

AMERICAN RELIGION, AMERICAN PRIESTHOOD

By Gabriel Moran

America has existed since 1507 when Europeans coined the term “America.” The name referred to a continent but also to a strange place imagined as the fulfillment of a religious dream. The twofold meaning of “America” has never disappeared. When a new nation-state called itself “the United States of America,” it announced two things; first, it had a “continental destiny” so that anyone else in America had better get out of its way; second, this new entity was something other and greater than one nation among many; it was the religious realization of human history.

From its beginning, the United States of America had an American religion that differed from European religions. Sometimes that was an improvement; it softened the Calvinism that the early settlers brought with them. Later, millions of Roman Catholics and Jews showed up, much to the horror of the “real Americans” who thought, as some still do, that this is a Christian nation (=Protestant). It could have led to bitter religious wars but the physical, social, and political conditions of the nation could also bring together the diverse religions under the aegis of America. Thus, “America,” whose meaning is biblical in origin, could unite American Protestant, American Catholic and American Jewish religions even while being restrained by these traditions (Islam poses a bigger challenge). Coming to America was in effect joining a mini-ecumenical movement.

There is also a quite frightening meaning of “American religion” in which America is the religion unrestrained by any tradition. By claiming to be America itself, the fulfillment of history, the United States was a danger to the whole world. Throughout the 19th century, the United States was a minor character on the world’s stage. But starting in 1898 when the United States began exercising its manhood it had the potential to do unimaginably destructive things in the name of apocalyptic America. Fortunately, it often channeled that power into constructive things as well. But politicians and military leaders acting for America are always a danger to the world.

The United States of America immediately began to move against anyone else occupying any part of continental America. The first obstacle was the natives of America who had to be displaced by any means necessary so that the U.S. could move west until it occupied the land from sea to shining sea. Movements north and south proved to be more difficult. Two American civil wars were fought in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1812 the United States coveted the vast land of the Canadas but after fighting for three years the U.S. ended with the same northern border as it had when it began the war. In 1846 the United States more easily defeated Mexico and took almost half of its land, much to the chagrin of those who thought the United States should have taken all of the land.

In the 1860s the internal contradiction of slavery within the land of liberty led to the “war between the states,” as it is called in the southern U.S. The United States of America and the Confederate States of America fought to decide who represented the real America. The Confederate States of America lost the war but many of the heirs to their “heritage” never gave up the claim to be a true part of America. Slavery was outlawed by the thirteenth amendment (except as a punishment for crime) but a conflict remained between “the American” defined in 1790 as a free white person and the claims of other men and women to also be Americans.

Every student of “American history” learned that America was the most peace-loving country on earth. America only went to war reluctantly when free people were threatened by evil attackers. Americans did not like to fight but once they were in a war they were unstoppable. America never started a war and America never lost a war. Perhaps all those things are true of America but the history of the United States tells a quite different story. The United States has been almost constantly at war for dubious reasons and has often not succeeded. But war was the way to try unifying the United States as America.

The country started with well-regulated militias but not a standing army. When the United States declared war on Great Britain in 1812 (and nearly dismembered itself) it had 7,000 soldiers and 12 ships. When it invaded Mexico in 1846 it still had an army of 7,000. But to run an empire after 1898 it needed a large military. It sent 126,000 soldiers to the Philippines but in 4 years could not suppress the Philippine freedom fighters. After World War Part II, the U.S. seemed ready to demilitarize. By 1950 it had drastically cut the army from 11 million to 554,000 men and cut the navy budget from 50 to 6 billion dollars. But as Secretary of State Dean Acheson said, “the Korean War came along just in time to lead to a quadrupling of defense spending”. It has henceforth continued to grow. The U.S. now budgets 700 billion dollars for the military – at a time that its health care is nearly the worst among developed nations, its bridges are falling down, it has no public transit outside of a few big cities, and many of its citizens are drinking poisoned water.

The United States, enveloped by the myth of America, is the most militarized country on earth. The claim that the military is under the control of civilian authority has long been fiction. Every president since Truman has been beholden to the military. It is true that there had been an attempt to keep the generals from running the country but Donald Trump has given over authority to the military. The public far from objecting is relieved that the country is in the hands of generals. For example, until Trump, the Secretary of Defense (originally Secretary of War) was a civilian. And President Obama approved of every drone killing (which did not make it moral but at least there was some control). Under Trump the military can assassinate anyone in the world that it decides is an enemy; a button is pushed in Utah or Colorado and a missile comes screaming out of the sky to obliterate everything near its target.

Mythical America locates its authority in a priestly class who are held in awe by most of the population. The military is the only institution that is trusted by a majority of U.S. people. While 70% of people believe the military, less than 20% trust Congress and even a lower percentage trust the press. It is said that the only people who “serve” to defend America are the military. The United States has soldiers in 172 countries serving to defend America. That is, the nation of the United States is not threatened in any of those countries but the idea of America has to be defended.

