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Reflection on Civil Religion in the United States

and Its Relevance to MLK, Jr.'s Legacy

"If America does indeed have a civil religion, we should remember Dr. King as its foremost practitioner," writes Richard A. Rosengarten, former Dean of The University of Chicago Divinity School. Based on material in this Spring 2025 Religious Nationalisms course, I'm sure America has civil religion; and based on research, I hold that U.S. Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advanced social good using aspects of it. Accordingly, I think people can better appreciate King's legacy by knowing more about it. I find it fitting to quote sociologist Robert Bellah, who wrote the 1967 essay "Civil Religion in America." He defined the term as used in the United States as an "institutionalized collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation."

In this paper I reflect upon civil religion in the world's leading nation of military and economic might, peopled by 340 million (up from 2.5 million in 1776, i.e. 136 times more populated) of whom 62 percent of adults identify as Christian, 29 percent as religiously unaffiliated, and 7 percent of other religion, the identity facts according to the Pew Research Religious Landscape Study. I unpack civil religion and explore through scholarly research how it's a form of nationalism. I provide examples of it and make clear that methodological tools of religious studies help with its analysis. While acknowledging that civil religion is in America regardless of one's view about it, I weigh its pros and cons.

With heightened awareness of civil religion, I connect it to the legacy of Dr. King, Jr., personally important to me as a member of the Brookline MLK Celebration Committee. My reflection leads toward proposing to the committee that we consider the topic of civil religion in the United States when deciding upon speakers and events regarding Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. What is civil religion? What do scholars think about it?

To understand civil religion, I think it's important to first recognize that it is a form of nationalism—the belief that humans are divided into nations, which share a territory, language, culture and aspiration. While many scholars think fear is the base of collective feeling, according to Derek Penslar, nationalisms "are not sustained by negative emotions alone but also by the intertwining of love and hope" (Penslar 10). Penslar was introducing Zionisms, but his remarks about nationalisms have general reach.

Second, it's important to recognize that religion influences nationalism (therefore it links to civil religion not just in name). That's due to the fourth foundational assumption of religious literacy: "Religious influences are embedded in all aspects of human experience" (Moore 3). Certainly nationalism is part of that. Atalia Omer and Jason Springs explain in "What is 'Religious' about 'Religious Nationalism'?" that religion is interwoven with nationalism even when it may seem separate. Many modernists say that society is secular and the public role of religion is past; the state rules; God is dead. But that is not so. Religious expression and observance do not happen in a silo. Religion impacts the community and society at large. I'm thinking about the public component that Omer and Springs discuss, saying "Religions are not merely abstract ideas and beliefs. Rather, they are embodied in communities, practices, and institutions" (13).

Third, besides the existence of nationalism and that religion influences it, I think it's important to recognize that nationalism has poles, relevant because such trait applies to civil religion, given it's a form of nationalism. I find compelling in Omer and Springs' "Reimagining Religion and Nation: The Cases of Israel and the United States" the thinking about nationalism as having two poles, exclusivist and inclusivist "along a spectrum from more or less ethnocentric and religiocentric visions of national identity" (90). A nation too toward exclusivism can lead to thoughts of superiority, rooted in chosenness—generally the idea that a person or group has been selected or chosen by a higher power for a special purpose. That may be good in some contexts, but on the dark end sometimes chosenness expresses itself extremely as total denial of others' humanity, often rooted in rage over past grievances or fear. The authors say these poles are ideal types, conceptual models; nationalism in any nation expresses characteristics of both.

As for chosenness, which has emerged in reflection from considering the nature of the exclusivist pole of nationalism, I think whether chosenness is good or not depends on its demonstration. Does a group believing it's closer to God make a better society or one where the dominant group is dismissive and intolerant? If it's toward a better society, toward whose vision is the society advancing and what does "better" mean? Here I think about it in relation to Dr. King. While King did not strictly use the idea of chosenness to argue for racial reconciliation and equality, instead preferring to frame Civil Rights progress in widely held American values such as justice and freedom, he did—according to The King Center in Atlanta, GA—draw inspiration from religious principles of Christianity and Hinduism, the latter due to Mahatma Gandhi, and as I understand, in Christianity the notion of chosenness exists with separation of believers and nonbelievers in Jesus Christ, chosenness having extended from the Jewish people, originally

God's chosen people. Simply put, chosenness is within a religion that influenced King's vision even though he kept calls for social reform rooted in American values.

