

Dominant and Public Center: Reflections on the "One" Religion of the United States

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Eighteenth-century America bequeathed its heirs a theoretical pluralism expressed in the founding documents of the republic, and in contemporary America that theoretical pluralism has become actuality. However, at the beginning of the European experience in America, there had been a counterpoint to the theme of manyness. There was numerical preponderance for certain groups in the English seaboard colonies as well as in the vast stretches of New France and New Spain that later became the United States. There was political and economic power for certain elites among these groups and, along with it, social and cultural prestige for their traditional identifications. When the United States was formed from the raw material of the thirteen former English colonies, the culture of the English colonists achieved a hegemony. While it would be too much to call the result a monolithic whole, it was also true that a cultural center held, uniting the new citizens in the deep structures of its beliefs and values mediated by its overarching social institutions.

Moreover, this dominant and public center began with conspicuously religious roots. Colonial and early republican culture was, of course, largely Protestant and mostly Calvinistic. But still further, from the era of the Revolution and even earlier in Puritan New England, Calvinist Christianity was linked to a self-conscious myth-ritual system that grew up around the political and governmental order—an expression that some modern interpreters call civil religion. From the beginning, too, it provoked general social and cultural expressions as various as the encouragement of hard work, thrift, and in-

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dustry, the public keeping of the Sabbath, the widespread suspicion of frivolity, and a disapproval of the stage. In other words, a dominant and public religion—a "one" religion, if you will—found institutional expression in organized Calvinist Christianity and wider cultural expression through the symbols of the political order and the more diffuse symbols of the general social order.¹

By contrast, the path from the past into the present has been called one of secularization. According to this reading, while religion once was at the heart of culture—so that, in the terms used here, the dominant and public culture equaled the dominant and public religion—that situation is no more. The public order has moved away from its religious past into a more rationally organized and bureaucratic present. Industrialization, urbanization, and modernization have all taken their toll on even the somewhat unconventional society of the United States. Even with the presence of fundamentalist political lobbies, religion has shrunk, on the whole, from the public to the private sphere. In the private sector, it has tended to occupy smaller and smaller spaces in the solitary mental worlds of individuals.²

While there is much that is persuasive in this picture of the present, it may in some respects be an unproductive way to look at the relationship between modernity and religion in the United States. An easy capitulation to the model of secularization, with its overtones of Weberian rationalization, obscures the power of the irrational in the present, a power to which traditionally the religious world has had access. And with the pervasiveness of the irrational in public life, it is important to find a rhetoric of understanding and, also, of criticism. Hence, instead of accepting the model of secularization, it may be useful to explore other models.

First of all, another description of what has happened religiously comes from the sociological concept of symbolic transformation, separated from its accompanying "secular" gloss. Like living beings, the symbols of our thoughts and their embodiment in material things and actions may grow or change or die. And they do so both as agents and expressions of large processes of social and historical transformation. Thus, from the perspective of symbolic transformation, what has hap-

1. To put the Calvinism of the colonies into statistical terms, out of 154 congregations in 1660, nearly 90 percent (138) could be described as Calvinist in inclination. See Edwin S. Gausstad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*, rev. ed. (New York, 1976), pp. 1-4. For a discussion of colonial civil religion, see Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1976).

2. The groundwork for the secularization theory was laid by Weber. See Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 4th ed. rev., trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston, 1963). For a discussion of secularization germane to this essay, see Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York, 1967), pp. 17-27.

pened in contemporary America may be considered a shift in language and image from overtly to latently religious forms. At the same time, while language and image are new in the present, great continuity of inner theme and feeling remains. The label of secularization does not help us to see this because it begs the question of religious continuity by assuming that surface changes are total and intrinsic changes. It assumes, further, that rationality—the pragmatic and structured reasonableness of surface patterns—is the key to understanding our culture. On the other hand, a description of symbolic changes leaves these questions open—to be answered after an analysis of individual cases or series of cases.

