Varieties of Civil Religion by Robert Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond

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Chapter 1: Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic

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Civil Religion, Term and Concept

In 1967 I published an essay I have never been allowed to forget.[1] In it I suggested there is such a thing as civil religion in America. My suggestion has roused passionate opposition as well as widespread acceptance. The opposition to the idea has shown little unity. Some of my opponents say there is no such thing; I have invented something that does not exist. Some say there is such a thing but there ought not to be. Some say there is such a thing but it should be called by another name, "public piety," for example, rather than civil religion. Unfortunately for me, my supporters are in even greater disarray. The term "civil religion" has spread far beyond any coherent concept thereof, or at least beyond anything I ever meant by the term. Perhaps the commonest reaction is a puzzled, "Yes, there seems to be something there, but what exactly is it?" Among the professional specialists in American studies there is another reaction: "We knew it all the time. What Bellah says is nothing new." And then there is perhaps a vague reference to Tocqueville. But, with one or two exceptions, little in the way of conceptual clarity has been forth-coming from the specialists. I would like to try once again to clarify this most troublesome problem. The burden of what I want to say is that the confusion about civil religion is rooted in a confusion about the nature of the American republic and that genuinely to clarify the nature of American civil religion would involve a reform of the American republic.

I must admit I am partly to blame for the confusion by my choice of the term "civil religion," which turned out to be far more tendentious and provocative than I at first realized. I think now the choice of the term was fortunate and the controversies it generated are fruitful. More neutral terms such as "political religion" or "religion of the republic" or "public piety" would not have churned up the profound empirical ambiguities "civil religion," with its two thousand years of historical resonance, inevitably did.

On the face of it, what would be more natural than to speak about civil religion, a subject that has preoccupied theorists of republican government from Plato to Rousseau? The founders of this republic had read most of those theorists and were concerned with the problem, even though they did not use the term.[2] The difficult arises because for most of those two thousand years there has been a profound antipathy, indeed an utter incompatibility, between civil religion and Christianity. There is even a question, which I cannot explore here, whether there has not been a historic antipathy between republican government and Christianity. Most Christian political theorists down through the ages have considered monarchy the best form of government (Christian religious symbolism would seem to be much more monarchical than republican) and the great republican theorists -- Machiavelli, Rousseau, even Tocqueville -- have wondered whether Christianity can ever create good citizens.[3] Augustine in the opening books of the *City of God* denounced Roman "civil theology" as the worship of false gods and the Roman Republic as based on false ideals and therefore as finally no commonwealth at all. Rousseau, in arguing for the necessity in a republic of a civil religion other than Christianity, wrote, "Christianity as a religion is entirely spiritual, occupied solely with heavenly things; the country of the Christian is not of this world . . . . imagine your Christian republic face to face with Sparta or Rome: the pious Christians will be beaten, crushed, and destroyed. . . . But I am mistaken in speaking of a Christian republic; the terms are mutually exclusive. Christianity preaches only servitude and dependence. Its spirit is so favorable to tyranny that it always profits by such a regime. True Christians are made to be slaves, and they know it and do not much mind: this short life counts for too little in their eyes."[4]And yet at the beginning of our history we were that mutually exclusive thing, a Christian Republic. (Samuel Adams even called us a Christian Sparta.) Or were we? Christianity was never our state religion, nor did we have in Rousseau's strict sense a civil religion, a simple set of religious dogmas to which every citizen must subscribe on pain of exile. What did we have? What do we have now? That indeed is the question.

Religion and Politics

Tension between church and state lies deep in Christian history. The idea of a nonreligious state is very modern and very doubtful. Through most of Western history some form of Christianity has been the established religion and has provided "religious legitimation" to the state. But under that simple formula lie faction, intrigue, anguish, tension, and, on occasion, massacre, rebellion, and

religious war. Through much of history the state has dominated a restless church, exploited it, but never destroyed its refusal of final allegiance. On occasion the church has mastered the state, used it for its own ends, and temporalized its spiritual loyalties into a kind of religious nationalism. In all this Christianity is no different from other religions I have characterized as being at the historic stage.[5] Even religions that seem to be much more intrinsically political, such as Islam or Confucianism, have for most of their histories been involved in uneasy and unhappy alliances with state power. Relative to the first four caliphs all Muslim rulers have been viewed as at least faintly illegitimate by the religious community. Relative to the ancient sage kings all the Chinese emperors have lacked fundamental legitimacy in the eyes of the Confucian scholars.

