



Sacred Citizenship



In Praise of “Civil Religion”

“Civil Religion” has a bad name. Even Robert Bellah, who popularized the term in 1967, no longer uses it because it has come to connote right-wing desires to fuse church and state as in the case of one proposed Constitutional amendment, meant to recognize the “sovereignty of Christ.” The situation has become increasingly problematic with “faith-based” funding by the federal government, and Americans are rightly concerned that they will be supporting proselytism and financing sectarian efforts.

But religion is often understood, at least in part, as the search for transcendent meanings. Surely we citizens have the right, indeed the obligation, to place the workings of our governments and the life of our nation — indeed, all nations — in the context of the transcendent. What does our life as a nation, as a society, as the human race, mean?

The Declaration of Independence is full of theological intimations. Even that entirely secular document, the US Constitution, is based on religious assumptions

arising from the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Our best leaders articulate a wholesome vision of who we are as a people, and how to place the events of the day into a larger pattern of history that makes transcendent sense. In so doing, they — and we — give voice to Civil Religion.

Thus, in his “Second Inaugural Address,” Abraham Lincoln describes the unexpected magnitude of the horrors of the Civil War and reverently places them in the context of a Power that moves in history toward justice. He speaks without self-righteousness. He urges reconciliation.

Martin Luther King Jr and many other American leaders have written and spoken in this tradition, growing out of, and beyond, a sense of chosenness, covenant, and millennial expectations.

Holidays like Independence Day, Memorial Day, and Thanksgiving should function as bearers of transcendent meaning for us as a diverse people, just as Yom Kippur, Christmas, Ramadan, Holi, Wesak, and the solstices recall the sacred as disclosed within specific traditions.

Ceding to extremists the right to ponder questions about, and to celebrate, the meaning of our national life is like vacating citizenship. We become isolated individuals without a sense of participating with each other in honoring the meaning of America. Abandoning civil religion because it is misused is like a Christian despising his own faith because some in its name are sexist, racist, or homophobic.

We need to recover a sense of respectful public life beyond partisan divisions and special interests. Instead of disdaining Civil Religion, we should seek to articulate it as a religion of mutual responsibility and joyous pluralism. — Vern

To celebrate the Fourth of July (and accommodate clergy who appreciate idea materials like this), we reprint a naturalization ceremony address from 1988 November 18. Scholars have called the use of religious categories to interpret public life “civil religion” and “the religion of the Republic.”

We recognize that some today feel the current administration has made it increasingly difficult to take pride in our nation’s place on the world stage, so we urge that, in the spirit of Lincoln, we assume a more humble posture. Nonetheless, recalling the values articulated below may be a path toward healing of our current distress. The current administration is not the nation, and no party can represent the soul of America. We also recommend the The American Creed: A Spiritual and Patriotic Primer (2002) and So Help Me God: The First Great Battle Over Church and State (2007), both by Forrest Church.

New citizens of the United States, Judge Saffels, members of the bar, and guests:

Last week I sat in another court, with my eight-year old son, Benjamin. It was very impressive: the Supreme Court of the United States of America, in session. I pointed out to my son the first black justice and first woman justice in US history, so someday he can tell his children he saw this historic court.

As I sat watching, I thought of being here today, in this court, with you and this

day which is so memorable in your personal life history. This is also very impressive: you have chosen to become citizens of the United States of America. So I want to say three things about citizenship. I thought a great deal about these things as I showed my son the monuments and museums of our nation’s capital, in his first visit to Washington, DC. My thoughts are about loyalty, freedom, and greatness.

The first thought is about *loyalty*. It is obvious as you swear fealty to the United States that your national loyalty is first and foremost to this country, to its laws, its people, and its future. But citizenship is not just obeying laws. It is also a sense of ownership. You now have the right to call this country yours.

As I took my son through the many buildings of the Smithsonian Museum, and I thought at the same time of standing here before you, I sensed pride at our achievements, so well displayed at the Air and Space Museum, Benjamin’s favorite. As citizens, we own our nation’s accomplishments. But the National Gallery, the new Oriental and African art museums, and even the museum of American history made something else clear: being a US citizen means also being a world citizen. You still own important memories and traditions of your native land which no one wants you to discard, because they can enrich the meaning of America as you contribute them to the community.

America’s greatness lies in part in the innovation from immigrants who brought their

backgrounds, talents, and skills to these shores. After all, except for the Native Americans, we are all immigrants or children of immigrants.

This became very clear earlier this month, when for the first time in American history, representatives of twelve religions gathered in mutual recognition, of all places, here in Kansas. American Indians, Bahá’is, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Shintoists, Sikhs, Unitarian Universalists, Zoroastrians and others met and celebrated their diversity as part of the fabric of this continent. The last such gathering was in 1893, as part of the Chicago world’s fair; but then the distinguished representatives had to be imported for the occasion. Now they are here all the time: they are American, and our nation is richer for them.

American loyalty means, to emphasize, not just obedience to US laws, but a sense of ownership of this nation’s heritage while maintaining reverence for the traditions of one’s native land that you choose to continue to honor.

