

The Best Patriotism: Reverence, Remembrance and Reliance

This Memorial Day weekend is a good time for us to reflect on the spiritual heritage of our nation and the relationship between our faith and our patriotism. From the beginning of our nation, our founding fathers understood their debt of devotion this new country owed to Almighty God. For that reason, a part of the festivity of our national celebrations has always included the singing of traditional patriotic songs, the best loved of which, express in their lyrics a spirit of devotion, humility and thankfulness, songs like Samuel Francis Smith's *America*.

*My country tis of Thee, sweet land of liberty of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride,
From every mountainside let freedom ring.
Our father's God to Thee, author of liberty, to Thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright, with freedom's holy light,
Protect us by Thy might, Great God our King.*

Or Katherine Lee Bate's *America the Beautiful*,

*O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain.
For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain
American, America, God shed his grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.*

Or the song that is officially our national hymn, Daniel Crane Roberts' *God of Our Fathers*. Roberts was a young minister for the St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Brandon, Vermont. On the 100th birthday of our country, July 4th 1876, the community wanted to have a centennial celebration and they

specifically requested a hymn to be written for the occasion. So Roberts penned the following lyrics,

*God of our fathers, whose almighty hand, leads forth in beauty all the starry band.
Of shining worlds in splendor through the skies, our grateful songs before Thy throne arise.
Thy love divine hath led us in the past. In this free land by Thee our lot is cast.
Be Thou our Ruler, Guardian, Guide and Stay, Thy Word our law, Thy paths our chosen way.*

America is not and has never been a theocracy, a nation governed by God. America is a democracy, a nation governed by citizens. But, the majority of the citizens in this nation have always been Christians; and they are governed by God. So, not surprisingly, America's patriotic events and symbols and songs often have a religious tone. From the beginning, the majority of people in our country have believed that whatever success or blessing we enjoy as a nation is due to the grace of Almighty God.

But America has changed dramatically in the last 200 plus years. The population of the United States in 1776 was something over three million people of which about 98% were Christian. Today our population is something over three hundred million of which about 75% claim to be Christian (with less than 40% of those regularly attending a church). Of the 24% or 74 million non-Christians in our country, 48 million describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or simply non-religious. And so we live in a significantly less devout and more diverse country than our founding fathers experienced or even envisioned possible.

Americans of course still love their country and are still writing patriotic songs. Recently I was curious about what kind of patriotic songs we are writing today. The most recent, traditional song that is overtly spiritual is probably the popular song, *God Bless America*, written by the Jewish-American composer Irving Berlin in 1939. But the songs written since then seem to show less interest in expressing devotion to God and humility before God as was more common in our more traditional patriotic songs. Maybe it's just me, but the popular modern patriotic songs don't seem to have much of a spiritual tone. For example, songs like Woody Guthrie's *This Land is Your Land* published in the 50s, which I'm told Guthrie actually wrote because he was tired of hearing Kate Smith always singing *God Bless America* on the radio. Later popular songs, like Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* or Willie Nelson's *Living in the Promise Land*, both written in the '80s, express appreciation for their country, but no mention of God, the focus is on us, our freedom, much less expressions of devotion toward him. More recently we've had a flourish of post 911 songs that have become popular in America, like Charlie Daniel's *This Ain't No Rag* or Toby Keith's very popular (and unfortunately very vulgar) *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue*. These songs seem to be focused more on a desire to express pride in America than thankfulness to God. Maybe it's

just me, but they seem tainted with vengeance and anger or worse.

Consider for example Charlie Daniel's inspiring and uplifting message to our enemies,

*This ain't no rag it's a flag and we don't wear it on our heads
It's a symbol of the land where the good guys live are you listening to what I said
You're a coward and a fool and you broke all of the rules
And you wounded our American pride
And now we're coming with a gun and we know you're gonna run.*

The spiritual tone of Lee Greenwood's *God Bless the USA* is a little better, but other than the title, God doesn't get much ink in the song. Greenwood thanks his lucky stars not his God that he's living here. There was one song I found I kind of liked. It expresses sadness that folks in our country seem to be less conscious of God, even many of those who call themselves Christian. Bobby Bare wrote his song, *God Bless America Again* in 1969.

