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# AMERICA'S NATIONAL FAITH AND THE BICENTENNIAL

Paul Toews\*

The Great Seal of the United States bears two affirmations: *Novus ordo seclorum*, "A new society for this world," and *Annuit Coeptis*, "our undertaking is favored."

They both suggest the American dream and self-understanding. This was to be a new nation. Here people would begin anew. A new type of society would emerge, one that had not existed since the original creation. This was to be Zion. Here men would realize all earthly hopes.

Our favorite patriotic hymn has said it for generations. This was the place of sunlit purple hills and of winds rustling the tall golden grain and fruited plains. "America, America, God shed his grace on thee and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea."

We are now two hundred years past the inaugural of the new order. We are uncertain as to the continuing meaning of America. We seem to have not one but two bicentennials. One bicentennial is happy, proud, exaltive, affirmative, and spirited. It loudly proclaims the success of the American experience. It stresses the continuity of the American story. It stands easily in the presence of the American past and sees the present as its faithful enlargement. It retells the original dream as though it were today's reality. America has succeeded in establishing the new order. In its thankfulness and confidence it readily unfurls the red, white, and blue banners.

The second bicentennial is ambivalent, cautious, sober, questioning. It wonders about the success of the American experience. It feels a fearful distance between our beginnings and the present. It feels uncomfortable in the presence of the past. The confusions of the mid-day seem to have dimmed the glory of the morning light. It doubts that we have succeeded in establishing the new order. It fears that the tri-color banners are a coverup hiding a hollow people. It fears that the fire-cracker rockets flare out above a people without vision or soul.

The religious rituals of the bicentennial reflect this fracture. Some churches have produced bicentennial liturgies that interchange God and country in a litany of effusive praise. Others bring forth litanies of confession and repentance. Seldom do both seem present in the same incantation.

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The differing liturgies and bicentennial styles reflect both our varying perceptions of America and our varying understandings of the religious health of the nation.

There do seem to be two Americas coexisting. One is the America of bounty, religious freedom, equality, economic opportunity, justice, political democracy, social harmony, and domestic tranquility—in short, the best political and cultural system ever created, the new Garden of Eden.

The other America is a nightmare: the place of black slavery and Indian genocide, the obliteration of the land, the rapacious economic giant sucking dry the resources of the world, the place of psychic impersonalization and mental sterility, and the bearer of technological means of destruction too terrifying to comprehend—in short, a demonic and stultifying society, the new Babylon.

The one liturgy misses the darkness of America. The other misses the American light. One sees a straight line logic from the noble visions of the founders to the present. The other sees only ironic twists and historical wreckage. The differing liturgies are neither class nor color based. Many of the nation's elite churches are more fascinated with confession than praise. Many who have been passed over continue to "faith" the future.

Both liturgies probably have little consequence. The optimistic and self-congratulatory one has no depth. Its praise without confession cuts it off from the continuing possibility of reformation. The confessional one seems frequently to be a kind of stylized purgation only by incantation. It lacks the will to alteration that true confession brings. In continuity with a historic American rite, it uses the sermon as jeremiad in a finely-developed ritual of humiliation which frees the purged sinners to continue the sins being confessed.

The differing liturgies, while reflecting this larger divergence over the meaning of history, also reflect more specific attitudes towards the role of religion in American society. Those who sing the litany of praise frequently do so with some hint of the vitality of American religion and its success in christianizing the nation. Those who call for repentance frequently find the church at the center of the American malaise. By its failure to christianize the state the tragedies of the present have emerged. The debate is about the relative religious content of America; it is not about the health of the church as a discernible and separate community. We are not retelling the history of the church or even of the denominations, but of the national religion.

At issue is what, since Robert Bellah's writing in 1967, has been most commonly referred to as "Civil Religion." It is that larger matrix and repository of religious values that can be found beyond the denominations. Variouslly described as the "religion of the republic," "the religion of the democratic society," or the "religion of the American way", it is that form of religion that infuses American life and gives it a religious dimension.