A second description of what has happened religiously comes from an anthropology of boundaries. Whatever else religion is about, it is surely about boundaries. Whether in the rites of passage of early nonliterate societies or in the identity crises of more introspective moderns, religion has helped people to define their worlds, to transcend them, and then to live within them. Religious language, we are told, is "limit-language,"³ and throughout human history, religion has taught people how to make contact with a world beyond this one. At the same time, it has showed them how to get along in the world in which they found themselves. To put the matter simply, religion has been both extraordinary and ordinary. On the one hand, as extraordinary, it has helped people to move beyond their everyday culture and concerns, inviting them to cross over into another country. On the other hand, as ordinary, religion has been more or less coincidental with culture, the taken-for-granted reality that we all assume. In the terms of Joachim Wach, it has been the trunk of the tree of culture, the source of distinguishable cultural forms and the background out of which the norms arise that guide us in our everyday lives.⁴

From the perspective of the religious anthropology of boundaries, what has happened in contemporary America is a reorganization in the relationship between ordinary and extraordinary religion. While in the years of the early republic, the dominant and public center formally expressed both ordinary and extraordinary religious concerns, with the passage of time, ordinary religion became more prominent and extraordinary religion faded into the background. The process was occasioned by a complex series of events ranging from changing mental perceptions, such as the growth of Arminian theology, to transformed social,

3. For "limit-language," see David Tracy, "Religious Language as Limit-Language," *Theology Digest* 22 (1974): 290-307.

4. Conversations with Charles H. Long introduced me to the terminology of and distinctions between extraordinary and ordinary religion. For Wach's discussion, see Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago, 1967), p. 16.

political, and economic events, such as the increasingly corporate organization of society in the twentieth century. This description in some ways parallels the description we call secularization, but again, there is a solid advantage to conceiving the change as a shift in the public negotiation of boundaries. A religious anthropology of boundaries leaves us still with some form of religion at the heart of culture, and such a description explains the hidden power of certain ideas, values, and institutions over us more clearly.

With the models of the transformation of symbols and the religious anthropology of boundaries as horizon for the discussion, we can now identify a religion of oneness in the present-day United States. This religion encourages the collapse of boundaries (again) between peoples to transform them into partisans of the center. It inherits the concerns of extraordinary religion from its Protestant heritage, but it is above all the ordinary religion of American culture that comes to us through the media, the public school system, government communications, and commercial networks. Thus, both in its ordinary and extraordinary forms, the one religion is the expression of the dominant and public center. Further, as in the American religious past, there are three faces to the contemporary one religion: public Protestantism, civil religion, and finally the general cultural religion that mingles Protestant and subliminally patriotic values with the forces of modernity and the peoples who embrace it.

Public Protestantism in the present begins, as in the past, with the numerical advantage of the Protestant church population, and overall statistics continue to tell an impressive tale of Protestant dominance. Moreover, Protestants have had an edge on prominence, prestige, and real power as part of a kind of ruling elite,⁵ while the processes of acculturation have also worked in their favor. To cite one example, American Catholicism in the late twentieth century has become more "Protestant" with its English Mass and scriptural sermons, its growing democratic spirit and thriving charismatic movement. It is true, of course, that American Roman Catholicism has made a complex move away from a medieval and toward a modern world view and that this move is shared by many in world Catholicism. But the move is especially influenced by its context in America, and the Catholic case is important because the statistics of Catholic church membership, when

5. See Jackson W. Carroll, "Continuity and Change: The Shape of Religious Life in the United States, 1950 to the Present," in Jackson W. Carroll, Douglas W. Johnson, and Martin E. Marty, *Religion in America: 1950 to the Present* (San Francisco, 1979), pp. 9, 12-13, for relevant statistics. See pp. 10-11 for a discussion of disproportionate Protestant strength in Congress. *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1980* (Nashville, 1980) counts almost 74 million people (roughly 55 percent of all church members) as Protestant.

combined with those of Protestantism, represent the overwhelming majority of church-affiliated people in the country.⁶

However, if Protestantism shapes the one religion, what are its characteristics? How does it form a meaningful religious system that becomes an identifiable center in public life? Like any religious system, Protestantism offers a creed or set of beliefs, a cult or prescribed form of ritual expression, and a code or body of (often unself-conscious) norms to guide everyday behavior. And like any religious system, Protestantism seeks to create community. However, whether, like other religious systems, American Protestantism is also the expression of genuine community is, as we will see, more problematic. At any rate, these elements of creed, code, and cult in American Protestantism form a set of interrelated characteristics in which one leads logically and psychologically to the next and the last leads back to the first in almost circular fashion. This set of characteristics has grown and changed with the years, but it contains noticeable patterns, present in the country from the beginning of English domination, and succinctly identified by American religious historians.

