

ANTI-TERRORISM AND ECONOMIC THEOLOGY:

An Exercise in “Comparative Theology”

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For much of the twentieth century, social scientists tended to ignore religion. By the end of the century, however, it was becoming increasingly evident that religion was still playing a large – and quite possibly growing – role in society. As they rediscovered the importance of religion, social scientists typically approached the subject in one of two ways. Perhaps the largest body of writings examined the impact of religious ideas on economic and political affairs. Max Weber had famously developed such an analysis early in the twentieth century in attempting to explain the rise of capitalism by the tenets of Calvinist theology.¹ Towards the end of the twentieth century, a new economic literature sought to explore the impact of “social capital” on economic outcomes.² The “new institutional economics” focussed on transaction costs that might be higher or lower, according to the level of social capital.³ Religious beliefs might be especially important because they might foster trust and in other ways significantly reduce the level of transaction costs.

A second social science approach was to study the impact of economic variables on religious activity.⁴ A religion could be understood as a way of maximizing individual “utility” and thus could be put under the same economic lens as other consumer behavior. A church could be seen as a special form of “business” and the “market for churches” as a special case in the field of industrial organization.⁵ Economists assumed in either case that consumers of religion and church businesses acted according to the standard assumption of maximization of individual interest.

In my own writings I have explored, however, another side of the interaction of economics and religion, one that has received much less attention. The past indifference of social scientists with respect to religion might have reflected a disdain for a religious competitor. In 1977, a book on *Psychology as Religion* appeared.⁶ In

1985, another book was published that might well have been given the title, “sociology as religion.”⁷ In 2001, I authored a book on *Economics as Religion*.⁸

When economics and other social sciences are seen in a theological light, brand new questions emerge.⁹ How does economic religion understand (sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly) traditional religious questions such as the presence of sin in the world. Where is human history leading – to a new heaven on earth, as many economic prophets have claimed, or perhaps to a new hell on earth, as some environmental critics of economic growth have more recently argued? What distinguishes “good” from “evil” -- for economists, one might say that the corresponding moral terms of approval or disapproval have been “efficient” versus “inefficient.” In Marxism, as one might say, the economic laws of history became a direct substitute for God, explaining not only economic events but all social institutions and even the ideas in peoples’ minds (a particular form of “false consciousness” corresponding to a specific economic stage of history).

If economics is seen as a secular religion, one approach to its study might be described as “comparative theology.” How do the explanations of economic religion compare with explanations of other faiths such as the Roman Catholic religion or Protestantism (or Buddhism). I propose to undertake in this paper a case study in comparative theology. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, and other terrorist acts, raised deeply disturbing questions for many Americans. Why did the terrorists do it, why did they hate Americans to such an extent that they would plan carefully for years and then kill several thousand innocent people? Why did normal moral restraints – generally assumed by Americans to be present in every society – not inhibit the terrorists? In short, why did such horrible events suddenly appear on the world scene? Americans looked to various

religions, including economic religion, for explanations, and these explanations would help to inform the resulting government policy responses. As a group of prominent figures in American religion declared, “we believe our response to terrorism is a religious issue.”¹⁰

Experiencing “The Wrath of God”

One of the first religious responses came from the Reverend Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. In the Bible, there are repeated episodes of God visiting severe punishments on a society that has fallen into evil ways. These punishments often take the form of earthquakes and other natural calamities but God also sometimes works his ways through devastating wars and other punishments that rely on human agency. As Falwell and Robertson interpreted the 9/11 events, America for them clearly qualified as a nation that was falling into evil ways, increasingly allowing abortion and otherwise sustaining a spreading secular “culture of death.” God, as it appeared to them, had responded as He had always done when his people were violating His commands.

Thus, as Falwell stated on September 13, 2001, speaking with Robertson on a televised religious program, the 700 Club, “What we saw on Tuesday, as terrible as it is, could be miniscule if, in fact, God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve.” Elaborating on this, Falwell declared that “the abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. ... The pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians, ... all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’” Robertson agreed, saying that “God almighty is lifting his protection from us.”¹¹ As *The New York Times* noted, although their comments were deeply offensive to most Americans, they “were

based in theology familiar to and accepted by many conservative evangelical Christians, who believe the Bible teaches that God withdraws protection from nations that violated his will.”¹²

If this was the correct explanation for terrorist attacks against the United States, the policy response should be directed inward – to cure the spreading evils in American life. Terrorism was a sign of a nation having fallen out of God’s grace, and the policy response must be to recommit to the true faith. Despite the strong biblical pedigree, however, Falwell and Robertson were immediately besieged with severe criticisms from many quarters, denounced as virtual religious crackpots and fanatics. Facing such fiercely hostile commentary from so many people, they soon retracted their earlier statements. It was a sign of the extent that Americans no longer subscribe to many of the traditional messages of Christianity as found in the bible.

