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Spirituality · Community · Justice

Religious Freedom, Corporate America, & Christian America

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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Friday will mark the four hundred forty-ninth anniversary of the Edict of Torda. **John Sigismund of Transylvania is history's first and only Unitarian King. And on January 13, 1568 — at a time when many ruling authorities were persecuting or even killing religious dissenters — he passed a landmark “Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience.”** Sigismund affirmed the freedom of both congregations and ministers. *Congregations were declared free* to hire a “preacher whose teaching they approve.” And *ministers were likewise declared free* to preach based on their own best understanding of the truth. The Edict concluded, “Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, and no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone.” Our proximity to this anniversary feels like an auspicious time to reflect on the state of religious freedom today.

In addition to being near this anniversary of a significant milestone in the history of religious toleration, I am also aware that we are less than two weeks away from the inauguration of Donald Trump as the next president of the United States. And as we reflect on the history of religious tolerance, I will also draw some connections to some of the historical factors that contributed to Trump's unexpected victory. My inspiration is One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America, a 2015 book from Kevin Kruse, a professor of history at Princeton University.

On the subject of religious freedom, I do not have time to rewind the clock all the way back to the eighteen-century founding of this country. (Perhaps I will have a chance to do that

next year on the 450th anniversary of the Edit of Torda.) But it may be equally — or even more — instructive for now to focus on changes in our country’s religious landscape over the last few decades.

Let’s begin in the middle of the twentieth century, where (in contrast to Trump’s small technicality of a victory in the Electoral College) in 1952, Dwight Eisenhower won a much more decisive victory of “55 percent of the popular vote and a staggering 442-to-89 margin in the Electoral College” (ix). And although we have examples of earlier presidents mixing religion and politics — such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was highly adept at weaving scriptural allusions into his speeches, many of which were essentially sermons (4-5, 39) — **Eisenhower brought a previously unseen level of religious spectacle to the presidency.** After swearing in not on one Bible but on *two Bibles* stacked on top of each other, turned to two different passages — Eisenhower’s first official act as president, immediately after taking the oath of office, was to lead Americans in what he called “a little private prayer of my own” (xi). Eisenhower was also the “first president ever to be baptized while in office,” the first president to attend a National Prayer Breakfast, and the first president to institute “opening prayers at cabinet meetings” (xii). Along those lines, there is a famous story of Eisenhower — this battlefield-tested, five-star general turned president — at one point “emerging from a cabinet session and exclaiming: “Jesus Christ, we forgot the prayer!” (xii).

Now, my intent is not to hate on Eisenhower. Instead, I am inviting you to see that some of the practices he and others started quite recently are among many examples of how aspects of civil religion as we know it today often date back, not to the founding of this country, but to the mid-twentieth century. To name two other major examples, the phrase “**under God**” **was not added to the Pledge of Allegiance until 1954.** And “**In God We Trust**” **was not added to our currency until 1956** (xiii). But without awareness of that recent change, many American incorrectly think it has always been that way.

The truth is that the early post-World War II period witnessed a remarkable shift in American religiosity. The 1950s do not represent the “norm” of how America “always was” prior to the counter-cultural revolutions of the 1960s. Instead, in many ways, it is the 1950s that were peculiar. Consider that:

The percentage of Americans who claimed membership in a church had been fairly low across the nineteenth century, though it had slowly increased from just 16 percent in 1850 to 36 percent in 1900. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the percentages plateaued, remaining at 43 percent in both 1910 and 1940. In the decade and a half after the Second World War, however, **the percentage of Americans who belonged to a church or synagogue suddenly soared, reaching 57 percent in 1950 and then peaking at 69 percent at the end of the decade, an all-time high.** (xv)

It is important to point out, however, that the motivations behind these high levels of church membership in the 1950s were often much more *cultural* and *social* than anything having to do with large numbers of people following the historical Jesus's radical teachings around mercy, forgiveness, and selflessness. To give just one example, "a Gallup Poll in 1950 found that **while 80 percent of Americans said they believed the Bible was 'the revealed word of God,' only 47 percent could name even a single author of the gospels**" (68).

To begin to point out some parallels between then and now, some of you may recall the controversy back in 2003 when Roy Moore, the Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court was removed from office for refusing to remove a large granite monument of the Ten Commandments that he had installed in the Alabama Supreme Court building. Moore's obsession with a massive Ten Commandments monument seems less random when seen in the historical context of many similar monuments that were inspired by Cecil B. DeMille's film *The Ten Commandments* — which was one of a slew of biblically-themed films released in the 1950s (140, 144). **In the wake of the blockbuster success of *The Ten Commandments*, nearly four thousand Ten Commandments monuments were erected in various public locations across the country** (148). It is illuminating to see the ways that the Roy Moore controversy of the early twenty-first century had deep echoes of the 1950s. Among other factors, nostalgia for the 1950s is about longing for a time of white cultural supremacy *before* the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of the mid-1960s. It is about longing for a time of more rigid gender roles — *before* Second-wave Feminism and *before* the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Movement. It is about longing for a time when the assumptions and perspectives foundational to

White Christian America were significantly more culturally accepted and dominant than they are today.

Here's another example of a historical trend coming to fruition in our current cultural moment, whose seeds were planted in the mid-twentieth century. **Starting in the 1940s, in opposition to FDR's New Deal, there was an increasingly concerted effort by theologically conservative ministers and wealthy business men to make the case that Christianity and capitalism are compatible** (7). One of the major players in this movement — though far from the only one — was Billy Graham. I was raised to hold Billy Graham in high esteem, and attended more than one Billy Graham crusade in my youth. But it is troubling to look back at the ways Graham helped warp Christianity in defense of Big Business. To limit myself to only one (among many, many examples), in 1952, he said that:

The Garden of Eden...was a paradise with “no union dues, no labor leaders, no snakes, no disease....” A truly Christian worker “would not stoop to take unfair advantage” of his employer by ganging up against him in a union. Strikes...were inherently selfish and sinful.... The type of revival I'm calling for calls for an employee to put in a full eight hours of work” (77-78).