These days, loyalty also means planetary citizenship. The stock market crash last year demonstrated the global interconnectedness of the financial centers of the world. Here in the American heartland, we send grain around the world, and purchase imported products of all sorts. But planetary citizenship is not merely economic interdependence. It is the recognition that our fate as a nation depends on the well-being of all other nations. The horrible side of this reality is that we cannot be protected from nuclear war or terrorism anywhere in the world, that the depletion of the atmospheric ozone affects all nations — our ecological unity. The blessed side of this reality is that, with vastly

increased communications, the possibility exists for us to come to understand each other, and enjoy each other, as we work together for a healed planet.

The loyalty you pledge to the United States of America is also an ownership of your own special past, a door open to full planetary participation.

The second idea I want to discuss is *freedom*. Of all the structures in Washington, I love none more than the Jefferson Memorial. Perhaps it is because I work in the field of religion, I especially prize Thomas Jefferson's careful appreciation for the distinct roles of religion and government. On one hand, the view that "the God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time" means that our freedoms are not granted by the government, but by the very order of nature; that governments are instituted merely to secure these freedoms. On the other hand, Jefferson, in promoting the separation of church and state, remarked that it does him no harm whether his neighbor believes in no god or twenty: It neither robs my pocket nor breaks my leg, he said. Most odious to him was the custom of the state, through taxation, supporting churches that individual citizens did not support.

The subsequent American consensus has been that religion is so important, the state must generally not interfere with its free exercise; and on the other hand, that religious tests may not be imposed upon its citizens, thus strengthening voluntary religion and separating government from religious intolerance. Personally, for me, freedom is first of all religious freedom, which permits me to act in accord with my conscience and conception of duties to a power far higher than even the most awesome majesty of the state. My understanding of what is sacred, that on which my life depends, is protected by the state, ennobling the free discourse about the most important of all concerns.

Thus as an American citizen, among the precious freedoms you enjoy, is freedom of religion — you may follow any path, or no path; your conscience is protected as an American. As an American, you are free.

This brings me to the third idea, *American greatness*. Now Americans can be very petty. . . . Nonetheless, at times a special capacity moves us above the conflicts and divisions of the day into a remarkable breath of acceptance and understanding — beyond self-righteousness into mutual focus and compassion.

In Washington, I thought about this especially when we visited the Lincoln Memorial, and I reread Lincoln's *Second Inaugural Ad-*

dress and was moved, as I always am, every time I make the pilgrimage to this temple of freedom. He spoke during the greatest crisis in American history, in the midst of the most terrible war the nation has ever known. His role was to preserve the union, and in so doing, he freed the slaves of the south.

But this alone is not what I mean by greatness. What astonishes is that he was able to look at the events around him and understand them as part of a pattern of meaning, a process, a flow of history, and to rise above even his own leadership of one side against the other in the battle, to extend compassion to all.

Listen to a few of his eloquent sentences as he speaks to the entire nation of the warring sides:

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.

The Almighty has his own purposes. If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him?

Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.

Yet if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still must it be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

And then, having placed the war in dreadful perspective, displaying the evil of slavery and its consequences, Lincoln concludes his address with these immortal words:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves and with all nations.

This generosity and understanding is what I call American greatness. Our news seems too often to fall into pieces, not patterns. Yet American greatness discerns a larger meaning in the events that tie us together, and Lincoln is the great example

of articulating that meaning in national history.

In my own lifetime, and in the lives of many citizens whom you now join, no experience has been more wrenching than the Vietnam war. One of my reasons for going to Washington last week, and to take my son, was to see the Vietnam Memorial,

near the Lincoln Memorial. One hardly notices it at first. It is a wall underground. One slowly walks into the grave and reads one name on the first black reflecting panel, then two on the next, three, and finally as one descends all the way, the panel is eight feet high filled with names of those whose lives are gone. And as one continues walking, one finally emerges above ground again, having passed through the awful experience, seeing people touching, kissing the names of their loved ones, tracing the names on paper. It is a memorial of American greatness, that despite the conflict of the war, abroad and at home, healing is taking place.

America is not without flaws and problems. I hope you will help in resolving them. But America is great because of its capacity to push through to healing and generosity, to discern a larger pattern in which we all participate, through which healing arises.

So this week, as I enjoy the company of this court, and welcome you to citizenship today, I offer the ideas of loyalty, freedom, and greatness, and pray that your participation in the ongoing life of this nation may be blessed, as the nation may be blessed by your citizenship. I took my son to Washington to see the monuments, to learn in a new way what it means for him to be an American. Yet I also told him that the greatest monuments of America are not the memorials in Washington, as inspiring as they are: the truest memorials, calling us to service and generosity, are America's loyal and free and great citizens such as you and I and all of us may strive to be.

— Vern Barnett

Historical note: The phrase "sacred citizenship" in the title of this essay is a response to "sacred kingship" of archaic peoples and the medieval "divine right of kings," to emphasize the new idea that citizens own the country.

This essay was originally published in this *Many Paths* format in 2001 June.



Ben Barnett, age 8, at the Lincoln Memorial

