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Heritage and Choice in American Religion

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Flashback / “Heritage and Choice in American Religion”:
An Unpublished Essay by Robert N. Bellah

Heritage and Choice in American Religion

by Robert N. Bellah

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After nearly 300 years of relentless criticism (Spinoza’s TRACTATUS THEOLOGICO-POLITICUS was published in 1670) traditional religion is still around. While the criticism has not been without effect it has certainly not in any straightforward sense been answered. Yet in terms of tangible measures the vitality of traditional religion, at least in America, seems to be very considerable. This seems to suggest that traditional religion viewed as a social institution continues to fulfill certain functions, both social and personal, regardless of the controversies of the intellectuals. This is not to say that the controversies of intellectuals are unimportant – we will return to them later – but we should not let them obscure for us the role of religion for unintellectual (most) people.

Historical identity

In a society which began its political existence in 1776, in which most economic organizations are less than one hundred years old, and in which most individuals have virtually no knowledge of their families more than two generations ago, it is notable

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that the major religious bodies trace themselves back two or three thousand years. Certain events of the ancient past still have the most immediate significance for religious people. Some of them, for example the Exodus from Egypt or the Crucifixion of Christ, are reenacted in periodic rituals – the Jewish Passover and the Christian Eucharist. Besides the common concern with the events of Biblical history each religious subgroup has its special historical preoccupations: the Jesuits with St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Lutherans with Martin Luther, the Mormons with Joseph Smith and so on. The special concern of religious groups with the past is not primarily a form of antiquarian curiosity. This concern is closely related to the very reason for the existence of the religious group itself. The group exists in order to transmit what is felt to be a fundamental truth about reality which was revealed through or discovered or clarified by one or more significant figures of the past.

The enormous variety of American religious bodies can be seen from one point of view as a living museum of three thousand years of religious history. Each religious group can be traced to its point of historical origin and many of its present features can be explained in terms of the conditions prevailing then. For example the Catholic Church in its variety of religious orders provides examples of diverse solutions to problems of the religious life in relation to society which have arisen from the earliest centuries of the era to the most recent times. A response to almost every phase of Reformation history is represented in America by at least one small sect or church. Even the brief span of American history has produced, in response to different sets of social conditions, such groups as the Disciples of Christ, the Mormons and the Christian Scientists. Of course contemporary religious groups cannot be explained simply as relics or fossils of some past historic situation. All of them are living in and responding to the milieu in which they exist, even those like the Hutterites who remain most tenaciously isolationists. But on the other hand no one of them can be understood without reference to the past which has bequeathed it so many features of organization and outlook.

American religion is not, of course, just a formless congeries of historical precipitates. The capacity of a large number of extremely diverse religious groups to survive and prosper in America is a fact with which any interpretation of American religion must conjure, but nevertheless the pattern of American religious life is far from random. One group of religious bodies, that deriving from the Calvinist and sectarian wings of the Reformation, was for long numerically in the ascendant and because of its close connection with the very formation of the American ethos, has been influential beyond any consideration of numbers. Any analysis of American religion as a whole must take this group of reformed churches as its primary point of departure. Other religious groups can then be dealt with from this reference point,

indicating the degree to which they have adapted to, remained isolated from or altered the dominant religious orientation. The historical moment most immediately in the background of American religion is the Protestant Reformation.

It is precisely the characteristic of the form of society which the Reformation Churches did so much to bring about, that is a society in rapid motion – change and development are its essence. The Protestant Churches have had, repeatedly, to face consequences which were unintended and often undesired. And in order to exist and play a role in this rapidly changing society they have had to undergo major alterations in their own structure and outlook at frequent intervals. In fact, how to evaluate and deal with this rapidly changing society has been one of the major problems of the American Church.