The Protestant code has expressed itself as clear conditions, institutions, and patterns of living within the mainstream. Thus, religious liberty, disestablishment, and democratic equality encouraged the institutions of denominationalism and voluntarism as the most effective means for the organization of religious groups. In turn, denominationalism and voluntarism fostered key behavioral traits such as activism, the religious busyness that puts its premium on public work for an organization; reductionism, antiintellectualism, and ahistoricism, expressions of the search to simplify; and moralism, a concern for the rules of action. Moralism is perhaps the most significant of these traits; and Protestantism has continued to interact with other currents in cultural life to express an abiding moral concern, a strong desire for purification, and a collective urge to innocence.

Still further, patterns of behavior are expressed in symbolic statements of the meaning of things, acted out in rituals and thought through in creeds. So the public Protestant code leads to the cultic actions that are logically and psychologically related to moralism, activism, and the search for simplicity. Now as in the past, revivalism is the general cult of a Protestantism in the aggregate more evangelical than liberal. Thus, in a society in which carefully articulated theological opinions could bring disunity and disagreement, the revival service, framed in sacred space and time, cultivated, as Sandra Sizer has shown, the creation of

6. According to the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1980*, American Roman Catholics numbered well over 49.5 millions, or about 37 percent of all church members, in 1978.

a community of feeling.⁷ Through the power that the revival unleashed, private religious experience expressed in public triggered mass emotions. There could be instant communion among strangers, and in the faceless crowds of so much of contemporary life, the community-bestowing gift of the revival is perhaps the chief source of its appeal. Indeed, the evangelical religion of private feeling legitimated in a public setting is *the American way*.⁸

The cult of the revival, in turn, is related to the general beliefs public Protestantism has espoused and encouraged—to the elements that form its religious world view. Although there are many such elements involved, important among them is belief in the significance of the individual, a Reformation idea that was intensified by the American experience of Protestantism. There is also regard for a higher law that is thought to transcend human legislation and institutions, and most prominently, the affirmation of different forms of perfectionism—innocence again—and of millennialism.

Throughout American history, Protestant denominationalism and voluntarism have supplied an institutional framework in which individual efforts are the bulwark of public order and organization. And if individualism is basic, the sources of public order become a logical next question. One continuing answer to that question has been the notion of a fundamental or higher law.⁹ Conceived in various ways in the course of American religious history, the higher law has meant the voice of the biblical God speaking to conscience, the God of nature at work through his law in governing the world, or the law itself as an absolute—an almighty nature or an unfailing law of progress. This movement from the biblical God to nature to an abstract law of progress is tied to the third and most significant belief in the American Protestant creed, the belief in the coming of the millennium. In the expectation of the end of the present age and the dawning of the new, the higher law becomes a force out of the future that can create a community of feeling in the moment. Just as important, millennialism has been expressed in a variety

7. See Sandra S. Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 52, 134-37, *passim*.

8. William McLoughlin has argued persuasively for the religious character of a contemporary "Fourth Great Awakening," present in manifestations ranging from Eastern and occult religious movements to rock concerts. See William G. McLoughlin, *Revolutions, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 179-216.

9. For a classic discussion of the concept of fundamental law, see Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, 2d ed. (New York, 1956), pp. 14-19. Gabriel lists as doctrines of the American democratic faith beliefs in the fundamental law, the free and responsible individual, and the mission of America. My own list has been shaped in part by his discussion. (See Gabriel, *American Democratic Thought*, pp. 12-25.)

of forms, some of them conservative and evangelical, and others leading out of a self-conscious Protestantism and into the realm of civil religion and general cultural religion.