The very spirituality and otherworldliness of Christianity has provided a certain avenue for reducing the tension not always open to other historic religions: the differentiation of functions, the division of spheres. Yet no solution has ever dissolved the underlying tensions described by Augustine and Rousseau. The tendency has been for every solution to break down into religion as the servant of the state or the state as the servant of religion.

Yet there have been great periodic yearnings in Western history to overcome the split, to create a society that would indeed be a Christian republic, where there would be no split in the soul between Christian and citizen. Savonarola had such a dream in fifteenth-century Florence, as did the Anabaptists in sixteenth-century Germany and some of the sectarians during the civil war in seventeenth-century England. Most of these experiments were highly unstable and illustrated rather than refuted Rousseau's argument for mutual exclusiveness. Yet John Calvin in sixteenth-century Geneva created a city that was Christian and republican in an organic way that had few precedents (and that stood curiously behind Rousseau's own republican theorizing). Church and state were not fused; indeed, formal distinctions were sharply maintained. Yet Christian and citizen were finally two ways of saying the same thing. Even more to the point, the New England colonies in the seventeenth century were Christian republics in a comparable sense. In Massachusetts, for example, only Christians could be citizens, though the church did not control the state and both church and state were governed by their members. Even though the reality of this experiment had evaporated by the early eighteenth century, the memory was still strong in the minds of the founders of the republic.

The civil theology of the youthful Hegel in Germany during the decades after the French Revolution shows the yearning for the union of Christian and citizen was still vigorous at the end of the eighteenth century.[6] These youthful speculations stand behind Hegel's mature political theory as well as, curiously, behind the thought of Marx about man and citizen.

Could there be a sense in which the American republic, which has neither an established church nor a classic civil religion, is, after all, a Christian republic, or should I say a biblical republic, in which biblical religion is indeed the civil religion? Is that what it means to say we are "a nation with the soul of a church"?[7] The answer, as before, is yes and no. The American solution to the problem of church and state is unprecedented, unique, and confused. I shall turn from external speculation and from the introduction of tendentious terms like "civil religion" to the way the tradition has understood itself.

The Work of the Founders

Today the almost Pavlovian response applied to all problems in this area is "the separation of church and state." That phrase, especially when it is intensified with the unfortunate Jeffersonian image of the "wall of separation," is pernicious precisely to the degree it seems to offer a clear solution when in fact it creates more difficulties than it eliminates. The first thing to remember is that the phrase "separation of church and state" has no constitutional standing. The first clause of the first amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." That clause has a long history of interpretation that I shall not review here, but it certainly does not mean and has never meant the American state has no interest in or concern for religion, or churches either, for that matter, and it certainly does not me and politics have nothing to do with each other.[8] To the extent the "wall of separation" image leads to those conclusions it distorts the entire history of the American understanding of religion and leads to such absurd conclusions as that religious congregations should have no tax exemption and legislative bodiesshould not be opened with prayer. To attribute such intentions to the founders of the republic is not only a historical error but a political error about the nature of the republic. Inspection of the second clause of the first amendment, "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," should begin to dispel the distortions of the extreme separationist position.

The Constitution, while prohibiting a religious establishment, protects the free exercise of religion. It is this second clause to which that other common phrase, "religious freedom," refers, a phrase that has often been used to sum up the American teaching about religion. This phrase too has a significant Jeffersonian source, for Jefferson pointed to his authorship of a bill for "establishing religious freedom" in Virginia as one of the three things he most wanted to be remembered for. The phrase "establishing religious freedom," which is not constitutional but which explicates the free exercise clause, suggests the positive institutionalization in this area. Indeed, religious freedom or free exercise is the controlling idea. The prohibition of the establishment of a particular religion is required because it would be an infringement on religious freedom. Even so, today it is not uncommon for the religious freedom concept to be swallowed up in the separation concept because freedom here as elsewhere is interpreted in purely negative terms, as the liberal philosophical tradition tends to treat it. Religious freedom becomes then

merely the right to worship any God you please or none at all, with the implication that religion is a purely private matter of no interest or concern to political society. I will argue that "establishing religious freedom" means something much more than that, indeed, that it has a powerful positive political significance. But the difficulty of interpretation is not entirely in the mind of the analyst. It is not just a question of reading late twentieth-century ideas about religion into the minds of the founders, though there is much of that. The difficulty is rooted in certain fundamental unclarities about the American political experience and the nature of the American regime, unclarities that go back to the formative period of the republic.

