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American Civil Religion: Negotiating Covenant and Capital

American democracy was conceived through conflict and survives through the planned tension of its federalist structure and the separation of powers rather than by any idealistic sense of organic unity. This essay argues that the American civil religion is fundamentally defined by the persistent dualism between the philosophical mandate of the Republican tradition (community, virtue, moral obligation) and the liberal ethos of utilitarian individualism (property, self-interest, neutrality), a structural conflict that has historically co-opted religious ethics for economic gain. Robert Bellah's framework, explored here, reveals that the survival of the American democratic ideal is ultimately contingent upon the resilience of this civil religion against the modern erosion of civility and the growing trivialization of its core symbols.

The Theoretical Framework and Historical Contrast

In *Varieties of Civil Religion*, Robert Bellah contends that the American political structure relies on its unique form of civil religion, seeded at the country's founding, which employs a model that contrasts sharply with failed historical examples. The concept of civil religion is not unique to America; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who coined the term in 1762, advocated for a civil religion that would harmonize religion and politics with agreement upon a few simple beliefs such as the existence of a benevolent divinity, the sanctity of the social contract, and the

punishment of the wicked. (Rousseau pp.161-165) The American iteration, however, is distinct and can broadly be understood as U.S. nationalism couched in Protestant terms, which most citizens have generally agreed upon despite the fact that the Constitution prevents any single religion from gaining theological hegemony. America's civil religion also represents a broad spiritual repository for those whose sense of religion has become uninstitutionalized yet who remain deeply nationalistic.

To understand the specific success of the American model, one must contrast it with archaic systems where such differentiation failed. In "archaic societies," such as the Bronze Age monarchies, political authority and the divine were fused. In these contexts, political submission to the "Divine King" was equated with cosmic order, while political opposition was viewed as an alliance with the demonic forces of cosmic chaos. Bellah notes that totalitarian regimes, such as fascism in Italy, represented an "archaic regression" (xii) where political authority claimed its own sacrality to break the hold of traditional loyalties. Similarly, in Japan, a civil religion of an archaic type survived into the modern era, involving a fusion of divinity, society, and the individual. Bellah explains that the Japanese system engaged in "conscious manipulation" (31) of Shinto mythology and mass media to promulgate an Imperial mythology, turning the samurai from private henchmen into public servants and securing ideological adherence across the populace.

The Failure of Fusion: The Mexican Example

A more immediate contrast to the American experience is found in Mexico, where a civil religion failed to coalesce despite favorable conditions. Mexico possessed a strong nationalism, a

history of religious dominance, and a distinct ethnic identity—factors that usually facilitate civil religion. However, the historical trajectory of Church-State relations in Mexico prevented a unified ideology. In 1814, when Jose Maria Morelos drew up a constitution, he guaranteed the sanctity of Roman Catholicism as the only religion that would be tolerated in Mexico. However, by the 1830s, liberal sentiment entrenched in Mexican politics viewed the Catholic Church as a barrier to freedom.

Unlike the United States, where churches competed with one another but not with the state, the Mexican Church was forced to contend directly against the state. The result was a bitter "Church versus State" struggle in which the State eventually won, leading to a secular social system by the 1920s. Consequently, while Mexico retains a vibrant secular nationalism and a deep popular religiousness (seen in the Cult of Guadalupe), these two forces never merged. God's influence in Mexico remained private or mediated by the Church or individual priests rather than being integrated directly into the national political identity. Because of this ambivalence, Mexican politicians could not "hold the strings of religious balloons," (Bellah 61) meaning that they could not use religious symbolism to legitimize the state without invoking a response from the clerical powers.

The American Synthesis: Structural Tension

The American system succeeded where these models failed because it managed a unique separation of church and state while maintaining a fusion of religious and political symbols. This synthesis originated in the inherent tension between two founding ideological principles. The first is the Republican ethos, crystallized in the *Declaration of Independence*, which Bellah

describes as the "superstructural" location of religion. (10) This document places sovereignty in a locus "above" the state—referencing God directly—and mandates that citizens exhibit positive freedom and ethical commitment. In opposition stands the Liberal moment, crystallized in the *Constitution*, which serves as the "infrastructure". The Constitution contains no references to God and focuses on procedural mechanisms and the protection of individual rights, reflecting a liberal state structure.

The founders understood that a political regime expresses a people's total way of life. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, religion in America was the "first of our political institutions" because it served as the great restraining element that turned "naked self-interest" into "self-interest rightly understood". (Bellah 16) This restraint was necessary because, as John Adams noted, the Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people and was "wholly inadequate to the government of any other". (Bellah 17)

The Role of Public Education

According to Bellah, a critical, yet often overlooked, vehicle for establishing this civil religion was the American public school system, and the civil religion is described as "both parent and child" to the public school. (75) Horace Mann, the creator of the model school system in Massachusetts, was a Calvinist Freemason who believed education could and should reform the world. Mann insisted that while schools should be non-sectarian regarding specific church doctrines, they were obligated to teach and indoctrinate the "Creed of republicanism" which was "believed in by all". (Bellah 74)

Unlike in Mexico, where public education was inhibited from using religious symbols,

American schools promulgated national unity using religious symbols thought to be common to all. While these symbols were often unjustly Protestant in nature—alienating Catholics, Jews, and others—the underlying intention was to create a common political faith. Through this mechanism, the nation itself began to fill the vacuum where a church would typically be, becoming the chief bestower of identity and purpose.

