

Does America Worship Power?

The Watergate scandal adds a dramatic chapter to an already extensive discussion of America's "civil religion," the nation's particular blending of piety and patriotism.

One question has to do with the degree of moral disorder that may have paved the way for Watergate "dirty tricks."

News Analysis

Another deals with the role of the Presidency, not of President Nixon himself "so much as the office he holds, in an American mind-set which in Senator Mark Hatfield's description seeks "man-centered power" to help it believe "God blesses America more than He blesses any other land."

But the overarching concern among many theologians, sociologists and politicians is how "civil religion" has operated, now functions and may contribute, positively or negatively, to U.S. society.

"Civil religion" has a short history in the language. Intense pro and con judgments have been heaped on it in recent years.

Actually, the term represents a relatively new way of talking about an old subject. "Civil religion" tends to look suspect in light of Watergate, but it is not based in any particular Administration or political party; it can flourish or falter in conservative or liberal situations.

"The religion of America is America," declares Sen. Hatfield, an Oregon Republican, and he thinks it is dangerous, a threat to life under the lordship of Christ. He fears, with reference to Watergate, that Americans have fallen into "idolatry of the Presidency" as the epitome of a

human power that encourages "uncritical faith in our institutions."

Congressman John Anderson (R-Ill.) takes another view. He agrees with poet T.S. Eliot that a "civic religion" is a "necessary ingredient of all political societies" and reflects something "between true Christianity and outright paganism." He advises some but not too much respect for it.

A laissez-faire stand is also taken by Dr. Will Herber, noted Jewish theologian and historian. He maintains that the "civil religion" of the nation is the American Way of Life, a reality that overshadows all other religious distinctions and is heresy in terms of traditional Christianity and Judaism. But he thinks virtually nothing can be done about it.

Others see real or potential value in "civil religion."

One is Dr. Robert Bellah, the sociologist who in a 1967 article injected the expression "civil religion" into modern speech. Dr. Bellah concludes that the concept is necessary in a society to show the links between religion, morality and politics. But he draws distinctions between types of "civil religion" and subjects each to value judgments.

The sociologist, for example, clearly dislikes the "civil religion" he finds exemplified in the Nixon Administration — in the President's inaugural addresses and in most of the White House worship services.

Piety and patriotism were closely aligned in ancient Israel, Egypt, Greece and Rome. The cooperating relationship between church and state in Europe before and after the Protestant Reformation left little room for a division of religion and government.

A different situation developed in the U.S., a nation officially committed to pluralism from the beginning and a place where the Founding Fathers decided to experiment with the idea — novel and untried in the 1780s — of separation of church and state.

Some interpreters today wonder if America has not produced a new kind of religious-political combination that operates independently of either organized religions or the letter of the law. They would dub this "civil religion."

Dr. Sydney Ahlstrom, a Yale historian, maintains that one of its dogmas was a belief that America is ordained by God to a special and superior destiny, to become a "beacon on a hill." He considers "America, the Beautiful" and "The Battle Hymn



Where it All Began

Washington's Watergate office-apartment complex, scene of an aborted burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters, has become a symbol of the scandal rocking the Nixon administration. It has led to the conviction of seven men connected with the break-in and bugging of the Democratic offices, the resignation of four of President Nixon's top aides, and charges of further corruption in the administration and the President's re-election operation. [RNS]

of the Republic" the anthems of "civil religion."

Pinnacles of the special destiny outlook, virtually everyone agrees, came in the geographic ("from sea to shining sea") Manifest Destiny of the late 19th century and the "war to end all wars" ideology of World War I.

Dr. Ahlstrom identifies a revival of a kind of common denominator "civil religion" in the Eisenhower Administration when, he says, the Chief Executive became the representative of "generalized religiosity." The Yale professor notes that President Eisenhower once said, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith — and I don't care what it is."

According to Dr. Ahlstrom, "civil religion" waned in the 1960s.

Many disagree strongly with Ahlstrom's assessment. While liberal churchmen and politicians see a burst of "civil religion" they do not like in the Nixon Administration, conservatives point out that liberals were "idolatrous" about the "new frontier" of John F. Kennedy and the "great society" of Lyndon Johnson.

Sen. Hatfield, who is of liberal political persuasions but has a conservative evangelical theology, warns that the god of "civil religion" is a small and very exclusive diety. He is a pawn rather than a king, a loyal spiritual adviser to American

power and prestige, an exclusive defender of the American nation, and the object of a national folk religion devoid of moral content."

The author team of Lowell D. Streiker and Gerald S. Strober

stress the folk dimension of "civil religion" in a book entitled "Religion and the New Majority." These men see Evangelist Billy Graham and President Nixon as hitting a centrist mark on piety and patriotism that a majority of the voting Americans can affirm.

Business In The Diocese



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