The basic unclarity rests on whether we are a republic in recognizable relation to the republics of classical and modern times and dependent on that inner spirit of republican character and mores that makes for republican citizenship or whether we are a liberal constitutional regime governed through artificial contrivance and the balancing of conflicting interests. What we wanted was to have our cake and eat it too, to retain the rhetoric and spirit of a republic in the political structure of a liberal constitutional state. In so doing we blurred every essential political consideration, including the place of religion in our public life. Indeed, we artfully used religion as a way of evading the incompatibilities in our political life. For as long as the religious bodies remained vital and central in our public life, the evasion was (at least partially) successful. Today, when religion, more even than our other institutions, is uncertain about itself, the evasion is no longer tenable. But I am getting ahead of myself.

The great political philosophers from Aristotle to Machiavelli to Montesquieu (who had such an influence on the founders of the republic) all believed a political regime is an expression of the total way of life of a people, its economics, its customs, its religion. The way of life correlates with the type of person the society produces and the political capacities that inhere in that person. As Montesquieu said a despotic society will have despotic customs -- the arbitrary use of power, dependence of inferiors on superiors, slavery -- that will produce a person primarily motivated by fear, just the right kind of subject for a despotic polity. But a republic will have republican customs -- public participation in the exercise of power, the political equality of the citizens, a wide distribution of small and medium property with few very rich or very poor – customs that will lead to a public spiritedness, a willingness of the citizen to sacrifice his own interests for the common good, that is, to a citizen motivated by republican virtue. It would be as absurd to expect a people long inured to despotism to create a successful republic as for a republican people to tolerate a despotic regime. And yet these patterns are not fixed. There is indeed constant flux and a tendency toward degeneration -- good customs become corrupted and republican regimes become despotic. Since republics go against gravity, so to speak, it is essential if a republic is to survive that it concern itself actively with the nurturing of its citizens, that it root out corruption and encourage virtue. The republican state therefore has an ethical,

educational, even spiritual role, and it will survive only as long as it reproduces republican customs and republican citizens.[9]

But the much newer form of political organization, which I am calling liberal constitutionalism though it grew in the very seedbeds of modern republicanism, developed a markedly different idea of political life, partly in response to a newly emerging economic order. Though formulated by some of the toughest minds in the history of modern philosophy -- Hobbes, Locke, Flume, and Adam Smith -- this tradition gave rise to what would appear to be the most wildly utopian idea in the history of political thought, namely, that a good society can result from the actions of citizens motivated by self-interest alone when those actions are organized through the proper mechanisms. A caretaker state, with proper legal restraints so that it does not interfere with the freedom of the citizens, needs to do little more than maintain public order and allow the economic market mechanisms and the free market in ideas to produce wealth and wisdom.

Not only are these political ideas, republicanism and liberalism, different; they are profoundly antithetical. Exclusive concern for se1f-interest is the very definition of the corruption of republican virtue. The tendency to emphasize the private, particularly the economic side of life in the liberal state, undermines the public participation essential to a republic. The wealth the liberal society generates is fatal to the basic political equality of a republic. And yet the American regime from the beginning has been a mixture of the republican and the liberal regimes and has never been a pure type of either. The republican moment emerged first, however, out of the revolutionary struggle and crystalized in a document the Declaration of Independence. The liberal moment emerged second, during the complex working out of interests in the new nation, and crystalized in the Constitution. Even that division is too simple, for there are liberal elements in the Declaration of Independence and republican elements in the Constitution, but it does suggest from the very beginning the balance has never been very easy or very even. The Declaration of Independence has several central references to God and the Constitution has none at all. It is time, then, to turn to religion as a means of mediating the tensions within the American regime.

Religion in the Early Republic

In the early republic religion had two vital locations: in the superstructure and in the infrastructure of the new political regime. It is to the superstructural location of religion that the Declaration of Independence points. By superstructural I mean a locus of sovereignty taken to be above the sovereignty of the state. Perhaps the most striking recognition of this superordinate sovereignty comes from the hand of Madison in 1785 during the debate on the bill establishing religious freedom in Virginia: "It such only, as he believes to be acceptable to him. This duty is precedent both in order of time and degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society. Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must

be considered as a subject of the Governor of the Universe: And if a member of Civil Society, who enters into any subordinate Association, must always do it with a reservation of his duty to the general authority; much more must every man who becomes a member of any particular Civil Society, do it with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal Sovereign." Here Madison confines himself to the superordinate sovereignty of God over the individual citizen, which precedes the sovereignty of political society over him.