Given I like King's vision for a better society, I'm unable to dismiss exclusivism because it includes chosenness, which is inherent in a religion that inspired Dr. King. I'm surprised because I'm also willing to accept the following statement by Omer and Springs: "Generally speaking, the closer one is to the representing chauvinistic interpretations of identity (i.e., those that… tend to deploy myths, symbols, rituals, and sacred times and spaces in exclusionary ways), the greater is the likelihood for discriminatory and violent practices on domestic and international levels" (90). I think the key here is that "greater is the likelihood" does not mean the discriminatory and violent practices are guaranteed. It cannot be so. Exclusivism is embedded in the religion that inspired Dr. King, and he promoted the philosophy of nonviolence.

But say Omer and Springs are generally correct, is it accurate to assume that more inclusive nationalism is often more impartial, fair, and peaceful not just at home but in foreign affairs? I assume such nation's society would be more secular, pluralistic, and liberal (with "secular" keeping aspects of religion). But it's not possible to have a state without flaws. Even nationalism leaning toward inclusiveness has its faults. For instance, inclusivist nationalism in a pluralist, secular society is neither fair nor peaceful when it enforces exclusion through economic disparity, cultural hegemony, or interventionist foreign policies. That said, I still think inclusiveness, flaws included, is typically better than exclusive nationalism for the type of social goodness I like, albeit Dr. King, Jr. in this context is exceptional, arguably walking seamlessly the bipolarity of nationalism, of which civil religion is part.

Light shed upon the context surrounding civil religion, I hone in, returning to Omer and Springs. In "Nationalism: A Religion?" they ask, is nationalism a form of religion operating as

civil religion? So, based on previous references, I've established that religion influences nationalism; I would say they are wondering if nationalism is part of the essence of religion, but that can't be given religion is older than nationalism (the former having emerged, based on evidence of ritualistic behavior, about 50,000 years ago; and nationalism accelerated with the French Revolution, just two and half centuries ago—unless they think that religion has extended its nature to include a new form). Aside from that spin-off debate, their discussion seems to make clear that the likely answer is "yes" given the influence of religion remains extensive in nations, and it takes place in secular, liberal societies too. The concept of "secular retrieval" occurs, brought up by Max Weber, where "forms of nationalism selectively use cultural, religious, and ethnic resources to build, sustain, and protect collective identity" (44). The aspects of religion help unify the people of a nation.

Omer and Springs say that while many scholars of nationalism see it negatively, leading a nation to violence, it can also work for good and eventually lead to a more secular, pluralistic, and liberal society, with even secular societies keeping aspects of religion. The latter echoes what Penslar said about how the intertwining of love and hope can sustain nationalisms, not just negative emotion, and it evokes fundamental values that Dr. King championed.

2. How does civil religion operate in the United States? Examples?

I'm interested in examples from the United States of how civil religion works because aspects of culture impact America, and I care. Despite the First Amendment, 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, put into practice by law in the Constitution. In "Nationalism: A Religion?" Omer and Springs give examples: "In God We Trust" on U.S. currency, the Pledge of Allegiance with "One nation under God," (44) and not

mentioned in the text but also notable: the President sworn in usually with a hand on the Bible, and the phrase "Truth shall set you free" (John 8:32) chiseled on courts. I think moments of silence are interesting too. It's like the norm is to provide an opportunity for people to pray if they want but no one is required to participate, so out of respect many stand in silence. Generally I think people follow that norm without disrupting.

I think it's important to share another example of American culture referring to religion before proceeding—the idea of America as a "city upon a hill." John Winthrop said that in a 1630 sermon before the Puritan settlers reached Salem, Massachusetts Bay Colony, in what became New England. It comes from Mathew 5:14: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden" (NIV). The idea is that America should lead the world in morality. America is destined to lead. It's a calling, and many generations of Americans have subscribed to it. This contributes to the belief in American exceptionalism [56].

With all these things showing religion woven throughout American society, I wonder: do other nations still see America as a moral leader and look to America for moral leadership? Should America strengthen civil religion to restore or demonstrate its moral leadership as set forth in the idea of the country as a "city upon a hill" setting an example for other societies? I use the word "should" because a counter-argument can be made: that America should not. Civil religion is present in nationalism and that includes secular societies. Moreover, because I am skeptical of binaries, which often don't address the complexities of reality, I also entertain the third view: America should keep civil religion as it is.

