

The Religious Character of American Patriotism

It's time to recognize our traditions and answer some hard questions (1987)

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In the last few years, we have witnessed a number of patriotic celebrations in the United States -- celebrations that have taken on an almost religious expression. In 1976, it was the glorious bicentennial of our independence. In 1984, American jingoistic displays associated with the opening and closing of the XXIII Summer Olympic games in Los Angeles were televised around the world. On July 4, 1986, amid hoopla and fireworks rarely equaled, the Statue of Liberty was rededicated in New York Harbor. Finally, on September 17, 1987, we celebrated the bicentennial of the signing of the U.S. Constitution. Festivities commemorating the final ratification of the Constitution on June 21, 1788; the passage of the Bill of Rights on September 25, 1789; and the ratification of the Bill of Rights on December 15, 1791, were comparatively subdued but recognized nonetheless.

That these are more than just anniversaries in political history is made clear not only by how we tend to celebrate them but in the reactions we receive from people abroad: they simply cannot understand our fervor. After all, as Americans we do not belong to a single racial group, do not share the same religion, and are mostly relative newcomers to the national soil we inhabit (so new, in fact, that many British still refer to the United States as "the colonies"). Lacking, then, a single racial, religious, or long-standing geographical identity, our cultural unity and patriotic zeal seem hard to explain.

What is it, then, that binds us? The answer can be found in a set of ideals and myths pervading our national consciousness that has been growing for two centuries. Whether we admit it or not, even if we claim we are not religious, we frequently tend to operate according to the prophetic vision, dogmas, and rituals of a generally unacknowledged religious tradition. Our behavior belies this as we take pilgrimages to its shrines, view its relics, sing its songs, celebrate its holy days, show respect to its saints and martyrs, and respond to its symbols. The United States is indeed a religious nation, but its unifying religion is not Christianity or any other world faith -- not even "the religion of secular humanism," as has been claimed of late. It is instead a unique national belief system best called Americanism.

THE CREATION OF A TRADITION

New nations are frequently formed when an already existing ethnic or religious group re-identifies itself and breaks away from a larger body. In the ancient past, new nations formed from the consolidation of similar tribes. In both cases, however, a long prior tradition existed, a tradition that cemented the union. But in 1776, a group of people from diverse linguistic, national, ethnic, and religious traditions, isolated on the coast of a continent they had only recently inhabited, suddenly decided to set themselves apart from the rest of the world. This must have seemed a postposterous undertaking to many.

Could a nation last without a common bond in some time-worn ground for unity? This was a bold experiment -- a government invented out of the whole cloth. If the project was to work, a unifying tradition would have to be invented to go along with it.

In his Centennial Oration of July 4, 1876, the great American agnostic Robert Ingersoll gave his view of how this came about:

There were the Puritans who hated the Episcopalians, and Episcopalians who hated the Catholics, and the Catholics who hated both, while the Quakers held them all in contempt. There they were, of every sort, and color and kind, and how was it that they came together? They had a common aspiration. They wanted to form a new nation. More than that, most of them cordially hated Great Britain; and they pledged each other to forget these religious prejudices, for a time at least, and agreed that there should be only one religion until they got through, and that was the religion of patriotism.

But the religion was more than just patriotism. As early as 1749, Benjamin Franklin pointed to "the Necessity of a Publick Religion" that would promote good citizenship and ethical standards. Later, in his *Autobiography*, he laid out "the essentials of every religion," limiting them to the following few items:

. . . the existence of the Deity; that he made the world and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to men; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter.

He then proceeded to accord "different degrees of respect" to existing religions depending on how far they departed from this outline and to what degree they added other doctrines that were divisive or unhelpful to public morality. His ideas were shared by many of the founders.

For example, in his first inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson asked his audience to carry on the American principles of government, secure in the knowledge that happiness and prosperity would result. After all, Americans were a people who were

. . . enlightened by a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter. . .

Other elements of this public religion were set forth in the Declaration of Independence. However, they were presented not as the absolute or God-given truths of prior religions but as "selfevident" truths discoverable by human beings. Furthermore, these truths were not a Decalogue of divine commands but an assertion of "unalienable rights," a notion no less religious for not being traditional. Noticing this, British journalist Gilbert K. Chesterton wrote in 1922 that America is "the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence."

