Civil Religion Today

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Is civil religion still relevant?

In his much-cited 1967 article in *Daedalus*, Robert N. Bellah (2005) famously contended that there exists in America a civil religion, “a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” that “exists alongside of, and rather clearly differentiated from, the churches.” The article was optimistic in tone. It stressed the critical powers of a prophetic discourse of American purpose and traced its evolution through American history from John Winthrop through George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to John F. Kennedy. Bellah’s article sparked nearly two decades of research and debate not only in history and the social sciences, but also amongst legal scholars, philosophers and theologians.

But in the midst of the debate, Bellah himself grew increasingly disillusioned with the tradition. In his 1975 book, *The Broken Covenant* (Bellah 1992), an analysis of the American civil religion, Bellah concluded that it was now nothing but “an empty and broken shell.” His pessimism is easy to understand. After all, much had happened during the intervening decade, and much of it was disheartening: the Kennedy and King assassinations, the street battles of Chicago, the Watts riots, the Watergate break-in, the denouement in Vietnam, and so on. The collective funk that settled on the nation in these years cast such a deep shadow on the civil religion idea, that it seemed altogether eclipsed.

A decade later, at a conference on “Political Theology and Civil Religion,” Bellah (1986) silently dropped the term. The title of his essay was “Public Philosophy and Public Theology in America.” Nor did civil religion receive any mention in *Habits of the Heart*, published the year before (Bellah 1985). The governing concepts were not the only thing that had changed. Whereas the *Daedalus* essay and *The Broken Covenant* had described the American tradition in univocal terms, *Habits* spoke of multiple and competing traditions — “utilitarian,” “civic” and “expressive” — and pleaded eloquently for the middle term.

Bellah and his collaborators were undoubtedly right to adopt a plurivocal interpretation of the American tradition (Smith 1997). But were they right to drop the term “civil religion” in favor of “public philosophy” and/or “public theology”? Is the term no longer applicable or defensible? That the term might still be relevant became apparent on the evening of July 27, 2004, during Barack Obama’s keynote address to the Democratic National Convention.
In that short speech, which immediately catapulted the young Senator from obscurity to stardom, Obama sounded two themes that would reappear four years later in his unlikely campaign for the U.S. presidency. First, that his personal story was, in some sense, the American story en miniature: “I stand here,” he intoned, “knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible.” Second, that the American experiment was not to be judged by its material results, however great, but by its founding principles. In Obama’s words:

Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our Nation — not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy. Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That is the true genius of America, a faith — a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles …

Evidently, Bellah’s death certificate was issued prematurely. The American civil religion was alive and, by November of 2008, very well indeed.

Civil Religion: Two Genealogies

In the standard genealogy, the term “civil religion” is attributed to Rousseau and traced to the Romans, sometimes via Machiavelli (Hughey 1983; Rouner 1986; Shanks 1995; Cristi 2001; Parsons 2002). While the peoples of Rome enjoyed a great deal of religious freedom, they were nonetheless obligated to take part in the civic rituals of the Empire (Scheid 2003). These demands, it should be noted, were of a purely ritual character. They did not involve a confession or creed of any kind, as regarded the efficacy or meaning of the rituals.

The refusal of the early Christians to take part in the Roman cult was one of the principal reasons, perhaps the principal reason, why they were subject to periodic persecutions. Nor did the Christianization of the Empire bring an end to religious persecution; it simply shifted their target — from the Christians to the “pagans”
(MacMullen 1984). The collapse of the Western Empire and consolidation of the Roman Church under Papal rule permanently dashed any hopes of religio-political unity under Caesaro-Papist aegis. Church and state were now durably sundered.

