

The Collapse of an American Sustained Cultural Identity: The American Civil Religion and the Spectre of Trumpism

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Abstract

This text stresses the diabolic spectre of Trumpism, a set of mechanisms for autocracy and authoritarianism, to redefine the United States while Trump’s supporters perceive America as a nation and an idea that have forgotten and betrayed them. Consequently, they deny the “religious” and mythical founding principles of the nation defending a “new religion”. Trump, the high priest of this “new religion”, and Trumpism represent a crisis of faith around the so-called American civil religion and announce the possible final collapse of an imagined American sustained cultural identity.

Keywords: Civil Religion in America; Religion; “New religion”; Trump; Trumpism

Resumo

Este texto sublinha o espetro diabólico do Trumpismo, um conjunto de mecanismos de autocracia e autoritarismo, para redefinir os Estados Unidos, enquanto por outro lado os apoiantes de Trump veem a América como uma nação e uma ideia que os esqueceram e traíram. Assim, e consequentemente, esses apoiantes negam os princípios, “religiosos” e míticos, fundadores da nação. Trump, o sumo sacerdote da sua “nova religião”, e o Trumpismo representam uma crise de fé em torno da chamada religião civil americana e anunciam o possível colapso de uma identidade cultural americana sustentada e imaginada.

Palavras-chave: Religião civil americana; Religião; “Nova religião”; Trump; Trumpismo

The arrival in 1620 of the first group of Calvinist Puritans on the East Coast, north of the colony of Virginia, marked the beginning of a great migration. They brought with them the charisma that would become the spirit of their colony, and which, in turn, would be extended and reformulated soon after the American Revolution. The nature of the colony, a society jointly led by religious ministers and political leaders, brought closer together by the convergence of the sacred and the profane, fostered the image it had of itself. Combining the sacred and the profane, the Puritan settlers who colonized America in the 17th century created their “Promised Land”, an imagined “America” fully vested with God-given rights and power over the world, to be erected over the course of time.

Possessing an undeniably utopian mindset, as stated by Lyman Sargent (cf. 2002) among others, Calvin’s followers on the New World inculcated the myth of “America” and its progress through political speeches inserted into religious sermons, shaped by the proximity between religion and politics.

The appropriation of a series of symbols and rites within American political discourse began as early as 1776, a process discussed by sociologist Robert Bellah in his essay from the late 1960s “Civil Religion in America”, which spurred accusations by many for seemingly supporting an idolatrous worship of the American nation. On the other hand, and as many other Americanists have already discussed, the historian and literary critic Sacvan Bercovitch argued that the Puritan typology, undoubtedly ingrained in an imagery sustained by a utopian impulse, sowed the seeds of the equally utopian project of unlimited American progress. In doing so, this typology opened the door to a cultural and ideological harmony which, by informing the men of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods and by being appropriated by them, became politicized and converted into a coercive ideology of state and power that would endure (Cf. Bercovitch, 1976).

America’s self-image of “exceptionalism” was assured by the rhetorical strategy born in Puritan New England under the leadership of John Winthrop. This image galvanized the people around an eschatological myth, alongside the utopian vision of America, “timeless” and idealized, whose essence lies in its myths and symbols. Consequently, a dominant ideological consensus was built up and configured as a way of expressing faith in a particular vision that, by the time of the American Revolution, had definitively become the national ideology. In addition, this ideology also made

“America” the symbol of a faith in the possibility of building a perfect society associated with a continually flourishing middle class, as capitalism through the lens of the Puritan ethic was understood as a “social dogma” that would lead to the growth and progress of the nation.

In fact, the Puritan Patriarchs tied the sacred and the profane to an eschatological myth because it was informed by a theology and a teleology. As it evolved towards the total galvanization of the people, this myth would ultimately prove chauvinistic since it would come, over time, to lay claim to the very affirmation of national exceptionalism.

It was undoubtedly this formative and informative role of an apocalyptic religious vision that largely contributed to America imbuing itself with both a mythical meaning and the faith in an exceptional “manifest destiny” and place in history. And although many other nations have also taken on a redemptive role for themselves, in truth the United States alone has tried to maintain the vibrant vitality of a particular vision that has sustained the longevity of the initial structure of that religious project, taken by Europeans in 1630.

