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Is That You Robert Bellah? Is This Me?: A Reexamination of Civil Religion and Its Successors

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“I chose the constitution and I always will.”

— Michael Pence

Introduction

Foundational to United States history is a unifying morality which has often motivated the people to act on what they believe to be their patriotic duty. Scholar Robert Bellah calls it civil religion, and over the years, Bellah and his heirs have elaborated upon this tradition. Their views on it vary, with even Bellah himself losing faith in the potency of civil religion in the modern day. What exactly is this American religion which has invited such scrutiny and debate? Who are the stewards of its traditions, its rituals, its tenets? Does it remain how Bellah originally conceived of it, rooted in Judeo-Christianity and rife with real life symbology? Or has it become a shadow of itself, lingering in the crumbling, once hallowed halls of institutions eaten away by greed. It is most likely that civil religion has become diluted into American society—retaining certain qualities whilst shedding others. Civil religion has embraced a wider range of influence and lives now in the collective consciousness of the American people.

Personal Opinion

When I initially read about civil religion in Robert Bellah’s *Civil Religion in America*, I was struck by how little the preeminence of Christianity in our country seemed to be taken into account. Although America’s religious diversity has increased since the country’s founding, Christianity still exerts a dominant influence in society.

Throughout his essay, Bellah emphasizes the religious neutrality of American politics, referencing important political speeches, rituals, and writings. Regarding John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech, he claims Kennedy "did not refer to any religion in particular,"¹ and even with his introduction of the concept of civil religion, he emphasizes the impact of "religion"² instead of specifically Judeo-Christianity, which is his main source to draw upon in the rest of the essay. A majority of America belongs to some sect of Christianity, as does a majority of Congress and Senate. With such a Christian presence in American life and politics, how could religious references to God allude to anyone except the Biblical one? With so many Christian politicians leaning on their religious moral education to inform their decision making, how could legislative action not reflect Christian values?

Though Bellah makes a compelling case, the reality is that his conception of American civil religion remains deeply rooted in Judeo-Christianity. The choice to label this concept as being influenced by all religions, instead of concentrating on the Judeo-Christianity gave me reason to pause. I found myself interested in this idea of a unifying morality which arose from being American. Yet I also found myself at odds with how it was labeled as being so inclusive. By looking to Bellah's heirs and the evolution of civil religion, I have found what I believe to be a more inclusive sect of this tradition.

Meet Our Heir and Disciple

Jeffery Alexander, a proclaimed heir to Bellah, deviates from the original outline of civil religion when it comes to the influence of Judeo-Christianity on the tradition. As Alexander

¹ Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", *Daedalus*, Vol. 117, No. 3, (Summer, 1988), 99.

² Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", 100.

explains: Bellah's original text that conceptualized civil religion "is about a Christian symbolism in the otherwise secular thought of the United States,"³ which he found "limited"⁴ the ways one could explore a collective American conscience. Where the original theory can underestimate⁵ the dominance of Christianity in American society in an effort to establish something with a much wider range of influence, Alexander chose to forgo the label of religion altogether. In its place arises the civil sphere. While religion is still a source, it has since become a smaller part of a whole. He posits that the literature, media, and events that shape this country's history make up the civil sphere from which the unifying morality and identity of being American springs from.

The literature which makes up the sacred canon of America is not only the Bible or the Torah in Alexander's eyes. In the modern day civil sphere, what has become most sacred are foundational documents like the Constitution.⁶ He points to the Watergate hearings as his moment of realization when it comes to the sacralization of this particular document. Alexander calls the trial "a secular ritual"⁷ during which senators accused Richard Nixon of having "poured dirt over this great thing," in reference to the values of the Constitution "rooted in the heart of ... democratic society"⁸. If the Bible's stories, scriptures, and prophecies provide an instructional framework of moral conduct on how to be a good Christian, then the Constitution's outline of values, laws, and rights provide the instructional framework of moral conduct on how to be a good American. Nixon's Watergate scandal was a blatant violation of the established instructional framework. It follows that he was met with swift judgment and damnation during his trials by the civil sphere: composed of good Americans who he betrayed with his violation.