Recent scholarship has reflected a growing interest in millennialism, and so has recent religious practice. Martin Marty noted in *Righteous Empire* that our era has seen, with the revival of fundamentalism, a growth in premillennialism, the belief that Jesus will come before the millennium to bring it by his power and without human aid.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Social Gospel dream of building the Kingdom of God on earth lives on in contemporary liberal Protestantism. Here the post-millennial vision ties the coming of Jesus to human efforts to construct a just and compassionate society. In these beliefs and related ones, millennialism may be identified as the strongest bond joining mainstream Protestantism to civil religion and then on to the more diffuse cultural religion of the nation.

The term civil religion is used here as Robert Bellah used it: to refer to a religious system that has existed alongside the churches, with a theology, an ethic, and a set of symbols and rituals related to the political state. But civil religion also means—as a shorthand—religious nationalism.¹¹ Although the term civil religion did not become common usage in this country until 1967, the reality to which it refers is as old as the roots of Western civilization. Both early Israel and ancient Rome had developed forms of civil faith, and both provided models for the American version.

In the Hebrew model, one nation, bound by ties of blood, history, and language, expressed these bonds in combined religious and political language and actions. By contrast, in the Roman model, different peoples, with different ethnic heritages, were brought together from the top down, so to speak, through formal ceremonies and ideals. Because civil religion in the United States has taken something from each of these models, its nature and specific history have proved difficult to chart. Briefly, some of the major symbols of the American civil religion arose out of the Puritan experience, the expression of a people united by ethnic ties and traditions. But the history of civil religion has made it increasingly a bond designed to unite many peoples from many different nations into one.

With this context as background, the creed of civil religion rests on assumptions that the United States is a chosen and millennial nation.

10. Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York, 1970), pp. 255-57.

11. See Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1-19. Bellah considered civil religion to be "well-institutionalized," but I would disagree. In light of the weak institutionalization, "religious nationalism" seems a good description of a phenomenon that waxes and wanes at various moments in American history.

Chosenness may come from God, from nature, or from historical events, while millennialism may mean the coming of the Kingdom of God or a golden age of peace, prosperity, and righteous innocence that Americans create for themselves without requiring God. Chosenness separates Americans from members of other societies in the world. With the transformation of religious symbols, it burdens them with the twin tasks of being an example of democratic equality and fulfilling a mission to bring that democracy to others. Meanwhile, millennialism splits the world into simple alternatives of good and evil and simultaneously encourages optimism and anxiety regarding America's future. Both chosenness and millennialism are religious concepts that, it is hoped, will forge one people out of many people, giving them a history and identity in the American Revolution, interpreted according to Puritan, Enlightenment, and new American themes.

The code of the civil religion is already contained in its creed. Being an example and fulfilling a mission mean that citizens in the chosen nation must engage in public activity. Loyalty and patriotism as inner qualities are not enough. Rather, as in the majority religion of Protestantism, citizens must *work* for the republic. Voting in official elections is a symbolic action to sum up the duty of the citizen. But in the ideal formula of the code, civil religion requires far more. Being American is a moral condition conferring on citizens an ontological status that sets them apart from others.¹² Hence, citizens must be willing to enter public life themselves, and if they are male, the ultimate action that may be required of them is death in defense of the state. Here human sacrifice for religious reasons is demanded in a new form.¹³ In contrast, on the domestic side, the code urges Americans to succeed economically and to blossom technologically so that the millennium will come fully.

However, the code of the civil religion goes beyond statements about how individuals should act in the United States. It is a statement about the political state and how it should behave toward the world, for being an example and having a mission are directives for foreign policy. The rhetoric of Puritanism and the American Revolution already predicted the world power that the United States would become in the present, and from this perspective world leadership is a self-fulfilling prophecy. At the same time, the code has another side. Just as the millennial mission of the Puritans was linked to themes of guilt and repentance, civil religion in contemporary life perpetuates the political jeremiad. In oratory and debate bewailing their country's failings,

12. I am indebted to Charles H. Long for this insight.

13. See Herbert Richardson, "Civil Religion in Theological Perspective," in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York, 1974), p. 174.