Looking back, from the vantage point of Renaissance Florence, Machiavelli regarded this outcome as deeply and doubly tragic (Machiavelli, Mansfield et al. 1996). He saw Christianity as an “otherworldly” and “priestly” religion that undermined the civic virtues of the citizen soldier and thereby initiated the dissolution and decline of Roman political and military power. What is more, he believed that the Roman Church stood in the way of Italian reunification. But while he believed that Christianity and republicanism were deeply at odds, he did not think that a republic could dispense with religion as such. A republic cannot survive without virtue, he argued, and virtue can only be founded on something like a religion, ideally, the sort of religion that existed in ancient Rome. For Machiavelli, then, something like the civic cult of the Roman empire was needed for the modern republic.

Rousseau agreed (1997). Indeed, he went so far as to spell out the “positive dogmas” of his “civil religion”: the existence of an omnipotent and beneficent deity, “the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws, these are the positive dogmas.” This minimalist and deist creed, he believed, would defuse the age-old tension between church and state and underwrite “sentiments of sociability” that would undergird civic virtue. To assure that civic harmony was never again disrupted by sectarian strife, Rousseau also proposed one “negative dogmas” as well: a ban on “intolerance.” “Whoever dares to say, no salvation outside the church,” has to be driven out of the state.” Notice that Rousseau’s civil religion is founded on a credo rather than a ritual. It is the Roman cult refracted through a Christian lens.

While this is the standard genealogy, the one rehearsed in most discussions of civil religion, it is not the only genealogy, nor the one most relevant to the American experience. As my colleague Elliott Visconsi shows in his forthcoming book, *The Invention of Civil Religion* (Yale UP, 2011), “the language of American civil religion has its origins in Later Stuart England, which was clearly felt and understood as the proximate past of the American revolutionary generation.”
In this account, the crucial figures are Milton (1991) and Sidney (1996), not Machiavelli and Rousseau. Like the Florentine and the Genevan, both Englishmen saw an inextricable link between republicanism, virtue and religion. Unlike him, however, they did not believe that Christianity severed the latter link or that it was in any way antithetical to republicanism.

On the contrary, both viewed themselves as Christian republicans, a compound that Machiavelli and Rousseau viewed as an oxymoron. Because Christianity emphasized inner conviction, they argued, and because inner conviction could not be coerced in the way that ritual conformity could, they concluded, Christianity introduced liberty into the heart of religiosity, an argument that would reappear in the writings of Roger Williams (1644; 1652; Morgan 1967; Nussbaum 2008) and John Locke (2006) and, more consequentially, in Madison (1999) and Jefferson’s (1999; Hamburger 2002) arguments concerning religious freedom in the run up to the Constitutional Convention.

The Roots of the American Civil Religion

In The Broken Covenant, Bellah argues that the civil religion tradition in America weaves together two discursive threads: the covenant theology of the New England Puritans (Miller 1939) and the classical republicanism of the Founding Fathers (Wood and Institute of Early American History and Culture (Williamsburg Va.) 1969; Bailyn 1992). About this, he was quite right.

The roots of covenant theology are to be found in the Biblical story of the Ancient Israelites (Nicholson 1986). The Israelites entered into a covenant — or rather, a series of covenants — with God. Importantly, they did so not individually but corporately and collectively — as tribes or as women or as elders or as a people (Walzer 1985). If they upheld God’s commandments then God would bless and protect them in various ways. If they violated the covenant, God would withdraw his blessings and deliver them to their enemies. The key thing to notice here is that being “chosen” involved high levels of moral obligation in which all were responsible for each and vice versa.

The New England Puritans made the covenant into the foundation not only of their theology but of their society (Weir 2004). Emigrees often entered into a covenant before embarking to the New World. The establishment of a new church or town also typically involved the ritual affirmation of a covenant. The covenant
idea and its attendant rituals served as a link between the civil and ecclesiastical realms in Puritan New England. Over time, the covenant idea was symbolically extended first to New England, and then to the American colonies more generally (Tuveson 1968; Cherry 1998). In this vision, America was not so much a New England but a New Israel.

