



Civil Religion and A Republic of Conscience

The observance of Independence Day for the United States on July 4th should include renewed thinking and fresh affirmation of the ideals associated with its founding. Although it took two centuries and a devastating civil war to include all citizens in the vision and application of these founding ideals, their inspiring value has provided a dynamic source of revolutionary change throughout the world since 1776. Thus, a deep sadness fills the observer of contemporary American politics. The destructive polarization of politics, the petty focus on trivial “gotcha” games and most tragically, the loss of awareness of founding ideals leaves little hope that the common good of all Americans, indeed of all mankind, will be the basis of 21st century politics. The news of how the rich are getting richer and how billionaires use their billions to prevail in politics does not hearten the millions who are struggling to survive financially and psychologically.

Missing from contemporary politics is a conscious invocation of principles, normative civil goals and an insistence on including a concept of public value in the determination of public policy. Such sources of ethical political thinking have been called a civil religion. According to Professor Robert Bellah who has written extensively on the topic, a civil religion is reflected in conscious citizen vigilance, understanding of political principles and sacrificial action in order “to subordinate the nation to ethical principles that both infuse it and transcend it in terms of which it (and its political life) should be judged.” Civil religion may include a symbolic or historical narrative of transcendent principles or ideals taught to its citizens and expressed through observance of day-to-day social norms and civil laws. Thereby, an aspect of what is thought to be sacred may influence a secular world view, and a transcendent, timeless and universal perspective may penetrate the immanent tumult of politics.

In democratic societies, civil religions can reflect the principles of a republic of conscience and stimulate opportunities in the civic sphere to open dialogue that helps awaken our conscience. Thereby, we are motivated to extend basic human rights for ourselves and others and to attempt to correct social injustice through political action, while preserving a commitment that exemplifies a fundamental spirit of civic community through honoring its rules, codes, and laws. A civil religion thus provides a source of legitimacy for the authority of civil

government and encourages political thinking shaped by transcendent ends and myths. Pursuit of a common good in expanding spheres of participation becomes the mark of real citizenship.

An active civil religion in societies with deeper and more extended forms of democracy can reduce the influence of coercive civil imposition of a dominant ideology which favors one elite group and discourages or suppresses a more universal orientation of citizenship arising from self-definition and free choice. For example, the struggle for the separation of church and state in many nations came after the imposition of one religion and its application to public policy uniformly on its population in a way that suppressed others' freedoms and interfered with their self-chosen beliefs. Different nations have reconciled the claims of religion and civil government with varying narratives, such as enabling political parties named "Christian Democrats" to participate as a political movement.

It is possible that the secular dominance of a political ideology with a dictatorial, totalitarian government or a monarchy can be challenged by a revolutionary movement that results in a new narrative of a civil religion promoting freedoms by protecting against intrusion. This revolution can be aided by traditional or sacred symbols or scriptures that bring citizens together in a unity rooted in shared or common memories of the social values they have inherited. In addition, a civil religion is important for imagining real possibilities for extending human and ecological rights into the economic sphere through deliberate and inclusive democratic action. Thus, unjust, crony corporate capitalism and militarism might be transmuted into more just and egalitarian systems of markets that meet diverse social and ecological needs.

However, a potent and dynamic civil religion depends on how attuned citizens are to their "conscience", to their highest principles, to their willingness to sacrifice, and to effectively reason, with facts and common sense and to protect the ideals and principles of their civil religion. Too often societies, including democratic societies, have used civil government machinery to exclude and imprison minorities. Thus, to sustain civil religion, societies need *heroes* as exemplars of higher ideals to articulate, inspire and instantiate a thread of the ideals of a civil religion. Wise and disinterested legislators and expert public officials to enact laws and engage in ongoing self-correction of their decisions are also needed. We can be inspired by different societies, admire their heroes and cultural excellences, learn from their public values and

policies, while becoming members of an emergent global civil religion based on many civil religions stressing global ethics, human rights, shared prosperity and ecological justice. Thus, civil religion can become a universal influence in a world shaped by global interdependence.

Maurice Bisheff

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