

In the absence of a common faith



Religious News Service

A Nation of Believers

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The American crisis in values and meanings has led many to look for a locale where common beliefs and behavior patterns can be engendered, appraised and nurtured. Words like "Vietnam," "Watergate," "Energy-versus-Ecology" codify complex issues for debate. Yet a nation with a troubled soul does not know where to take up the issues. Religious organizations and voluntary associations abound, but, it is argued, they are too private and particular. The nation seems to be the only available matrix and repository of common values. "One can only reach out to the universe with a gloved hand," said the poet William Butler Yeats. "That glove is one's nation, the only thing one knows even a little of."

The reaching out has occasioned in recent decades a number of arguments for and about what has come to be called a "religion of the republic" (historian Sidney E. Mead) or a "civil religion" (sociologist Robert N. Bellah). The relative universalists who advocate such faiths lock in combat with the relative particularists who argue that separate religious communities have potency to contribute to the common weal, even though their divisions compromise and hamper them. Each side claims the other measures the worst expressions of the antagonistic party against the highest norms of their own.

The confusion in the debate derives as much from quite another source. Both sides make their case almost entirely on what might be called dogmatic grounds or creedal bases. They stress the cognitive or substantial centers of their two systems of symbols and affirmations, and overlook the fact that most American religion finds what might be called its

normative center in collective social behavior, not in formal dogma. The civil religionists and their denominational particularists both act as if their adherents are self-conscious systematic theologians.

Belief and behavior are linked, of course, at root. Those who stress the content of the two religious systems are not wholly beside the point. Suzanne K. Langer has pointed out that our social behavior has roots that "lie much deeper than any conscious purpose . . . in that substratum of the mind, the realm of fundamental ideas." When President Lyndon B. Johnson said in his inaugural address that "we are a nation of believers" in justice and liberty and our own union, he set this belief in the context of social behavior. These fundamental ideas are what Ortega y Gasset called *creencias*: "They are not ideas which we *have*, but ideas which we *are*." Inevitably, they become public in ways of life.

The link between behavior and belief is overlooked by Jews and Christians, who act as if their communities actually embodied the social concerns and judgmental notes of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. Similarly, it is slighted by those who make too much, with Sidney Mead, of G.K. Chesterton's view from a distance that America "is founded on a creed . . . set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence" and that consequently America is "the nation with the soul of a church." Both sides also stress "belief *that*" at the expense of "belief *in*," but "belief in" has more to do with ways of life and collective behavior.

From the beginning both domestic and foreign observers and advocates have commented on the dominance of social behavior and practice in American religions, however much nominal assent they may give to the propositional elements of their faiths. Yes, Founding Fathers like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson believed in

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(and helped write!) the creed and dogma of which Chesterton spoke. But the weight of their contribution lay in their Enlightened concern to see religion producing good manners and morality in the polis. Father George Washington in his farewell address in 1796 urged that the "permanency of your felicity as a People" would be forfeited unless due attention be paid to the complex of religion, manners, habits, political principles and memories. "Of all dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports." People should avoid "mere speculation" about the nation's design.

The public schools became the nurseries of the national "established church." Ruth Miller Elson in *Guardians of Tradition* summarized a century's worth of the textbooks used in these schools. "All books agree that the American nation politically expressed is the apostle of liberty, a liberty personified, apostrophized, sung to, set up in God-like glory, but rarely defined. To discover what liberty means in these books is a murky problem. . . . For the child to find out from these books what this liberty is would be astonishing." The behavioral expression in liturgy and social morality preoccupied the author of every text.

The testimony of voyaging voyeurs from Europe is virtually unanimous: The United States was a nation of behavers who acted on the basis of a few *creencias*, none of them expressed in clear creeds or dogmas. Alexis de Tocqueville: "Go into the churches (I mean the Protestant ones), you will hear morality preached, of dogma not a word." Why? "The infallible response is this: The different preachers, treating only the common ground of morality, cannot do each other any harm." Max Weber noted later that "'ethics' alone could be offered." In the recent past Britisher D. W. Brogan concluded that the nation's religion "became highly functional, highly pragmatic; it became a guarantee of success, moral and material." "The political function of the schools is to teach Americanism, meaning not merely political and patriotic dogma, but the habits necessary to American life." Religion became "a matter of conduct, good deeds, of works with only a vague background of faith." This was true of both the civil and denominational faiths.

