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**THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SQUARE:
CHRISTIANITY, CIVIL RELIGION, AND THE ENDURING
CONTRIBUTION OF RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS**

It is a rather daunting task to address the place of religion in American public life. The question is so rich, so complex, and often so divisive, even contentious. It brings together the two things that American folk wisdom teaches us, from a very early age, that we should not discuss in polite company: religion and politics.

And indeed, one widely held, and widely respected, view of the matter is that one should say as little as possible in public about either religion or politics. While there are times when this is good advice, and represents the acme of prudence, it will hardly do for us as a general principle. A form of “civility” that is achieved only by our remaining studiously silent about the things that matter to us most, and are most fundamental to the health of our civil society, is not really civility, but merely an uneasy and impoverished social peace. Nor is this the kind of society that the American Constitutional order envisioned. The first item in our Bill of Rights makes it clear that the Framers placed religion in a very high place—not only as the first and most fundamental of our freedoms, but as a mental and moral and social right whose “free exercise” we also are promised.

The question can be made a little more manageable, too, by our making some distinctions. One can, to begin with, talk about the “place” of religion either descriptively or prescriptively, as the place religion occupies or as the place it ought to occupy. The two are impossible to separate, of course, and I will do some linking of them in what follows. But the distinction is a useful one to make at the outset.

Also, I have assumed in what follows that we are speaking of an American public square, although the title does not specify that. As you'll see, I am a typical historian in regarding these questions as being highly context-sensitive in character. I will have nothing to say about, for example, the issue of Turkish women being allowed to wear head coverings in public, or French women being proscribed from doing so. And I find it very difficult to talk about the particular texture of American religious life, and our view of religious liberty in this country, without taking into account certain highly particular aspects of American history and society.

Which brings one to a last distinction, revolving around the place of Christianity in one's thinking. One can talk about the "place" of religion in American life from the standpoint of an American citizen, irrespective of one's belief or unbelief. Or one can talk about the place of religion in American life specifically from the standpoint of a Christian believer. The two are not necessarily the same. Nor are they necessarily at odds. And there is a wide variety of points of view within each perspective. But it is useful to think about them separately, and sometimes to employ different language to do so.

What I will do in what follows is to try, in a very rough way, to do first the one, then the other. I should like first to address myself in a general and detached way to the phenomenon of religion in public, using the concept of "civil religion" to illuminate the way. Then I will take a look at the latter, how to think Christianly about the role of one's own faith in the public square, viewing the matter through a consideration of the career of the man who was mainly behind the emergence of the term "public square" in our discourse about these matters: the late Richard John Neuhaus. Then, finally, we can consider how the two different perspectives may combine, or clash.

I'll begin by thinking back to the situation approximately nine years ago. In the immediate wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Americans suddenly found themselves faced with an unexpected choice between radically different perspectives on the proper place of religion in modern Western society. The alternative perspectives were not new. But the urgency with which they were felt, and the intensity with which they were articulated, marked a dramatic departure. Coming at a moment when Americans had been gradually rethinking many settled precedents regarding religion and public life, it seemed to give a sharper edge to the questions being asked.

For many intelligent observers, there was only one logical conclusion to be drawn from these horrifyingly destructive acts, perpetrated by fanatically committed adherents to a militant and demanding form of Islam: that all religions, and particularly the great monotheisms, constitute an ever-present menace to the peace, order, and liberty of Western civil life. Far from embracing the then-growing sentiment that the United States government should be willing to grant religion a greater

role in public life, such observers took 9/11 as clear evidence of just how serious a mistake this would be. The events of 9/11 seemed to confirm their contention that religion is incorrigibly toxic, and that it breeds irrationality, demonization of others, irreconcilable division, and implacable conflict. If we learned nothing else from 9/11, in this view, we should at least have relearned the hard lessons that the West learned in its own bloody religious wars at the dawn of the modern age. The essential character of the modern West, and its greatest achievement, is its tolerant secularism. To settle for anything less is to court disaster. If there still has to be a vestigial presence of religion here and there in the world, let it be kept private and kept on a short leash. Is not Islamist terror the ultimate example of a “faith-based initiative”? How many more examples did we need?