*God, I sure do wish you'd bless America again
You know, the way you did back when it all began
You blessed her then, Lord, but somehow we just took it for granted
And we never did ask again so, just hold her hand, God, that's all
And if she should stumble, please don't let her fall
God bless America again, You see all the trouble that she's in
Wash her pretty face, dry her eyes and then God bless America again*

Not too bad for a fella whose spiritual insights were previously expressed in the song, *Drop Kick Me Jesus through the Goal Posts of Life*.

Christians often quote the little phrase WWJD, *What would Jesus do?*

If I may coin another phrase, how about WWJS, *What would Jesus sing?* I'm not sure how enthusiastically Jesus would join in on some of our patriotic songs in this country. Christians have struggled throughout history in every country to keep love and allegiance to country in proper balance with their first love and first allegiance to Christ and His Kingdom. Paul was thankful for his Roman citizenship and used it often to advance the Kingdom of God, and at the same time he agreed wholeheartedly with his fellow apostle Peter that we will always be strangers and aliens in whatever country we may be living because our true citizenship is in heaven.

I wish more songs were written today that express our love of country with the same humility, devotion and thankfulness before God as Samuel Francis Smith's *America* and Katherine Lee Bates' *America the Beautiful* and Daniel Crane Roberts' *God of Our Fathers*. But if we cannot write such songs, we can, as Christians who live in America, encourage our fellow citizens, amid all the patriotic pageantry, to not forget the kind of character to which those early hymns called us, a character that would include a reverence for God, a remembrance of God and a reliance on God.

As Christians in America we should remind America to never stop being a reverent people. Reverence means to live in the humble awareness that we are constantly in the presence of the holy one, the one, as Crane writes in his hymn,

whose almighty hand leads forth the starry band of shining worlds in splendor through the skies. There is no denying the fact that we Americans have become a more irreverent and crude people. Nothing much is sacred anymore. Our language is increasingly vulgar; our attitudes increasingly cynical; our respect and courtesy of others, increasingly non-existent. We live as if we were in charge, what we want is most important. We are easily angered and daily offended. We need to call America back to reverence, to recognizing the sacredness of life. We should treat all people with respect because all people bear within them the image of God. And so our speech, our business dealings, our politics, our recreation should reflect our beliefs that people are sacred and we live and work among them with reverence.

That same reverence for our Creator should of course also be shown for the world he has created. We should acknowledge the sacredness of the planet we live on, see it as a gift to be treasured, not trashed. He has commanded us to care for this world he has placed us in, not to exploit it or ravage it for our own personal profit. To acknowledge the sacredness of creation means to acknowledge the sacredness of life, all life, including that most fragile of life forms, the unborn of which over 56 million have been killed since we first legalized their killing in 1973. But our outcry against the death of the unborn will ring hollow in our fellow citizens ears if we are

not just as concerned for those who have been born into suffering and poverty, the elderly who have outlived their companions and caregivers, the lonely, the abandoned, the hungry, the oppressed, the terminally ill. We cannot claim to reverence God and not reverence the sacredness of all lives.

In addition to living in reverence of God, we also need to be people who remember what God has done for us in the history of our country. The second verse of Roberts hymn states, *Thy love divine has led us in the past*. Many today seem desperate to re-write history and remove all reference to religion as a major influence and factor in the development of our country. Perhaps this is a reaction to some who have overstated the role of religion and have told the story of America as if it were a theocracy. No nation is a Christian nation. No nation could ever be a Christian nation because Christ himself said his kingdom was not of this world. But America is and always has been a nation predominantly populated by Christians. That is less true today than the 98% in 1776, but 75% is still a significant majority, even if half of those are Christian only in a nominal sense. It is simply foolishness or willful ignorance to not acknowledge the huge role that Christian faith has played in this country's founding and development.

