

INVISIBLE RELIGION & DIVISIVE RELIGION

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Invisible Religion

Religion in America has always been surrounded by some degree of contention. Many American colonists were Puritan refugees fleeing persecution in England. Their influence along with other Protestant values shaped the culture of the American state and of the American public. As the country aged, Protestantism remained an invisible influence on the country. Division occurred between adherents to Protestant values (whether denominationally or through the American state) and people with varying religious backgrounds as religious diversity increased throughout American history. Through American history, Protestantism remains prevalent invisibly even as American opinions of organized religion become more divisive.

Protestant invisibility dominates American culture and has had an impact in defining American culture through what appears to be “neutral” laws (Hurd and Sullivan, 2021). Whereas there is not a formally organized church that frames “American religion”, there are generally accepted standards for cultural behavior and values, visible through government actions and the promotion of cultural ideals. In 1901, Georg Jellinek (a teacher to Max Weber) argued that the ultimate source of modern ideas of human rights could be traced to radical sects of the Protestant Revolution (as cited in Bellah, 1998). Weber similarly argued, such sects “gave rise to an inalienable personal right of the governed as against any power[...]”. One can argue that the freedom of individual rights is fundamental to American government and public life. Further, American cultural norms reflect Protestant values: the moral ethic to work hard, expected impersonal and emotionless workplace norms, and individualist values. Invisible religion, as defined by Thomas Luckman (1967), is the concept that religion and belief are inherently present in all societies and part of the human condition even beyond conventional religious traditions. Invisible religion is present in the American state and amongst the American public. Also referred to as “American Christianity,” or disestablished religion, invisible religion in the United States is not generally “seen” because it can pass for secular (Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2014).

It is established organizations, defined by mandated and inherited membership, that operate separately from the approved (and invisible) “American religion”. Whereas established religion poses a threat to the American cultural status quo, disestablished religion is based on “persuasion and a free market in religious ideas” and is therefore deemed acceptable by the

American public (Hurd and Sullivan, 2021).

Salvation Army: Becoming Invisible

The history of the Salvation Army exemplifies the power of working through disestablished, invisible religion in the United States. The Salvation Army (called the Christian Mission for the first thirteen years of its existence) began in London in 1865. The organization's goal was to "conquer the world for Christ" (Winston, 2013). The Salvation Army operated in public spaces engaging in street warfare, as they called it, to gain attention and save sinners. Their aggressive approach, which included "occupy[ing] high-profile public spaces" and "invad[ing] dens of iniquity", was deemed unchristian by conventional churchgoers (Winston, 2013).

As the organization continued operations, founder William Booth realized that their belligerent strategy had little actual impact on helping people with temporal needs. When a Salvation Army branch was approved for the United States in 1880, services offered by the Army were carefully separated from evangelical zeal. For example, Booth's son and daughter-in-law began an outreach program in New York City tenements. Because they were serving Jewish people, Catholics, and native-born Protestants (who would disapprove of the militant evangelicalism of the organization's mission), the Salvation Army "soldiers" made sure to wear plain clothes in lieu of Army uniforms and did not discuss religion unless asked.

In the twentieth century, the Salvation Army was portrayed as a highly regarded charitable philanthropy by news and entertainment media in America (Winston, 2013). The shift in public opinion from seeing the organization as belligerent and offensive to nonsectarian and effective, has been attributed to the Army's relief work in the 1900 Galveston hurricane, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and World War I. Public opinion shifted as it noted the organization seemed to put "need before creed" (Winston, 2013). During the first half of the twentieth century, American news coverage occasionally referenced the organizations religious-affiliation, but decreasingly referenced their aggressive tactics.

The first century of the Salvation Army's history reinforces American disapproval of religion that is overtly visible. As the organization progressed, it realized evangelical fervor must take a backseat to charitable service. The organization did not remove itself from its Christian roots, but the Christian ethic it was founded on became folded into organizational action rather than overtly expressed. The Salvation Army learned to operate within the American confines of invisible religion to continue operations and continued to do so until the post-war era (continued discussion below).

Divisive Religion

Dissonance between established religion and invisible religion is present throughout American history. First, when the colonies split with the English Monarchy, the founders rejected the formal church-state relationship that defined the monarchical system. Later, an influx of Catholic immigrants were seen as foreign threats to American life. In fact, some historians see

anti-Catholic sentiment as being an integral part of shaping the American identity, seeing it as a tacit assumption that has informed our character, institutions, and history (Schwartz, 1984). William Cavanaugh (2009) argues the 1940s were a critical point in the history of dissonance between American religion and established religion.

Not only is invisible Protestantism a foundation of the American state, but American patriotism itself has become a sort of religion (Cavanaugh, 2009). The call for unity, largely coming from religious groups in the pre-World War I period, was replaced by a call for unity from the American state in the post-war period. Violence and divisiveness that is criticized when coming from religious groups, is excused when perpetuated by the state. This can be observed frequently in U.S. foreign policy. A general acceptance of violence and intolerance by the American state, for example, contrasts strongly with U.S. foreign policy condemnation toward international (and often, non-Christian) religion for being violent, coercive, and sexist (Hurd and Sullivan, 2021).

