

When things are going well in a society, its civil religion goes unnoticed. Today civil religion is very much noticed—and hotly debated

# American Civil Religion—and Others

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A happy result of the Bicentennial can be increased self-knowledge. The danger, however, is that one may focus too exclusively on the United States, thus magnifying out of proportion both our virtues and our faults.

Such distortion is evident in the current discussion of American civil religion. The turmoil of the late sixties and the self-examination of the seventies have encouraged consideration of the civil beliefs and practices widely shared by Americans. Robert Bellah, Will Herberg, Martin Marty, and Sidney Mead are among those who have recently written on the subject. Too often learned commentators have failed to note that American civil religion is an expression of general social patterns. It is therefore useful to take a look at non-American civil religions in several traditional and revolutionary societies. By civil religion I mean a summary of the shared meanings, symbol systems, and ethical guidelines that are stated in universal or transcendent terms by a certain *public polity*. A strong nation-state can transform the more general phenomena into a kind of religious nationalism, as we shall see.

Early precursors of the modern polity were built squarely on civil religion. The “politics” of classical Greece and Rome were, in truth, a subspecies of public religion. Or better, politics, ethics, economics, and religion (to use our contemporary terms) were, not only in Hebraic theocracy, but also in the “pagan” areas, indistinguishable and inseparable. As Aristotle noted, *Politics* was a continuation of *Ethics*. Undergirding and tying together the entire culture was an explicit and developed civil religion in which the gods regularly dealt with men, especially with public heroes and leaders.

What has escaped contemporary understanding even more is the fact that the rising nation-state always had at its base civil religion, often in the form of divine kingship. Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1762 first defined

civil religion as we know it. The religion of the *Social Contract* was to be postrevolutionary and part of the new radically democratic order.

But Rousseau understood that the ancien régime as much as the new France was unified by civil religion. Like Machiavelli, Luther, Hobbes, and Locke, Rousseau and the French revolutionists (and, dare we add, the American founders) knew that to create a new social and political order meant not only to create a new public theology but, first, to destroy the old Christian civil religion. Michael Walzer, most recently in *Regicide and Revolution*, has investigated these historical currents in depth, and my argument is indebted to him at several points.

For over a thousand years in the West it was unquestioned that a sovereign God, “the Father,” ruled directly through a human sovereign king who was father to his people and head of the social body. Various writers thus held that republican and mixed regimes were unnatural and monstrous. King James of England (1603-25) specifically argued and sought to act out the ideas of “the descent of the divine resemblance through the blood royal” and its assimilation in the very being and rule of the king. “The grace of God hath this day changed thee into another man, and by the holy rite of unction hath made thee partaker in its divinity”—with these words the Archbishop of Mainz affirmed divine kingship and stated the center of its civil theology.

Pope Gregory (1073-85) and his Papalist disciples had, of course, argued that the king was really another (albeit special) layman and that God’s true representative sat on the seat of Peter, not on a royal throne. But Gregorianism at most modified the civil theologies of the courts in Paris, London, Madrid, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Berlin, and Munich. From the early Middle Ages until the revolutionary years legitimacy and power rested on monarchical civil religion. The king was the direct agent of God and as such, ruler, judge, healer, and priest.

Building on Pauline theology of a mystical body, medieval political thinking held that society was the king’s body politic. In the words of a fourteenth-century Italian jurist:

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just as men are joined together spiritually in the spiritual body, the head of which is Christ...so are men joined together morally and politically in the republica, which is a body the head of which is the Prince.

Similarly Pauline in origin was the civil theology of King James: "I am the husband, and all the whole island is my lawful wife." The wife took her status from the husband. The body would die without its head. For the society to live in health and harmony the directives of the head must be followed. Indeed no choice was possible. For the body could neither think nor breathe without its head. Thus the dominance of the head could be neither examined nor questioned. Nor could there be two heads, or one and a half, or a half. Sovereignty and kingly power were in this doctrine indivisible. All activity must be under the head. Thus the civil religion of divine kingship (discounting Gregorian claims) held to as unified and integrated a view of society as was ever stated by the classics.

A parallel though less powerful idea was that of the "Mandate of Heaven" put forth during the Chou dynasty in first millennium B.C. China. According to this theory, government is legitimated because of the Mandate (Ming) the rulers received from the supreme God (T'ien). Unlike Western divine right, the supreme God in ancient China could recall his mandate if necessary. In South Vietnam in 1967 the population waited to see which competing strong man had the "Mandate of Heaven." This would be shown by which side was successful in the competition for power. No doubt Chou dynasty civil religion was much more stable than mid-twentieth-century Vietnamese. Yet Chinese "divine right" was, from the first, tied to the performance and quality of the monarch. The point here is that for thousands of years China and its large East Asian cultural sphere have had some elements of civil religion akin to those of the West.