None of these wholly slighted "belief that" when they showed how "belief in" issued in behavioral patterns. The Presidential inaugurals regularly call people back, as Dwight D. Eisenhower's did, to "the abiding creed of our fathers." In the public schools, as Robert Michaelson has pointed out, the rituals lead people back to these creeds in what are repeated initiation rites. But the cognitive element is minimal. Wilson Carey McWilliams points out that new citizens are not even once asked to give formal assent to the creed. American politics has "eschewed any claims to control more than external behavior." The

"oaths" for newcomers "have not been concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy." One swears by none of them; one swears to support law and reject lawlessness. Churches, of course, are more free to preoccupy themselves with doctrinal orthodoxy, but in the public realm their concern has been with ritual, manners and morality; in short, with practice.

Confusion results when belief and practice are brought together. Brogan points out that Americans have high regard for the formal statements of national life, though they do not know their content. He told of a badly frightened citizen who typified many when, in order to escape a lynching over some controversial remarks, he protested: "I didn't say I was against the Monroe Doctrine; I love the Monroe Doctrine, I would die for the Monroe Doctrine. I merely said I didn't know what it was."

The fundamental problem for a "nation of behavers" has been to find the common ground where its behavioral patterns and their root beliefs can meet to generate social power. The assertion *e pluribus unum* relates not only to the federal covenant but to patterns of value and practice, where it remains as much a hope as a reality. The Founding Fathers were nervous about the separate sects' distance from a common "religion of the republic." Throughout the nineteenth century this nervousness found expression in constant public debates. But these debates have become most intense since the middle of the twentieth century, when "realized pluralism" came to characterize America.

During this period a few scholars have observed the behavioral element in civic faith. The pioneer was W. Lloyd Warner, who studied ritual and ceremonial patterns in national-religious life. He took up the pluralist question squarely. "Our communities are filled with churches, each claiming great authority and each with a separate sacred symbol system. Many of them are in conflict, and all of them in opposition." So the community asked whether it had sacred symbol systems that permit integration and collective action through their use by everyone in the community (*Democracy in Jonesville*, 1949). Similarly Carlton J. H. Hayes observed how the modern nation took over historic church practices and fit the citizen for "life of service" on the precepts of "the beauties of national holiness." Flag ceremonies, solemn feasts and fasts, hymns and other music, processions and pilgrimages, national holidays and saints' days, temples and shrines, icons, images and relics were the public displays.

Contemporary debates have largely overlooked this collective behavioral side and stressed the cognitive dimensions. The sides change somewhat, depending upon the national mood. In general, religious and academic élites have taken a more critical attitude toward national religion in the Republican Eisenhower and Nixon eras than they did in the

Democratic interregnum of the Kennedy and early Johnson years. Only a few scholars and publicists have been dialectical, applying the same standards in both styles of administration while bringing ambivalent attitudes to both; most of these analysts have also stressed the dogmas, creeds, beliefs and formal statements.

In the Eisenhower era postwar Americans sought common values. Through those years Robin M. Williams was frequently quoted to the effect that "every functioning society has to an important degree a *common religion*," an observation that for many became an injunction: develop one! express one! In 1959, in *The New Shape of American Religion*, I distinguished between the élites' "Religion of Democracy," rich in cognitive elements, and the societal "religion-in-general," over which Mr. Eisenhower had presided and wherein the few cognitive dimensions were undefined, invoked only as a basis for behavioral consequences. The advocates of "Religion of Democracy" tended to be Deweyite liberal critics of Eisenhowerian popularism. They saw the need for a better or higher "belief that" or "belief in" system than the one the public halfheartedly adhered to. J. Paul Williams was most explicit in his call that the democratic ideal be taught as the Will of God or the Law of Nature, that "democracy must become an object of religious dedication." Churches and synagogues meant well, but were dogmatically and practically too divided among themselves. The public schools should support the religion of democracy with "metaphysical sanctions" and "ceremonial reinforcements."

