

INTRODUCTION

In the Winter of 1967, Robert Bellah published his seminal essay on “Civil Religion in America.” In that essay, he defined civil religion as “the religious dimension of political life” and, more specifically, as “a collection of beliefs, symbols and rituals” pertaining to American politics which “exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches” (Bellah 2005). To persuade his audience that such a thing actually existed – something many doubted -- he provided close readings of Presidential speeches and ritual from Washington to Johnson. The red thread that ran through these events, he argued, and the doctrinal core of the American Civil Religion (henceforth: ACR), is the premise that the United States is founded upon, and bound by, a sacred covenant or charter, and the promise that the nation will flourish if it keeps this agreement – and perish if it does not. The unspoken hope in Bellah’s essay is that an enduring set of transcendent commitments, to the values of liberty, justice and equality, revitalized from time to time, and reworked as those times themselves demand, might serve as a restraint on hatred, tyranny, and greed, that is, on the darker angels of the American character.

It is a hope that was disappointed all too soon. Just four months after the publication of Bellah’s essay, on April 4, 1968, those angels descended on Memphis, Tennessee, in the form of an assassin’s bullet that struck down civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr, sparking days of rioting in cities across the country. Then, two months later, on June 5, another bullet felled Robert F. Kennedy, only one day after a victory in

the California Democratic primary had raised hopes that he would beat out Eugene McCarthy for the Democratic nomination, revive the dreams of Camelot, and end the war his brother had started. The RFK assassination set the stage for the tumult of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. While riot police clubbed down demonstrators just a few blocks away, Hubert Humphrey – who had not won, nor even entered, a single primary – was chosen to run against the Republican nominee, Richard M. Nixon. Using the coded language of “states rights”, “law and order” and “traditional values” to appeal to Southern whites, Nixon won a plurality of the vote in November, and an electoral college landslide, besting Humphrey and the segregationist candidate, George Wallace, who had run as an independent. Nixon’s “Southern strategy” would serve as a model for a generation of Republican candidates, leading to a period of GOP dominance of the White House and initiating the gradual transformation of the once Democratic South into a solidly Republican mainstay. In retrospect, one might see the 1968 Presidential campaign as the opening skirmish of the culture wars that would so define American politics during the late 20th century – and on into the 21st. Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, one might even argue that the serial crises of the Nixon years, far from ushering in the politics of civil religion, served rather to usher it *out*. [Ahlstrom ref on this?]

But this was not so apparent at the time, except perhaps to a few particularly astute pundits (Phillips 1969). Despite the disconnect, Bellah’s essay had sparked a lively debate that quickly filled the pages of many journals and edited volumes. In 1975, with the Bicentennial just around the corner, and public reflection on US history in full swing, Bellah decided to weigh in again with a book length study of ACR. Much had happened

since the original study, of course -- bombings, riots, shootings, be-ins, love-ins, die-ins, break-ins, impeachment hearings, presidential resignations, and a lost war, to name just a few -- and the weight of those events was already evident in the title of the new book: *The Broken Covenant*. Where the original civil religion essay had mostly highlighted the persistence of providentialist thinking in American public discourse, the new book tallied up the nation's infractions against its founding covenant, from the genocide against Native Americans, through the sins of chattel slavery and the shame of Jim Crow to the imperialistic ventures of the American century. Gone was the hopeful tone of the first essay. "Today", Bellah warned, "the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell.....The main drift of American society is to the edge of the abyss" (Bellah 1992). Bellah was not just dissecting jeremiads any more; he was delivering one of his own.

While the publication of *The Broken Covenant* generated a new wave of interest in ACR, the torrent turned to a trickle by the early 1980s (Mathisen 1989). Why the sudden decline of interest in ACR? Certainly, it was not due to the oft-prophesied secularization of American politics. America's first "born again" President (Jimmy Carter) was elected in 1976. Four years later, he was ejected from the White House with the help of restive religious conservatives led by ministers-turned-activists who joined together with other social conservatives in the pursuit of a new agenda of "family values." No, if writing on ACR waned during these years, it was not because religion had ceased to matter in American politics; rather, it was because civil religion was no longer the vital center of American politics, and for some time. File it under "Owl of Minerva."

So, why write a new book on the notion of civil religion now, over forty years after Bellah penned his original essay on ACR, and over thirty years after he pronounced

it an “empty and broken shell”? Because the Owl of Minerva may have metaphorphosized into a Phoenix-from-the-Ashes. Consider the following:

On March 13, 2008, ABC News broadcast excerpts from two sermons delivered by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright before Trinity United Church of Christ of Chicago, a large, predominantly black church on the South Side of Chicago, whose members included Presidential hopeful Barack Obama. In the first excerpt, taken from a sermon which he gave on September 16, 2001, Wright suggested that the 9/11 attacks were “America’s chickens coming home to roost”: “We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye... We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards.” The second excerpt was drawn from a 2003 sermon in which Wright argued that the war on drugs and policies of mass incarceration were part of a systematic policy aimed at the black underclass and implied that Federal Government was distributing drugs to its own citizens: “The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing ‘God Bless America.’ No, no, no, God damn America -- that’s in the Bible -- for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme.” In both cases, Wright charged that America’s misfortunes were the consequences of her own sins, and that worse was to come if she did not mend her ways.

