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The inauguration of Bill Clinton provides a welcome opportunity to look back at American civil religion a full generation after Robert Bellah, in his celebrated *Daedalus* article, taught us to read inaugural addresses as important ceremonial events in the American civil religious calendar. Bellah, it will be recalled, began his famous paper with an analysis of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address of January 20, 1961. He pointed out that Kennedy mentioned God three times in his brief address, and he suggested that "if we could understand why he mentioned God, the way in which he did it, and what he meant to say in those three references, we would understand much about American civil religion." To understand how our characterization of American civil religion has since changed, and where Bellah's analysis needs to be modified, the place to begin would seem to be another inaugural address—the address that Bill Clinton delivered on January 20, 1993.

Clinton, unlike John F. Kennedy, did not frame his address around references to God nor did he emphasize, as Kennedy did, divine transcendence as the ultimate source of human freedom. Instead, Clinton relegated religion to the back end of his speech and mentioned God directly only twice in passing:

And so, my fellow Americans, as we stand at the edge of the 21st century, let us begin anew with energy and hope, with faith and discipline. And let us work until our work is done. The Scripture says, "And let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not."

From this joyful mountaintop of celebration we hear a call to service in the valley. We have heard the trumpets, we have changed the guard. And now each in our own way, and with God's help, we must answer the call.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

While this might be understood, following Bellah, "as only the most recent statement of a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth," Clinton's address, taken as a whole, actually appealed to a quite different source of authority: American tradition itself. Clinton, in his speech, repeatedly hearkened back to "Our Founders," he cited by name both Washington and Jefferson, he invoked the nation's great historical turning points ("from our Revolution, to the Civil War, to the Great Depression, to the civil rights movement"), and he called on Americans to rededicate themselves "to the very idea of America." Belief in America, not belief in God, was the president's rallying cry. When he spoke of "faith" at all, it was a faith in the ability of Americans, "each in our own way, and with God's help," to live up to

the legacy of their founders and to unite around a common ideal of service.

The surprising dearth of religious references in Clinton's inaugural did not stem from any dearth of religious convictions on his part. To the contrary, we know that prior to becoming president he regularly attended services at the Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock and that he sang for more than a decade in its choir. In an address to the congregation on his final Sunday in Arkansas before moving to Washington, he characterized his church as "the place where I have come to seek divine guidance and support and reassurance." He urged his fellow parishioners to pray for him and thanked them "for always making me feel at home here even in the darkest days of my campaign."

In that same address, however, Clinton hinted that religion would not play the same role in his administration as it did in that of his predecessor. Where the Bush administration had purposefully injected religion into the public sphere, associating its own policies with the forces of good, characterizing its opponents as the forces of evil, and making common cause with those who espoused "traditional values" and "family values," Clinton played to the themes of liberty, diversity, and tolerance. "Our church, the Baptist church," he reminded his fellow worshipers, "has always believed in religious liberty. That does not mean we should take our values or our principles out of our politics. None of us can or should do that. But it does mean we should bring a great deal of humility in making moral judgements of others in public life" (*Boston Globe*, January 11, 1993, 12). Symbolically, he spent the very next Sunday worshipping at one of the great shrines to American religious liberty, Thomas Jefferson's home of Monticello. Having drunk from that well of tradition, he hit the road again for the final leg of his election-year odyssey: a ritual reenactment of Jefferson's journey into Washington followed by a grand ceremonial entry into the White House.

To reread "Civil Religion in America" against the backdrop of the Clinton inauguration reveals much about the strengths and the weaknesses of Bellah's analysis. On the one hand, the essay supplied a valuable methodology for analyzing American national rituals as well as an extremely useful conceptual framework for understanding a whole range of unquestionably religious phenomena that had not previously been studied in any systematic way. The lengthy bibliography of studies inspired by "Civil Religion in America" and the even longer list of publications that it indirectly influenced amply testify to the essay's remarkable fecundity. It surely ranks as one of the most influential essays in the whole study of religion.

On the other hand, Bellah's characterization of American civil religion seems, at this distance, to require substantial modification. To

begin with, Bellah focused on the continuities in American civil religion and on "the common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share." By implication, at least, he purported to find a hitherto overlooked source of national consensus, the religious equivalent of the "liberal tradition" that seemed at that time so powerful a bond between Americans of otherwise different persuasions. The few exceptions that Bellah noted—those who fused "God, country and flag . . . to attack non-conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds" and "the overt religiosity of the radical right today"—all were quickly dismissed. Lumping them together with "defenders of slavery before the Civil War," he portrayed them as modern-day infidels, enemies of democracy itself.

Today, particularly in the wake of the 1992 election, this sense of national consensus flies in the face of observed reality; there is substantial question, indeed, whether the "great majority" that Bellah pointed to was *ever* so large or so widespread as he and many others believed. Instead of a single civil religion harmoniously uniting all Americans, an alternative hypothesis rooted in the pervasive sense of cultural conflict that characterizes much of America's past seems, in the eyes of a new generation, far more persuasive. According to this view, debates over America's character and purpose have played themselves out on the altar of public religion throughout the nation's history. Highly charged conflicts concerning the nature and content of this faith—battles over rituals and symbols, beliefs and practices, traditions and values—reflect deep-seated cultural differences that continue even today to set Americans at odds with one another.