To be sure, most of those who put forward this position were predisposed to do so. They found in 9/11 a pretext for restating settled views, rather than a catalyst for forming fresh ones. More importantly, though, theirs was far from being the only response to 9/11, and nowhere near being the dominant one. Many other Americans had a completely opposite response, feeling that such a heinous and frighteningly nihilistic act, so far beyond the usual psychological categories, could only be explained by resort to an older, pre-secular vocabulary, one that included the numinous concept of “evil.” There were earnest post 9/11 efforts, such as the philosopher Susan Neiman’s thoughtful book *Evil in Modern Thought*, to appropriate the concept for secular use, independent of its religious roots.¹ But such efforts have been largely unconvincing. If 9/11 was taken by some as an indictment of the religious mind’s fanatical tendencies, it was taken with equal justification by others as an illustration of the secular mind’s explanatory poverty. If there was incorrigible fault to be found, it was less in the structure of the world’s great monotheisms than in the labyrinth of the human heart—a fault about which those religions, particularly Christianity, have always had a great deal to say.

Even among those willing to invoke the concept of evil in its proper religious habitat, however, there was disagreement. A handful of prominent evangelical Christian leaders, notably Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, were unable to resist comparing the falling towers of lower Manhattan to the Biblical towers of Babel, and saw in the 9/11 attacks God’s judgment upon the moral and social evils of contemporary America, and the withdrawal of His favor and protection.² In that sense, they were the mirror opposites of their foes, seizing on 9/11 as a pretext for re-proclaiming the toxicity of American secularism. They were arguing for a separation of religious identity and national identity, from a position mainly concerned to preserve the integrity of religion.

¹ S. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton 2002.

² Falwell and Robertson made their statements on Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network television show, “The 700 Club,” on September 13, 2001. Their discussion was covered the following day by J. F. Harris of the “Washington Post” in “God Gave Us ‘What We Deserve’, Falwell Says,” p. C03, also found at www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A28620-2001Sep14.

But their view was not typical, and in fact, was so widely regarded as reckless and ill-considered. The more common public reaction was something much simpler and more primal. Millions of Americans went to church, searching there for reassurance, for comfort, for solace, for strength, and for some semblance of redemptive meaning in the act of sharing their grief and confusion in the presence of the transcendent. Both inside and outside the churches, in windows and on labels, American flags were suddenly everywhere in evidence, and the strains of “God Bless America” seemed everywhere to be wafting through the air, along with other patriotic songs that praised America while soliciting the blessings of the Deity. The pure secularists and the pure religionists were the exceptions in this phenomenon. For most Americans, it was unthinkable that the comforts of their religious heritage and the well-being of their nation could be in any fundamental way at odds with one another. Hence it can be said that 9/11 produced a great revitalization, for a time, of the American civil religion, that strain of American piety that bestows many of the elements of religious sentiment and faith upon the fundamental political and social institutions of the United States.

Such a tendency to conflate the realms of the religious and the political has hardly been unique to American life and history. Indeed, the achievement of a stable relationship between the two constitutes one of the perennial tasks of social existence. But in the West, the immense historical influence of Christianity has had a lot to say about the particular way the two have interacted over the centuries. From its inception, the Christian faith insisted upon separating the claims of Caesar and the claims of God—recognizing the legitimacy of both, though placing loyalty to God above loyalty to the state. The Christian was to be in the world but not of the world, living as a responsible and law-abiding citizen in the City of Man while reserving his ultimate loyalty for the City of God. Such a separation and hierarchy of loyalties, which sundered the unity that was characteristic of the classical world, had the effect of marking out a distinctively secular realm, although at the same time confining its claims.