Conspicuously absent from the writings of many of the nation's founders and first presidents are indications of belief in Christ, hell, and Original Sin. But they all mentioned God -- and not merely the clockwork God of deism but a god actively involved in history. Their "public religion" clearly was not Christianity, though it could include Christians and others within its embrace. In some ways it harked back to the Old Testament with its view of America as "the promised land." This was prevalent in many writings of the time. Jefferson concluded his second inaugural address in this vein:

I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with His providence and our riper years with His wisdom and power . . .

How much of this public religion Jefferson or other founders of the republic may have personally believed is not central here. What is important is that they felt a need to promote_it and, in so doing, to give roots to a population that previously shared little in common. George Washington spelled out this utilitarian rationale in his 1796 farewell address:

Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

THE BUILDING OF A MYTHOLOGY

No religion is complete, however, if it only has a unifying doctrine. It also needs a unique history, complete with saints and martyrs. Thus, it was not long before the principal figures in the saga of the United States' founding began to take on a heroic character.

In the growing mythology, George Washington, "the father of his country," came to be immortalized as a type of latter-day Moses who led his people out of British bondage and to a "sweet land of liberty." Benjamin Franklin was immortalized, too, as the intellect behind the holy cause. These two became the most prominent among the stock characters of nineteenth-century children's U.S. history textbooks. That this imagery remains strong is evidenced by the satirization of it in this scene from the Broadway musical 1776 by Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards:

JOHN ADAMS [to Franklin]: It doesn't matter. I won't appear in the history books anyway -- only you. Franklin did this, Franklin did that, Franklin did some other damned thing. Franklin smote the ground, and out sprang George Washington, fully grown and on his horse. Franklin then electrified him with his miraculous lightening rod, and the three of them -- Franklin, Washington, and the horse -- conducted the entire Revolution all by themselves.

BEN FRANKLIN: I like it!

But the Old Testament analogy does not end here. Like the Hebrews who followed Moses, the brave patriots who followed Washington soon strayed from the truth and fell from grace. Robert Ingersoll, in his Decoration Day Oration of 1888, summed it up in a manner common to the oratory of his time.

When their independence was secured they adopted a Constitution that legalized slavery, and they passed laws making it the duty of free men to prevent others from becoming free. They followed the example of kings and nobles. . . . They forgot all the splendid things they had said -- the great principles they had so proudly and eloquently announced. The sublime truths faded from their hearts. The spirit of trade, the greed for office, took possession of their souls.

And so a war was required to redeem the nation, Ingersoll maintained:

The conflict came. The South unsheathed the sword. Then rose the embattled North, and these men who sleep tonight beneath the flowers of half the world, gave all for us.

They gave us a Nation -- a republic without a slave -- a republic that is sovereign, and to whose will every citizen and every State must bow.

Added to the liberation imagery of the American Revolution were the new elements of a fall, repentance, sacrifice, death, and rebirth. Abraham Lincoln was especially adept at getting this message across. In his Gettysburg Address, he spoke of "those who here gave their lives that that nation might live," the honored dead who "gave the last full measure of devotion" so that "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

One almost feels need for the concluding phrase: "but shall have everlasting life." It's hardly surprising that generations of American school children were once required to memorize and recite the Gettysburg Address. Such was a ritual and a sacrament of the national religion, much as the Pledge of Allegiance is today.

The Gettysburg Address took on an even greater meaning after Lincoln was shot. For then it was Lincoln who had become the blood sacrifice so that the nation might be reborn. The imagery of Lincoln as savior, as an American Christ, arose immediately in the sermons that resonated from the pulpits of a grieving nation. The Reverend John McClintock in New York said it most explicitly:

We had no fear about Abraham Lincoln, except the fear that he would be too forgiving. Oh! what an epitaph -- that the only fear men had was that he would be too tender, that he had too much love; in a word, that he was too Christ-like! And how Christ-like was he in dying! His last official words in substance were, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." And on Good Friday he fell a martyr to the cause of humanity.