The second source of the American civil religion, as Bellah has rightly noted, is the ancient tradition of civic republicanism (Pettit 1997; Skinner 1998; Pocock and American Council of Learned Societies. 2003). I say “ancient” because its roots may be traced back to the Roman Republic and the Athenian polis via thinkers such as Cicero and Aristotle. Classical republicanism is quite different from contemporary liberalism in a number of respects. For example, modern liberals from Hobbes and Hume to Mill and Berlin tend to define liberty as the absence of (physical) constraint (Skinner 2008). For them, liberty is the right to do as one pleases, so far as it does not (physically) harm others.

For the classical republicans, liberty is defined in contrast to slavery. Someone who is dependent upon another or enslaved to his passions is not really free. To be free is to be master of one’s time and one’s self. Liberalism and republicanism also have very different views of how social order is formed and maintained. In the republican account, as we have seen, civic virtue is crucial to social order. Without it, society devolves into “faction” and succumbs to “corruption.”

In the liberal account, by contrast, order is sustained by contracts, both social and economic. Constitutionally guaranteed rights and untrammeled free markets contain self-interest and transmute it into common benefit. There is one more contrast that is worth noting as well. Liberals and republicans work with different views of historical time. For the liberal, time is linear. And since time has only one dimension, it can only move in two directions: forwards (“progress”) and backwards (“regress”). In the republican scheme, time is cyclical. Republics have a tendency to decay from within. Virtue tends to give way to corruption. And if this corruption is not counter-acted, it issues in tyranny.

On all these counts — liberty, social order and historical time — there are striking parallels and deep affinities between civic republicanism and covenant theology. For instance, both see self-mastery as a precondition of individual freedom; both were opposed to the utilitarian view that the reason should be the slave of the passions. Similarly, both insist that social order has moral foundations; neither would have accepted
Mandeville’s (Mandeville and Hundert 1997) premise that free markets can transform individual vice into collective virtue. On the contrary, each warned of the corrupting influences of luxury and commerce. Finally, both view historical time in cyclical terms, defined by corruption and revival, rather than linear ones, consisting of progress and regress.

While the Founding Fathers were a diverse lot — as was the revolutionary generation more generally — most of them espoused some form of Christian republicanism. Consider John Adams, perhaps the most classically orthodox of the Revolutionary leaders. In his “Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law” (1765), he urged his readers to “read the histories of ancient ages” and “contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome” (Adams and Diggins 2004).

Virtue is the greatest thing to which human beings can aspire, for “the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue” (Adams and Diggins 2004). And to attain virtue, Adams believed, means to control the passions. Besides a mixed and balanced constitution, the other best means of preserving liberty is civic education. In Adams’ view, “liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people,” so “no expense” should be spared in providing for “the liberal education of youth, especially for the lower class of people” (Adams and Diggins 2004). All of this sat comfortably with the Calvinist orthodoxy of Adam’s youth.

Thomas Jefferson was certainly not an orthodox Christian by the standards of the day. But even he can be understood as a Christian republican of sorts. While he rejected the evangelical soteriology of the era in favor of a more universalist theology, he nonetheless regarded Jesus as the “greatest moral teacher” in history. Similarly, while he did not believe that the constitutional architecture of the United States could or should be modeled on that of the ancient republics, as Adams did, his understanding of liberty emphasized socio-economic independence and political participation. Accordingly, he admired the autonomous yeoman farmer — whence his support for the Louisiana purchase — and sought to strengthen local government in his famous scheme of local “wards.” At the same time, he vehemently rejected the egotistic view of human nature advanced by Hobbes, Selden and their followers in favor of a modernized version of the sociability thesis influenced by Hutcheson and the Scottish Enlightenment: “Man was created for social intercourse; but social intercourse cannot be maintained without a sense of social justice; then man must have been created with a sense of justice” (Jefferson, Appleby et al. 1999).
Civil Religion and Its Others

For most of the mid-twentieth century, most American historians characterized the Founding Fathers as “Lockean liberals” (Hartz 1955; Macpherson 1964; Appleby 1978; Appleby 1984) As we have seen, this reading cannot be fully sustained. Even Thomas Jefferson was influenced by classical republicanism — and Christianity.

