

4-15-2019

The Texts of Faith in Times of Tragedy

Ryan Anderson

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, revryananderson2019@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Ryan (2019) "The Texts of Faith in Times of Tragedy," *Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

The Texts of Faith in Times of Tragedy: A Theological Analysis of "God Bless America"

Ryan Anderson

Introduction

September 11, 2001 was an unprecedented tragedy for the United States of America. An act of terrorism took the lives of 2,996 individuals and shook the nation to its core. Tragedy burned itself into the nation's memory. As expected during a national catastrophe, the nation entered a state of mourning. Citizens sought comfort in various places, including patriotism and national identity. One such instance was a televised benefit concert held only ten days after the attack entitled *America: A Tribute to Heroes*. Of the artists who took the stage that night, Celine Dion's performance of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" continues to stand as a fascinating example of the phenomenon known as "American civil religion" and its connection to national tragedies like terrorism.

This paper will focus on that phenomenon and its longstanding tension with American Christianity. I will investigate how American civil religion emerges when faced with tragedy. The investigation will be done by way of a case study: a thorough analysis of Celine Dion's performance of "God Bless America," the history of the original song and its author, and the variety of responses her performance has fostered both then and now, particularly online. What we will discover is that practitioners of civil religion existentially and therapeutically depend on an "encounter with the divine" during times of national tragedy. This encounter is achieved by borrowing from various texts and practices of other religions — in this case, a prayer — in a way that is divorced from their original intent. Such acts of borrowing can maintain dynamic emotional force, even decades after the initial act of appropriation.

This paper will also critique what can be perceived as a deficient response on the part of the Church in America to the tragedy that was 9/11 and will tentatively suggest a way forward. The aim of this essay is to suggest a way for the Church to faithfully bear witness to Christ in the midst of national tragedy. This is theologically

significant because the Church must speak faithfully in such times, urging the nation to seek healing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not in American patriotism or civil religion.

Hope for the Hopeless

Those who observed television coverage and saw the second plane hit the South Tower shortly after 9:00 a.m.¹ on that Tuesday will never forget where they were, who they were with, and how they reacted. Tragedy, especially national tragedy, has that sort of impact upon mankind. Pain and sorrow burdened the hearts of Americans for years afterwards. For those who lost friends and family members in the attacks, the pain persists to the present day.²

Pain endured after that day because the terrorist attacks threatened the fundamental values of American civil religion. As Peter Gardella notes in his recent book on the dynamics of civil religion, “immediately after the attacks of 2001, explanations of why the terrorists hated the United States focused on the values of American civil religion.”³ Since freedom, democracy, and tolerance are the key tenets of this civil faith, many Americans assumed that the terrorists were out to destroy those pivotal values; that this new enemy despised peace and sought to sow seeds of discord. We may never know the precise reasons why the terrorists acted as they did, but Gardella suggests that the broad interpretation of those actions was one of civil religion.

But what exactly is “American civil religion”? Concise definitions are hardly exhaustive, but Paul Christopher Johnson shows in a recent article how Jean Jacques Rousseau expressed the “positive dogma” of civil religion in a simple and concise fashion. This includes: “the existence of an all-powerful, good and intelligent divinity, the afterlife to come, the belief in justice or the good, the punishment of evil-doers, and the sanctity of the social contract and its laws. The only sin for civil religion was intolerance.”⁴ These sound like the tenets of American patriotism. In fact, we may equate American civil religion with patriotism. These dogmas play themselves out on a national scale every time that the President gives the State of the Union Address. They also evidenced themselves clearly after the terrorist attacks.

After tragedy, every American must find a way to grieve. For those who are religious, tragedy turns them to their god for answers. After the great tragedy which befell Job, he worshipped the LORD God and said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Jb 1:20-21). Christ Himself, when he was grieving the death of his friend Lazarus, cried out to his Father in prayer (Jn 11:41)

Men seek out a higher power during grief because they believe that it has the ability to do something about it. In times of national tragedy, religious men seek out their god for identity, purpose, and meaning when those ideals are challenged by their circumstances.