Indeed, the very concept of original sin – that most people are fallen and gravely sinful, and fully deserving of severe punishment (which God may mercifully forego for at least some people) – no longer fits the worldview of most Americans. The original Puritans in Massachusetts may have seen the world in this light but three centuries of Enlightenment “optimism” by now have fully triumphed in America over such old fashioned religious – and especially Protestant -- “pessimism.” The majority of Americans, even Christian Americans, today think about the world in terms that would be scarcely recognizable to a Martin Luther or a John Calvin.

Curiously enough, the closest analogy to the Falwell and Robertson view could be found in secular religion. Some prominent intellectuals blamed the sins of American foreign policy – the strong U.S. support for Israel and/or U.S. worldwide “imperialism” – for the 9/11 attacks. Here as well, American had brought terrorism upon itself by its evil ways. Writing in *The New Yorker* magazine shortly after 9/11,

Susan Sontag asked “where is the acknowledgment that this was not a ‘cowardly’ attack on ‘civilization’ or ‘liberty’ or ‘humanity’ or ‘the free world’ but an attack on the world’s self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?” Sontag asked “how many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word ‘cowardly’ is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others.”¹³

America, Sontag was saying, and much like Falwell and Robertson, was being punished for its sins (although they had very different sins in mind). The solution for Sontag as well would have to be found internally -- in reform of American aggression against other innocent peoples and countries. This view also was roundly condemned in the American mainstream, although perhaps not to the degree of Falwell and Robertson. It was another illustration of how the messages of old fashioned Christianity can be adopted by modern secular systems of belief, divorced of their Christian context and language, and yet the result is similar. Sontag was closer to Cotton Mather than almost any mainstream Protestant theologian.

The Problem of Evil

Yet, even many Americans of little religious faith found that “evil” seemed to be an appropriate term for the terrorist acts of 9/11. If not an expression of God’s displeasure, what was the source of this great new eruption of sinfulness in the world? It was not the first time that such issues had arisen in modern times. Prior to World War I, much the western world was convinced that history was on a course of rapid scientific and economic progress. There were wide expectations that a new world of peace and plenty would soon be arriving – a secular understanding of the arrival of the millennium. The events of World War I and World War II, and above all the

holocaust, however, brought all this into severe question. Many modern thinkers struggled to answer how the holocaust might have happened in such an economically and scientifically “advanced” nation as Germany. If the rise of Hitler was difficult to comprehend in any “rational” and “progressive” terms, the emergence of Osama bin Laden now raised similar questions that historically have fallen within the province of religion.

Many millions of evangelical Christians believe, for example, and drawing on the Book of Revelations in the Bible, that history is on a sure course towards an apocalyptic set of events that will usher in the second coming of Christ. Moreover, for some of these American Christians the fate of Iraq and Israel are central portents of things to come. As *The Christian Century* magazine (a longtime leading voice of liberal Protestant Christianity) commented, “millions of Americans believe that the Bible foretells regime change in Iraq, that God established Israel’s boundaries millennia ago, and that the United Nations is a forerunner of a satanic world order,”¹⁴ all this presaging the arrival of the millennium. Osama bin Laden and the terrorist actions of 9/11 thus might be God’s way of giving President George Bush the justification and the means for a “regime change” in Iraq – a necessary step in reaching the second coming. Since Bush counts himself as a devout evangelical Christian, *The Christian Century* editorialised that “the American people have a right to know how the President’s faith is informing his public policies, not least his design on Iraq.”¹⁵

Despite such concerns, it seems most unlikely (if not impossible) that Bush’s Iraq policies were based on such a religious understanding – although the American political support for the Iraq war no doubt did reflect in part the millennial expectations of many millions of other conservative evangelical Christians (who had

other reasons as well for supporting the Bush presidency). In any case, this was another common religious viewpoint, like Falwell's and Robertson's immediate response to 9/11, that could not be uttered in the American political mainstream. Other explanations for the resurgence of evil in the world – with corresponding policy responses – would be needed for more mainstream discussions.

Muslim Infidels

There was yet another old fashioned Christian explanation that was more acceptable in current society. According to this explanation, Islam is a dangerous religion. It is a religion that preaches war and violence as a principal means of religious conversion. Indeed, Islam spread across the southern Mediterranean in the seventh century on a great wave of military conquest. At one time, the future of Christian Europe was in great jeopardy. For many Christians historically, Islam has thus been seen as an instrument of the devil, part of his constant efforts to warp the minds of people around the world, keeping them from the true Christian faith. One conservative Christian group stated recently that “what we see happening in the middle east, particularly through the aggression of Islam, is the result of demonic powers. In the Old Testament we can read Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah and see that the same things were happening then.”¹⁶

There is always hope that Muslims can be converted, and Christians should work heroically to this end, but until success is met the Muslim world will be a force for disorder and darkness within the world. Thus, as Franklin Graham (who gave the benediction at President Bush's 2001 inauguration, and is the son of Billy Graham) explained in November 2001 on national television, Islam is “a very evil and wicked religion.”¹⁷ Writing in the op ed page of the *Wall Street Journal*, Graham declared that “I believe it is my responsibility to speak out against the terrible deeds that are

committed as a result of Islamic teaching” and that “the persecution or elimination of non-Muslims has been a cornerstone of Islamic conquests and rule for centuries.”