For Americans, this dualism has often manifested itself as an even more decisive commitment to something called “the separation of Church and State,” a slogan that is taken by many to be the cardinal principle governing American politics and religion.³ Yet the persistence of an energetic American civil religion, and of other instances in which the boundaries between the two becomes blurred, suggests that the matter is not nearly so simple as that. There is, and always has been, considerable room in the American experiment for the conjunction of religion and state. This is a proposition that committed religious believers and committed secularists alike find deeply worrisome—and understandably so, since it carries with it

³ P. Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, Cambridge MA 2002.

the risk that each of the respective realms can be contaminated by the presence of its opposite number. But it is futile to imagine that the proper boundaries between religion and politics can be fixed once and for all, in all times and cultures, separated by an abstract fiat. Instead, their relationship evolves out of a process of constant negotiation and renegotiation, responsive to the changing needs of the culture and the moment. It is, to repeat the term I used before, highly context-sensitive.

Experience suggests, however, that we would be well advised to steer between two equally dangerous extremes, which can serve as negative landmarks in our deliberations about the proper relationship between American religion and the American nation-state. First, we should avoid total identification of the two, which would in practice likely mean the complete domination of one by the other—a theocratic or ideological totalitarianism in which religious believers completely subordinated themselves to the apparatus of the state, or vice versa. But second, and equally important, we should not aspire to a total segregation of the two, which would in practice bring about unhealthy estrangement between and among Americans, leading in turn to extreme forms of sectarianism, otherworldliness, cultural separatism, and gnosticism, a state of affairs in which religious believers will regard the state with pure antagonism, or vice versa. Religion and the nation are inevitably entwined, and some degree of entwining is a good thing. After all, the self-regulative pluralism of American culture cannot work without the ballast of certain elements of deep commonality. But just how much, and when and why, are hard questions to answer categorically.

Let's take a closer look at the concept of "civil religion."⁴ This is admittedly very much a scholar's term, rather than a term arising out of general parlance, and its use seems to be restricted mainly to anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and historians and the like, even though it describes a phenomenon that has existed ever since the first organized human communities. It is also a somewhat imprecise term, which can mean several things at once. Civil religion is a means of investing a particular set of political/social arrangements with an aura of the sacred, thereby elevating their stature and enhancing their stability. It can serve as a point of reference for the shared faith of the entire state or nation, focusing on the most generalized and widely held beliefs about the history and destiny of that state or nation. As such, it provides much of the social glue that binds together a society through well-established symbols, rituals, celebrations, places, and values, supplying the society with an overarching sense of spiritual unity—a sacred canopy, in

⁴ An excellent introduction to current thinking on the subject is *Civil Religion in Political Thought: Its Perennial Questions and Enduring Relevance in North America*, ed. J. von Heyking, Washington 2010. Although the term "civil religion" generally traces back to Rousseau, its modern usage is grounded in the work of Emile Durkheim; see notably his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. C. Cosman, New York 2001.

Peter Berger's words—and a focal point for shared memories of struggle and survival.⁵ It can sometimes take on some of the spontaneous characteristics of a folk religion, but it also can be highly artificial and self-consciously wrought. Although it borrows extensively from the society's dominant religious tradition, it is not itself a highly particularized religion, but instead a somewhat more blandly inclusive one, into whose highly general stories and propositions those of various faiths can read and project what they wish. It is, so to speak, a highest common denominator.

The phenomenon of civil religion extends back at least to classical antiquity, to the local gods of the Greek city-state, the civil theology of Plato, and to the Romans' state cult, which made the emperor into an object of worship himself. But the term itself appears in recognizably modern form in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*, where it was put forward as a means of cementing the people's allegiances to their polity.⁶ Rousseau recognized the historic role of religious sentiment in underwriting the legitimacy of regimes and strengthening citizen's bonds to the state and their willingness to sacrifice for the general good. He deplored the influence of Christianity in this regard, however, precisely because of the way that it divided citizens' loyalties, causing them to neglect worldly concerns in favor of spiritual ones. Christians made poor soldiers, because they were more willing to die than to fight.