The message was not exactly novel. The American Jeremiad is much older than Jeremiah Wright. Its roots can be traced back to the Puritan divines, indeed, to the

Hebrew prophets. Nor is it the monopoly of black preachers. Consider Jerry Falwell's charge "that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way - all of them who have tried to secularize America - I point the finger in their face and say "you helped [9/11] happen." Falwell's logic was the same as Wright's: 9/11 qua divine retribution for America's sins. The only difference was *which* sins were at issue.

Unlike Falwell's Jeremiad, however, Wright's sparked widespread outrage. They were replayed endlessly in the following day and analyzed *ad nauseam* by the punditocracy. The verdict: Wright was convicted of being "anti-American" and "un-patriotic." Others brought additional charges: "anti-Israel" and "anti-Semitic." There were dissenting opinions of course. Wright's defenders – Obama among them – countered that his remarks were being "taken out of context" or "blown out of proportion." They had to be seen against the background of "the black church tradition" or balanced against Wright's lifelong social justice work. Others declared the reactions to be racist as well.

But the furor refused to subside, and on the evening of March 18, with his polling numbers in free fall and his Presidential prospects seemingly in peril, Obama sought to defuse and reframe the debate in his now famous speech on race relations in the United States. The speech was highly successful by most measures. It was widely praised in the media, viewed millions of times on YouTube and quickly lifted Obama's numbers to their pre-Wright levels. Some commentators touted it as the greatest speech on race since the days of Dr. King.

What most commentators failed to notice is the “race speech” was about much more than race. It was also about religion – civil religion. To be exact, the speech analyzed American race relations through the prism of ACR, and *not*, it should be emphasized, through more common frames, such as interest group liberalism, multiculturalism, or black nationalism. The ACR frame was immediately established by the setting: the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, directly across the street from Independence Hall. Not a sacred site of the Civil Rights movement, then -- the Lincoln Memorial, say, or Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta – but a memorial to the birth of the United States.

The setting of the speech was in perfect accord with the opening, which was taken from the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution: “We the People, in order to form a more perfect union.” Was Obama going to distance himself from the prophetic rage of Rev. Wright by embracing the civic republicanism of the Founders? Obama did draw on that tradition. But he quickly wove it together with the Biblical language of the Puritan divines as follows: the American Constitution, began America’s “improbable experiment in democracy”, he argued, but left it “ultimately unfinished”, for “[i]t was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery.” It is precisely this blend of covenant theology and civic republicanism that Bellah had identified as the molecular formula of ACR over thirty years earlier.

Obama did more than recall the terms of the founding charters, however. He refigured them as well. In his reading, the union that must be perfected is not a union between states, but a union between peoples. Echoing Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, Obama argued that the disunion of slavery had required atonement: great

suffering was necessary, generations of “protests and struggle...a civil war and civil disobedience.” And further perfecting the union, he continued, will require more than just changes in law or policy, however important these may be; they will also require both individual sacrifice and national unity and, at a deeper level still, personal transformation and racial reconciliation. Accordingly, Obama closes the “perfect union” speech, not with a list of policy recommendations, but with a story about two different people. His words can only be quoted in full:

There is a young, twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there. And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom. She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat. She did this for a year until her mom got better, and she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too. Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming

into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice. Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

It is a simple and poignant story, redolent with religious tropes: the puzzle of unwarranted suffering, the moral clarity of small children, the virtues of good cheer, the transformation of suffering into compassion, the quest for justice in the world. It is also susceptible of a small-r, republican reading as well, one that recalls the Ancients more than the Prophets: the manifestation of virtue in action, the practice of self-denial, dedication to the common good, the need for civic unity, the redemptive character of the active life, and the importance of distributive justice. That there is a certain affinity between these two ways of viewing the world is no accident of course: successive generations of Western intellectuals have spent the better part of two millennia weaving together Ancient philosophy and Christian theology. Each, by now, is deeply inflected by the other.

Ashley's story has another feature worth stressing: it is deeply moving. And the simple fact that so many Americans find Ashley's story – and Obama's speeches in general -- so moving, suggests that the ACR may be not be, or may not any longer be, just a "broken and empty shell." Of course, the emotional resonances of Obama's rhetoric

is partly due to his oratorical abilities. But only partly. It is also due to the content of the speeches, which echo phrases and stories and tropes that we have heard or read before, in school, in church or on television, and because they connect us to the past, the history of the United States, and to the future, to our better selves and highest aspirations. In sum, Bellah's elegy to the ACR may have been premature. Re-file it under "Phoenix-from-the Ashes."

How far this Phoenix will fly remains to be seen. But that is not the subject of this book. Its subject is the origins, evolution and behavior of civil religion, and of its two chief rivals, religious nationalism and liberal secularism. The book will be in eight chapters, three on origins, three on evolution, and two on behavior. The aim of the book, to put it less metaphorically is to reconceptualize, renarrate and reevaluate civil religion.