Within Islamic nations, deep intolerance is the norm, and “conversions from Islam to any other faith are often punishable by death.”¹⁸ Violence and forcible punishment are much more integral to Islamic than to Christian teachings. It was not a marginal feature of Islamic practice, but “persecution is taught by them, it’s in their Koran.”¹⁹

If this was a main contributing factor to 9/11 and other Islamic terrorism, the appropriate government policy response would be to maintain a strong national defense against Muslim terrorist acts and then to seek in the longer run the religious conversion of Muslims. They must at least give up certain false tenets of Islam – the understandings in Islam that promote violence against non-Muslims. How to achieve conversion is of course an ancient question that missionaries have pondered for centuries. In the end, it may be in the hands of God but there may also be a role for active Christian proselytising. There is also the precedent of the crusades in the Middle Ages when Europe sent military expeditions to rescue the holy land from the infidels. Although the American government would never speak officially in such terms, the Iraq war has elements of a modern crusade – and it is seen explicitly in these terms by some hostile segments of the Arab world.

The Christian idea that the contents of Islamic religion are the real problem has a secular counterpart. According to this view, there has been no Muslim religious accommodation to modern science and economics – to the modern world in general. As a backward and out-of-date religion that never adapted successfully to changing times, Islam has prevented its followers from full participation in the modern world. Islamic nations have repeatedly been defeated militarily by Christian nations (and then by tiny Israel), reflecting their overall backwardness. The confusions created by

the tensions between Islam and modern science and economics have then confused the minds of many Muslims, causing too many of them to turn to fanaticism and violence.

Perhaps the leading proponent of this view is Middle East historian Bernard Lewis of Princeton University. According to Lewis, Islamic terrorism is part of “a religious war, a war for Islam and against infidels, and therefore, inevitably, against the United States, the greatest power in the world of the infidels.” In centuries past, Muslims had interpreted their great military successes as a sign of the validity of their religion and of God’s favor (similar to the Puritan idea that success in a “calling” can be a sign of God’s favor). The colonization of the Middle East by western powers in the first part of the twentieth century then suggested that God might have abandoned Islam, that the Islamic faithful perhaps were no longer deserving, or even that Islam was a false religion. Osama bin Laden in one of his videotapes rages against the “humiliation and disgrace” that Islam has experienced for “more than eighty years.” As Lewis comments, “we can be fairly sure that bin Laden’s Muslim listeners ... picked up the allusion immediately and appreciated its significance. In 1918, the Ottoman sultanate, the last of the great Muslim empires, was finally defeated – its capital, Constantinople, occupied, its sovereign held captive, and much of the territory partitioned between the victorious British and French Empires.”²⁰ Islamic terrorists, in short, are lashing back blindly at their modern tormenters in the West who seem to threaten the very foundations of their faith.

Again, if Muslim failure to modernize is the problem, the policy response would seem again to be to encourage religious transformation. The out-of-date elements of Islam that have kept Muslim nations backward for so long must be abandoned. The Muslim world must learn how to enter fully into the modern age. It

must develop its own adaptations to science and economics, much as the Christian world has already done – including the spread of new secular ideologies that arose in the West as a substitute for old fashioned religion. Some elements of traditional Islamic faith may survive – as some elements of Christian faith have survived (in both the remaining Christian churches and the secular ideologies) – but the basic character of Islam will have to be significantly altered.

This policy prescription, admittedly, had some major problems. A number of Muslim nations such as Turkey and Iran under the Shah – and even Iraq under Saddam Hussein – had adopted secular ideas such as socialism and otherwise sought to modernize. The current terrorism was partly a product of the failure of these efforts. Even in the West, liberal Protestantism – the part of Christianity that had been the most accommodating to modern trends – was declining, and conservative Christian faiths were booming. Indeed, some western commentators spoke of a looming “post-modern” age in which the “value-free” claims of secular “scientific” ideologies would increasingly be rejected and traditional religion would be making a major comeback.

9/11 in “Economic Theology”

There was also a deep reluctance among Americans to place the blame for terrorism on the Islamic religion itself. President Bush emphasized that he was not waging a religious war against Islam. The traditional American attitude in matters of religion is tolerance of all faiths, as reflected in the principle of separation of church and state. The idea that the American government might have to wage a war on one particular form of religious expression is difficult for many Americans to accept. Dwight Eisenhower had captured the customary American attitude with his comment that everyone needs a religion and “I don’t care what it is.”

