The Promises and Pitfalls of Moral Formation in American Civil Religion

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Service-learning and community service seem like unambiguously positive things to do. This article argues that, while that is often the case, there can also be unintended consequences of service that may undermine the very goals that service intends to achieve. The article focuses on the United States and the role that service plays in American Civil Religion. The article traces out a short history of secular non-military history, its relationship to other aspects of US culture, and its emergence in recent years as a key part of character formation in American Civil Religion. The author suggests that traditional religions have avoided the pitfalls of an over emphasis on works with a parallel emphasis on spirituality, and the article asks whether such service in a secular context can avoid the unintended consequences associated with it.

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Several years ago I invited members of an Old Order Mennonite community to speak to an Introduction to Christianity class that I was teaching. During the question and answer period that followed the lecture, one student commented that he had never been proselytized by members of an Old Order community, and he asked why there was not much proselytizing from Old Order communities. One of the elders of the Mennonite group answered that they believed that God called everyone, that salvation was in God's hands, that they hoped to always be proselytizing by

example, and that the individual's response to God's call was his or her own responsibility. Moreover, he added, their community was very sensitive to the risks of proselytizing: if in proselytizing one turned another person away from God, then one bore a certain responsibility oneself for that lost soul. To me, this elder's response displayed a profound humility and awareness of the risks of unintended consequences. It also showed very clearly this Mennonite community's deep seated faith in a God whose call and whose good manifested itself in God's own time and with an allure that could not be matched by the voices of humans.

Although the comments of this Mennonite elder were related to proselytization and this article is related to processes of "formation" in American Civil Religion, they share a common concern with unintended consequences. In this article, I argue that American Civil Religion, like all religions, seeks to form the character of its members (and, particularly, its youth). Further, I argue that over the last hundred years, and especially in the last thirty years, this process of character formation has increasingly promoted "service" to others as one of the means by which citizen formation is accomplished. I agree with many teachers and activists that a focus on service to others can be wonderful, but I worry that too great an emphasis on service, especially forced service (whether forced *de jure,* for example through curricular requirements, or *de facto,* as something everyone feels obliged to do to compete in the marketplace), without a reciprocal emphasis on spirituality, can have the unintended consequence of leaving some youth cynical, malformed, and less connected to the world around them.[1] This is, I think, a serious risk, especially in the United States.

To put this in Biblical terms, I think it is worthwhile to keep in mind that service in the absence of some form of spirituality quickly becomes the kind of "dead works" referred to in Hebrews 6: 1, and which tragically subvert the very goals they set out to achieve. For me, this undermining of the good is a classic example of the Christian notion of "sin" or, in Greek, *hamartia* (often translated as "missing the mark"). Service aims for the right thing, but when disconnected from spirituality, it "misses the mark." This notion of sin is not new to Christianity, and I think it is best expressed in one of my favorite passages from Paul (Romans 7:19) when he says, "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

1 To put this in more theological terms, "service" typically aims at con-version, or turning someone towards the face of the other and God. The risk I am mentioning is the risk of per-version, or turning someone away (even unintentionally) from the face of the other and God.

The question, of course, is what sort of spirituality refocuses us on the mark and sustains us in a world where everything can be corrupted. And even more practically, how can that spirituality be created and linked to service if the service one does is conducted in a formally secular environment such as the US, where the the notion of *sin* is not included in public discussion?

Service as I am thinking about it has a long and detailed history in the US that stretches back into the earliest years of the colonies and intersects with American ideas of volunteerism, notions of individual freedom, Calvinist verses Arminian construals of the will, the practical necessities of the early American frontier experience, and a sense of mission to others that gets filtered through notions of American exceptionalism. My interest here is specifically in the relationship of "service" as mission to "service" as exemplary of and formative of American character. I am using "service" here to refer service that is at least ostensibly secular. In this article I am focusing solely on four historical points in the development of what I think is a trend. Interestingly, three of these historical points directly involve the Philippines.

The first point is at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, when a set of concerns about the loss of American character combined with a sense of American exceptionalism and mission to promote a variety of calls for a particular kind of service. This moment coincides with a period of American expansion and imperialism, the culmination of which was the Philippine War. As various scholars have noted, the entire premise for the war with Spain and the subsequent war in the Philippines was framed in terms of American (and Anglo-Saxon) moral duty and service. The second historical point is the Thomasite mission, well-known in the Philippines for its role in Philippine education, but less known in the US. In terms of US history, as far as I can tell, the Thomasites are the first major non-military overseas mission run by the US government. Again, while the Thomasites individually participated for a variety of reasons, the mission itself seems to have been framed in terms of patriotic duty and service. The third historical point, sixty years later but directly linked to and partially modeled on the Thomasite mission, is the US Peace Corps and the plethora of secular service and voluntary organizations that followed from it, many linked directly to the first director of the Peace Corps (and architect of President Johnson's War on Poverty, Sargent Shriver). These include the wide range of "corps" that we find in the USA today such as the Peace Corps, Job Corps,

Senior Corps, Freedom Corps, Citizen Corps, and AmericCorps, among many others. Finally, and as a further development of service as a part of American Civil Religion, over the past 30 years, politicians and educators in the United States have turned to voluntary service, more recently through community engagement and service-learning programs, as an important part of education. These programs all have a central focus on providing assistance to others; but beyond that, they are also programs through which we train or form our youth to a particular type of citizenship and character.