³ Gordon Lynch and Ruth Sheldon, "The Sociology of the Sacred: A Conversation With Jeffrey Alexander", *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 14, (2013), 6.

⁴ Lynch and Sheldon, "The Sociology of the Sacred: A Conversation With Jeffrey Alexander", 7.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lynch and Sheldon, "The Sociology of the Sacred: A Conversation With Jeffrey Alexander", 5.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Just as it is with religion, “We, the People,”⁹ may interpret and practice the instructional framework differently, but ultimately, all adhere and call back to the same secular canon. The whistleblowers practicing their rights to free speech exposing politicians’ lies, the licensed students open-carrying on school campuses, and the radicals storming the Capitol Building to overthrow a wrongful government are all, in their view, upholding the morals and practicing the duties that come with being American. However, these examples anomalously constitute both a more active participation in the civil sphere and a more individual practice of rights. In general, Alexander’s civil sphere is more passive than its ideological predecessor due to the wider range of sources it draws upon to create it. Compared to the Judeo-Christian allusions of civil religion, these references feel less overt because they simply exist everywhere, creating the fabric of American identity. Therefore the morals and duties supported by it are also less intentionally practiced. Awareness of the morals and duties lie dormant until their sacrality is violated, as only then do most citizens feel the need to reflect upon them. While individual engagement with the instructional framework is important, the civil sphere is defined predominantly by its collectivist nature. What then unites us all in the public forum of the civil sphere? Alexander argues osmosis of the cultural consciousness seen within the morals of religion, stories, and imagination can do this, but he claims the most powerful binder is cultural trauma.

Culturally Trauma Bonding

There are events in American history which have resulted in “acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity.”¹⁰ The Watergate scandal, 9/11, and

⁹ In quotes in reference to the Constitution.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Alexander, et. al., “Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity” (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 10.

January 6th all qualify as causes for the formation of cultural trauma. Their entry into the institutional arenas identified by Alexander, such as mass media and state bureaucracy, have elicited the very reactions he suggests might be generated.¹¹ The aftermath of events such as these leave people feeling as though the country has been irrevocably altered in a way which extends past that of political upheaval or policy change. The entire zeitgeist of the nation is transformed. Cultural trauma inflicts lasting damage unto the American civil sphere, as well as the identity it informs, calling into question how sound the framework which supports our unifying morality really is.

“[T]wo years of Watergate showed how even the most powerful institutional figures are never entirely in control of the sacred”¹², as the representative public wrested away Nixon’s titles and ousted him from the White House. Although justice was won for the morals of the civil sphere, the American people never again trusted the government like it had in previously. Watergate was just the punctuating period in a decades-long course of government deception. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 terrified the country because the idea of American infallibility was challenged—in an instant, this identity was stolen. Shadowed by fear, America actually sacrificed morality for the feeling of safety. Islamophobia rose amongst the populace, the creation of the TSA and its purportedly random Secondary Security Screening Selection seemed to feed into it. Meanwhile, the government allocated an unrestricted amount of money towards the “War on Terror”. At the time, our morals and duties translated to retribution and protecting the American people; two decades later, we are forced to ask if the ends justify the means, if 4.5 million deaths was a fair price for it all. January 6th sparked discussion regarding Donald Trump, who fits neatly into the symbolic biblical archetypes¹³ of Bellah’s American civil religion—to

¹¹ Jeffrey Alexander, et. al., “Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity”, 15-24.

¹² Lynch and Sheldon, “The Sociology of the Sacred: A Conversation With Jeffrey Alexander”, 5.

