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OBAMA AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION FROM THE POLITICAL LEFT

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Fred Gedicks has written an interesting paper on the future of civil religion in the United States.¹ As Gedicks describes it, the American civil religion, as defined most notably by Robert Bellah several decades ago,² argues that there is and should be a core series of basic principles at the heart of American nationalism, principles supportive of the American democratic order and derived from principles associated with the major religious traditions practiced by American citizens.³ Gedicks paints a dreary picture of the future of the American civil religion, arguing that civil religion is a theoretically undesirable concept and a practically impossible one to realize in the contemporary United States.⁴ My brief reply to Gedicks's paper will focus on this latter point, and argue that there is a good reason to believe that the American civil religion has a viable future, one deriving from the American political left. The best example of this is the 2008 presidential candidacy of President Barack Obama.⁵

I. THE CIVIL RELIGION OF BARACK OBAMA: A LIBERAL CIVIL RELIGION?

Gedicks argues that it would be empirically difficult to have an American civil religion in the current climate because of increasing

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1. See generally Frederick Gedicks, *American Civil Religion: An Idea Whose Time is Past?*, 41 GEO. WASH. INT'L L. REV. 891 (2010).

2. See Robert N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, in AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION 21 (Russell E. Richey & Donald G. Jones eds., Harper & Row 1974) (1967).

3. See *id.* at 21, 29.

4. See generally Gedicks, *supra* note 1.

5. For a helpful discussion of the role that religion played in Obama's candidacy, see generally Paul Horwitz, *Religion and American Politics: Three Views of the Cathedral*, 39 U. MEM. L. REV. 973 (2009), and Francis J. Mootz, III, *Faith and Politics in the Post-Secular Age: The Promise of President Obama* (Scholarly Works, Paper No. 60, 2009), available at <http://scholars.law.unlv.edu/facpub/60>.

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religious diversity and the vehemence of the religious beliefs held by religious true believers.⁶ In its place, he argues for a procedural civil religion, one comprised entirely and exclusively of “a thinner Rawlsian [civil religion] dedicated to procedural values of fairness and equity.”⁷ The political success of Obama, however, which relies on a civil religion that was (contrary to Gedicks’s predictions) both religious *and* civil, may defy some of Gedicks’s empirical expectations.

By the time Obama became politically relevant, it might have been impossible for civil religion to be advocated by those on the right. Despite what Gedicks argues, there is still a shared, monotheistic, Western religious angle to American public sentiment. The most recent annual poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that 92 percent of American citizens believe in God.⁸ Gedicks is certainly right that within this monotheism there is diversity; as he estimates, between one-quarter and one-third of American citizens may hold nontraditional religious beliefs.⁹ These religious beliefs, however, still share the core of the civil religion that Bellah identified: monotheism, dedicated to certain rights and beliefs consistent with the American liberal tradition—understood at a sufficiently high level of generality, of course.¹⁰

The issue with the American civil religion, though, is that it had come to be seen as so ideological and exclusionary that it alienated many mainstream and liberal voters. While advocacy of an American civil religion could have motivated those true believers, typically those on the political right that Gedicks discusses, a politically conservative civil religion that had “appropriated the symbols and practices of American civil religion and infused them with sectarian meaning”¹¹ turned off many voters. An American liberal civil religion held out more promise as an inspiring American nationalism, but with a tolerant edge. Enter Obama onto the national political stage, perhaps “the most theologically serious politician in modern American political history,”¹² whose speeches have been

6. Gedicks, *supra* note 1, at 898.

7. *Id.* at 891.

8. PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUB. LIFE, U.S. RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE SURVEY 162 (2008).

9. Gedicks, *supra* note 1, at 899–900.

10. See Bellah, *supra* note 2, at 23, 29.

11. Gedicks, *supra* note 1, at 900.

12. Charlton C. Copeland, *God-Talk in the Age of Obama: Theology and Religious Political Engagement*, 86 DENV. U. L. REV. 663, 664 (2009).

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2010] *Obama and the American Civil Religion from the Political Left* 911

just as full with religious imagery and rhetoric as they have been with civil imagery and rhetoric.

Obama's speeches were full of references to civil ideas, or as Gedicks defines them, Rawlsian ideas,¹³ as well as to *religious* ideas. During his now famous 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention, Obama stated that even in blue states people "worship an awesome God"¹⁴ and believed in hope as "God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation; the belief in things not seen; the belief that these are better days ahead."¹⁵ In a major speech at a 2006 conference on poverty, Obama referenced the importance of "acknowledge[ing] the power of faith in people's lives"¹⁶ and argued as follows:

[S]ecularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square [I]ndeed, the majority of great reformers in American history were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their "personal morality" into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁷

At his inauguration in 2009, as *The New York Times* reported it, Obama was aiming "for a much broader audience: an increasingly diverse America, where people want their beliefs acknowledged in the nation's most important ceremony."¹⁸ Rick Warren's invocation, the most controversial part of the inauguration, was itself multi-theological and multicultural.¹⁹ Warren referenced God as "the compassionate and merciful one," a phrase taken from Muslim ceremonies, and he also said the name of Jesus in Arabic, English, Hebrew, and Spanish.²⁰ Obama's speech itself was full of religious references, quoting St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in saying that "[w]e remain a young nation, but in the words of

13. Gedicks, *supra* note 1, at 891.

14. Barack Obama, Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention (July 27, 2004), available at http://www.barackobama.com/2004/07/27/keynote_address_at_the_2004_de_1.php.

15. *Id.*

16. Barack Obama, Call to Renewal Keynote Address (June 28, 2006), available at http://www.barackobama.com/2006/06/28/call_to_renewal_keynote_address.php.

17. *Id.*

18. *Obama Inaugural Strikes Inclusive Note on Matters Spiritual*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 21, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/21/world/americas/21iht-religion.1.19556458.html>.

19. *See id.*

20. *Id.*

Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things.”²¹ Obama referenced “the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness,”²² and “the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.”²³ Again, though, these religious references as part of his civil religion rhetoric were multicultural: Obama talked about “a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and non-believers.”²⁴

With this many speeches about religious ideas, the press covered Obama’s religion more than that of any other candidate. One study found that 53 percent of references to religion in the media’s coverage of the presidential campaign were to Obama’s religion, 19 percent to Sarah Palin, 9 percent to John McCain, and 1 percent to Joe Biden.²⁵ Even taking away the astronomically high percentage of the stories that were about whether Obama was Muslim (30 percent of all of the media stories about religion²⁶), and the stories about Jeremiah Wright (9 percent of all stories²⁷), coverage of Obama’s religion was still the single biggest religion-related story of the campaign.

In other words, then, perhaps the American civil religion is not dead, but has been brought to life by our new President. Since Bellah’s concept of the civil religion was about the idea as a political tool as much as about a sociological concept, it has come to life again because it has been used by a group—and a political phenomenon—better able to use it in the political sphere. Indeed, just as maybe only Nixon could go to China, maybe only Obama can reinvigorate civil religion.

21. Barack Obama, Inauguration Speech (Jan. 20, 2009), *available at* <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/01/20/obama.politics/index.html>.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*

25. *How the News Media Covered Religion in the General Election*, PEW F. RELIGION & PUB. LIFE (Nov. 20, 2008), <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=372>.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*