

## Comment: Who Can Be Embraced by America's Civil Religion?

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### **Introduction: Why Religion Was Neglected in My Historical Study**

It is said to be the Japanese habit to begin one's talk with an apology for the poor quality of one's paper, whether out of modesty or self-defense—perhaps both. I was about to follow this tradition but decided otherwise, not because I felt confident—in fact, I feel just the opposite—but because I find that making a confession is more appropriate for this conference on religion. Only mine will be made in public. I am totally, and ashamedly, ignorant of religion, and I am afraid that I must confess I know almost nothing of the Bible. In my study of US history, I have seldom read about religion except when religion was obviously related to my research subject or when it was indispensable for understanding a particular period.

However, I am very much aware that Americans are among the most religious people in the world, even when compared to the people of the Middle East, and that American politics is more often than not affected by religion. Without understanding religion you cannot understand American society and history. Despite this, I have neglected religion in my study of US history.

Consequently, though hard pressed to prepare my comments for this seminar, I could not help spending some time thinking about why I am so ignorant of religion. Upon reflection, I decided it was not simply a matter of my being stupid and incompetent as a historian, although that also may be true. There seem to be more general answers to the question of why religion failed to impress me as an important subject for my historical study.

One answer is that I am Japanese and most Japanese are not religious. Unless they are Christian, Japanese do not know what they are in religious terms, and thus couldn't tell you whether they are Buddhist, Shintoist, or atheist or agnostic. Moreover, they don't even care if they don't know their religious identity.

In contemporary Japan religion comes to our attention only when politicians use an institutionalized religion of one form or another for their political purposes. It is hard to imagine that we would react with sacred feelings about the death of a Japanese man serving in Peace Keeping Operations, though we would feel very sad for him and have much sympathy for his family. In other words, contrary to

what Professor Gary Laderman convincingly demonstrates about the United States, war would not generate religious feelings in contemporary Japan unless the government or some organization or person of power were to try to induce it. A good example of this may be seen in Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there are very few Americanists in Japan who engage in the study of religion. In general, religion is studied only when it is obviously related to politics, a social movement or some other aspect of culture and society.

The second reason for my ignorance of religion concerns the way US history is taught not only in Japanese but also in the American universities where I received much of my training as a historian. In US history textbooks, for example, there is little description of religion, especially after the Civil War. In the 20th century, we learn about the Scopes Trial and for more recent times, the Religious Right. We see only scant attention paid to the role of religion even in such a religiously motivated organization as the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Even in historical studies about the Salem witch trials in the 1690s, which undoubtedly had important religious implications, explanations tend to focus on political, social, economic and psychological factors, rather than religious beliefs or theological doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

Why, even in the US, does religion carry so little weight in the study of history? I speculated that maybe professional historians, because of their scientific training and their personal beliefs, are not as religious as the general population and thus find religion irrelevant to the discipline of history. I found my speculation was not off the mark when I read Warren Nord's book *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma*,<sup>3</sup> which deplores the near absence of religion in American education. Nord writes, "We take it for granted that students can know everything they need to know about whatever they study without knowing anything about religion."<sup>4</sup> Yet, as *Time* magazine, which Nord cites, reported in its 1991 cover story on religion in American public life, "To say that God is everywhere in American life is as much as statement of fact as of faith. His name appears on every coin, on every dollar bill and in the vast majority of state constitutions. Schoolchildren pledge allegiance to one nation, under him. The President of the United States ends his speeches with a benediction. God bless America."<sup>5</sup> To this day this remains unchanged.

Nord gives three reasons for the near absence of religion in textbooks. First, the secularization of society; second, as I speculated, intellectuals consider religion irrelevant to their academic disciplines; and third, publishers want to avoid the controversy that inclusion of religion might cause, though according to Nord, this is proof of the vitality of religion within American culture. Nord argues that the most important of these reasons is the secularized intellectuals who write textbooks, and he states that since the seventeenth century scholars in virtually all fields have come more and more to reject religious ways of understanding the world for those provided by modern science and social science and that the conventional wisdom of their disciplines leaves no philosophical

room for religious claims and arguments.