Many Americans thus looked elsewhere to try to comprehend the events of 9/11. Besides the fall in the Garden, there is another longstanding American understanding of the presence of evil actions in the world. The wide presence of sinfulness has reflected the fact that so many people historically have lived in terrible material conditions. Dire poverty and other economic deprivation, as many Americans believe, is the real source of evil actions— the economic “original sin.” Human beings have been driven to lie, steal, and cheat simply by the pressures of their material existence – to survive in a world historically of extremely limited resources relative to human needs. Indeed, this explanation was probably more widely accepted – and certainly had more influence on public policy – in twentieth century America than any other religious explanation.

In the case of 9/11, it was thus the economic backwardness of Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and other parts of the Muslim world that bred the despair and fanaticism that led ultimately to terrorist acts. One observer comments that “more than 90 percent of Yemen’s 20m people live in squalor, providing fertile breeding grounds for militant Islam,” a main reason why “Yemen is a frontline state in the US war on terror” where it is necessary to continue an active “hunt for al-Qaeda terrorists.”²¹ In Indonesia, another commentator noted, “Islamic militant groups [were] attracting more young men radicalised by poverty.”²² The prime minister of Malaysia warned that terrorism would continue until its “root causes” were addressed, reflecting a common view that “the destruction of the twin towers was caused by global poverty.”²³ Gordon Brown, the chancellor of the exchequer in Great Britain, declared that “the international community will have to confront the world’s other war, the global war against poverty, a war that must be won if we are to succeed in our war against global terrorism.”²⁴

Columnist Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*, and a former Middle East correspondent, wrote in September 2003 that “the U.S. war on terrorism suffered a huge blow last week – not in Baghdad or Kabul, but on the beaches of Cancun” where world trade talks had failed. As Friedman saw matters, the best hope for alleviating poverty in less developed nations was an expansion of world trade, and reduced poverty must be a central element of any anti-terrorism policy. “Sure, poverty doesn’t cause terrorism – no one is killing for a raise. But poverty is great for the terrorism business because poverty creates humiliation and stifled aspirations and forces many people to leave their traditional farms to join the alienated urban poor in the cities – all conditions that spawn terrorists,” as Friedman wrote.²⁵

Similar statements could be recited from many other authors. Matthew McHugh, chairman of Bread for the World, states that “reducing poverty, not just feeding the hungry,” is the means to curb the threat of terrorism. “If you have impoverished people, it promotes, helplessness, instability and radical solutions.”²⁶ Indeed, this was the explanation of choice for most “sophisticated” people, rather than attacking the false or misguided religious convictions of other people. It reflected a pervasive economic determinism and materialism found in so much of modern thinking. People do not go wrong because they have bad ideas; they are led astray by their economic and other external circumstances. The corollary, also very attractive to the modern mind, is that the problems of the world can be fixed by fixing the external circumstances. If the material conditions of life can in fact be perfected, as the economics profession holds out the hope, the result may even be heaven on earth. One can be certain in any case that there will be few if any acts of terrorism in a world of universal economic abundance.

The Religion of Economics

Most economists dismiss out of hand the idea that economics could be a religion. They think, for one thing, that a religion must have a God in the hereafter. But most theologians disagree and some traditional religions such as Buddhism or Confucianism do not have a god. It is in fact common among theologians – especially critical theologians – to refer to economics as a religion. John Cobb is professor emeritus of religion and theology at Claremont Graduate School; he says that in the twentieth century “neoclassical economics became the theology of those who saw economic growth as the savior of humankind.” Although economic religion “does not dominate the spirituality of all peoples, it is the ‘religion’ that governs planetary affairs,” based on a “devotion” to the “increase of economic production.”²⁷ Economic production is worshipped because its continuing rapid increase – the processes of economic growth -- can abolish economic scarcity and thereby bring about the arrival of heaven on earth. The old biblical version is replaced by a new economic millennialism.

Marxism is a good example of such an economic religion; in fact, a great number of people have previously said explicitly that Marxism is a religion.²⁸ Their characterization, moreover, was not just metaphorical or sociological – that Marxism was organized in the manner of a religion, and inspired followers whose behavior exhibited a true religious zeal. Rather, Marxism had an actual theology with a moral system and a vision of the future salvation of the world. Admittedly, like other secular religions, there is no God. There is, however, a close equivalent to God, the economic laws of history. Economic history in Marxism is omniscient and omnipotent. According to Marx, everything important in the world – ideas, institutions, culture, and also business organization -- is determined by the particular

economic stage of history. Terrorism as well can be seen in this light, a response to the economic circumstances at present and one of the predetermined outcomes in economic history (and Marxists of course were not above employing terror themselves to help history along towards a future classless society).

