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Presidents as High Priests

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Presidents as High Priests

Would you please elaborate on the president as America's "high priest" (your term)?

In my last answer I said that Americans expect presidents to govern, to be sure. But they also want leaders who can inspire, console, comfort, and even lead the nation in prayer when the situation warrants -- in other words, to be their high priest. Think about it: no other individual in America can summon the entire nation to prayer when there is a D-Day Invasion, a Challenger tragedy, or a September 11th.

Nor do we look to our presidents to serve as high priests only in crises. Going all the way back to the founding, we have followed our leaders when they have called for days of "fasting, thanksgiving, and prayer." Presidents have lent solemnity to the national mood when laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. And they direct our thoughts when leading us in benediction at the annual National Prayer Breakfast.

There is no question that religion has been historically linked with the presidency. The question is: What are the policy implications of this relationship?

Secular-Friendly Interpretation of the Presidency

To say that presidents have served as Americans' high priest is to confirm the historical record, and to broach one of the thorniest debates in the United States today. On the one side are historians, sociologists, and political scientists with secular leanings. The most extreme secularists would share Ernest Hemingway's sentiment, "To Hell with a church that becomes a state; to Hell with a state that becomes a church."

For these, Jefferson's famous letter to the Baptists, calling for the separation of church and state, has become tantamount to a Constitutional provision (which is somewhat curious, considering that Jefferson was neither a delegate at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 nor the author of the First Amendment).

One of the deans of American history, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, has weighed in on Hemingway's side of the debate. Recently the former aide to John F. Kennedy roundly attacked attempts to merge God's House with the White House by going back to our nation's origins. In the interest of balance, it is worth quoting Schlesinger at length:

"The founding fathers did not mention God in the Constitution, and the faithful often regarded our early presidents as insufficiently pious.

"George Washington was a nominal Anglican who rarely stayed for Communion. John Adams was a Unitarian, which Trinitarians abhored as heresy. Thomas Jefferson, denounced as an atheist, was actually a deist who detested organized religion and who produced an expurgated version of the New Testament with the miracles eliminated. Jefferson and James Madison, a nominal Episcopalian, were the architects of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. John Quincy Adams was another Massachusetts Unitarian. Andrew Jackson, pressed by clergy members to proclaim a national day of fasting to seek God's help in combating a cholera epidemic, replied that he could not do as they wished 'without feeling that I might in some degree disturb the security which religion now enjoys in this country in its complete separation from the political concerns of the general government.'

"In the 19th century, all presidents routinely invoked God and solicited his blessing. But religion did not have a major presence in their lives. Abraham Lincoln was the great exception. Nor did our early presidents use religion as an agency for mobilizing voters. 'I would rather be defeated,' said James A. Garfield, 'than make capital out of my religion.'

"Nor was there any great popular demand that politicians be men of faith. In 1876, James G. Blaine, an aspirant to the Republican presidential nomination, selected Col. Robert G. Ingersoll, a famed orator but a notorious scoffer at religion, to deliver the nominating speech: The pious knew and feared Ingersoll as 'The Great Agnostic.'

"There were presidents of ardent faith in the 20th century. Woodrow Wilson had no doubt that the Almighty designated the United States -- and himself -- for the redemption and salvation of humankind. Jimmy Carter ... was 'born again.' Ronald Reagan, though not a regular churchgoer, had a rapt evangelical following. But neither Wilson nor Carter nor Reagan applied religious tests to secular issues, nor did they exploit their religion for their political benefit."[1]

John F. Kennedy is perhaps unique among the presidents. On the way to becoming the nation's first Roman Catholic president, he explicitly distanced himself from the Vatican and church teaching. His September 1960 speech to Baptists gathered in Houston was a landmark in campaign history.

Religious-Friendly Interpretation of the Presidency

Most presidents have not been like Kennedy. Most have unapologetically deployed their faith to tap into the strong spiritual beliefs of citizens. Many of our early presidents, for example, could call for official days of fasting, thanksgiving, and prayer without being criticized. Some other specific examples:

Jefferson, stung by accusations of being an atheist in the bruising campaign of 1800, proved to be more accomodating to Christianity than is generally realized. He acknowledged the beneficence of Providence in his Second Inaugural Address and funded Catholic missions to the Indians with federal dollars.

During our nation's agony, Lincoln, a man of deep faith, openly wondered in his Second Inaugural Address about divine retribution for the nation tolerating the sin of slavery and appealed to "the better angels of our nature."

Garfield was the nation's first preacher-president.

On June 6, 1944 -- D-Day -- Franklin D. Roosevelt asked that Americans stop what they were doing to pray for the success of the Allied reconquest of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Ike at his Inauguration read aloud a prayer that he himself had composed; was baptized in the White House; and hired an individual to be his liaison to the faith community.

Carter appealed directly to the "born again" for political advantage.

Reagan, who was rarely seen going to Sunday servives, nevertheless courted evangelical Protestants (known as the Moral Majority) and wrote a pro-life article for *Human Life Review*. He also detailed William Casey to work with the Vatican to end the Cold War.

