

The Left Wing of America's Civil Religion

In a few of my past columns I focused attention on the right wing of America's civil religion. Now it is time for the left wing. In a recent op-ed column in *The Washington Post* (11/22/08), Sally Quinn—one of the moderators of "On Faith," an online conversation on religion supported by *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post*—gives perfect-pitch expression to what I have in mind.

Ms. Quinn urges Barack and Michelle Obama to choose the Washington National Cathedral as their church when they move to Washington in January. Why does she think the Obama family should become part of the cathedral? Because, she says, compared with "all of the other sacred spaces in Washington," the cathedral "is the most pluralistic of the places of worship I've been to." By pluralistic she means that although the cathedral is "nominally an Episcopal church, it welcomes everyone. It is at once deeply Christian and deeply interfaith." Quinn quotes Sam Lloyd, the current dean of the cathedral, as saying, "We are a place that welcomes people of all faiths and no faith." In fact, the cathedral is so pluralistic that in welcoming "people to have the experience of being part of a faith community," it offers itself, in Lloyd's words, as a "space for people to come on their own terms."

This, however, does not sound like a faith *community* but like a gathering place of many faiths where everyone agrees ("believes") that each person may gather on his or her own terms. Pluralism in this sense secures an all-inclusive gathering by vacating or minimizing what is shared in common by those who have gathered.

Why should the Obamas want to attend the cathedral? Quinn thinks it is because two years ago Obama said in a speech that the United States is "no longer just a Christian nation. At least not just. We are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation and a Buddhist nation and a Hindu nation and a nation of nonbelievers." But what Obama was saying is that the United States is a very pluralistic *political* community, a community of citizens that is not qualified by a single faith. One's faith is not a qualification for membership in the political community.

But Quinn does not think of America as a political community alone. She presents it as a civil-religious community whose diversity needs to be held together (even trumped) by an overarching unity. That unity is characterized, in part, by a common faith that transcends all parochial and sectarian communities of faith. Quinn is

drawing here on an idea that is as old as America. The politically dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), who worshipped in a variety of churches, welcomed immigrants from many countries but wanted all of them to become good Americans, that is, the kind of citizens who would share the WASP view of the nation and the American way of life. WASPs were especially suspicious of, and at times strongly antagonistic toward, Roman Catholics throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So much so that they structured the education systems to make sure that only the “nonsectarian” Protestant schools received public funding and Catholic “sectarian” schools had to survive (if they could) with private funding. Today, of course, the government-run schools no longer privilege the WASP point of view and try to be as all-inclusive as the Washington National Cathedral wants to be. Quinn would undoubtedly approve this development as truly progressive. But while she may have relinquished the WASP version of America’s civil religion, she has by no means given up on an American civil religion—one she hopes can be all-inclusive.

Those Americans who might be uncomfortable (or perhaps even deeply offended) with membership in the cathedral would be those who believe that the Jewish or Muslim or Christian *faith community* does not coincide with the national *political community*. If one goes to the heart of the Christian faith, or of most faiths for that matter, one will discover that members of the Christian faith community do not “come on their own terms” but on God’s terms. In fact, Episcopalians who believe that the church cannot be both “deeply Christian” and “deeply interfaith” at the same time and who would contend vigorously for an exclusively Christian membership in the cathedral would surely be seen by Quinn and Lloyd as exclusivists who do not share the all-inclusive faith of the cathedral’s community. Rigorous all-inclusiveness must exclude someone, namely those who do not agree with the terms of all-inclusiveness.

Quinn’s confusion comes from having ignored the most important basis of pluralism that the United States offers. Precisely by distinguishing the political community from many faith communities, the US Constitution opens the public arena to diverse faith communities, all of which are free to be *exclusive* in their membership while being *included* on equal terms in American society. Quinn, by contrast, wants to hold onto an *American community of faith*. And to do that she needs to find a “church” that is so all-inclusive that it can serve as the “sacred space for the nation,” as “a place the nation looks to in critical times.” But such a “church” can, by definition, no longer be an institution of Christian faith, for it has to serve the whole nation. Therefore, it has to be a place where the American civil religion can be celebrated, a religion distinct from all other religions even if it claims to include and encompass them all.

In essence, Quinn implies that other “sacred spaces” in Washington are not adequate for the Obamas. Why? Because she is thinking of the Obamas as the nation’s *first family*, not as a *Christian family*. Yet what if the Obamas want to join a community of Christian faith rather than a community of civil-religious faith? What if President-elect Obama views the office of the president as an office of the political community and not as an office of America’s civil religion? Will Quinn think less of the Obamas both as Christians and as the first family if they decide not to join the Washington National Cathedral?

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