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## In God We Trust: The Cold War and the Creation of Modern American Civil Religion

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## **In God We Trust:**

### **The Cold War and the Creation of Modern American Civil Religion**

*Julian Theseira*

In the article “Civil Religion in America,” Robert N. Bellah claims that “there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America” and that this “religion” or “religious dimension” has “its own seriousness and integrity.”<sup>1</sup> Bellah sees this public religious dimension as being expressed in a set of “beliefs, symbols and rituals” which he calls the “American civil religion.”<sup>2</sup> He cites the example of a presidential inauguration as being an “important ceremonial event” of this American civil religion that “reaffirms the religious legitimation of the highest political authority.”<sup>3</sup> Bellah suggests that American civil religion was something organic that grew out of America’s unique history and traditions and he traces its genealogy back to America’s Founding Fathers. This paper will however attempt to challenge this conception of American civil religion by historicizing some of its rituals and symbols and examining them within their historical contexts. Drawing on recent scholarship proffered by Jonathan P. Herzog in “The Spiritual Industrial Complex,” this paper will show that rather than being an organic and inherent part of American tradition, American civil religion, especially in its modern and contemporary form was born of conscious policies during the early years of the Cold War. Furthermore, this paper will also draw on Herzog’s work and to show that certain features of American civil religion were

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<sup>1</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1970), 168.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

results of the secular, especially the political sphere, legitimizing the religious sphere rather than the other way around as Bellah had believed.<sup>4</sup>

Bellah begins his article with an analysis of President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address noting that Kennedy mentions God three times in his address and that these references are similar to those made by other American presidents on solemn occasions in the past.<sup>5</sup> Kennedy's declaration that he swore the oath of office before "you" (the people) and before "Almighty God" is supposed to be a manifestation of the American conception that ultimate sovereignty lies with God.<sup>6</sup> The motto "In God we trust" and the words "under God" in the pledge of allegiance are also taken as further manifestations of what Bellah thinks is a key idea in American political theory. The significance of this idea is that God is the ultimate judge of what is right and wrong, not the will of the people.<sup>7</sup> Kennedy's other references to God in his address are also understood as indicators that America and the American people have an obligation to carry out "God's will on Earth."<sup>8</sup> Bellah claims that these beliefs were part of the motivating spirit of the American Founding Fathers and that they have been "present in every generation since."<sup>9</sup> He cites the references to the Divine made by George Washington during his inaugural address and by Abraham Lincoln during the Gettysburg address as evidence of the continuity and development of American civil religious beliefs and practices from the time of the Founding Fathers up to the present.<sup>10</sup> Bellah also notes how President Kennedy's references to God in his inaugural speech are very vague and he did not refer to any particular religion and this allows him to link President Kennedy with President Eisenhower who reportedly once said "Our

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 92.

<sup>5</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 169.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 174, 177.

government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith – and I don't care what it is" in order to show that their general statements about God are products of the long history of the separation of church and state in America and that these statements do not reflect the nature of their personal beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

However, a closer examination of American civil religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as done by Jonathan Herzog challenges many of Bellah's claims. Herzog shows us that while multiple presidents may have referenced God on solemn occasions, these Divine references had rather different meanings depending on the larger political context in which they were used. They were not just simply rites of an American civil religion serving to legitimize political authority. In the case of President Eisenhower, Herzog argues that his remarks were actually part of a larger political project to frame the Cold War and the struggle with the Soviet Union as essentially a Manichaeian spiritual war between two irreconcilable faiths, namely Judeo-Christianity on the side of good and Communism on the side of evil and that America was a Judeo-Christian nation fighting for the good of the world.<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower's frequent public references to God and his public prayers were not part of an organic civil religious tradition dating back to the time of the Founding Fathers but were rather part of his efforts to draw together political, military and religious institutions into a "spiritual-industrial complex" to resacralize America after the secularization of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century so that America would be ready to fight the holy war against communism.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, because President Eisenhower himself came to office not belonging to any particular denomination while being personally and openly religious, and also because his project would unite formerly disparate groups of Catholic, Protestants and Jews for a common cause, his claim to not care what faith America chose can be understood to mean that

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 170–171.