Likewise, after a national tragedy, those who rely upon American civil religion must also find a way to grieve. The difficulty presented to them is that American civil religion has no prayers of its own, so it must appropriate the texts of other faiths in order to speak to a higher power. Gardella again is helpful by showing that the tenets of American civil religion are held through reason, even if most Americans “have not come to those values through reason. They have learned to value liberty, democracy, peace, and tolerance through the monuments, texts, and images of American civil religion.”⁵ Many of the texts which are used by American civil religion, especially during times of mourning after a national tragedy, are borrowed from religious tradition. The near seamlessness of this religious borrowing after the attacks on 9/11 explains why there was a growth in church attendance on the Sundays that followed: what people heard and appreciated from sources of civil religion were the words and practices of traditional religions, especially Christianity.

This is not to say the practitioners and priests of American civil religion neglected to hold their own forms of worship services. One of those borrowed prayers in one of those gatherings of civil religion will allow us to reflect on how American civil religion grieves and how the Church can speak to civil religion in a time of national tragedy. The benefit concert called *America: A Tribute to Heroes* contained a performance of the well-known “God Bless America.”

A Text, A Context, and Healing

Irving Berlin’s song originated in a context unknown to most Americans. He is famous for “White Christmas,” but few will know that he also wrote “God Bless America.” The song was originally intended to be a prayer of thanksgiving to God for blessing him in his new homeland. Berlin’s personal background elucidates why this prayer meant so much to him.

Irving Berlin was born during a tumultuous time in Russian history. Revolutionaries assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881, but Jews received blame for the deed. Subsequent attacks involved the destruction of property and loss of life. John Shaw, who wrote one of the biographies on Berlin’s life, recounts that Berlin’s very first memory was watching his family home burn to the ground.⁶ Due to the persecution and risk of death, Berlin’s family fled Russia and immigrated to America, landing in New York in late 1893.

Initially, the family found little success in their new homeland. Berlin's father died when he was eight years old, and by age thirteen, Berlin dropped out of school to provide for his family. He had no great musical skill, finding success only by great effort and repetition. It was this sort of perseverance that led Berlin to become one of the most prolific and respected songwriters of his era.⁷

Although he experienced great success as an artist and is responsible for many powerful songs, "God Bless America" held a special place in Berlin's heart, reflecting his love for his new homeland. Contemplating in hindsight, Berlin told the *New York Times* in 1940 that the song was "an expression of gratitude for what this country has done for its citizens, of what home really means."⁸ Although he originally wrote the song as the concluding number of a revue for his military company called Yip, Yip Yaphank, he deleted the number from the performance because he felt that it did not fit with the jubilant and comical nature of the rest of the show. In his mind, the song was too emotional and too somber to be combined with such a light-hearted comedy. As Stephen Prothero's book cataloguing the evolution of American patriotism suggests, "Berlin thought the song—a prayer set to music—was too heavy for such lighthearted entertainment, so he put it away, only to dust it off in 1938."⁹ Kate Smith's performance of the song in that year resurrected the otherwise dormant prayer and began its transformation into a song of patriotic proportions.

By the time the song was played post-9/11, it had become the nation's song of choice for patriotic expression. Prothero suggests that it even displaced the national anthem after the tragedy, because "rockets' red glare" and "bombs bursting in air" seemed inappropriate and emotionally laden following the fireballs caused by the jets on that Tuesday.¹⁰ This is why Celine Dion's performance on September 21, 2001 sticks in the minds of so many Americans. "God Bless America" had become America's song—it gave the chance for the nation to express the emotions felt after 9/11 and to find healing in its lyrics.

Dion's performance is set in the context of the larger memorial service called *America: A Tribute to Heroes*.¹¹ It was dedicated to those first responders and citizens who lost their lives on 9/11. Funds raised benefited the victims, especially the New York Police Department and the New York Fire Department. Twenty-one performers offered musical acts that night. "God Bless America" was the twentieth. The background was lit with burning candles to signify the hope of a nation shrouded in darkness. Even those with negative reviews of the event (and specifically the performance of "God Bless America") noted that "not even a glutinous performance

by the Canadian pop balladeer Celine Dion could erase the sweep and balance of Berlin's great melody."¹²

The performance begins with Dion and the choir behind her covered in darkness, an obvious reference to the darkness of terrorism that enveloped the nation. Dion emerges in a single spotlight, setting her performance as a light in the gloom. She sings through the entire song solo, and then dim lights slowly rise to illuminate the chorus standing behind Dion. They join in unison throughout the entire second chorus, a strong nod toward the unity that is important to American civil religion. Near the end of the rendition, a bright ray of light can be seen streaming out from behind the chorus, again calling attention to the performance as a remedy to the darkness of terrorism. Vocally, Dion's most-emphasized word was "America," a fitting emphasis for the occasion in which it was sung. All of this imagery devoid of its original significance, with Dion at the center, stands not as a religious ceremony and priestess offering up prayer to any god in particular, but as an expression of patriotic unity in the form of civil religion directed toward a nondescript deity that has America's general interests in mind.