Of greater interest than the historical and traditional role of civil religion is how it survives the revolutions and secularizations that bring an end to "divine kingship." In *The Rebel* Albert Camus wrote of the trial of Louis XVI: "The condemnation of the king is at the crux of our contemporary history. It symbolizes the secularization of our history and the disincarnation of the Christian God." Disincarnation is an aptly theological term. The ending of the ancien régime is precisely and centrally a repudiation of the civil religion of divine kingship, through which the Christian God has ostensibly been present in the civil society.

So profound a theological act as the first publicly proclaimed regicide—that of Charles in 1649—required the religious fervor and certainty of the Puritan revolutionaries. It was a matter of the gravest concern that God might intervene directly to preserve his appointed ruler and to prevent the heresy of disincarnation.

The Puritans, however, acted on behalf of Jehovah and differed from the royalists by being *better* (more

successful) theologians and more dedicated historians. The issue was in doubt for a time. But the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 settled once and for all the matter of divine kingship precisely by the elaboration and broad acceptance of a new civil religion, that of John Locke's *Treatises on Government and Letter Concerning Toleration*. In the 1689 *Letter* John Locke urged broad toleration, but not for atheists. "Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all...."

A century later in France the new civil religion would be explicitly called for by the herald of the revolution, Jean Jacques Rousseau. It would, said Rousseau, be based on a broad deism, with dogmas "simple, few, and precisely formulated" so as to require little explanation and commentary. Like the old, the postrevolutionary civil religion would be ineluctable. It alone unified a people, inspired love of country and its laws, forbade intolerance, and helped control crime.

Revolution may be thus understood as a seminal act of civil theology. As old myths are smashed and old pieties destroyed, the result is not the absence of myths and popular piety but a new civil religion. The "Christian God" of traditional civil religion may be disincarnated. A new cultural diety takes his place. The creation of new myths—indeed of a new civil religion—is strikingly evident in the modern revolutions in Russia and China.

Christian civil religion began in Russia in 100 A.D., when Prince Vladimir was converted to the Greek wing of Christianity. The first saints canonized in the Russian church were Vladimir's sons, Boris and Gleb. In the fourteenth century the princes of Moscow gained control over the princes of Kiev. As a result the "national capital" moved from the religious center of Kiev to the political center in Moscow. By the sixteenth century Moscow had solidified its conquests, and its prince took the title "Czar of all the Russias" and was crowned *Orthodox* Emperor.

In 1721(!) the power of the highest religious leader in Russia, the Patriarch, was sharply curtailed and transferred to a Ministry of Religion. The "will of God" and "will of the Czar" became bureaucratically synonymous. Church services and theology honored the nation in combination with the transcendent God.

Russian civil religion has centered on a number of themes that were nationalized quite early and have remained remarkably constant in the Marxist formulation. A well-developed theology of *national destiny* was stated in terms of such key concepts as "the third Rome," "Holy Mother Russia," "Mother of Socialism." In each case the conviction is that Russia has been selected by Providence and ordained by history to maintain ancient truth and to bring *all humankind* into a higher state of blessedness. Saints Cyril and Methodius, early missionaries to the Russians, propounded ideas of national calling.

In 1451, even before Constantinople had fallen, a Russian leader raised the idea of Moscow as the third Rome. In 1511 Philotheus of Pskov addressed the Czar in what was to become characteristic fashion:

Now there shines through the universe, like the sun in heaven, the Third Rome, which is the [Russian] Orthodox faith....See to it, most pious Tsar, that all Christian dominions unite with thine own. For two Romes have failed, but the Third still stands, and there will not be a fourth; for the Christian Tsardom will not pass to any other, according to the mighty word of God.

So Russia was to be the center of the Christian faith for the world.

Both traditional and Marxist Russian civil religion might also be said to be *utopian* in the sense that each brings a "new heaven on earth" that will come through Russian leadership in the historical process. It is not surprising in this context that both ancient and modern civil religion are deeply *moralistic and communal*. This emphasis culminates in central attention to a time of apocalyptic judgment and redemption at the turning point of history. Whether as portrayed in the Orthodox Easter service or as experienced in October, 1917, human life is caught in the anguish of sin, corruption, exploitation, and despair. The last candle flickers out. Comes then, however, in celebrated history, the sudden dawning of a new age—where light reigns—and in its reign brings heaven on earth. The Russian idea of redemption is precisely redemption of the earth and the historic process.