The term "Civil Religion" is frequently used interchangeably with "nationalism." The appearance of the nation state and its accompanying idolatry has long been defined as a religion. It is so because it demands ultimate loyalty and commitment. The state provides a set of common ideals, rituals, and symbols that gives a sense of unity and even peoplehood. It has in

many places replaced the church as the agency of salvation and as the source of basic identity. We readily call ourselves by our national name. We are Americans and Canadians. That gives many of us more than a title; it gives a basic ontological security.

American civil religion is, however, something more than religious nationalism. Both terms can be used in reference to the ultimate concerns that characterize allegiance to the state. Both might be used to describe the socialization patterns whereby the metaphysical claim of the state is implanted. American civil religion, however, refers to something more than a nation's desire to adore itself. It carries the historic sense of specialness and chosenness that arose from the nature of America's birth. Most nations at some point confuse their workings with the moving of providence. Few nations have birth stories that parallel ours. It is the nature of our birth, religiously understood, that distinguishes our civic faith.

The question of how this civic faith emerged and consequently functioned has been the subject of continuing inquiry. One interpretation understands this emergence as the response to the experience of religious pluralism. The American revolution, by disestablishing the church, created a setting different from the previous national experiments of Western Civilization since Constantine. The myriad competing churches created a context in which any claim to be *the* church was pretentious. The religious free market forced American denominations to relax their claims to exclusivity and pressured them to admit some higher unity. Churchmen groping for the larger identity to carry the ultimate and inclusive functions formerly held by the church transferred them to the nation. As the denomination ceased to function as the church, the nation came so to function. <sup>1</sup>

Another interpretation fuses nation and church in the early nineteenth century to counter the pressing danger of fragmentation. The highly influential writings of Perry Miller argue that religious nationalism was necessary to preserve the newly-created union from the danger of skeptical rationalism and social anarchy. Confronted with internal divisions and the influx of French deism, the clerics sought a program of Christian unity in revivalism, voluntary evangelical societies, and preeminently in transforming the nation into the new ark of the covenant. Religious definitions of America mustered the energy to christianize and stabilize the new nation. <sup>2</sup>

More recent interpretations suggest that civil religion can better be understood as the culmination of a tradition which during the century of the revolution and the early nineteenth century joined the secular idea of republican liberty to the tradition of christian providentialism. In England and New England a particular protestant conception of history had arisen out of the Reformation. The view was a combination of the usual protestant view of papist apostasy, the anticipation produced by the Reformation itself, and the English conviction that they were peculiarly chosen by God to advance his kingdom. Because the English reformers saw their own ecclesiastical maneuverings as a turning point in the direction of history, they also participated in a revival of eschatological thinking. <sup>3</sup>

The eschatological revival replaced metaphorical with literal beliefs, apocalyptic with progressive hopes. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Puritan theology gradually came to expect Christ's return after,

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rather than before, the millennial age. This alteration transformed millennialism from a formal stage in eschatological thinking to a passionate longing and anticipation. Millennialism ceased being merely a doctrine and became popular and dynamic. Instead of consolation it becomes a call for action. <sup>4</sup>

The juxtaposition of the millennial hope and the discovery of new lands could not escape attention. Surely providence had retained the virgin continent to be the place to usher in the new age. American settlers were quick to identify themselves as colonists of the new kingdom. Sydney Ahlstrom has noted the first sermon preached to stockholders of the Virginia Company by the Reverend William Symonds, a prominent eschatologist. His text was the commandment to Abram:

Get thee out of thy Country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and will bless thee and make thy name great and thou shalt be a blessing . . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. <sup>5</sup>

The founders of New England were not to be outdone. John Winthrop, first governor and architect of the Massachusetts Bay colony, defined his mission in his sermon aboard the ship *Arbella*. The sermon was entitled "A Model of Christian Charity."

The Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us as his own people and will commaund a blessing upon us in all our wayes, soe that wee shall see much more of his wisdome, power, goodnes and truthe than formerly we have beene acquainted with. Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when tenn of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make us a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us. . . . <sup>6</sup>

Millennialism did much more than give the colonists a sense of destiny. It demanded temporal and secular embodiments. The new heaven and new earth required a new church and new commonwealth. It was the basis for building a counter-culture whose history would transform the traditions of Europe.

The Great Awakening that convulsed the colonies during the mid-eighteenth century and the Revolution both seemed to give evidence that the New Kingdom was coming. In a society whose essential symbolism was religious, it was easy to transmute the meanings of both events as inaugural of the new age.

The counterpart to this religious ideology of America was the emerging nationalist ideology. In principle, origin, and history the two were different. The latter was essentially political and social. It drew heavily on enlightenment thought and the classical tradition. Both systems however posited a national mission for America. The political leaders of the Revolutionary era and the new republic construed America's role as universally as did their clerical colleagues. But the Founding Fathers thought that they were grounding the new nation in the laws of nature.

The nationalist ideology and the religious ideology were interlinked by

more than the common sense of mission. There was a certain symmetry on other major beliefs. Nineteenth century protestantism came to endorse the multiplicity of denominations; the political ideology was grounded in the diversity of political and social interests. Separation of church and state was accompanied by separation of political power at various levels. Both ideologies stressed the principle of personal autonomy. The protestant stress on individual responsibility for salvation had its counterpart in the American emphasis upon the individual as the center of the new social order. <sup>7</sup>

Both ideologies embraced each other. America could be the primary agent of redemptive history only as long as the nation preserved civil liberty. Republican virtue could triumph only when buttressed by righteousness.

The first half century after the Revolution witnessed the institutionalization of this civil religion. That period is frequently characterized as being the era of the "Evangelical Empire." The phrase suggests the formative role of protestant churchmen in shaping the contours of the new culture. Under the aegis of the evangelicals the kingdom of God and the virtuous political republic became one and the same empire. At the center of this merger was the eschatology which linked the destiny of America with the course of redemptive history. It is this millennial persuasion functioning as the central idiom that separates American civil religion from varieties of nationalism. <sup>8</sup>

The Revolutionary and immediate post-revolutionary period shaped the continuing style of both the *polis* and the *ecclesia*. Both have in large part perpetuated themselves. We have little trouble noting the staying power of the constitution. We need to more fully appreciate the durability of the religious arrangements and identities realized by the contemporaries of Jefferson and Madison.

This faith in America as the millennial agent of God now seems very naive. It has all but passed from the scene for most Americans. Some of us are much too sophisticated to be deluded by such sentimental stuff. Others of us have drunk too deeply of the twentieth century to believe any utopian dreams. Some of us have a gospel too biblical to be seduced by a state robed in incarnational clothing. Furthermore, in our pseudo-modernity, we disclaim the tribalism of nationalism.

While the core of the millennial faith in America may be gone, its remnants are much alive. They surface in the persistent appeals for a rebirth of the civil faith. We yearn for a renewed assurance that we are indeed a special and chosen people. Those appeals come from the lettered and unlettered, the republicans and the democrats, the believers and non-believers. This nation has gone through a period of self-rejection and negation. The mood is changing. National affirmation is probably a necessary part of a larger cycle. The bicentennial, while being a corrective to our indulgent skepticism, also has the possibility of raising the American civic faith to new levels. Most of us do love America. It has been good to us. We are drawn to the bicentennial because we too have much to celebrate. We have reason for the litanies of praise.

Our praise however needs to be joined to confession for we are the inheritors of the American civil religion. Its lingering remnants do invite discussion as to whether we have christianized the culture or culturized the faith. Has the noble dream of a godly commonwealth been achieved or are we

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the victims of a vulgarized church? Seven identifiable remnants of the old faith can focus the question:

(1) A religious self-understanding is certainly a requirement for becoming a religious people. Our dreams of being God's new kingdom and our appropriation of the symbols of the Old Testament, the New Adam, and the New Garden of Eden, have undoubtedly allowed us, in part, to become that.

