

Civil Rights–Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible People

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AMERICAN RELIGION IS USUALLY understood as the religion of European immigrants transplanted into the American soil. Most general texts that deal with this topic begin with the coming of the Puritans, continue through to the breakdown of the Puritan theocratic ideal and on to the new light, old light debate of the Presbyterians. We are then treated to a description of the great awakenings and the religion of the pioneers as they moved across the American landscape.

Other texts pay equal attention to the different religious communities of the thirteen original colonies and their histories. More precise and detailed work in the area of American religious history has shown that certain themes tend to run through much of this history, becoming the threads with which American religious life weaves its fabric of meanings. Thus the notions of wilderness, new land, errands, and so on, form the symbolic threads of the American religious tradition.

In this vein some historians have more recently become interested in what is now called American civil religion. "Civil religion" is an exceedingly vague phrase, and attempts to define it have often led to more ambiguity. However, some basic notions are involved in the phrase. Greater clarity might be forthcoming if the phrase is placed in the context of the French sociological tradition from Denis Fustel Coulanges's *The Ancient City* to Émile Durkheim's

The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. Works in this tradition define and locate religion as either a projection of the image of society into objective and sacred symbols or as a correlate of the structure of society. If notions such as these are applied to American religion, the emphasis falls on the religious meanings implicit in the founding documents of the American Republic: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. As such, the religious vision stemming from this orientation differs from that of the revealed religion, Christianity; for the revealed religion offers salvation to all human beings regardless of circumstance whereas, in the civil religion, salvation is seen within the context of belonging to the American national community. But the American national community in its ideals and history also offers salvation to all, since it has defined itself as a community that includes peoples from all over the world who seek the forms of freedom and order enunciated in the founding documents.

Civil Religion emerges as a parallel structure alongside revealed religion and its institutions, or it may find expression through revealed religion, or again it may borrow symbols from the revealed religion. Issues of this kind are exhaustively discussed in H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, where a typology of the possible range of relationships is described in detail.

If American religion is dealt with in either of these two ways or in a combination of these ways, we must note some glaring omissions. Let me raise the issue by asking a simple question, the answer to which will raise a serious issue of method and description. What is meant by "American" and by "religion" in the phrase "American religion"? If by "American" we mean European Christian immigrants and their progeny, then we have overlooked American Indians and Afro-Americans. And if religion is defined as revealed Christianity and its institutions, we have overlooked much of the religion of Afro-Americans, American aborigines, Asian Americans, the Jewish communities, and others. Even from the point of view of civil religion it is not clear, from the perspective of the various national and ethnic communities, there has ever been a consistent meaning of the national symbols and their meanings. In short, a great many of the writings and discussions on the topic of American religion have been consciously or unconsciously ideological, serving to enhance, justify, and render sacred the history of European immigrants in this land.

Indeed, this approach to American religion has rendered the religious reality of non-Europeans to a state of invisibility, and thus the invisibility of the non-European in America arises as a fundamental issue of American history at this juncture. How are we to understand this invisibility and how are we to deal with it as a creative methodological issue? It is no longer possible for us to add the "invisible ones" as addenda to a European-dominated historical method, for such a procedure fails to take into account the relationships of the ones omitted throughout the history of religion in America. Nor is it possible for us, simply in imitation of the historical method and historiography we are criticizing, to begin the project of writing history in which the ideological values of blacks or American Indians dominate. This procedure has no merit, for it could not make sense of that problem of invisibility which allowed us to raise the issue of our

discussion. The issue raised here is a subtle one, and questions must be asked concerning the nature of historical method. Reference has already been made to the issue of concealment as described by Sidney Mead in his *The Lively Experiment*. Allow me to add another statement in regard to this same matter. Ralph Ellison, in his prologue to his novel *Invisible Man*, writes:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber, and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus side-shows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident of my epidermis. That inevitability to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of construction of the inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. . . . You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds.

Mead's statement and this one by Ellison deal with the issues of concealment and invisibility. From the point of view of a religious historian, these statements carry great import, for they refer to definitive and fundamental modes of orientation of the American tradition of history and religious history. The statements have to do with the American cultural language, the American mode of perception, and the American religion. "The mighty saga of the outward acts" is a description of the origins not simply of an American language rooted in the physical conquest of space but equally of a language which is the expression of a hermeneutics

of conquest and suppression. It is a cultural language that conceals the inner depths, the archaic dimensions of the dominant peoples in the country, while at the same time it renders invisible all those who fail to partake of this language and its underlying cultural experience. The religion of the American people centers around the telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors. This story hides the true experience of Americans from their very eyes. The invisibility of Indians and blacks is matched by a void or a deeper invisibility within the consciousness of white Americans. The inordinate fear they have of minorities is an expression of the fear they have when they contemplate the possibility of seeing themselves as they really are.

