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NORTH AMERICAN REPORT:

SECULAR SAINTS

Civil Religion in America

On 11th January 1989 Ronald Reagan, under whose administration, according to Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, 'civil religion reached a new pinnacle in the American experience as it was exalted by a powerful, priestly president',[1] delivered his farewell address to the nation. After extolling the successes of the previous eight years, Reagan summarised the accomplishments of his two terms in office with these words: 'We made the city stronger - we made the city freer - and we left her in good hands'.

No one conversant in American history could have failed to grasp the significance of the allusion encoded in that image. The city to which Reagan referred is the American nation, carved out of the wilderness by divine providence and called to be, in the words penned by the seventeenth-century Puritan, John Winthrop, while en route to Massachusetts colony, 'a city upon a hill' with the task of serving as a beacon to Europe and the world. By means of this metaphor, the outgoing President was once again employing the language of an exceptionally powerful aspect of the American ethos, namely, civil religion, an aspect of which many observers maintain had come to characterise the Reagan era as a whole.

Put simply, the phenomenon termed civil religion refers to the blending of religious piety with patriotic sentiments. It is the use of religious terminology and categories as a vehicle to speak of the aspirations and goals of a specific nation. In their book, *Twilight of the Saints*, Linder and Pierard offer an expanded definition: civil religion

> is the use of consensus religious symbols by the state - either directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously - for its own political purposes. These purposes may be noble or debased, depending upon the type of civil religion (priestly or prophetic) and the historical context. It involves mixing traditional religion with national life until it is impossible to distinguish between the two, and usually leads to a blurring of religion and patriotism and of religious values with national values.[2]

I. Civil religion before the 'American experiment'

Although civil religion is technically a modern phenomenon that arose from the development of nation states, its roots may be traced much earlier, specifically to ancient near-eastern civilisations. That world knew no distinctions and made no differentiation between personal religious adherence and membership in a certain tribe or civil order. Instead, the concept of tribal gods was everywhere present. To be a member of a specific people or to reside in a specific locale meant being a worshipper of a certain god, for the gods were seen as tied to peoples and locations. The concept of civil religion was likewise not totally foreign to the ancient Greeks and Romans. In *The Republic*, for example, Plato indicated that religion plays an important role in a viable state. And the New Testament book of Revelation gives indication of the presence in the first century Roman Empire of a politically-oriented emperor-cult that functioned as a quasi-civil religion alongside the other religions in the realm.

During the early centuries of the present era the Christian community, with its vision of the people of God called out from all nations and peoples, refused to be equated with any political entity. But this position was altered when the victory of Constantine brought political emancipation to Christians and favoured status to the church. The emperor came to be seen as the chief bishop of the people of God which in turn was virtually co-terminous with the empire. Over the next centuries ensued an ebb and flow of civil employment of Christianity as a religious foundation for the unity of the Christianized lands.

A blow to the vision of a Christian people united together under a Christian civil government was dealt by the division of the empire. In the West, a further setback came with the teutonic invasions. Nevertheless, the dream survived, rekindled by the ambitions of Charlemagne. According to church historian, Philip Schaff, Charlemagne's goal was

> to unite all the Teutonic and Latin races on the Continent under his temporal sceptre in close union with the spiritual dominion of the pope; in other words, to establish a Christian theocracy, coextensive with the Latin church.[3]

Lying behind the Carolingian revival were two bold assumptions: that the people of the empire were the people of God and that the emperor was the new David.

The more immediate roots of modern civil religion lie in the 'messianic consciousness' that accompanied the rise of the European nations. This phenomenon became pronounced first in France. The French sense of national election was fuelled by the pope's adulation of the French king and people, motivated by his political struggle with the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire.

In Elizabethan England the link between God and country took a new turn. The accession of Elizabeth I to the throne, following the death of the Catholic Queen Mary in 1558, signalled to the English Puritan theologians the dawning of the long-awaited divine intervention on behalf of the full reformation of the English Church, which had severed ties with Rome in 1534 under Henry VIII. The struggle of the true church against the false church of antichrist (i.e., the pope), they believed, was now focused on the nation of England. One outworking of this understanding was the transference of the elect status of the true church to the nation as a whole. This move was facilitated by the nature of the Church of England as a national church, which made membership in the ecclesiastical body virtually coterminous with citizenship in the land. This transference was likewise fully in keeping with the understanding of the English reformers that the reform of the church should be carried out under the auspices of the godly magistrate.