Americans continue to experience the tensions of being chosen. Sometimes the guilt leads to stronger statements about being chosen and stronger protests of innocence, as Americans conceal their problems from themselves. This is the case, for example, in conflicts created by racism and continued discrimination against minority groups. Sometimes, too, the guilt becomes a great political upheaval in an attempt at moral purification. This was the case in the Watergate scandal of the seventies.

Finally, in the cult of the civil religion, the necessary conditions for ritual are provided in sacred space and time—national shrines and holy places as well as special holy days like the Fourth of July and Memorial Day. There is a catalogue of national saints in figures like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and, from our own century, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John Fitzgerald Kennedy. There are sacred objects as well, as in the original copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And last, formal ritual practices are associated with sacred space and time, commemorating the founders of the republic and reverencing the articles that also help people to re-member.

Hence, creed, code, and cult together form the visible structure of the civil religion. However, the most serious problem facing this structure in the present is whether or not it can function to create community. It is in the context of this atmosphere that the rise of scholarly interest in civil religion needs to be set. As John Wilson has argued persuasively, for some sociologists, like Robert Bellah, and for some historians, like Sidney Mead, scholarship about civil religion has become an earnest attempt to revitalize the tradition.¹⁴ So in their awareness of the lessening hold of the civil religion, scholars have become theologians and preachers, dedicated to the continuance of the old dreams and visions. Their work is woven of the same thread as the myth of the Revolution, and it seeks to understand the present from the vantage of a mythic world view.¹⁵

But there is something still to say about the community-building substance of their myth. In his memorable article of 1967, Bellah identified the existence of civil religion by studying presidential inaugural addresses to find in them references to God. Yet it is significant that in the excerpts he included from the 1961 inaugural address of President John F. Kennedy there were as many references to history or our

14. John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 169–75. For civil religion scholarship, see Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," and *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York, 1975). See also Sidney Mead's many older essays on the "religion of the Republic," which are collected in Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York, 1975).

15. See Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers*, p. 223.

"forbears" as to God.¹⁶ Later, at the height of the Watergate episode, Richard Nixon continually referred to history as the judge of his deeds. He wanted to make history, and so he taped presidential conversations in the Oval Office to preserve them. His unwillingness to destroy the tapes, his bond with history, in the end brought him down. In America from the beginning, making history has been identified closely with politics, and making history has usually been associated with the search for striking and sensational events that characterizes millennial expectation. It is as if Americans must see the extreme case to see at all. Thus, the sense of high and dramatic destiny achieved through the political order gives many Americans a sense of clear direction in the ordinary world. News accounts revolve around the (often crisis-ridden) doings of the president and the Congress, while every four years the country passes through a season of revival as the presidential election campaign is waged. Rooted in the Puritan and revolutionary past, civil religion urges Americans toward a millennial future, with the fervor of the anticipated millennium—the bond of right feeling—as the bond of community.

Still, the vision of the millennium civil religion proposes is often clouded, and for many the vision is far from persuasive. For those who are red or black or recent immigrants, the ideological ties of civil religion with a Protestant Anglo-Saxon heritage blunt much of the millennial force. Civil religion can give Americans a creed, a code, and a cult, but it cannot, except in the final and ultimately passionate crisis of war, transform them into one community. Caught between the past and the future, civil religion, with its dream of millennial chosenness, cannot awaken to the manyness of the present. It has only the violent formula of final crisis for the community that needs to be created now.

At this juncture, it should be clear that civil religion is a religious system with weak institutionalization at best. Hence, it is the first example of a diffuse and part-time religion that is still a religion. Without strong institutionalization and, although often allied to evangelical themes, without an absolute need for the language of the supernatural, civil religion lives on in attenuated, but recognizable, form. It seems a rather natural and even noncontroversial move to extend this explanatory paradigm to other aspects of American culture. Besides civil religion, there are other means by which people order their lives and search for meaning within the everyday world. Beyond civil religion, too, there are other ways that people reach moments of transcendence, using ordinary culture as a window into an "other" world. A mental

16. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," pp. 1–2.

construct to describe their thought and activity is the term cultural religion.

