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The Religion of Communism and the Spiritual Stalemate

Brendan O'Donnell

In his article “Civil Religion in America,” Robert N. Bellah argues that the United States of America has unified around civil religion during “times of trial,” defined as moments when America has faced serious situations that have threatened to fundamentally change the country. The first time of trial was the Revolutionary War, the second the Civil War, and the third time of trial, which at the time of his writing was just developing, was “the problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world, a world seeking to attain many of the things, material and spiritual, that we [Americans] have already attained.”¹ This third time of trial refers to America’s realizing a role in helping developing countries achieve the level of economic prosperity and spiritual stability emphasized in the American model. Bellah predicts that this third time of trial would create a new transnational sovereignty that would incorporate American civil religion to create a new, international civil religion.² This international civil religion would unite the entire world around spiritual symbols and concepts common to all cultures, regardless of the personal religious beliefs of the individuals living in those places. America aimed to use an international civil religion as a weapon against the Soviet Union’s godless Communism. While America certainly tried to create an international civil religion during the Cold War, it failed for two reasons: the first is that Communism was already providing a set of symbols and concepts that would need to be overcome to establish those affiliated with American civil society; and the second is that the U.S., trying to impose a world civil religion alone in the absence of an appropriate transnational body, gave up the spiritual battle, which had stalemated and been

¹ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970 [1967]), 184.

² *Ibid*, 186.

overshadowed by material accomplishments, effectively ending efforts to establish an international civil religion.

Bellah and Jonathan P. Herzog, author of *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War*, each provide their own definition of civil religion; Bellah defines it as “the public religious dimension... expressed in a series of beliefs, symbols, and rituals,”³ while Herzog provides a more purpose-driven definition, calling it “the use of sacred vocabulary, imagery, and prophecy to bolster the legitimacy of the secular institutions.”⁴ Even though both Bellah and Herzog based their definitions on American case studies, both definitions can apply to civil religion outside the American context as well. Communism in the Soviet Union, for example, had the qualities of civil religion as defined by both Bellah and Herzog; strongly rooted in the public sphere, Communism operated across society using beliefs, symbols, and prophecy that ultimately bolstered the legitimacy of the secular state. Communism enshrined a belief in dialectical materialism, “a conviction that humans alone could order the chaotic universe and achieve perfection,”⁵ which was, in many ways, a counter-belief to the faith in a god that is an integral part of most religions; given that humans maintain sovereignty over themselves while working within the confines of strict historical processes, they cannot be subject to an all-knowing and all-powerful god. This doctrine was used to legitimize the Communist government in the Soviet Union. By arguing that the task of ordering and perfecting the world fell to humans, the government was able to justify the control and central planning characteristic of the country during the early Cold War. This ties into another part of Bellah's argument: under a civil religion, “the will of the people is not

³ Ibid, 171.

⁴ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 32.

⁵ Ibid, 41.

itself the criterion of right and wrong” and, by extension, “there is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged.”⁶ Communism, aiming to resolve “the sin of exploitation at the hands of an evolving economic system,” offered a savior: “an entire labor class, the proletariat, to bring about the ‘last days.’”⁷ The existence of the proletariat gave the state a higher purpose by which it could determine right and wrong: an action would be “right” if it went toward creating an environment through which this savior-class could arise and purify the world. State actions could thus be justified according to the immediate goal of facilitating the rise of the proletariat, which fell under the broader doctrine of dialectical materialism. While these beliefs were not religious in the traditional sense, they legitimated the Soviet Union along well-defined logical lines in the same way that religion and religious imagery could. Perhaps most importantly, the civil religion of Communism was not specific to the Soviet Union; both dialectical materialism and the proletariat called for international unity. While the Soviet Union had little success turning its state civil religion into an international civil religion, the fact that this civil religion was inclusive enough that it could theoretically expand internationally meant that American civil religion could not fill a void in the international sphere by default. Were American civil religion to become an international civil religion, it would need to compete with and prove itself universally superior to Soviet civil religion first. Thus, Communism, the Soviet civil religion, served as a competitor for American civil religion in the international sphere and made it hard for the U.S. to create an international civil religion.