During the 1940s, dissonance between established and disestablished religion reached a breaking point. American perception of religion began to shift overall toward a perception of established religion being violent or divisive. Before this period, religion was generally seen by the state as a unitive force that held society together. Then, the state, through the Supreme Court, began to interpret religion in America as divisive.

The Supreme Court was instrumental in building a narrative that religion posed a threat to American public life (Cavanaugh, 2009). It was implied that only the state could unify people properly. The Supreme Court interpreted religion, particularly established religion, as a threat to American order. Therefore implying that established religion, beyond the Protestant morals and values that define the American psyche (see: Invisible Religion), are directly at odds with the goals of the American state.

In one method of building this narrative, the Supreme Court signaled its view that established religion was divisive through new and increased use of the phrase, “separation of church and state” in its decisions. In 1947, *Everson v. Board of Education* established Thomas Jefferson’s assumed (and debated) contribution of the phrase “separation of church and state” to the U.S. Constitution as judicial precedent. The phrase, originally written in a letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association, has become a more significant part of American public life over time. Despite its common invocation as a defense for religious liberty and its association with the religious liberty clause of the First Amendment, the phrase was likely not intended to be interpreted as such (Hamburger, 2002).

The idea of separating church and state, as it is generally considered now, did not become popularized until the mid-nineteenth century. Historically, there were two main groups that championed the phrase to be conflated with the constitution: Nativist Protestants particularly hostile to the rise of Catholic immigrants and secondly, theological liberals and the growing secularist (see: Secularization) movement eager for the government to be free from any specific religious influence. Neither group found success in advocating for a specific

constitutional amendment that ensured separation of church and state, but rather changed tactics to argue that such separation was guaranteed by the constitution all along. This belief has been perpetuated by the general American public and is frequently invoked by lawmakers and pundits.

Salvation Army: Inviting Division

The increased reference to the church-state separation interpretation in the 1940s, affected the Salvation Army's service as well. Until the post-war period, the Salvation Army, at least publicly, had successfully managed to shield the religious zeal of its mission from the public. The Army developed a relationship with the United States federal government, receiving federal funding for some of its work. Their ability to maintain the church-state separation standard set by the government, allowed them to receive federal funding. The Army learned to quiet its aggressive missionary tactics and prioritize direct service actions in the first century of its existence to operate within the American status-quo. On one hand, this furthered the outwardly presenting secularization of the organization. However, the Army maintained some values that were at odds with Federal mandates.

The media began to increasingly report on religion and religious institutions in the 1960s and 1970s, the Salvation Army's evangelical commitments resurfaced (Winston, 2013). Whereas the Salvation Army managed to avoid the divisive religion pushback observed in the 1940s by adopting invisible American religion, when religion became a topic of public interest the Army's overt and "aggressive" (as generally perceived by the public) Christian values were exposed.

In the post-war era, the Salvation Army became embroiled with accusations of discrimination. Unsurprisingly, the Salvation Army's conservative values were at odds with the new spirit of the 1960s. The Salvation Army seemed increasingly conservative to a country focused on changing social mores. At first, the Salvation Army's culturally traditional system of beliefs was generally ignored. However, in the 1980s their conservatism began to clash with state and public support. Receiving wide attention, was the Army's opposition to any union outside of heterosexual marriage. The organization, with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York and an Orthodox Jewish group, sued when, in 1980, New York City Mayor, Edward Koch, signed an executive order barring discrimination on the basis of race, religion, disability, age, sex, or sexual preference. Later, in 1998, the Army turned down a contract with the City of San Francisco because it would require them to offer domestic partnership benefits to unmarried and homosexual employees. (Winston, 2013). Following in the 21st century, the Salvation Army continues to receive negative attention, particularly for what is called its anti-gay agenda. Despite negative media coverage, the Salvation Army has remained one of the nation's top charitable fundraisers.

Moving Forward

A growing tide of political agents have pushed back against the historic integration of Protestantism with the American government. This can be observed in politicians resisting the

patriotic invocation of God, being sworn in on a Bible, and the increased desire of the American people to have representatives from non-Protestant Christian traditions. This trend may suggest positive developments for the marginalization of religion in institutional philanthropy. However, there also seems to be an increase in the state's desire to keep up with social mores, which often are not reflected by more conservative religious organizations. This is observable through the Salvation Army's experience with church-state relationships becoming increasingly negative after having survived the first century of their existence as a secular-facing organization. Despite the Salvation Army's public and state scrutiny, they are still a highly successful fundraising body. Have they maintained enough religious "neutrality" to survive? For the immediate future, the answer seems to be yes. They have Protestant roots after all.

As the public increasingly seeks a pluralist country, support for the traditionally marginalized established religions (especially non-Western, non-Christian religions) will likely increase. The existence of belief-systems is inevitable and religious diversity is on the rise. Beliefs will not go away, nor will established religion. The challenge faith-based organizations face moving forward is based on America's invisible religion and historical resistance to anything that opposes it. Organizations that can adapt to American religion, will be able to be successful as philanthropic institutions.

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