The Declaration of Independence points to the sovereignty of God over the collective political society itself when it refers in its opening lines to "the laws of nature and of nature's God" that stand above and judge the laws of men. It is often asserted that the God of nature is specifically not the God of the Bible. That raises problems of the relation of natural religion to biblical religion in eighteenth-century thought that I do not want to get into here, but Jefferson goes on to say, "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, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it." We have here a distinctly biblical God who is much more than a first principle of nature, who creates individual human beings and endows them with equality and fundamental rights.

It is significant that the reference to a suprapolitical sovereignty, to a God who stands above the nation and whose ends are standards by which to judge the nation and indeed only in terms of which the nation's existence is justified, becomes a permanent feature of American political life ever after. Washington a Jefferson reiterate, though they do not move much beyond, the language of the Declaration of Independence in their most solemn public addresses, such as their inaugural addresses or Washington's Farewell Address. The existence of this highest level religious symbolism in the political life of the republic justifies the assertion that there is a civil religion in America. Having said that, I must also say American civil religion is formal and in a sense marginal, though very securely institutionalized. It is formal in the scarcity and abstraction of its tenets, though in this it is very close to Rousseau's civil religion. It is marginal in that it has no official support in the legal and constitutional order. It is in this connection that I must again point out the absence of any reference to God, and thus of any civil religion, in the Constitution of the United States, Belief in the tenets of the civil religion are legally incumbent on no one and there are no official interpreters of civil theology. Indeed, because of the formality I have just pointed out, there was very little civil theology to interpret, although we did produce at a critical juncture in our history at least one great civil theologian, Abraham Lincoln.

The marginality of the American civil religion is closely connected with the liberal side of our heritage and its most important expression, the Constitution. This side has led many to deny there is a civil religion or there ought to be in America. And indeed, from the point of view of the liberal political idea there need not and perhaps ought not to be. The state is a purely neutral legal mechanism without purposes or values. Its sole function is to protect the rights of individuals, that is, to protect freedom. And yet freedom, which would seem to be an irreducible implication of liberalism on etymological grounds alone, no matter how negatively and individualistically defined, does imply a purpose and a value. Since I believe a pure liberalism is a *reductio ad absurdum*and a sociological impossibility, I would locate here at least one of the reasons a pure liberal state has never existed and why in America the rhetoric and to some extent the substance of republicanism has always existed in uneasy tandem with liberalism.

Precisely from the point of view of republicanism civil religion is indispensable. A republic as an active political community of participating citizens must have a purpose and a set of values. Freedom in the republican tradition is a positive value that asserts the worth and dignity of political equality and popular government. A republic must attempt to be ethical in a positive sense and to elicit the ethical commitment of its citizens. For this reason it inevitably pushes toward the symbolization of an ultimate order of existence in which republican values and virtues make sense. Such symbolization may be nothing more than the worship of the republic itself as the highest good, or it may be, as in the American case, the worship of a higher reality that upholds the standards the republic attempts to embody.

Yet the religious needs of a genuine republic would hardly be met by the formal and marginal civil religion that has been institutionalized in the American republic. The religious superstructure of the American republic has been provided only partially by the civil religion. It has been provided mainly by the religious community entirely outside any formal political structures. Here the genius and uniqueness of the American solution is to be found. At the 1976 Democratic convention Barbara Jordan called for the creation of a national community that would be ethical and even spiritual in content. This is what Talcott Parsons calls the "societal community." It is what might be called in Europe the nation as opposed to the state. It is in a sense prepolitical, but without it the state would be little more than a mechanism of coercion.

The first creation of a national community in America it is now widely recognized, preceded the revolution by a generation or two. It was the result of the Great Awakening of the 1740s, a wave of religious revivalism that swept across the colonies and first gave them a sense of general solidarity. As the work of Professor Nathan Hatch has shown, this religious solidarity was gradually given a more political interpretation from within the religious community in the 750s and 1760s with the emergence of what he has called "civil millennialism," namely, the

providential religious meaning of the American colonies in world history.[10] It is the national community with its religious inspiration that made the American Revolution and created the new nation. It is the national community that was, in my sense of the term, the real republic, not the liberal constitutional regime that emerged in 1789.

