

States Construct Collective Beliefs Similar to Religion: Mechanisms and Methods

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Abstract. In the modern world, as traditional religions lose their unifying power, many states have sought alternative ways to create shared values and collective identity. This paper examines how modern states construct collective belief systems which are religious in their character through symbols, ceremonies, and ideological narrative. Using the works of Robert Bellah, Emilio Gentile, and Clifford Geertz, it examines how secular governments have created civil religions to legitimize their authority and increase social cohesion. This is demonstrated through a comparative essay concerned with the political systems of the United States, Russia, and North Korea and how religious symbols and rites are used in their political systems to create loyalty, meaning and moral order. The United States uses voluntary rituals of civic significance which have their sources in the democratic idea. Russia fuses Orthodox Christianity with nationalism which forms a sort of hybrid state faith. North Korea converts ideology into an all encompassing religion which argues for absolute devotion to its leaders. The similarities in these methods reflect how both democratic and authoritarian regimes sacralize political life in order to acquire legitimacy and emotional cohesion.

Keywords: Civil religion, Political symbolism, Legitimacy, Nationalism, Ideology

1. Introduction

Religion has historically provided a moral order, psychic tranquillity, and a common identity to society. The temples, rituals, and sacred books not only connected individuals with the divine sphere, but oh, so also condition them into integral communities which possessed a moral code and common objectives. However, as modernity advanced and secularism became a characteristic of numberless states, the public power of religion decreased. But while modernity seemed to decrease the function of religion numberless political systems developed alternative means of serving the same social and moral purposes. These means under lay the new nationalisms, ideologies and symbols.

This fact suggests the main question of this paper: in what manner do political systems create a collective belief that functions as religion? In other words, if conventional faith no longer unites the modern citizen, what symbolical and ritualistic structure has taken its place to be responsible for the fears that national identity and moral authority in a measure produce? Political ceremonies, national myths, and symbolical stories operate very much as religious ceremonies. They give sanctity to the

nation itself, unify heterogeneous populations together, and justify political power itself by placing it on a moral basis. Citizens are not merely ruled, they are converted into a part of the faith of the trinity of the state. Robert Bellah [1] called this phenomenon “Civil Religion”, a non-secular but sacred type of public life which enables nations like the United States to re-inforce collectively values like justice and liberty. Emilio Gentile [2] similarly observed this in the phrase political religion, in which political ideologies themselves become objects of worship through sacralization of authority and the creation of sacred myths. Clifford Geertz [3] approaches from another direction the same essentials in his noted essay religion as a “cultus”, in that the symbols, religious and political, are the basis of meaning and identity and who provides models for society that present how it wishes to explain reality and human moral purpose. The present paper compares three different political systems—the democratic United States, the post-Soviet Russia, and the totalitarian North Korea in order to study in what manner it presents the varied uses of collective belief through practices which are given attributes that are sacred. The investigation presents a spectrum extending from the voluntary moral unity of the civil religion of democracy, on the one hand to the compulsive ideological faith of the political religion of the other. From the theoretical observations of Bellah, Gentile, and Geertz each of these political systems will be summed up in such a manner as to afford an understanding of the sacred aspect still existent in modern governmental systems even in an age that itself calls secularism.

2. Related literature

2.1. Civil religion and moral legitimacy

Bellah’s [1] notion of civil religion offers an important framework for analyzing how nations attempt to create moral legitimacy out of their own basic symbols, rituals, and myths. According to Bellah, even the secular state possesses a “religious dimension” which serves this purpose, and which is articulated through national ceremonies, political speeches, and common devotion to founding persons and documents. These elements are a symbolic moral order transcending the beliefs of individuals, which gives a sense of unity and common fate.

In the United States the presidential inaugurations, the Pledge of Allegiance, and such national holidays as Independence Day are examples of rituals derived from civil religion which help to renew the faith of Americans in the democratic process and divine providence.

The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence function as “holy Scriptures” legitimizing the nation’s political authority. Bellah believes this moral foundation will help to insure the state’s general legitimacy, especially in times of crises, if possible by representing the major values of the society (liberty, justice, equality) as almost divine principles [1]. The framework reveals how political institutions may promote the cause of social cohesion in pluralistic societies by appealing to symbolic moral narratives.

2.2. Politics as religion

Whereas Bellah’s [1] views stress the moral aspect of civil religion as a unifying agent, Gentile’s [2] analysis has to do with the much more radical transformation of civil religion into its extreme form, the sacralization of politics. Gentile [2] argues that modern political ideologies, especially when expressing themselves through totalitarian regimes, turn out to be a substitute for the traditional religion. Mass propaganda, ritual events and mythologizations of leadership position the ideology at

the sacred level. People are witnessing not devotion to God, but to the state, the party, or the leader whose authority is considered unquestionable and absolute.