Still, it would be equally mistaken to deny the influence of liberalism and claim that republicanism is “the” American tradition par excellence as some intellectual historians and political philosophers have done. More recently, some scholars, such as Joyce Appleby, have argued that “liberal-republicanism” is “the” American tradition(Appleby 1992). Others, such as Rogers Smith, contend that a “multiple traditions” approach is more adequate (Smith 1997). It is this latter approach that I follow here.

Historically, I argue, the civil religion tradition has had two principal competitors: religious nationalism and liberal secularism. Building on Max Weber’s (1964) well-known theory of “value-spheres”, we can formally distinguish the three traditions as follows: religious nationalists wish the boundaries of the religious and political communities to be as coterminous as possible; liberal secularists seek to keep the religious and political communities as separate as possible; and civil religionists imagine the two spheres as independent but interconnected. In a word, religious nationalists advocate total fusion, liberal secularists advocate total separation and civil religionists imagine them as overlapping.

But these are purely formal distinctions. We can add more substance to them by attending to the textual sources and governing metaphors of each tradition. Religious nationalism has two principal sources: the Hebrew Bible and ethno-nationalism. Whereas civil religionists read the Old Testament through the metaphor of covenant, religious nationalists read it through the metaphor of blood: the spilled blood of Israel’s enemies; the blood sacrifices on the altars of the temple; the blood purity of the Israeli people; and the river of blood at the end of days.

Read in this way, the Old Testament narrative has a remarkable affinity with ethno-nationalism. Both emphasize blood sacrifice in war, the racial purity of the sovereign people, the importance of sacred homelands and the apocalyptic nature of geopolitical struggles. In the United States, religious nationalism first appears during King Philipp’s war, where it takes the form of an anti-native and anti-Catholic Protestant nationalism
And it reappears again and again in wartime, with the notable exception of the American Revolution.

It was the Civil War and its aftermath, however, that transformed Christian nationalism into a popular ideology and gave it its characteristic ritual form: the cult of the fallen known as “Memorial Day” (Stout 2006). Politicians and clergy on both sides of the Mason-Dixon were quick to claim that God was on their side, that theirs was a sacred cause, and that the blood of the fallen was a form of sacrifice to the Almighty. And as the carnage escalated, the rhetoric turned apocalyptic as well.

Consider one of the most famous and familiar texts of the era — the lyrics for "The Battle Hymn of Republic." It contains the archetypical tropes of Christian nationalism American style: God as a God of war who marches, carries a “terrible swift sword” and can be seen “in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps.” A God, too, who demands blood sacrifice on “an altar in the evening dews and damps.” A demonized enemy, a “serpent” whose head must be crushed. An apocalyptic war that will unleash “the grapes of wrath” and set all men free. An empty promise, of course.

After Reconstruction rituals of remembrance such as Memorial Day would serve as a vehicle for reuniting Northern and Southern whites — and of denying full citizenship to African Americans (Blight 2001). The experiences of the Holocaust and the triumphs of the Civil Rights movement eventually undermined the openly racialist versions of Christian nationalism. But claims that America is a “Christian nation” are still quite common (Murphy 2009), and contemporary defenders of “American exceptionalism” echo historic rhetoric of national “chosen-ness” (Jewett and Lawrence 2003).

So, the American tradition of religious nationalism springs from the same root as covenant theology: the Old Testament. But there are crucial differences in their moral logics that bear emphasis. In covenant theology, chosen-ness confers special obligations as well as special blessings. When the Puritan leader John Winthrop declared to his fellow Puritans that “the eyes of the world are upon us,” and that “we shall be as a city upon a hill,” he was reminding his co-religionists of the special burden they carried, not congratulating them for winning the divine lottery.