Civil religion already provides a good introduction to cultural religion in the American ritual calendar. All of us are aware of special times in the annual calendar like the Fourth of July, Presidents' Day, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and Thanksgiving. But there are other special days as well. Encircling the year are a series of times that bring people together as part of American culture—Christmas, New Year's, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Labor Day, to name a few. It is worth pausing to reflect on the cumulative meaning of this annual cycle. Five holidays belong to the calendar of the civil religion, and of these, four—the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and Presidents' Day—are associated with apocalyptic millennial themes that recall catastrophic wars and sacrificial deeds on behalf of country. A fifth holiday of the civil religion, Thanksgiving, is millennial as well, but here the golden age of peace and plenty rather than the final battle is celebrated, usually in a family setting.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are the holidays in which family or domestic themes are highlighted. Christmas belongs to children who receive the gifts and goodwill of neighbors, family, or Santa Claus. Adults, when they participate in the feast, renew personal bonds with one another through parties or family reunions. Similarly, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and Father's Day show regard for a special person within the context of a close relationship. What these occasions have in common is that they pay respect to innocence. There is the natural innocence of children on Christmas and the virtuous innocence of family or friendship on all of the feasts. Coming as they do to interrupt the economic cycle of the marketplace, the sanctity of their domestic themes is only underlined.

Labor Day strikes a middle position between the public and private spheres, for it honors each American's personal contribution to the golden age of equality through the public activity of productive work. At the same time, it recalls Puritan and Calvinist virtues of industry, hard work, and efficiency. In the same way as Thanksgiving, it weaves private and domestic themes into the millennial cloth. Finally, New Year's Eve combines millennialism with innocence in its anticipation of the dawning of a new era when the mistakes and misfortunes of the past will be erased. With its destruction of old forms, New Year's Eve envisions the world born anew.

In sum, the liturgical cycle of ordinary American culture tells us that millennialism is as important there as in the dominant Protestantism and, as the cycle itself partially reflects, in the civil religion. Furthermore, the cycle shows us that millennialism and innocence are

closely related. Apocalyptic conquest and destruction are not so far as we may think from the innocence of babies and of family reunions. Neither the millennial soldier nor the innocent American can be comfortable with the ambiguities of a world not black or white, but muddled shades of gray.

Such thoughts concerning the American ritual calendar lead to a consideration of the basic beliefs—the creed, if you will—of cultural religion. Even a superficial survey of elements of our culture suggests the power of culture in shaping the mental worlds of Americans. At the same time, even the most superficial survey suggests how complex and many-sided is the message that is delivered. All that can be done here is to suggest one important avenue for analysis and one important theme.

Consider, therefore, the case of television and film dramas. They are important because they work much as the sacred stories fundamental to different religious traditions. Like these sacred stories, they establish a world that makes sense and reassures Americans about their place in the scheme of things. Moreover, although this fiction comes in a variety of styles, considerable evidence shows that one favorite plot, with variations, dominates in a number of dramas. This plot organizes a great many stories, and further, it is the skeleton of many of the all-time successes in living room and at box office. Not surprisingly, the preferred plot is related to the religious background of American culture and, in fact, is a transformed version of it.

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have argued that typically the plot turns on a wholesome and innocent society invaded from outside by some overwhelming evil.¹⁷ Members of the society are caught off guard and unable to defend themselves because of circumstances. But just in the nick of time, a powerful stranger, also from outside, comes to save them. His past and his background are noble but unclear, and he seems to want nothing, not even sexual favors, from members of the community. Once he has conquered the forces of evil through acts of sudden and righteous violence, he leaves the people in the redeemed society to continue their peaceful lives as before. Superman, the Lone Ranger, and with a change of gender, Wonder Woman, all conform to this basic plot outline. So, too, do such science fiction successes as the former television series "Star Trek" and the film *Star Wars*; and with some variations, the well-remembered *Jaws* fits the pattern.

