The Christian Foundation of the American Civil Religion

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La perception générale est que tous les Américains, à l'exception notable des Natifs américains, sont des immigrés ou descendants des immigrés. À l'origines, l'Amérique n'était pas un pays des immigrés mais des colonistes, presque tous venus des Îles Britanniques aux 17ème et 18ème siècles. La différence entre les deux concepts, colonistes et immigrés est d'importance capitale en ce qui concerne l'histoire de la formation d'une identité américaine. L'auteur de cet article étudie cette distinction.

Introduction

The general claim nowadays is that all Americans, with the notable exception of the Native Americans, are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. In his work *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity,* Samuel P. Huntington notices the fact that this claim is a valid "partial truth", but a false "total truth"[1]. In its origins, America was not a country of immigrants but of settlers, almost all of whom came from the British Isles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The difference between the two concepts, settler and immigrant is of outmost importance as far as the history of the formation of an American identity is concerned. Settlers leave an existing society (mainly because of religious intolerance as in the case of British settlers in the New World) in order to built an entirely new one, whereas immigrants do not attempt to create a new society. Immigrants move from one society to another one, which is already defined by rules and regulations. For immigrants the main reason for leaving their country is not strictly religious but rather economical or political, immigration being a personal process. In the case of settlers, the situation is radically changed: they came to America because they wanted to create a "city upon a hill" (Matthew 5:14) in a place where there was no pre-existing society, except for the Indian tribes, which, in their view, could be killed or moved westward easily. Thus, they had to create a new society out of nothing, whereas immigrants came later, when the society created by settlers existed. Another difference would be the fact that a settler who left his country because of religious reasons is more likely to cut all his ties with his mother country in his attempt to create an entirely new society with

[1] Huntington, S. P., *Who Are We-: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Simon&Schuster, New York, 2004, p. 39.

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different rules and enforce more religious tolerance. In this respect an immigrant does not usually cut all his ties with his mother country.

But why is this differentiation so important for our topic? The reason is quite simple: the core of the American culture is, primarily, the culture of the settlers, for whom the important elements were Protestantism, with its values, moralism and work ethic, the English language and the influence of British law and justice. However, what is even more important as far as the first settlers are concerned is that they were not representative of the homeland population as a whole. They came from different social classes, equally persecuted because of their religion, who wanted to find new opportunities for personal development in the New World. Thus, in the new society they created class ideology was eliminated from the beginning as an important factor and was "transmuted into the nationalism of the new society"[2].

Puritanism contributed to the formation of an American identity by establishing a culture based on two written texts: the Bible and the Constitution. As Winfried Herget puts it, "These scripted documents serve as 'identity charters', as focal texts which are the object of – what Ronald R. Garet termed – 'normative hermeneutics' to which community turns 'for moral guidance and reflection that interpretation is expected to elicit'"[3]. The word was central for the Puritan culture because it was based on the principle of *sola scriptura*, the Bible being the only normative text accepted. Although a part of the Puritans believed that God's Word as transmitted by the Bible had a literal meaning, the reformers were aware of the Pauline notion that the scripture is obscure and difficult to understand, thus it needs commentary and interpretation. The interpretation was the attribute of the Puritan minister who transformed God's Word into the human word of his own place and time. What turns out to be important for the impact of the religious teachings, besides the moral dimension, is the power of the oral presentation in the communal presence of the congregation. All these characteristics will help the Founding Fathers gain the mythical statute they have in the American history. Even though they had different religious orientations, they were accustomed to thinking in scriptural terms, characteristic which reinforced the biblical dimension in American official rhetoric.

The Puritan Legacy

America was founded as a Protestant society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it is indebted to the Reformation. In a very famous phrase Tocqueville claims that America "was born equal and hence did not have to become so". More importantly, as Huntington puts it, America was born Puritan and did not have to become so[4]. Although religious persecution is not the only reason why settlers came to America, it was central; religion was a predominant motive in the creation of most colonies in the seventeenth century. The explanation

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 43.

[3] Herget, W., *The centrality of the Word*, in Hagenbuchle R. and Raab, J., ed., *Negotiations of America's National Identity*, Stauffenburg Verlag, Tubingen, 2000, vol.1, p. 49.