At its best, service focuses on others, creates new relationships with others, forces those who serve to witness, learn about, and address some of the deep social and structural failures of our society, and provides positive practical benefits, including characterological benefits, to those who serve and are served. However, while these positive benefits can be recognized, this trend towards character formation through service in American Civil Religion also has an ironic dimension that exploration with a religious studies lens, or more specifically a theological lens, can help point out and perhaps address. The ironic dimension that I am referring to presents a risk to American Civil Religion that has been pointed to before, most directly by Reinhold Niebuhr (1973) in his classic, *The Irony of American History*. For Niebuhr, tragedy defines the situation we face when we consciously embrace evil in order to achieve a greater good (he cites as an example the development of nuclear weapons to halt the spread of communism). Irony, in contrast, defines the situation we are in when an unconscious weakness undermines our goals (for example, when a naïve belief in our own pure motives blinds us to the harm we might inflict on others). Of course, if irony implies responsibility for some unconscious weakness, then the more aware of that weakness we become, the more our responsibility becomes manifest and the more the ironic dimension of our history devolves into tragedy. Similarly, the choice to believe oneself innocent or to remain unconscious in the face of overwhelming evidence is its own tragic embrace of evil. Unless we address the risks inherent in the choices we make about how to promote service, we risk shifting our situation from an ironic one, in which our culpability is mitigated by hope, into a tragic or even cynical responsibility.[2] And the problem with tragic (or cynical) responsibility is that it offers little opportunity for growth or hope, and thus it undermines the very purpose of what we have set out to do.

2 While tragedy embraces a known evil for the sake of what is perceived to be a larger good, cynicism is not even certain of the value of the good.

For example, I would caution that the more recent turn to service in the US risks undermining itself through its very breadth and in its slow shift from a voluntary to a required endeavor. When service is required, *de jure* or *de facto*, a dimension of coercion is introduced to service which may undermine its goals (see, for example, several chapters in Rimmerman (ed.) 2009, in which some students, albeit a minority, have negative reactions to required service). Or, again, when service is required in a formally secular place like the US, it is impossible to embed or splice a serious historically informed or communally developed spiritual dimension into it; thus, required service includes too few moments of sustained reflection or questioning, or the type of reflection and questioning that are included are limited to the individualistic sorts of reflection that a secular and consumer society promotes. It is only fair for me to point out that proponents of service-learning are aware of this difficulty, and they are often quite intentional about including self-reflection and questioning as part of service. However, the very nature of the way service is broadening limits how students reflect and question.

At its worst, the US can substitute for serious spirituality, which always includes moments of doubt and pain, a falsely optimistic sense of mission that is rooted in American exceptionalism and power. It is precisely this exceptionalism and power that Reinhold Niebuhr cautioned us about. Always justifying ourselves by our intended aim for the good, we often undermine our own goals and, worse, fail to recognize our faults and complicity in unjust situations. For him, America's sense of innocence and persistent focus on good intentions had the potential to be the very definition of tragedy: a recognized evil that is embraced for a larger good. Niebuhr cautioned us to view America ironically rather than tragically insofar as irony recognized points beyond itself to a greater truth than the failure of tragedy; yet, these moments of ironic revelation are not apparent without a lens through which to see them, a lens which American Civil Religion on its own does not provide.

In other words, without moments of deep reflection, and especially reflection that goes beyond what an individual might do on his/her own and additionally taps into historical and communal insights, I think the opportunities that open with service are severely diminished. In the past, such lack of spirituality was less important insofar as people had other resources, including specifically religious resources, available to them in their private lives; but with secularization and decreasing participation in

organized religions, these sources are no longer attractive to our students. Thus, while the short term goals of making our youth help others and engaging with our community are admirable, in the long term I think we need to be on guard to ensure that the secular and pragmatic logic of the US does not transform the promise of voluntary service into a requirement for service and, from there, an affirmation of the status quo or a cynical way to gain credentials for oneself. The great German sociologist Max Weber famously wrote in *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* that the inner worldly asceticism of the calvinist, worn as a "light cloak" to stave off doubts about salvation, was transformed in competitive capitalism into an "iron cage" that required everyone to work in the same way or perish. Similarly, I am afraid that the call to service, originally a "light cloak" meant to help others and to enrich and deepen a young person destined for citizenship, might become an "iron cage," necessary for admission to college, for graduation, and for future employment, but now undertaken for purely pragmatic reasons. Without a link to spirituality in some form, my fear is that service will be done for cynical reasons and reinforce our inability to see the face of God in others and in ourselves.

In a sense I want to warn you in advance that this article is incomplete, for I do not have a solution. One of my research interests is what sorts of solutions might be possible. I have a strong conviction that the only guard against a parsimonious sort of pragmatic service is to ground service in a kind of spirituality. But I am not sure what sort of spirituality is possible for a secular world. Gustavo Gutierrez (1995), the great Peruvian Liberation Theologian, titled his most famous book on spirituality *We drink from our own wells*. In that book he was addressing the spirituality of a theology of liberation which starts with an active commitment to the poor, but which also recognizes that commitment is not done either in isolation from a community, nor without the difficulty of dark nights of the soul in solitude, in the desert, in the wilderness. The Christian community has resources for this passage through the wilderness and even thrives on it; insofar as God is for Christians decisively revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it is clear that trial in the wilderness, dread in Gesthemane, doubt on the cross, and lack of recognition on the way to Emmaus must be included in Christian spirituality. But American Civil Religion leaves spirituality to individuals to find, if they want it, like a pair of shoes, selected according to style and fit, among hundreds of other shoes available. And yet it is

precisely this sort of individualistic spirituality that creates the sorts of problems I want to point out.

