

The American **Religious Experience**

The American Civil Religion from a Hungarian Perspective

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When I was a child an American cartoon was broadcast on Hungarian television titled 'Life with Louie'. The plot was about a little boy who lived in the United States of America in a little town named Cedar Knoll, Wisconsin. The interesting character in the cartoon was Louie's father, Andy Anderson, who a 'typical American patriot'. Andy was a proud American who can trace back his genealogical tree to the Puritans – at least that is what he is saying – who arrived in America by the Mayflower. Andy also fought in the Vietnam War and was a supercilious veteran who always participated in the celebrations of Veteran's Day. Of course when I was a child this character was only a funny, noisy old man who had this enormous American identity. However after more than ten years and having a bachelor degree in sociology I realize that Andy Anderson serves the classic example of a devotee of the US Civil Religion.

This semester I participated in a seminar held by Briane Turley who delivered a lecture about Civil Religion. This topic was especially interesting for me because in the Hungarian culture there is no such phenomenon like the Civil Religion in the USA. In this paper I would like to summarize the main features of the American Civil Religion and my purpose is to examine the status of Civil Religion in Europe.

The concept of Civil Religion

To define what the notion of Civil Religion really is about I reached back to the root of the concept which is the article 'Civil Religion in America' written by Robert Bellah in 1967. At the beginning of the essay Bellah claims that 'there actually exists alongside of, and rather clearly differentiated from, the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America' (Bellah 1967). The purpose of the article is to show that Civil Religion is a well entrenched social phenomenon. Beyond that Bellah argues that this phenomenon is not that different from an more common forms of religion. Bellah says that in the American life the sphere of personal beliefs and religion is considered to be strictly private in which the politics

has no say at all. Nevertheless there exist certain common elements in the American identity which are similar to the features of religion. These aspects are essential for the ‘whole fabric of American life’ (Bellah 1967). In Bellah’s definition the American Civil Religion includes a



series of symbols, beliefs and rituals. As we can see Bellah firmly thinks that Civil Religion can be considered as a real religion.

The publication of this notion generated a series of scientific discussions about whether the American Civil Religion is a religion or just a quasi-religion. In this lengthy debate a lot of different opinions were expressed out of which I would not like to highlight one as the truth. In this paper I aim to examine more closely this social phenomenon, which for me as a Central European seems utterly foreign. For this venture I intend to use a

book of a Hungarian professor of theology, Dr. András Máté-Tóth, the head of the Religion Faculty of the University of Szeged. Máté-Tóth published a book titled ‘Vallásnézet’ which has a chapter about the US Civil Religion. In this book he examines the article of Bellah and says that in his analysis Bellah shows that in the American political life and identity there is a basis of reference which is accepted by the great majority of Americans. Bellah deals with the inauguration speeches of the great American presidents like for example J. F. Kennedy and finds that the usage of the term ‘God’ is not related to the actual Christianity. Instead it symbolizes a cohesive foundation of American society. That foundation determines the system of institutions and the moral principles that are shared by all Americans. According to Máté-Tóth Civil Religion in modern societies plays the same function as the classical religions did in previous times.

As Károly Pintér, the Hungarian historian and professor in American science, teaching in Pázmány Péter Catholic University points out the American credo can be considered as the decisive political ethos of the USA. This faith involves the basic rights and values inherent in the Declaration of Independence and the American constitution for example the right of freedom, the freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press. Although American Civil Religion includes some other values, for example, the myth of the self made man, which means that basically anyone can be successful with enough diligence and hard work if equal chances and freedom of entrepreneurship are provided (Pintér 2014).

With reference to Hammond (Hammond 1976) Máté-Tóth claims that in view of Civil Religion the American society has a special mission. There is a belief that God wanted the Americans to play a great role in history, and if they are loyal to this mission of God, then they are true Americans.

According to Máté-Tóth Civil Religion has three main functions: first of all it integrates society, secondly it legitimates the order of society and the common aims and finally it motivates the members of society to reach these goals. (Máté-Tóth 2014).