One of the central aspects of this confrontation has been the place and meaning of tradition in the church's outlook. This, as has already been noted, is a general problem of religion, but it takes a special saliency in a society which, more than any previous society, is in many respects opposed to tradition and in fact highly destructive of tradition. If this anti-traditional tendency of modern society were simply alien to the Protestant position then the Protestant Church could unambivalently deplore it. But the fact is that the rationalizing tendencies within Protestantism were one of the chief components of the anti-traditional orientation of modern society. The problem for American Protestantism, then, has been both serious and complex. The Reformed churches, for all their rationalism, have not abandoned tradition. In fact, the Reformation was justified with what was formally, at least is a highly traditionalistic argument, namely that it was returning the church to the pure forms of primitive Christianity. Except, perhaps, for the Unitarians (and even there the issue is debatable) none of the Protestant groups have chosen to stand on purely rationalistic grounds – all have made some recourse to tradition, though of course the very terms of the rational-traditional contrast have undergone great changes in the past three and a half centuries.

For the moment I wish to put aside the problematic nature of the relation between religion and tradition in America and consider its meaning for the average man. In a society in rapid motion religion more than most aspects of life has seemed stable, connected with the valued past and capable of providing an orientation for the individual based not on the new and the transient but on eternal verities. This has not, because of the predominantly favorable attitude toward progressive democratic society of Protestantism (Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish attitudes with some exceptions have tended to go along on this point), been a major point of strain in the society. One could be “traditionally religious” without feeling alienated from or opposed to “modern society.” Fundamentalist groups for whom “modern” equals “sin” are

only partial exceptions to this generalization. They are very selectively opposed to aspects of modern life and have by no means been massively opposed to modern economic and political institutions. An adequate consideration of these problems would require an analysis of the relation between religion and social class, race, region and so on. For the purposes at hand I wish to restrict myself to the most general level of consideration.

There is no doubt that stability of orientation toward the basic problem of meaning and the regular recurrence of worship and ceremony have positive values for many individuals. They provide not only a focus of individual identity but an important expression of common identity especially for the family. It is for this reason that baptism, religious weddings and funerals continue to be salient for so many Americans. The individual congregation also provides a limited focus on “mechanical solidarity,” to use Durkheim’s term, between persons of usually similar background. While detailed specification of moral norms has long since ceased to be a function of religious groups, religion continues to provide a generalized sanction for “morality.” What is meant is, by and large, middle class or “bourgeois” morality, though lower-class sects may insist on it even more vehemently than the more comfortable churches. The close meshing of religious life with stable and established tradition, with overtones of home, mother and childhood, has made it difficult for many Americans to see the church as a place where startling intellectual innovation or dramatic social reform should emerge. But before we accept too quickly the critical conclusion that religion in America has been made captive by an alien culture or has been completely “privatized” we should remember to how great an extent that culture is itself a product of the religious tradition and how important for the “public” sectors of life a stable private sector can be. But religion in America is not only private; it is also public. It is to this aspect of it that we now turn.

The Civil Religion

Besides the “private” religious organizations in America we can also observe religious acts and language in connection with many official public occasions. Indeed the more solemn the occasion the more apt it is to have a religious aspect. It is this aspect of religion in America that I am calling the civil religion, though to what extent I differ from those who say that “the American Way of Life” is the real religion in America will soon become evident.

As a way of dealing with a complex subject in a short compass I would like to take President Kennedy's inaugural address of 20 January 1961 as an example and a clue to the American civil religion. That address began:

We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom-symbolizing an end as well as a beginning-signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and to abolish all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe-the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

And it concludes:

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice that we shall ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.

I have quoted the three places in this brief address in which Kennedy mentioned the name of God. I believe that if we could understand why he mentioned God, the way in which he did and what he meant to say in those three references we would understand American civil religion. But this is not a simple or obvious task and American students of religion would probably differ widely in their interpretation of these passages.