The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, the most famous cleric of his day, practically canonized Lincoln in the conclusion of his sermon:

In the midst of this great continent his dust shall rest, a sacred treasure to myriads who shall pilgrim to that shrine to kindle anew their zeal and patriotism. Ye winds that move over the mighty places of the West, chant his requiem! Ye people, behold a martyr whose blood, as so many articulate words, pleads for fidelity, for law, for liberty!

To this day, whenever an American hears the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," he or she thinks of Lincoln and his death. What is the song about? Think of the words. It is about "the glory of the coming of the Lord" in the last days when "his terrible swift sword" shall destroy the wicked. Yet, our mental associations turn to Lincoln who died for the sins of a nation and whose "truth is marching on."

The song is appropriate in a way, however, for in the religion of Americanism there is also a vision of the millennium, a paradise on Earth to come. Ingersoll offered his version of this at the conclusion of his Decoration Day Oration of 1888.

A vision of the future rises:

I see our country filled with happy homes, with
firesides of content, -- the foremost land of all the earth.

I see a world where thrones have crumbled and where
kings are dust. The aristocracy of idleness has perished
from the earth.

I see a world without a slave. Man at last is free.
Nature's forces have by Science been enslaved. Lightning
and light, wind and wave, frost and flame, and all the
secret, subtle powers of earth and air are the tireless
toilers for the human race.

I see a world at peace, adorned with every form of art,
with music's myriad voices thrilled, while lips are rich
with words of love and truth; a world in which no exile
sighs, no prisoner mourns; a world on which the gibbet's
shadow does not fall; a world where labor reaps its full
reward, where work and worth go hand in hand . . . -- and,
as I look, life lengthens, joy deepens, love canopies the
earth; and over all, in the great dome, shines the eternal
star of human hope.

Of this speech, the New York Times of May 31, 1888, reported:

Enthusiastic cheers greeted all his points, and his audience
simply went wild at the end. . . . Nor did the enthusiasm
which Col. Ingersoll created end until the very last when
the whole assemblage arose and sang "America" in a way which
will never be forgotten by any one present.

Ingersoll was popular, even with many who opposed his agnosticism, because he advanced a common doctrine using inspiring and emotional language that spoke to the heart. One could either espouse traditional religion or advocate freethought and still be inspired by a religious display of Americanism.

THE APPROPRIATION OF A TRADITION

Because of the power this common religion has held over the imagination of Americans, different groups have continually tried to claim it as wholly their own. For example, in 1912 An American Bible by Elbert Hubbard was published. This was a collection of selected sayings from eight American "prophets" -- Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Robert Ingersoll, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Hubbard himself (who devoted nearly half of the book to his own writings). The selections had a decidedly freethought slant, and the book was a bestseller in its time and remained popular into the 1940s.

When I attended in 1987 the annual Hill Cumorah Pageant put on by the Mormons in Palmyra, New York, I noted how cleverly they used Americanism to make their bizarre religious ideas more palatable to non-Mormons. American flags flew on flag poles throughout the pageant area, the program opened with the national anthem, and a giant flag on the hillside was waved by over a hundred Mormon youth. Then there were fifteen minutes of bicentennial hoopla involving claims that America's founders were guided by God in all their actions. Only after this common emotional ground was established did the uniquely Mormon part of the program get under way. And even in this latter part, the mythical pre-Columbian

followers of Christ in the Americas were depicted as advocates of liberty and democracy -- an indication of the influence Americanism had on Joseph Smith when he published The Book of Mormon in 1830.

And Christian fundamentalists constantly try to tell us, in spite of well-established evidence to the contrary, that our forefathers and mothers were practically all devout Christians.

It should be noted that fundamentalists from other countries don't generally attempt such claims. For example, Ian Taylor, a Canadian fundamentalist and creationist, was willing to suggest in the June 1987 Bible-Science Newsletter that Thomas Paine was probably the real author of the Declaration of Independence, a claim usually advanced only by American freethinkers. He further argued that most of the signers of the document, including Franklin and Jefferson, were members of the alleged Illuminati conspiracy and were non-Christian Freemasons. One would never hear such things from Jerry Falwell!