Rousseau's solution was the self-conscious replacement of Christianity with "a purely civil profession of faith, of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogma, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen and faithful subject." Since it was impossible to have a cohesive civil government without some kind of religion, and since (as he believed) Christianity is inherently counterproductive to or subversive of sound civil government, he thought the state should impose its own custom-tailored religion, which provides a frankly utilitarian function. That civil religion should be kept as simple as possible, with only a few, mainly positive beliefs: the existence and power of God, the afterlife, the reality of reward or punishment, etc., and only one negative dogma, the proscribing of intolerance. Citizens would still be permitted to have their own peculiar beliefs regarding metaphysical things, so long as such opinions were of no worldly consequence. But "whosoever dares to say, 'Outside the Church no salvation,'" Rousseau sternly declared, "ought to be driven from the State."

Needless to say, such a nakedly manipulative approach to the problem of socially binding beliefs, and such dismissiveness toward the commanding truths of Christianity and other older faiths, has not attracted universal approval, in Rousseau's day or since. Nor has the general conception of civil religion. It is not hard to see why. One of the most powerful and enduring critiques came some two centuries later, from the pen of the American scholar Will Herberg, whose classic 1955 study *Protestant Catholic Jew* concluded with a searing indictment of what he called

⁵ P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Toward a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Garden City 1967.

⁶ J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, transl. C. Betts, New York 2009, p. 158–168.

the “civic” religion of “Americanism.” Such religion had lost every smidgen of its prophetic edge; instead, it had become “the sanctification of the society and culture of which it is the reflection.” The Jewish and Christian traditions had “always regarded such religion as incurable idolatrous,” because it “validates culture and society, without in any sense bringing them under judgment.” Such religion no longer comes to prod the indolent, afflict the comfortable, and hold the mirror up to our sinful and corrupt ways. Instead, it “comes to serve as a spiritual reinforcement of national self-righteousness.” It was the handmaiden of national arrogance and moral complacency.⁷

But civil religion also had its defenders. One of them, the sociologist Robert N. Bellah, put the term on the intellectual map, arguing in an influential 1967 article called “Civil Religion in America” that the complaint of Herberg and others about this generalized and self-celebratory religion of The American Way of Life was not the whole story.⁸ The American civil religion was, he asserted, something far deeper and more worthy of respectful study, a body of symbols and beliefs that was not merely a watered down Christianity, but possessed a “seriousness and integrity” of its own. Beginning with an examination of references to God in John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, Bellah detected in the American civil-religious tradition a durable and morally challenging theme: “the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God’s will on earth.” Hence Bellah took a much more positive view of that tradition, though not denying its potential pitfalls. Against the critics, he argued that “the civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or ... revealed through the experience of the American people.” It provides a higher standard against which the nation could be held accountable.

For Bellah and others, the deepest source of the American civil religion is the Puritan-derived notion of America as a New Israel, a covenanted people with a divine mandate to restore the purity of early apostolic church, and thus serve as a godly model for the restoration of the world. John Winthrop’s famous 1630 sermon to his fellow settlers of Massachusetts Bay, in which he envisioned their “plantation” as “city upon a hill,” is the locus classicus for this idea of American chosenness. It was only natural that inhabitants with such a strong sense of historical destiny would eventually come to see themselves, and their nation, as collective bearers of a world-historical mission. What is more surprising, however, was how persistent that self-understanding of America as the Redeemer Nation would prove to be, and how easily it incorporated the secular ideas of the Declaration of Independence

⁷ W. Herberg, *Protestant Catholic Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Garden City 1960, p. 254–272.

