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Bad Religion

William Wiebe

The early Cold War era—marred as it was by a virulent, reactionary anticommunism—saw for Jonathan Herzog the construction of a spiritual-industrial complex clearly distinguishable from Robert Bellah’s notion of the traditional undertakings of American civil religion. This religious revival constituted “America’s counterideology,” springing from the “deliberate and managed use of societal resources [...] in the late 1940s and 1950s” to “reendow religion with social, cultural, and political meaning” in the face of Communism’s own ideological zeal.¹ Though Bellah attempts to condense the evolution of public faith under the homogenizing umbrella of civil religion, the spiritual-industrial complex defies such simplifications. Amidst the new fears of the Cold War, it inaugurated a new relationship between the political and religious spheres, marshaling domestic resources to inculcate religious belief from the top down.² Indeed, in investigating the claims Herzog makes in *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, we would do well to instead revisit Phillippe Burrin’s idea of political religion—a mimetic program that absorbs religious culture into the political domain, offering a “counter-society” that “finds its fullest expression when coercion and intimidation are coupled with the organization of enthusiasm.”³ This paper regards the history of the religio-political relationship in America as a dynamic one, arguing that the antebellum strength of civil religion dwindled through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries until finally being

¹ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 76, 6, 7, 67.

² Herzog, 7.

³ Phillippe Burrin, “Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept,” *History and Memory* 9, no. 1-2 (Fall 1997), 332.

extinguished by the Cold War, which saw the fabrication of a hierarchically-directed political religion in its stead.⁴

In stating that there exists “an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America,” Bellah contends that the “political realm [contains] a religious dimension” founded in a shared Judeo-Christian heritage that manifests in “a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals.”⁵ This premise of civil religion seems patent, agreeing with the “process by which a minimal religious reference was incorporated into the political culture” that Burrin suggests in his own definition.⁶ Bellah, however, continues. American civil religion, in his view, hearkens to a constant and pervasive “obligation [...] to carry out God’s will on earth,” offering “a transcendent goal for the political process.”⁷ Holding that civil religion has played an active, foundational role throughout the American project, Bellah argues that the religion’s role persists as more than a framing device or rhetorical flourish—that God himself locates our notion of sovereignty and offers the “higher criterion” against which all political actions are judged.⁸ Yet this extension remains largely unsubstantiated: while Bellah cites the words of political actors and historical commentators as evidence, he neither establishes his transcendent notion of civil religion as a consistent through line of American political life nor demonstrates its operative function in postbellum political decision-making (not to mention its impact outside of the oratorical/political sphere, where he argues it stands at the nexus of “the Western religious and philosophical tradition and the common beliefs of ordinary Americans”).⁹ Indeed, Bellah’s most concrete examples of God’s static position at the base of the American political totem—“the motto, ‘In

⁴ Antebellum and postbellum both occur here, as in common nomenclature, as designations of the pre- and post-Civil War periods.

⁵ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 168, 171.

⁶ Burrin, 327.

⁷ Bellah, 172.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 172, 169-170, 171.

⁹ Bellah, 183.

God we trust,’ as well as the inclusion of the phrase ‘under God’ in the pledge to the flag”—both trace to the “Congressional process of sacralization” effected by Herzog’s spiritual-industrial complex.¹⁰

So does Bellah fall trap to the revisionist tautology that Herzog warns against, seeing confirmation of a sustained American “dependence upon God” in the Cold War reifications of the “connection between religion and nationalism.”¹¹ Herzog, in contrast, maintains that civil religion’s initial importance in incubating and guarding “public morality” in the incipient American state—and, thus, “[fortifying] society against forces of individualism”—lost much of its potency in the postbellum era of secularization.¹² Against Bellah’s idea of an unbroken religious dependence, Herzog demonstrates that the waning of America’s originary civil religion reflected in Roosevelt’s vestigial “use of the sacred to legitimize the secular” in World War II gave way to a historically divergent process of religious revival at the start of the Cold War.¹³ This revival relied on an alliance of political, military, and business leaders—the loci of societal power—who came together with clergymembers to form “interlocking directorates” that “pooled political, economic, and cultural power” and coordinated “mutually-reinforcing” efforts to propose and impose their vision of a more religious American society.¹⁴ The “tenuous consensus” reached among the powerbrokers elicited a new manifestation of American religious belief—a political religion based on the exercise of power to intimidate enemies (i.e., Communists) and organize enthusiasm in their meticulously crafted vision.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid., 171.

Herzog, 87.

¹¹ Ibid., 187, 8, 3.

¹² Ibid., 20, 78.

¹³ Ibid., 32, 179, 20.

¹⁴ Ibid., 161, 162.

¹⁵ Herzog, 186.

Burrin, 332.

Though this political religion ostensibly drew on “the secular to legitimize the sacred,” it effectively ensured that religion remained a subsidiary of political power.¹⁶ For religion itself was merely the means used to combat the Communist ideology: the ends were ultimately political. Where American leaders saw Communism as “a dangerous religion,” “genuine religious faith” seemed “a powerful weapon in the anti-Communist arsenal.”¹⁷ The secular institutions of society joined hands to inculcate religious fervor in the hopes of overpowering their common ideological enemy, not out of any concern for appeasing particular religious leaders or faiths.¹⁸ While sacralization superficially extolled religious values, it comprised less a genuine revival of individual belief than an externalized glorification of “outward appearances of religiosity”: it presented as the “exaltation of acts over beliefs,” “faith in faith” itself.¹⁹ The generative political power of this process lay in a “conflation of religion with Americanism,” the creation of a “national religion” that would paradoxically oppose and endanger the “traditional faiths” that had lent their essences to it.²⁰ The transformation of religion from “a proscriptive entitlement into a prescriptive obligation” was effected through the deliberate development of the “spiritual component” of Americanism, rather than the veneration of any particular faith denomination.²¹ Outwardly, it appeared religion had achieved a true revival of belief, an autonomous sacralization of society; however, it remained merely an instrument, beholden to the political needs of anticommunism. Religion would be in vogue only so long as was politically necessary.

¹⁶ Herzog, 179.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 174-176.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 177, 178.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 79, 76.

Thus, the demise of religious fervor according with the continued progression of the Cold War was caused by the shift in political attitudes toward the Communist threat. As “harmony through strength” became the calling card of American Cold War policy, so did that particular articulation of political religion lose relevance.²² When societal leaders stopped directing Americans towards religion, Americans stopped marching towards it.²³ Given, then, that the “democratized exercises” of religious fervor that characterized early America stand distinct from the top-down administration of faith during the Cold War, where does a post-civil religion, post-political religion America align today?²⁴ The most apt answer seems to lie in an amalgam of the two. We retain the external trappings of Bellah’s civil religion—including the Cold War reifications he cites—alongside a modified Americanism (though it manifests as a more traditional nationalism), while that uniquely conservative political religion has, for the most part, relinquished its hold over the reigns of power to become the basis of participatory political groups bereft of Burrin’s “conquest and monopolization of power.”

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²² Herzog, 184, 189.

²³ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7, 20.