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**“God Bless America (and No Place Else?!):  
The Uses & Abuses of Civil Religion**

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Memorial Day has sometimes become merely a three-day holiday weekend, symbolically marking the beginning of the summer vacation season. But **the original intent of Memorial Day is an annual time to honor and remember all who have died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces**—not to be confused with Veterans Day in November, which honors all military veterans. For me, Memorial Day includes remembering my great-uncle Wilber, who was killed in action during World War II.

And when I think about honoring the legacy of those who have given their lives in military service to this country, it is also important to remember that **part of what they died for was that future generations might have “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”** As John Adams, our Unitarian forebear and second President of the United States, wrote to his wife Abigail about why he and other risked their lives in the American Revolutionary War:

I must study Politics and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematics and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematics and Philosophy, Geography, Natural History...Navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Music, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry, and Porcelain. (4)

But in our nation’s history, this progression toward the things that make for peace has too often been undermined by war.

In 2002, then-Senator Obama delivered a now-famous speech against the Iraq War, words that I agree with in many ways:

**I stand before you as someone who is not opposed to war in all circumstances.... What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war.** What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by...armchair...warriors...to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne. What I am opposed to is the attempt by political hacks...to distract us from a rise in the uninsured, a rise in the poverty rate, a drop in the median income — to distract us from corporate scandals.... The consequences of war are dire, the sacrifices immeasurable. We may have occasion in our lifetime to once again rise up in defense of our freedom, and pay the wages of war. But we ought not—we will not—travel down that hellish path blindly. Nor should we allow those who would march off and pay the ultimate sacrifice, who would prove the full measure of devotion with their blood, to make such an awful sacrifice in vain.

Ironically, however, from our vantage point almost fourteen years in the future from that historic speech, we know, as reported in *The New York Times*, that,“If the United States remains in combat in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria until the end of President Obama’s term—a near-certainty...he will leave behind an improbable legacy as **the only president in American history to serve two complete terms with the nation at war.**” President Obama’s visit to Hiroshima, Japan is also a reminder that in contrast to his admirable vision of a nuclear weapons-free world, the reality is that his administration “has reduced the [nuclear] stockpile less than any other post-Cold War presidency.”

Here at UUCF, our mission statement is to “encourage spiritual growth, build beloved community, and act for peace and justice.” That middle section always reminds me of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s prophetic warning that **the three greatest threats to building the beloved community are “racism, materialism, and militarism”** (91).

**The problem is not the military used well and responsibly.** As President Obama said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, there are “two seemingly irreconcilable truths—that

war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly.” **The problem is *militarism*, the misuse of blood and treasure—that should be used to support the common good here at home and around the world—to instead support the Military Industrial Complex.** Militarism undermines peace and prosperity—and disrespects the memory of those who have died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.

As Unitarian Universalists, it is vital to keep in mind our UU 6th Principle: “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,” a vision that ultimately transcends the interests of any one nation-state. As a bumper sticker I saw recently said, **“I love my country, but I think we should start seeing other people.”**

Remember the lyrics of our opening hymn: **“This is my home, the country where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine; but other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.... Hear my song...of peace for their land and for mine.”** But that sentiment of world peace is not the conclusion to most presidential speeches of recent decades. Instead, it has become reflexive for presidents to conclude major addresses with “Thank you. God bless you, and God bless The United States of America.”

Those words have become so commonplace that it can be easy to assume the tradition goes back to George Washington. Instead, it turns out that **the first president to use that sign-off was Richard Nixon in the wake of the Watergate scandal, and it was Ronald Reagan, who first used it regularly.** As detailed in *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America*,

out of the 229 major presidential speeches from the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 to the end of Carter’s term in 1981, Nixon’s use of “God bless America” was the only time a president used the phrase publicly. In contrast, from the inauguration of Reagan in 1981 to the Bush administration in 2008, 49 out of 129 major presidential addresses used the line.

Every time I hear a president close a speech with that line, it makes me think of the 2003 Chris Rock political satire *Head of State* in which Rock’s opponent concludes every speech by saying, **“God bless America. And no place else.”** Toward the end of the film, Rock challenges him by

saying, “**God bless America, and every place else!**”

The phrase “God Bless America” is an example of what religion scholars call **American Civil Religion**, “**a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals**” in American public life that are **essentially a patriotic religion of the nation**. The late sociologist of religion Robert Bellah made the term famous, and an excellent recent survey is Peter Gardella’s 2013 book with Oxford University Press titled *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred*.

In American Civil Religion, some of our *martyrs* include Lincoln, MLK, and JFK. Our *scriptures* includes the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” and “Second Inaugural Address.” Our *sacred spaces* include the National Mall here in D.C., Arlington National Cemetery, and Mount Rushmore. Our *sacred symbols* include the flag and the Statue of Liberty. Our *sacred music* includes “The Star Spangled Banner,” “God Bless America,” and “America the Beautiful.” Our *creed* is the Pledge of Allegiance. Our *high holy days* include Memorial Day, July 4th, Election Day, and Inauguration Day.

