

America's Civil Religion Today

Written by Calvin Fox

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We all know American has a plurality of Religions. All the major organized Religions of the world can be found in our Country along with versions of Judaism and Roman Catholicism and hundreds of kinds of Protestant Denominations and independent religious groups. Beyond all that, some academics believe that many Americans are Civil Religionists. An article in WIKIPEDIA on the subject states, "Civil Religion is a distinct cultural phenomenon within American society which is not embodied in American politics or denominational religion."

Jim Skillen is the former president of the Center for Public Justice (U.S.)- an evangelical "Think Tank" on Public Policy. In the current issue of Perspective, the Newsletter of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, CN, Skillen says the name "Civil Religion" is no longer in vogue, but he is convinced, nevertheless, that many people still hold to its tenets.

Mr Skillen says those tenets include the following: "America is God's chosen nation", "America is a righteous nation which has a God-given mission in the world." "America is an exceptional nation, the leader of the world to promote and and protect democracy, freedom and prosperity around the globe (and ths is why Terrorism against America, like Communism before it, must be stopped)." "God blesses America."

Skillen notes this "God" is not Christ, He is the god of all Americans- the American god. Many Americans supposedly hold these views along with the traditional beliefs of their Faith. Mr Skillen sees heresy and blasphemy in all of this. I agree with him that such a "Civil Religion" is not Christian or Biblical. However, to my knowledge I do not know anyone who has this "Religion".

Back in the late1960's-early 1970's, a similar, but different version of Civil Religion was popular (in the midst of the caotic social upheavel of that Decade

In 1967, Sociologist Robert Bellah wrote, "While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith...few have realized that there actually exists alongside...the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America". The publication in this year of his essay titled "Civil Religion in America" made a great impact on the study of Relgion by Sociologists of Religion in America. Many claim he the name, "Civil Religion", originated with this essay.

Bellah's article claimed that most Americans share common religious characteristics expressed through civil religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals that provide a religious dimension to the entirety of American life. Later, he adds that civil religious principles transcend the nation and represent a "higher standard" by which the nation should be judged. Civil Religion, he said, is a common set of beliefs in transcendent principles and reality against which the historical experience and actions of the nation should be evaluated.

According to Sociologists Ronald C. Wimberley and William H. Swatos, Jr today, Bellah's

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definition of American civil religion is that it is 'an institutionalized collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation,' which he sees symbolically expressed in America's founding documents and presidential inaugural addresses. It includes

*a belief in the existence of a transcendent being called "God,"

*an idea that the American nation is subject to God's laws,

*an assurance that God will guide and protect the United States.

"Bellah sees these beliefs in the values of liberty, justice, charity, and personal virtue and concretized in, for example, the words 'In God We Trust' on both national emblems and on the currency used in daily economic transactions. Although American civil religion shares much with the religion of Judeo-Christian denominations, Bellah claims that it is distinct from denominational religion. Examples of civil religious beliefs are reflected in statements such as: 'America is God's chosen nation today.' 'Holidays like the Fourth of July are religious as well as patriotic.' 'A president's authority . . . is from God.' 'Social justice cannot only be based on laws; it must also come from religion.' 'God can be known through the experiences of the American people.' *Source: .<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/civilrel.htm>*

I do know people who hold these Tenets and thus have this form of Civil Religion. However, the original (first) Civil Religion going back to the time of the Founding Fathers still exists and is also operative today. The next article (below) will elaborate on what that is.