There is a fairly direct line that can be traced from these seeds conflating Christianity and capitalism that began to sprout in the mid-twentieth century, have come to greater fruition today — so that, for example, to deliver the prayer on Inauguration Day, Donald Trump has chosen the “Prosperity Gospel” televangelist Paula White.

Instead of “following Jesus” being all about building the Beloved Community and serving the “least of these,” **the Prosperity Gospel is often promoted by charlatans who conflate Christianity and capitalism to create a religion of individual financial prosperity through positive thinking**. And, as with all snake oil salesman throughout history, the result is rarely the prosperity of the followers. Instead, it is more often the televangelist who ends up prospering through coercively taking money from their followers.

But I want to do more than expose negative trends. I also want to highlight **two examples, among many, of resistance and resilience that arose in response to overreach by the religious right**. The first relates to a 1951 decision by the New York Board of Regents to

compose a prayer to be said each day in New York's public schools (170). The plaintiffs in the lawsuit protesting this decision included three Jews, an Ethical Culturalist, and a Unitarian. Because the board president's name was William Vitale and because Steven Engel was the plaintiff whose name came first alphabetically, the case became known as *Engel v. Vitale*.

Interestingly, not long before the New York lower courts began ruling in support of compulsory school prayer, "In God We Trust" was being emblazoned on the walls of New York courtrooms as part of the spread of that motto in the 1950s (175). "In a sign of how swiftly and thoroughly the religious revival of the 1950s had taken root, **these judges cited changes that had occurred in their own recent memory as proof that the country's religious roots stretched back to time immemorial**" (176).

In 1962, *Engel v. Vitale* made it to the Supreme Court. The majority opinion included a rigorously researched historical section debunking the unsubstantiated arguments made by the lower courts about our nation's Christian "religious heritage." The Supreme Court ruled that the "Regent's Prayer" was unconstitutional:

It is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to receive as a part of a religious program carried on by the government. The prayer of each man from his soul must be his and his alone. If there is anything clear in the First Amendment, **it is that the right of the people to pray in their own way is not be controlled by the election return.**
(181)

It is a significant part of our UU history that a Unitarian — in coalition with three Jews and a member of an Ethical Culture congregation — were at the heart of this landmark case protecting individual religious freedom and opposing religious coercion by the government.

The second example is from the same time period. In 1949, the Pennsylvania legislature passed a statute mandating that public school teachers in that state read "at least ten verses from the Holy Bible" each day to their classes. **Ellery Schempp, a sixteen-year-old Unitarian "refused to stand for the ceremony and instead sat at his desk, reading a copy of the Koran"** (192). His parents enlisted the help of the American Civil Liberties Union and filed a lawsuit in 1958 on behalf of Ellery and his two younger siblings.

The Schempps said publicly that: “We hope this action will not be interpreted as an attack on religion or the Bible. We believe that random Bible reading and state control degrades religion. **To us, religion is too precious, too important, and too personal to permit the state to meddle in it.**” Ellery added that, “the Bible passages read in class advance a number of beliefs — including the divinity of Christ, the immaculate conception, the Trinity, and the existence of an anthropomorphic God — that he did not hold as a Unitarian” (193).

In 1963, the Supreme Court heard this case of *Abington School District v. Schempp*. The majority opinion concluded that, “**The State is firmly committed to ‘a position of neutrality’ in regard to religion.** And that the First Amendment guarantees the ‘right of every person to freely choose his own [religious] course free of any compulsion from the state’” (198).

Interestingly, whereas 1962’s *Engel v. Vitale* resulted in tremendous public outcry from religious conservatives, 1963’s *Schempp* case resulted in little reaction: “**Embarrassed by their overreaction to Engel, most major religious denominations had anticipated a new ruling against Bible reading and already made peace with it**” (199). Nevertheless, these landmark Supreme Court cases are part of the background context for understanding the battles that continue today — such as whether it is more appropriate to say the purportedly more Christian “Merry Christmas” or the more neutral “Happy Holidays” when you are in a diverse public setting.

There is so much more to say, but my point has been to invite us to become more aware of changes in quite recent history. In the words of the Princeton University historian Kevin Kruse:

Our public religion is, in large measure, an invention of the modern era. The ceremonies and symbols that breathe life into the belief that we are “one nation under God” were not, as many Americans believe, created alongside the nation itself. Their parentage stems not from the founding fathers but from an era much closer to our own, the era of our own fathers and mothers, our grandfathers and grandmothers. This fact need not diminish their importance; fresh traditions can be more powerful than older ones adhered to out of habit. Nevertheless, we do violence to our past if we treat certain phrases — “one nation under God,” “In

God We Trust” — as sacred texts handed down to us from the nation’s founding. Instead, we are better served if we **understand these utterances for what they are: political slogans that speak not to the origins of our nation but to a specific point in its not-so-distance past.** (294)

Seeing how recently major shifts have happened can also embolden us to consider what major changes we can bring about in our present day.

We live in treacherous times, but there remain many reasons for hope. **When the pendulum swings too far in one direction, the energy for resistance and resilience builds.** I returned late Friday night from a three-day conference at Meadville Lombard Theological School, our UU Seminary in Chicago, on “The Tilt to Global Authoritarianism: Religious Leadership and Shifting Power.” And I would like to conclude by sharing with you the quote from that conference that most resonated with me for such a time as this. It’s a short, but profound poem by Adrienne Rich:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:

So much has been destroyed.

I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.