

Reflection on Civil Religion in the United States and Its Relevance to MLK Jr.'s Legacy

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The Embrace (2023) by Hank Willis Thomas in Boston Common. MLK Jr. and Coretta Scott King

“If America does indeed have a civil religion, we should remember Dr. King as its foremost practitioner.”

Richard A. Rosengarten, former Dean,
The University of Chicago Divinity School



Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial (2011), National Mall, 1964 Independence Ave. SW, Washington, DC 20024

Brief (1 of 2)

- **Why am I writing this paper?**

Opportunity for me to gain clarity on US civil religion and connect it with the life and legacy of MLK Jr.

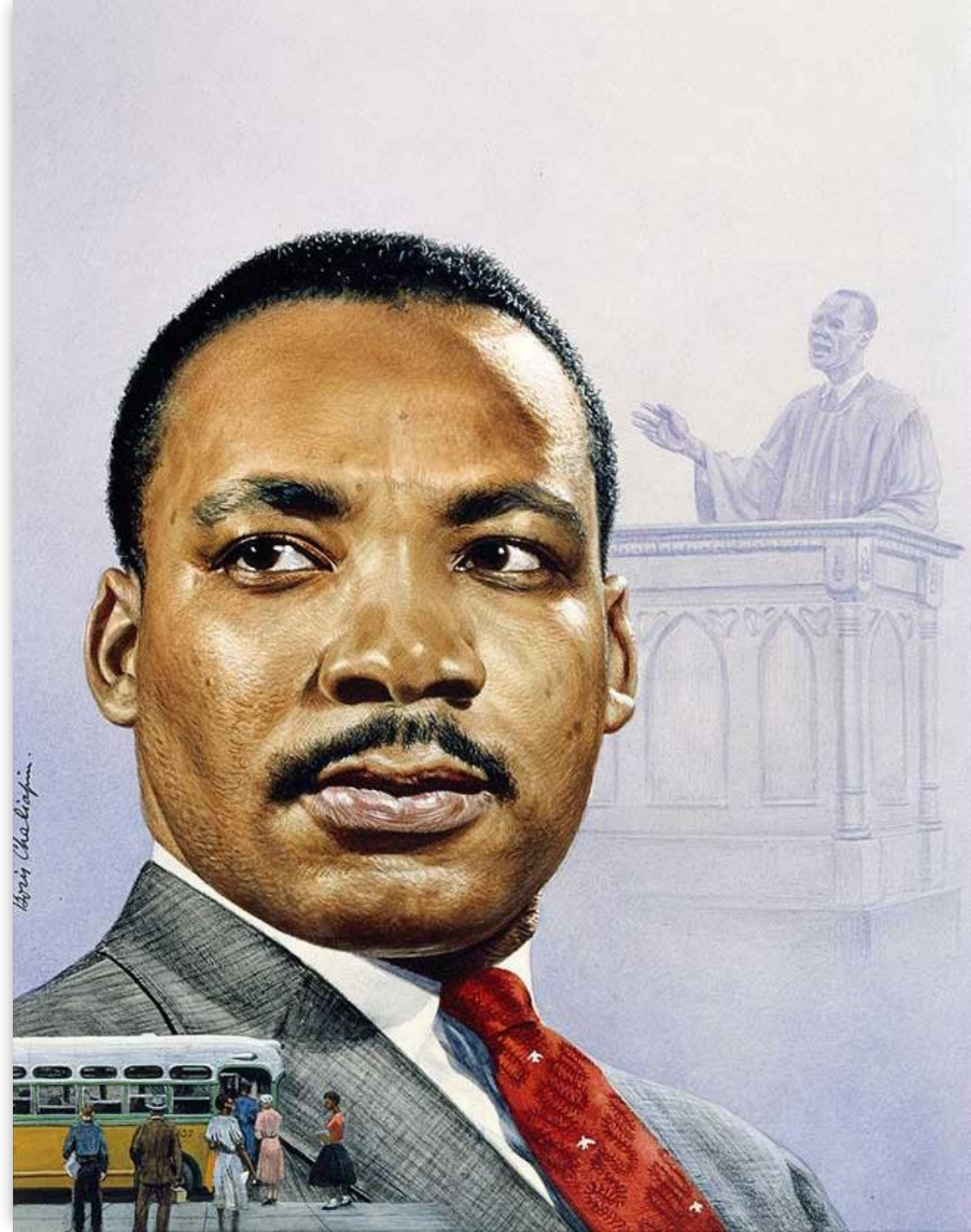
- **Talking to whom?**

Self, member of the Brookline MLK Celebration Committee. Potentially other members.