One reason for the massive popular appeal of these dramas and many like them is that they tap a fundamental understanding of them-

17. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, 1977).

selves and their world held by mainstream Americans. For in the drama there are visible still the themes of millennial dominance and righteous innocence of public Protestantism and civil religion. The saving stranger, though disguised by the trappings of role and character, is the messiah of the final battle, the Word riding forth at the head of his troops for Armageddon. Hence, the violent destruction of evil in the plot is religious and right. As the stranger fades into the distance, a millennium of peace and justice can reign in the redeemed community.

With ritual and belief systems working together, there are codes for living to express and reinforce them in American culture. As in the cases of cult and myth, the codes are many, and they are complex. Therefore, we glance briefly at only two, each of which expresses one version of the millennial theme. In organized sports we have a paradigm for a code of conduct which expresses the motifs of the millennial battle. By contrast, in the ideology of nature we have a behavioral norm which celebrates the innocence of paradise in the millennial kingdom.

What distinguishes organized sports from other physical activities, such as fishing and solitary running, is that they are contests with a winner and a loser. Historically, games of sport originated in religious rituals, and structurally, since they are forms of play, sports activities resemble rituals, as Johan Huizinga has shown.¹⁸ But more important here, our public games have given people a code of conduct for everyday living. If the ball field is a miniature rehearsal for the game of life, it tells that life is a struggle between contesting forces in which there is a winning and a losing side. Significantly, the division into two teams who battle each other in the game resembles the dualistic scheme of the millennial battle. Like that ultimate war, it is clear that there is a team that is good (our side) and another that is bad (the opposing team). Coaches urge the members of their team to pour all their efforts into winning—as if this were the last game they will play on earth. Each team, in its own understanding, is on the side of righteousness, and so each team stands on its innocence. Preparatory exercises in self-denial and self-purification by team members—diet, calisthenics, sleep requirements—are evidence. While sports contests are surely an important feature on the cultural landscape of most westernized nations, and even more widely, of most human societies, we need to look at how they function in an American context. It is the web of interrelated cultural forms, rather than any one element in isolation, that tells the persuasive tale. Hence, the code that the games offer to Americans is one that subtly agrees with themes of millennial dominance and inno-

18. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, 1955), pp. 7-27.

cence. Here, though, without waiting for a messianic stranger people assume the protagonist's role themselves. Therefore, the sports code can foster success in business, industry, or government.

However, throughout American history, a countertheme has challenged this vision of millennial achievement with its own version of the golden age; and in contemporary America, the code of identification with nature continues to be an impulse in the national life. Sierra Club, Boy Scouts—joined by Girl Scouts and Campfire Girls—Tarzan, Davy Crockett, and other nature heroes are solidly established on the American scene. Meanwhile, under the banner of ecology, the code has gained renewed strength and support. It is a story that is so familiar to all of us that it hardly bears repeating. Nature has become a central symbol by which Americans orient themselves, manifested in everything from natural cereals to the use of earth tones for room decoration and yoga and jogging for health. National parks overflow with visitors, and a homestead movement continues to thrive. Periodicals such as the highly successful *Mother Earth News* both express and reinforce the preferred code of conduct for nature lovers.

Although identification or harmony with nature seems a far cry from the competitive ethic of the sports code, it represents the other side of the millennium—its innocence in a paradisaical age. The refusal to face history is itself a function of American religious history: final conquest and final purity alike avoid the middle space of ambiguity, preferring instead the simple alternatives of black and white. A subtle violence underlies the commitments of the lovers of the wilderness, as the protest movements of some ecological activists tell us. Just as the American ritual calendar celebrates both militant and sentimental holidays, so the behavioral code of mainstream America includes the double face of the millennial dream.