In the end, according to Marx, the workings of economic history will lead inevitably to a future communist paradise. As in the Bible, the coming of heaven to earth is preceded by a great cataclysm – in Marxism, the final stage of class warfare and the triumph of the proletariat. Marxism, as one might say, is a Book of Revelations, rewritten for modern times in secular (“scientific”) imagery. As the American writer Michael Crichton said also recently with respect to environmentalism, it is a remapping of Christianity onto a modern landscape.²⁹

Marxism is not the only economic religion. Indeed, there have been a host of economic theologies, including social Darwinism, American progressivism (the “gospel of efficiency”), old fashioned European socialism, and others. As numerous writers have noted, many millions of people have believed since the Enlightenment in economic progress as their core religious conviction. Moreover, while there are new elements introduced, the roots of this economic religion lie in Judeo-Christian sources. Secular and traditional religion both offer a vision of history as leading along a path of world salvation. Just as Christian schools of theology have differed on the details, leading economic schools have offered competing interpretations of the best routes of economic progress.³⁰

In the Bible, evil came into the world when Adam and Eve ate the apple in the Garden. In economic religion, as explained above, there is a new understanding of original sin. Over the course of human history until very recently, most people lived in dire poverty; many children died before five, and few people lived past 50 years. If

it was a matter of stealing food for your baby, or letting the baby die, most people would steal – and also lie, cheat and do whatever else was necessary. Nations, as economic theology similarly taught, fought wars with one another because they were battling for control over economic resources that were necessary to survival. Today, conflict among nations has been partially superceded by the actions of terrorists; in economic theology, the explanation for terrorism, however, is the same – the terrorists do it because dire material poverty has alienated them from their own truer and much better natural selves.

Economists like to say that they are genuine scientists. Hence, as professionals, they should usually keep any religious tendencies under wraps. Indeed, an explicit confession of a religious grounds for economic reasoning would be professionally discrediting. On a few occasions, however, leading economists have been explicit about the secular faith of their professional priesthood. John Maynard Keynes once declared that economic growth would soon “lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.”³¹ Abolishing economic scarcity would abolish the grounds for sinful behavior. Keynes regarded the pursuit of self-interest as a crude and unpleasant human motive but it was only a temporary necessity. Within perhaps as few as 100 years, as he prophesied, economic growth would have advanced rapidly enough that humanity might be “free at last” to discard the base institutions of the free market, grounded in the unworthy motive of private greed. In the end, and even if it takes longer than 100 years, the world will be saved by economic progress.

Richard Ely was a founder of the American Economic Association in 1885 and also a leading member in those days of the social gospel movement. Like other social gospellers, he transposed the traditional Christian message to this world. As Ely stated in 1889, there must be “a never-ceasing attack on every wrong institution,

until the earth becomes a new earth, and all its cities, cities of God.”³² Ely saw the activities of professional economists as central to this religious mission; economists would become the leading priesthood of the modern age. Economists were so important because they had the scientific understanding for the achievement of rapid economic growth and development. In our own day and age, it is again economists who will have to provide the long run solution to terrorism. Following the advice of economists, the American government will have to rededicate its efforts to the elimination of global poverty – and thus the breeding grounds for terrorist acts.

The Religion of Democracy

Religion often has such a powerful hold that followers will cling to it even in the face of direct contrary evidence. Osama bin Laden comes from one of the richest families in Saudi Arabia. Many of the 9/11 hijackers had studied in Germany; they were not poor but had well off backgrounds and economically promising futures. Other leading terrorists today are former intellectuals and professionals. An upbringing in poverty may help to explain the actions of some terrorists but the correlation of terrorism and poverty is loose at best. Believers in economic religion ritually invoked poverty as the explanation for terrorism as the unthinking recitation of a basic tenet of their own core faith (admittedly, some of them were also seeking to enlist the rhetoric and the energies of the war on terrorism to advance a different campaign in which they might actually be more interested, the worldwide reduction of poverty).

Hence, it would be necessary to look in other directions than the state of economic deprivation of the world’s poor to find a satisfactory explanation for the rise of terrorism. A person can be brutalized by his or her economic circumstances but this can also be a result of political repression. If some people have seen the

alleviation of poverty as the solution to terrorism, others have argued that the establishment of free democratic institutions is the most important step. The leaders of democracies work for the betterment of the people as a whole, rather than some narrow elite or other controlling group. Each person has an equal voice in the democratic process in selecting the rulers of society. Political freedom is not only a practical means of governance but a great moral cause which can inspire a whole nation – and thus help to defuse the tensions that lead to terrorism. Political freedom is also correlated with economic freedom and thus advances a main precondition for overall economic advance.