- **Thoughts before reflection?**

- *Civil religion is a form of nationalism and exists in America.*
- *MLK Jr. championed racial equality, justice, nonviolent resistance; used aspects of civil religion*

Martin Luther King Jr. by Boris Chaliapin (1957)



Brief (2 of 2)

- **What drives this reflection?**

Because Dr. King used aspects of civil religion to advance social good, understanding US civil religion is important to better appreciate his legacy.

- **Single most important takeaway?**

The Brookline MLK Celebration Committee should consider speakers who address and events that regard US civil religion and Dr. King.

Portrait of MLK Jr. by Ben Shahn (1966)





MLK Celebration Committee

- Brookline, Norfolk County, MA neighbors Boston. 63,000 people
- Government: Town Administrator, Select Board, Town Meeting
- The Select Board (5 people) appoint committee members
- The Brookline MLK Celebration Committee has 7 members
- At first aimed to celebrate annual MLK Day; now work is throughout the year, honoring the life and legacy of MLK Jr.

Notable facts: MLK Jr. earned his Ph.D. in systematic theology at Boston U (1955) and met his wife, Coretta Scott, in Boston. King returned several times between 1955 and 1965.

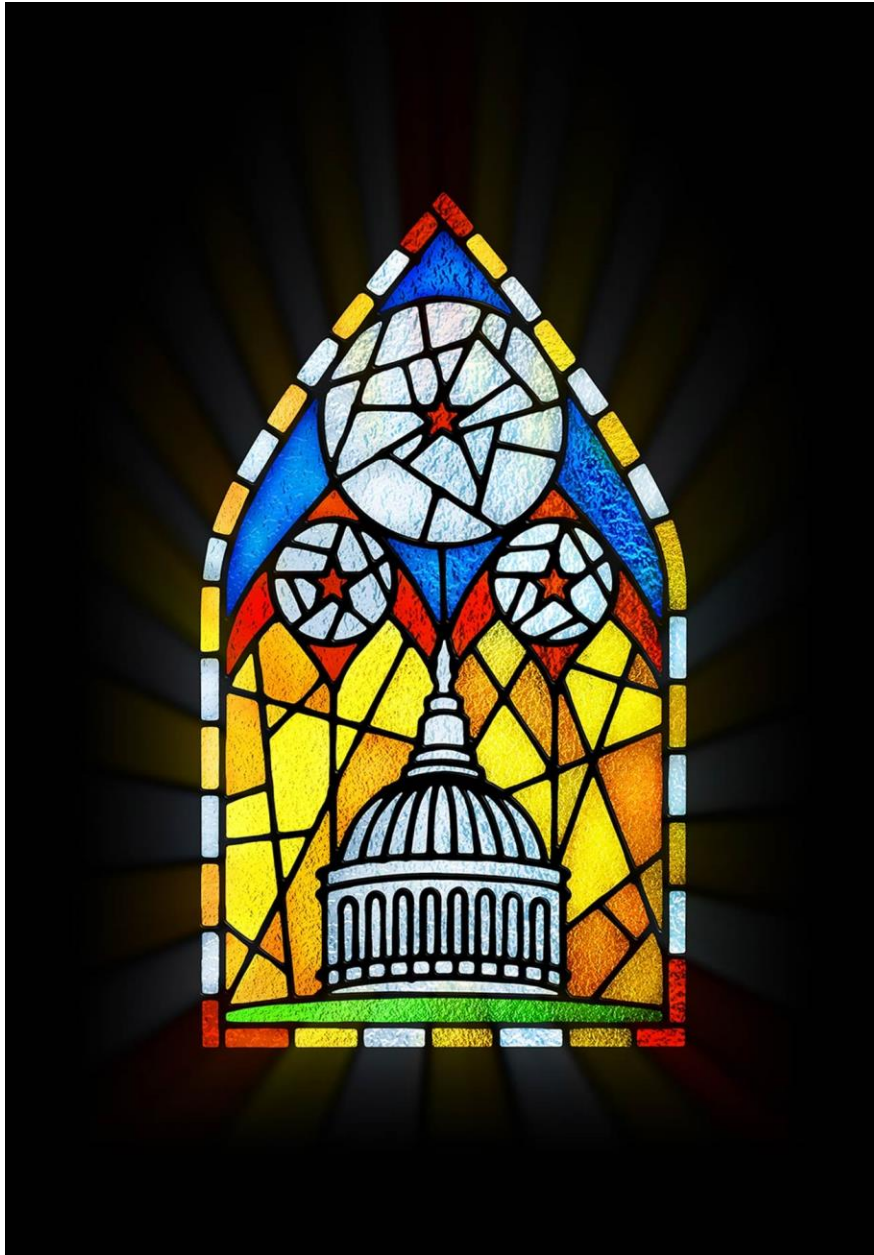


Illustration by Paul Spella / Rendering by Patrick White. *The Atlantic*, April 2021

Outline

What is civil religion?

How does civil religion operate in the US?

How are Religious Methodology tools applicable?

Debating Pros and Cons of US Civil Religion

Recognizing King's View and My Stance

I. What is civil religion? (1 of 3)

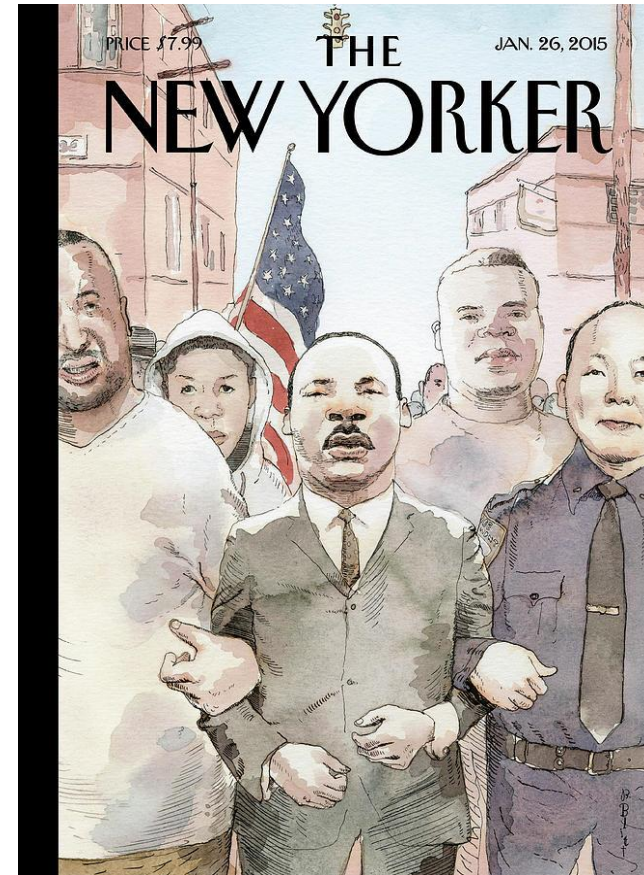
- Form of nationalism
 - Humans are divided into nations, sharing a territory, language, culture, and aspiration
 - sustained not just by negative emotions but by love and hope intertwining (Penslar)
- Religion influences nationalism
 - Religious influences are embedded in all aspects of human experience (Foundational Assumption IV, Moore)