As Horst Mewes points out in the 2010 essay “Reflections on Religion and Politics in American Democracy”, there is also an undeniable historical thread between the experience of the New England Puritan “religious exile” and the concern with the defence of religious freedom in the US Constitution. Madison and Jefferson were great defenders of the inclusion of both religious freedom and the separation of church and state in the Constitution, which they justified with religious as well as political arguments. However, in practice this has not prevented religion (or a sense of religiosity) from being present in American political life from the very beginning, as Horst Mewes rightly points out. George Washington, for instance, even argued that republican virtues should be rooted in religion, stating in his Farewell Address: “religion and morality are indispensable supports . . . , national morality cannot prevail in exclusion of religious principle” (Mewes 164). Nevertheless, and as Horst Mewes also stresses, while this idea is probably as old as the Constitution, the first instance of its clear formulation as “civil religion” can be traced back to President Lincoln’s description of the American reverence for the law as “the political religion of the nation”. Mewes further points out that

a civil or civic religion [in America] is based on the faith that not American governments, but the American founding principles of individual rights and constitutionally enshrined popular self-government are indeed divinely inspired and

sacred. These essentially political principles therefore ought to be regarded with the same awe and respect as are the object of religious worship. America as a whole therefore is engaged in a divine mission to realize those principles in its everyday practices, and its failures and successes can be measured accordingly. (163-4)

But in my view, and moving on to the central theme of this text, much more meaningful in this context is the understanding that if a fundamental part of the American experience has been the quest to consolidate the idea that the founding principles of individual rights and the sovereignty of the people are sacred or of sacred inspiration, on the other hand, the problem faced by American democracy today is not related to the loss of its religious foundations. Above all, the perils brought by thoughtful and structured attempts targeting the intensification of a dangerous privatized individualism masked by many religious practices, whether by fundamentalist Evangelicals or more “mainstream” Christians, constitute, indeed, the threat faced by American democracy. A private individualism, supported by the media to promote questions and answers to achieve one’s own interests and passions, witnessing, in turn, the decline of the traditional American civil religion; an individualism that contrasts with the principles of Emerson, himself also a founder, who celebrated individualism in a spiritual context and, readjusting the myth, encouraged people to listen to their individual intuition to cultivate the spiritual power within themselves. Emerson looked to nature as a source of inspiration and as an expression of the correspondence between human beings, God, and the material world. His transcendental ideas about self-reliance, about the unity of nature, the individual soul and God influenced generations of American writers and thinkers. An “oracular voice”, he was the founding prophet of hope and boundless optimism in search of social reforms that could establish a more inclusive and egalitarian society in nineteenth-century America.

The state of mind that was encouraged from its outset by a sense of universal mission sought its institutional consolidation, thereby engendering and instilling a definitive American cultural model that has persisted through numerous new beginnings. This model has endured several episodes informed by the anxiety instated by the conflict between believing in the possibility of a place of happiness and ultimate perfection, and the imposition, evidenced by the facts of everyday life and history, of the impossibility of its accomplishment. In other words, it concerns the experience of various processes of destruction/restructuring, dystopias and eutopias

whose anthropocentric perspective of the utopia built on the becoming seems to legitimize everything as long as it is under the condition of being American.

In fact, what at first meant believing that the world - the New World on the New Continent - could be changed and that happiness was possible was not exhausted in Puritan New England. And it has yet to be exhausted precisely because in America the Puritan legacy, its typological memory, has favoured an ideological expansion that has subsequently, in the refraction of the images the nation has of itself, strived to ideologically feed the sense of maximizing what can be achieved in each circumstance or at each moment. A process dedicated to realizing a project that is constantly blossoming, which is constantly returning to its original intention, seeking to survive in the face of new circumstances, be they political, social, or even conflictual or emotional.

I note that the particularity of the relationship between religion and politics in the USA, as well as the feeling of the nation itself as something sacred by covenant, has been at the heart not exactly of any Christian Religion in America but of a secularized religious cement that has connected individuals as disparate and distant in time as John Winthrop, Martin Luther King, and Barack Obama, for instance. Undoubtedly it is this common thread that lies at the heart of a unique “America” that laid the foundations for a sustained cultural identity.

If the need to give meaning to the American experience in general preceded US independence with the mythology of the New Jerusalem established by John Winthrop on the one hand, on the other this need did not fade with independence. History shows that America defies static definitions through the construction (and constant renewal) of a complex of myths and symbols whose consideration is crucial to the understanding of both America and the legitimacy of its political actions and anxieties such as those in Martin Luther King’s speech “I have a dream”.