First let us consider the placing of the three references. They occur in the two opening paragraphs and in the closing paragraph, thus providing a sort of frame for the more concrete remarks which form the middle part of the speech. Looking beyond this particular speech we would find that similar references to God are almost invariably to be found in the pronouncements of American presidents on solemn occasions, though not in the working messages that the president sends to congress on various concrete issues. How then are we to interpret this placing of references to God?

Some would feel that the passages I have quoted reveal the essentially irrelevant role of religion in the very secular society which is America. The placing of the references in this speech as well as more generally in public life indicate that religion has "only a ceremonial significance," that it gets only a sentimental nod which serves largely to placate the more unenlightened members of the community, before going

on to the really serious business with which religion has nothing whatever to do. A cynical observer might even say that an American president has to mention God or risk losing votes, that at least a semblance of piety is merely one of the unwritten qualifications for the office, a bit more traditional than but not essentially different from the present day requirement of a pleasing television personality.

I would offer a rather different interpretation. We know enough about the function of ceremonial and ritual in various societies to make us suspicious of dismissing something as unimportant because it is “only a ritual.” What people say on solemn occasions need not be taken at face value, but it has often proved to be indicative of deep-seated values and commitments which are not made explicit in the course of everyday life. Following this line of argument it would seem at least worth considering whether the very special placing of the references to God in President Kennedy’s address may not reveal something rather important and serious about the place of religion in American life.

But it might be countered that the very way in which Kennedy made his reference reveals the essentially vestigial place of religion today. For he did not refer to any religion in particular. He did not refer to Jesus Christ, or to Moses or to the Christian church; certainly he did not refer to the Catholic Church. In fact his only reference was to the concept of God, a word that almost all Americans can accept but which means so many different things to so many different people that it is almost an empty sign. Is this not just another indication that in America religion is considered vaguely to be a good thing but that people care so little about it in fact that it has lost any content whatever? Isn’t Eisenhower reported to have said, “The important thing is to have faith and I don’t care what it is,” and isn’t that a complete negation of any kind of real religion?

These questions are worth following up because they raise the issue of how the civil religion is related to the political society on the one hand and to private religious organization on the other. President Kennedy was a Christian, more specifically a Catholic Christian. So his general references to God do not mean that he lacked a specific religious commitment. But why then did he not include some remark to the effect that Christ is the Lord of the world or some indication of respect for the Catholic church? He did not because those are matters of his own private religious belief and of his relation to his own particular church, and are not matters which are relevant in any direct way to the conduct of his public office. The point here is that others with different religious views and commitments to different churches or denominations are equally qualified participants in the political process. The principle of separation of church and state guarantees the freedom of religious belief and

association and at the same time clearly segregates the religious sphere, which is considered to be essentially private, from the political one.

But we are left with the question of how, with the separation of church and state which I have just mentioned, it is justifiable for a president to use the word God at all. The answer is that the separation of church and state has not meant the denial that the political realm has a religious dimension. It is true that matters of personal religious belief, worship and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, but at the same time there are certain common elements of religious orientation which the great majority of Americans share, which have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions, and which still provide a religious dimension to the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. Kennedy's remarks might be taken as a recognition of this dimension, which in the political sphere has to do with the ultimate legitimation of authority.

Let us look more closely at what Kennedy actually said. First he said, "I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forbears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago." The oath is the oath of office, including the acceptance of the obligation to uphold the constitution. He swears it before the people (you) and God. Beyond the constitution itself then the president's obligation extends not only to the people but to God. In American political theory sovereignty of course rests with the people, but always, I believe implicitly, and often explicitly the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God. This is the meaning of the motto, "In God we trust," as well as the inclusion of the phrase "under God" in the pledge to the flag. What difference does it make that sovereignty belongs to God? Why not just leave it with the people? Though the will of the people as expressed in majority vote is carefully institutionalized as the operative source of political authority, it is deprived of an ultimate significance. The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which that will can be judged and it is possible that the people may be wrong. The president's obligation extends to that higher criterion.