Then as now it was Will Herberg who was tireless in his criticism of both élitist and popular public faith for its tendencies toward idolatry of "the American Way of Life"; the concept of the "way" gave a clue to Herberg's understanding of the behavioral connotations. Herberg also gave new currency to the concept of a "civic religion" that was to "celebrate the values and convictions of the American people as a corporate entity."

Critics of Herberg have seen him to be typically guilty of the confusion to which I am pointing here: His kind of Jewish-Christian existentialism made unrealistic prophetic demands on the national, common or civic religion of America; he unfairly contrasted its flaws as a "way" with the theological substance (not practice) of the Jewish and Christian traditions.

In the early 1960's the liberal academic community was in reaction against Herbergian prophecy and what they saw to be his double standard. Enjoying the protection of generally congenial Presidential administrations, this community temporarily breathed a new spirit of pragmatic liberal optimism: the New Frontier, the Great Society, the Secular City, the New Creation as Metropolis, the Committee on the

Year 2000, the Ecumenical Council—these were symbols of the new devotions. Religious revival took new forms as energies were diverted into academic interpretation of faith, social action and expansiveness on the international scene. A common faith, it was argued, would serve better than particular belief systems for such a day. John F. Kennedy performed priestly roles for this school of thought.

No one spoke better for the academy on this subject than did Sidney E. Mead, who seemed to be shelving his earlier reservations about J. Paul Williams's appeals for the religion of democracy. With one or two brief exceptions Mead stressed not the "ceremonial reinforcements" but the "metaphysical sanctions" of the common faith. His essays on "the nation with the soul of a church" exegeted official and high-cultural documents: the writings of the Founding Fathers, the democratic charters, Presidential addresses (particularly those of Abraham Lincoln, who was the normative center of the American experience). He based his argument on Chestertonian affirmations about the dogmatic-theological bases of American national religion, discerning in them the "higher unity" that church religion lacked.

What about Herberg's negative comments on the "way" of the national faith? Mead quoted Whitehead: "Great ideas enter into reality with evil associates and with disgusting alliance. But the greatness remains, nerving the race in its slow ascent." Mead, showing monistic hungers and a cosmic grasp, stressed with Lyndon Johnson that "we are a nation of believers." He played the *tu quoque* ("you're another") game with the Herbergians, as if to say, "behaviorally, your churches and synagogues also do not actually square with the prophetic, nonidolatrous, ecumenical professions contained in your idea and belief systems." Then he would outline the prophetic, nonidolatrous, cosmopolitan "religion of the republic." He was most emphatically critical of, and worried about, the existing divided religious institutions, because they held loyalties but could not generate the common faith.

No one better symbolized the turn from the Eisenhower to the Kennedy-Johnson ethos than sociologist Robert N. Bellah, who deserves most credit for bringing the concept of Herberg's "civic religion," now translated to Rousseau's "civil religion," to favor among élites. "Few have realized," he wrote in 1967, that such a faith exists. It had "escaped serious analytical attention."

The historians, aware of two centuries of chronic and two decades of acute debate on the subject, tended to chortle over Bellah's historical naiveté. (Eisenhower: "Things are more like they are now than they ever were before.") But Bellah knew something the historians did not. The public was not

conscious of their debates, because the time had not yet come for consolidating the modern expression of a civil religion. The moment arrived for the liberal academic circles—where the term is still largely discussed and to which it is confined—to be receptive.

Bellah has certainly paid more attention to the behavioral and practical expressions of civil religion than did Mead. Elsewhere he even argued that post-modern religion could be expressed without much of a cognitive accent. He liked to quote the poet Wallace Stevens: "We believe without belief, beyond belief." But when it came to scoring points, Bellah also relied on the credal statements of the official culture, exegeting as did Mead the Presidential inaugural addresses and other establishment evocations of civil faith.