**R**ighteous anger, paranoia, inferiority feelings, and isolationism have combined to give Russian civil religion a heavy component of *exclusivity* and *anti-Western attitudes*. The actions of Soviet leaders were prefigured by love-hate attitudes and experiences going back to fifteenth-century Russian romanticism, to the fluctuating policies of the great Czars with regard to Western know-how and culture, and so back to early orthodoxy, which felt itself betrayed by, superior to, and yet somehow less powerful than the Western church. Russian history is replete with purges against elements that would corrupt the civil religion and the nation—whether these be Western orthodoxy or pop art.

Furthermore, Russian civil religion has often had to contend with groups—especially *left-wing radicals*—who rejected or greatly reinterpreted the public theology. These sects have historically felt themselves allied with dissenters in the West (Baptists, Hussites, Mennonites, and others), and have periodically appealed to the Western conscience for spiritual support. In Russia the dissenters have been viewed as "unpatriotic" (which they were, because first Eastern Orthodoxy and latterly Marxism-Leninism are at heart civil, much more than personal, religions).

In the latter years of the Khrushchev regime antireligious activity, which had languished since World War II, was revitalized. The Russian Orthodox Church lost ten thousand of sixteen thousand churches, and the Baptists half of five thousand churches. A comparable 50 per cent loss was felt by Baltic Lutherans and Lithuanian Catholics.



Drawings by Janice Stapleton

Official Marxist-Leninist atheism was encouraged in public education, including the creation of departments of atheism at the "people's universities." New rituals and holidays were created and propagandists of atheism sent throughout the country. Official civil religion has thus been strongly encouraged. But there is little evidence that the remnants of traditional religion are being removed. Illegal churches, many in homes, abound. Women and lay leaders are often pressed into service. To counter the official theology persons, families, and sometimes groups as large as sixty attempt to cut themselves off from society. "Escape" methods include monasticism, total seclusion, and the wandering life of fugitives.

"Underground Orthodoxy" began in the twenties. In the sixties various factions coalesced into a single movement, the "True Orthodox Christians." Liturgical and clerical rules are forgotten. Indeed, the True Orthodox Christians evidence a high degree of social and political alienation. Revolutionary literature, monarchist ideology, conscientious objection to the military



and to broader society are explicit aspects of the True Orthodox Christians' views.

When there was evidence in the early sixties that Baptist leaders had been co-opted by the state, an action group was formed to promote reform. The legalized Baptists ordered a halt to proselytizing and held a recognized national convention in 1963. Many recalcitrants were arrested and formed a Committee of Prisoners, which sent appeals to the U.N., the World Council

of Churches, Baptist World Alliance, Red Cross, and others.

Attempts at post-Khrushchev accommodation proved unsuccessful, and by 1970 the dissenters were engaged in broad attacks on the state. The authorities once again imprisoned and tortured the leaders. In Orthodox circles no organized resistance was formed, but 1970 saw a number of priests engaged in sect-like renunciation of state policies.

Religious dissent from Soviet practices has occurred repeatedly since 1917 even as the left-wing reformers challenged statist official civil religion in Czarist Russia and in other divine-right polities. The most challenging aspect of the dissent is that it reflects alienation from society, which is especially evident in the pleas and pronouncements of the late 1960's. Then too dissenters' voices are heard in the West more sometimes than others. The present causes célèbres of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and the Jewish population are notorious examples of challenges to Soviet Orthodoxy in the name of competing civil religions.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Soviet social science is called to "struggle against hostile ideology," especially in the religious sphere. Thus the Soviets have recently developed sociology of religion with an eye to promoting atheism.

Soviet researchers note that non-Marxist religions are strong, as expected, among the rural poor, the aged, and women. However, there is also the shocking evidence of religious interest among the young, the bright, and even the well educated. Communist interviewers find that traditional religion appeals because of its moral emphasis, its help in personal crises, and its community aspects—especially its ability to meet aesthetic needs and to provide "local patriotism." Thus traditional religion fills the need for natural, communal, and personal roots and identity.

The contest between competing civil religions in the USSR is well illustrated by traditional and new ceremonial forms of marriage, naming, burial, and other rites, all of which compete in Eastern Europe as well. The struggle of new against old religious practices is necessary if Marxism-Leninism is to achieve the dominance, indeed the monopoly, that is required of a successful civil religion.

Soviet civil religion did not have the luxury of growing naturally, but rather was ingrafted into an ancient stem. It parallels the old in many ways, and that makes the graft possible. But in the tradition there are tendencies (such as confessional theism) that directly counter Soviet beliefs (such as atheism). These opposing strains surface regularly, and where assimilation is impossible alternatives and challenges to Soviet civil religion are inevitable. Precisely for these reasons they are so dangerous and cause such anxieties among Soviet leaders.