It is really this point again that he is making when he says that "the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God." It does not matter whether the state is the expression of the will of an autocratic monarch or of the "people." Kennedy is saying that the rights of man are more basic than any political structure and provide a point of revolutionary leverage from which any state structure may be radically altered. That is the basis for his reassertion of the revolutionary significance of America.

But the religious dimension in political life as recognized by President Kennedy not only provides a grounding for the rights of man which makes any form of political

absolutism illegitimate, it also provides a transcendent goal for the political process. This is implied in his final words that “here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.” What he means here is I think more clearly spelled out in a previous paragraph the wording of which, incidentally, has a distinctly Biblical ring:

Now the trumpet summons us again – not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need – not as a call to battle, though embattled we are –but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation” – a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

Actually I think the whole address can be understood as only the most recent statement of a theme which lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to build the Kingdom of God on earth. That was the motivating spirit of those who founded America and it has been present in every generation since. It seems to me that this conception is just below the surface of Kennedy’s inaugural address and becomes explicit in the closing statement that God’s work must be our own. That this very activist and non-contemplative conception of the fundamental religious obligation, which has been so closely associated with the Protestant position, should be enunciated so clearly in the first major statement of the first Catholic president seems to me to underline how very deeply established it is in the American outlook.

Examples could be given to show that the civil religion often celebrates American values in a somewhat less complex way than the one I have chosen. That is, it sometimes expresses a devotion not to American commitments and aspirations but to American society as it is. Yet if we consider the life and work of Lincoln, perhaps the central figure in the American civil religion, and of other heroes and thinkers who have helped to define the tradition, I think it will be admitted that Kennedy struck the authentic note.

Problems

It is the occupational disease of the intellectual to see problems and crises everywhere, especially in such fields as religion and philosophy. I have preferred to begin with what is relatively unproblematic, with what is established and functioning. This is not because I think there are no problems but because I think problems can best be faced in the larger context, much of which is unproblematic. So far I have been dealing with heritage, a heritage which I, for one, would hesitate to abandon. It is now time to turn to problems and to the choices they entail.

I would single out two separable but not unrelated problems: intellectual relevance and social change. These are problems not necessarily for most Americans but primarily for the intellectuals, for the young and for the culturally and socially alienated. That does not make them any less important.

The intellectual basis of traditional religion which was in modern times first seriously called into question in the Seventeenth century has grown more doubtful with each succeeding generation. For a large part of the scientific and scholarly community that intellectual basis is nil. Even with theological circles there is serious disarray with little agreement as to the meaning of even such basic terms as "God" and "revelation." I do not mean to ignore the very serious critical effort at a reformulation of traditional religion in ways not wholly at variance with the contemporary scientific and social world view. But I think it is clear that there is no consensus on which of the several attempts to do this are most likely to succeed and certainly no agreement that any one of them has achieved any conclusive success.

yet in spite of this intellectual uncertainty life and religion go on much as usual and most people seem to be entirely oblivious of these perplexities. Anyone, however, who has extended contact with Divinity School students knows that for many this intellectual uncertainty is a serious problem. There is a great temptation to bracket the whole issue and throw oneself into liturgical reform or the Civil Right Movement. But when the going gets tough in the parish church the intellectual uncertainty, kept acute by the problem of preaching to the theologically unsophisticated, may contribute to the decision to leave the ministry or to retreat to the graduate school and prepare to teach rather than preach religion.

In spite of the considerable theological revival of the last 30 or 40 years the intellectual hiatus between theology and the other scientific and scholarly disciplines of the university continues to be profound. One symptom of this is the extreme weakness of departments of religion in arts and sciences faculties, often considered by other faculty members to be mere extensions of the chaplain's office and seldom evincing the scholarly vitality to overcome the prejudice. An independent scholarly discipline of the study of religion such as was foreseen in the late Nineteenth century has not emerged and religion has not continued to be a salient preoccupation of philosophers and social scientists as it was a couple of generations ago.

