civil religion is its beating heart. Political leaders, whether official or unofficial, formal or informal, with or without authority, cannot make up myths. They can only call upon the store of beliefs that they and their constituents share and shape them to enforce the status quo or to invite change of incremental or transforming degrees (Couto, 2007). They and their constituents share the myths to which they ascribe meaning through symbols and rituals. Wearing fatigues instead of suits and ties suggests that political leaders are carrying on a political revolution. Donning the clothes of the Indian people of Bolivia signals that Evo Morales knows of the political, social, and economic inequality that marks their place in society. After 9/11, athletic teams, police, firefighters, and other first responders, even officials at athletic contests, sewed American flags onto their uniforms. Without a flag lapel pin, a U.S. politician risks criticism for lack of patriotism.

This is not to suggest that symbols and rituals have a universally accepted meaning, even within the group that claims them. Indeed, symbols provide the content of ritual, but both symbol and ritual may have a wide variety of meanings. David Kertzer suggests that symbols' important property is the aggregation of common beliefs, not their sharp articulation. Three properties of symbols for Kertzer are (1) condensation, symbols represent and unify a diversity of meanings made at the individual level; (2) multivocality, the same symbol may evoke a variety of different meanings for different groups; and (3) ambiguity, the complexity and uncertainty of symbols exceed a simple, concise, and precise meaning (Kertzer, 1988, p. 11).

These properties of symbols make it likely that people will offer different interpretations at different times, as we have seen, and will differ over their meaning at the same time. Executions provide a ritualized taking of life. For some, the ritual expresses belief in justice and safety, whereas for others, it expresses a primitive understanding of ourselves and our world. The difference in interpretation suggests the range of contradictions within any store of beliefs. By calling those contradictions to the forefront through the use of symbols and rituals, a new interpretation might bring one to a realm of belief that goes beyond reason. Thus responses to varied interpretations can be emotional. The term "political correctness," as the chapter in this collection points out (Chapter 72), cryptically expresses contempt for an opposing interpretation and cuts off discussion. This sort of reaction can reach excess. Civil religion can then have its own Grand Inquisitors to purge heretics and schismatics from the flock of the faithful; "McCarthyism" provides one instance of many in which civil religion went amok in search of heretics (Hofstadter, 1964).

Despite these extremes, the tensions in beliefs, if not their contradictions, ordinarily provide vitality to the civil

religion of any nation. In most general terms, civil religion provides another setting for the vocation of politics. As Max Weber explains this vocation, it requires an ethic of values as well as an ethic of responsibility. The latter keeps the former from excess and mindful of the consequences of pursuing absolute beliefs, absolutely. The ethic of values, on the other hand, provides the purpose of politics. Bellah understood that U.S. civil religion faced its third trial in finding its vocation for politics. He understood the United States as a superpower facing the choice of enemies to combat—particular men or nations or the common enemies of humankind.

This choice reflects two interpretations of a dominant symbol of U.S. civil religion: the city on a hill. For some, this symbol suggests that the United States is the hope of the world and a moral beacon and exemplar. Perhaps no one used this interpretation of this symbol more often than Ronald Reagan, as he recalled in his farewell address to the nation.

> I've spoken of the Shining City all my political life. . . . In my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.

President Bush invoked this same image on September 11, 2001, to explain the motives behind the terrorists' attack. "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining." These themes of being a God-chosen, shining exemplar for others make the United States an exception among the nations of the world. This belief in exceptionalism, most recently expressed in neoconservatism (see Project for the New American Century, www.newamericancentury.org), provides for its adherents a special responsibility to safeguard what God has granted from those who threaten it at home or abroad.

For Bellah, the advocacy of exceptionalism flirted with an arrogance of power. The city on the hill in his interpretation meant "awareness that our nation stands under higher judgment." The God of U.S. civil religion, for Bellah, is "on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love." There was much to be thankful for, but as Lincoln noted, there was also reason for penance. The "new sort of social order that will be a light to the world" was a work in progress (Bellah, 1967/2005, p. 45). Being on a hill meant that "The eyes of all people are upon us," as John Winthrop intoned in his 1630 sermon that described the Puritans' undertaking in Massachusetts Bay Colony. For Bellah, if the United States was exceptional, it was so because it had the opportunity to stand for revolutionary principles stated in the founding documents of the U.S. civil religion and to strive to live up to them in changing times.

Summary

Originally intended to protect young English colonists and to remind them of their unique values and virtues, the concept of civil religion would become an instrument of assimilation for new groups to the political culture of the United States and of socialization of its young. The test for U.S. citizenship, for example, provides a catechism of U.S. civil religion, assuring that new citizens have familiarity with the sacred texts of the nation—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—with the rituals of citizenship, voting, jury duty, and paying taxes; and with its pantheon of saints such as Washington, Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. Apart from this short course for conversion, we find civil religion within civics classes in schools. If we see religion as holding sacred the pursuit of moral ideals and human progress, civics imparts a civil religion with ideals of "liberty and justice for all" and "government of the people, by the people and for the people." Instruction proceeds on the progress the nation has made toward those goals and on the saints, sinners, and martyrs—such as Abraham Lincoln—who have played roles in that progress.

Symbols provide the key to both sacred and civil religion's functions as a force for social cohesion. Whether in the totems of tribes or the icons of Christianity or Judaism, symbols provide shortcuts to the total reaction about which James wrote. Thus a flag, a national anthem, a pledge of allegiance, and icons such as the Statue of Liberty or the stone carvings on Mount Rushmore express patriotic sentiments and are also teaching tools to inculcate those sentiments. Society, no less than religion, "in all its aspects and in every period of its history, is made possible only by a vast symbolism" (Durkheim, 1912/2001, p. 186). In their function, the symbols of civil religion, no less than sacred religion, bridge time and space and combine the transcendent and the immanent in a tension without which the tone of civil life, no less than spiritual life, collapses (Smith, 1992, p. 20).

Note

1. Ironically, despite their attention to the positive roles of myth in corporate culture, Deal and Kennedy revert to the popular meaning of myth to disparage mistaken beliefs about changing corporate cultures. See Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy, *The New Corporate Cultures: Revitalizing the Workplace After Downsizing, Mergers, and Reengineering* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1998), pp. 32–36.

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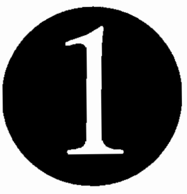

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