⁸ R. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, “Dædalus” 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Winter), p. 1–21.

and the language of liberty into its portfolio. The same mix of convictions can be found animating the rhetoric of the American Revolution, the vision of Manifest Destiny, the crusading sentiments of antebellum abolitionists, the benevolent imperialism of fin-de-siècle apostles of Christian civilization, and the fervent idealism of President Woodrow Wilson at the time of the First World War. No one expressed the idea more directly, however, than Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana, who told the United States Senate, in the wake of the Spanish-American War, that “God has marked us as His chosen people, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world.”⁹

The American civil religion also has its sacred scriptures, such as the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, the Pledge of Allegiance. It has its great narratives of struggle, from the suffering of George Washington’s troops at Valley Forge to the gritty valor of Jeremiah Denton in Hanoi, to the tangled wreckage of Ground Zero. It has its special ceremonial and memorial occasions, such as the Fourth of July, Veterans Day, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Martin Luther King Day. It has its temples and shrines and holy sites, such as the Lincoln Memorial and other monuments, the National Mall, the Capitol, the White House, Arlington National Cemetery, the great Civil War battlefields, and great natural landmarks such as the Grand Canyon. It has its sacred objects, notably the national flag. It has its organizations, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Boy Scouts. And it has its dramatis personae, chief among them being its military heroes and the long succession of Presidents. Its telltale marks can be found in the frequent resort to the imagery of the Bible and reference to God and Providence in speeches and public documents, and in the inclusion of God’s name in the national motto (“In God We Trust”), on all currency, in the patriotic songs found in most church hymnals.

The references to God have always been nonspecific, however. From the very beginnings of the nation’s history, the nation’s civil-religious discourse was carefully calibrated to provide a meeting ground for both the Christian and Enlightenment elements in the thought of the Revolutionary generation. One can see this nonspecificity, for example, in the many references to the Deity in the presidential oratory of George Washington, which are still cited approvingly today as civil-religious texts. But there is no denying that civil-religious references to God have evolved and broadened even further since the Founding, from generic Protestant to Protestant-Catholic to Judeo-Christian to, in much of President George W. Bush’s rhetoric, Abrahamic and even monotheistic in general. But what has not changed is the fact that such references still always convey a strong sense of God’s providence, His blessing on the land, and of the Nation’s consequent responsibility to serve as a light unto the nations.

⁹ A. Beveridge, *In Support of an American Empire*, a speech delivered to U.S. Senate on January 9, 1900, which can be found at *Congressional Record*, 56th Cong., 1st Session, Vol. 33, p. 705, 711.

Every President feels obliged to embrace these sentiments and expresses them in oratory. Some are more enthusiastic than others. Yet it is clear, given the force-field of tensions within which civil religion exists, that it has an inherently problematic relationship to the Christian faith, or to any other serious religious tradition. At its best, it provides a secular grounding for that faith, one that makes political institutions more responsive to calls for self-examination and repentance, as well as exertion and sacrifice for the common good. At its worst, it can provide divine warrant to unscrupulous acts, cheapen religious language, turn clergy into robed flunkies of the state and the culture, and bring the simulacrum of religious awe into places where it doesn't belong.

Even today, over nine years after the attacks, a substantial flow of visitors continues to make pilgrimages to the former World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan. It remains an intensely moving experience, even with all the wreckage cleared away and countless pieces of residual evidence removed or cleaned up. One still encounters open and intense expressions of grief and rage and incomprehension, in the other visitors and perhaps in oneself. It has become a shrine, a holy place, and has thereby become assimilated into the American civil religion, which is one reason why the controversy over the building of a large mosque in the immediate vicinity has been so heated. Yet for five years the site's single most moving sight, its most powerful and immediately understandable symbol, was the famous cross-shaped girders that were pulled out of the wreckage, and raised as a cross. (The so-called Ground Zero Cross was moved in 2006 from the WTC site to St. Peter's Church, which is directly across the street, and is to be returned to the site when a planned WTC museum is constructed there.)