## **I . What Is Religion?**

Given the important place of religion in real American society as shown in polls and statistics,<sup>6</sup> there is no excuse for my shameful ignorance of religion in American history. Nonetheless, it also seems to accurately reflect the general lack of interest in religion in the academic community. The papers by Professors Andrew Rotter, Hortense Spillers and Laderman all bring home to us how religion has made history. Professor Rotter tells us that many US presidents believed in typology and felt Divine guidance when making important decisions on foreign affairs. Professor Spillers shows how Martin Luther King, Jr. personified America's civil religion when he took the church to the streets in the civil rights movement or, put differently, when he fused Christian faith and republican ideas of the equal rights of citizens. Professor Laderman demonstrates that while religion generates violence, as seen in the case of the Christian Right's violent attacks on abortion clinics, violence also engenders religious feelings as we see in reaction to the deaths of soldiers in war. Reading these fascinating and provocative papers compels us to examine the religious dimension of every aspect of US history.

While poring over the three papers, I was puzzled by one big question: What is religion? Indeed, I found myself defining religion somewhat differently for each of the three papers. Religion in the papers by Professors Rotter and Spillers is Christian religion centered on a specific God, but in Professor Laderman's paper, religion does not necessarily have a god or gods. Religion in his paper may be broadly defined as faith in the sacredness of something. But what does being sacred mean? And why do people consecrate a soldier's death by giving it sacrificial and patriotic meanings?

In all three papers, I found religion's inevitable link to the American nation and the nation's politics. We learn from the papers of Professor Rotter and Professor Laderman how politicians invoke God or sacredness in their appeal to people's patriotism. Professor Spillers shows that Martin Luther King's political leadership was an extension of his leadership in the Christian church. All three papers demonstrate how religion has been used by politicians and movement leaders for their political purposes.

## **II . The Expanding Civil Religion: From Above and Below**

Religion's link to the American nation is what constitutes America's so-called civil religion, or "religious nationalism," if we use Professor Laderman's term. Needless to say, all three papers are concerned with this civil religion. Professor Spillers' paper, which has "civil religion" in the title, maintains that it was King who merged Christian faith and republican ideas of equality for all the

American people as embodied in the nation's civil religion. We also see this civil religion in the typology Professor Rotter applies to policy makers' thoughts and actions. Professor Laderman's paper shows how war engenders religion by the consecration of those who die in war. Soldiers' deaths are given sacred and national meanings, and here again we see a civil religion, or religious nationalism.

Since the publication in 1967 of Robert Bellah's seminal article "Civil Religion in America,"<sup>7</sup> which described a religious "dimension" as being, characteristic of the American republic since its founding, civil religion has come to be considered a unifying force for a diverse American society. Beginning with the faith of the Puritans, established in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and growing through the nation's crises, civil religion has been expressed in presidents' speeches, and symbolized by rituals, the flag, and national holidays. Here I would like to ask: Has this civil religion been embraced by all the people in America, and not just by politicians and national leaders? America always has been multicultural and multiracial in reality, but today not only in reality but also in principle multiculturalism<sup>8</sup> or pluralism is the rule.

Since its birth, the American civil religion, as I understand it, has expanded to embrace a broader range of the population, and this expansion has come from two directions. From above, we see it in presidential speeches, the pledge of allegiance to the flag, national cemeteries and monuments, national holidays and other rituals and symbols that are institutionalized by the government and its leaders. Meanwhile, from below, the people have believed in the civil religion's tenet of liberty and equality for all, celebrated national holidays like Thanksgiving, Memorial Day and great presidents' birthdays, heard presidents' speeches, and visited national monuments. These acts all reminded them of their "one nation under God," thus reinforcing the civil religion and nationalism.