The liberal regime never repudiated the civil religion that was already inherent in the Declaration of Independence and indeed kept it alive in our political life even though the Constitution was silent about it. From the point of view of the legal regime, however, any further elaboration of religious symbolism beyond that of the formal and marginal civil religion was purely private. From the point of view of the national community, still largely religious in its self-consciousness, such elaboration was public even though lacking in any legal status. Here we can speak of public theology, as Martin Marty has called it, in distinction to civil religion. The civil millennialism of the revolutionary period was such a public theology and we have never lacked one since.

As a number of scholars have begun to recognize, the problems of creating a national community in America did not decrease with the establishment of the constitutional regime but in a sense became more severe. With the formation of the new nation the centrifugal forces that were restrained during the revolutionary struggle came to the fore and a sense of national community actually declined. To some extent a national community in the new nation was not fully actualized until after the trauma of the Civil War, though that event set in motion new problems that would later create even greater difficulties in maintaining a genuine national community. But, as Perry Miller has pointed out, to the extent we began to create a national community in the early national period it was again religious revivalism that played an important role.[11] I would not want to minimize the role of enlightenment thought in complicated relation with the churches that Sydney Mead has so brilliantly emphasized. From my point of view enlightenment religion and ethics were also a form of public theology and played a significant role. Yet Jefferson's hope for a national turn to Unitarianism as the dominant religion, a turn that would have integrated public theology and the formal civil religion much more intimately than was actually the case, was disappointed and public theology was carried out predominantly in terms of biblical symbolism.

Even though I have argued that the public theology that came out of the national community represented the real republic. I do not want to idealize it. As with all vigorous young republics it had an element of self-intoxication that has had ominous consequences for us ever after. The "chosen people" or "God's new Israel" symbolism that was pretty well eliminated from the formal civil religion was common in the public theology, though it also had its critics. The public theology provided a sense of value and purpose without which the national community and ultimately even the liberal state could not have survived, but it was never entirely clear what that value and purpose was. On the one hand it seemed to

imply the full realization of the values laid down in the Declaration of Independence but certainly not fully implemented in a nation that among other things still legalized slavery. On the other hand it could imply a messianic mission of manifest destiny with respect to the rest of the continent. It may be a sobering thought, but most of what is good and most of what is bad in our history is rooted in our public theology. Every movement to make America more fully realize its professed values has grown out of some form of public theology, from the abolitionists to the social gospel and the early socialist party to the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King and the farm workers' movement under Caesar Chavez. But so has every expansionist war and every form of oppression of racial minorities and immigrant groups.

The clearest and probably the purest expression of the ethical dynamism I have located in the realm of the public theology broke through at one crucial moment in our history into the civil religion itself in the person of our greatest, perhaps our only, civil theologian, Abraham Lincoln. Basing himself above all on the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence, in the Gettysburg Address he called us to complete "the great task remaining before us," the task of seeing that there is a "new birth of freedom" and that we make real for all our citizens the beliefs upon which the republic is based. In the Second Inaugural Address Lincoln incorporated biblical symbolism more centrally into the civil religion than had ever been done before or would ever be done again in his great somber tragic vision of an unfaithful nation in need above all of charity and justice.

It has not been my purpose here to evaluate the whole checkered story of civil religion and public theology in our national history but only to point out they have been absolutely integral to one aspect of our national existence, namely, our existence as a republican people. But so far I have spoken only of what I have called the superstructural role of religion in the republic. Now I would like to turn to the infrastructural role.

Religion and the Creation of Citizens

As I have already pointed out in describing the classical notion of a republic, there is a necessity in such a regime not only for asserting high ethical and spiritual commitments but also for molding, socializing, and educating the citizens into those ethical and spiritual beliefs so they are internalized as republican virtue. Once again, however, when we look at the liberal constitutional regime we will see a complete lacuna in this area. The state as a school of virtue is the last thing a liberal regime conceives itself to be. And yet the liberal regime could not do the national community as the real republic could.