What, one wonders, did that cross mean to the people viewing it, many of whom were not Christians and not even Americans? Was it a piece of nationalist kitsch, or a sentimental relic? Or was it a powerful witness to the redemptive value of suffering—and thereby, a signpost pointing toward the core of the Christian story? Or did it subordinate the core of the Christian story to a more generic religious meaning, one that in some sense traduced its Christian meaning? Or, most important for our purposes, did it subordinate the core of the Christian story to the American one, and thus traduce its Christian meaning?

In addressing ourselves to such questions today, it is nearly inevitable that we have recourse to the ideas and terminology of Richard John Neuhaus, especially as expressed in his 1984 book *The Naked Public Square*—one of the most significant books published in the United States during the past thirty years, and a book whose

momentum is far from being spent.¹⁰ That does not mean, however, that it has always been adequately understood. When a book achieves the influence and visibility of *The Naked Public Square*, and especially when its marvelously evocative title has become shorthand in the discourse of most educated people, it is likely to face certain problems in this regard. These may look like “nice problems to have,” but that does not mean they aren’t genuine problems. Often such books become fixed in the public mind in their most stereotypical or capsulized form, associated with arguments or perspectives that are but a poor reflection at best of what the books actually argue, and influencing public opinion in ways that their authors never quite intended.

Having a memorably evocative title is an especially mixed blessing, since it can too easily become a way of compressing a complex argument into a oversimplifying sound bite. This is good for notoriety but bad for understanding. The next thing you know, your argument is being passed around far and wide, but sealed inside the potent simplification, like a celebrity who is condemned to live trapped inside the artificial bubble of his fame.

All which is a way of making the point that those of us who actually read *The Naked Public Square* often find it is not the book that we think we “know about.” It is a far richer, subtler, more nuanced work, at once more bold and more tentative than its now-familiar tagline can convey, a book defying easy summation, with no easy party-line reassurances to offer any of the combatants in our culture wars. Its perspective is lofty and its intellectual reach embraces almost every significant theological or political issue relating to the relationship between church and state over the past 2,000 years. As a consequence, it often operates on a very high level of abstraction. And yet it also crackles with insight into the nitty-gritty particulars of American politics and culture. Its wide scope reach did not come at the expense of a secure grounding in the specificities of time and place.

It was not, to begin with, a simple critique of secularism per se. Neuhaus’s arc of reconsideration was longer and more complex than that. For him, the task at hand was not the dethronement of science or the overturning of the Enlightenment, let alone the political defeat of garden-variety American liberalism per se. Instead, the goal was and is the decoupling of liberal democracy from the iron logic of secularization, and the recovery of an insight that, he argued, was apparent to most of the Founders of the American republic, but which liberal political philosophers and theologians have tended to bury and secular Europe has lost—that the health of democratic institutions depends as much on the free and vibrant public presence of the biblical religions, and their culture-forming influence, as it does on the constraints placed on that religion’s ability to exercise direct political power.

A right understanding of Neuhaus’s argument needs to balance both sides of this formulation. In other words, he argued, our choices should not be restricted—and in the end cannot be restricted—to either the complete privatization of religion

¹⁰ R. J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, Grand Rapids 1984.

or the complete integration of church and state. The separation of church and state is not, and cannot be, absolute, and it does not—and cannot—require the segregation of religion from public life. This is a complicated argument, and its working-out in public policy is bound to be complicated too. But it is a direct challenge to the idea that a commitment to official secularism as national policy is the logical, nay inevitable, consequence of our commitment to liberal democracy. That, I believe, is the key thrust of this book, and it stands as much in need of explanation and articulation today as it did twenty-six years ago.

But the book does something more. *The Naked Public Square* argues that liberal democracy is inconceivable and unsustainable without a prior commitment to a certain conception of the human person—a belief that men and women are created in the image of God, that their dignity and their rights arise out of this condition, as endowments from their Creator, and therefore are not to be conferred upon them, or taken from them, by the state or by anything or anyone else, including themselves. I don't think there is any way of getting round the fact that this is a fundamentally religious assertion. But it is an assertion to whose consequences many secularists would readily assent, circa 1984, since it undergirds the notions of universal human rights and human dignity that they, too, cherish. One can agree to disagree about the metaphysics, so long as the physics work out right.

