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"...with Liberty and Justice for All" Toward Tolerant Public Discourse

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Every American who hears the words *liberty* and *justice* is instinctively warmed by their transcendent glow. These words make the patriotic breast swell with pride and conjure the image of those Revolutionary War veterans limping along playing their fife and drum, flag rippling in the breeze. The words *freedom*, *rights*, *equality*, *democracy*, and *justice*, among others, have been elevated to an almost spiritual plane, even as metaphors for the United States.

This paper will examine the titles of several conservative and progressive religious and political organizations to demonstrate how some rhetors are distorting the lexicon of civil religion to conflate sectarian beliefs with political ambitions. While there is nothing inherently sinister about promoting sectarian beliefs, intentionally failing to differentiate between religion and politics muddies the public discourse and can be a means to justify intolerance toward opposing viewpoints. The title of an organization is perhaps the most intentional rhetoric it employs. Implying that "God is on my side, and if you disagree with me, you are against God" sets up an either/or choice that is inherently intolerant.

Further, I will review a theory of political discourse first proposed in 1986. It offers a framework for a respectful public discussion that tolerates differences and builds a sustainable dialectic dialogue.

America's Civil Religion

In 1967, Robert Bellah defined civil religion¹ to mean a religion of the polity that glorifies the politics and history of a culture with patriotic rituals and quasi-religious imagery.² As Bellah explains, "[T]he American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality" (13). It is evoked by veneration of past leaders and war veterans, use of public buildings for worship and to display symbols, and the invocation of God and use of religious texts at public events. Without attachment to a particular creed or religious tradition, these elements are all "indicative of deep-seated values and commitments" (Bellah 2).

American civil religion celebrates past political leaders who embody the essence of the American ideal, such as Benjamin Franklin for his wit and wisdom; George Washington and Martin Luther King for their courage and leadership; and Thomas Jefferson for his curiosity and intelligence. Traditionally, stories about such figures (though probably fictitious) are used to illustrate morality. Memorials to veterans and war casualties are fixtures in most American communities and the nation's capitol. Civil religion also requires public display of symbols, for example "Old Glory"—a symbol of American ideals that belies a simple definition. While the Constitution protects against a state religion, Congress begins every day with a prayer, and every President since Washington has sworn "so help me God" at his inauguration.

But most importantly, America's civil religion is not tied to the creed of any particular traditional religion. Bellah observes that "civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people" (9). But because it "serves to mobilize support for the attainment of national goals," it is easily manipulated by rhetors to induce a patriotic feeling in the public in order "to attack nonconformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds" (Bellah 10). Herein lies the danger.

Evolution of the Lexicon³

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, among these life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness... We...solemnly publish and declare, that these colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states...

With the first breath of independence, America began the lexicon of civil religion. Not only did Jefferson write of equality, inalienable rights, liberty, freedom and independence, he acknowledged that a Supreme Being endowed those rights on man. "Divine providence," stemming from a universal guardianship beyond human experience, makes them inalienable.⁴

In a declaration even more deviant from the 18th century norm of divine sovereignty, the Preamble to the Constitution states:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Thus the Constitution steps further away from divine sovereignty. Here, the source of authority for liberty and justice is the Union of the People.

During the Second Great Awakening, an evangelical revival movement of the early 19th Century, the concept that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were inspired by the Christian understanding of God swept over America. When the great orator Daniel Webster created a "narrative of nationhood," calling the Founding Fathers our "spiritual fathers" (62), his listeners, who would have been almost entirely of European descent, connected that spirituality with Christianity. Webster's goal was to preserve the Union of the United States against parochial secessionism. To do this he glorified the *mythos* of America as an idea rather than a place and gave it a spiritual, and for him a Christian, patina.

Since the Civil War, "the theme of sacrifice [has] been added to American Civil religion" (Pierard 112). "The idea that sacrifice was 'sacred' because it furthered America's God-given purpose as a model of human liberty and equality" (Pierard 112) has been a powerful rhetorical tool of every politician advocating war since. Glorifying sacrifice in war has also been used to silence questioning the justness of the war.