From the building of "a city upon a hill" and the time of the Revolution when political leaders established the civil religion with the republican principle of "all men are created equal" and endowed with natural inalienable rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," "men" meant only white men, though immigrants from European countries other than England might eventually be included. After the Civil War, the constitution expanded the category of men to include African American males but continued to exclude all women. With the rise of the Civil Rights movement, America's civil religion came to embrace all the people in the land by top-down governmental actions (of the judicial, executive and legislative branches). Martin Luther King, Jr., who fused republican ideas of equality and Christian faith, should undoubtedly, as Professor Spillers shows, be considered the greatest contributor to the expansion of the civil religion from below.

Other minorities and the working classes also have adopted America's civil religion for their liberation and reform movements. Recently we saw an example of this in the demonstration against an immigration law by half a million

immigrants in Los Angeles and in other cities. They claimed their rights as American citizens or would-be citizens, waving the Stars and Stripes and signs that read, "I am American." By protesting against their government they are confirming the American civil religion and enhancing nationalism. America's civil religion, thus, is sustained and grows with the forces from the top and bottom of society.

### III. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and *The Woman's Bible*<sup>9</sup>

From below, feminists also have expanded the civil religion by protesting the government and getting women into the category of equal "men." Among them Elizabeth Cady Stanton was unique. She is well known as the author of the famous Declaration of Sentiments, a women's declaration of independence adapted from the Declaration of Independence, which stated that "all men and women are created equal." She started the woman suffrage movement but her demand of equality for women went further to challenge the Bible she thought of as the cause of the degradation of women. Unlike King who found the source for equality in the Bible, Stanton, in pursuing equal rights for women, attacked Christianity for promoting inequality. *The Woman's Bible* that Stanton and her "revising committee" published in 1895 and 1898 criticized those texts and chapters in the Bible that directly referred to women. Her *Bible* was no ordinary exercise in biblical criticism but an outright rejection of the Bible and organized religion. Here are some excerpts from the Introduction to *The Bible*.

The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible position of woman briefly summed up.<sup>10</sup>

The only points in which I differ from all ecclesiastical teaching is that I do not believe that any man ever saw or talked with God, I do not believe that God inspired the Mosaic code, or told the historians what they say he did about woman, for all the religions on the face of the earth degrade her, and so long as woman accepts the position that they assign her, her emancipation is impossible.<sup>11</sup>

In Part II of *The Woman's Bible*, she questioned the whole idea of original sin and the consequent need of a redeemer.

The real difficulty in woman's case is that the whole foundation of the Christian religion rests on her temptation and man's fall, hence the necessity of a Redeemer and a plan of salvation. As the chief cause of this dire calamity, woman's degradation and subordination were made a necessity.

Then she went on further to suggest the validity of the theory of evolution rather than creationism to understand the origin of the human race.

If, however, we accept the Darwinian theory, that the race has been a gradual growth from the lower to a higher form of life, and that the story of the fall is a myth, we can exonerate the snake, emancipate the woman, and reconstruct a more rational religion for the nineteenth century, and thus escape all the perplexities of the Jewish mythology as of no more importance than those of the Greek, Persian and Egyptian.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this rejection of the Bible's teachings, she did not deny the presence of a supreme being. She wrote:

To this "Word of God" I bow with reverence, and I can find no language too exalted to express my love, my faith, my admiration.<sup>13</sup>

*The Woman's Bible* was resisted fiercely not only by clergymen but also by most women, including her colleagues in the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), of which she had been the first president. To most of NAWSA members, *The Woman's Bible* was either unbearable or politically detrimental to the organization. To prevent *The Woman's Bible* from hindering the cause of women's suffrage, leading members of the Association introduced a resolution saying that, "This Association is non-sectarian, being composed of persons of all shades of religious opinion, and... has no official connection with the so-called 'Woman's Bible,' or any theological publication." Susan B. Anthony pleaded tolerance, but the resolution passed by a margin of 53 to 41.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion: Some Riddles about the Civil Religion**

Stanton fought for equality for women and rejected Christianity and the Bible. Like King, she contributed to expanding America's civil religion from the grassroots, but unlike King she denied the Bible's teachings. The civil religion is understood as the fusion of an enlightenment tenet of equality and liberty and Biblical teachings. I wonder if we can place Stanton, who rejected the Bible in her pursuit of complete equality for women, in the tradition of the civil religion.