But much has changed in twenty-five years. We now find ourselves in an era in which the process of manufacturing human beings strictly for medical and quasi-medical uses is no longer a futuristic pipedream but an activity that our major universities are eager to associate themselves with, and in which the concept of “transhumanity” is now being raised as a topic for serious discussion. It may be that the common ground is rapidly eroding. Why indeed, unless we have some religious reason for doing so, should we accept the notion of inherent human dignity, let alone human rights and human equality? Why should we continue to accept the notion of inherent human limitations, such as the inevitability of death and debility, and forgo the enhancements of strength, agility, intelligence, sexual prowess, and other characteristics that might be entailed in comprehensively remaking ourselves as individuals, or even as a species? And who is to decide when a blob of protoplasm is to be considered a person, and when it is to be deemed a mere blob of protoplasm? Can “public reason” provide a resolution of these matters, without making invoking—or negating—specifically religious assertions?

There is real reason to doubt whether it can do that. And this may help explain why, in moving from *The Naked Public Square* to what would be his final book, Neuhaus seems to have moved past the deployment of secular ideas, and begins to place the American story in a more Biblical context. The change was striking.

To begin with, we are talking about a book called *American Babylon*.¹¹ And its subtitle is *Notes of a Christian Exile*. But what did these things mean? “Are we in Babylon?” Neuhaus asked. “Are we in exile?” The answer, it turns out, is yes and no. No, America is not the Babylon of the world’s nations. Indeed America still is for him, with all its decadence and disorder, a very great and exceptional nation, the source and bulwark of much that is good in the world, a nation whose story is “part of the story of the world,” a world that is, for all its fallenness, worthy of our love and allegiance.¹² Neuhaus loved Lincoln’s formulation, that America was an “almost-chosen” nation, a formulation that satisfied him far more than it satisfies me. But he liked it because it conveyed how there is much to support the idea that America has a special role to play in history, but that it is not the Biblical Israel, and certainly not the New Jerusalem.

In this sense, Neuhaus would say that yes, America Babylon is Babylon in the sense that all the world is Babylon. Or in Neuhaus’s own words:

America is Babylon not by comparison with other societies but by comparison with that radically new order sought by all who know love’s grief in refusing to settle for a community of less than truth and justice uncompromised.¹³

To make sense of such a situation, one can no longer look to secular social science, which knows nothing about what it means to dwell in the living reality of the not-yet. It cannot explain what Neuhaus declares to be his fundamental purpose in writing *American Babylon*: “to depict a way of being in a world that is not yet the world for which we hope. . . . exploring the possibilities and temptations one confronts as a citizen of a country that is prone to mistaking itself for the destination.”¹⁴ Instead, he urges that we look to the prophetic counsel that the prophet Jeremiah related to the exiles living in the original Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.¹⁵

If we understand it rightly, the promise of what is to be, the world to come, only intensifies our commitment to the earthly city. We are to serve it faithfully and effectively. Yet, as in the story of the Biblical Daniel, himself an exile in Babylon,

¹¹ R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile*, New York 2009.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 30.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 15–16.

we can be faithful and effective servants only up to a point, the point where our worship is being corrupted or misdirected and we are commanded to serve false gods. Then a parting of ways, perhaps even eventuating in the fiery furnace, is our only choice. But the story of Daniel just as clearly teaches that one does not declare such things lightly, and one must be willing to go a very long way in patience before making that choice. For those whose primary allegiance is to the City of God, every foreign country is a homeland, and every homeland is a foreign country. America is our homeland, and, as the prophet Jeremiah says, its welfare is our welfare. America is also—and history testifies that this is too easily forgotten—a foreign country. Like every political configuration of the earthly city, American too is Babylon. And so as Christians we too must learn to live here, and to sing, as in Psalm 137, the songs of Zion in a foreign land—and not make the mistake of thinking that the civil-religious songs are interchangeable with those songs.¹⁶