Comments on the YouTube video of her performance show that it was received in three general ways. Some users viewed the performance as a means for healing the sorrow they felt after 9/11. Some individuals saw the performance as an emphasis of patriotism and love of country, even using it to criticize Dion for her Canadian heritage. The final group of people viewed the performance as an opportunity for peace and unity across the boundaries of nations. Each of these will be expanded in more detail below.

The first group of comments focused on the performance as a therapeutic moment of healing. This best aligns with Gordon Lynch's existential/hermeneutical religious function of culture, where a cultural artifact helps "people interpret reality and gain a sense of identity, security, and meaning in life."¹³ Rachel Burdick-Hanks commented, "SAD ALL THE LIFES LOST BUT WE WILL NEVER FORGET."¹⁴ BK Lulu shared that she "cried when I saw her sing this." Perhaps the most therapeutic comment of them all was from whoareyou2me, who said, "Thank you Celine. Thank you. This was a horrible, painful time, but this helped." None of these comments mentioned a higher power or deity as the agent for this healing. The song itself is attributed the power to heal and comfort.

In the second group of comments, patriotism and love of country replaced love of God. Civil religion in the time of tragedy has a way of erasing the figure of God in this way. David Doe said, "My a Canadian who is singing God bless America she must like or even love the USA. I can't see anything wrong with that." Some

users found an issue with Dion's heritage and nationality. A comment by heliostellar exemplifies this strand: "She isn't American... has she even attempted to become an American? It's phony for a foreigner to sing our patriotic songs when they are not a patriot." For heliostellar, the pain of 9/11 could be healed by a patriotic song, but not if sung by a foreigner such as Dion.

The third group of comments were a series of individuals who used the song as an occasion to wish for peace across national borders. Faskimy3344 said, "God bless USA, God bless all of us and may peace be spread worldwide." Peace is a fundamental tenet of American civil religion. Some commenters were from other countries, such as Mark Van Winckel, who said, "GOD BLESS AMERICA for now and forever from a Belgium citizen. I love you American people for now and forever and care you for always in my heart." This group of comments advances the idea of peace while only sometimes mentioning the name of God.

The performance of "God Bless America" in *America: A Tribute to Heroes* perfectly aligns with American civil religion. Michael Lienesch, in his article about American patriotic nationalism, notes that it "devised new civil religious rituals, organizing public celebrations that closely emulated worship services, with invocations, benedictions, creedal statements, patriotic hymns, and public prayers."¹⁵ This celebration and memorial emulates a worship service, with "God Bless America" closely resembling a hymn. American civil religion took Irving Berlin's private prayer and made it a public statement promoting the ideals of peace, concord, unity, and healing. The conclusion which the organizers of *America: A Tribute to Heroes* want hearers to reach is that "God Bless America" has the power to heal the fractured nation and can save the nation in times of tragedy.

Mutual Conversation

So, when the aftermath of 9/11 leads to a public turn toward civil religion and the performance of "God Bless America" reveals how civil religion works with the language of faith, what is the Church to do? Both culture and Church can teach us something about response to tragedy. I argue that the Church has responded poorly in the past, especially in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. Responses post-9/11 advanced the tenets of American civil religion. As a result, I propose a way forward that combines our teaching on the incarnation of the God who takes our pain into Himself and the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a witness to the world.

When the culture makes its own response to national tragedy, especially in the form of a patriotic event such as *America: A Tribute to Heroes*, it seeks healing in

its own identity. Philip Gorski's monograph, *American Covenant*, traces the history of American civil religion from the Puritans until the present day. A paragraph toward the conclusion of his book is worth reproducing in its entirety:

We are, or at least aspire to be, a sovereign and democratic people. We are part of a collective, multigenerational project, an ongoing effort to realize a set of universal political ideals—above all, freedom and equality—from within the confines of a particular historical trajectory. Some of us are thrown into this project by birth; others enter into it by immigration. We are part of an ever-expanding river flowing through historical time toward an uncertain horizon. Our civic conversation concerns those who have entered and exited the stream before us, and the course that we hope to steer into the future.¹⁶

Therefore, American civil religion is a collective project to realize universal ideals like freedom and equality. Efforts of men toward this final goal are portrayed most clearly during emotionally trying moments. The post-9/11 concert and telethon stand as proof that tragedy has a way of bringing the nation together in a cooperative project that rarely exists in peacetime. We can see now how the performance of “God Bless America” described above was a small contribution to an immense project that has existed since the beginning of American democracy. Dion and her chorus showed that “God Bless America” can contribute to inspiring the work of American civil religion.