In religious nationalism, by contrast, being chosen confers special privileges and even a sort of blanket immunity. “America right or wrong.” “America, love it or leave it.” “American, the greatest nation on earth.”
Nor are civil religion and religious nationalism the only American traditions with ancient roots. The genealogy of liberal secularism also winds back to antiquity, not to republican thinkers, however, but to Epicurean ones, such as Democritus and Lucretius (Wilson 2008). How so? What are the links?

First, a deep hostility towards religion, which is viewed as a puerile response to uncertainty and mortality. Second, a pessimistic view of politics, which is seen as an arena of struggle between the mendacious, the vainglorious and the self-interested. Third, the embrace of a refined hedonism of sensual pleasure within measure. And fourth, a celebration of private life as the arena of the good and true life.

The teachings of the Epicureans were revived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and exerted a deep influence on thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Bernard Mandeville and Pierre Bayle. Echoes of them can be heard in the work of political economists and classical utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and Adam Smith and, more faintly, in the religious individualism of the American romantics and the liberal theology of New England Protestantism. It is through these latter channels, particularly the economic one, that neo-Epicureanism enters into American culture. So, it is not really until the late nineteenth century that one can speak meaningfully of liberal secularism in the American context. And attempts to project it back into the Revolutionary era, as in the emblematic claim that “America was founded on the separation of church and state,” are anachronistic and rest on a highly tendentious reading of the First Amendment (Hamburger 2002). Of course, separationist jurisprudence was not solely the work of liberal secularists. It was also spurred by the well-founded fears of religious minorities vis-à-vis a mighty Protestant establishment. So, the secularization of public education and later, of American law, were the work of a diverse coalition motivated by very different interests.

Civil religionists are also separationists of a sort, of course. So, how does their view of church-state relations differ from liberal secularism? Here, it may be helpful to distinguish between two different versions of modern liberal secularism: libertarian and Kantian. On the libertarian reading, the legitimate purposes of government are limited to the protection of basic rights, especially property rights, the defense of the national homeland, and, perhaps, the provision of basic infrastructure (Rand 1966; Nozick 1974). From this perspective, the separation of church and state is just one part of a more general program to keep ethics out of politics and politics out of life. Insofar as religions speak of the common good, moral principles or collective purposes — chimera all — they are a threat to liberty. Of course, neo-Kantians such as John Rawls (Rawls 2005) and Robert
Audi (Audi 2000) do not regard notions such as the common good, moral principle or collective purpose as mere chimera. But they insist that ethics can be grounded in individual moral reason and, indeed, that they *must* be so grounded in a liberal democratic society, because only individual moral reason can provide a “neutral” and “generally accessible” source for politico-ethical argumentation. Consequently, religious reasoning must be banished from the public square.

The civil religious position is closer to the Kantian view than the libertarian view, but ultimately at odds with both. It is at odds with libertarian secularism insofar as it views the purpose of the political community in positive, moral terms, as a quest for the common good. And it is at odds with neo-Kantian secularism insofar as it disputes the claim that “secular reason” is truly “neutral” or more “accessible” to the general population. As Talal Asad (2003), Alasdair MacIntyre (1988; 1990), Charles Taylor (2007) and many others have shown, liberalism contains its own set of metaphysical premises and its own view of the human good. As such, it is itself a tradition, even, in some sense, a “religion.” And the claim that Kantian ethics is somehow more “generally accessible” to the American population than Judaeo-Christian ethics is frankly quite difficult to even take seriously (Eberle 2002).

In short, while civil religionists agree that a fair degree of institutional separation between church and state is salutary for both, the notion that religion can and should be kept out of politics or, for that matter, that political commitments can somehow be “neutral” and “general,” is rejected in favor of a robust pluralism in which citizens are free to deploy religio-ethical forms of argumentation and encouraged to do so.