Bellah predicted that the success in the “third time of trial” would create a new set of symbols embodied by a “genuine transnational sovereignty,” eventually resulting in the “the

⁶ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, 171.

⁷ Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 53.

American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion of the world.”⁸ Bellah was partially right; the spiritual-industrial complex did create new symbols. Symbols unifying Americans around religious themes began appearing during the Cold War in ways that they had never appeared before. The words “In God We Trust” were added to international stamps and printed money.⁹ The Pledge of Allegiance was amended to add the words “under God.”¹⁰ The motto of the U.S. was changed from “E Pluribus Unum,” which means “one out of many,” to “In God We Trust.”¹¹ An expedition called the Freedom Train traveled around the country in 1947 bearing America’s founding documents, including many religious ones to emphasize the country’s Christian basis.¹² However, despite this rise of symbols around civil religion, and despite the U.S.’s intention to use these symbols to show the world the “spiritual quality on which American success had been based,”¹³ these symbols remained localized. While peoples around the world adopted Christianity, this was different from the idea of a civil religion. The civil religion established so strongly in the United States did not spread outward. No shared religious symbols arose on the international level like they arose in the U.S.

The U.S. did try to create this international civil religion. In the internal memo NSC-68, the State Department’s Policy Planning department advocated active checking of Soviet expansion worldwide, while simultaneously redefining the Cold War as a “fundamental conflict of values, ideas, and morals.”¹⁴ America painted itself as the champion of religion internationally and distributed many different types of pro-religion propaganda throughout the developing world, including the film reels, the radio programs, and physical fliers. However, the

⁸ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, 186.

⁹ Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 101, 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 102.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 108.

¹² *Ibid*, 81.

¹³ *Ibid*, 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 125.

spiritual battle stalemated. Communism did not lead to widespread conversions across America as was initially feared.¹⁵ Nor did American faith succeed in undermining the Soviet Union. The entire spiritual battle became overshadowed by material accomplishments. The launching of the satellite Sputnik highlighted the U.S.'s technological shortcomings—which Kennedy used in part to win his presidency.¹⁶ Kennedy saw the end of the Cold War arising not from the U.S.'s “casting itself as the world’s moral and spiritual guardian” but by “feeding, clothing, and educating the vulnerable masses.”¹⁷ In the battle to make “American civil religion... one part of a new civil religion of the world,” the U.S. had no allies. Without a “genuine transnational sovereignty,” the task of establishing an international civil religion fell on the United States. As Communism continued to provide strong competition in the international spiritual sphere, it became apparent that the conflict between the two ideological monoliths would not be resolved by the formation of an international civil religion. When the spiritual battle was deemed less effective for the overturning of Communism than material solutions and, as a result, was abandoned, so too was the idea of a world civil religion.

The U.S. project of a world civil religion failed. When Nixon and Khrushchev met in Moscow, their so-called Kitchen Debate focused not on religion, but on material goods—technology, household items, and wealth.¹⁸ Kennedy won a campaign that included an argument that the Soviet Union needed to be fought materially instead of spiritually.¹⁹ Communism had maintained its strength in the Soviet Union, well established there as a civil religion, and had made international expansion of American civil religion difficult; as it existed as an civil religion that called for universality, it provided competition for American civil religion on the

¹⁵ Ibid, 185.

¹⁶ Ibid, 183.

¹⁷ Ibid, 184.

¹⁸ Ibid, 183.

¹⁹ Ibid.

international sphere, and thus prevented American civil religion from filling the international void by default. Likewise, without the “transnational sovereignty” that Bellah predicted, America was the lone fighter in favor of an international civil religion, and when they rerouted the battle in the material direction, the spiritual battle died out completely. The Cold War had changed. It was no longer a battle for the souls of the world, but for technology.

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