Historian Sydney Ahlstrom in *Worldview* (August, 1972) asked, in effect, whether the exegesis and advocacy of the religion we here associated with Robin Williams and J. Paul Williams, with Sidney E. Mead and Robert N. Bellah, had been codified and propagated at the last possible moment. "Is it possible that here we have evidence of a familiar fact—namely, that we often study the history of something only after its demise?" Ahlstrom pointed to contradictions in the "civil religion." Most Americans, when polled, showed that they feared national breakdown. Congress demeaned patriotic tradition by transforming "the national holy-days into a series of long—or lost—weekends." American youth used American flags to patch their jeans. Flag-waving was taken over by fundamentalists, racists and law-and-order crowds.

The civil religion of the 1960's was clearly in trouble. Attempts by Bob Hope, Cardinal Spellman and John Wayne to "evoke the mystic chords of memory" over Vietnam doings were pathetic if not absurd. The events surrounding Watergate further compromised the faith. The ten-year aftermath of Supreme Court decisions about school prayer left the public schools confused about their role as the junior stage of the established "civil religion" church. Even Bellah had second thoughts as he pondered Nixon's Second Inaugural: "If I had had this document before me six years ago the tenor of [my original essay on civil religion] might have been different." The new expression was "a form of national self-worship without any element of higher judgment and a worship of the individual's autonomy at the expense of the common good." Simple advocates of civil religion were reduced to (or raised to) a "though it slay me, yet will I trust it" profession.

Ahlstrom had good reason to raise his questions about demise, and Bellah similarly had warrant for taking second thoughts. But "civil religion" has always been episodic and has been based on different styles of advocacy through the decades. Robin Williams is no doubt correct: a complex society will seek and find elements of a common faith. Especially

from the viewpoint of collective behavior, it is likely that a "way" will continue to be sought. If America reconstructs after Vietnam and Watergate, and if there is to be a way beyond the current malaise and morosity, there is reason to believe that some sort of "religion of the Republic" will be revitalized. Therefore it is worthwhile to appraise the current state of the debate.

Paul Ramsey put the question well in a plaintive essay: "How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in a Pluralistic Land?" He feared a subpagan post-Protestant American culture. "A loss of feeling for the essentially human follows upon the loss of essentially religious feelings and convictions." "Therefore the acknowledgment of God in the public life is itself a matter of supreme earthly importance" (*Journal of Public Law*, No. 2, 1964). Where and how shall the engendering and nurturing centers be located? That question remained. What Thomas Luckmann called "invisible religion" did not have broad positive social consequences. A second subculture, what Jacob Needleman called "the New Religions"—the occult, Eastern or Afro-American—was often cultic and private. The religious debate came back to the standard Jewish-and-Christian *versus* some sort of religion of the Republic, or to some creative interplay between the two. The argument follows essentially three lines.

The *first* has to do with the two sides themselves. Sidney Mead argued that the religion of the Republic was "not only *not* particularistic; it is designedly antiparticularistic." "Under it, one might say, it is religious particularity, Protestant or otherwise, that is heretical and schismatic—even unAmerican."

The difficulty with Mead's advocacy, from the viewpoint of the student of "a nation of behavers," is that in practice the common religion is at least as sectarian as particular denominational religion is. True, most citizens give assent to the *creencias* alluded to in the Johnson inaugural. But in the American behavioral "way" there was no more unity than the churches could find on the basic biblical grand themes.

As to the first pro-civil religion argument, disarray is evident. First, the scholars who describe the civil religion cannot agree on its detail nor decide about its positive and negative features. Second, it is a curious faith, for most of the public that was said to hold it does not *want* to be described as holding it. They will take its informal and inchoate forms, but reject it when formally outlined, especially when, as Mead does, in competition with their churches. The differences between élites and publics in this faith are as wide as between theologians and congregations in the denominations. In addition, all the new articulate groups—women, blacks, Chicanos, American Indians, countercultures, youth movements—reject it as an embodiment of historic male WASP

emblems and metaphors. J. Earl Thompson called for "the reform of the racist religion of the republic." Vincent Harding defined his black history over against this white expression. D. W. Brogan discerned specifically Protestant emblems, metaphors and notes in this "universal" religion.