Perhaps in the United States the only option is for Civil Religion to take other religious traditions more seriously. Some US scholars, such as Stephen Prothero (2008) in his book *Religious* Literacy, have proposed integrating religion into US curricula so that the link to a religious past and "communities of memory" will not be broken. His proposal is to treat religions in school just as any other cultural, literary, or historical phenomena are treated. He proposes a required curriculum that includes one semester of comparative religious education and one semester of Bible as literature. However, I do not think his approach will work precisely because secular courses about religion strip religion of its spiritual dimension; in his approach, it would be forbidden to talk about meaning or doctrine in the texts in the classroom, to question contradictions in the text, or to use critical scholarship in reading. Thus, exploration and discovery, doubt and risk, all of which are key parts of spirituality, would be forbidden.

Still, at this point I do not have any other solution. Perhaps for Silliman University my message is simply not to lose the relationship of your university and religion. Maintain its spiritual foundation.

CIVIL RELIGION

Before turning to the four historical points I mentioned, I need to say a few words about Civil Religion in general and American Civil Religion in particular. My point here is not only to describe what I mean by civil religion but also to suggest that in exploring American Civil Religion we should attend also to the practices associated with it, not just with its beliefs or other formal components. I think that when we recognize that civil religion is comprised not only of beliefs and rituals but also other practices, a door opens which allows us to see the production of civil religion in the US in much more subtle ways.

The theory of civil religion goes back at least to Plato's *Republic (1980)*. In practical terms, civil religion is much older, with origins shrouded in the original unity of religion and politics in the ancient history of early city-states. It was Jean Jaques Rousseau (1782)--in book 4, chapter 8, of *The Social Contract*--who gave us the term "civil religion." For Rousseau,

civil religion was simply a loose set of beliefs which it would be beneficial for the state if citizens were to hold in order to form a dedicated social body. These doctrines were loose and were explicitly not to conflict with other privately held religions, which Rousseau thought that the state should leave strictly to individual belief. Among the dogmas Rousseau saw as necessary were "The existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent, foresighted and providential divinity; the afterlife; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; [and,] the sanctity of the social contract and the laws." For Rousseau, civil religion could be constructed intentionally, as an ideological glue that reinforced the structural integrity of a society.

Formally speaking, then, civil religion is the religion of a civic body that functions to give unity to that body. Thus, the term civil religion has close ties with one of the etymological roots of the word religion: *religare* or, to bind together. The specific content of any civil religion depends on where it is found and what, exactly, binds people together. Like most foundational terms in the study of religion, the precise dimensions of civil religion are something that people disagree about, and even the best-known scholars of civil religion, like Robert Bellah, have used the term in different senses and with different purposes.

For example, in his 1967 *Daedalus* article, "Civil Religion in America," Bellah contrasted private religious beliefs with a parallel set of common religious orientations shared by a majority of Americans. Bellah wrote:

> Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs [in the United States], there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion. (Bellah 1967: 100)

He continued to say that this religious dimension has its own seriousness and integrity, and that it requires the same care in understanding as any other religion does.

In his book, *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah (1975) provided a more concise, though perhaps more widely applicable and thus controversial definition: civil religion is "that religious dimension, found I think in the life of every people, through which it interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality" (p.3) In this definition, Bellah shifted from highlighting the formal qualities of civil religion, like rituals and other practices, beliefs, myths, and symbols, and instead emphasized civil religion as a meaning-making process. That is, according to the latter definition, civil religion includes the process by which a nation reflects on transcendent foundations in order to make sense of its historical reality. This latter definition implicitly considers civil religion to be a changing reality in the life of a nation. Its focus will change as a society changes the way it makes sense of itself and the issues it must grapple with. In the US, for example, Civil Religion has changed dramatically in the last 150 years as the nation has had to make sense of what it means to shift from relative isolation to being a superpower. Other nations, such as the Philippines, have to deal with other issues such as how to unify a variety of islands, languages and cultures, and how to make sense of independence, the lack of hope that might come from poverty, or even issues like corruption which threaten to undermine faith in the civic project.

For Bellah, all people and all nations have a sacred dimension. I think in this sense he is just affirming what Emile Durkheim had said about religion as a society's projection of itself made sacred. I know next to nothing about the history and culture of the Philippines, but even a quick glance tells me that there are shared elements of culture that, if not viewed as sacred, are treated as if they are sacred. Whereas the United States might see a figure such as Abraham Lincoln or John F. Kennedy are in some way sacred, in the Philippines the figure of José Rizal, Manuel Roxas, or Benigno Aquino might be considered parallel figures. In the US, documents, such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, or the Gettysburg Address, or even literature like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, convey a sense of what is considered sacred in the nation. Perhaps *Noli me Mangere* is such a text here. Even the meanings which we attribute to historical events, such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March on Washington or the People Power Revolution in the Philippines, contribute to the way we make meaningful and sacred the civic institutions in which we participate. Civil religion, then, is meant to be a term with very wide applicability but which takes on its specific characteristics in particular places.