 - Religion is interwoven with nationalism even when it may seem separate (Omer and Springs)



Washington National Cathedral, site of King's last sermon on March 31, 1968.

I. What is civil religion? (2 of 3)

- Nationalism has poles (that apply to civil religion, a form of nationalism)
 - Exclusivist (including chosenness) and inclusivist
 - Chosenness is within Christianity, extended from Jews. Others: nonbelievers in Christ. Christianity influenced King, but King kept his vision for social reform rooted in American values, such as justice and freedom.
 - Exclusion may increase the likelihood of discrimination and violent practices (Omer and Springs), but not always. It includes chosenness, part of Christianity that influenced King, promoter of nonviolence.



Dream of Reconciliation by Barry Blitt (2015). “Reconciliation” is a concept in many religions, here applied in a social sense.

I. What is civil religion? (3 of 3)

- Is nationalism a form of religion operating as civil religion? (Omer and Springs, "Nationalism: A Religion?")
 - Are they wondering if nationalism is part of the essence of religion? I don't think so. Religion predates nationalism.
 - I think their point is, "Yes, nationalism is a form of religion operating as civil religion."
- Many scholars see nationalism negatively, leading a nation to violence, but it can work for good and lead to a more secular, pluralistic, and liberal society
 - Even liberal societies keep aspects of religion
 - The positive outlook echoes what Penslar said about nationalism having love and hope, values King championed



A sign at a MLK Jr. Parade in Fort Pierce, FL, on Jan. 20, 2025. Eric Hasert / TCPALM

II. How does civil religion operate in the US?



John Francis Paramino. *Founders Memorial on Boston Common* (1930). John Winthrop et al. Winthrop delivered "A Model of Christian Charity" in 1630, the year Boston was founded. He served as the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony.