The Conflict: Biblical vs. Utilitarian Morality

Bellah argues that this early structural tension subsequently developed into the defining internal conflict of the American experience: the struggle between the tenets of Biblical morality and the principles of utilitarian individualism. The Biblical tradition, rooted in the belief that the colonists were "God's New Israel," (Bellah 168) emphasized values like community, charity, and public virtue. It viewed the citizen as intrinsically linked to the collective via a social covenant. In contrast, the Utilitarian tradition, derived from thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, advocated for a neutral state where individuals were free to pursue the maximization of self-interest. Locke's view was that society is not an organic unity but a conscious creation of individuals for the mutual protection of property and interests. (Locke 105)

Bellah suggests that the pervasive mechanism for reconciling these disparate worldviews was the corruption of the Biblical tradition by the liberal tradition of utilitarian individualism. Through the influence of what Max Weber termed the "inner-worldly asceticism" of the Protestant Ethic, (Weber pp.123-125) religion was subtly transformed. It became a means for the maximization of self-interest, while the rationalization of means became an end in itself. Bellah illustrates this with the story of the American farmer who works hard to raise more corn, to make

more money, to buy more land, to raise more corn—a cycle of acquisition that continues *ad infinitum*. Thus the view of life as a "treadmill" threatens to render the final end of American freedom devoid of any real meaning. Ironically, mainstream Protestantism often aligns not with the austere demands of Republican morality, but with the Liberal side of the divide, re-casting individual prosperity as a God-given reward for Christian virtue.

Sociological Function and Civility

Despite this internal conflict, America's civil religion serves a critical sociological function as a vital spiritual repository for the "uninstitutionalized" citizens, providing them with a shared moral language while allowing full participation in political life without requiring adherence to any specific religious doctrine. For these citizens, the ritual celebration of the Fourth of July may be just as sacred as Christmas, and this group populates the ideologically vital middle ground between institutional religion and secular individualism.

The American system relies heavily on "civility," which Bellah describes as a "Protestant etiquette" or a ritualized belief that no religion should offend another or upset secular society. This civility constitutes a major plank of the civil religion, where strong religious convictions are "softened and muted" in the public sphere. (Bellah 192) Walter Lippmann identified this as the "public philosophy" or the "code," a natural law that acts as the structural stability of democracy, much like the laws of carpentry determine the stability of a house. (Bellah 202) This code transcends individual choice and self-interest; it is the "non-contractual element" of the social contract. However, this tolerance developed at the cost of making religion a private affair to be kept separate from the public pursuit of the common good.

Erosion and the Crisis of the 1960s

Bellah contends that the American civil religion began experiencing significant erosion beginning in the 1960s, marking a distinct period of "repudiation of the tradition of utilitarian individualism" (Bellah 172) by a significant portion of the educated youth. The counterculture of the 1960s did not merely reject politics; it rejected the dualism central to Western religion. Many turned toward "Oriental religions" and philosophies that emphasized the "unity of all being" and "non-dualism". If all people and nature are one there is no basis for exploitation, they argued, leading some of these groups to conclusions that resembled Marxism; conclusions based not on cold logic but through spiritual insight. This inclusive pluralism represented a profound break from the symbolism of "God's New Israel" that had previously unified the nation. (Bellah 14)

This erosion was exacerbated by the trivialization of religious symbols by the political establishment. In the 1950s, the addition of "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" to currency were perceived by many as trivializing because they were largely political, not truly religious, in origin. Furthermore, events like the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal shattered public faith in the idea of U.S. exceptionalism. Watergate, in particular, forced the recognition that “Tricky Dick’s dirty tricks" had become a way of life and that fidelity to the "rules of the game"—the very essence of civility—could no longer be pretended. As Bellah notes, the despair at the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and the cynicism following Nixon’s victory in 1972 signaled a victory for "cynical privatism". (177)

Conclusion: The Danger of Relapse

The health of America's civil religion is intimately linked to the survival of the Republic. Bellah warns that if the Republic fails, the distinct possibility of a "relapse into traditional authoritarianism" exists. (185) He speculates that the most likely candidate to supply a new orthodoxy in such a vacuum would be right-wing Protestant fundamentalism. While the "ideal Republic" dreamed of by the founding fathers never existed in actuality—it was and still is a creative idea meant to inspire—the potential loss of that vision is very real and extremely perilous to the American way of life.

The ongoing fragmentation in American society suggests that the "Protestant etiquette" and the "code of civility" are decaying. (Bellah 202) The religious movements that are rising today often prioritize theological particularism and an ethic of individualism, which intensifies rather than neutralizes the mood of self-interest. Unless there is a major shift away from the uneasy alliance with utilitarian individualism and a revitalization of the revolutionary spirit of true Republicanism, the American experiment may face a grim future. Ultimately, the nation's identity remains intrinsically linked to the health and resilience of its civil religion; a volatile melting pot of contending convictions that must somehow find a way to harmonize the pursuit of self-interest with the ethical demands of its evolving sense of social morality.

Works Cited

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