As I read Bellah, the term civil religion can be used both descriptively and normatively, and the relationship between the descriptive sense and the normative sense is fluid. When I say that the term civil religion can be used descriptively, I mean that the term can be used to describe the sacred dimensions of social and political bodies. When I say that the term can be used normatively, I mean that civil religion not only describes what people perceive to be sacred dimension of civic bodies, but it is also something that can be used to form and shape civil bodies by creating a shared sense of the sacred. And when I say that the relationship between the descriptive and normative sense of the term is fluid, I mean that describing what people perceive to be a sacred dimension of something frequently slides into proclaiming the sacred dimension of something. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz articulates this idea in his seminal article, *Religion as a Cultural System*, in which he clarifies that symbols can be models of a social reality (that is reflective of it), but also models for a social reality (that is blueprints for how a reality should be). In his book *Discourse and the Construction of* Society, Bruce Lincoln (1989), borrows from and builds on Geertz (1973) by showing us that models of reality as expressed in forms of discourse like narratives, actions or taxonomic schemes compete with one another to construct, maintain, or reconstruct particular versions of the world. That is, he explains and provides examples of how discourse can traverse the descriptive/normative boundary. Ultimately, I am most interested in civil religion in its normative dimension, as a set of ideas and practices that are used as part of a civic project that articulates a shared sacred dimension of collective identity.

As Bellah articulated it in *The Broken Covenant*, the transcendent reality through which Americans interpret their historical experience is constituted by a tense relationship between conceptions of individual freedom, on the one hand, and concepts of the public good, on the other. Beyond this tension of individual and public good lies a foundational sense of "internal covenant," or shared commitment and purpose that appears throughout American history, a sense of mission which Bellah finds embedded in public documents such as the Inaugural Address of President Kennedy:

> The whole address can be understood as only the most recent statement of a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out

> God's will on earth. This was the motivating spirit of those who founded America, and it has been present in every generation since. (Bellah 1975: 101)

In other words, for better or worse, American Civil Religion presents America as a chosen nation: chosen sometimes in the sense of being elected for special benefits but also elected for special purposes and thus carrying special responsibilities. It is for this reason that America's wars, for example, are so often understood internally as redemptive missions.

In *The Broken Covenant* Bellah argues that the American notion of the public good, and the covenant that binds us to the public good, is broken, and the individualistic stream of American Civil Religion has come to dominate our lives to the detriment of our common project as a nation. In other words, as a nation we no longer seek to carry out God's will on earth, but rather, we simply pursue our own individual ends. As Bellah (1975) put it, "Today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell" (p. 142). The task before us, he wrote, was to create a new civil religion, something which he thought Americans had done at certain key moments in the past.

Writing in the 1970s, I think Bellah was too close to the transformation that was taking place in American Civil Religion to be able to see it. What he saw was the cynicism that was emerging from a faltering belief in American ideology after a rise in consciousness about race and class in the US, the death of important political and civil rights leaders like John and Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr, the failing war in Vietnam, and the Presidential scandal of Watergate. From where we stand now, however, I would argue that there were even then emerging dimensions of civil religion focusing on the public good that have now come to prominence and are mainstream.

My colleague at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Craig Rimmerman (2009), had dealt with this change from the perspective of political science in his book *The New Citizenship*. Against those who saw our political landscape as a field of growing political apathy because of declining rates of voter participation and declining activity in formal political parties, he saw student involvement in social activism as a new way of being a citizen. He saw the growth of courses in "civil engagement" and "service-learning" as a reflection of this new citizenship. From the perspective of civil religion, I saw this increase in social involvement as a rejection of the old way of

"thinking" about American Civil Religion and the embrace of new way of "doing" American civil religion, and I would suggest that the activities of service and civil engagement about which he spoke can also be seen as a practical dimension of American Civil Religion, dedicated to what we could equally call "citizenship formation," or in religious terms, moral formation for the role of being a good citizen.

In order to see how this formative aspect of Civil Religion works, I think we need an additional approach. Bellah showed us how to read critical texts as sources for an American civil religion that reflects and conveyed a metahistorical sense of the nation (see also Cherry, 1998); other scholars of civil religion, such as Conrad Cherry (1969), had focused on the ritual dimension of Civil religion, demonstrating how civic life like institutional religions has its ritual behaviors (for example, pledging allegiance to the flag), sacred sense of time (e.g., national holidays), sacred spaces (e.g., national memorials), rites of passage (e.g., secular pilgrimages in schools), and even its own aesthetics. Still others, such as Ernest Lee Tuveson (1980) or Richard T. Hughes (2004) might point to the narrative dimensions of American Civil Religion that are not only taught as authoritative discourses in history or in civic classes but are also taught unofficially, as Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence (1958) pointed out, through television shows, movies, books, art, and other cultural artifacts.