This “political religion” can be seen most clearly in a state of fascist Italy under the reign of Mussolini and Soviet Russia under communist rule of Stalin. The public parades, monuments, and the programs of education ideologically directed were all intended to change political loyalty into spiritual commitment. With a view of this formula, contemporary North Korea succeeds in directing attention to the Kim family in divine representations, and that the population participates in special ceremonials of reverence to them [4]. Thus, Gentile’s outlook provides the perspective on what political authorities may do to the instinctive, emotional, and spiritual requirements of the ordinary people for the purpose of augmenting their totalitarian hold upon them [2].

2.3. Symbolic systems and collective meaning

According to Geertz’s [3] symbolic theory of religion, political system integration of Bellah’s [1] civil religion and Gentile’s [2] political religion provides an enhanced application to political systems across the spectrum of states, from democracies to authoritarian regimes. Using Geertz’s [3] cultural systems theory helps clarify the ways in which symbols create a common understanding of the world in which people live; they inform the worldview and influence people’s behavior, just like religions do.

Geertz’s [3] perspective can help explain why Bellah’s civil religion works so well in democratic countries like the United States. National symbols like the flag, the Constitution, Inauguration Day, and Independence Day provide a shared cultural framework through which inhabitants of the United States interpret the concept of civic duty and what it means to be an American. These symbols aid in cultivating a climate of voluntary participation, patriotism and pluralism; therefore, civil religion is maintained through symbolic order as well as through democratic institutions that produce moral obligation.

On the other hand, Geertz’s [3] theory can also help explain how authoritarian political systems create and use symbols to manipulate their respective citizens in the same manner that Gentile’s [2] theory describes political religions. The use of portraits of the Kim family, Juche slogans, mass games and monumental architecture in North Korea creates a unified symbolic universe that provides meaning to citizens while at the same time eliminating the possibility of alternative meanings for reality [4]. The Russian hybrid system similarly utilises symbols and rituals from the Orthodox Christian church, the Victory Day commemoration and the rituals of the church and state in an effort to establish a national identity as sacred and justifying the maintenance of political power. As such, symbols become tools of ideological domination rather than voluntary civic expression.

Consequently, the integration of Geertz’s with Bellah’s and Gentile’s theories allows for a coherent explanation of the role that symbols have in establishing political legitimacy in different types of political systems. In the case of democratic political systems, symbols cultivated civil engagement through voluntary means; conversely, in the case of authoritarian political systems, symbols were used to justify and compel ideological conformity. Political authority is present in North Korea, Russia, and the United States not only through the use of institutions or coercive measures but also through the creation of a common universe of meaning derived from the symbols through which an individual derives meaning from their own moral universe.

3. Discussion and synthesis

The examples provided by the United States, Russia, and North Korea illustrate how modern states utilize mechanisms analogous to those of religion to create systems of collective belief. While common structural characteristics can be noted, the degree of voluntarism, ideological control, and symbolism varies greatly across different political settings. Key mechanisms of belief formation, the symbolic elements involved, and the level of voluntarism and compulsiveness of such activities are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of belief construction in the United States, Russia, and North Korea

Country	Mechanisms of Belief Construction	Symbolic Elements	Level of Voluntarism
United States	Civic rituals foster unity through voluntary participation in national celebrations and ceremonies.	National flag, Constitution, presidential inaugurations, "In God We Trust".	High – participation is voluntary and emphasizes pluralism and shared values.
Russia	The state fuses Orthodox Christianity with nationalism and nostalgia for Soviet power to legitimize authority.	Church-state cooperation, patriotic holidays, Orthodox symbols, victory parades.	Medium – participation is encouraged, often linked to patriotism.
North Korea	Ideology becomes a total religion centered on the Kim family; political rituals are compulsory.	Portraits, Juche ideology, mass parades, monuments to Kim leaders.	Low – participation is mandatory and demonstrates total devotion.

According to Robert Bellah [1], the American version of civil religion is based on creating rituals that honour our democratic ideals as opposed to a god. The Promissory Note of Allegiance and Independence Day, for example, help create a common "faith" in liberty and democracy for American citizens. In a democratic regime, civil religion is voluntary; all citizens are included; and civil religion calls for expectations of moral unity without silencing dissent. In contrast, Gentile's political religion identifies where political ideologies become sacrosanct and totalizing based on a government's attempt to instil an ideology into the citizenry that is governed by that ideology (as seen in totalitarian states).