Without wishing to manufacture a phony crisis or underestimate the capacity of individuals and societies to live with intellectual ambiguity, one can still see dangers in the present situation. When so much of the personal stability and social aspiration of American society rests on religious orientations and value commitments whose intellectual foundation is unclear there is an obvious danger of irrational reaction

should circumstances force that unclarity to public attention. We should not forget how precariously rational and scientific pursuits [sic] are institutionalized in any society. Too deep a split between an enlightened intellectual elite and a believing mass invites attack on that institutionalization.

Nor is such a situation healthy for the elite itself. In reaction to the old charge that Americans are political idealists and in the face of massive international responsibilities we have seen the emergence of deep political cynicism, masked as realism, among the policy advisors even while the public spokesmen mouth the traditional phrases. The cynical misuse of the phrase "free world" when it means only "our side" is only the most obvious example.

It is not my intention to imply that there must be a new orthodoxy. This would be impossible in our sort of society. But in any society there must be some balance between differentiation and integration, between diversity and consensus. Even if the consensus were itself an explicit recognition of the uncertainty of ultimate commitments, if it were an application of the reticular or circular hierarchy of our political theory to religious symbolism where outworn monarchical and absolutist analogies still hold sway, this would be preferable to silence, evasion or cynicism. But this paper is intended to point out problems rather than suggest solutions. The burden of these remarks is that the unsolved intellectual problems of religion deserve thought, choice and decision.

I would suggest that intellectual uncertainty about religion is closely related to the second problem, the problem of the meaning of social change in the contemporary world. How we react to the massive changes actually taking place and what sort of changes we wish to further are related to our own deepest orientations and value commitments. Uncertainty about the latter can be reflected in uncertainty about the former. Perhaps this is not unrelated to our bewilderment in international politics, our tendency to fall back on the purely negative strategy of anti-Communism rather than advocate anything but the most obvious sort of material benefit (with the contradiction that the Communists may outbid us on precisely that issue).

Though the American church or at least an important section of the American clergy is speaking out vigorously on social issues and has become involved in social movements, especially the civil rights movement, the orientation of the average churchgoer to social change remains problematic. For reasons sketched above he may look to the church more for security and stability than for any prophetic zeal. Disturbed in the depths of his middle class values by his image of minority groups as alternatively lazy and violent, reading the international scene in terms of a spy thriller involving the good guys and the bad guys, the exhortation of his pastor may have relatively little meaning to him. Certainly better information about domestic

and foreign social problems needs to be disseminated and some church groups are undertaking this responsibility. But enlightenment alone is not enough where deep value commitments and emotions are involved. The most successful appeal so far, and it is one which has been used by the spokesmen of civil religion (for example President Johnson's speech asking for the Voting Rights Bill) as well as the clergy is based on the religious and value commitments of the average American arguing that selective social change in certain directions is not only desirable but mandatory unless those commitments are to be violated. But this approach too may be inadequate unless it takes into account the irrational anxieties which are part of the personality precisely of the "good (repressed) bourgeois." To attack that personality and the institutional structure which supports it is the temptation of those frustrated by the slow pace of social change and the obtuseness of the power structure. But since virtually everything good about American society also derives from that personality and its institutions, any revolutionary alternative proposed must be carefully considered. Rather than frontal assault on the status quo, one might work with the religious symbols which are closely related to deeper levels of the personality and its irrational aspects to provide a leverage for reorientation of the majority middle strata of the society to social change both at home and abroad. I do not want to underestimate the size of the problem – the capacity of the average American to handle the strains generated by a nation and a world in rapid change may be decisive for the avoidance of total nuclear destruction.

The problems are formidable ones, but the heritage both of private religious organization and of civil religion is still a viable one, and with respect to the problems, perhaps more resource than obstacle. But the traditions will solve nothing automatically. It is up to us to choose what we will make of it.

Bellah, *Heritage and Choice in American Religion*

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