These are all important dimensions of Civil Religion, but one dimension of American Civil Religion that I think has been left unexplored by scholars is the dimension in which ideas are translated into practical activities meant to shape character. In theology we would say that this is the dimension of "practical theology". Drawing on practical theology as an analogy, I am suggesting that we attend not only to beliefs or rituals in American Civil Religion, but also to those practical activities and strategies which are undertaken to form those who participate in a religion.

In order to explore this practical dimension of American Civil Religion, I propose a turn to an archeology of the practice of non-military secular service. In other words, for the remainder of this article, I want to look not at speeches or rituals or stories, but rather at some of the places where the conception of what America is has been inscribed in practices of secular service. I want to emphasize that I am not being naïve here: I know very well that I am looking at a very small slice of US history and that what I am describing here is historically subordinate to, for example, the military role

of the US. However, I think this emphasis on service as a reflection of and model for a particular kind of American character is growing in importance.

Some scholars might say that this strand of practical activity is a relatively recent phenomenon, but I would suggests that its roots go back far into American history. The early 20th century essay by William James (1990), *The Moral Equivalent of War*, is often understood as the foundational essay arguing that Americans should inculcate virtues through a national service work program. In that essay, James, a pacifist who was a both an anti-imperialist specifically with regard to the Philippine war, argued that for all of its bad characteristics, war did inculcate valuable virtues, including courage and bravery, self-sacrifice, teamwork, ingenuity and resilience. The national service program he proposed was to be a morally formative experience equivalent to war; in other words, James rejected the idea of war as immoral, but he thought we still needed a functional equivalent of war to form youth that have the positive moral qualities inspired by war. His essay is widely regarded as the touchstone for many future service programs, including the US Peace Corps.

James may have been the most well-known person to propose a national service program, but I think the timing and impetus for his suggestion can be traced back to four strands of history that come together at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century: in one way or another, all of these strands emphasized either the need to form, through particular activities, an American youth that was losing its character, OR the value of extending American values through practical work in the world that would also create a wholesome American character.

The first strand can be found in a religious and theological movement generally known as the Social Gospel movement or alternatively as the Third Great Awakening. Led by leaders like Josiah Strong, Walter Rauschenbusch and Charles Monroe Sheldon, this group sought to enact the Gospel message in service to others, particularly in America's growing cities and particularly with regard to social issues like education, urban decay and alcoholism. The Social Gospel movement was a progressive movement in the sense that it sought a cure to social ills through activity in the name of Jesus, and it believed that human beings were empowered to do so. Sheldon (2009), for example, coined the phrase "What would Jesus do?" in his book, *In His Steps*, where the phrase was meant as a prompt for Christians to use in thinking about social issues. Although the movement was not at its core bellicose or

imperialistic, some of the key promoters of the movement, such as Josiah Strong and Senator Albert Beveridge, did promote the social gospel in racial and ethnocentric terms. When it came to American activity abroad, Strong and his supporters advocated something akin to a "white man's burden" to spread what they understood to be Anglo-Saxon values and democracy to the rest of the world.

At roughly the same time as the Social Gospel, a related strand, known as muscular Christianity, sought to rescue Christianity from what it perceived to be an over-sentimentalized and feminized Victorian Christianity. Since at least the time of Schleiermacher at the start of the 19th century, Protestant Christianity had focused on feeling and emotion as the core of the Christian connection to God. In reaction, Muscular Christianity (Putney, 2001) sought the connection to God in an active life, and as part of that active life subscribers to muscular Christianity sought to inculcate in individuals what they understood to be the Christian notions of virtue, including the idea of sportsmanship and fair play, through gender specific physical activity. It is to this movement that we owe the widespread growth and popularity of the YMCA organization, not to mention the engineered sports which made that growth possible such as basketball and volleyball. While the YMCA too is a movement that brought many benefits, it is important to note that it also emerged from a milieu particularly concerned with the loss of American vitality that it saw taking place in American cities. Not only was life in the cities understood to limit physically the activity and growth of children, and thus leave them physically and morally stunted, but cities were also the location of immigrant groups, Roman Catholics in particular, that were perceived to threaten the Protestant foundations of America. Insofar as mainline American Protestantism at this time saw Roman Catholicism as corrupt and over-sentimentalized, muscular Christianity sought to advance what they understood to be countervailing virtues of strength, self-reliance, honesty and toughness.

A third strand is found in the notion of the Strenuous Life (Roosevelt, 1998), as promulgated by the President of the US, Theodore Roosevelt. Along with muscular Christianity, the Strenuous Life put forth the idea that hard work, especially physical work, was the foundation for a good life. In the US we owe our wonderful national parks to this idea, for Roosevelt specifically wanted to preserve wilderness as a place where the American identity was formed. But the Strenuous Life had its negative consequences

too. The Strenuous Life argued that what was true for the individual life was also especially true for the national life. In his collection of essays titled *The Strenuous Life*, Roosevelt (1998) singles out the role of US in the Philippines for special consideration. For him, it would have been a sign of cowardice, weakness and infirmity of the US had shrunk from involvement in the Philippines, and instead he argued for a full engagement, starting with establishing the sovereignty of the American flag on Philippine territory.

A fourth strand that contributes to the emergence of secular voluntary service at the end of the 19th and 20th century, and which lies behind the other strands, is best represented in the famous Turner Thesis articulated by Fredrick Jackson Turner (1893). The Turner thesis famously announced the American frontier was closed. Turner argued that the American character was formed in large part through encounter with the frontier, thus the closing of the frontier meant that a new American Character would come forth. Many scholars have pointed out that with the end of the continental frontier, America increasingly saw its mission abroad.