Civil Religion in Central and Eastern Europe and in the European Union

According to Máté-Tóth there are some differences between the features of Civil Religion in the Eastern part of Central Europe and in the USA, since in the United States of America from the beginning religious individualism and the role of religion in building civil society exist in parallel. However in the Eastern part of Central Europe religious individualism is more emphatic as opposed to the power of the central public institutions. Therefore due to historical factors, the role of Civil Religion in community building is lacking a solid basis.

On the whole it can be said that Civil Religion's contribution is crucial in times of major historical changes, because it can protect or promote the continuity of society (Máté-Tóth 2014.) As regards the Eastern part of Central Europe the collapse of the socialist/communist era and the birth of the democratic republics at the beginning of the 90s decisively reshaped the image of these societies. Since then in these countries one of the most urgent tasks is to reestablish the function of the civil sphere which has been ruined by the forty years of communism. According to Máté-Tóth the difference between these countries is determined by the degree to which they use Civil Religion for managing the period of transition. The functions of the symbols of Civil Religion in the transitional societies are to emphasize the new social norms, to restore social continuity, to strengthen common national identity and to legitimize the new social system and its institutions (Máté-Tóth 2014). The situation is particularly difficult because several nations occupy this region and, therefore, it's hard to find the delicate balance between the different cultural backgrounds of these nations and the European civil cooperation.

As Máté-Tóth claims the degree of efficiency of civil religion can be measured by the level of political stability and social cohesion. Because in the countries where the political power of

the state is stable and there is a high level of cohesion, strong Civil Religion exists. These societies are capable of evolution and finding democratic solutions to the problems that occur (Máté-Tóth 2014).

To fully understand Civil Religion in Europe I studied an article of Károly Pintér aiming at analyzing the role of Civil Religion in the European Union. In this study Pintér states that in the course of the past two decades there has been a rising attention for the issue of European identity. The reasons for this are the increasing debates about the European integration and the social and cultural conflicts that surround the immigration to Europe. Pintér opines that a European Civil Religion could be successful if the majority of the European citizens accepts the principles of being European. In order to achieve this it would be necessary to incorporate the above principles into the Civil Religions of each country, which as it has already been mentioned is not easy because of the cultural and intellectual diversity of Europe. Summarizing the past quarter of a decade that passed by since the change of the political system in Eastern Europe it can be stated that building an integrative European Civil Religion has not been a successful endeavor, one reason for which is the lack of historical traditions of civil society. As a consequence of the collapse of socialism the majority of the previous satellite states of the Soviet Union during regaining independence have returned to their traditional national religions. The main problem with this process is that the goal of these national religions leans toward separation rather than integration, and they often bear the characteristics of intolerance towards each other due to memories of offenses committed against one another in the past. At the end of the article Pintér points out that in absence of a common set of norms and civil integration the European unity is not a real community of values in spite of having political and economic cooperation (Pintér 2014).

Summary

As a conclusion I suppose the features of the American Civil Religion are duly summarized in this paper. However in connection to the European, and especially the Hungarian, aspects of Civil Religion I am unable to provide a clear-cut and concise definition due to the fact that there is no common understanding on the topic among social scientists and historians.

As the European region is still in transition in the aspect of the development of civil society and integration, in my opinion it is especially significant to study the processes related to this subject matter. The topic has gained even greater urgency since the start of the massive influx of immigrants and refugee seekers into the European Union. I believe that the evolved

situation has become the greatest challenge ever in the history of modern European integration, one which would compel Europe to decide whether it can rise above its internal controversies and form a genuine unity. I deem that only such a solid integrity that is able to overcome and leave behind its century-long tensions and problems will be able to manage a complex and delicate international situation like the current one. In the absence of such an established solution, the European community will encounter a real, even life threatening danger consequent to the ever increasing immigration and the related threat of terrorism.

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