An even more radical and fascinating attempt to create a new civil religion is occurring in Communist China. It is more radical because, first, China is so large, diverse, and lacking in traditions of central government and national culture; and second, because before Marxism-Maoism there had been no successful civil religion or ideology in China for many centuries, if ever. Therefore the Communists have had not only to combat old culture religions, but have also had to create, for the first time in modern history, a unified Chinese understanding of common culture, values, nation, and religion. Maoism thus comes closest to seeking the Rousseauist idea of civil religion, at least in function. Like the Great Legislator, Mao and his as-

sociates had to rebuild a people, nation, and culture where corruption, collapse, and division existed.

Much of the story of religion in China, especially since 1949, is unknown. In the early part of the century Confucian scholars sought to convert the widely, but diffusely, held tenets of Confucianism into a more systematic organized religion. They were unsuccessful, in part, because the republican élites (such as Chiang Kai-shek) preferred a self-styled Chinese Confucian-Christian-Taoist syncretism. For decades the mass of peasants had practiced a blend of animism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

The early twentieth century saw a Buddhist reform movement and also more integrity in the smaller Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic faiths. In general, however, pre-Communist China was pervaded by syncretistic religious practices and beliefs. Family events often required the services of a Taoist priest or Buddhist monk so that Confucian filial piety could be fulfilled. Many homes had their door gods, most streets had shrines, and fairs and festivals were often built on religious motifs.

There are records of the young Mao speaking out against supernaturalism and superstition and evidencing disgust over the tangle of cultural religions that served to bemuse and entertain the peasants. But after the Revolution and while feeling their way into power, Mao and Chou expressed a more tolerant view toward traditional religions. In January, 1951, Chou told Chinese Catholic leaders that he saw no necessary conflict between Catholicism and Chinese patriotism so long as the Catholics could discipline the imperialistic "Judases" in their midst.

Within the next five years steps were taken to infiltrate the better organized traditional religions such as Catholicism and Islam. Where "internal reform" failed, external pressures were brought to bear by the late 1950's. (The sources for these events are scarce, the most comprehensive and available being Richard C. Bush, Jr.'s *Religion in Communist China* [1970] and Donald E. MacInnis's *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China* [1972].)

The central story of Maoism as a civil religion is seen in its confrontation with the ancient Chinese expressions of syncretistic Confucianism. What little formal contact Mao had with religion came in his early schooling, where students were made to memorize and recite the Confucian classics. Before the Revolution Mao attacked peasant Confucianism as an opiate. In 1940 he called for an end to semifeudal culture, "whose exponents include all those who advocate the worship of Confucius, the study of the Confucian canon, the old ethical code and the old ideas in opposition to the new culture and new ideas."

After the Revolution Mao advised his followers "to learn from Confucius and Sun Yat-sen, as well as from Marx and Lenin...." And Liu Shao-ch'i, until 1965-66 the chief theoretician next to Mao, in his booklet *How to Be a Good Communist* drew heavily on the Confucian tradition, particularly the sayings of Mencius.

More recently the direction of Maoism has been to establish itself as an exclusive, radical, and comprehensive civil religion. The most vivid expression of this

Maoist fundamentalism was the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" of 1966-69. The Red Guards sought to uproot the "four old ideas, cultures, customs, and habits—to throw them once and for all on the "garbage heap of history." In their place would emerge true Communist beliefs and practices.

**A**t the heart of the new society is Maoism as civil religion, seeking nothing less than the creation of a new earth through the conversion and radical transformation of the 800 million persons who constitute China. As far as the outsider can tell, for a host of cultural and historical reasons Maoism has come quite close to this goal of revolutionary Marxism.

Mao's death (or prolonged incapacity) may undo much. But Mao appears to have achieved a special hold on the Mandate of Heaven. Indeed, he is divinized beyond the norms of even medieval divine kingship. In 1967 a poet sang these widely heard praises:

Joyful shouts burst from our throats:  
 "Long live Chairman Mao! Long long life to him!"  
 Chairman Mao has come!  
 Chairman Mao has come!  
 ...  
 Chairman Mao, oh, Chairman Mao!  
 You are the lighthouse by the misty sea,  
 The bright lamp showing us the way;  
 You are victory,  
 You are light!  
 We will follow you....

From Shanghai a year later came reports reminding one of European peasants called to prayers:

...the first thing workers, peasants, fighters and young Red Guards do is to stand before a portrait of the reddest red sun in their hearts to wish the great leader Chairman Mao a long, long life.