¹³ Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, 115.

some a martyred prophet and to others the antichrist. Some would use Trump's actions to make a point about the civil religious tradition yet, by comparison, Mike Pence's refusal of Trump's order to overturn the election serves as the most salient proof for the continued existence of civil religion, and more fittingly, the civil sphere. Pence's resolution that he "chose the Constitution and...always will,"¹⁴ evokes not only the sacredness of a foundational document, but also its contribution to an instructional framework of moral conduct. America's history is pockmarked by cataclysmic changes whose significance is apparent today, but once threatened to tear our country asunder. Culturally traumatic events and eras of civil unrest, are essential in "breaking the envelope of the mundane," but Alexander claims they should not be thought of as "creating something entirely new"¹⁵. Creation is delegated to conversations held in the court of public opinion. Despite all the differences in ideas presented, reevaluation of the morality and duty which makes up the American identity, consistently unites the country in conversation, if nothing else. Perhaps then, the constant reexamination of identity is just as much a part of our duty, a part of our canon, and a part of our civil sphere, as any of our violated sacred values, laws, and rights are. To be American, is to be constantly challenged and born anew.

Those Who Have Lost Faith

It is actually Bellah of all people who have become doubtful about the continued existence of civil religion in America. He and other scholars have noted the rise of consumerism and individualism as the leading causes contributing to the fall of cultural unity in America.

¹⁴ Michael Pence, "Iowa Campaign Launch" (Speech, Iowa, June 7, 2023), The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2023/jun/07/republican-candidates-pence-trump-president-2024-politics-live-updates>.

¹⁵ Lynch and Sheldon, "The Sociology of the Sacred: A Conversation With Jeffrey Alexander", 10.

Around ten years after his initial publishing of *Civil Religion in America*, Bellah wrote an essay questioning the tradition's continued viability: *Is There a Common American Culture?*. He states that "the enormous pressure of the market economy, and the mass media and mass education oriented to it, obliterate the genuine heritage of Anglo-American, European, African, and Asian culture with equal thoroughness."¹⁶ The culture inherited and embraced by the modern American melting pot is no longer that of their heritage, it is instead what is produced and aired on television and social media.¹⁷ The educational system is focused on teaching American history, culture, and values; it lacks teaching which thoroughly educates on that which is non-American. Meanwhile, children largely undergo an American socialization as they learn from each other. The unique cultures they bring have been jettisoned in favor of assimilation. Bellah also identifies how the importance of the individual person, which is something rooted in Christianity threatens to overtake any collectivist or cultural bonds the people of this country may hold in today's society. America's "capacity to imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together" is diminishing as the "validation of the sacredness of the individual person"¹⁸ grows. This religious individualism ties in directly with economic individualism, which irreparably destroys solidarity amongst the American people. Smaller subcultures, who group together based on heritage or religion, are disappearing. They have been replaced by a monoculture of monetary drive, as well as the fervent individualism stemming from Christian religiosity. In the process, many of the positive moral influences of Judeo-Christianity have been drowned out. It is here, in the grave of civil religion, that ideals of unifying morality lie.

¹⁶ Robert Bellah, "Is There a Common American Culture?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Autumn, 1998), 617.

¹⁷ Robert Bellah, "Is There a Common American Culture?", 617.

¹⁸ Robert Bellah, "Is There a Common American Culture?", 6

This sentiment is shared by the likes of Robert Putnam. His essay *Bowling Alone*, published around the same time as *Is There a Common American Culture?*, makes similar claims that the American societal mentality has become more focused on the individual and has led to the downfall of unity in the country. Putnam points to how more involved organizations such as churches, unions, and PTAs have seen a decrease in membership,¹⁹ whilst organizations like the Sierra Club, the National Organization for Women, and AARP, have increased.²⁰ Where the latter organizations fall short is that they do not necessarily bond their members through any required meetings, duties, or activities like the former organizations might ask of their participants. The main requirement for continued involvement, according to him, is monetary: “writing a check for dues”.²¹ Putnam also invalidates the growth and attendance of small, emotional, support groups, by pointing out how they are more focused on “[providing] occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others”, and “[assert] only the weakest of obligations”.²² In his view, these members may have joined because they all have the same hobbies or wants, but they lack the same shared goals and ideals which would galvanize them to band together, take action, and move as one. As a result, there may be membership, but the camaraderie and social interaction which might lead to cultural unity is nowhere to be found. The idea that social capital has declined as a result of people being more interested in joining organizations tailored to their individual hobbies, rather than joining for the improvement of a community or to be a part of a team is one that goes hand in hand with Bellah’s reasoning for the deterioration of civil religion.