During the 1640s and 1650s, when the Puritan movement was at its height, two changes in the concept of civil religion took place. First, the slowness of reform under a succession of monarchs who were reluctant to bring change to the ecclesiastical status quo, resulted in a change in the minds of the Puritans concerning the identity of the godly magistrate. Now, rather than looking to the Crown, their hopes were shifted to the House of Commons. Second, the splintering of the Puritan party itself led to a change in the religion they viewed as foundational to the elect nation. Now the Protestant faith that lay behind the various sects became the civil religion of the land.

Two important formulators of the Puritan position at this time were Oliver Cromwell and John Milton. In his speech, delivered to a committee of the Second Protectorate Parliament on 3rd April 1657, Cromwell spoke of 'the two greatest concernments that God hath in the world', namely, religion and the interest of the nation. While Cromwell placed the latter under the former in the divine mind, he nevertheless found a close connection between the two: 'if any whosoever think the Interest of Christians and the Interest of the Nation inconsistent, or two different things, I wish my soul may never enter into their secrets'.[4] A similar understanding was articulated by Milton in his *Areopagitica*. He declared that God had chosen England to reform the Reformation, that the Puritan movement was the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (Numbers 11.29), and that English democracy was the expression of Yahweh's rule over England.[5]

The term, civil religion, was not coined by the Puritans, however, but apparently by an influential thinker of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment, Jean Jacques Rousseau. By Rousseau's day, developments including the religious wars had resulted in an altered meaning for the concept of religion. No longer did the word refer to the worship of God by the devotees of the deity. Rather, it had become an overarching concept referring to the reality that unifies or lies behind the differing theologies in the world. In keeping with this new understanding, Rousseau's chief concern in his book, *The Social Contract*, was not theological but sociological and practical, namely, to provide legitimation for the state. After surveying the 'civil religious' value of Christianity, which he concluded is not suitable as a legitimiser of the state because it creates a dual, and hence divided, allegiance in its adherents, Rousseau offered a proposal for a new bonding element in society. This new 'glue' was to consist of two elements, the social contract, which takes the form of a constitution and approximates to a creed for the nation, and a civil religion, which as a consensus of the religious sentiments of a diverse populace could cement the allegiance of the people to the civil order.

II Civil Religion in America

The ethos of the new American nation was the product of the coming together of these two strands of thought. The Puritan influence was evident from the very beginning, having been transported to the new world by the founders of the New England colonies. From their inception the new commonwealths were viewed by the Puritan leaders in religious, even civil religious, terms. And this religious vision was accepted and expanded by the colonial communities as a whole.

The religious significance given to the American experiment centred on the belief that this was a chosen land established with a divine purpose. This theme was articulated in the Mayflower Compact. Its architects explicitly declared that Plymouth Colony was called into existence to honour God and advance the Christian faith. In the same way, Massachusetts Colony was viewed as called to be a city on a hill, created for the purpose of bringing the Reformation to a successful conclusion in the new world.

But on the shores of the Atlantic another stream combined with the vision of English Puritanism to form the ethos of the new nation, namely, the thinking of the Enlightenment. Although this second stream at first did not determine the soul of the nation to the extent that its Puritan counterpart did, it nevertheless penetrated and leavened the whole. The working together of the Puritan and Enlightenment influences led to the addition of still other understandings of the nature of the American national purpose. Perhaps the most important of these was the widespread view that the new nation was to be the seat of liberty, viewed by some in political and by others in religious terms. This concept played a central role in the American revolution, as the cry was raised that English tyranny was threatening both civil and religious liberty. The appeal of this perception rallied support for the revolutionary cause even among persecuted minorities in New England, such as the Baptists.