Chapter 1 sets forth a neo-Weberian theory of civil religion. Neo-Weberian, because its point of departure is Weber's claim that the emergence of Judaism, Christianity and other "world-rejecting religions" introduced a deep and ultimately irreconcilable tension between religion and politics. The central argument of the chapter is that civil religion is one means of stabilizing this tension within the context of a modern polity characterized by popular sovereignty in some form. Others include liberal secularism, religious nationalism and political religion. It will further be argued that: i) none of these four "solutions" are entirely stable; ii) one typically gives rise to another; iii) US politics is characterized by a rivalry between liberal secularism, religious nationalism and civil religion; iv) the importance of civil religion, and the unimportance of political religion, is one thing that sets American politics apart from European politics,

one aspect, that is, of “American exceptionalism.” Distinguishing between these four “solutions” to the religion and politics “problem” not only sheds light on the dynamics of American politics; it also avoids some of the confusions that arose about Bellah’s analysis of ACR, and helps place ACR in a wider, comparative and historical context.

Chapter 2 dissects the Biblical background of religio-politics in early America. It argues that the covenant tradition of the Old Testament is more ambiguous and polyvocal than earlier analyses have allowed. While it is no doubt true that the Pentateuch and the prophets can be read in covenantal terms, I argue that they also provide scriptural warrants for other forms of religio-politics, including religious nationalism and liberal sectarianism. Further, while it is also true that Puritan thinking was mainly governed by covenant theology, it is also true that liberal sectarianism makes its initial appearance in early New England (in the so-called antinomian controversies) as does religious nationalism (in the early wars with the native population).

Chapter 3 analyzes the classical background of ACR. Much has been written about the influence of “classical” or “civic republicanism” on the American founders. However, much confusion has arisen from the failure to set American republicanism against the classical model. Accordingly, this chapter opens with a discussion of the republican tradition from Ancient Greece to Stuart. This makes it possible to dispel one myth – that republicanism and Christianity are inherently opposed to one another. It also sheds some light on the ongoing debate about the relative influence of classical republicanism and Lockean liberalism on the American founding. To this end, I examine the affinities and disaffinities between republicanism and Christianity, the emergence of Christian republicanism in England and America, and the beginnings of liberal

secularism in the Jeffersonian era. I argue that Christian republicanism was the dominant form of ACR during this period, and that liberal secularism had not yet taken on an anti-religious form at this time.

Chapter 4 narrates the history of American religio-politics through the Civil War to Reconstruction. The most important development of this period is the emergence of full-blown religious nationalism of a Protestant imprint. Key catalysts: war, specifically the War of 1812 and the Civil War, which led to a formal cult of blood sacrifice institutionalized in Memorial Day observances; and pluralism, especially the growing presence of Catholics in the Northeast, along with the appearance of Mormonism, which unleashed a nativist backlash amongst “Anglo-Saxon” Protestants. Other important developments during this period include the emergence of romantic – and often a-political – forms of religious individualism, the development of a racialized version of civic republicanism in the South, and the re-emergence of civil religion in the public theology of Abraham Lincoln.

Chapter 5 continues the story from the beginnings of the Progressive era through the end of the New Deal. The most consequential development in this era was the crystallization of a radicalized form of liberal secularism, which aimed to expel religion from the public square, and denied the relevance of morality to public life. The key agents of this process, it is argued, were secular intellectuals who used naturalistic ideologies such as social Darwinism to decrease the influence of the Protestant establishment in higher education and public life – so as to increase their own.

Chapter 6 focuses on the post-WWII era, particularly the years 1968-2008. It is argued that the “culture wars” that so defined the politics of this era can largely

understood as a conflict between a radicalized form of liberal secularism and a post-Protestant version of Christian nationalism. Against this backdrop, the election of Barack Obama can be seen as a revival and reconfiguration of the vital center of American politics: civil religion. Other key figures in this restoration of civility include post-fundamentalist Christian leaders, such as Rick Warren, and post-secularist liberal intellectuals, such as John Rawls.

Chapter 7 assesses the current conjuncture from a normative perspective. It opens with critiques of Christian nationalism and liberal secularism, arguing that both are internally inconsistent – i.e., that Christian nationalism is un-Christian and liberal secularism illiberal. It then sets forth a positive vision of civil religion as a regulative ideal for political practice. It asks what kind of civil religion is morally defensible in a pluralistic society such as contemporary America, what an ethos of political civility would entail for norms of public engagement, and how such an ethos might be cultivated. It is argued that political civility would be increased by improved civic and religious education, particularly in public schools, and by a reinvigoration of civic ritual, particularly on national holidays.

Chapter 8 assesses the current conjuncture from a social-scientific perspective. Echoing the ancients, it argues that unrestrained avarice and militarism have been, and still are, the two greatest dangers to the American republic, avarice because it undermines individual commitment to the common good, and militarism because it subsumes principles of justice to considerations of *Realpolitik*. A neo-classical theory of moral corruption is elaborated and various institutional antidotes are proposed.

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