

William Cavanaugh, *The End of Religious Violence*, (excerpt on civil religion)

Advocates of liberal democracy tend to be more sympathetic with the idea of Marxism or Nazism as religions than with the idea of a civil religion of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, a wide range of scholars have argued that many liberal democracies rely on a strong civil religion to provide a common meaning and purpose for liberal nation-states. In Gentile's definition, civil religion is not a type of "politicization of religion," in which traditional religion merges with the state. Civil religion, though it may occasionally borrow elements from traditional religion, is a new creation that confers sacred status on democratic institutions and symbols.³⁷ Civil religion is an example of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger call the "invention of tradition." Hobsbawm notes the general agreement that we live in an unliturgical age, and in many ways that is true. The rites and customs that structured the hours, days, and seasons of traditional societies have largely faded in the face of Western individual freedoms. Where this generalization does not apply, however, as Hobsbawm points out, is in the public life of the citizen. Here, liberal democratic societies are every bit as "liturgical" as traditional ones: "Indeed most of the occasions when people become conscious of citizenship as such remain associated with symbols and semi-ritual practices (for instance, elections), most of which are historically novel and largely invented: flags, images, ceremonies and music."³⁸ Rituals which many assume to be ancient are in fact the products of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when rituals were invented in Europe and the United States to stoke a nascent sense of exclusive national loyalty, supplanting previously diffuse loyalties owed to region, ethnic group, class, and church.

According to Carlton Hayes, it is this exclusivity that sets off modern nationalism from previous types of loyalties. Before modernity, people experienced conflicts among their many loyalties to locality and priest, lord and guild, and family: "But nowadays, and herein lies the fundamental difference between us and our ancient and mediaeval and early modern forebears, the

individual is commonly disposed, in case of conflict, to sacrifice one loyalty after another, loyalty to persons, places and ideas, loyalty even to family, to the paramount call of nationality and the national state."³⁹ Nationalism qualifies as a religion because of this exclusivity. It is in its exclusivity—its jealousy—that the nation becomes not merely a substitute for the church, but a substitute for God.

Scholars have long noted the way that nationalism has supplanted Christianity as the predominant public religion of the West. Hayes's 1926 essay, "Nationalism as a Religion," puts forth this idea, which in 1960 he developed into a book entitled *Nationalism: A Religion*.⁴⁰ For Hayes, humans are naturally endowed with a "religious sense," a faith in a power higher than humanity that requires a sense of reverence, usually expressed in external ceremony. Hayes argues that the decline in public Christianity with the advent of the modern state left a vacuum for the religious sense that was filled by the sacralization of the nation, the "enthronement of the national state—*la Patrie*—as the central object of worship."⁴¹ According to Hayes, political religion enjoyed the double advantage of being more tangible than supernatural religion and having the physical means of violence necessary to enforce mandatory worship. Benedict Anderson similarly argues that the nation has replaced the church in its role as the primary cultural institution that deals with death. According to Anderson, Christianity's decline in the West necessitated another way of dealing with the arbitrariness of death. Nations provide a new kind of salvation; my death is not in vain if it is for the nation, which lives on into a limitless future.⁴²

The term civil religion was introduced by Rousseau in the eighteenth century. In the last chapter of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau proposes an explicit civil religion as a cure for the divisive influence of Christianity, which had divided people's loyalties between church and state. Rousseau does not wish to erase Christianity entirely, but to reduce it to a "religion of man" that "has to do with the purely inward worship of Almighty God and the eternal obligations of morality, and nothing more."⁴³ Civil religion, on the other hand, is the fully public cult of the nation-state: "the sovereign is entitled to fix the tenets of a purely civil creed, or profession of faith. These would not be, strictly speaking, dogmas of a religious character, but rather sentiments deemed indispensable for participation in society." Rousseau distinguishes here between civil religion and religion "strictly speaking"; by the latter, he seems to mean what Gentile means by traditional religion. This distinction makes little difference, however, in its practical effect. Civil religion has its dogmas, and the consequences of disobedience are severe: "As for that man who, having committed himself publicly to the state's articles of faith, acts on any occasion as if he does

not believe them, let his punishment be death. He has committed the greatest of all crimes: he has lied in the presence of the laws."²⁴⁴

After the revolution in 1789, there were many in France who took Rousseau's ideas to heart and tried to create an active cult of the French nation. There developed a zealous devotion to the myth of the creation of a new humanity in the revolution. After 1791, Catholicism was actively suppressed and attempts were made to invent structures and rituals to inculcate devotion to France itself. Altars to the fatherland were erected, with copies of the French Constitution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man engraved on metal and in stone above them as objects for worship. Rites of civic baptism and civic funerals were invented. The Declaration of the Rights of Man was declared the "national catechism."²⁴⁵ Most such efforts were short-lived, but France has retained a powerful civil religion, which crystallizes around reverence for its war dead and the sacralization of republican ideals.²⁴⁶

The primary example of civil religion cited by scholars is that of the United States. As early as 1749, Benjamin Franklin had argued for "the Necessity of a *Publick Religion*," by which he meant a cult of the nation and the duties of the citizen.²⁴⁷ Franklin was typical of Enlightenment figures who looked to the model of republican Rome and saw how religion provided a unified sense of civic duty and loyalty. Thomas Jefferson advocated for the "reverence" of the Declaration of Independence and the "holy purpose" of adhesion to it. As Pauline Maier points out, although Jefferson's draft declaration made no reference to God, and although Jefferson was responsible for the complete separation of church and state in Virginia, Jefferson wrote in the language of medieval Christianity about the preservation of physical things associated with the creation of the declaration: "Small things may, perhaps, like the relics of saints, help to nourish our devotion to this holy bond of Union." Of the desk on which he drafted the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson expressed his hope that we might see it "carried in the procession of our nation's birthday, as the relics of the saints are in those of the Church."²⁴⁸ As Maier notes, throughout the nineteenth century, virulently anti-Catholic leaders were inclined to borrow Catholic imagery to describe the nation's founding. The founders were "saints," they raised "altars" of freedom, their houses were "shrines" containing "relics," and so on.²⁴⁹