3. What are the Religious Literacy Methodological Tools?

Previously said, a foundational assumption of religious literacy is that "religious influences are embedded in all aspects of human experience." That includes culture (the shared

beliefs, values, and behaviors of a group), which is why I find compelling the cultural studies/critical theory approach to understanding religious studies. The cultural approach also brings in politics and economic influences (Moore 6). In "Cultural Violence," Johan Galtung presents a typology of violence, saying there is direct, structural, and cultural violence and these relate. The corollary of peace and nonviolence underscores the convictions of King.

To understand the typology, I find helpful the imagery of the earthquake that Galtung puts forth (294): the earthquake (event, direct), movement of tectonic plates (process, structural) and the fault line (more permanent). Aspects of cultural violence are expressed that link and flow into direct and structural violence, at times reinforcing them. A great example is slavery, mentioned by Galtung and quoted in the Moore reading: slaves were captured and many killed (direct); whites had a mentality of superiority (structural) and racism was present (cultural), which in time has diminished in discussion to discrimination (structural) and prejudice (cultural). The slavery example applies to understanding the work of Dr. King, who viewed slavery as an injustice with lasting effects, including racial inequality and systemic racism.

I hope people strive toward the light of cultural peace, but I think to do that it's necessary to understand the darkness of violence and agree on what we're striving for. Of the six domains of culture that Galtung identifies—religion and ideology, art and language, and empirical and formal science—I find compelling what Galtung says about religion and ideology as part of cultural violence because it pertains to belief, and I think one needs to align one's beliefs and behavior in a way that contributes to cultural peace. Recognize I confess that's opinion.

But herein is a challenge. Who is to say what belief system and behavior will lead toward a more just world at peace? Galtung says it's problematic, the "search for a peace culture," because imposing a culture [even by those who think they're on the side of peace] is direct

violence (Galtung 291). That's ironic. By imposing peace is one violent? Can peace be enforced? What are United Nations blue helmets doing? Something other than that. I agree with part of what is said about Gandhi, who influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.—his view of how in a peaceful society people should act in life enhancing ways (Galtung 302). Yet I find even that challenging. For instance, I am not a vegetarian. Am I contributing to violence, not fully respecting the sacredness of all life? Is my thinking, "You're not doing anything wrong by eating meat"? It regards beliefs, and I think a tendency is to think one is on the side of right. That's challenging when many think that. Conflict seems inevitable.

Amidst study of violence, it's nice to read about what direct, structural, and cultural peace involves. A word bank includes "respect, kindness, compassion, empathy, healing, generosity, and humility" and discussion includes "equal access to opportunities, goods, and services that enable the fulfillment of basic life needs" and "imagination, creativity, and critical thinking" (Moore 9). Compared to the darkness of violence, the light I much prefer, and I believe that many people do too. But that's not to be naïve or in denial that violence exists. It's appreciating the corollary and hoping we aim for that.

4. The Pros and Cons of Civil Religion in the United States

I think there are several reasons supporting those who think civil religion is good for America, and in turn, that civil religion in America should stay at the same level or strengthen. Civil religion creates solidarity among many people. Also, America's goodwill can improve international relations. Some think American values espoused by civil religion make a better society. One might argue that people trust the government more when they think it's acting on principles. And when religious nationalism upholds morality, other nations may respect the United States more and look to America for moral leadership. That expresses itself in several

ways, including the promotion of aspects of the corollary to violence. Arguably moral leaders are more aligned with the international community, especially Europe (NATO) and bodies like the United Nations. King won the international Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

But moral leadership is not limited to political leaders. Another good example is one of soft power: Hollywood films, a great exporter of American culture to the world. Many films have values in their stories. A list of moral themes, based on general search, includes love, sacrifice, friendship, and loyalty. Disney films often incorporate these values into their narratives. Other moral themes include justice, freedom, and consequence of immoral action. When proponents of civil religion stand for these values, it's more challenging to say that there's not some good to America civil religion. But those wary of civil religion have a case too, and it too is solid.

As some scholars of nationalism hold, it's not always for good, and that is the flip-side of seeing it all positive. According to the authors talking about Max Weber's explanation of the concept of nationalism, it's largely about chosenness [50]. As a cultural example in the United States, Bob Dylan's "With God On Our Side" points out the irony of America performing acts of violence on grounds that religion calls for it. For example: "Oh, the history books tell it, they tell it so well / The cavalries charged, the Indians fell / The cavalries charged, the Indians died / Oh, the country was young with God on its side." What about the views of Native Americans toward a higher power and that land was sacred to them? Was that ignored? Often the dominant group in a society determines whose view gets its way. Whose vision paints the ideal toward which a nation strives?

