



George F. Simons

Most would agree whatever their position politically, that 2003 has been “one helluva’ year.” We have commented in this column for almost a year now about the violent roots or “Bellicose Veins” of US culture and the implications and costs to us all, but particularly to our self-concept as US men trying to make the best of this world with gentleness instead of aggression.

Now we enter the New Year. For some reason the simple number on a calendar is an opportunity for renewal, hope and reversal of fortune. Please accept my best wishes for you and for your part of the world wherever and whenever you celebrate New Year. I resolve in the coming year to do my best to explore these issues of male self-awareness in US society and culture with you.

Recently friends have been sending me posts about the debate over the name of “God” in the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. I would like to throw some perspective on this question.

Though they and their descendents make up only a small part of the population the largely British founding generations of the nation have succeeded in leaving their values in the structure of the nation as well as in its culture. Thus, the country today belongs culturally in a special way to Protestant Christianity, despite the fact that in ensuing years Catholics became and remained the largest single denomination and that the population has been and is composed of all kinds of believers and non-believers as well.

However, it is not an actual discernable Protestant sect that dominates the US and its culture as a body. Rather, it is the nation itself that functions as a kind of religion, reconstituted daily by acts of faith such as the pledge of allegiance and other forms of reverence for the flag, and other sacred symbols (at a level of intensity, by the way not found in many other countries). This makes the US a theocracy of sorts, with its current high priest endlessly chanting, “God bless America,” as he preaches a God-given national purpose to reform the world.

History shows that religiously the country’s mood has swung between liberal Protestantism (sometimes even deism, but rarely in a leading role) and Calvinistic fundamentalism. This Calvinistic form tends to get glued to the driver's seat in the “Great Awakenings” and in times of stress as we seem to be undergoing right now—when there is a sense of insecurity and a need for control.

The doctrine of “Separation of Church and State” is a cornerstone of US liberty but its actual implementation has had some strange effects. It serves to hinder the political interference of religious denominations, on one hand, but it also discourages religious dialogue and involvement of values in the public dialog, on the other. So more and more today, the separation doctrine seems to be used as a smoke screen behind which the increasingly fundamentalist civil religion is given free reign while its critics are silenced. How many holiday

cards did you get this year in which, if Jesus was not pictured with the flag, then Santa's sleigh was flying the Stars and Stripes as if it were a military vehicle?

Paradoxically, US Americans, Catholics, Muslims, Jews and others embrace this separation as a way of life, though it chafes from time to time. This is because an essential part of the immigrant assimilation process is coming to "believe in America." Religion is a private matter in the USA, but belief in America a public imperative. Check out the process of taking the oath of citizenship, oaths of office, and US (sole religion) passport policies over the years, if you find what I say hard to believe. These are not simply bureaucratic public acts as one would expect in a secular society, but they are constructed very much sacred acts of faith and rituals and sacraments of civil belonging that exclude all other allegiances. Since there is no state religion, we have had to create one to fill the void and there is no question as to where its denominational roots come from.

Making and keeping this Calvinistic God explicitly visible and audible in acts of state and as the foundation of US cultural values is an important part of keeping US civil religion dominant. The mention of God seems essential, at least now more than usual, for political success, so you hear it coming from the mouths of most potential candidates, even if they are not Protestant. So to be and act "American" you need to have these values or at least seem to, whatever your religion of origin or lack of it—hence the many current efforts to keep or "put God back" into our public acts like the Pledge of Allegiance. Many USians need somehow to feel that God is on their side, which makes it difficult to closely scrutinize just what we may be doing in national and commercial policy that may be fueling if not causing some of the problems we purport to be fixing. There is a strange but logical flow. If God is on our side, and God doesn't make mistakes, then, neither do we. This easily becomes permission for violence of one sort or another.

Unfortunately, there are not many religious voices currently being raised to call this renegade religion into question. Certainly not from the churches or church leadership. Due to the well advertised clergy sex abuse scandals, Catholics, who in the past could contest some issues by their sheer numbers and solidarity, have no credible voice left. Given the puritan nature of the US civil religion, sexual issues are far more disqualifying than other problems (e.g., tricky accounting). To compare, in Italy a politician cavorting with bimbos half his age or a Ciccolina running for office is easily tolerated, and is even seen by quite a few people as a sign of vitality and energy. When in Rome do as the Romans do, but watch out in Washington... where Ashcroft is covering the tits of justice. Protestant liberals, as well, seem to have dwindling support.

Before I sound too much like a spoiler, it is important to say that there are attractive sides to many of the values in the civil religion. They are certain freedoms that virtually all of us love and are often what brings people to the USA and what they like when they get here. Many new USians tend to go to the right precisely because the right has no hesitation about touting them. That was true of immigrants and their children in my parents generation and is witnessed to now by the numbers, e.g., of Latino rightist groups, etc. Certainties are easier to live with than is questioning.

So, there is less skepticism and fewer raised voices, particularly now, about patriotism, politicians, and power, just when we need to keep these dominant values from getting distorted and out of control. This self-reinforcement of values, particularly under stress will tend to happen in any culture. Fortunately, the US has had the ability to right itself after tipping into

various forms of excess in the past, e.g., Know-Nothings¹ in the middle of the 19th century, McCarthyism in the middle of the 20th. However, bouncing back is not a given, but something to be worked hard at—and the power of the current regime and the lack of effective protest and alternatives gives me pause... History shows that the route to totalitarianism has gone this way before, and it is perhaps what the world fears most about the USA right now.

Such groups as the ACLU (often branded as "Jews, liberals and atheists" though many Protestants, Catholics and others are there as well) have struggled for years to keep the civil religion from abusing its position above and beyond the separation of church and state, in the name of full individual freedom. Their activity is necessary not only for the individual liberties it defends, but for reminding us in some way to be wary of encroachments on freedom in the name of protecting freedom. Such actions seem at times to put only band aids on the occasional open sore, when we need to address the essential cultural condition of the body politic. Our insistence on pluralism, however, is the best key to the use of our US values, both those from the civil religion and those we bring from our differing backgrounds.

So for the New Year, a good resolution for might be: I will listen, think, speak and make myself and your diversity heard, despite the pressures to conform to a single view of who I am, what I "should" believe, and what we "should" be doing as a people.

¹ The Know-Nothing party was an anti-immigrant, anti-Roman Catholic political party in the 1850's that arose from fear about the Democratic tendencies of Irish and German immigrants. While it called itself the American party, it's members were known as "know-nothings" because they would say "I know nothing" when questioned about their exclusive nativist and Protestant policies.