*The American Civil Religion qua Tradition*

Throughout this essay, I have tacitly characterized civil religion and its others as “traditions.” Let me now make clear what I do, and do not, mean by this. To that end, it may be helpful to distinguish two understandings of tradition. On one view, traditions are static and unchanging. They are rooted in a singular moment of revelation whose ultimate significance is final and transparent. Let us call this the “fundamentalist” view, since it is espoused by religious and secular fundamentalists, both of whom define tradition in opposition to modernity and reason (Harris 2004; Dawkins 2006; Marsden 2006; Hitchens 2007; Gorski 2009).
On another view, traditions are dynamic and evolving. They are grounded in a common stock of stories and principles whose meaning is subject to ongoing interpretation and reasoned debate (Murray 1960; Pelikan 1984; MacIntyre 1990). Consequently, there is no necessary opposition between tradition on the one hand and rationality and modernity on the other. Let us call this the “scholastic” view, since it is has been worked out at greatest length by Catholic intellectuals of Thomist sympathy. When I speak of “tradition,” I speak of it in the scholastic sense. This is also how civil religion conceives of itself qua tradition. Religious nationalists and liberal secularists, on the other hand, tend to conceive of tradition in fundamentalist terms. For religious nationalists, to say that something is “traditional” is _ipso facto_ to commend it. For liberal secularists, by contrast, it is to condemn it.

Is the American civil religion really a tradition in the scholastic sense of the term? To answer in the affirmative requires that we show that its central stories and principles have been reinterpreted and elaborated over time. This is easily done. Consider the Puritan story of the covenanted community, the “city on a hill.” New England Puritans of the first and second generation imagined that it was English eyes that would be upon them. The Stuart Restoration put an end to Puritan dreams of a renewed England and transformed them into dreams of New England on American shores. By the time of the Revolution, the vision of New England as a New Israel had been extended to the English Colonies as a whole, and it would live on in the United States until well into the nineteenth century.

In some quarters, it is still alive even today. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the American Constitution had taken over the role of the Puritan covenant — this is quite clear in Lincoln’s rhetoric — and the Ten Commandments were replaced by two: “democracy” and “equality.” Consider Whitman’s “America.” America was no longer the “New Israel” but the “New Nation.” The increasing emphasis on ethno-racial equality whose penultimate culmination was the Civil Rights Movement ushered in a third dispensation stressing “diversity” and “civility,” evident in the oratory of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. It is this latest version of the American civil religion that Obama has attempted to revive, with some success. While the explicitly biblical language of covenant and being chosen has gradually receded to the margins, a more secular version of the underlying claim — that the American experiment is a consequential experiment of world-historical significance — continues to permeate the nation’s political culture and public discourse.
While the American civil religion has evolved in response to American national experience, there are also some underlying continuities that bear emphasis. The first is a recuperative relationship to American history, as opposed to the restorative vision of religious nationalists and the progressive vision of liberal secularists. In moments of crisis, civil religion looks back in order to move forward. To that degree, it retains a more cyclical understanding of historical time like the ones found in the original traditions of covenant theology and classical republicanism.

The second is a devotion to founding principles, as opposed to the self-worship of religious nationalists or the stadial consciousness of liberal secularists. In moments of reflection, civil religion focuses on the ethico-political principles of the founding moments. In that sense, it measures itself against an enduring, if not eternal standard, just as the Puritans looked to divine law, and republicans to natural law. As such, civil religion stands apart from the fundamentalist traditionalism of religious nationalists and also from the radical anti-traditionalism of secular fundamentalists.

*The Case for American Civil Religion*

I conclude on a normative note. The United States does have a civil religion. But *should* it have one? Does it *need* one? I have no reservations about answering in the affirmative. Let me very briefly explain why. I begin from a simple premise. One of the fundamental challenges confronting all modern democracies, particularly diverse ones such as the United States is achieving and maintaining the appropriate balance between pluralism and solidarity. Excessive pluralism, whether of an individualistic or sectarian variety, impedes the level of social cooperation that is necessary to achieving the common good and individual flourishing.