Every performance of “God Bless America” since September 11, 2001 advanced this American patriotic vision. Consider every time that the song is sung during the seventh-inning-stretch at many baseball games. The unison of the crowd speaks volumes about what is happening in those moments. America as a vision is at work when “God Bless America” plays and is sung by a chorus of voices, *native* and *immigrant* alike. In her defining work on the song, Sheryl Kaskowitz writes, “‘God Bless America’ was one of a series of patriotic symbols that acknowledged the tragedy of 9/11 but then allowed spectators to melt into the crowd and the game.”¹⁷ People felt a moment of catharsis and healing through the song, quite similar to the moment of healing that some felt after Dion's performance.

The great irony of the multiplicity of performances of “God Bless America” is that the title figure is often left out of the picture. The song, written as a prayer to Irving Berlin's God, is used for therapeutic and existential purposes while forgetting the God who heals his people. By removing God from the picture, the American culture has robbed itself of the beauty of Berlin's lyrics. As Robert Bellah puts it,

“today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell”¹⁸ because the words that it uses are meaningless.

As it stands, the culture cannot bring God into the picture. That responsibility falls to the Church. The problem is that therapeutic preaching, hardly differentiable from the slogans of civil religion, has often served as the Church’s default public response to catastrophe. This has only furthered the meaninglessness of American civil religion. Instead, the Church has something better to offer. This offer will subtly critique the vacuous nature of civil religion while providing hope in time of tragedy.

Billy Graham’s message at the Washington National Cathedral on Friday, September 14, 2001, four days after the tragedy, serves as an excellent example:

A tragedy like this could have torn our country apart, but instead it has united us. So those perpetrators who took this on to tear us apart, it has worked the other way—it has backlashed. We are more united than ever before. I think this was exemplified in a very moving way when the members of our Congress stood shoulder to shoulder and sang, “God Bless America.”¹⁹

The Church has much more that it can offer a culture enveloped in tragedy. Amid sorrow, the Church brings the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the very Son of God. As Philip Yancey puts it in a beautiful paragraph published shortly after the Newtown shooting:

Tragedy rightly calls faith into question, but it also affirms faith. It is good news that we are not the random byproducts of a meaningless universe, but rather creations of a loving God who wants to live with us forever. That “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” in order to reconcile with his rebellious creation. That by entering our world, the Son took on our sufferings and temptations, demonstrating in person that nothing—not even death—can separate us from the love of God.²⁰

Yancey’s words apply after the events of any national tragedy. The Incarnation is the Church’s response to national tragedy, because the incarnation is God’s response to national tragedy. The suffering of the Son of God, in that “he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Is 53:4), fills the need of Americans for a Savior who knows the depths of pain and suffering. With the incarnation, hurting people are brought into contact with the God who became flesh and felt the depths of human woe.²¹

The second reply which the Church must make in times of national tragedy is an emphasis upon the resurrection. As Yancey writes, "Easter Sunday gave a sure and certain sign of contradiction, demonstrating that nothing can withstand the healing force of a loving God. We live out our days on Holy Saturday, aware of the redemptive power of suffering while awaiting the restoration power of creation made new."²² The events of September 11, 2001 inaugurated a lengthy Holy Saturday, where death appeared to be the final word, and all was gloom. But the message of Easter is that death itself will die. The hope which the Church can offer in national tragedy is not just any old platitude of healing that aligns with the discourse of civil religion. No, only the Christian Church can proclaim the message of Easter: Jesus is risen, and we shall arise. The hope for victims of 9/11, and for the country which suffered thereafter, is in Jesus Christ and him incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and reigning on high.