<sup>12</sup> Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 93–98.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17–20, 70, 161–163.

while he did not preference any particular denomination over another, he did however earnestly believe that America's faith was rooted in Judeo-Christian beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, Herzog also claims that though President Kennedy referenced God in his inaugural address, he only did so because it had become an ingrained trope in American political culture that he could not ignore.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Eisenhower however, Kennedy was much less open about his personal religiosity and rarely spoke about his religious beliefs nor prayed publicly unlike his predecessor.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Herzog argues that Kennedy understood the Cold War in primarily material terms, and the struggle between the USA and the Soviet Union hinged on material strength as manifested for example by nuclear arms.<sup>17</sup> Kennedy's understanding of the Cold War differed fundamentally from the spiritual understanding of the Cold War that his predecessor Eisenhower had. Hence when Kennedy talked about the need for America to "bear the burden" of the "struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself," he did not see this struggle as being a divinely ordained Cold War mission that America had to fulfill.<sup>18</sup> Rather, he considered this struggle important because the problems he mentioned were real material problems that were driving communism's appeal in the developing world and that they required material and not spiritual solutions.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, Herzog's work shows us that certain symbols and practices of American civil religion such as the national motto "In God We Trust" and the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance that Bellah had taken to be part of an old historical tradition of American civil religious belief that ultimate sovereignty came from God were actually novel products of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 59, 96, 148, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>18</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 172.

<sup>19</sup> Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 183-184.

particular circumstances during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, Herzog argues that some practices such as the inclusion of “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance were not examples of religion legitimating the political the way Bellah saw it, but were rather cases of the political legitimating religion as they were the fruits of conscious political decisions. For example, Herzog reminds us that the Pledge of Allegiance as it was originally written in 1892 by the Christian socialist Francis Bellamy was secular with no reference to the Divine.<sup>20</sup> It was only in 1954 that Congress unanimously voted to include the phrase “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance and President Eisenhower signed the resolution into law.<sup>21</sup> This is a clear example of politics being used to legitimate the religious dimension of America.

Likewise, Herzog also reminds us that while “In God We Trust” had served as an unofficial motto for currency and was inscribed on some American coins since 1865, President Theodore Roosevelt had actually tried to stop the practice in 1905. His attempt failed in the face of strong opposition from a coalition of religious leaders, patriotic organizations, and politicians. However it was only in 1955 that Congress voted that the phrase “In God We Trust” be inscribed on all American currency including paper money. Moreover, it was only in 1956 that Congress voted to adopt “In God We Trust” as the national motto of the USA. This is another example of politics legitimizing the religious dimension of America. The example of the national motto also challenges Bellah’s notion that American civil religious practices grew out of an organic and continuous civil religion tradition in America.

In conclusion, by historicizing some of the symbols, beliefs and practices of American civil religion, they are shown to be the products of political actions, some of them fairly recent. They are examples of political authority being used to legitimize the religious dimension of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 104–105.

America rather than being examples of the religious dimension legitimizing political authority as Bellah had claimed.<sup>22</sup> In light of this, Bellah's conception of the organic and continuous nature of American civil religion and that it is a part of a tradition dating back to the Founding Fathers seems very tenuous. Bellah's article also demonstrates just how resilient and pervasive some of the products and ideas created by the "spiritual-industrial complex" of the 1950s are that they appear to be organic and inherent parts of American society and tradition so much so that Bellah is unable to recognize neither their novelty nor their influence on his ideas. However, all is not lost for Bellah as his idea of civil religion serving as a conduit for the religious dimension of America to legitimate political authority seems to be manifested by the practices, beliefs and policies of the modern American Right. Nevertheless, as Herzog shows us, even the modern American Right is very much shaped by the legacy of the "spiritual-industrial complex" of the 1950s. Therefore historicizing it also helps us to better understand it and shows us that much of the religious heritage of America that the American Right purportedly defends may be younger than they realize.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 171.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 211, 215–216.