[IR 14.1 (2011) 115–118]
doi:10.1558/imre.v14i1.115
Implicit Religion (print) ISSN 1463-9955
Implicit Religion (online) ISSN 1743-1697

Book Reviews

Myths America Lives By, by Richard T. Hughes. Foreword by Robert N. Bellah. University of Illinois Press, 2004. 224 pp., Pb. $19.95. ISBN-13: 9780252072208.

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Keywords
civil religion, foundational myths

Civil religion, civic religion, public theologies—all are terms used to describe a powerful form of implicit religion that often becomes quite explicit. Although the concept of civil religion owes its origins to Rousseau, Robert Bellah is primarily responsible for sparking more recent interest in the term with his 1968 article, "Civil Religion in America," and his later book, *The Broken Covenant*. Bellah's work sparked considerable discussion and debate. Is there an American civil religion? If so, what is it, and how widely are its beliefs held by the American public? Several surveys revealed that civil religious beliefs are widely held by Americans, though they would not necessarily recognize the term "civil religion." James Davidson Hunter argued that two forms of civil religious beliefs—he preferred the term "public theologies"—exist: a conservative or orthodox version, and a liberal or progressive version, which define the opposing positions of the "culture wars" that have divided American society in recent years. These divisions became especially sharp and acrimonious after the events of September 11, 2001, and during the presidency of George W. Bush. Bush's claims of an "axis of evil" and his "missionary" crusade to spread American democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan have fuelled fresh debate between the conservative and progressive versions of America's civil religious beliefs. This is where Richard Hughes' book is especially pertinent and helpful, even if its focus is much broader than the more immediate debates of recent years.

The book is an effort to explicate the various ways that American civil religion has been expressed at different times in the nation's history;

though, save for his acknowledgment of Bellah's influence, Hughes rarely uses the term. Instead, his approach is narrative, focusing on five foundational myths and their offshoots that have helped to order, for good and for ill, the American experience both domestically and in foreign affairs. Each of the five myths functions at an unconscious level for most Americans, remaining mostly invisible or implicit, except for national holidays, in political speeches, or in times of national crisis. Hughes not only traces the origin and uses of the myths, he is also concerned to show how they have been perceived by those who have been marginalized and oppressed by them—for example, African Americans, Native Americans, women, the working class, and the poor. In attending to the myths' negative consequences, Hughes draws on Reinhold Niebuhr's ironic view that human evil has regularly subverted the potential for good in American history. The myths are virtues that have often been turned into vices.

Although the author's primary concern is with the five myths, he locates (and judges) them in relation to what he calls the "American creed": the assertion in the Declaration of Independence that "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." In spite of the ways in which the myths have often obscured rather than sustained its promise, this creed, Hughes maintains, stands as a "compelling vision" and "a constant beacon of hope", especially for the poor, marginalized and oppressed.

What then are the five myths? First, prominent during the colonial period, is the "Myth of the Chosen People." While its original emphasis was on being chosen by God to serve the good of the neighbour, it has become a basis for belief in American exceptionalism, that God has chosen America for a special mission in the world Second, given expression during the revolutionary period by America's founding fathers, is the "Myth of Nature's Nation," with its emphasis, drawn from Enlightenment Deism, on the rights of humankind grounded in "Nature" and "Nature's God." This was followed, especially during the Second Great Awakening, by the "Myth of the Christian Nation," a nation that is called to embrace the teachings of Jesus as interpreted primarily by Protestant Christians; though it later was somewhat grudgingly broadened to include Jews and Catholics in the tripartite synthesis described by Will Herberg. The fourth myth, prominent during the early national period, is the "Myth of the Millennial Nation," in which America would usher in a new golden age of freedom that would bless all people. Finally, during the twentieth century,

there is the "Myth of the Innocent Nation": America is standing for good over evil, right versus wrong, virtue over vice, democracy versus godless Communism. Unlike the first four myths, the latter, Hughes maintains, has no redeeming virtues. It is grounded in self-delusion.

The five myths are variously interconnected and these interconnections have influenced how they have been expressed at different times. They have also given rise to such offshoots as the belief in Manifest Destiny and mythic aspects of American capitalism, both of which are based on absolutized and corrupted versions of the other myths. Manifest Destiny, for example (the belief that God has chosen America to work His will, using force where necessary) was especially prominent in America's westward expansion and led to the virtual extermination of Native Americans, who, as non-Europeans, were considered "unnatural" savages. American Capitalism, whose mythic dimensions flowered during the Gilded Age (late nineteenth and twentieth century), also drew legitimacy from the other myths: for example, belief that the search for material wealth is both "natural" (grounded in Nature's law) and an expression of the Christian gospel.

The author explores in some detail each of the five foundational myths and the two offshoots, tracing their origins and showing how each has been expressed in American history, sometimes explicitly by religious figures and movements, and more often as implicit religion in justifications of government policies or individual behaviour. As noted, he concludes the discussion of each myth with the voices of those who have been marginalized and oppressed when the myths have been absolutized and corrupted.

How to assess the book? While the book doesn't break new ground—others have also examined the myths and their offshoots, often in greater depth—one of the book's virtues is bringing the several myths together in a single place and showing not only their origins, but their interrelations and corruptions. Doing so sheds new light on the myths and especially on various periods, events, leaders, and movements in American history. The myths have a history that has at times been admirable, but more often than not has been shameful. The latter is made clear by Hughes' use of voices from the margins. Although his intent in using these voices was not to provide exhaustive critiques of the perversion of the myths, at times they seem rather eclectic and somewhat superficially treated, needing more in-depth analysis and discussion. They do, however, make quite clear the ironic view of the myths, their functioning somewhat like the chorus in ancient Greek tragedies. Also, functioning as what he calls the American Creed, but that is simply posited as of being great importance, rather than

discussed at any length. While he treats the creed and the relation of the myths to it as highly significant—correctly so, I believe—it would have added to his argument had he said more about its importance and appeal.

As noted, the book was published during the end of the second Bush administration. It is easy to see ways in which the administration and its supporters, especially on the religious right, drew on and used these myths in response to 9/11, in justifying the Iraq War in terms of the spread of democracy, and in defining the so-called "axis of evil." We can also see how the mythic dimensions of American capitalism are taking root in developing nations, especially as a result of the globalization of American industry. Now, in the first years of the Obama administration, we also see the continuing use of several of the myths, though clearly in a more Niebuhrian and less Manichean way than was true in the Bush years. Indeed one can possibly interpret Obama's Nobel Peace Prize as the award committee's hope that he embodies the virtues of the myths and the promise of what Hughes calls the American creed.

One of my former teachers called technology a universal solvent, breaking down traditional social orders and their cultures and driving modernization across the globe. Hughes' book leads me to wonder whether the Creed (and the myths that support it) is not a similar solvent, the basis for an implicit global religion, as the Nobel committee appears to believe; or will the myths be corrupted into a justification for domination and exploitation, as has too frequently happened in the past?