[4] Huntington, *ibidem*, p. 63.

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for the religious intensity of the time can be outlined if we take into account the respect for the Bible, central to the Puritan doctrine. They defined their settlement, based on "a Covenant with God", as "a city upon a hill", a real model for the entire world. On the other side, under the influence of a rhetoric derived from the Bible, they saw the Indians as "the devil's children", the enemies who were sent by evil forces to prevent them from the construction of the "city upon a hill".

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the settlers defined their mission in the New World in Biblical terms, the new continent becoming the New Canaan. The Promised Land imagery was decisive in shaping the colonial thinking and the settlers identified themselves with the ancient Hebrews. The biblical rhetoric was taken as granted by all of them: they were, first of all "the chosen people", sent by God to create the "new Jerusalem" in a place which was undoubtedly perceived as "the promised land". Thus America becomes God's country, the site of "a new Heaven and new earth, the home of justice".

This religious zeal and the effort to find legitimacy in the Bible for every action the Puritans took, first of all in New England, then in every colony were eventually transmitted to the whole nation. The rapidity with which the Puritan teachings were transmitted in the new world was partly due to the East Anglian group of settlers, who were mostly urban artisans who came in groups, all of them literate (some of them attended Cambridge) and, what is even more important, they were entirely committed to spreading the word of God.

The key elements of the Puritan doctrine had long-lasting effects on what we call the American identity. First of all, they believed in the original sin and in the principle of innate depravity. Secondly, they believed in predestination, meaning that the divine being has elected people to be saved from their sins, "the elect"; W. Bradford claims the fact that God chooses those he wants to save before their birth. Strictly related to this particular belief, they had another principle, that of continuous self-scrutiny; each believer had to find answer to one question related to his own salvation: 'Do I behave in a way that gives me a right to be elected?'. Puritans were also committed to the emphasis on the individual's direct relation with God, and wanted to do away with the intermediaries between men and God. A direct consequence was the fact that all believers were equal, with equal chances of salvation. The only means of salvation was pure faith, the rest depending on God's arbitrary will, as God is always present, rewards good deeds and punishes bad deeds.

All this system of beliefs had immediate consequences in the American way of life. The importance of the Bible and the centrality of the word in the Puritan society had as a result the emphasis placed on education. Not only that literacy was obligatory, but they also created a school system (i.e. Harvard College was founded in 1635).

Another consequence is work ethic. Work ethic is a central feature of Protestant culture and, as Huntington notices, "from the beginning America's religion has

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been a religion of work"[5]. It is important to notice the fact that work ethic was not a characteristic of the American culture only at the beginning, in the seventeenth century. Numerous foreign commentators noticed this component of the American society later on, as Alexis de Tocqueville and Michel Chevalier who, in the 1830's writes: "From the moment he gets up, the American is at his work, and he is absorbed in it till the hour of sleep"[6]. Work ethic is partly responsible for the creation of the American concept of the "self-made man". The concept which appeared in the 1830's denotes a characteristic of the Americans who believe that the success in life depends almost exclusively on one's individual talent, character and behavior.

Puritanism also involved a belief in the fundamental opposition between good and evil, right and wrong. Together with the fact that they eliminated any intermediary between God and the believer, it had as a consequence what we would call American individualism. Americans oscillate between the absolute moral standards which should govern their behavior and the nature of the society they created in the struggle to make their society obey the moral rules. As an immediate positive consequence of individualism we may notice the belief in individual responsibility which also contributed to the concept of the self-made man.

The Nature and Genesis of American Civil Religion

Civil religion is not an American concept, it has been dealt upon by many thinkers. Andrew Koppelman believes that the fundamental idea of a civil religion was offered by Augustine[7], who wrote: "A people is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by common agreement on the objects of their love."[8] A people's character was determined by the objects of its love: "the better the objects of agreement, the better the people." It is clear that Augustin "didn't think that a people united around genuinely attractive objects, even a common sense of justice, could exist in this world: in any earthly republic, good people would be forced to coexist with evil ones"[9].