The 20th century civil rights movement was "morally based and politically independent" (Wallis 64), but appeared to be a Christian movement because it arose from the pulpits of so many Black churches. Its great spokesman, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously used the imagery and cadence of the pulpit to express universal ideals about freedom and equality. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail" he declared that "the goal of America is freedom," and coupled freedom with God's transcendent will: "We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands" (qtd. in Carson 202). The letter was intended to prick the consciences of his fellow clergy and make them recognize that equality was sacred, and therefore the right to freedom was immediate and just. He was a Christian minister who wanted to change specific laws, but his rhetoric was straightforward and intentional, never ambiguous or deceitful.

In 1979 Rev. Jerry Falwell launched "an organization with a mission of organizing evangelical leaders" to "boldly engage the culture." Calling himself "the father of the modern 'religious right' political movement," Falwell established the Moral Majority to promote "a pro-life, pro-traditional family, pro-national defense and pro-Israel platform" ("Moral Majority"). The rhetoric of this movement added the term "family values" to the civil religion lexicon. For a politician today to announce opposition to family values would be as shocking as taking a stand against freedom and liberty or any of the other sacred words of the lexicon.

In *Moral Politics*, cognitive linguist George Lakoff explains what "family values" means to conservatives and liberals. Because politics has a "moral, mythic and emotional dimension," conservatives have turned family into a metaphor for government (19). While all politicians describe their policies as pro-family, they mean very different things by the term. Lakoff says conservatives think of the family/government as a hierarchy, led by a strict father who imposes discipline in order to raise children who are obedient, self-sufficient and respect "legitimate authority" (33). Although not necessarily articulated as such, liberal policy is also based on a family model, which Lakoff calls the Nurturant Parent model because "[l]ove, empathy, and nurturance are primary, and children become responsible, self-disciplined and self-reliant through being cared for, respected and caring for others, both in their family and in their communities" (33). Lakoff's analysis illuminates why the "culture war" has been fought with one side slinging apples and the other oranges, leaving both sides bewildered at the other's response—particularly when considered within the context of civil religion's evolution.

The Founding Fathers' sense of freedom, equality, independence, and inalienable rights was based in Enlightenment philosophy, out of which arose the concept that church and state be separate. Not until the 19th century did the ideals espoused in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution become linked with the predominate religion of the day, Christianity. During the Civil War, the Christian principle of sacrifice was added to the vocabulary of civil discourse. In the mid-20th century, the civil rights movement returned to the universal morality of the 18th century by tying arguments for legal changes to the concepts of

justice, freedom, and equality to conscience rather than doctrine. Thus has rhetoric evolved to shape public discourse and policy.

Today, however, some politically ambitious organizations are using the vocabulary of civil religion to infer that patriotism and religion are inseparable. They identify themselves with the words liberty, freedom and American side-by-side with creedal words of traditional religion, implying a link by mere proximity without further explanation. Their intent seems clear: We are right because God is on our side.

Rubric Rhetoric

The examples below compare the titles of conservatives and liberal organizations and demonstrate how conservatives combine words in their titles to imply a connection between religion, specifically Christianity, and conservative political policy while liberals do not.

Jerry Falwell founded Liberty University with the goal of producing "Christ-centered men and women with the values, knowledge, and skills required to impact tomorrow's world" ("Liberty University"). Currently he heads the "Liberty Alliance, one of [his] affiliate organizations that is dedicated to promoting Judeo-Christian values in the political realm through lobbying efforts" ("Alliance"). The websites do not define "liberty," leaving its connection with the Christian mission implied, but they do provide electronic links to each other. By naming his organizations "Liberty" Falwell seemingly suggests that Christianity and liberty, a core value in American's civil religion, are the same thing.