Like economic progress, belief in democracy can itself become a religion – in fact, they often go together. Ernest Koenker wrote in *Secular Salvations* that many have urged that “democracy be the real object of devotion in America’s churches and synagogues. Public schools, too, should teach the democratic ideal as America’s religion.”³³ Wilfred McClay has more recently written in *The Public Interest* of “that strain of American piety that bestows many of the elements of religious sentiment and faith upon the fundamental political and social institutions of the United States.”³⁴

Indeed, in a nation of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and still many other faiths, an American “civil religion” may be necessary to provide a bonding influence to hold the nation together. This is an old idea going back at least as far as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As McClay comments, “since it was impossible to have a cohesive civil government without some kind of religion, and since Christianity is inherently subversive of sound civil government, Rousseau thought that the state should impose its own custom-tailored religion.”³⁵ It did not have to be imposed in American but was embedded in the very foundations of the nation from the Declaration of Independence, to the Gettysburgh address, and now in many

presidential proclamations. The American civil religion proclaims the basic freedom of human beings – their right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” -- in matters of economics (ownership of private property and the freedom in the market) and politics (democracy).

Many Muslim nations are fragmented by diverse clans, ethnic groups, and competing branches of Islam. Perhaps they as well need a unifying civil religion to escape the debilitating divisions of religious and other internal conflicts. A secular religion might also help to displace many of the tenets of Islam that have served to keep Muslim nations in a backward condition. It is often argued that the tenets of Islamic faith are a main contributing factor to the governance failures in so many Muslim nations. The American tradition of separation of church and state has never taken hold in most Muslim nations. If a new civil religion could be established in the Islamic world, grounded in democratic political institutions and values, it might represent a large step to the improvement of Muslim political systems and then to economic improvement as well and the elimination of the breeding grounds for terrorism.

Admittedly, this might be putting the cart before the horse. In a recent analysis, for example, Patrick Besham declared that it would be “unrealistic” to expect a democracy in Iraq within the next two or three decades. As he stated, “a free society is a complicated social artifact” that requires “specific social and cultural conditions,” almost all of which are missing in Iraq (and most other Muslim nations). It was not enough simply to establish the formal constitutional structure of a free society because “political culture shapes democracy far more than democracy shapes political culture.” Indeed, “Iraq is a deeply dysfunctional country” created only 80 years ago by the British and in which “there exist centuries-old religious and ethnic

hatreds, as well as intense, frequently violent, tribal and clan rivalries.” In the face of “Sunni religious leaders [who] are calling for a defensive jihad against the Shia,” there might be little prospect of a successful civil religion in Iraq along western lines.³⁶ Indeed, the current Islamic leaders might wage war on any such secular faith, seeing it as an attempt to undermine the authority of traditional Islamic religion with modern ideas.

Moreover, even if the religious hostilities could be surmounted, Iraq’s low level of economic development might trump politics. As Basham summarized many research findings, “economic development stimulates higher levels of democratic values in the political culture but not vice versa.”³⁷ The Harvard economist Robert Barro has reported that “the global evidence demonstrates that prior measures of economic and social development ... are relevant predictors of democracy. Notably, the chances for developing democracy in a country go up a lot when levels of per capita GDP and primary schooling are higher” – and Iraq fared poorly in economic terms. As a result, “one can expect, at best, a minimal level of democracy from Iraq’s current economic and social conditions.”³⁸

Consistent with the tenets of economic theology, and as economic researchers were now asserting, adequate economic pre-conditions must be set in place, before democracy was likely to become a viable alternative in the Middle East or elsewhere. The economic priesthood had the most important expertise to show the path to a future heaven on earth. If the economic requirements were fulfilled, other necessary elements, including a political culture congenial to democracy, would soon enough fall into place.

The Faith of George W. Bush

President George W. Bush is an evangelical Christian; learned about economic affairs in getting a masters degree at the Harvard Business School; was educated as a Yale undergraduate in the American civil religion; and as President he might now be said to be the “head priest” (or “American Pope”). In developing a response to 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, the Bush administration had to weigh the competing religious explanations for terrorist actions. Its terrorism policies would then reflect implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – the religious conclusions.

Other than the President himself, and given the wide range of competing ideas and influences to which he is regularly exposed, no one knows Bush’s final inner thoughts. Because of the prominence of terrorism issues in his administration, however, President Bush has made a number of public statements to justify his policies, including on a number of occasions the war in Iraq. These public pronouncements often have an underlying theological content. Religion has been particularly important to the thinking of President Bush. As McClay comments, it is traditional for an American president to “convey a strong sense of God’s providence, His blessing on the land, and of the Nation’s consequence responsibility to serve as a light unto other nations.” Ronald Reagan especially liked to invoke such themes in his presidential speeches but McClay finds that President Bush “surpasses even that standard and puts forward the civil-religious vision of America with the greatest energy of any president since Woodrow Wilson.”³⁹ Wilson was determined that the spread of democracy should save the world and so today is Bush.