It is worth mentioning that Bellah and Putnam both seem to avoid accusing capitalism to be the culprit behind the slow death of civil religion. They point instead to symptoms of

¹⁹ Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” *Journal of Democracy*, (1995), 4-5.

²⁰ Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone”, 5.

²¹ Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone”, 6.

²² Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone”, 6-7.

capitalism: economic individualism,²³ the decline of unions, lower wages, and the destruction of local businesses.²⁴ However much these terms have all been alluded to, they never quite strike upon the label of capitalism itself.

Revival

While Bellah and Putnam make compelling arguments regarding the decline of civil religion and the unifying morality that comes with it, there is also proof against them. Bellah mentions how in a seminar divided almost equally into quarters by race, the students spoke to each other with “remarkable”²⁵ ease. Their differing Asian, Hispanic, African, and Anglo American backgrounds did not take precedence over their concerns about the state and market, or their more “immediate experience of coping with a vast state university, [and] its demands and its incoherence.”²⁶

His anecdotal recounting reveals that ultimately, in a group, a unifying morality will still arise. The students’ concerns regarding the state and market as young adults, nervous to enter the job market or buy a house, are the same as a vast majority of modern Americans. These students are voicing their opinion to the public forum of the civil sphere—creating discourse to inform the unifying moral opinion about these issues. The vast state university might have made these students feel unseen, overworked, and swindled. Although their complaints may stem from the fact that their individual concerns have not been properly addressed, it is the ideal that all

²³ Robert Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?”, 622.

²⁴ Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone”, 6-7.

²⁵ Robert Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?”, 615.

²⁶ Ibid.

students be treated equally which will lead them to commiseration, shared conversation, and possible action.

The individualism which Bellah claims will destroy moral unity can also drive change. The prevailing ideology of many movements today is that all voices and stories deserve to be heard—a sentiment which values the sacredness of the individual—²⁷ in order to bolster the potency of their messaging. Groups such as Black Lives Matter, pro-choice advocacy, and the Me Too movement are often full of people coming forward to tell their individual experiences of oppression in institutions rigged against them. Centering these accounts as a part of the movements' morality not only validates the individualistic need for personal empowerment, it also mitigates ego.²⁸ How could one be self important when there are others who are hurting in the same way, speaking out in solidarity, asking for support? How could one put themselves first knowing others will continue to be hurt by “profit principle”²⁹ driven institutions that do not care for morals? How could one be singular when the movement stands stronger as one? The members of these movements value each other's individual input; it builds support networks, and reveals moral deficiencies that must be rectified. Instances of individualism here add to the unifying morality of the civil sphere.

Conclusion

The civil sphere, as Alexander conceptualized it, has only grown stronger in the modern day. The sources the sphere draws upon to inform a unifying morality in America remain within documents such as the Constitution, but have also expanded to include literature, religion, and

²⁷ Robert Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?”, 620.

²⁸ Robert Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?”, 623.

²⁹ Robert Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?”, 624.

culturally traumatic events. Thus the civil sphere's moral influence has become more passive in its existence, rising to the forefront of conversation when something happens to violate the previously established tenets of being a good American and call for a reevaluation.

Those who no longer see the validity of civil religion, or its successor, the civil sphere, would have to ask if their opinions still hold true in recent years. Activist movements based on the individual experiences of women, the COVID-19 pandemic, and January 6th have all been times of reckoning for America. But through either individual or collective actions of solidarity against oppression, sacrifice in hardship, and adherence to moral ideals facing immense pressure, the American people have proven themselves strong in moral character.

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