In the eighteenth century, in his famous work *On the Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau further developed on the subject, stating the fact that every citizen has both civic and spiritual obligations. He did not define the spiritual obligations in purely religious terms, as religious dogmas, but "as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject". Next he clarifies his understanding of civil religion: "The dogmas of civil religion ought to

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[5] *Ibidem*, p. 71.

[6] Chevalier, M., *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States; Letters on North America*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, 1967, p 267, apud Huntington, *ibidem*.

[7] Koppelman, Andrew M. M., *The New American Civil Religion: Lesson for Italy* , George Washington International Law Review, Forthcoming; Northwestern Public Law Research Paper No. 10-05, p.1, http://ssrn.com/abstract=1544465, accessed 1 Nov. 2010.

[8] Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, (Henry Bettenson trans), Pelican, London, 1972, 19.24, at 890.

[9] Koppelman, *ibidem*.

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be a few, simple and exactly worded, without explanation or commentary. The existence of a mighty, intelligent and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws: these are its positive dogmas"[10].

The phrase 'civil religion' was not used by the Founding Fathers, but they were certainly aware of the ideas which animated the philosophical climate of the eighteenth century. However, scholars consider John Winthrop's famous sermon, *A Model of Christian Charity* delivered on board the Arrabella, heading Massachusetts, a century earlier, in 1630, the genesis of American civil religion: "Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission.[…] For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." The idea of a covenant did not remain only a statement of a XVIIth century religious rhetoric, but continued to gain more importance and new meanings through the Revolution period, the Civil War and up to the present time.

The first one to analyze the phenomenon was Alexis de Tocqueville, in his oft-quoted *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville noticed the fact that the church played a decisive role in the creation of an American identity and stated that religion is considered as a political institution "which powerfully contributes to the maintenance of a democratic republic". Moral codes, deeply rooted in religion, are more important than the laws in the success of the American democracy. The main figures of the American politics agreed with Tocqueville and emphasized the role played by religion in the American life. First of all, John Adams said that "Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other". Washington, in his farewell Address, stated the fact that "Of all our suppositions and habits which lead to political prosperity Religion and morality are indispensable supports". More than that, in 1749 Benjamin Franklin spoke of "the necessity of a public religion, from its usefulness to the public: the advantage of a religious character among private persons, the mischiefs of superstition and the excellence of the Christian Religion above all ancient and modern"[11]. Huntington is of the opinion that "civil religion enables Americans to bring together their secular politics and their religious society, to marry God and country, so as to give religious sanctity to their patriotism and nationalist legitimacy to their religious beliefs, and thus to merge what could be conflicting loyalties into loyalty to a religiously endowed country"[12].

However, the relation between religion and state politics are complicated, especially in America, because of the principle of the separation of church and state. The first thing to notice in this respect is that the concept 'civil religion' has

[10] Rousseau, J.-J., *The Social Contract*, Penguin Books, London, 1968, chapter 8, book 4.
[11] Apud Reichley, J. A., *Religion in American Public Life*, Brookings Institution, Washington, 1985, p. 101.
[12] Huntington, *ibidem*, p. 103.

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no constitutional standing[13]. The first amendment states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion". The Constitution prohibits an official religious establishment, but, on the other hand protects free exercise of religion.

The problem is aggravated by the fact that The Declaration of Independence has several important references to God and religion, while the Constitution has no reference to religious issues. The Declaration of Independence claims the sovereignty of God over collective views, as it refers to "the laws of nature and of nature's God" which should be more important than the laws given by men. Thus, God stands above the nation and it is through the will of God that American political life is justified. In the Constitution the state is seen as a neutral mechanism, whose main purpose is to protect the rights of the individuals and their freedom. It indirectly means that freedom does however imply a purpose and moral value.

Civil religion became, gradually, the emotional center of the symbolic universe of America only after the Civil War, having in Abraham Lincoln its main theoretician and defender. In the Gettysburg Address he called the Americans to "the great task remaining before us", that of assuring the existence of a "new birth of freedom" and in the Second Inaugural Address Lincoln incorporated biblical symbolism central for the civil religion, by expressing the importance of the theme of the covenant in the course of American history .