American fundamentalists feel duty-bound by the pervasiveness of Americanism to admire our nation's founders and claim them as their own. It just won't do to suggest that they were anything less than good Christians, for that might imply that Christianity is unpatriotic and Americanism is heresy! It would also require belief that most of the nation's great heroes are now burning in hell. Christian Reconstructionists, however, frequently take such a view because, harboring few illusions about the religion of our forebears, they really mean to overthrow the present order and set up a theocracy.

A TWO-EDGED SWORD

That America is most religious when it is most patriotic cannot, I think, be denied. A common religiosity seems to run through our national life. The evidence of it is everywhere. One event sticks in my mind. When I was a teenager, I attended a summer camp for boys, established by the U.S. Marine Corps. We all had drill instructors who, to us, seemed pretty rough. Because of this, one teenager wanted to go home. But when our sergeant told us that this teenager had said he would "walk across the American flag" to get out of there, the guys in my group went crazy with rage and wanted to kill him. He had to be moved to a different group for his own protection.

This is one of the dangers of Americanism. It leads to fanaticism and bigotry. And because it calls upon ideals that are sometimes seen as higher than the law, it makes possible an Oliver North and, worse, a public admiration of an Oliver North.

We are inculcated with this Americanism in our youth and we reflexively respond to key words, strains of music, symbols, and imagery. It is no wonder that religious, political, and social organizations deliberately seek to evoke patriotic responses.

But, in spite of the fact that blind patriotic belief, like any such belief, is dangerous, there is a positive side to it as well. By its very nature, it is the glue that holds this diverse nation together. As such, it is the best reply to the charge that America will collapse in a post-Christian era, floundering without roots or religious moorings. It will not, for America does have roots and religious moorings, even without Christianity. The Christian Reconstructionists sense this and are none too happy about it.

Of course, this is where problems emerge in today's political climate. So long as Americanism was never acknowledged as a unique religious tradition separate from all others but was merely fought over by different groups trying to claim it as their own, religious extremists did not question it. However, after World War II, J. Paul Williams, a follower of John Dewey, declared that "Democracy must become an object of religious dedication." He hoped that providing metaphysical sanctions and ceremonial

reinforcements for a now explicit American faith would enable Americans to better compete against the more zealous patriotisms of fascism and communism. In 1967, Robert N. Bellah expanded on this notion with what he called the "American Civil Religion" -- a faith that he said was already institutionalized and included common theological ideas as well as the principles of democracy. And in 1987, Martin Marty's *Religion and Republic* appeared, exploring further this line of thinking.

With the growth of these ideas came increased attacks on the wall of separation between church and state. More and more, the Religious Right has used these ideas in their challenges to the notion that the United States and the public schools can be value neutral or religiously neutral in any absolute sense. John W. Whitehead argues from this perspective in his book, *An American Dream*, which calls for "salvaging the soul of America" by a rejection of American Civil Religion and an explicit "return" to our supposed Calvinist roots.

Defending public education against the predations of such religious apologists is not easy. It will continue to require sophisticated argumentation that takes into account the historically religious character of American patriotism. We will have to face our traditions for what they are and realize that *absolute* neutrality is not possible in a nation that is so clearly a product of Western culture in general and American culture in particular.

But this is no reason to throw out the baby with the bath water. A *relative* neutrality, in the context of our historical traditions, has been supported by many court decisions and can be maintained flexibly with consistency. This approach is especially necessary when the public schools, facing onslaughts from growing numbers of adherents of Eastern religions, are called upon to defend their teaching of Western values.

Also, a relative neutrality need not be overly permissive. For example, the more theological aspects of Americanism can still be kept out of public education in deference to the rights of non-theists. But this should not lead us to fool ourselves into believing that the end result is a product sanitized of religiosity. The religious nature of our reverence for the documents of our republic, our forebears, and our nation's history will continue to make its presence felt.

Americanism, for all its shortcomings, dangers, and new problems, has successfully served for over two centuries as the religious unifying factor thought so necessary for successful governments by the Roman statesman Cicero, by America's founders, and even by humanist historians Will and Ariel Durant. Whether it will continue, and whether it should, are questions to ponder as we celebrate our various national anniversaries.

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