Such themes were prominent in July 2004 in a speech at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in which Bush assessed the current state of the war on terror. As the President stated, “we are extending the peace by supporting the rise of democracy, and the hope and progress that democracy brings, as the alternative to hatred and

terror in the broader Middle East. In democratic and successful societies, men and women do not swear allegiance to the malcontents and murderers.” The presence of democracy can literally take the evil motives out of the hearts of men and women – or as Bush said, “democratic governments do not shelter terrorist camps or attack their neighbors.” This is partly because in a democracy there is the political and economic freedom to commit “their hearts and labor to building better lives.”⁴⁰ Democracies not only provide political freedom but encourage economic growth and development that undermines the motives for terrorism.

It was hardly the first time that these themes had been invoked. In August 2003, President Bush marked the 100th day since the start of the Iraq war, declaring that the events in Iraq would “demonstrate to other countries in that region that national prosperity and dignity are found in representative government and free institutions.”⁴¹ On another occasion he stated his confidence that “Iraq can be an example of reform and progress to all the Middle East” – language that echoed the traditional progressive gospel.⁴² But the highest objective, repeated time and again by the President, was the achievement of political “liberty” and “freedom.” Democratic freedom was a core value in itself but it was also practically useful in that “as freedom advances in the Middle East, those societies will be less likely to produce ideologies of hatred and produce recruits for terror.”⁴³

President Bush seldom elaborated on why political freedom would have such powerful salutary effects, including a great reduction in the potential for terrorism. It was simply an article of faith, repeated time and again in speech after speech. On one occasion, however, he did address one of the specific objections to his views, that the people of Iraqi might not yet be prepared for free political institutions, that they might be so bruised and battered from years of autocratic government that the cultural and

economic preconditions for democracy might be lacking in Iraq. Again, typically for the President, he did not offer much reasoned analysis but rejected this view as simply an incorrect understanding of human nature. As he declared to a group of Iraqi Americans in Dearborn, Michigan, “you are living proof the Iraqi people love freedom and living proof the Iraqi people can flourish in democracy.” For Bush, a love of freedom was intrinsic to every human being; it was not something which required long education and experience in a free society. The desire for freedom could be suppressed by evil governments but only in the short run. The love of liberty was not unique to any one or a few cultures; it is the universal hope of human beings everywhere on earth. In Iraq, for example, this is true “whether you’re Sunni or Shia or Kurd or Chaldean or Assyrian or Turkoman or Christian or Jew or Muslim – no matter what your faith, freedom is God’s gift to every person in every nation.”⁴⁴

Bush stated similarly on another occasion that “I believe that God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom. And even when that desire is crushed by tyranny for decades, it will rise again.”⁴⁵ As a consequence, with the help of Americans “I have confidence in the future of a free Iraq” because today “the Iraqi people are fully capable of self-government. Every day Iraqis are moving toward democracy and embracing the responsibilities of active citizenship.”⁴⁶ Such views were not based on any careful polling or other research into the actual thinking of Iraqis. Rather, for Bush it was simply a matter of faith. God has made us this way. Our true nature as imparted at the creation can be warped and distorted – by original sin, by severe poverty, or by autocratic governments. But if the sources of repression are lifted, as Bush proposed to do now for Iraqis, the original and good inner nature of each person will be released to do great things in the world. Bush was offering nothing less than a future path of individual and collective salvation, and this religious

vision – widely shared by large numbers of fellow Americans – lay at the core of U.S. national policy in Iraq.

In his State of the Union Address in January 2004, President Bush again stated that the deployment of American “servicemen and women” was with the purpose of “bringing hope to the oppressed, and delivering justice to the violent, they are making America more secure” from terrorist acts. It reflected the fact that “America is a nation with a mission, and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs,” which can also redeem the lives of other people throughout the world, including Iraqis and others in nations that are now breeding grounds for terror. As Americans, Bush said, “we understand our special calling. This great republic will lead the cause of freedom.” The building of the American republic was part of God’s plan to save the world. In Iraq, “we’ve not come all this way – through tragedy, and trial and war – only to falter and leave our task unfinished.” In fulfilling its destiny in Iraq, Americans will be taking another step in “rising to the tasks of history.”⁴⁷ In the American civil religion it is the verdict of history – operating ultimately according to a divine design – by which a person is finally judged. For Americans the verdict of history is the new St. Peter at the gates of heaven.

