

America's Holy War: FDR, Civil Religion, and the Prelude to War

By:
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American presidents from George Washington to the present have incorporated religious rhetoric into their speeches and over the years the use of such language has come to be termed “civil religion.” Sociologist Robert Bellah defines American civil religion as a “genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or... as revealed through, the experience of the American people” (12). Bellah argues that civil religion is a set of “secret beliefs” shared by the American populace that shapes the way in which the nation is perceived by its citizens (8). However, these beliefs are defined outside any denominational hierarchy and therefore Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder describe civil religion as an alliance between religion and politics at the national level outside of any institutional religious basis (25). Similarly, Charles P. Henderson, Jr. argues that Bellah’s definition of civil religion is a comingling of nationalistic and biblical ideas where saints are represented by national heroes; rites and rituals are national holidays, and presidents symbolize priests and prophets (474). Because of this idea of shared beliefs, civil religion has been used as a means to bring the citizenry of the United States into a more cohesive group, especially in times of crisis. The rise of the Nazi party in Germany and the impending war in Europe were one of those times.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) stood as a main proponent of the war and he relied on the use of civil religion as a means to garner support from the religious community for the United States’ entrance in the conflict. Roosevelt was not the first or the last president to incorporate civil religion into his speeches and the American populace, in general, readily

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accepts the practice. Often in his Fireside Chats or speeches to the houses of Congress, FDR argued for the entrance of America into the war by using both blatant and subtle religious rhetoric. Roosevelt portrayed the conflict in the light of good versus evil, the religious against the irreligious. In doing so, he pitted the Christian ideals of democracy against the atheism of National Socialism. In his view, competing theologies were not the enemy of religion, but the real conflict existed between belief and non-belief (Smith, Faith 194). The president continued the use of religious rhetoric throughout the war, framing the conflict in morals rather than through a political stance.

Roosevelt had a deep connection with religion throughout his life. Christened at St. James Episcopal Church in Hyde Park, New York, the future president held close relationships with ministers and other religious individuals. In 1928, FDR became a vestryman and later the senior warden at St. James, the highest rank that a layman can hold. He continued to have a strong association with church life, becoming a trustee of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. His history with the Episcopal Church led to an easy transition to the use of civil religion once he became president. Roosevelt became so adept at using religious rhetoric that Ronald Isetti argued that the leader “employed biblical symbols, religious language, and moral injunctions...more often” than most other presidents (678). Likewise, James MacGregor Burns characterized the president as a preacher, describing many of Roosevelt’s speeches as “sermons” rather than policy pronouncements (476).

Though the president rarely attended church services while in office, FDR’s religious devotion was never in question. Both his wife, Eleanor and his son James attested to the deep religious connection that Roosevelt held (Smith, Faith 193). The religious periodical,

Presbyterian Banner, as well as the editors of Christian Century considered FDR to be a devout man; with the latter describing the president as “spiritually sound” and labeling him a “religious leader” (“A Year of Roosevelt” 311). George Q. Flynn reiterated this view by stating Roosevelt set himself as the “moral leader” of the nation by framing the war in the “spiritual dimension” (191). The sentiments of Flynn and Christian Century echo Bellah’s argument of a president-priest connection in American civil religion.

The staging of a “spiritual” slant to the conflict began in 1939 when Roosevelt started propagating the idea of America’s Christian destiny in the world. In his State of the Union Address of that year, FDR stated that “God-fearing democracies” had to come to the defense of “religion, of democracy, and of good faith” (Pierard and Linder 178). Roosevelt set the stage for the Manichean idea of a coming struggle between good and evil, portraying the United States as the morally just defender of faith. With the country firmly placed in the hands of God, FDR saw “no end save victory” (Parker 168). To fit the mold of evil, the president described nations that attempted to regulate democracy and religion as agents against the “ideals of the Prince of Peace” (Pierard and Linder 177). Given that Roosevelt delivered these words after the signing of the Munich Agreement, it is clear that the president’s words referred to Germany.

As German aggression worsened, Roosevelt’s calls for the nation to take up its “noble duty” also increased (Buhite and Levy 162). America had a responsibility, according to the president, to protect religion from the Nazi invasion. In his Fireside Speech on 27 May 1941, FDR proclaimed the Nazi party did not “recognize any God except Hitler” and a German victory meant the end to the right to worship (Buhite and Levy 178). Roosevelt continued this thought later that same year in a more dramatic presentation in his Navy Day radio speech. FDR cited a

Nazi plan which called for an attempt “to abolish all existing religions,” seize all church property, and liquidate the clergy in an effort to organize an “International Nazi Church.” The president also stated that the German regime wanted to replace the cross with the swastika and the Bible with Hitler’s Mein Kampf (Pierard and Linder 179). The editors of Christian Century, who only a few years earlier praised Roosevelt’s faith, derided the president for his use of an attack on religion as a basis to promote war (“To Your Battle Stations” 1360-1362). Although the document used as the foundation for this alleged plan later proved to be a British forgery, FDR understood the intentions of Hitler and his allies much better than those who criticized this belief (Smith, “Religion” 202).

In contrast to his condemnation of Germany’s attitude toward religion, Roosevelt argued that America could persuade the Soviet Union, though understood to be atheistic, to accept the idea of freedom of religion than Nazi Germany. With a majority of Catholics adamantly opposed to Communism, the president petitioned Pope Pius XII to declare the necessity of aid to Russia. Though Roosevelt never fully accepted the idea of religious freedom taking hold in the Soviet Union, he felt the need to promote the impression among American Catholics of a religiously tolerant Russia. Public opinion at the time favored the United States’ support of the communist nation as a means to facilitate a timelier end to the war, thus Roosevelt’s attempt to court the Catholic community was unnecessary (Dallek 296-297). Therefore, FDR’s efforts to garner the support of Catholics can be construed as an attempt to once again frame the war in religious terms rather than as an argument made out of political necessity.

Opponents of FDR argued that his use of religiously based speech led the nation toward a “holy war” fought “against the ungodly Axis tyranny” (Pierard and Linder 163). Roosevelt’s

call for a “holy war” garnered the ire of Senator Jeanette Rankin. An avid participant in various peace movements throughout her life, Rankin stood as the sole dissenting vote in the Senate at the time of America’s entrance into the war. Rankin, known as a person who “ridiculed all religion,” framed her arguments for peace by economic and social concerns rather than on theological constraints (Wilson 46). However, her views on religion led her to write “Beware of Holy Wars” for the periodical World Outlook. The article stood as an indictment of Roosevelt and what Rankin viewed as his attempt to incite a “holy war... by arousing fear of invasion” (Rankin 26). She did not limit her pacifist stance to arguments against a holy war, yet her criticism of Roosevelt and his promotion of America’s participation in the European conflict was one of the few times that she mentioned religion.

Though Roosevelt attempted to sell the impending war as a religious battle, the attack on Pearl Harbor ultimately thrust the country into the conflict and the use of religious rhetoric did not sway many to his cause. As the country prepared for war, religious leaders remained divided in their support for the president and his handling of the situation, with some leaders calling for intervention while others remained pacifists. However, Roosevelt did not only use religious language to merely promote the war, but rather it played an important role in his life, as evidenced in his church service and personal life. FDR’s continued use of religious rhetoric set the stage for a more pronounced implementation of civil religion in the modern presidency. Though enemies have changed from conflict to conflict, presidents from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush have all followed Roosevelt’s example of framing war in a religious context.

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