So what Neuhaus is balancing is an intense love of America with an intense awareness of America's inadequacies, both general and specific. He expressed the love once in a famous sentence: "When I meet God, I expect to meet him as an American."¹⁷ In so speaking, and as a Canadian-born naturalized American, he was not being a jingo, but instead insisting upon the scandal of particularity, that what we are is inseparable from the very particular things that comprise our earthly identities. Indeed, Neuhaus severely faults the American tendency, which he ultimately traces to Protestantism, toward a Gnostic abstractionism, the presumption that one can escape one's time and place, including one's identity as an American. But he insists upon the importance of the place of the American experiment, as he liked to call it, in establishing an earthly realm in which the idea that we are creatures of God with inalienable rights with which we are endowed by our Creator. Thus is America an exceptional nation in the story of the world.

The general inadequacy of America is that inadequacy shared by all earthly nations: they are Babylon, every one of them, and are not, and cannot be, transformed into the City of God. In this respect, America is no worse and no better.¹⁸

But he acknowledges that there is a specific inadequacy of America, one peculiar to its makeup and history, and related to its prominence in the story of the world. It has to do with its tendency to exaggerate America's very real virtues, and its place within the story, and mistake its provisional goods for real and enduring ones, errors that lead America to the very grave error of "mistaking itself for the destination," for the world for which we hope, rather than the Babylon for whose welfare we strive but in whose ultimate perfectibility we fervently disbelieve.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 27–28, 55.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

This is a version of what Reinhold Niebuhr called “the irony of American history,” by which he meant the way in which the country’s genuine virtues were precisely the source of its genuine vices.

One final observation that stems from this, and suggests something very important that we as Christians, and particularly those of us who are Protestant Christians, can take away from this discussion. Neuhaus makes the shrewd observation in *American Babylon* that our tendency as Americans to confuse Washington with Zion may have something to do with the way that Christianity has been conceived and institutionalized here. “American theology,” he says, “has suffered from an ecclesiological deficit, leading to an ecclesiological substitution of America for the Church through time.”²⁰ That this would coexist with our Emersonian penchant for free-floating individualism is no paradox, but quite logical and consistent. That this would tend to support a disproportionately large role for the American civil religion seems almost inevitable.

I think Neuhaus had hold of something profoundly important here, one of the central riddles of Christianity in America. It is certainly the case that the American Protestant tradition, particularly in its evangelical form, suffers from a perilously weak ecclesiology, and has since the days of the Great Awakening. The energy of revivalism, a source of so much of its strength, is also a source of its vulnerability. Nothing has more severely impaired the Church’s ability to be a “people” apart from the culture in America, and thereby serve as a sign of contradiction and a signpost to Zion, than its inability to function as a cohesive institutional entity. When faith becomes radically individualized, it becomes far less culturally effectual, and ceases to be fully reflective of the Gospel in its wholeness and power.

And by the same token, a strengthened Church would give moral strength to the nation, precisely by counteracting its Babylonian tendencies and reminding it of its first principles. It should be able to speak those concerns in a way that respects the manner of discourse appropriate to the public square. But it should be able to speak those concerns openly and boldly rather than remaining silent about them.

It should be able to do so for two reasons. First, as a matter of freedom: because the genius of American pluralism at its best is expressed in the fact that, to very large extent, our deepest particular loyalties and our larger national loyalties are not viewed as mutually exclusive. Second, as a matter of virtue: because we serve the goal of responsible citizenship best by visibly upholding the principle that there are things higher and more important than merely being a citizen.

None of which means, however, that negotiating the twists, turns, and paradoxes of a faithful Christian life will ever be easy, or ever be reducible to a formula. The place of religion in the contemporary American public square will continue to be a vital but contested one, constantly under negotiation and re-negotiation, constantly shifting ground, rethinking precedents, and incorporating new and changing realities. It seems unlikely to go away any time soon.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 41.