When Columbus first saw the shores of this new land, he was convinced he had found the ancient paradise of Eden. When the Puritans

arrived here, they were convinced God had called them to establish a New Israel. I do not think America is nor has ever been an Eden or a New Israel, but our founding fathers clearly understood that faith in God was and should continue to be a crucial part of the American character. Our first president Washington was clear about the role of religion and faith to a nation. *Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion...It is impossible to govern rightly without God & the Bible.* Similarly, even our beloved Thomas Jefferson, no orthodox Christian as he denied the divinity of Jesus and the inspiration of Scripture. Still even Jefferson understood the critical dependence of liberty on our belief in God. *God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?*

To this list we should add the words of John Adams. *Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.* And even that perennial backslider Ben Franklin understood the role religion must play if America is to be a successful country. In his speech to the constitutional convention in 1787 he said, *I've lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this Truth — That God governs in the Affairs of Men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his Notice, is it*

probable that an Empire can rise without his Aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that except the Lord build the House they labor in vain who build it. I firmly believe this, — and I also believe that without his concurring Aid, we shall succeed in this political Building no better than the Builders of Babel.

As Christians who live in America our task is not so much to make our country Christian but to fill our country with Christians. When the French philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, visited America in the early 1800s he was impressed by the religious character of the American people, what he called the “habits of their hearts.” He said *America is great because her people are good.* This often quoted phrase, however true it actually was, expresses what we should hope would always be true of us.

Finally, in addition to reverence for God and remembrance of what God has done perhaps most important of all, we should have and encourage our fellow citizens to have, greater reliance on God. *From war’s alarms, from deadly pestilence, be thy strong arm our ever sure defense.* This may be our greatest failing as Christians living in America. Have our lives been an example of people who trust first and foremost in the strong arm of our God? Or have we become as self reliant and materialistic as those who have no God to rely on? Is our security and peace of mind dependent upon the

strength of our economy and the power of our military? Is our hope placed too much in the possibilities of medical technology and scientific discovery? Does our peace come because our first reliance is on God, our first response to trouble to pray? We Americans are a very self-reliant people. Our language is over-filled with an array of “self” words: self-made, self-reliant, self-confident, self-assured. Among the largest sections in our bookstores is the self-help section. We often hear the phrase *God helps those who help themselves*. It is not in the Bible though many probably think it is; many more may think it should be.

But such a phrase would not fit easily alongside other passages in the Bible, passages like, *We wait for the Lord; he is our help* (Psalm 33:20). *Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me* (Psalm 54:4). *Let my cry for help come to you* (Psalm 109:26). *I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me* (Psalm 118:13). *My help comes from the Lord* (Psalm 121:2). Or if you want to add a good New Testament passage, how about Hebrews 13:6. *The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?* Before we were Christians we may have thought of ourselves as self-made and self-confident, but we became Christians when we saw the mess we had made of our lives. As Christians, we seek to be God-made, God-reliant, God-helped, God-confident. But it is

not those who can help themselves that need God; it is those who have come to the end of themselves.

So, on this Memorial Day weekend, I would remind us that God's people throughout history and in every nation have always been called to be a light to the nations. It is no different with us. We must be a light to our own nation, living within her boundaries as good citizens, loyal citizens, but always remembering that our first citizenship is in heaven. Paul referred to Christians as living letters of recommendation, recommending Christ to others by the way they lived their lives. In the same way we should be living songs, patriotic songs, lives demonstrating the very best kind of patriotism, a love of country that has been filtered and purified through a reverence for God, a remembrance of God and a reliance upon God. As we influence more Americans to become this kind of Christian, then America will become more Christian. I would end with the ending words of our national hymn:

Refresh Thy people on their toilsome way,

Lead us from night to never ending day;

Fill all our lives with love and grace divine;

And glory, laud, and praise be ever Thine.