Libertarian opposition to current proposals for health-care reform in the U.S. is merely the most topical example. Conversely, excessive solidarity, whether of a racial or national variety, squelches the cultural pluralism and individual autonomy that are the wellsprings of societal adaptation and creativity. The white-nativist backlash politics represented by Sarah Palin is an excellent example of this. If we accept this premise, then we must reject radical secularism and religious nationalism, at least in their extreme forms. The one leads to excessive pluralism; the other to excessive solidarity.
Now, there are plenty of people who would agree about the need to balance pluralism and solidarity but who would still disagree that a civil religion is a necessary means to this end. First, there are non-theistic neo-Kantian rationalists who would be somewhat uneasy about the religious dimension of civil religion, philosophers like John Rawls, Jurgen Habermas or Robert Audi. Then there are theistic neo-Aristotelian confessionalists who would be somewhat uneasy about the civil dimension of civil religion, Christian thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), Richard Neuhaus (1986) or Stanley Hauerwas (1983; 1991). But does not each critique supply an answer to the other? Consider that rationalists often assert that certain abstract principles and formal procedures such as “communicative rationality” or “public reason” are a sufficient means to the ethical aims of a civic republic such as the United States. They are also compelled to admit that civic virtue and civic friendship are necessary as well. But virtue and friendship cannot be founded on abstract principles or formal procedures; rather, as the neo-Aristotelians insist, they can only be nurtured in concrete communities and modeled by particular individuals against the background of particular narratives. This is precisely what a civil religion does. But many of the neo-Aristotelians also have neo-sectarian leanings. They worry that civic engagement will stain or undermine the religious community. In Hauerwas’ well-known phrase, the job of the church is to be the church and not to be the state. A politically-engaged church, he implies, cannot be a narratively-authentic church because it must compromise its first principles for the sake of political expediency. The fatal flaw in this position is the assumption that an agreement on principles of political justice can only be founded on an agreement on foundational principles of justice. This is not the case. As John Rawls has famously shown, and as Jacques Maritain (Maritain and Anson 1943) showed long before him, divergence concerning first principles of justice does not preclude convergence on political principles of justice, such as human rights or social solidarity. One can agree about the need for health care reform without agreeing on the reasons why it is just or necessary. The same might be said about civic narratives. One can embrace the American creed for different reasons both secular and sacred: natural law (Murray 1960), Kantian ethics (Ackerman 1991), covenant theology (Bellah 1992), Deweyan pragmatism (Rorty 1998) and so on.

Of course, even if one agrees that something like a civil religion might be desirable, one might still worry that it is unrealistic, that it is better to be content with a half portion. And there are plenty of reasons to be pessimistic about its prospects. Hedonistic individualism and capitalist consumerism on the one hand.
Unreflecting jingoism and uncompromising fundamentalism on the others. Not to mention cynical elites who stoke both to their own ends. Shouldn’t we be more realistic? And less hopeful? Perhaps.

But as Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us, there is something unrealistic about a certain kind of realism, a realism that denies the efficacy — and indeed the realism — of hope (Niebuhr 1960). Because hope does sometimes win out. Not always, not often, but sometimes. It won in 1620, 1776, 1787, 1864, 1934 and 1964. Perhaps it will win out again in 2008, 2010 and 2012. Hope must always be tempered by realism, of course. That is clear. But realism without hope is not realism but fatalism. Aquinas taught us that hope is a theological virtue. Obama taught us that it is a civic virtue as well.

References


Discusses on the aspects of a well-institutionalized civil religion in the U.S. Needs for an equal care and respect for its seriousness and integrity, just like with other religion; Speech of former U.S. president
and the late John F. Kennedy that serves as a clue that civil religion really exist; Consideration to the
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