Many was the Sunday that Bill Clinton would use going to church, with Bible in hand, as a photo-op. But those who know Clinton well say that his faith is no superficial gesture, that it is genuine and deep.

On the campaign trail in 2000, President George W. Bush famously said that his favorite philosopher was Jesus Christ. And Democratic candidate Al Gore said he supported faith-based initiatives to help solve social problems.

There is no question that many of our presidents have been men of faith. Nor is there any question that they have served as a kind of high priest in our national life. But debate rages over the extent to which the presidents' personal religious convictions should inform public policy.

AMERICA AS A RELIGIOUS NATION

To acknowledge that our presidents from time to time play the role of high priest presupposes that the United States is a religious nation with citizens who are open to such a high priest. In fact, the U.S. is unusual in this regard. Of the twenty most developed nations in the world, the U.S. is by far the most religious. Surveys show that a large majority of Americans believe in God and in Satan and say that religion is important to them; more than half our population believes that the U.S. benefits from divine protection and has a negative view of atheists; almost half attend a worship service weekly. The extent of American religiosity contrasts sharply with that of other peoples. Only 20 percent of Germans, 12 percent of Japanese, and 11 percent of French say that religion is highly important to them.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, "religious expression in the United States seems to have grown, not diminished, with socio-economic development. According to Roger Finke, a sociologist at Pennsylvania State University, in 1890, 45 percent of Americans were members of a church. By 2000, that figure was 62 percent."[2]

It is fascinating to inquire why America is the most religious of the top twenty nations on the United Nations' Human Development Index. Our country hardly fits the long-espoused sociological model that held that modernization and religion do not mix; that said the more wealth a nation generated and distributed, the less religious it would be. A fascinating piece in the *New York Times* explains: "Old-school sociology holds that as nations become more prosperous, healthy, and educated, demand for the support that religion provides declines. People do not suddenly lose faith as they grow rich, these sociologists argue. Rather, they gradually go less to church -- reducing their children's exposure to religion. Meanwhile, secular institutions take over functions, like education, formerly controlled by the church. Religious attendence, they argue, wanes from one generation to the next. In economic terms, demand for religion drops as its perceived benefits diminish compared with the cost of participating."[3]

Certainly the old sociological model seems to account for the lukewarm state of religion in thoroughly modernized European nations, as well as in Canada and Japan. But it does not explain why the wealthiest and most modern nation of all, the United States, has remained an enclave of religiosity.

The way to understand American exceptionalism may lie in thinking by means of an analogy. The analogy that suggests itself is supply-side economics, long associated with America's fortieth president, Ronald Reagan (which is apt, considering the extent to which the Gipper reached out to evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics, and pro-Israeli Jews). Here is what the same *New York Times* piece observes: "over the past 10 years or so a growing group of mostly American sociologists has deployed a novel theory to explain the United States' apparently anomalous behavior: supply-side economics. Americans, they say, are fervently religious because there are so many churches competing for their devotion."[4]

More specifically, "demand for religion has little to do with economic development. Instead, what creates change is the supply of religious services. That is, Americans are more churchgoing and pious than Germans or Canadians because the United States has the most open religious market, with dozens of religious denominations competing vigorously to offer their flavor of salvation, becoming extremely responsive to the needs of their parishes. 'There's a lack of regulation restricting churches, so in this freer market there is a larger supply,' said Mr. Finke."[5]

What's more, "The suppliers of religion then try to stoke demand. 'The potential demand for religion has to be activated,' said Rodney Stark, a sociologist at Baylor University. 'The more members of the clergy that are out there working to expand their congregations the more people will go to church.'"[6]

Further, "Mr. Finke notes that this free-market theory fits well with the explosion of religion across Latin America, where the weakening of the longstanding Catholic monopoly has led to all sorts of evangelical Christian churches and to an overall increase of religious expression. The supply-siders say their model even explains secular Europe. Europeans, they argue, are fundamentally just as religious as Americans, with similar metaphysical concerns, but they suffer from an uncompetitive market -- lazy, quasi-monopolistic churches that have been protected by competition by the state. 'Wherever you've got a state church, you have empty churches,' Mr. Stark said."[7]

Historian Garry Wills makes the trenchant observation that the American tradition of separating church and state "protected religion from anticlericalism." This fact, combined with our pluralism, would help religion flourish in the U.S.[8]

All these factors help explain why Americans do not shy away from seeing their president occasionally play the role of high priest. But this statement must be qualified. If the president is to play the role of a "pope" in America's civil religion, he must be respectful of America's tradition of religious pluralism. He must not be perceived as a proselyte or apologist for his particular denomination. He must take care to avoid using symbols and words that are peculiar to his denomination. *(Question from Walter A., of Portland, ME)*

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[1] Arthur Schlesinger Jr, *Los Angeles Times.*

[2] Roger Finke quoted in Eduardo Porter, "Give Them Some of That Free-Market Religion," *New York Times,* November 21, 2004, p. 14 in Week in Review.

[3] Porter, "Give."

[4] Porter, "Give."

[5] Finke quoted in Porter, "Give."

[6] Rodney Stark quoted in Porter, "Give."

[7] Stark quoted in Porter, "Give."

[8] Garry Wills quoted in Porter, "Give."