Two opposing factors characterised the nineteenth century. On the one hand, evangelicalism emerged as the quasi-civil religion of the republic, even though only 26% of the populace claimed religious affiliation as late as 1865.[6] The role of the movement in this era of American history is indicated by evangelical historians Wells and Woodbridge:

> Convinced that the propagation and implementation of evangelical faith were the most effective means of civilizing the world, restraining vice, and making America a decent place to live, these evangelicals sponsored a vast range of missionary and social relief programs... A working relationship emerged between the politicians who guided the republic's fortunes and the evangelical clergymen who guarded its morals.[7]

On the other hand, a growing secularization of the significance of the nation engulfed the understanding of many Americans, including many American Christians. The earlier tendency to view the national purpose in terms of the role of the United States in God's programme for the church and in terms of church history was now replaced with the view that the nation had a purpose of its own. This secularized national purpose was seen as confirmed by its unique history, and its 'manifest destiny', which carried first continental, then global, implications. Americans envisioned a nation spreading across the North American continent, 'from sea to shining sea'. But then the United States came to be seen as a redeemer nation with a messianic mission to spread liberty and freedom - Christianity and democracy - around the world. In short, Christians and nationalists, Puritans and Enlightenment latitudinarians were able to join together in the one national mission. The Christian mission had been fused with the national, with freedom being the common motif of both.

In the twentieth century several additional changes took place. First, the breakdown of the evangelical establishment and the immigration of non-Protestant peoples offered the challenge of assimilating other traditions into the national consensus. In responding to this altered situation, a broader (or reduced) national civil religious glue emerged: 'Godism', or the general belief in a supreme being, displaced the explicitly Christian religious foundations of the previous century. Likewise a thoroughgoing national mission pushed out the remnants of the Christian mission of the past. The new vision was fully secular, but continued to offer a religious significance for the nation. On this basis, Americans of various backgrounds could be rallied in support of several military and geo-political activities fighting 'to make the world safe for democracy', waging a 'war to end all wars', and engaging in a national crusade against 'godless and totalitarian' communism.

Second, the twentieth century has witnessed an expansion of a development begun earlier, namely, the evolution of the presidency as a quasi-sacred public office. In contrast to the intent of the framers of the Constitution, the presidency has become the most powerful political office in the United States. But the power of the office goes beyond the legislative process. Historically, the president has been viewed, in the words of Pierard and Linder, 'as a one-person distillation of the American people, just as surely as the monarch is of the British people'.[8] However, in the twentieth century the presidency has gained a religiously-oriented role in American national life beyond what characterised the office in the past. This role includes interpreting to the nation its transcendent purpose and encouraging the citizenry in the fulfilment of that purpose. To this end, it is important that the office holder be a religious person, or one who can employ religious language in carrying out the tasks of the presidency.

Sociologist Robert Bellah maintains that this aspect of the American civil religion, the glorification of the presidency as a religious symbol, refuses to limit itself to recent office holders. Instead it appeals to central figures of the past. The most important of these are George Washington, who, according to Bellah, presided over the first crisis in American history, and Abraham Lincoln, who held that office during the second crisis.[9] Following the path charted by Bellah, Pierard and Linder have recently narrated the story of this development and focus on the Reagan presidency as climaxing the move from a 'prophetic' to a 'priestly' role of this highest office in the public faith. A prophetic president, they explain, summons 'the nation to higher purposes and to fulfil its obligations', whereas the priestly office holder officiates at national ceremonials that confer sacredness on the country and its heroes.[10]

Finally, this century has witnessed both the breakdown and then the revival of civil religion in the land. A series of reversals in American national life - especially the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair - threatened to spell the demise of American civil religion. These events led many Americans to question national social and political establishments. As a result, many found their illusions concerning the goodness of the nation shattered, and a wave of cynicism, shame and dislocation engulfed the nation.

From the ashes of this widespread gloom, however, arose a resurgence of evangelicalism and fundamentalism. This was accompanied by, or perhaps even contributed to, a corresponding resurgence of the dream of a godly, if not Christian, commonwealth built on a restoration of 'the Christian principles on which our country was founded'.

Important in the renewal of civil religion was a new political-religious movement, the New Religious Right. With a fervency reminiscent of the nineteenth-century evangelicals, this movement called on a discouraged populace once again to be optimistic about their country, that is, to 'take pride in America'. It likewise championed what it saw as the traditional values of the nation and called for the 'moral majority' once again to let its influence be felt in the political arena.