The American civil religion differs from the French in that it has tended to operate with the support of the churches. American civil religion is a curious blend of Enlightenment and Christian themes and symbols. It is especially marked by what Gentile calls a "transfer of sacredness" from traditional Christianity to the United States itself.²⁵⁰ American civil religion has often, for example, mined the Puritan use of biblical images. The Puritans famously

identified their colony with a new Israel chosen by God, but John Winthrop's "city on the hill" was not America but the fledgling Puritan colony. This was less difficult to justify biblically as long as the church and civil government were intertwined. With the separation of church and state after the American Revolution, however, the new Israel came to be identified not with the church, but with the United States itself. In American civil religion, the new Israel was not to bring the messiah of Israelite prophecy to the world; rather, the United States would save the world through its creation and spread of democracy, freedom, and progress. The messianic form was taken from biblical Christianity, but the content was supplied by Enlightenment themes.²⁵¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, U.S. progress was increasingly identified with the providence of a generic god, to the point of implicitly deifying the nation. Herman Melville's oft-quoted contention in *White Jacket* that "we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time" actually goes beyond the claim to God's blessings and makes the nation itself into a divine reality. Melville continues:

Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterance to his promptings. And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America, but we give alms to the world.²⁵²

Christianity, Judaism, and other traditional faiths in America, which are construed as particularistic and voluntary, coexist with a public civil religion of the United States itself, which embraces the whole of the social order and is more than merely voluntary.

Robert Bellah's famous 1967 article, "Civil Religion in America," sparked significant discussion, coming as it did in the midst of the Vietnam War.²⁵³ Bellah identifies "an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America" that "has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does."²⁵⁴ Bellah argues that the civic rituals of American life revolve around a unitarian god that underwrites America's sense of purpose in the world. This god, however, is not the Christian God. References to Christ and the church are kept to a private, voluntary sphere of worship.²⁵⁵ The implication of Bellah's argument is that the separation of church and state in the United States is *not* the separation of religion and state. Religion as such is not privatized; traditional religion is privatized, while the religion of politics occupies the public realm.

Although Bellah's article attracted a lot of attention, he was by no means the first scholar to identify Americanism as a religion. Will Herberg had

already claimed, "By every realistic criterion, the American Way of Life is the operative religion of the American people."²⁵⁶ Herberg defines *operative* religion in a functionalist way as "the system of norms, values, and allegiances actually functioning as such in the ongoing social life of the community."²⁵⁷ Before Herberg, Carlton Hayes had identified the American religion's saints (the founding fathers), its shrines (Independence Hall), its relics (the Liberty Bell), its holy scriptures (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution), its martyrs (Lincoln), its inquisition (school boards that enforce patriotism), its Christmas (the Fourth of July), and its feast of Corpus Christi (Flag Day). According to Hayes, the flag occupies the same central place in official ritual that the eucharistic host previously held:

Nationalism's chief symbol of faith and central object of worship is the flag, and curious liturgical forms have been devised for "saluting" the flag, for "dipping" the flag, for "lowering" the flag, and for "hoisting" the flag. Men bare their heads when the flag passes by; and in praise of the flag poets write odes and children sing hymns. In America young people are ranged in serried rows and required to recite daily, with hierophantic voice and ritualistic gesture, the mystical formula: "I pledge allegiance to our flag and to the country for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Everywhere, in all solemn feasts and fasts of nationalism the flag is in evidence, and with it that other sacred thing, the national anthem.²⁵⁸

If we think that Hayes is exaggerating the function of the Pledge of Allegiance, we need only consult the author of the pledge, Francis Bellamy, who said that the pledge was meant to sink into schoolchildren through ritual repetition, and added, "It is the same way with the catechism, or the Lord's Prayer."²⁵⁹

According to Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, "nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States, and perhaps in many other countries."²⁶⁰ Marvin and Ingle have identified the flag as the totem object of American civil religion. Their fascinating book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* contains dozens of photographs depicting American reverence for the flag as a sacred object.²⁶¹ The flag is of crucial importance for the U.S. religion because it is that for which Americans will kill and die. For Marvin and Ingle, what makes American patriotism a religion is precisely its ability to organize killing energies. Through close analysis of rituals surrounding war and remembrance of the war dead, Marvin and Ingle argue that it is blood sacrifice on behalf of the nation that constantly renews the nation. The "ultimate sacrifice" for the nation is elaborately ceremonialized in liturgies involving the flag and other

ritual objects. Blood sacrifice is an act of both creation and salvation. At the ceremonies marking the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in 1994, for example, President Bill Clinton remarked of the soldiers that died there both that “[t]hey gave us our world” and that “[t]hey saved the world.”²⁶²

For Marvin and Ingle, the transfer of the sacred from Christianity to the nation-state in Western society is seen most clearly in the fact that authorized killing has passed from Christendom to the nation-state. Christian denominations still thrive in the United States, but as optional, inward-looking affairs. They are not publicly true, “[f]or what is really true in any community is what its members can agree is worth killing for, or what they can be compelled to sacrifice their lives for.”²⁶³ People are not allowed to kill for “sectarian religion,” which is what Gentile means by traditional religion. Only the nation-state may kill. According to Marvin and Ingle, it is this power to organize killing that makes American civil religion the true religion of the U.S. social order.