

Origins of Civil Religion in the United States Comparison with the Political Religion of the USSR

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Abstract

The idea of Nietzsche (1882) that "God is dead" lies in the foundations of both American Civil religion and the political religion of the Soviet Union. The idea was perceived differently by two different civilizations according to their cultural and ideological backgrounds. The American perception imposed God as being something abstract from now on. Under God we can understand democracy, unity, freedom or civil rights. The political religion of the Soviet Union denied the acceptance of God even as something abstract bringing him a clear opposition in the face of Communism, where the state worked both as an institute of power and implemented the symbolism and morality of the religion.

In this article the main differences between the approaches to Christian religion in the USA and USSR, together with the conception of civil religion of the U.S. and the political religion of the USSR will be analyzed, and, based on the historical-cultural approach, the major interpretation of the American tolerance and Soviet rejection in the early periods of the formation of both states will be viewed.

Keywords: Civil religion, Political religion, United States Politics, USSR

Introduction

In one of his works John Locke says: "In the beginning all the world was America" (Locke 1832). At the same time, it was communistically structured society, which differentiated us from the animals in the early ages. The idea of Nietzsche that "God is dead" (Nietzsche 1835) lies in the foundations of both American Civil religion and the political religion of the Soviet Union. The idea was perceived differently by two different civilizations according to their cultural and ideological backgrounds. The American perception imposed God as being something abstract from now on. Under God we can understand democracy, unity, freedom or civil rights. The political religion of the Soviet Union denied the acceptance of God even as something abstract, bringing him a clear opposition in the face of Communism, where the state worked both as an institute of power and implemented the symbolism and morality of the religion.

To analyze the differences and rare relationship between the civil religion and the political one, we should first get a certain picture of the cultural-historical background of both civilizations. Throughout history, there were often transformations between the interests and the ideologies. In his book "Russia, The Soviet Union and the United States" he defines what interests and ideologies meant for these two nations: "Interests" are here understood to mean those conditions a state con-

siders necessary in order to maintain its authority in the world; "ideologies" are the justification advanced for the exercises of that authority" (Gaddis 1990).

In this article, the origins of the civil religion in the United States and its relationship with the Christianity and political incorporation of Christian symbols will be analyzed, the attitudes of Karl Marx and Lenin towards Churches and Christianity will be explained, and the Orthodox Christian origins of the political religion in the Soviet Union with the comparisons of the civil religion in the U.S. will be discussed. In this work I am referring to the works of: Robert N. Bella, Karl Marx, Rousseau, Marcel Cristi, Lenin.

Origins of the Civil Religion in the United States Relations with the Socialism

Among Americans, according to the religious statistics, 74.4% of the U.S. population consider themselves to be Christians (The New Forum on Religion and Public Life n.d.). Striking and unusually ease are relations with God, who is a sort of a kind and sweet friend, to whom you should pay a visit with friends on Sunday to enjoy life together, sing songs and listen to a sermon, for example, on "Business and the Gospel". This is one

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of the aspects which seem to be strange to the members of the other nations. A very good example brings R. Laurence Moore who describes about a stadium at the Notre Dame University, one side of which is covered with a large mosaic mural of Christ, a place which many Europeans consider no appropriate for the face of Lord (Moore 2003). U.S. has given the world a new type of religion, which at first was totally unknown, and even odd for the European consciousness. The origins of the "religion of the American" go back to the distant past.

When Columbus first described the New Land he witnessed far away in the West, he pictured a new kind of soil and society where the man and nature live together hand in hand in peace. His description was very close to the paradise or the Gardens of Edem. A big part of Europeans followed this description. On the other hand, as the colonists were moving to the new found continent, they were met not by the utopian idealistic description of Columbus, but by a wild and dangerous reality. The struggle of two perception "heaven on earth vs. wilderness" required a special kind of new settlers, which had a dialectical relationship in the perception of both. That idea of unification between the wild and paradise came from the Protestant reformations.