The Declaration of Independence is, undoubtedly, a decisive moment in the creation of American civil religion. In a short analysis of the document, Robert N. Bellah counts four references to God[14]. In the first one, the syntagm "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" is used, while the second one presents one of the main principles of the Declaration: all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights". The third one is in fact an appeal to "the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions", while the last one refers to "a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence". The immediate conclusion is that the authors of the Declaration acknowledge the existence of God and its sovereignty over the social and political issues. More than that, idea of a God who stands above the American nation, protects it and judges the way it develops has become the core of American political life ever since.

Another important development for the concept of civil religion may be the XIXth century when many Americans came to believe that prosperity and material success is a proof of the fact that they are chosen. The Calvinistic idea of the elect who receive God's blessing was attached to the idea of success and the general belief came to be the one according to which, if you are successful and rich, you are blessed by God. The main element of the public religion is no longer the dream

[13] Bellah, R. N., *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p. 169.
[14] *Ibidem*.

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of building 'the city upon a hill', but the utilitarian dream or what will later be called the American Dream.

According to Huntington, American civil religion incorporates some important elements. First of all, it is based on the assumption that there is a Supreme Being. Thus, civil religion is compatible with believers in Christian or non-Christian God, or with Deists as were some of the Founding Fathers, but it is incompatible with being atheist because to deny God is to challenge one of the fundamental ideas behind the American society. The general view in this respect is that the republican government can only exist and is consolidated only among religious people who have strong moral principles. The second element which, as we have seen, is derived from the puritan values, is the belief that the Americans are "the chosen people" and that America itself is "the new Israel", having a divine mission in the whole world[15]. The third one is the importance of religious symbols in American life, including political speeches, rituals and other ceremonies. It is common knowledge that all the inaugural speeches of American presidents include mentions to God or other biblical mentions and are usually ended with the formula "God bless America" or the fact that the words "in God we trust" appear on every American bill or coin. More than that, Bellah states that "Behind the civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all nations"[16].

Last but not least, we notice the fact that national ceremonies have a religious dimension or function, if we are to quote only Memorial Day or Thanksgiving. Other important documents or speeches, written or given on certain occasions, have become part of the American sacred tradition; all of them incorporate religious elements, except for the Constitution, as we have seen: The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, Kennedy's inaugural speech, and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream".

A controversial concept

The ideas of emancipation were put into a new light in the 1960's and were shaped with the language of civil religion by Martin Luther King who, in the summer of 1963, delivered the famous speech *I Have a Dream* on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The reason why King invoked the language of civil religion was because he wanted to draw attention to the shortcomings of the covenant and to the failure of the Americans to raise up to its standards. He criticized America using the language of its white presidents and religious terminology in order to

[15] This element of the American civil religion is also at the core of another important principle of the American identity, that of American exceptionalism.

[16] Bellah, R. N., *Civil Religion in America*, in *Dædalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, from the issue entitled 'Religion in America',* Winter 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1, p.19.

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touch the hearts and minds of all Americans. One can say that, together with the debate on slavery in the period of the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement represents a symbolic amendment to the American civil religion.

The second amendment to the idea of a civil religion was brought by the concepts of diversity and multiculturalism which gained much sympathy starting with the 1970's. As we have already seen, some American scholars, Huntington included, defend the controversial opinion that the creed is the crucial element of the American identity, the creed being the product of the Anglo-Protestant culture in which the key elements are "the English language, Christianity, religious commitment, English concepts of the rule of law, dissenting Protestant values of individualism, work ethic and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth, a city upon a hill". Huntington signals the fact that American civil religion is challenged by the new masses of immigrants who come especially from Central and South America and who are reluctant in assimilating the core of the American Creed. The danger, as Huntington puts it, is that America might become a bilingual society, as the Spanish language is gaining more and more support, especially in Southwestern states. He goes further on and states the fact that multiculturalism, globalization and immigration are real threats for the traditional American identity as part of the American elite sees itself as cosmopolitan, secular and attached to the principle of diversity as an end. As other American intellectuals, Fukuyama believes that the American civil religion is not a static system of beliefs, but a continuously developing phenomenon which can incorporate diversity and pluralism.