The problem was partly handled through federalism. What would not be appropriate on the part of the federal government could appropriately be done at lower jurisdictional levels. Just as religion was much more open and pervasive at

local and even state levels through most of our history than it ever was at the federal level, so the state as educator, and educator in the sphere of values, was widely accepted at lower jurisdictional levels. Robert Lynn has brilliantly shown how the McGuffy readers purveyed a religious and republican ideology, including a powerful stress on the common good and the joys of participation in the public life, during much of the nineteenth century.[12]

And yet, as important as the public schools have been, the real school of republican virtue in America, as Alexis de Tocqueville saw with such masterful clarity, was the church. Tocqueville said religion is the *first* of our political institutions. It was a republican and a democratic religion that not only inculcated republican values but gave the first lessons in participation in the public life. More than the laws or the physical circumstances of the country, said Tocqueville, it was the mores that contributed to the success of the American democracy, and the mores were rooted in religion. As a classic theorist of republican government would, Tocqueville saw that naked self-interest is the surest solvent of a republican regime, and he saw the commercial tendencies of the American people as unleashing the possibility of the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest. But he saw religion as the great restraining element that could turn naked self-interest into what he called "self-interest rightly understood," that is, a self-interest that was public spirited and capable of self-sacrifice. In this way Tocqueville showed how religion mitigated the full implications of American liberalism and allowed republican institutions to survive. Late in his life he began to doubt that such a compromise would really work in the long run, and his doubts have been all too fully confirmed by our recent history. Yet for its time and place Tocqueville's analysis was undoubtedly right. It gives us an essential clue to understand this strange, unique, and perhaps finally incoherent society in which we live.

What Tocqueville saw about the role of religion in such a society as ours was well understood by the founders of the republic. It is significant, for example, that John Adams, during his first year as our first vice-president under the new liberal constitutional regime, said, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." [13] And Washington in his Farewell Address wrote, "Of all the suppositions and habits which lead to political prosperity Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and cherish them." Perhaps the recognition by our first and second presidents of the necessity of religion and morality, of the basis in the mores and religious beliefs of a people, for a successful republic, in the rather negative, circuitous, and almost apologetic terms of the quotations, expresses the uneasy compromise between republicanism and a liberal regime I am arguing was characteristic of the new nation. But it also

suggests the founders of the republic fully understood the relation between the way of life of a people and their form of political organization.

The Corruption of the Republic

It is inevitable, having celebrated only several years ago the two hundredth anniversary of our republic, that we should look around us to see how well our heritage is understood and how much of it is still operative in our public life. We might have hoped that a political campaign for the presidency in that bicentennial year or the recent 1980 campaign would have been educative in the high republican sense of the term. We have had such campaigns in the past. In the Lincoln-Douglas debates the deepest philosophical meaning of our republic and of our history was plumbed by two men of enormous intelligence and sensitivity to the crucial issues. Alas, we did not get that in 1976 or in 1980. Perhaps the Illinois farmers who drove into the towns from miles around to hear the Lincoln-Douglas debates were a different kind of people from the millions in their living rooms in front of the television screen. Perhaps there were other reasons. But in recent campaigns what we got was vague and listless allusions to a largely misunderstood and forgotten past and an attitude toward the present that seemed to be determined, above everything else, not to probe beneath the thinnest of surfaces. And yet the great themes I have been probing here were present, not in any articulate form but present in the uncertainty, the groping, the yearning for something that has so slipped out of memory as to be almost without a name. It is the ethical purpose of our republic and the republican virtue of our citizens, or rather the loss of them, that has haunted our recent political life.

Our rhetoric speaks in the terms of another day, another age. It does not seem to express our present reality. And yet our politicians and those to whom they speak are surprised and troubled by the lack of fit, concerned less to find a new rhetoric than to find an easy formula to make the old rhetoric apt again. Such an easy formula is the assertion that we must restrain, control, and diminish government, as though the enormous growth of our government were some fortuitous thing and not a sign and symptom of the kind of society in which we live.

To ask the questions the 1976 and 1980 campaigns did not ask is to ask whether under the social conditions of late twentieth-century America it is possible for us to survive as a republic in any sense continuous with the historic meaning of that term. If we discover the republican element in our national polity has been corroded beyond repair, we must consider whether a liberal constitutional regime can survive without it, a question it seems to me not too difficult to answer, but I am prepared to listen to contrary arguments. Finally we must ask, if we have the courage, if both our republic and our liberal constitutional regime lack the social conditions for survival, what kind of authoritarian regime is likely to replace them, remembering that republican and liberal regimes have been in the history of the planet few and brief. Perhaps we can even discern, beneath the battered surface of

our republican polity, the form of despotism that awaits us. Of course, I would hope to discover how to do what Machiavelli says is that most difficult of all political things, reform and refound a corrupt republic. But we must not flinch from whatever reality is to be discovered.