Compare this to the progressive Christian organization, Sojourners, a "Christian ministry whose mission is to proclaim and practice the biblical call to integrate spiritual renewal and social justice" ("Sojourners"). Its name is derived from "[t]he biblical metaphor 'sojourners' [that] identifies God's people as pilgrims—fully present in the world but committed to a different order..." The name is intended to reflect expanding "exploration of issues of faith, politics, and culture" as well as ministry to the poor ("Sojourners").

Sojourners uses the word "justice" to define their mission, but it is modified by "social." Social justice is a moral concept sometimes at odds with legal justice, which is about following accepted laws. (The death penalty debate is a stark example of this dichotomy.) In civil religion, the word "justice" is usually used without a modifier, leaving it open to ambiguity. That the Sojourners defines its mission as one of social or moral justice clearly states its intent.

Two prominent conservative organizations that exist to influence the political agenda also suggest a connection between the words of civil and traditional religion. The Family Research Council is an organization dedicated to "Defending Faith, Family and Freedom" by shaping "public debate and formulat[ing] public policy" (FRC). American Values is "a non-profit organization committed to uniting the American people around the vision of our Founding Fathers" with the subtitle "Your Voice to Help to Protect Life, Marriage, Family, Faith, and Freedom" (American Values). Both organizations link "freedom" with family and faith. Tony Perkins of FRC and Gary Bauer of American Values are both politicians, not theologians.⁵

In contrast, the titles of two prominent liberal political organizations make no religious connection. The rubric of MoveOn.org is "Democracy in Action" (MoveOn); People for the American Way defines itself as "an energetic advocate for the values and institutions that sustain a diverse democratic society" (PFAW). Both are clearly not affiliated with any religious organization, nor do they attempt to align themselves with any particular religious creed.

Donations to both liberal groups are not tax deductible, while donations to both conservative groups are. The websites offer no explanation for their deductible status (FRC "Contribute," American Values "Contribute") Rev. Falwell's Liberty Alliance is, however, "a not for profit educational and lobbying organization. It is an IRS recognized 501(c)(4) corporation chartered in Washington, D.C. that is allowed to lobby Congress and influence legislation" ("Alliance"). The titles and tax status of the conservative organizations are confusing, making it difficult to discern which is a religious group, i.e., a charitable one, and which is political.

The first guarantee in the Bill of Rights is that Congress will not establish a state-sponsored religion. Groups that commingle the words of traditional and civil religion evoke in those who disagree with their political philosophy Orwellian visions of intolerance and control. It is time to consider a method of public policy debate that clearly distinguishes public issues from personal beliefs.

"From Civil Religion to Public Philosophy"

In his 1986 essay "From Civil Religion to Public Philosophy," Christian theologian Richard John Neuhaus suggested that our civil religion be replaced by a new public philosophy. His proposal is as vigorous and imperative today as it was almost twenty years ago.⁶ He suggests a public philosophy where we "can prevent our just causes from turning into holy wars and our public philosophies from turning into civil religions"

(109). His model would require a democratic, pluralistic, religiously attuned, critically affirmative debate with realistic expectations for resolving conflict (105).

The first requirement, democratic principles, should be “marked by popular, even populist sympathies,” but a democracy cannot function if some of the people “habitually cultivate contempt for the values of the people whose lives they would more rationally order” (105). Neuhaus argues that we should rely on the common wisdom of the “ordinary people” to create a “normative ethic by which extreme propensities, including populist propensities, can be held in check” (105). In other words, he envisions a democracy where every voice is valued and heard.

Further, this public philosophy requires pluralism in “which differences are engaged in civil contestation,” embracing the idea that we are a “society of many societies, a community of many communities,” a “people in their astonishingly diverse particularities” (106). The duty of the democratic state is to respect and serve the multitude of its constituent communities. The majority may rule, but it cannot silence the minority.