The colonists, who descended in the XVII century on American soil from the deck of Mayflower, were Protestants. Inspired by the idea of creating here 'the promised land' - a new Christian society, future Americans eagerly set to work. Construction of an earthly "paradise" proved to be not so easy, but the Protestant ethic (rejecting "unnecessary" monastic asceticism and "excessive" formalism of the Church) with its new attitude to work gave a bountiful harvest: blossomed American pragmatism, which was a must for survival in those conditions. Practical Americans were not only in resolving domestic and socio-political issues, practical and different religious builders of a new society.

But the practicality of the American nation had the other side: the lack of interest in theology. Questions of dogma and understanding complex philosophical construct found little concern in the minds of ordinary Americans and their pastors. Modern American historian J. Boorstin wrote: "The lack of Virginians zealous attitude to religious dogma can be explained quite simply: quite often they didn't know anything about dogma. So for example, George Washington, who participated very actively in the work of his parish council, probably was not able to distinguish Anglican Church from any other Christian" (Boorstin 1964).

The dogmatic differences were the reason why most of the first settlers actually were expelled or made to leave from their homelands. Their goal was to create the society free from the dogmatic rhetoric and contradictions, to make religion more centralized on their everyday life.

Pragmatism demanded the religion to be clear, simple and fast in a newspaper kind of way. Contrary to the traditional religion "book", religion of the Old World, the American novelty was a more lightweight phenomenon, "newspaper-like", but at the same time more convenient

and effective under the circumstances. This kind of religion offered more than it demanded (Boorstin 1964). It gave the sense of life and work, declared the U.S a "God chosen state", craved in the idea of Manifesto Destiny and shaped the self-religious identity within the citizens' mind. (Bellah and Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion* 1980). But, moreover, losing its dogmatic side religion became more associated with the recognition of the newly developed state.

Right at the same time as the formation of the religious self-identity rose the question of the political and ideological one. Contrary to the other nations, United States didn't have enough historical experience to formulate ideology based on the ethnicity of the nation. It became a perfect platform for the development of very different kind of political recognition. In contradiction to the Puritan covenant came the covenant of Enlightenment, which kept religion separate from the state though at the same time which was based on the Christian traditions.

According to Robert N. Bellah, even though two words: socialism and individualism came to the United States at the same time, but it was not till the Civil War when the nation made its decision in the favor of individualism. Why? First of all, in Europe from where both these ideas came from, socialism by that time was considered to be positive while individualism negative. But, in opposition to the Old World, individualism resonated more in the hearts of Americans and their perception was set to be vice versa than in Europe. Second is that individualism has actually never been tried and America being itself a huge laboratory, free for the experiments, easily embraced it (Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* 1975).

During the pre-Civil War era, both ideologies had almost equal representation in the United States. So why did the nation shift in the favor of one side. My explanation is the Civil War itself. During the war the state was given enormous amount of power. Along with the Reconstruction of the former Confederates we can witness how actually the government was interfering into the economy trying to transform it from the slavery system into a new kind of agricultural one. Of course it left a negative taste in the minds of the citizens. In the post-war situation everyone had to rely only on their own self-interest. With the rise of the industrialization and capitalistic system, individualism followed the flow and became a good foundation for them.

The First World War and the Russian revolution killed, not even developed by that time, socialism in the United States. Starting that point, socialism became associated not only with the class prejudice but also it got its own ethnic background. But the final most important nail in the coffin of the socialism in the United States was set by the radical side of it - Marxism.

Marxism and Religion The Creation of the Political Religion in the Soviet Union

Contrary to the former schools of communism which were not against and quite often included religion in

their vision of the global construction, Marxism denied the whole idea of existence of any religion declaring it “the opium for the citizens” (Rains 2002). In the Marxists point of view, religion was unnecessary and misleading attribute of the tyrannical society, one of the tools of control, while he himself stood for the “historical materialism” (Marx 1977). Many people mistakenly suppose that Marxism openly declared to fight with religion. In fact, the Marxists didn’t pay a lot of attention to it, hoping that with the development of the communism the necessity in religion will reduce and it will self-destruct in the future.