I have mentioned corruption. Corruption is a great word, a political word with a precise meaning in eighteenth-century discourse even though its use has become narrowed and debased with us. Corruption is, in the language of the founders of the republic, the opposite of republican virtue. It is what destroys republics. It might be well for us today to remember what Franklin said on the last day of the Constitutional Convention, 17 September 1787. Old, sick, tired, he had sat through that long hot Philadelphia summer because his presence was crucial to the acceptance of the new document. He was the very symbol of America. He rose on that last day to call for unanimous consent in hopes that that too might help the document be accepted, and he said, "In these sentiments, Sir, I agree to this Constitution with all its faults, if they are such; because I think a general government necessary for us, and there is no form of Government but what may be a blessing to the people if well administered, and believe further that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in Despotism as other forms have done before it, when the people shall have become so corrupted as to need despotic Government, being incapable of any other."[14] Can we not see in those words the sentiments of an old republican, aware of the compromises contained in the new Constitution but hoping almost against hope that the republican virtue of the people would offset them, at least for a time?

Corruption, again using the eighteenth-century vocabulary, is to be found in luxury, dependence, and ignorance. Luxury is that pursuit of material things that diverts us from concern for the public good, that leads us to exclusive concern for our own good, or what we would today call consumerism. Dependence naturally follows from luxury, for it consists in accepting the dominance of whatever person or group, or, we might say today, governmental or private corporate structure, that promises it will take care of our material desires. The welfare state -- and here I refer to the welfare that goes to the great corporations, to most above the median income level through special tax breaks, and to the workers whose livelihood depends on an enormous military budget as much as to the welfare that goes to the desperately poor to keep them from starving -- in all its prolixity is the very type of what the eighteenth century meant by dependence. And finally ignorance, that is, political ignorance, is the result of 1uxury and dependence. It is a lack of interest in public things, a concern only for the private, a willingness to be governed by those who promise to take care of us even without our knowledgeable consent. I would need to explore throughout our society the degree and extent to which corruption in these forms has gone in order to assess whether there is strength enough in our republic for its survival.

Sources of Revival

I would also need to look at religion, following today the brilliant sociological analysis Tocqueville made of the role of religion in our public life, a role all the founders of the republic discerned. To what extent do our religious bodies today provide us with a national sense of ethical purpose? Certainly here there are some notable recent examples. The religious opposition to the Vietnam War was certainly more effective than the opposition of those who spelled America with a "k." And if we have made some significant progress with respect to the place of racial minorities in our society in the last twenty years, it is due mostly to religious leadership. Yet is the balance of American religious life slipping away from those denominations that have a historic concern for the common good toward religious groups so privatistic and self-centered that they begin to approach the consumer cafeteria model of Thomas Luckmann's invisible religion? And to what extent is the local congregation any longer able to serve as a school for the creation of a self-disciplined, independent, public-spirited, in a word, virtuous citizen? Have not the churches along with the schools and the family, what I have called the soft structures that deal primarily with human motivation, suffered more in the great upheavals through which our society has recently gone than any other of our institutions, suffered so much that their capacity to transmit patterns of conscience and ethical values has been seriously impaired? I am not prepared to say the religious communities, among whom I would include the humanist communities, are not capable even today of providing the religious superstructure and infrastructure that would renew our republic. Indeed, I would look to them, as always before in our history, for the renewing impulse, the "new birth" any ethical institution so frequently needs. But the empirical question as to whether the moral capacity is still there on a sufficient scale seems to me open.