Stanton's denial of the Bible suggests contradiction inherent in the civil religion that is composed of Christian faith and the republican tenet of liberty and equality. Yet, we should note that she did not abandon her faith in God. So if we redefine the civil religion to mean the republican tenet authorized not necessarily by the Biblical God but by some supreme existence above human beings, the contradiction Stanton found between the Biblical teachings and the enlightenment tenet is resolved. Then, Stanton the theist fits fully within the tradition of America's civil religion.

But does the civil religion allow for atheism? Without divine authority, will America's civil religion be able to retain its strength? Or can we still call the civil religion minus religion, that is, enlightenment ideas unauthorized by a supreme

being, a civil religion? Is there anything that will substitute for divine authority? With these riddles in mind I feel keenly the necessity of studying religion.

## Notes

1. A Shinto shrine that enshrines the spirits of soldiers and others who died in war from the Meiji Era to the end of World War II. Because of its association with militarism under the prewar regime, Yasukuni Shrine has caused controversy over Japan's Imperial past and over the separation of religion and state.
2. Some US historians may not agree with this view. One of them is Richard Abrams, Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who states as follows: "... nearly all such [survey] courses begin with the Puritans, and their theology. The Great Awakening of the early 18th century (Jonathan Edwards, and all that) is another standard in a survey syllabus.... then, with the rise of abolitionism, we get to the period that textbooks refer to as The Second Great Awakening, and reference to the most active abolitionist districts (e.g., upstate New York) as The Burnt Over District, because of the fervor of the religious abolitionists. After the Civil War, most texts cover both the religious challenge to Darwinism, and also the rise of The Social Gospel which had its influence not only on politics but on American Roman Catholic relations with the Vatican, controversies that ran right through the era of the First World War. And in the 1920s, the Fundamentalists occupy an important part of most U.S. history textbook accounts of the period." Abrams attributes critics' complaints that not enough attention has been paid by "the liberal academic establishment" to America's religious history to a new wave of evangelical fervor with political implications that began in the 1950s (E-mail from Richard Abrams to Natsuki Aruga, September 15, 2007). What Abrams maintains is true; nevertheless, it is still true that generally speaking religion is studied to the extent that it is necessary to explain politics, a social movement or some other aspect of culture and society and that religion tends to be slighted compared to other aspects as we see in the cases of such religiously motivated movements as the Salem witch trials and the Women's Christian Temperance Union.
3. Warren Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1995).
4. *Ibid.*, 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.
6. The Harris Poll in 2003 reported that 90% of the adult Americans believed in God, and that 82% believed in heaven. (The Harris Poll, February 26, 2003, [http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/index.asp?PID=359](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=359) accessed September 28, 2007) The United States stands out among advanced nations concerning the place of religion in people's lives. In the 44-nation survey of the Pew Global Attitudes conducted in 2002, 59% of people in the U.S. said that religion played a very important role in their lives. This is a much higher percentage than peoples living in Europe (For example, Great Britain 33%, Italy 27% and France 11%, Poland 36%, Czech Republic 11%). In Japan and South Korea 12% and 25% of people respectively gave religion in an important placed in their lives. (<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=167> accessed September 28, 2007)
7. "Civil Religion in America," *Dædalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96 (Winter 1967), 1-21.

8. By multiculturalism I do not mean only respect for cultures of different racial/ethnic groups. Different groups also include those identified by gender, class, age and other categories.
9. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Revising Committee, *The Woman's Bible* (1895; Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974).
10. Stanton, Part I, 7.
11. Stanton, Part I, 12.
12. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Revising Committee, *The Woman's Bible*, Part II, (1898; Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974), 214.
13. Stanton, Part II, 61.
14. Kathi L. Kern, "Rereading Eve: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and The Woman's Bible, 1885-1896," *Women's Studies* 19 (1991), 378.