Neuhaus reminds us that the United States is essentially “religiously attuned” and warns against adopting an Enlightenment conceit “that religion either is withering away or could be neatly confined to the private sphere of life” (106).⁷ Instead our public philosophy must be “historically and socially rooted” because spirituality elevates us above the personal and material and lends moral authority to our political philosophy (108). He invites traditional religions to engage “in the development of a mediating language, a common moral vocabulary to be shared by those who are not of shared religious conviction” (107). As Lakoff’s analysis suggests, acknowledging that “family values” is a moral issue for both sides would help to establish such a common moral vocabulary.

In addition, public philosophy must also be “critically affirmative”—that is, according to Neuhaus, able to “both affirm and criticize this [American] experiment, prodding it ever so slowly and erratically toward the fulfillment of its promise” (108). Simply put, dissent gave birth to America and nourishes its growth. Dissent is an American value.

And finally, Neuhaus cautions that our public philosophy must be “modest in the expectations that it raises. It will speak religiously of the American experience but it will not make the American experience a religion” (108). He warns against “social gospellers” at both ends of the political spectrum claiming to be building a “Kingdom of God on earth” (108). Instead “[t]he only religion that will help construct the public philosophy that we need is the religion that knows that all of our politics and all of our philosophies are, at best, faint intuitions of the City of God to which we are all called” (109). He urges us not to think we are creating perfection as we dabble in democracy. We must “not be surprised by times of testing but... rather recognize that testing is in the very nature of being an experiment” (108). Only through “a shared moral discourse about the meaning of the social experiment of which we are part” can we hope to survive (108).

Conclusion

The single theme that underlies all components of Neuhaus’s public philosophy is tolerance. His paradigm would replace the malleable symbolism of civil religion with a model in which respect and tolerance are integral because they are inclusive and acknowledge tradition while leaving room for criticism. Rational debate does not occur without respect for the right to dissent.

Intolerance does more damage to democracy than any weapon that merely destroys physical matter. On March 8, 2005 President Bush addressed the National Defense University about Islamist terrorism:

It should be clear that the best antidote to radicalism and terror is the tolerance and hope kindled in free societies... And that goal is within reach, if all the parties meet their responsibilities and if terrorism is brought to an end. Arab states must end incitement in their own media, cut off public and private funding for terrorism, stop their support for extremist education.

America must assume the same responsibility. In his recent book *God’s Politics*, Christian theologian Jim Wallis warns that President Bush “seems to make this mistake over and over again of confusing nation, church, and god. The resulting theology is more an American civil religion than Christian faith” (142). We cannot be a beacon of democracy in the world by making faith a litmus test for patriotism. By discarding the ambiguous terminology of civil religion, we can debate issues, not personalities or faith, and remain “one nation under God”—even with those who disagree with us.

Notes

¹In *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacque Rousseau was the first to use the term "civil religion," but its meaning has evolved since 1762.

²"This concept sometimes goes by other names—public, political or societal religion; public piety; civic faith; the common faith; theistic humanism; or in the case of the United States, secularized Puritanism, the religion of the republic, the American Way, American Shinto, and often 'the American Democratic Faith.' Whatever one calls it... it refers to the widespread acceptance by a people of perceived political traits regarding their nation's history and destiny" (Pierard 22).

³The author in no way intends to imply that this is an exhaustive history of the evolution of the lexicon of America's civil religion.

⁴For a concise, impartial history of the role religion has played in American politics, see "the Faith of Our Fathers" in the 28 June issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, which quotes a book by the head of the manuscript division of the Library of Congress, "[W]hether they were old-line Calvinists or liberal deists, the Founders believed divine will legitimized their institutions and laws and made citizens more willing to respect them. Even Thomas Jefferson, who thought most Americans would be rationalist Unitarians within a generation or two, considered the acknowledgment of providential authority essential to public virtue" (Tolson, 55-56).

⁵For Bauer biographical information see http://www.ouramericanvalues.org/bauer_main.php.

For Perkins biographical information see <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=BY03H27>.

⁶In February, 2005 *Time* magazine called Dr. Neuhaus one of America's most influential Christian evangelicals (Van Beima 37).

⁷Clearly the political rise of the Religious Right in the last twenty-five years proves his point.

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