Jerry Falwell and others in the electronic church, who played important roles in this revival, pitched an old message in a new age to the nation's ear. The United States has a central place in God's plan, they declared, and they challenged the nation to be faithful to this divine mission. The message of the New Right spokespersons was translated into political action, including attempts to support candidates for political office who reflected the agenda of the movement. These efforts climaxed in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and again in 1984, a man who many in the movement believed to be God's chosen instrument for this hour of crisis in the national history. In keeping with the categories utilised by the New Right rhetoric, Reagan focused on one central theme, designed to encourage the nation. 'America is back', he maintained throughout his eight years in office, so that once again its citizenry could 'stand tall'.

This, then, forms the context for the monumental words uttered by this most popular president of recent years, as he bade farewell to his people and turned the mantle of destiny over to his hand-picked successor.

NOTES

1. Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, **Civil Religion and the Presidency**, Grand Rapids, 1988, p.283.
2. Robert D. Linder and Richard V. Pierard, **Twilight of the Saints**, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p.21.
3. Philip Schaff, **History of the Christian Church**, 1899, IV, p.238.
4. Oliver Cromwell, **Letters and Speeches**, ed. Thomas Carlyle, 1871, 4, pp.250-51.
5. John Milton, **Areopagitica**, in **The Harvard Classics**, ed. Charles W. Eliot, 1937, 3, pp.222-

3. Philip Schaff, **History of the Christian Church**, 1899, IV, p.238.
4. Oliver Cromwell, **Letters and Speeches**, ed. Thomas Carlyle, 1871, 4, pp.250-51.
5. John Milton, **Areopagitica**, in **The Harvard Classics**, ed. Charles W. Eliot, 1937, 3, pp.222-25.
6. Edwin Scott Gaustad, **Historical Atlas of Religion in America**, revised edn., 1976, p.168.
7. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, eds., **The Evangelicals**, revised edn., Grand Rapids, 1977, p.10.
8. **Civil Religion and the Presidency**, p.15.
9. Robert Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', **Daedalus**, 96/1, 1967, pp.1-21. This thesis is more fully developed in Robert N. Bellah, **The Broken Covenant**, 1975.
10. **Civil Religion and the Presidency**, p.291.

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ENGLISH DISSENT: DISSOLUBLE OR DISSOLUTE?

Mark D. Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850-1918*, Garland Publishing, New York & London, 1987, xxiii + 345pp. $55.

In this welcome and provocative book Dr Johnson seeks to show how English Dissent, as represented by Congregationalism, dissolved into a bland ecumenism as social impediments were removed, and as the desire to take their due place in society (exemplified by the story of Mansfield College, Oxford) undermined traditional dissidence. He anchors the intellectual history in the socio-political context of the times, thereby drawing our attention to important sources which those concerned only with the period's significant thinkers may leave uninvestigated.

There are five substantial chapters. The first, entitled 'From the Old Evangelicalism to the New: The Theological Education of Robert William Dale', sets out from Dale's view that Evangelical individualism contributed to the slackening of the Dissenters' grip upon ecclesiology. Not least by subtly re-writing Dissenting history at crucial points, Dale managed to articulate a new Evangelicalism, attuned to the aspirations of the growing Nonconformist middle class, accommodating those modifications of scholastic Calvinism which recent evangelistic practice seemed to require. The theological transformation is illustrated by reference to the Carrs Lane succession of John Angell James and Dale. The influence of F. D. Maurice upon Dale is shown to have been formative; John Campbell's doomed rearguard action against the 'increase of German error' is noted, as is Dale's 'hearty admiration' of the socio-politically prophetic Edward Miall. The mood captured by Binney's declaration that 'It is not wrong to be rich', and that Congregationalism's special mission was to the middle classes; and the Unitarian George Dawson's (undiscriminating) allegation that the ethical stance of the early Evangelicals was largely other-worldly, are revealed as further factors in Dale's formation. As Dale's theological position matured, he set the older Evangelical emphasis upon the Cross within the broader framework of the Incarnation; though with the passage of time he came to regret the loss of the sense that 'sin is an awful offence', and that Christ is Lord and not only Brother. In Chapter II 'The Leicester Conference' of 1877 (which A. J. Grieve described as 'a small theological breeze') is described and analysed. Johnson rightly views the episode as indicative of Congregational anxiety at the erosion of communal life in face of 'spiritual'-liberal (albeit internally discordant) emphases. The theological role of James Baldwin Brown, who mediated the thought of McLeod Campbell, Erskine of Linlathen (whose final 'e' and necessary qualifying phrase are omitted in both text