In sum, cultural religion in contemporary America has shown itself to be continuous with public Protestantism and civil religion. Moreover, the case can be made that the ordinary religion of culture takes its power from the extraordinary religious symbols that it has transformed. In other words, although millennial dominance and innocence have become ways to live within the boundaries of American culture, cultural religion comes trailing clouds of glory from its ancestry in the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is a strange carry-over of transcendence and ultimacy in the myths and rituals that compel modern Americans.

Even more, this carry-over is the source of a power and energy that may be terribly dangerous as well as beneficent. To put it bluntly, like anything else, religion may be dangerous to individual and collective good health. One of the roles of the organized religions historically has

been to protect human beings *from* the sacred. By hedging in the mysteries with formal and ritual restraints, by providing a class of specialists to handle them, religions satisfactorily procured the power of the sacred for their adherents while at the same time avoiding its destructive violence. For as René Girard has told us, violence and the sacred are very closely intertwined.¹⁹

In this context, concealed and unrecognized religion may be doubly dangerous. If "invisible religion" does hold sway in contemporary America, unidentified it is also uncontrolled.²⁰ It can run rampant and rouse hearts and minds without the formal restraints of a self-conscious and self-critical tradition. In short, the unacknowledged religion of the millennium can sound the trumpet and light the inner fire that leads us to the Armageddon of World War III. Ironically, if cultural religion fails to urge us to this pass, it will probably be because in the end it has not made of Americans an authentic community. Like civil religion, it is the (mostly) ordinary religion of many Americans some of the time. Still, the power of violence to *create* community is something that American wartime behavior has in most cases taught, and finally the absence of genuine community may itself create the need for Armageddon.

Whether or not Armageddon finally happens in this Jerusalem, it is clear that, in the terms used here, the center still holds and that it is religious. If we predicate that the dominant and public center is meaningful for many of the people at least some of the time, and if we broaden our understanding of religion while at the same time making distinctions between types of religion, then religion is central to our people and our time. What kind of religion is it that lives at the center? In important measure, it is millennialism. Sometimes it has been the dominating millennialism which takes its cue from visions of the final battle when good will triumph over evil. Other times it has been the innocent millennialism which seeks to make utopia in the uncorrupted landscape of the United States. The instincts of public Protestantism are at home here. Moralism, the search for simplicity, and the activism of doers and achievers are part of the millennial theme. Significantly though, individualism is merged in the compelling presence of a stirring mutual task. In millennialism, the loneliness of the long distance runner is overcome. Voluntarism is encouraged, but in a land of different peoples and different traditions, the only possible way to be alike is to

19. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, 1977), pp. 6-26.

20. For the definitive study of "invisible religion," see Luckmann, *Invisible Religion*. Here I am stressing a kind of "community" of invisibility, while Luckmann emphasizes the private and individualistic character of his "invisible" religion.

feel alike. So the millennial community is a community of righteous and, beneath the surface, violent feeling. Finally, the instincts of the civil religion have their deepest rootage in the millennial theme. The righteous nation finds its identity in exemplary and missionary action, bringing on the dawn of the millennial day either under God or without him, depending on the form of symbolization that is evoked.

The role of the one religion in America is to try to create a religious nation—to blur the social and ideological boundaries between separate groups who constitute the many. In so doing, it has also blurred the boundaries between ordinary and extraordinary religion, using the Judeo-Christian past and transforming it for its purposes. Perhaps the single most observable feature of the one religion is its alliance with the principle of *undifferentiation*. And while secularization is one description of the evolution of the one religion, in the present discussion it is not so useful as others. We need a language to be able to name the power of the irrational; we need, in short, a rhetoric of religion.

There was once, supposedly, a conversation between Carlos Castaneda, the well-known apprentice in sorcery, and his Yaqui Indian guide, Don Juan. As recorded by Castaneda, Don Juan insisted that "the world of everyday life is not real, or out there, as we believe it is. For a sorcerer, reality, or the world we all know, is only a description."²¹ In dealing with the dominant and public center, we need to become, like Don Juan, sorcerers. Seeing and naming a different reality may bring critical awareness. It may help us to tame the strange and irrational energy at the heart of the familiar.

21. Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan* (New York, 1972), p. 8.