Another downside to nationalism is the occurrence of solidarity built on having a common enemy. For example, President Eisenhower made enemies of atheists and during the Cold War the Soviet Union was portrayed as godless, an enemy of America's largely Judeo-

Christian society. When you're on the side of the dominant power, perhaps it's not a problem to you. Perhaps you don't empathize with others who are the perceived enemy. Perhaps you want to subdue them, dismiss them, abuse them or even maim or kill them. But if you're on the flip side, life is more challenging than it would otherwise be and your voice is at times ignored or silenced. I'll voice opinion here. I support freedom of speech and recognize non-dominant groups and individuals have the right to speak, and it's important that their voices be heard.

Back to discussion of Hollywood films promoting American values; those who do not support civil religion in the United States as strongly or at all may reasonably point out that many films are criticized for stereotypes and harmful messages. Take how for decades in Hollywood films and still today in the Western genre known for Cowboys versus Indians, the largely white settlers are the good guys and girls and the Native Americans are the enemy out to attack them, steal from them, take their women, make manifest destiny difficult to realize by interfering with Western expansion. That is cultural violence, according to Galtung. The violent messages become normalized and perpetuated. People become numb or indifferent to the harm done to the non-dominant groups and individuals in the society. Since I'm focused on American society, I mean in the United States.

Having weighed the pros and cons of American civil religion and explored the positions for and against maintaining or strengthening it, I present an alternative. Some may hold that America is just fine with the current state of civil religion. There may be problems with it, they think, but the benefits outweigh the diminishment of morality. They point out, in light of religious literacy, that there is no such thing as the absence of civil religion when it regards nationalism, but it can be extremely diminished.

5. Recognizing King's View and My Stance

With what religious literacy has helped me to understand about civil religion in America, I turn to recognizing King's view and stating my stance with such in mind. According to The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, "Throughout his life, King wrestled with the religious and moral meaning of nationalism." Part of King's struggle was due to how nationalism expressed itself during his lifetime. The institute mentions Adolph Hitler's tyranny and Senator Joseph McCarthy's attacks against "un-American" activities as nationalism expressing itself. King was aware. There is the darker side. And even with Southern Baptist training, King promoted an internationalist Christianity. In saying, "Not some white and not some black, not some yellow and not some brown, but all flesh shall see it together" (from "The Birth of a New Nation" sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 7 April 1957), King was both addressing a national matter while extending beyond the border, providing global reach. The realization of ideals of the American Revolution—equality and justice for all included—regards humanity.

I think America should strengthen its role as a moral leader for other nations to follow. The United States should set an example, to serve as the metaphorical city upon a hill. But I do not think moral leadership should express itself as solely Christian, even though many values emerge from Christianity. That's where I think King stood. Other religions and even some who are not spiritual or religious orient with a moral compass. Christianity sometimes has an "us" and "them" with "them" as non-believers (or perhaps as believers who don't practice rituals as often as others). Discussed, exclusivism can lead to culture violence with the dominant group relegating subordinate groups to the periphery or dismissing them altogether, and perhaps worst

of all are extreme circumstances where there's total denial of other people's humanity, as in cases of ethnic cleansing and genocide. There's no empathy. Indifference and hatred take hold.

As a belief, I do not think God oversees and helps only people practicing Judeo-Christianity in the United States. I'm aware it's a devotional assertion, and I stress that it's important I declare such. I hold that civil religion, and Christianity which influences it, should support the United States' moral leadership while advancing a pluralistic, liberal and secular democracy (with our secular society having religious aspects).

Religion is present in nationalism, so it's here whether morality is practiced or not. That was the case in King's time, and it remains so. Given its presence, I think it makes sense to keep in mind the addressed influence of civil religion in America and hope it is useful for the greater good. Of course, that raises what "good" means and according to whom. Perhaps there's not one goodness and multiple people's understanding overlap in a postmodern way. I welcome others' views about that. Generally I think the greater good is when people live joyful, peaceful lives.

As the founders thought, governments are to protect the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The rights are unalienable. Governments can't take the rights away but have the responsibility to protect them, at least in the United States of America. With U.S. nationalism rooted in that, I assume that love and hope are also present sustaining society, however minimal or obscure at times. If those values are amplified, I think and believe operational would be civil religion supporting joyful people in a place of love and hope.

With insight gained, I feel prepared to encourage the Brookline MLK Celebration Committee to consider speakers addressing and events regarding civil religion in America.

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