Further, there are, as can be seen in this essay, right-wing and left-wing interpreters of civil religion. Regionally it is practiced in vastly different ways, as studies of school prayer practice indicate. It appears and sounds different on campus and off, in meetings of the American Legion and the American Civil Liberties Union, in small town and in big city. From the angle of collective behavior, the religion of the Republic does not provide the unity particular religions in their common thrust lack.

The *second* claim of pro-civil religionists was that while particular faiths chained God and used him for their purposes, the religion of the public in the Republic allowed for effective appeal to the transcendent. For Mead "the religion of the Republic is essentially prophetic" and not "worship of the state or nation." Bellah was more cautious. "Without an awareness that our nation stands under higher judgment, the tradition of the civil religion would be dangerous indeed. Fortunately, the prophetic voices have never been lacking." Both credit biblical religion with producing these voices, but are critical of the way the "particularistic theological notions of the sects" war against the "cosmopolitan, universal theology of the Republic." Both draw on one or two texts of Abraham Lincoln, and stunning texts they are, to point to transcendent possibility. But their critics can point to the flag-wavers and law-and-order enthusiasts and show that in the American "way," in behavior and practice the transcendent note almost never interferes. In the modern world the religions of nationalisms seem to be more potent and dangerous than those of particularistic sects.

The *third* claim is that civil religion is indeed devoted to cosmopolitan, universal, ecumenical theology, while the churches are at war with each other. Mead was concerned lest "this or any nation assumes the traditional garb of the church" by "becoming heteronomous vis-à-vis other peoples and nations" and asserting that our law is somehow superior to theirs and they should be subject to it. For Bellah, ecumenical civil religion was a problematic dream for the future. In the end even particular national symbols have to be subsumed, transformed or overcome. American civil religion would become "simply one part of a new civil religion of the world." This would be a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion. "Indeed, such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning."

Not many Americans have shown the imagination to locate these truly transnational symbols. More likely they will simply look for American virtues on

an international scale, as did Mr. Yogi Berra when he heard that a Jew had become mayor of Dublin. "It could only happen in America." Mead's cautionary and Bellah's eschatological words on the subject are in place. Civil religion in practice has been singularly non- or even antiecumenical.

Where does this leave "the nation of behavers"? The universalistic, transcendent and ecumenical notes have been sounded by both an Amos and a Jesus in the tradition of biblical religion, and by an Abraham Lincoln in American national religion. My thesis is simple: Spokesmen for the two traditions are both guilty of comparing the cognitive dimensions of their community's belief system with the practical and behavioral experience of the adherents of the other tradition. The effect has always been that their prophets sounded better than their competitors' practice appeared. The faithful in both traditions—and admirers and critics of both agreed that there was significant plural belonging and overlapping of memberships—usually turned out to be particularist, self-worshipping and "heteronomous vis-à-vis other people and nations." The mid-century debates were merely the latest in a series of episodes. They resolved little but posed again the issue of the *unum* and the *plures* in the two main spheres where citizens have faced them for two hundred years.

What was most impressive was the ability of many citizens to incorporate something of both tendencies in their behavior. Father John Courtney Murray once said that from his point of view "religious pluralism is against the will of God. But it is the human condition; it is written into the script of history." From such a vantage, Americans in practice have been able to be plural belongers at times, withholders of consent from both traditions at others. They know how to take both very, very seriously—but not too seriously. They engage in creative foot-dragging when the sects become so sectarian that they overlook the common good, or when the civil sphere becomes so encompassing that it allows for no reservation. They know that it is possible to be loyal and positive citizens even if, to borrow Albert Cleage's terms, they "de-religiocify" some of the civil causes, loyalties and symbol-systems that call for their assent. Yet few of those who give loyalty to the denominational causes, loyalties and symbol-systems let these prevent a concern for the common good.

As the bicentennial approaches, it can be shown that in behavior as well as in belief the citizens have two large and broad traditions on which to draw, as they have been drawing on them, and as they probably shall. Both the moments of concord and conflict between them can be creative; such a situation would almost certainly be more creative than if either departed the field and slunk away.