(2) We have worked with the enthusiasm of a people doing God's work. The energy and devotion brought to the building of the nation was frequently undergirded by a sense of being part of the cosmic scheme of renewal. The view of America as harbinger of the future elevated the tasks of ordinary people into universal significance. No wonder that we have built a remarkable society.

(3) Our vision of ourselves as God's elect, while producing our historic pattern of success, now ironically threatens our very existence. The perils we currently face come from the ironic tendency of idealism to turn to cynicism when too easily proclaimed, the tendency of strength to destroy when too easily used, the capacity of virtue to become vice when unchecked. The irony of our noble dreams and sordid present can be understood only when we disclaim our pretensions. We are not God's New Israel. We cannot evade history. <sup>9</sup>

(4) By confusing the *polis* and the *ecclesia* we have elevated political institutions and activity to an ultimate value. This very ultimacy which characterizes American politics may well be more destructive than helpful. Some things do go better when valued less.

(5) Our models of how faith is to be understood have been influenced by civil religion. When faith takes its image from the *polis*, then God is made out to be a king, one higher than all other kings; and the kingdom of God becomes the nation state. Faith rooted in the *ecclesia* knows that redemption is transhistorical and transnational. It affirms that God is not simply a super king, but is better revealed in the suffering Christ. <sup>10</sup>

(6) Through civil religion the nation becomes the community of the righteous. The nation preserves religious discipline. We rarely excommunicate deviants from the church but gladly participate in the exiling of dissenters. Orthodoxy and heresy, treason and loyalty, were once religious terms. They have become political measurements.

(7) The church has adopted the conventions of the *polis*. Civil religion legitimates them as the biblical forms. Ecclesiastical faith knows that the supernatural enters history in concrete and alternative forms. The commandments of Jesus are not the same as the requirements of civic health. So long as we maintain the mythology of a holy chosen nation we get caught with our incarnational principles down. The illusion allows us ever to constrict the transformation required by grace.

1976 calls us to the glorification of the *polis*. It calls for a renewal of the national faith. We need to distinguish this call from the call of the *ecclesia*. We need to participate in the liturgy of the nation in ways that do not minimize our commitments to the liturgy of the church. We need to reaffirm that our praise of the nation must be coupled with confession. In 1976 we need particularly to

be clear about what the church is. We need to proclaim that its loyalties are not to the nation but to God.

## NOTES

1. Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Sidney Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); John E. Smylie, "National Ethos and the Church," *Theology Today* 20 (October, 1963): 313-321.
2. Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), Book I - The Evangelical Empire.
3. Nathan O. Hatch, "Visions of a Republican Millennium: The Ideology of Civil Religion in the New Nation," (unpublished paper). See also Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); J. F. Maclear, "The Republic and the Millennium," in Elwyn A. Smith ed., *The Religion of the Republic* (Philadelphia: Forest Press, 1971); Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Religion, Revolution and the Rise of Modern Nationalism: Reflections on the American Experience," in *Church History* 44 (December, 1975): 492-504.
4. Maclear, "The Republic and the Millennium."
5. Ahlstrom, "Religion, Revolution and the Rise of Modern Nationalism," p. 498.
6. The sermon is reproduced in full in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, *The Puritans*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1938, 1963), Vol. I, pp. 195-199.
7. The description of the nationalist ideology and its relationship to the religious are suggested by John Higham, "Hanging Together: Divergent Unities in American History," *Journal of American History* 61 (June, 1974), pp. 5-28.
8. Hatch, "Visions of a Republican Millennium."
9. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York; Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952) for a penetrating analysis of our present ironic situation.
10. Herbert Richardson, "Civil Religion in Theological Perspective," in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 161-184, probes the issues suggested in remnants four and five. The Richey and Jones collection is noteworthy for its treatment of American Civil Religion.