An illustration of political religion can be found in North Korea. The Juche ideology requires the Kim family to be viewed as divine intermediaries (or religious leaders). Large-scale political celebrations, coordinated performances, and pledges of loyalty are all mandatory ceremonies that resemble religious practices. Political belief is imposed rather than embraced voluntarily, thus clearly exemplifying Gentile's theory regarding the basis for establishing political legitimacy (i.e., that it can be established from an emotional attachment to a sacred object, as opposed to through the use of rational laws). Conversely, in the United States, civil religion is founded upon encouraging citizens to voluntarily participate in these types of activities utilizing pluralist values.

Russia is somewhere in between North Korea and the United States in terms of civil versus political religion. The state has made an effort to create a sacred political identity by merging Russian nationalism with the Orthodox Church. Since Vladimir Putin became president, the Russian state has been working to incorporate elements of the Orthodox Church into state functions; for example, Orthodox clergy provide annual blessings for the Russian armed forces, the Russian Patriarch Kirill was present at various governmental ceremonies, and various Orthodox prayers have been recited at state-sponsored national holidays. The state still maintains its political authority by establishing the state's moral legitimacy through these sacred connections. The most recent examples are President Putin attending the Easter Sunday service of the Orthodox Church and the

state-organized observance of Victory Day incorporating religious elements as well. As a result, scholars like Daniel Payne [5] have identified this merging of nationalism, ecclesiasticism, and political loyalty as a post-Soviet method to achieve moral as well as political legitimacy.

While the three cases mentioned here differ on the basis of whether belief is voluntary or imposed, all three demonstrate that political legitimacy is based on more than simply the law or force; all participants also have an emotional connection to the symbols and rituals that validate their political legitimacy. Gentile's theory maintains that when a political system becomes sacred to a population, then that political authority will function within a faith-based context rather than a legal context and create allegiance that extends beyond any formal legal or institutional authority.

4. Conclusion

This investigation sought to discover the capacity of political systems to fuse together collective sets of beliefs in a way that resembles religion and demonstrated that the sacred nature of politics remains in existence through the different types of regimes. Again through the theories of Bellah, Gentile and Geertz, it was found in comparing the systems of the United States, Russia and North Korea that the use of rituals, symbols and myths were not found to be mere cultural expressions, but rather were devices by which the legitimacy and collective identity were maintained as well.

In the case of the United States, a democratic state, civil religion was found to be a moral system by which through voluntary civic participation, the authority of the state is legitimized through mutual agreement, political participation and the celebration of such ideas as freedom and justice. The power of civil religion lies in its ability to express the beliefs of disparate groups within unified understanding as to the essential nature of the state, which in turn promotes an allegiance to the state as a moral duty rather than coercive.

In the case of semi-authoritarian systems of states, such as Russia, an interesting combination of political and religious symbols has been found to exist in order to produce loyalty to the state. In the agreement between the Orthodox Church and the State in the post-Soviet Union states, we see Gentile's concept of sacralization discussed at work where the elements of spirituality and political power become mutually reinforcing in that they work together towards the preservation of the state. This blending of symbols reinforces the identity of the nation state while suppressing any believer who dissents from the goals of the state, while the leader becomes politically and spiritually a guardian of the people.

At the end of the spectrum opposite the democratic state of the United States, North Korea and the absolute conversion of ideology to spirituality. The system of political idolism within the state of North Korea, through the ideas presented in the Juche polity entirely replaces spirituality with political labor. Through the use of rituals, deified leadership and constant repetition of symbols, the state attempts to convert obedience to the leader to spiritual worship. As Gentile argues, this political religion is a striking example of how totalitarian states have monopolized both the moral and emotional factors in human life to preserve their governments.

In conclusion, these comparisons reveal a continuum, from moral persuasion in democratic states through spiritual-political combination in hybrid states, evolving into absolute ideological domination on the totalitarian type of states. In each case the state performs as the symbolic custodian of the identity which was once reserved for god, giving meaning, purpose and identity to its citizens.

Future study can further evaluate what the effects of such aspects of the contemporary world as globalization, social media and digital nationalism will cause to the sacred secular political religion narratives explored here in the era of the twenty-first century. As the social media and digital

communications tendencies gradually in time replace the rituals of physical religions, some future observers may research if the various symbols inherent in the digital processes of communication and the communities around them will tend to become supportive of the moral legitimacy of contemporary governments or to assist in its negation.

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