This American cultural language is not a recent creation. It is a cosmogonic language, a language of beginnings; it structures the American myth of the beginnings, and has continued to express the synchronic dimensions of American cultural life since that time. It is a language forged by the Puritans and the Jeffersonians and carried on by succeeding generations. The Puritan "errand in the wilderness" was undertaken in the name of religious freedom, a freedom that would allow the colonists from Europe to divine the Word of God in a manner appropriate to their dispositions and knowledge, and a freedom to show this light of the gospel to all human beings, both far and near. This wilderness was, in following the biblical paradigm, a place of retreat from the world for prayer and reflection upon divine meanings. And again, this wilderness was paradise, a space overflowing with the bounty of creation. These meanings of the wilderness are undercut when they confront the American aborigines. The aborigines do not partake of these Puritan understandings of their culture and lands. Even when the aborigines become the teachers of the Puritans, the Puritan cultural languages fail to take cognizance through an alteration of their own language; or even when they are treated benignly by the aborigines, the shift in

language and thus in cultural perception does not take place. The aborigine is a wilderness creature who, like the wilderness itself, must be conquered. The conquest of the aborigine began in the seventeenth century and continues into the present. The linking of the aboriginal cultures with the wilderness and the subsequent conquest of both raise issues of race and ecology. These are issues that point up an inherent hermeneutical structure in American historical and religious interpretation.

The Jeffersonian language is equally ambiguous, and this ambiguity is made more intense by the factor of self-consciousness. Unlike the Puritans who wished to be a light unto Europe, the Jeffersonians were thrilled by the possibilities of creating a free society in a new land. They were enlightened people who had thought about the meaning of freedom as an essential ingredient of human societies. Around the issue of slavery was to be played the poignant and commiserating drama of the Jeffersonian conscience; Jefferson is the archetype of the sophisticated liberal. But this issue is deeper than the biography of Jefferson; Jefferson is the hand behind the Declaration of Independence and one of the moving spirits of the Constitution; these are the founding documents, the structures of cosmogony. Through these documents the character of the Jeffersonians and the structure of American cultural language gain a definitive form.

The compromise over slavery at the beginning, in the formation and promulgation of the Constitution, is the archetype of that long series of compromises concerning the freedom of black Americans within the American national community. This first compromise sets the tone for what is almost a ritual of language concerning the nature of black freedom and, consequently, the meaning of freedom in the American Republic. Indeed, we are able to discern almost precisely the one-hundred-year periods in which the Jeffersonian cultural and linguistic compromises rise to an intense and violent level; where the antinomies of its inner

structure are exposed. These are cycles of American history. From 1776 to the 1860s is almost a hundred years, and from the Civil War to the 1960s and 1970s is another hundred-year period. These cycles represent dramatic rituals of the archetypes of American history and religion.

At each of these mythical cycles the opportunity is presented for a change of the ritual, for a break in the repetition of this kind of eternal return. It was present in 1776, and then again in the bloody Civil War, and then again in the 1960s with the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X; but at each of these junctures the American revolution is aborted and clever priests of our national language and apparatus, skillful in the ways of ritual purity and manipulation, come upon the scene to ensure the repetition of the American ritual.

It is from this perspective that we must understand the meaning of religion in America from the point of view of one who is not a part of the heritage of European immigrants. In this sense, the distinction between civil religion and church religion is not one that looms large for us. In the first place, it is the overwhelming reality of the white presence in any of its various forms that becomes the crucial issue. Whether this presence was legitimated by power executed illegally, or whether in institution or custom, its reality, as far as blacks were concerned through most of their history, carried the force of legal sanction enforced by power. The black response to this cultural reality is part of the civil rights struggle in the history of American blacks.

The fact that black churches have been the locus of the civil rights struggle is not incidental, for the civil rights struggle represented the black confrontation with an American myth that dehumanized the black persons being. The struggle was a mode of affirmation on the part of blacks and a protest in the name of human rights and freedom. The location of this struggle in the church enabled the civil rights movement to take on the resources of black cultural life in the form of organization,

music, and artistic expression, and in the gathering of limited economic resources. The civil rights movement has been one of protest and exposition — a protest in the name of freedom and an exposition of the hypocrisy of the American cultural language. But more than hypocrisy was being exposed in this movement, for at points the American system was seen as a gross irrationality or a rationalized demonism. This is religious language and the expression of religious experience. The vicissitudes of the black struggle against the American myth can be traced from recalcitrant slaves through persons symbolized by the names of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, David Walker, Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others.

To the extent that the struggle for black freedom was carried on through the seeking of legal redress and petition, it participated in and made use of the American cultural language; for in this affirmation there is the tacit acceptance of the American language as adequate for the expression of human freedom for all the American people. But something more is at work here within the black communities. First of all, the very organization of black people meant that they were not invisible to each other; their humanity was affirmed within their communities. Second, they came to know the meaning of the American cultural language in all of its subtleties and antinomies, or, to use a colloquial expression, they came to know the Man. Third, and probably more important, they came to a knowledge and experienced *another reality*, a reality not created or given by the Man. This otherness is expressed in the spirituals as God, or as a mode of perception that is not under the judgment of the oppressors. It is equally expressed in the practical and concrete proposals that speak of *another space*, whether Africa or another geographical location, or heaven. This sense of otherness, or the sense of the other that has arisen out of the black experience, is present when the black communities contemplate the meaning of America as a free society; for if

blacks are to be free in American society, this society will indeed have to become a radically different one, *an-other* place.