It is not a disparagement of soldiers and sailors to point out that millions of people “serve” the good of their city, their country and the world. They risk their lives every day. Living in a neighborhood where most of the buildings are a hundred years old, I am acutely aware that the fire departments on either side of me are defending and serving the good and saving the lives of people. I hear the siren several times each day as the firefighters risk their lives for

neighborhood, city and country. (And these people serve in many ways. The three times when I have called 911 there were firemen running up the stairs with oxygen tanks on their backs within 5 minutes).

The death of a soldier, as well as that of a police officer, a firefighter, and others in the public service, is a special occasion which should be marked with solemnity. They deserve expressions of sorrow and gratitude to their families for a life that was dedicated to the public good. Lawyers, physicians and other professionals like to talk about doing some of their work *pro bono* but the actual phrase is *pro bono publico*. All work is done for a good; the professional's claim is to do work not for private gain but for the good of public life. The professional's promise to do good for others has a religious origin and still has religious overtones. There is nothing wrong with that. But modern professions are not religions. That includes the military which employs religious language ("semper fidelis") when talking about its "service to America."

Two words that the military constantly uses are "sacred" and "sacrifice," neither of which belongs in discussions of the horrors of war and preparation for war. There is nothing sacred about the work of the military; it is gruesome stuff which admittedly may sometimes be unavoidable. And soldiers who are killed do not sacrifice their lives, a word that means "make sacred." Like all genuine professionals, soldiers intend to defend life not get themselves killed. The 343 firemen and paramedics who were killed when they rushed into the World Trade Center did not sacrifice their lives. They were trying to save lives, including their own. Their deaths were heartbreaking but they were not sacrifices. The soldier who is shot in some country that most U.S. people have never heard of is not sacrificing his life for his country; he is tragically losing his life often because of the ineptitude of some higher up in the military.

Whenever I hear a general talking about their sacred work and sacrifices I think of this passage from Ernest Hemingway's World War novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. The ambulance driver says:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, and glorious, and sacrifice. I had seen nothing sacred and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words one could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity.

Trump claimed that unlike his predecessors he always called the families of soldiers who had been killed. As a result of this false boast he was pressed into making such a call about a soldier's death in Niger but he had no idea how to do it. He asked General Kelly (because only another military person could understand) who told him what to say. Trump proceeded to call and said those words but without the pious tone that was needed. Six people heard what he said and all of them complained about his insensitivity to Myeshia Johnson, the widow of La David Johnson.

In defense, the military stepped forth in the person of John Kelly, a marine general whose son was murdered in Afghanistan. He conducted what was billed as a press conference. It consisted in a long sermon followed by a willingness to take "one or two questions." The press sat there in solemn silence as he detailed how the dead body of a soldier is treated and the reaction of the

family. He finished with a four minute tirade against a black congresswoman, Fredericka Wilson, a close friend of the grieving family. She had reported that Trump's words were not well received by the family. In the days that followed, her statement was proved to be accurate and a tape of a speech of hers that Kelly had attacked showed him to be lying.

The press completely missed the point by focusing only on Kelly's last four minutes and treated the rest of the speech as sacred words beyond criticism. They puzzled over his attack on Wilson, but that attack was integral to the speech and in some ways the main point. Kelly was not defending Trump. Kelly was defending Kelly. He said twice that he had told Trump what to say which is what Trump said (while tone deaf of course). Kelly was furious with Wilson for criticizing not only Kelly's words but the first dogma of America's military religion. Trump, repeating Kelly, said that the woman's "guy" (he did not seem to know the soldier's name) knew what he signed up for. It was almost the same phrasing that Kelly used about his own son and every soldier who makes the "ultimate sacrifice." A martyr has to freely choose the path that he or she knows may lead to his or her sacrifice.

Kelly claimed that many things used to be "sacred," including women, religion, and life. All of those things he said are no longer considered sacred but surely the death of a soldier and the grief of his family remain sacred. If the public does not understand that, it is because only 7/10 of one percent of the country is in the military. "They are the best that America has produced" so that Kelly's son and Johnson died "surrounded by the best people in the world." One might excuse such hyperbole but Kelly really meant it. Only gold star families can possibly understand the sacrifice that soldiers make. I don't doubt that soldiers are generally good people doing their best in terrible situations. They may be the best that America produces but they are not the best that the United States does.

The shocking conclusion to Kelly's performance was to take a question only from someone who knew a gold star family. More shocking was that the White House press corps meekly accepted the general's orders. As they were told the next day, it is not appropriate to debate a four star marine general. Peter Alexander had not asked for debate; he asked whether Kelly would be apologizing for his blatant lies. Kelly dismissed with contempt the demands for an apology to the black congresswoman he had maligned.