So on this Memorial Day Weekend, on the eve of one of our national high holy days, I would like to invite us to reflect some on both the promises and perils of American Civil Religion. **Naming the phenomenon of American Civil Religion (which often functions at an unconscious level) can help us become more aware of this force in our country**, which can and has been used *constructively to call us to our best selves* (“ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country”) and also *abused cynically for war-mongering, war-profiteering*.

Arguably the most important text of American Civil Religion is at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence (Gardella 99):

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

**In an age of the Divine Right of Kings, claiming that governments derive their powers from the consent of the governed is a powerful example of Civil Religion being used to empower**

**the people.**

During the Civil War, President Lincoln used the opening line of his Gettysburg Address as a similar challenge, calling us to live into the full promise of Jefferson's words: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" (106). But it was far from clear in either Jefferson's or Lincoln's own day whether "all men" included people of color—just as neither Jefferson nor Lincoln would have included women as being created equal. But **Lincoln harnessed the power of the Declaration of Independence, which had come to be a sacred text, to expand the concentric circle of who is fully enfranchised.** Later generations would continue to expand the circle to include women, the disabled, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender citizens of this nation. Again, **that is Civil Religion at its best: using the power of secular scripture to include the marginalized.**

As a side note, for any fans of Ken Burns' mostly excellent documentary *The Civil War*, both he (and the historian Shelby Foote) get it wrong in saying that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was met with silence. That's a myth. "Most contemporary newspapers noted that the speech was very well received. Some attacked the content of the speech, but none said that it provoked only silence" (179).

There is much more to say about American Civil Religion, both then and now, but to limit myself to only a few more prominent examples, **we literally built a religious temple to Lincoln on the National Mall in D.C. that is modeled on the Temple to Zeus in Olympia, Greece**, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. And lest anyone miss the symbolism, the large words carved above the giant Lincoln statue say, "IN THIS TEMPLE..." (225-226).

Similarly, the sculptor who carved the faces of Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln into Mount Rushmore frequently said in public statements about his work that **his intention was to suggest "the gods they have become"** (234-235). Incidentally, the original plan was also not to end with the four presidential faces: "carving was to continue until the figures had clothing and arms down to the waist, with one of Washington's hands on a sword and Jefferson's right hand on Washington's arm, while Lincoln held the lapel of his coat." For better or worse, time and funding ran out (241). There is also the **tragically symbolic choice to carve**

**Mount Rushmore into the Lakota Sioux's sacred site the *Paha Sapa*, or Black Hills.** From an Indigenous perspective, this sacrilege is a classic example of American Civil Religion gone awry, and it sadly mirrors the treatment of the American Indians in U.S. history.

For now, I'll give one final example of Civil Religion. In the opening paragraphs of President Kennedy's Inaugural Address, there are three classic intersections of church and state: (1) "For I have sworn before you *and Almighty God* the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago" and (2) "the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but *from the hand of God*." Just as Thomas Jefferson used Civil Religion in the Declaration of Independence to assert that certain rights are inalienable—"endowed by [the] Creator"—irrespective of what George III or any other king says, Kennedy is using Civil Religion to say that there are human rights that are *transcendent* over any state's laws (292). It's the same logic that led our Transcendentalist forebear Henry David Thoreau in his essay "Civil Disobedience" to say that, "An unjust law is no law at all" and should be resisted. **Again, we are seeing Civil Religion at its best: being used to secure human rights and liberties.**

Fascinatingly, President Kennedy invoked God a third and final time in the final line of his inaugural address, but he did so with a **significant twist that put the responsibility on us**: "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*" (298).

My larger point has been to make us more conscious of American Civil Religion—and the ways it can and has been used to manipulate the American public for good and ill. The next time you hear a politician invoke Civil Religion, I invite you to mentally take a half step back and ask yourself, "Am I being manipulated?" (Yes, you are.)

Relatedly, the single most powerful warning I have seen of what American Civil Religion can look like at its worst is an anonymous quote that is often misattributed to Sinclair Lewis: "**When Fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross.**" When and if we are persuaded to give up our Civil Liberties, it has been and likely will be by someone standing in front of a row of American flags and claiming to act in the name of God. (This claim is not abstract. **History reminds us of the Alien and Sedition Acts, McCarthyism,**

**the USA PATRIOT Act, and other examples.)** We need to be more conscious of Civil Religion because when it operates only at the *unconscious* level, it can and has been abused to silence dissent and cynically manipulate the misinformed masses.

But ultimately **American Civil Religion—like Islam, Christianity, and or any other religion—is not inherently good or evil, but can be harnessed for either purpose.** In the words of the public theologian Brian McLaren, there are two kinds of every religion:

one of social control and one of social transformation. One to hold people down, one to lift them up. One an opiate to pacify people into compliance, the other a stimulant to empower people to imagine a better world, a better future, a better life—giving them the courage to live in peaceful defiance of violent, corrupt, and greedy powers-that-be. Neither kind is perfect, and both kinds contain good and sincere people. But if those who use God and religion for social control are left to define faith, the religion they define will be a false one, an ugly one, an idolatrous one.

Unitarian Universalism is a big tent, drawing from many sources, both sacred and secular. May we continue to be a movement that lifts people up, empowering them “to imagine a better world, a better future, a better life—giving them the courage to live in peaceful defiance” of injustice.