Robert Wuthnow, in *The Restructuring of American Religion*, came closest to this view when he described American civil religion as being "deeply divided":

Like the religion found more generally in the nation's churches, it does not speak with a single voice, uniting the majority of Americans around common ideals. It has instead become a confusion of tongues speaking from different traditions and offering different visions of what America can and should be. Religious conservatives and liberals offer competing versions of American civil religion that seem to have very little of substance in common.

Wuthnow identified the conservative version of American civil religion with the idea of "one nation under God" (a slogan, he pointed out, that carries many levels of meaning), and he equated the liberal version with the (no less polysemic) idea of "liberty and justice for all." Neither version, he observed, "can claim effectively to speak for consensual values. Each represents a constituency, but holds . . . no assumptions on which all can agree."

Wuthnow did not trace the history of these different versions of American civil religion, nor is this the place to do so. One need do no more, however, than reread Robert T. Handy's *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (1971) to realize that the "confusion of tongues" that Wuthnow alluded to has deep roots in the nation's past. To point, as Bellah did, only to those elements of American civil religion that have drawn Americans together is, thus, to distort the story. The divisive attempts by various segments of American society to forge a civil religion in their own image is, unfortunately, no less a part of the story. Civil religion, like all religion, turns out, upon close inspection, to promote both *communitas* and its opposite.

Bellah also exaggerated the unifying power of civil religion's rituals. The flag, the national holidays, the federal monuments—indeed, almost all of the rites and symbols of national unity and patriotic piety that he enumerated—have become, in recent years, far more divisive than his analysis predicted (while most of the rest, following the movement of national holidays to Monday, lost their sanctity altogether). This declension has traditionally been attributed to the trials and tribulations of the Vietnam era, when protesters spurned national symbols of unity as part of their expression of public dissent. In the post-Vietnam era, however, these symbols and rituals never regained their power to bring Americans together. This may be explained in part by the fact that social activists learned from the antiwar movement that disruptions of civic events and iconoclastic attacks on national symbols guaranteed them media attention. Even Thanksgiving Day, still the most durable holiday on the civil religious calendar, now regularly comes under attack from Native American protesters and their supporters. In the case of the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landing in the New World, a coalition of dissenting groups effectively thwarted commemoration plans even before they took shape. Where a century earlier the great mariner, cast as an authentic American hero, had been the object of almost cultic national veneration, in 1992, he—like so many other erstwhile symbols of the national consensus—had become a pawn in a divisive struggle for America's soul.

A second explanation for the decline of rituals and symbols once closely associated with "the national faith" stems from the close association that many of these symbols had with American Protestantism. John F. Wilson, in *Public Religion in American Culture*, goes so far as to suggest that civil religion may be seen "as the attempt, through a variety of particular forms, to distill the old political culture of the United States which was supported by a broadly Protestant establishment . . . [and] to conserve that culture even as it, and the associated establishment, is threatened from within and without." With the breakdown of Protestant hegemony, the growth of minority faiths (many of

them not Christian at all), and legal challenges to all forms of religion in the public square, symbols that Bellah could still (misleadingly) describe as all-embracing now appear decidedly sectarian and, thus, far more exclusive than he allowed. Christmas crèches, clergy invocations at high school graduations, wall plaques containing the Ten Commandments, and a wide range of other supposedly nonsectarian religious activities all fall into this category. While Bellah classified such symbols and rituals as part of civil religion, "not antithetical to, and indeed sharing much in common with, Christianity" but "neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian," others, convinced that these phenomena are indeed sectarian and antithetical to church-state separation besides, have in recent years challenged them in court—and won. As a result, the public schools, once the great temples of civil religion and a prime locus for "the cultic celebration of the civil rituals," have become increasingly polarized, and civil religion itself is today fiercely contended.

Given all that has happened to civil religion over the past generation, does Bellah's formulation of the concept hold any continuing utility? For the historian, the answer is, of course, "yes." If nothing else, "Civil Religion in America," read as a primary source, sheds enormous light on the culture of the sixties, with all of its contradictions, ambivalences, yearnings, and fears. The essay might also be viewed by students of American culture as a late manifestation of one of the oldest quests in the nation's religious life: the search for unity, the effort to find a faith sufficiently encompassing and inspiring to envelop all of "God's New Israel" under one snugly religious quilt.

Even read as it was intended to be read, however, Bellah's formulation of civil religion, notwithstanding the many weaknesses in the argument that subsequent students have discerned (and that Bellah, in his later writings, admits), and notwithstanding additional modifications that may yet be required, still has much to commend it. For the questions that he poses, the phenomena that he explains, the ideas that he draws upon, the insights that he offers, and the challenges that he sets forth all have continuing relevance. Nobody has thought more deeply than Bellah has about the dynamic relationship between religion, society, and government; nobody has written more eloquently than he about the role of religion as both legitimator and judge of state power. If, as I have argued here, Bellah's depiction of civil religion is, nevertheless, a product of its own particular historical moment and, as a result, insufficiently sensitive to clashing social values and to the forces of historical change, then what we need is an updated conceptualization—one that takes full account of recent events and explores the ongoing interplay between civil religion and American culture as a whole.