If we look to my own community, the scholarly community, there is not a great deal to be proud of. We have left the understanding of our basic institutions, as we have left everything else, to the specialists, and with notable exceptions they have not done a very good job of it. Somehow we have never established a strong academic tradition of self-reflection about the meaning of our institutions, and as our institutions changed and our republican mores corroded, even what knowledge we had began to slip away. On the whole it has been the politicians more than the scholars who have carried the burden of self-interpretation. The founders were all political thinkers of distinction. Lincoln's political thought has moments of imaginative genius – his collected works are still the best initiation into a genuine understanding of the regime under which we live. Even as late as Woodrow Wilson and Calvin Coolidge we had presidents who knew our history in intricate detail and understood the theoretical basis of our institutions. In contrast we have never produced a political philosopher of the first rank. The only profound work of political philosophy on the nature of the American polity was written by a Frenchman. Still we have produced works of the second rank that are not without distinction, though they are usually somewhat isolated and eccentric and do not add up to a cumulative tradition. Such works are Orestes Brownson's *The American Republic* and Raymond Croly's *The Promise of American Life*. But in a

barren time we must be grateful for such works as we have. If we turn to these works, we will be referred once again to the great tradition with which I began this chapter. Croly quotes the European/ American philosopher George Santayana: "If a noble and civilized democracy is to subsist, the common citizen must be something of a saint and something of a hero. We see, therefore, how justly flattering and profound, and at the same time how ominous, was Montesquieu's saying that the principle of democracy is virtue."[15] How ominous indeed! In that context we can understand the bicentennial epigram written by Harry Jaffa, one of the few political scientists who continues the great tradition today: "In 1776 the United States was so to speak nothing; but it promised to become everything. In 1976, the United States, having in a sense become everything, promises to become everything. In 1976, the United States, having in a sense become everything, promises to become nothing."[16]

One would almost think the Lord has intended to chastise us before each of our centennial celebrations so we would not rise up too high in our pride. Before the centennial he sent us Grant, before the bicentennial, Nixon (in whom we can perhaps discern the dim face of the despotism that awaits us -- not a despotism of swastikas and Brownshirts but a despotism of game plans and administrative efficiency). It is not a time for self-congratulation. It is a time for sober reflection about where we have come from and where we may be going.

Notes:

1. Robert N. Bellah. "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, 96 (Winter 1967). Reprinted in Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

2. Benjamin Franklin came close when he spoke of "Publick Religion" in his pamphlet of 1750 entitled *proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania*. See Ralph L. Ketcham, ed., *The Political Thought of Benjamin Franklin* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill,1965), p. 55.

3. Tocqueville wrote in a letter to Gobineau of 5 September 1843: "The duties of men among themselves as well as in their capacity of *Citizens*, the duties of citizens to their fatherland, in brief, the public virtues seem tome to have been inadequately defined and considerably neglected within the moral system of Christianity." Alexis de Tocqueville, *The European Resolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, John Lukacs, ed. and trans. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor,.1059), p. 192.

4. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* trans. Willmoore Kendall (Chicago, Ill.: Gateway, 1954), book 4, chap. 8, pp. 204-223.

5. See Robert N. Bellah, "Religious Evolution," *American Sociological Review*. 29 (1964), pp. 353-374. Reprinted in Bellah, *Beyond Belief*

6. See Raymond Plant, *Hegel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) chap. 1.

7. See Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

8. It is worth noting that while the Constitution specifically forbade a non-republican Form of government in any state, the First Amendment did not forbid the states to establish religion.

9. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland,* trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill,1972), pp. 29-30**,** is contemptuous of a people who are not ethically prepared for it espousing liberty:

> "I laugh at those debased peoples that let themselves be stirred up by agitators, and dare to speak of liberty without so much as having the idea of it; with their hearts still heavy with the vices of slaves, they imagine that they have only to be mutinous in order to be free. Proud, sacred liberty! If they but knew her, those wretched men; if they but understood the price at which she is won and held: if they but realized that her laws are stern as the tyrants yoke is never hard, their sickly souls, the slaves of passions that would have to be hauled out by the roots, would fear liberty a hundred times as much as they fear servitude. They would flee her in terror, as they would a burden about to crush them."

10. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977). See especially chap. 1.

11. Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World,.965), chap. 1.

12. Robert Wood Lynn, "Civil Catechetics in Mid-Victorian America: Some Notes about American Civil Religion, Past and Present," *Religious Education*. 68, no. 1 (1973), pp. 5-27.

13. Quoted in John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press,1966), p.185.

14. Ralph L. Ketcham, ed., *The Political Thought of Benjamin Franklin* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 401.

15. Raymond Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), p. 454.

16. Harry V. Jaffa, *How to Think About the American Revolution* (Durham, NC.: Carolina Academic Press,1978), p.1.