Mao's divinity even extended beyond China. In late 1968 Chinese sources carried news of Maoism's coming to Tibet:

Whereas previously clay Boddhisattvas were worshipped in most families, they are now replaced by Chairman Mao's portraits. Whereas statues of god and spirits filled villages and streets, they are now replaced everywhere by quotations from Chairman Mao. Whereas previously the Tibetan people carried bundles of Buddhist scriptures, everybody now holds the "red precious book...."

In 1965 Mao told the French writer André Malraux:

Chinese Marxism is the religion of the people....When we say "We are the Sons of the People," China understands it as she understood the phrase "Son of Heaven."

Mao might have added that China understands its Chairman as Christianity understands the "Son of Man."

The "Son of Heaven" has given his people a scripture by which they may know the "Way" into the future. The writings of Chairman Mao are

the best books in the world, the most scientific books, the most revolutionary books....There have never been writings in China or abroad like the writings of Chairman Mao...they are The Peak in the modern world Marxism-Leninism. There are peaks in the mountains but the highest peak is called The Peak.

In the half-decade after 1966 thirty million sets of the four-volume *Selected Works of Chairman Mao* and many millions more of the *Sayings of Chairman Mao* were distributed. From the divine one himself has come the divine canon.

Maoism resembles Western fundamentalism in permitting no deviation and demanding purity of faith and practice. Those who deviate, even if by mistake or as members of the highest élite, are called upon to confess and repent. Thus Liu Shao-ch'i publicly repented at least twice in one year—admitting an independent mindset and lack of faith in the "mass line." When Lin Piao, veteran of the Long March, Marshall of the Army, and onetime heir apparent, could not overcome his lack of perfect faith in Mao, he met an untimely death.

As Rousseau had predicted, civil religion beliefs are few and simple and are directly tied to practice in the maintenance and support of society. *Conversion* to Maoism is leaving the false gods of self-interest and giving oneself to the people under the direction of Chairman Mao. "Chairman Mao Is Dearer Than Any Parent," as the title to a recent poem put it.

The whole family sat down and talked it over,  
 Chairman Mao is dearer than any parent,  
 Consider him to be your own pa and ma.  
 "Chairman Mao saved us from our sea of sorrows,  
 Never forget it, good child of mine.  
 Neither mountains of knives nor seas of fire  
 Should stop you from following Chairman Mao."

Thus explicitly has Maoism replaced the former civil religion of familial piety.

Maoism, like Soviet Marxism, has created a series of new ceremonies and rites. The old religious practices have been replaced, strictly forbidden, abolished. Moreover, Maoism apparently has been successful in instilling in the masses an ethical asceticism far beyond what traditional Chinese religion and even Soviet Marxism could achieve.

Of the contemporary civil religions, Maoism is the strongest. Its divine ruler, although failing, still dwells with his people, the embodied word performing great feats and inspiring the entire society. A new canon, new ethic, new culture of Maoist piety pervades Communist China. The profound test of Maoism will be whether it can continue after its founder joins the other prophets of religion—civil and otherwise—in the dust of that earth civil religion has done so much to control and transform.

This brief survey suggests that revolutionary as well as traditional and Marxist as well as capitalistic societies have discernible patterns that can be termed civil religions. These patterns explain and legitimate social arrangements and affirm that authority is properly constituted.

Civil religion serves the important function of unifying a society. Times of turmoil and change therefore require a reformulated, perhaps even a new, civil theology. But deeply ingrained meanings and symbols resist alteration. Indeed, in a smoothly running society the presence of civil religion will scarcely be noted, since its affirmations seem self-evident.

The growing awareness of an American civil religion is thus an opportunity, an alarm, and a challenge. Especially by understanding our civil doctrines in relation to others, we can come to understand ourselves and our world neighbors.

It is no coincidence that attention to America's civil meaning system came to the fore in the late 1960's. Not only surface politics and economics, but the very fundamental meaning-systems of our culture have been shaken. The world history of civil religion suggests a return to the status quo ante is not possible.

The challenge is to give shape, unity, and meaning to an increasingly pluralistic and "secularized" America. At the same time, parochial and chauvinistic civil religions are highly problematic. Yet one does not see much hope for an effective "universal consciousness" (à la Kant, or Bellah's recent proposal).

Rousseau might say we need a new Moses, Lycurgus, or Calvin. But philosopher-leaders (even thinkers like Rousseau) are few and far between. Likely we shall have to muddle through, working out our pluralistic, "secularized," world-conscious civil religion with errors, false starts, and much fear and trembling. It should help us to know that our search for civil meanings and ethical guidelines is a task we share with other human polities.