These strands all contribute to a growing importance being placed on practical activity as a way of forming youth, projecting and articulating a sense of Americanness. Clearly there is no one single instant when service comes to the fore as part of the American Civil religion, but here I want to turn to the three points which I think are indicative of how service has functioned: the Thomasites, the Peace Corps, and the growth of the service-learning movement.

At the turn of the 20th century, in the midst of the Philippine-American War, and even before James' essay, the United States sponsored what, as far as I can tell, was the first US non-military service mission abroad. I am sure that the history of the Thomasites is well-known to you. Named after the USS Thomas, the transport ship on which the majority of the Thomasites arrived, the Thomasites were a group of US educators recruited by the US government to implement the ideal of the American public education and American virtues in the Philippines. The commissioner of the Islands, and future President of the United States, William Henry Taft, was clear that the educational mission was an extension of the military mission, and in fact, the first teachers were soldiers. However, conquest was not the sole goal of the mission. The goal was to civilize through education.

The Thomasites were recruited from over a hundred colleges in the United States, and at their peak there were over 1,000 Thomasites in the

Philippines. Part of the mission of the Thomasites was to "work themselves out of a job" by training Filipino teachers, and to a large extent they were successful. The Thomasites had a formal curriculum and formal duties, though the curriculum changed dramatically as the education system was modified to local needs, but perhaps more important than the classes that the Thomasites taught were the values that they were supposed to display and model. Thomasites were not supposed to respect the status system that had grown during Spanish occupation, and equality, through shared work in projects like school gardens, was also one of the virtues that Thomasites were supposed to display. It has been interesting to me as I have travelled past many schools in the Philippines to see that these values are still prominent in Philippine education: often schools have sayings and slogans written into their mission statements that make clear that education is not just about knowledge, but is also about inculcating moral values such as thrift, honesty, and hard work.

Officially speaking, the Thomasites were part of the civil service, but I am including them as a moment in American voluntary service for two reasons. First, they received low pay, were expected to live with the people whom they served, and were often alone in their posts. The Thomasites' main duty was teaching, but given the circumstances in the provinces, their duties also extended to areas like health care and sanitation especially in the smallpox and cholera outbreaks at the turn of the century. They were encouraged to volunteer their services as needed. Many of the Thomasites were profoundly religious, and some even had missionary ambitions, but as a work of the US government, proselytization was strictly forbidden; thus, whatever missionary activity that they did had to be done through modeling. Secondly, the Thomasites are generally understood to be forerunners of the main 1960s US overseas voluntary service, the Peace Corps. Interestingly, the 50th anniversary commemorative book of US Peace Corps in the Philippines even starts with a chapter on the Thomasites and the legacy they left for the Peace Corps.

Other service opportunities followed the Thomasites, though most foreign programs, such as the American Red Cross and the American Field Service were associated with war, and domestic programs were tied to jobs programs during the Great Depression. The 1940s became an interruption to the growth of non-military and non-war related service opportunities largely because of the Second World War which mobilized the entire country.

The next major growth in non-military service in the US happened in 1960, when Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy picked up on a proposal that had been circulating for several years and, at an impromptu speech at the University of Michigan proposed the creation of a volunteer corps to serve overseas as part of his New Frontier program. The Peace Corps was founded fewer than 100 days into John F. Kennedy's presidency. By 1963, only two years into the program, there were 7,300 volunteers which rose to 15,000 in 1966, the high-water mark for volunteers in the field. Since that time the numbers have varied from 5,380 in 1982 to about 8,000 today. At this point nearly one quarter of a million Americans have served in the Peace Corps.

The official mission of the Peace Corps was articulated in three goals which have guided the program from its start. These goals are as follows:

1. To help the people of interested countries and areas in meeting their needs for trained manpower;
2. To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and
3. To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

Although it has always been important for Peace Corps volunteers to provide technical assistance where they serve, the last two goals make it clear that the Peace Corps was also a sort of cultural exchange program, attempting to introduce other peoples to Americans who were not part of the official diplomatic corps. In this sense, the Peace Corps marked a sharp shift from the diplomacy of the 1950s and earlier, which shocked and horrified the nation when it was presented in the extremely popular 1958 novel *The Ugly American*. Perhaps more significantly, the Peace Corps marked a generational shift from the World War Two generation into Kennedy's vision of the "New Frontier," a frontier beyond the American West and into which America would push in an effort to spread its wealth and well-being. The new Peace Corps volunteers were the new pioneers, not intending to conquer the rest of the world but intending to serve it by bringing American ingenuity and practical know-how and showing the world the pragmatic pioneer spirit of the real America. The early Peace Corps training reflected the clean-cut rugged individualism that the government wanted in volunteers: extensive

psychological testing to eliminate volunteers with communist tendencies, hands on technical training to augment the volunteer's practical skills, rigorous physical training and survival training, including solo survival expeditions, to make sure volunteers could be independent, and the most thorough language training programs that had existed up to that time in the US.