“Therefore we explain the religious prejudice of free citizens by the secular prejudice. We do not insist that they should abolish their religious limitation in order to abolish secular limitation. We insist that they abolish their religious limitation as soon as they abolish their secular limitation” (MARX 1843).

At the beginning of the Russian revolution we see the same tendencies going on:

“We demand that religion be held a private affair so far as the state is concerned... Everyone must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases, or no religion whatever, i.e., to be an atheist, which every socialist is, as a rule. Discrimination among citizens on account of their religious convictions is wholly intolerable. ... Complete separation of Church and State is what the socialist proletariat demands of the modern state and the modern church” (Lenin Moscow).

This is a statement taken out of Lenin’s work called “The Religion and the Politics” and we see so much similarities with the same ideas the Founding Fathers had during the foundation of the United States, with the First Amendment. But at the same time this concept was impossible to be achieved. While the Civil Religion of the United States was inclusive in its nature, the new kind of religion which began to develop in the Soviet Russia didn’t allow the existence of any concurrency. The new state USSR went further than the United States with its Civil Religion. Soviet Union introduced alternative - political religion based on the Communism.

The Political religion of Soviet Union takes its ideology from the Marxism. Transformation of the ideology into religion took several decades. The final development occurred by the end of the 1940s. Nevertheless, rejecting the Old religion transferred itself in the creation of the symbols for a new one. Russian culture before the revolution was heavily based on the Orthodox Church traditions. The Church itself was associated with the Emperor and had great power within the empire. Christianity was one of the main aspects of Russian self-identity. As well as civil religion of the United States, the political religion took its symbolical revenue from Christianity. To draw an analogy with it, we can mention:

- 1) The Bolsheviks created a “god” - Karl Marx. A messiah was presented by Lenin. But the lack of this religion was that each incoming ruler hurried to call him new “Messiah”.
- 2) The belief in a bright future. In a paradise on Earth.

It is worth noting that the Christians believe not only in God, but

in heaven after death.

3) Baptizing. Acceptance of the Pioneers, the Kom-somol, the party ... All were obliged to say the ritual words, such as

“always ready.”

4) Prayers. Prayer to the Lord. The whole country was singing a chorus of “Lenin is always with me, Lenin is always

alive.” And the art was intended to glorify the existing system and the “Messiah,” which became “God” – Lenin (Hoppe

2001).

The transfer was radical and very rapid for one of the most religious countries in the Europe. The main difference between the churches of the United States and the Orthodox church of Russia was the fact that before the revolution church was not a secular institute. The identification of the church with the autocratic power alienated it from the intellectual part of the society. Orthodox Church throughout its history never had witnessed the Reformation like the one in the Western Europe or any big theological disputes. The conservative views of the church were based on the same ground for about 1000 years of its existence. Subservience to the State and innate conservatism corresponded to the actual doctrines of the orthodoxy. The emphasis of changelessness and tradition often led to resignation, withdrawal, and strong anti-world stance (McLellan 1987).

World War I, two revolutions, “red” and “white” terrors, all that personal tragedies which nearly touched everyone in Russia actually made the people ask themselves “if there is God?” And Communism was giving a good alternative for that. Even though the intelligentsia, which came to power after the revolution, gave philosophical and ideological basis for their “political atheism” or “go-satheism” (Anderson 1944), as it was called later, the turning point was rather psychological for the citizens.

While the Founding fathers of the United States used the ideas of Christianity and churches themselves as a support for their ideas, the Founding fathers of the Soviet Union, in contrary, were all set against “old prejudices”, though even they acknowledged the religious background of their new philosophy. The so called God-builders: Lunacharsky, Gorki and Bazarov, declared Marxism the fifth-great religion of labor which came after Christianity. Of course this way of understanding the ideology totally opposed Carl Marx’s “historical materialism”. The god builders were trying to introduce the Kantianism (universal good of the communism, without questioning or comprehension) into the Marxism. Lenin hated this attempt to combine Marxism with Christianity trying to keep both as far of each other as possible (Turner 1983). Nevertheless those ideas were more understandable for the Russian people, who were raised on the traditions of the Orthodox Church.