- Robert Bellah "Civil Religion in America" (1967): "institutionalized collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation."
- The extent of religion is throughout the nation, and people, including leadership, use aspects of religion to support cohesion and the belief in the idea of America
- Examples
 - "In God We Trust" on US currency
 - "One nation under God" (Pledge of Allegiance)
 - President usually sworn in with his hand on the Bible
 - "Truth shall set you free" on courts (John 8:32)
 - America as a "City upon a hill" (John Winthrop sermon, 1630), taken as America should lead in morality, which contributes to American exceptionalism
- Do other nations still see America as a moral leader and seek moral leadership?
- Debate: should America strengthen civil religion, reduce its influence, or stay as is?

III. How are Religious Methodology Tools applicable?

- Cultural studies/critical theory approach to understanding religious studies
- Johan Galtung (“Cultural Violence”) presents a typology of violence (direct, structural, cultural). It’s corollary (peace and nonviolence) underscores the convictions of King
- Galtung’s “earthquake”
 - the quake (event, direct)
 - movement of tectonic plates (process, structural)
 - fault line (more permanent)
- Earthquake applied to affects of slavery, which Dr. King saw as injustice with lasting effects, including racial inequality and systemic racism
 - Slaves captured and many killed (direct)
 - White mentality of superiority (structural), discrimination
 - Racism (cultural), prejudice
- The corollary to violence includes, among other things, “respect, kindness, compassion, empathy, healing, generosity, humility” (Moore)



IV. Debating Pros and Cons of US Civil Religion

Constantino Brumidi. *Apotheosis of Washington*. 1865.
United States Capitol Rotunda



Civil Religion is here to stay regardless, but I think it's good to weigh its perceived merit.

- View: US Civil religion should stay the same or strengthen
 - Creates solidarity among many people.
 - American goodwill can improve international relations.
 - American values espoused by civil religion make a better society.
 - Arguable: people trust the government more when they think it acts on principles.
 - Moral leaders are more aligned with the international community. (e.g., King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964)
- View: US civil religion has a dark side, so reduce it.
 - The notion of chosenness leads to the dominant group removing people (e.g., Native Americans)
 - Common enemy (e.g., atheists and Communists during the Cold War)
 - Some Hollywood films don't promote positive values. Instead, stereotypes and harmful messages
- Alternative: Keep civil religion the same, even with flaws, outweighed by benefits

V. Recognizing King's View (1 of 2)

- “Throughout his life, King wrestled with the religious and moral meaning of nationalism” (MLK Research and Education Institute, Stanford University). Why?
- King was aware of the dark side of nationalism
 - Hitler’s tyranny
 - McCarthy’s attacks against “un-American” activities
- King’s view of equality and justice for all regarded humanity: “all flesh shall see it together,” a better, greater nation



2025. Jennifer Kinon/Bobby C. Martin Jr., Designers. Paul Spella, *The Atlantic*, Art Director. Katie Martin. *The Atlantic*, Associate Art Director. David Somerville, *The Atlantic*, Creative Director. The Original Champions of Design, Design firm.

V. Recognizing My Stance

(2 of 2)

- I think America should strengthen its role as a moral leader for other nations to follow.
- I do not think moral leadership should express itself as solely Christian, even though many values emerge from Christianity.
 - Other religions and even some non-spiritual and non-religious people orient with a moral compass
 - Christianity sometimes has an “us” and “them” outlook, exclusivism discussed
- Devotional assertion: I don’t believe God supports only people practicing Judeo-Christianity in the US.
- Civil religion, and Christianity that influences it, should support US moral leadership while advancing a pluralistic, liberal, and secular democracy aimed at a greater good for people to live joyfully, peacefully.
- **I have gained clarity on US Civil Religion and connected it with the life and legacy of MLK Jr.**
I encourage the Brookline MLK Celebration Committee to consider both speakers who address and events that regard civil religion in America.





RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Atalia Omer and Jason A. Springs



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Michael Ochs Archives

