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Having watched a number of major-league baseball games lately – autumn is the season of the playoffs, culminating in the World Series in November – I’ve been reminded of an American cultural practice I had otherwise forgotten. In playoff games, during the seventh-inning stretch (something of a brief intermission in a baseball game) spectators are treated to a rousing rendition of “God Bless America,” written by Irving Berlin in 1918.

Even more than the national anthem (“The Star-Spangled Banner”), “God Bless America” is intended as a hymn, an act of religious worship that begins with a spoken invocation. The invocation calls upon people to “swear allegiance to a land that’s free,” and “raise our voices in a solemn prayer.”

It follows with the song’s lyrics and melody, culminating in its now-famous refrain:

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

No church sponsors or solicits this act of religious devotion; government does not finance or require it. Rather, it is delivered by Major League Baseball, Inc., a for-profit corporate monopoly with a worldwide reputation for commercial savvy and success. MLB does nothing without an eye on the bottom line, on its reputation and brand image. “God Bless America” rings out in every playoff game because it is good business and good public relations.

These are strange times to reflect on civil religion and the notion of “American exceptionalism” – the idea that Americans see themselves as being set apart by God to accomplish special purposes in the world, a new Chosen People among the nations. Its imperial ambitions are frustrated at every turn, symbolized by two wars it cannot win and cannot pay for; the future of the world economy may well depend more on voices other
than its own; its self-proclaimed ideals languish in secret prisons and explode with the ordnance delivered by drone aircraft and other lethal means.

In its domestic discourse, “God Bless America” seems to mean different things to different people – as it always has, perhaps, but with the contrasts even more evident than in the past. For some, it has a retrospective quality that evokes gratitude – looking at the liberty and prosperity it has enjoyed over its history, God surely has blessed America. For others, given so many problems without obvious solution, there is a plaintive quality to it – God bless America, please. And for still others, among the loudest and most insistent, the phrase takes on the form of a demand shouted up to heaven – God, bless America! Or else.

This latter group – for whom God bless America becomes an ultimatum delivered to God – crosses partisan divides. While it seems most at home among the ‘tea-party’ ideologues of the political right, it has its own version among the center-left epitomized by the Obama apologists. The latter’s stridency was most evident in 2008, when they denounced – with much fury – the suggestion by Obama’s former pastor that the crimes of the United States in history might well evoke God damning, not merely blessing, America. God wouldn’t dare damn America, they thundered; they implied strongly that God had better not damn America if God knows what’s good for Him.

Scholars continue to produce books about religiosity in the United States (American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, by Robert Putnam and David Campbell, 2010, Simon and Schuster, provides a useful overview). These note significant generational changes in religious attitudes and practices as many religious communities falter in matters of religious formation and transmission (Catholics in the United States are the poster child for such failures, as evidenced by a raft of studies including Soul Searching: The Religious Lives of American Teenagers, by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, Oxford University Press, 2005).

One finding in Putnam and Campbell suggests that young people in the United States are even more alienated from institutional religion than earlier generations because they perceive an unbreakable link between religion and the politics of the so-called Religious Right and its upsurge since the early 1980s. Over and above the ‘typical’ youth drift from religion, they suggest, young people are leaving and not returning because they perceive American religion as deeply politicized and opposed to gay rights, sexual expression, and social tolerance (e.g., pp. 130-1).

Beneath these changes, however, one cannot help but be impressed by the durability of the object of worship in American culture – what Will Herberg identified in 1955 as the “American Way of Life,” the true object of religious devotion in the United States. While generational cleavages may be deepening between the present generation and its predecessors, considerable unity across age groups seems to exist in matters attendant to civil religion in its varied expressions.
Following baseball in the American secular liturgical calendar is Veterans Day, the successor to Armistice Day and the ending of World War I on November 11. The pleas and demands that God bless America take special form in this swirl of public and private deluge of soldier worship and veneration. Professional athletes, politicians, entertainers and countless others record messages thanking military personnel for their selflessness, sacrifice for the nation, and protection of freedom, prosperity and security. Countless local parades and observances abound, and every town seems to lift up select local military personnel – dead, wounded, or returned from service – to be praised, venerated and emulated by schoolchildren and the general public.

Glorification of soldiers has long been a part of national mythologies, at least since citizen armies supplanted mercenary forces in many countries. But in the dominant theological self-story of America, soldier worship has become even more potent and central. Soldiers have become martyrs and saints, missionaries for freedom and deacons of democracy; they become more central and beyond reproach in inverse proportion to the dubious morality of the wars they presently fight.

One would be hard pressed to find a heresy worse in American public life than to be opposed to “supporting the troops”. No matter what they do, no matter how immoral their mission or conduct may be, the troops must be supported. Even critics of American wars bow in obeisance to the nobility of those who ‘serve’ their country; especially if one opposes a given war, one must be even more vocal in supporting those who carry out the war.

This aspect of American self-worship has built, and built upon, a mythology of the ‘despised’ soldiers who returned from Vietnam only to meet with scorn and rejection. Never again will the United States scorn its suffering servants, goes the renewed orthodoxy of nation worship; having sinned in this way in the 1960s and 1970s, America must atone by venerating its veterans in ever-ascending ways. That these veterans are drawn disproportionately from the lower economic classes and nonwhite communities provides for a ritualistic sort of reversal: the wealthy and powerful, who would never enlist nor push their children to enlist, can sing the praises of their social inferiors in a way that affirms the system that produces and protects such social stratification.

The demand that God must bless America – or else – meets up with the demand that soldiers be glorified – or else. These confluent streams refresh and nurture the insistence that it is The Nation – not the church, not any real-life religious community or movement – that God chooses to work through in the world. If churches or other religious communities dare to question the salvific role of America, if they demur from the glorification of warrior culture implicit in ‘supporting the troops,’ then God will damn them as assuredly as he blesses America.

The last part of the autumnal triduum in American civil religion is the observance of Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday in November. Unlike a religious observance that has become secularized and pressed into national service (like Christmas), and unlike a secular holiday that has taken on the trappings of religiosity (Veterans Day),
Thanksgiving has long inhabited the estuary of civil religion and lived religious communities. Its observance has been more episodic and affected by political decisions than is usually acknowledged in popular renderings of its history. What is beyond dispute is that it has long served American culture as a confirmation for the special status of the American people and the American state in the outworking of salvation history.

On the fourth Thursday of November, the entire country stops working and expresses gratitude for its many blessings; therefore, the United States is a humble power, not an arrogant one. On this day millions of households enjoy meals whose abundance and variety gives testimony to the wealth and prosperity of America; the fruits of God’s blessings apparent to all, available to (almost) all, and proof that God has provisioned America like no other people in history. And on the following day, the Friday after Thanksgiving, the country explodes in a spasm of retail buying (so-called “Black Friday”) that marks the ceremonial beginning of the most important month of the capitalist calendar, the Christmas shopping season. Blessings, blessings and more blessings – what more proof could one want, says the civil religion of America, that God sheds his grace on America in ways unique in the world?

To those with eyes to see, this autumnal sequence reaffirms that God blesses America, at least for those who believe in America. For those who do not, and who do not believe in America (including those in religious communities for whom nationalism is not the highest value), the believers pray that they may be saved from the error of their ways. For especially in times of war, denying the tenets of national worship is both a treasonous and damnable offense according to the still-vibrant civil religion of America.