The new kind of religion couldn’t coexist with the Old one. The Communist regime is integrated; it is based on the unity of all the individuals under the same goal. Tak-

ing that into consideration, of course, the future conflict with the Russian Orthodox Church was inevitable.

Talking about the rivalry and great opposition of the Soviet state to the church, the fact should be mentioned that Soviet Union consisted of 15 different former independent countries. The religion in those countries arrived from Islam and Buddhism in the East and Orthodox Christians and Catholics in the West. The new formed Soviet state could not allow any disputes between them on the religious thematic. To preserve the Union, the citizens have to unite under the common idea and the common manifest. Like the Manifesto Destiny of the United States, Soviet Union came out with the Communism Manifesto, meaning non-stop expansion of the communistic frontier. The only and crucial difference of the Soviet manifest was the ideological background. Nevertheless it implied the people of the Soviet Union as a "God chosen" people, whose main aim is to spread the ideas of Marx in the world. The collision of these two great manifests was the actual reason for the future of the Cold War.

It was not till the 1927 repression, when the political religion and Christianity came to an actual open battle. In the period up to 1939 the number of Orthodox Churches in the Russian Republic fell from almost 20 000 to 400. More than 85,000 Orthodox priests were shot in 1937 alone (Pospelovsky 1995). The fear and despair made some part of the Russian Orthodox Church to agree on the cooperation with the proletariat power.

Till the time of the World War II, the clergy were rejected to be recognized by the government, Stalin made a decision to reestablish the institute of the church and Moscow patriarchate to bring more encouragement to the people of the Soviet Union fighting with the enemies. It is interesting that "the renaissance" of the Russian Orthodox church looks similar to the New Evangelical movement in the United States, which occurred decade later. It was similarly caused by the necessity of the unification and fear in front of the "evil" enemy. And it declared the full support of the ruling system, calling for the patriotic self-identification and, of course, "the God" on the side of the right ones.

Conclusion

The political and civil religions have a lot of similarities in their nature, especially in the areas of symbolism and traditions. As examples we can compare: the Pledge of Alliance in the United States with the Oath of a Young Pioneer in Soviet Union, that share almost the same patriotic spirit or the symbolical "religiously sacred" meaning that have the flags of the both superpowers.

The main conflict of the two lay on the ideological and mentality layers. The development of relations between those two concepts is based on dialectical interaction of the two trends or approaches or civilizations. The first approach was and is still represented by the countries of "transatlantic civilization", which has two components - the Euro-Atlantic and America-Atlantic. The most pow-

erful and dynamic part of the trans-Atlantic civilization is the United States. The main feature of transatlantic approach is the focus on people as the highest value. This is based on the ideals of social processes: democracy, civil society, market economy, private property, the rule of law (Huntington 2003). This kind of approach is inclusive and liberal. It is more flexible to the going on changes.

Another approach is put forward by representatives of the Asia-Borean civilization, the core of which was the Soviet Union (now Russia and China). This civilization is characterized by the priority of the state, which has a decisive influence on the society as a whole and each individual in particular. The man here is a pawn in the hands of the powerful (Ibid). In the Asian culture, social ideal can be considered as a "nest" where the state acts as a "queen", which revolves around the lives of individuals and structures of society. In this kind of civilization everything is put into absolute, it is more conservative and heavily tolerates to even a slightly changes in its system.

I have already mentioned above that the civil religion of the United States and the political religion of the Soviet Union perfectly answered the main features of these mentalities. The idea of moral is depending according to the cultural and the historical background of the society, and both societies included the "God choosiness" in their way of thinking.

My opinion is that civil and political religions were first the attributes of colonialist policy which later transformed into imperialistic. Since the culture and the national identity have the tendency to change, can we witness the future transformation of the civil religion in the United States into political? The good example of it was the collapse of the Soviet Union which brought a whole nation to the reconstruction of their self-identity, way of thinking and beliefs when everybody had to ask the question of: "Who are we?" In the 1940s, Stalin tried to create his own hybrid of Christian civil religion. Nowadays China is predicted to become another great superpower on the world scale, and maybe soon we will witness another clash of Eastern and Western religions and mentalities.

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