It is almost impossible to predict the way in which American civil religion will evolve from now one. However, one thing is sure: starting with the first George W. Bush administration civil religion became a major concern for the American government as it is used once again to justify America's interference into international issues. Anyone can notice the fact that the most frequently used word in the president's speeches is 'faith' and analysts think that because of the way he used the word, he won the 2004 elections. On the other hand some condemn him for his public displays of religiosity and fear that he crosses the strict line of separation between the state and the church. This is the case with his famous 2002 State of Union Address when he used for the first time the syntagm "axis of evil" denoting some states with strong connections to terrorist organizations. Further on he speaks about "a war against evil" itself, which elicited strong criticism, coming especially from the Muslim world, who feared the fact that the war a terrorism would become a new version of a crusade.

Bush's speechwriter, Michael Gerson, states that the president uses most of the oldest themes of American civil religion, from liberty, freedom to democracy, which he considers to be gifts of God's providence[17]. He also explains the fact that

[17] Murray, B., *With 'God on our side'?–How American 'Civil religion' permeates society and manifests itself in public life*, http://www.facsnet.org/issues/faith/civil_religion1.htm, accessed 23 May 2005.

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Bush's use of civil religion language and of religious symbolism in general has to be understood as a way to express the idea that the focus is on a transcendental moral order that governs the nation's actions different from the principle 'God is on Our Side", which is dangerous because it identifies "the purposes of an individual or a nation with the purposes of God"[18].

However, the fact that the American president uses the language of civil religion does not mean that it is widely accepted. More than that, public displays of civil religion came under major attacks by the defendants of the separation between state and church. Until recently civil religion has not been acknowledged in courts of law[19], the result being that it was most often mistaken for religion itself. There were a lot of controversies during the last years. In his article *With 'God on our side'?*, Bruce Murray gives a number of examples: in 2003 Roy S. Moore lost his job as Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court for refusing to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments, which also included quotes from *The Declaration of Independence*, James Madison and George Washington, from the foyer of the state courthouse; in late 2004, teacher Stephen Williams sued the school district because the school officials forbade him to instruct students of the religious context of the founding of America and prohibited him from citing from the *Declaration of Independence*.

But the case which caused a vivid public debate in America is represented by the June 2002 decision of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco that the words "under God" in the *Pledge of Allegiance* were a violation of the separation of church and state[20]. The judges argued that the two words represent a threat posed to the First Amendment which requires the neutrality of the state toward religion. On the other hand, the critics of the decision pointed out the fact that the phrase echoes the opinions of the Founding Fathers and that, as we have seen in sub-chapter 3.1, Lincoln himself used the words in the Gettysburg Address. President George W. Bush, together with the vast majority of the Americans criticized the decision. (The President called the decision "ridiculous"). Huntington quotes a Newsweek poll which found that 87 percent of the public agreed with the fact that the two words should remain part of the *Pledge of Allegiance*, while only 9 percent opposed; 84 percent also approved of references to God in public settings like schools, government buildings, etc., as long as there is no mention of a specific religion.

Conclusion

According to Bellah, since its coming into existence, the American civil religion suffered a number of changes or "times of trial". The first one is related to the question of independence and the way Americans should govern their own country. The second "time of trial" was related to the problems raised by the

[18] Gerson, M., *Speech at the semi-annual conference on religion and public life at the Ethics and Public Policy Center*, quoted in Bruce Murray, *ibidem.*

[19] The Supreme Court acknowledged civil religion in the 1992 case of Lee vs. Weisman.

[20] Huntington, *ibidem*, p. 81.

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institution of slavery, which was, for decades the most important shortcoming of the American democracy. The third crisis is related to the problem of the responsibility of America on a global scale and its role as a super power, starting with the Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, 11th of September and up to the present. Taking into account the recent political, social and economic changes that took place in the United States of America starting with the election of Barack Hussein Obama to the presidency, we assume that the language of civil religion, based on the traditional Christianity of the Puritans, together with the Enlightenment ideology of the American Revolution will undergo further changes and will be "folded into a new and different vision."[21]

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