As I wrote at the start of this article, I think it would be a mistake to see programs like the Thomasite program and the Peace Corps cynically as simple attempts to curry domestic and international favor or to push forward American influence. They are complicated endeavors, reflections of their time and efforts to create a particular sort of America, and we can certainly criticize them for being narrowly conceived or inadequate to the tasks set for them. But precisely because of what they attempt to do, they show us something about American Civil Religion that we do not see when we look at speeches or national rituals: in an effort to introduce others to American values and so-called real Americans, these programs must articulate a sense of what a real American is. Even more importantly, in describing what a real American is, they also proclaim and then create Americans in that same image.

Before turning to the last historical point in the development of service as a dimension of American Civil Religion, I want to point out two common traits that the Thomasites and Peace Corps volunteers share. First, both groups serve voluntarily. Second, both required relatively long-term commitments (3 years for Thomasites, 2 years minimum for Peace Corps volunteers). Those long-term commitments meant that the volunteers were ready from the start for difficulties and for working through them. When one reads the first person narratives produced by the volunteers, one is impressed with how quickly those who came to serve are receiving aid from others. In the course of living in a new place for an extended period of time, they became vulnerable and needed help from others. Thomasites and Peace Corps volunteers both became sick; both found themselves at the mercy of those around them, for housing, for food, for local-knowledge, for credit, for health care, for companionship. This moment, in which the server is served and in which the supposedly more powerful finds him or herself needing the help of the supposedly less powerful, is one of the distinctive traits of these sorts of long term service programs. Ironically, then, the very traits of intrepid and rugged individualism, mission to others, and know-how,

are what got overturned in these service experiences. Yes, the Thomasites and the Peace Corps Volunteers brought (and bring) assistance and help to others, but they were also helped and cared for by others, and in both cases soon learned that on their own, they could accomplish nothing. With Reinhold Niebuhr, I would call this an ironic moment because, unlike the tragic moment, where the server's conscious embrace of power becomes the source of problems (for example, in conscious adoption of force to impose a notion of civilization), the revelation of irony temporary weakness provokes a wry smile, as the one there to serve gets served and thus sees the deeper truth that is included in mutuality. As I will mention again below, I think this ironic moment in service is at risk of being lost in some of the current service programs that are used in American higher education. Instead of irony, these sometimes produce cynicism, the most bitter form of tragedy.

If the Thomasites and the Peace Corps are two of the historical points through which we can see the development of this sacred sense of character in things like an intrepid spirit, physical vigor, and a sense of American mission, then I think it has reached a new level in the current service and service-learning movement in American education. Not surprisingly, some of the key founders the service-learning movement in the United States were returned Peace Corps volunteers or VISTA volunteers (VISTA is a domestic version of Peace Corps) who were motivated by their own service experience to include service oriented activities in their own classrooms (see Stanton, Giles, Jr., & Cruz 1999). An even greater number of the leaders of service-learning became interested in the movement after already having strong religious commitments to service.

Presently, service-learning in the United States has grown in leaps and bounds to be de rigor in many schools. The idea behind it is that by asking students to conduct service as part of the educational experience, students can gain practical experience that they would not gain in the usual classroom setting and at the same time help others who can benefit from their assistance. Sometimes the service activities are clearly related to economic or political issues, such as poverty or unequal access to health care. In my university, where many students are from a more privileged background, the hope is that by serving in an impoverished community, they will become connected to and concerned with issues of poverty at a real level rather than just through textbook examples. To give a less political example, we have in my department a course called Death and Dying which explores end of life

issues as they are considered in multiple religious traditions. In that class, students are simply asked to spend a couple of hours each week visiting the elderly at a local home for the elderly. Since many of the students do not know anyone who has been seriously ill or who has died – not even members of their family – this is an opportunity for them to see aging and the end of life process. And, of course, whatever the students are asked to do in the community that they are serving is meant to be helpful (even if it is as simple as providing companionship and engaging people socially).

This call to service in the classroom setting follows a call to service in other educational arenas also. I would agree with Adams (1987) that this proliferation of educational service experiences in the US began in the 1980s, was made more visible with Ronald Reagan's call to service and has been institutionalized in groups such as Campus Compact, a national organization of College and University presidents dedicated to bringing the resources of University campuses to bear on local communities through service activities. Speaking of my university, our students arrive having completed many hours of required service in order to graduate from their secondary schools; furthermore, they are told that a record of service is necessary for admission to top universities; they know that a record of service helps gain internships and employment. A record of service is so much a part of a successful high school and college career, that it has become obligatory. The vast majority of my students have multiple experiences of service, including short term service abroad. Herein lies the biggest potential pitfall of service, for when I ask my students to think deeply about service, they are often either at a loss or they answer with memorized answers that they have been told in school. Some see service as a hoop to jump through on the way to personal success. Others become cynical about service and alienated by an experience which they feel is forced on them or designed to make them feel guilty for the circumstances of their own lives.

Here again I think a turn to theological language can be helpful in both describing the problem and suggesting avenues to explore to maintain moral virtues of service.

First, I think it is fair to describe what has happened to service, when it is at its worst, as a perversion. That is, in the technical sense, when service becomes obligatory, or is done by rote, and then even more when service becomes something that is done because of the status or material benefits it brings to the person who does it, the ends of service become twisted. Instead

of allowing people to see one another more fully, as what service is supposed to do, service becomes a means/end to a relationship.