In the light of this perspective on American religion, let us ask our second question: How is it possible to do justice to the facts of American religious history and at the same time overcome the concealment of peoples? How might it be possible to make visible those who have been rendered invisible religiously and historically? The issue has to do with the network, the nexus, onto which and out of which the facts are generated and interpreted. I am raising a question that is close to the problem of myth.

If we take myth as defined by Mircea Eliade—namely, that myth is a *true* story—then it is the question of a rendering of American religion as a story that does justice to the inner-life meanings and vitalities of those who were made invisible in the old interpretive schema, and it should be a true story that can halt the repressive concealment that has characterized so much of American history.

As in all hermeneutical procedures, one must take account of the misunderstandings and misinterpretations; only by going through these can we arrive at meanings that are substantive. I have stated above that I wish to be faithful to the facts of American history and religion; my problem, or better, the problematical issue, centers around the matrix or pattern onto which these facts are spread. The issue is one of the relationship between authenticity and truth as involving both the facts and the interpretations of these facts. Myth emerges as a category at this point, because I am interested in telling a story of America that is both true and authentic—a story that can respond to an objective and felt meaning of all Americans, a *true story* of the American peoples that moves beyond concealment and invisibilities.

In the telling of the story of America and American cultural reality, we have been dominated by one tradition, the tradition of “the mighty saga of the outward acts,” told and retold in such a

manner, “until it overshadowed and suppressed the equally vital but more somber story of the *inner experience*.”

The telling and the retelling of the American experience in this mode have created a normative historical judgment and ideology of the American experience. The *historical* telling of this story has in the form of historiography relegated itself to a position of objectivity in terms of the canons of scholarship; it has become identified with truth and legitimacy. Those identified with this approach have not openly asked the question of why they wish the facts to conform to this conception of the truth of the American reality, or better, why certain facts were chosen as the sinew of this truth.

Most interpretations of American religion, whether from the point of view of the revealed tradition or the civil tradition, have been involved with an ideological concealment of the reality of the inner dynamics of their own religio-cultural psychic reality and a correlative repression and concealment of the reality of others. This procedure has been undertaken to give American reality a normative mode of interpretation centered in one tradition. This mode of interpretation has a hallowed position in Western intellectual thought. It constitutes the problematic and resolution of the issue of the episteme. The notion of the episteme constitutes a problem for any form of coherence, and as understood in this context it is the issue of the normative center of interpretation of American religion.

The invocation of the notion of the episteme is an indication of the seriousness of this problem at the level of method. While the notion of the episteme as a pre-methodological meaning allowed for an organizing principle of coherence and provided a normative structure for the organization of data, it simultaneously operated as a center, a presence, making possible the permutation or transformation of other data. “The mighty saga of the outward acts” represents the data produced from the unknown, suppressed, never revealed “inner

depths." It is this ideological construct that forces all other traditions to remain in their places — places allocated to them by the centering of this "great tradition."

The concealment and correlative invisibility of various and sundry American peoples result from this methodological centeredness of the American episteme. But even when this tradition is the normative center, we observe that it cannot be known in itself. It is known only through the data that it generates about itself and others. Once this is revealed, we are able to see the contradiction; it constitutes a coherence encompassed by a contradiction, and from a hermeneutical point of view this issues into a problem of desire. It is precisely this desire to uncover, reveal, make visible, the truth of the American reality that explains the violent centennial outbreaks of the American antinomies.

On the practical level, a method must be found whereby we deal with the religious history of all the American peoples. I suggest that we might begin by defining this culture as an Aboriginal-Euro-African culture. The terms should not be seen as simply additive or descriptive. The terms are relational. This means that these meanings should always form the background for any discussion of American religion at any historical period. They are not simply additive, that is, I am not suggesting them because I wish to include all the peoples in America in this methodological paradigm. I am saying that once the singularity of a normative tradition is overcome, the problem of inclusion of all peoples

will no longer be at issue. The notion of equality which is part and parcel of the American cultural language must express itself in theoretical terms also; we must work for a meaning of this notion that has relevance for historical method. The question of the meaning of American religion in its revealed or civil forms calls for new theoretical considerations.

In this short essay I have attempted to raise certain theoretical problems in relationship to historical method and historiography of American religion. New understandings of this history will be forthcoming with a change of consciousness; with this I agree, but my emphasis has been directed toward changes on the levels of the intellectual and theoretical expressions of human consciousness.

NOTE

One sees again the influence of Sidney Mead's work *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

I am indebted to works that have come from the history of religions methods and from what has come to be known as the "structural schools." In the former, Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Millard R. Trask (New York, Pantheon Books, 1954), and in the latter Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), and Jacques Derrida's programmatic essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard A. Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), have been of particular importance to me.