Articulating a vision of basic civic equality, Martin Luther King stressed that unalienable rights were included in the Declaration of Independence, and that they were based on divine natural law. Barack Obama in his Farewell Address declared:

It was on these streets where I witnessed the power of faith, and the quiet dignity of working people in the face of struggle and loss. This is where I learned that change only happens when ordinary people get involved, get engaged, and come together to demand it. After eight years as your president, I still believe that. And it’s not just my belief. It’s the beating heart of our American idea - our bold experiment in self-government.

It's the conviction that we are all created equal, endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It's the insistence that these rights, while self-evident, have never been self-executing; that we, the people, through the instrument of our democracy, can form a more perfect union.

This is the great gift our Founders gave us. The freedom to chase our individual dreams through our sweat, toil, and imagination - and the imperative to strive together as well, to achieve a greater good. (Obama)

And he ends: "God bless you. And may God continue to bless the United States of America" (Obama).

Although, as Tocqueville emphasized in the 19th century in *Democracy in America*, "the charm of anticipated success" (147) has indeed framed many American collective discourses, the relevance of a complex of myths and symbols in American culture, and their permanent revisiting and renewal, allows us in part to question whether they are not the result of the fragility of the idea of America. In fact, by transposing the image of American exceptionalism, which is still widely used to justify a particular vision of national foreign policy, we can realize that the idea of America and its infinite possibilities has not only remained under constant construction and revision but has been above all evoked to justify both its projections of self-esteem and its occasional crises, insecurities, and paranoia.

As a concept, the ideological consensus that emerged in seventeenth-century New England, problematized by Bercovitch and affirmed, in different terms, by Bellah as the American civil religion, often proved to be useful internally because it disciplined moments of crisis and social tensions. The absorption of the prophecy of divine election and the consequent growing glory that it heralded often transformed those same tensions into rites of consent, of which the rhetoric that participated in the process of "Americanization", "socialization", stands out (cf. Bercovitch, 1993).

As a matter of fact, all political ideologies are religious (Cf. Gray), and so it is with the United States, which was undeniably founded as a "religious" nation. Nonetheless, if we consider the religion on which America was founded as not exactly Christianity, but rather the arrogant idea of the nation itself as the world's best hope for redemption, and if we take this "religion" as having worked to maintain American demagoguery, it is also undeniable that, however pernicious the American cult of uniqueness may be, historically it has prevented the kind of national cult of a personality that we see today in the indisputable threat posed by Trumpism.

As David Rosen points out in a Chris Jennings' *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism's* book review, published in 2016, "amidst all the 2016 electoral clamour and Donald Trump's call to 'Make America Great Again', the concept of 'utopia' [and with it that of an American civil religion] has essentially disappeared from the American vocabulary" (1103). and has been replaced by what I call a personalized "new religion" in unbridled pursuit of affirming its institutionalization in 2024. A "new religion", which is as worrying as Donald Trump himself. Indeed, Trump's strident (and meaningless) call to "Make America Great Again" reveals both his understanding that the United States has "become too weak and ineffective" and his contempt for any weakness, accompanied by his defence of action for action's sake. All this to the point of abandoning American values of law and justice, free speech, and the constitutional rule of law itself. In Trump's defence of economic policies that are traditionally read as more liberal, we also witness the threat of a selective populism of a candidate who believes that his theatricalized generous and benign action should only be shared by certain segments of the population, dominantly an economic elite, and white nationalist movements.

While the diabolic spectre of Trumpism, a set of mechanisms for autocracy and authoritarianism, aims to redefine the United States, Trump's supporters perceive America as a nation and an idea that have forgotten and betrayed them and, consequently, they deny the founding principles of the nation. In fact, Trumpism both represents a crisis of faith around the so-called American civil religion and announces the possible final collapse of an imagined American strongly sustained cultural identity. But Trump himself, the high priest of Trumpism, his "new religion", the right-wing populist as defined by Carter A. Wilson in his interesting book *Trumpism: Race, Class, Populism and Public Policy*, published in 2021, is also a symptom of a dangerous turn in America, and even if he, as a candidate, is defeated in 2024, what remains a grave threat is the possibility of a bigger crisis reverberating, given the international context.

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