The emphasis on such themes is particularly American. Prime Minister Tony Blair of Great Britain did declare that the Iraq war was being fought in order that the “Iraqi people will be free.” But Blair’s rhetoric of salvation by freedom and liberty was much tamer than Bush’s. For Blair, the war in Iraq was more a humanitarian mission to relieve the world of a minor-league Hitler. As he declared on one occasion, “day by day, we have seen the reality of Saddam’s regime – his thugs prepared to kill their own people; the parading of prisoners of war; and now, the release of those pictures of executed British soldiers. If anyone needed any further

evidence of the depravity of Saddam's regime, this atrocity provides it." Indeed, Saddam was guilty of acts of "cruelty beyond comprehension." It showed that there was not "an ounce of humanity in their souls."⁴⁸ For Blair, the world had a moral obligation – for many followers to be derived from a faith in God – to relieve the Iraqi people of this living abomination, a modern devil on earth.

Conclusion

The fact that current terrorists are almost all Muslims raises issues that are disconcerting for many Americans. It calls into question the tradition of religious tolerance that is part of the American civic religion. In general, it forces the subject of religion into the public arena, a violation of the traditional American attitude that religion should be kept private and personal. In the case of the war on terror, the shaping of public policy depends on core religious assumptions about the driving factors and motives in human behavior. If these assumptions have to be debated explicitly, it could result in deep religious tensions in American life. Americans have sought to avoid public debates about religion because of the strong – and potentially divisive – emotions that religious disagreements can stir. Indeed, the increased divisiveness of American politics today may reflect the greater prominence of religious questions – not only terrorism, but abortion, same-sex marriage, etc. – in current American public life.

Such a debate could also force many Americans to think about uncomfortable tensions in their own religious thinking. The accommodation of Christianity to modern science and religion has at times been awkward. Some people might argue that it has never been successfully resolved but instead papered over.⁴⁹ Secular religion has in fact for many people significantly displaced the historic Christian faith, as many Islamic theologians now fear could happen throughout the Muslim world as

well. The most powerful secular religion of all may have been nationalism which can complement the historic Christian faith but can also be a substitute for it. As Wilfred McClay comments, in America and although a minority within the faith, “for many committed Christians, there has been a growing sense that the American civil religion has become a pernicious idol, antithetical to the practice of their faith.”⁵⁰

Yet, the Bush presidency has elevated that American civil religion to greater heights than any other recent presidency – and often with the strong support of people who believe they are devout Christians. Bush is not the most introspective of individuals and he may have failed – along with many of his followers – to recognize the degree of tension between their “worship” of the American nation and its political and economic institutions and their simultaneous worship of the God of the Bible. Perhaps the leading intellectual proponent of this view is Stanley Hauerwas, a distinguished American theologian who delivered the Gifford Lectures in Scotland in 2000-2001. Hauerwas recently signed a statement criticizing any politicians who “adopt the dangerous language of righteous empire in the war on terrorism and confuse the roles of God, church and nation.”⁵¹ He writes that in the United States today,

Theological convictions have lost their intelligibility. They have lost their power to train us in skills of truthfulness, partly because accounts of the Christian moral life have too long been accommodated to the needs of the nation state, and in particular, to the nation state we call the United States of America. As a result the ever present power of God’s kingdom to form our imagination has been subordinated to the interest of furthering liberal ideals through the mechanism of the state.⁵²

Secular religion and Christian religion in America are alike in assuming that there is a single “human nature” that applies universally across the whole world. Some people, observing the chaotic circumstances of the Middle East, might be tempted to suggest that people of the Islamic faith are driven by its world view to be

“irrational,” as compared with Americans and Europeans. Not one of the American religious perspectives above, however, holds such a view, nor does any other leading body of American thought. This general conviction ultimately traces to the biblical argument that human beings are all fellow creatures made by the same God and indeed alike in all being created “in the image of God.” If some people do at present seem to behave in less than a rational fashion – the terrorists, for example – it is because their better and truer self has been corrupted either by original sin, by false ideas or by harmful economic (or other) external circumstances. In most branches of Christianity, the ultimate distortion of our better and truer nature is a product of the fall in the Garden.

If the intrinsic equality of all human beings around the world were rejected, the philosophical and political implications would be radical, and unacceptable to almost all Americans. The debate in this country thus must address the issue of why “good people have gone bad” and how they can be restored to their better selves – in the terms of some Christian faiths, how they can be “born again.” As this paper has described, there are various conflicting views on this matter in the United States, all derived from a religious perspective of one kind or another. It has been difficult to have an honest debate, however, because of the traditional reluctance of Americans to disagree about religion in public. The result is that policies are adopted for religious reasons that are poorly articulated or not even stated at all. Religious compromises are implicitly developed when there may be basic contradictions in the religious views given expression.

Thus, if American policy in Iraq has ultimately proved to be incompetent and incoherent, along with other elements of the “war” on terror, the real reason may be an underlying inability to resolve basic religious questions. Policy confusion may

reflect religious confusion. It is a difficult concept for most Americans to accept but they may have to learn again how to think about and to argue about religion in the public sphere.

Endnotes

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