I certainly do not want to say that service or service-learning is universally a bad thing. It clearly helps many people, and it can often be a transformative experience. But looking at service theologically, I am aware that it can be perverted or twisted from its original ends. This is the pitfall of moral formation through service in American Civil Religion--that transformative experience, or what might be called in theology as "conversion" experience insofar as service turns us towards others, towards our true selves, and towards God, is not substantially nurtured or sustained by American Civil Religion. In fact, American Civil Religion can augment alienation. If some of the virtues that American Civil Religion seeks to inscribe are qualities of independence and self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and rugged individualism. Then, when these are the lenses through which students see the Other, they sometimes ask "Why don't these people help themselves?" or "What is wrong with these people?" or "Why do they never change?" Worse again, students can be led to a sort of moral and material superiority in which they think that the privilege they hold is a prerequisite to service, or even worse, that privilege is deserved on merit. And, worst of all, since service has become obligatory, forced upon students by those who are in positions of power over them (and we must remember that professors are in positions of power over students), the moments of doubt, the outrageous statements of privilege, the secret thoughts of moral superiority cannot be voiced by these students (or, therefore, engaged by others). In religious terms, there is no moment of confession available, so the thoughts fester, or they are voiced in secret to other cynical students who affirm them. Again, as a Christian and as a scholar of Christianity, I see these as a manifestation of sin insofar as it separates people from one another, from themselves, and from God. There is no moment of reversal here: superiority is affirmed. Students who dip into service are free to return to their everyday lives with a confirmation of what they thought before.

I do not think it would be fair to end my article here without suggesting at least some options to explore so that we may avoid this pitfall. One option is to look to other religious traditions to see how they handle cynicism.

I think that when we see Christianity in its proper light, it not only deals with the problem of cynicism but makes the problem of cynicism one of its central concerns. All too often people think of Christianity as a set of

propositions believed, but as we know, it is meant as "a way". Conversion, marked initially by baptism, is an entry into "the way," but the "way" is, as hymn after hymn tells us, a journey that we walk as a people, as a church or, in Greek, as an *ecclesia*. We draw each other along, open in our doubts and fears, exploring, chastising, questioning. Beliefs may be part of that way, but they are secondary to the way itself. To quote in a different context: *Lex orendi, lex credendi* --- worship and prayer come first, and doctrines emerge to help us make sense of our experience of the way.

Let me make my point very clear here at the end: to avoid the pitfalls of service in American Civil Religion, we need a spirituality that allows for doubt, for exploration, and for the ironic dimension of service to be made clear. Christianity might help, but unlike Stephen Prothero, I do not think that a historical view of Christianity or a view of the Bible as literature will do much to introduce students to Christianity. Instead, students need exposure to something like the spiritual dimension of Christianity.

Now, there are two obvious questions here. First, is Christianity the only spirituality that will work? I do not think so. Christianity is the tradition with which I am familiar; it is the language of spirituality that I speak; and, it opens doors for me--but I certainly see the deep spirituality of other religious traditions. When I think, for example, of the intersection of the Christian spirituality of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Buddhist spirituality, rooted in mindfulness, of Thich Nat Hahn, I certainly think there is a deep well-spring of spirituality to be gained. Dr. King took found tremendous insight from Gandhi, and Gandhi was profoundly moved by Tolstoy's Russian Orthodox. BUT, I say this with a caution: in a market-driven world, we must be on guard against the danger of spiritual dabbling. What I mean is that spirituality is not a buffet in which we can choose bits and pieces that we like. Yet, a market-driven world tells us precisely that we should choose our spirituality based on immediate desires. I have not worked this out fully, but my intuition is that spirituality requires a certain commitment to a way, and that commitment means that we commit to what we do not like either. We can ask about what we do not like, we can question it, we can even change it slowly and with others, but commitment requires that we face it and not simply ignore it or turn away from it.

The second obvious question has to do on the one hand with secularization and on the other hand, with the law in the US: how can spirituality be inculcated among secular people and in a country that has

strong laws against state involvement with religion? Here again I do not have any answers. However, for several years I have been intrigued by the work of the Argentinian Rabbi, Sergio Bergman, who has sought to develop not a civil religion but a civic spirituality. His book, *Ciudadania Argentina*, uses Biblical texts as sources for thinking about the moral growth of the nation. Specifically, he uses the texts to provoke questions and discussion about "the way" by which inhabitants of a territory become a people. For example, Exodus is a profound text telling the story of the powerful brought low by hubris and released slaves who must be formed into a people before reaching a promised land. The stories allow us to think about why people might choose idols, what it means to live under law for the first time, why some people might want to reject freedom and uncertainty and return to the absolute certainty of slavery, and the benefits of a bureaucracy of judges rather than one autocratic ruler. I think Bergman's approach has promise insofar as it recognizes shared religious traditions as sources for extended thought and civil formation but does not require any specific confession of faith. However, I do not think it could be taught in the US because of concerns about separation of Church and state.

To elaborate on what this civil spirituality might look like and how it might collaborate with Christian and other spiritualities would require an entirely new article. In fact, this is one question I hope to explore in future work. For now I will close, simply enjoining you to what I said earlier: Silliman University embraces its Christian heritage--keep this connection, drink from it, renew yourself in it, and allow it to provide some sustenance for your life.

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