Conclusion

In this way, the Church offers a response to the culture which turns to civil religion for comfort during times of national tragedy. American civil religion, through the playing of songs like "God Bless America," can create a sense of peace and a universal brotherhood. However, it cannot offer ultimate healing from the hurt. A common question asked during times of distress is "Where is God when it hurts?" Yancey urges the importance of the Church when answering this question, suggesting that it be rephrased, "Where is the church when it hurts?"²³

American civil religion often receives severe blame among theologians, who see it as an empty, meaningless construction that leaves God out of its picture. This essay has shown that characterization contains much truth. However, we must not so quickly dismiss American civil religion in times of tragedy. The fact that "God Bless America" (a prayer) was borrowed for *America: A Tribute to Heroes* shows that the culture needs avenues to grieve and find meaning. The Church can provide those avenues, but we must guide the culture in their use of those texts and meanings to arrive at a place that is both biblical and salutary.

Does God bless America? Yes: penultimately through our collective efforts at peace and brotherhood. And ultimately through his Son, the One who became incarnate to take upon himself our sorrows and to abolish them by his death and resurrection. The collective efforts of man "are like a polluted garment" (Is 64:6). In the pursuit of goodness apart from the divine, civil religion is bad. The project that is American civil religion is ultimately futile.

On the other hand, civil religion is good in that it advocates for ideals for which the Church also advocates: freedom, justice, and goodness. Though it promotes these things apart from the blessing of the divine, the Church steps in to provide divine truth. That divine truth is well summarized in a quotation from J. R. R. Tolkien's *Return of the King*:

But Sam lay back, and stared with open mouth, and for a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not answer. At last he gasped: "Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?"²⁴

If the resurrection is true, then the answer to Sam's question is an emphatic yes. Everything that is sad is going to come untrue. This is the Church's response in times of tragedy to a culture that is hurting, to a civil religion that cannot provide that answer itself. And so, the Church can lead the culture to pray,

God bless America, land that I love
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with the light from above
From the mountains to the prairies
To the oceans white with foam
God bless America, my home sweet home

but not in the way that you think.

Endnotes

- 1 "Flight Path Study – United Airlines Flight 175," National Transportation Safety Board, February 19, 2002.
- 2 That pain has been memorialized and expressed in a museum on Ground Zero. For an excellent review of that museum, consult Amy Sodaro, "Affect, Performativity and Politics in the 9/11 Museum," *Liminalities* 14, no. 3 (2018): 171–192.
- 3 Peter Gardella, *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 352.

- 4 Paul Christopher Johnson, "Savage Civil Religion," *Numen* 52, no. 3 (2005): 298.
- 5 *American Civil Religion*, 5-6.
- 6 John Shaw, *This Land That I Love: Irving Berlin, Woody Guthrie, and the Story of Two American Anthems* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 9.
- 7 John Shaw records that Berlin's sixty-year career saw 451 hit songs, including 35 that reached number one on the music charts; see *This Land That I Love*, 6.
- 8 S. J. Woolf, "What Makes a Song: A Talk with Irving Berlin," *New York Times*, July 28, 1940; cited in Stephen Prothero, *The American Bible: How Our Words United, Divide, and Define a Nation* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 227.
- 9 *The American Bible*, 227.
- 10 *The American Bible*, 226.
- 11 Manuel HR, "Celine Dion – God Bless America (Tribute to Heroes)," YouTube video, 3:41, October 21, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfdcrUDQ_tc&list=PL4CFDA891835F28EC&index=19.
- 12 Terry Teachout, "Prime-Time Patriotism," *Commentary* 112, no. 4 (November, 2001): 53.
- 13 Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 28.
- 14 All comments from YouTube were accessed on December 8, 2018.
- 15 Michael Lienesch, "Contesting Civil Religion: Religious Responses to American Patriotic Nationalism, 1919–1929," *Religion and American Culture* 28, no. 1 (Winter, 2018): 98.
- 16 Phillip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 222.
- 17 Sheryl Kaskowitz, *God Bless America: The Surprising History of an Iconic Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 127.
- 18 Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 142.
- 19 Billy Graham, "Billy Graham's 9/11 Message from the Washington National Cathedral" (2001), Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, <https://billygraham.org/story/a-day-to-remember-a-day-of-victory/>.
- 20 Phillip Yancey, "National Tragedy and the Empty Tomb: Not Even Senseless Murder Can Separate Us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus," *Christianity Today* 57, no. 3 (April 2013): 25.
- 21 "National Tragedy and the Empty Tomb," 27
- 22 "National Tragedy and the Empty Tomb," 28.
- 23 "National Tragedy and the Empty Tomb," 28.
- 24 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 229–230.