

1-1-2005

Editors' Notes

Stuart Love
slope@pepperdine.edu

D'Esta Love
dlove@pepperdine.edu

Lee Camp
lee.camp@lipscomb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

Recommended Citation

Love, Stuart; Love, D'Esta; and Camp, Lee (2005) "Editors' Notes," *Leaven*: Vol. 13: Iss. 4, Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol13/iss4/2>

This Editor's Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.



Editors' Notes

D'ESTA LOVE AND STUART LOVE

Through the years *Leaven* has intentionally presented a number of challenging issues to our readers such as women in ministry, race and reconciliation, and searching for justice and peace. This issue carries forward that tradition and explores a topic critical for our time: nationalism and the American church. At its focal point is the convergence and impinging seduction of the powerful political forces of civil religion, patriotism, and nationalism. We ask: have we for some time, particularly since 9/11, combined faith in God with faith in America to such an extent that we have violated the Lord's command, "...you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:1)? One of our authors, Craig Watts, cites a quotation from *The Dallas Morning News* that since 9/11 "the American flag has replaced the cross as the most visible symbol in many churches across the country." In his book *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr taught us years ago that our discipleship to Christ never escapes the sway of culture. Accordingly, we must ask in prayer, personally and as a Christian community, without ceasing, "has our spiritual exodus led us to forsake our sole allegiance to Yahweh?" This is a difficult topic. At what point do we cross the line and make patriotism a god that is greater than or supplants our exclusive loyalty to the Lord and Redeemer of all creation? We hope this issue of *Leaven* will help us in a number of ways: to consider afresh the ongoing need for the power of Christian transformation; to bring greater clarity to our realization that we are *in* the world but not *of* the world; to sound a warning that we must not become too easily enmeshed in the goals and the programs of our political leaders; to call us to courage—to be prophetic voices—to speak truth to power—to speak over and against the prevailing political gods of our age; and to call us back to the essentials of our calling in Jesus—our baptism identifies us as the called people of God from every tribe and nation and tongue.

We are pleased to have Lee C. Camp as our guest editor. Dr. Camp knows our religious heritage well, having grown up in the tradition of Barton Stone, Alexander Campbell, and David Lipscomb. He did his doctoral studies at Notre Dame University in the area of Christian Ethics/Moral Theology. He is currently Associate Professor of Theology and Senior Faculty Fellow, Center for International Peace Ethics, at Lipscomb University. You may remember his article in our issue on *Searching for Justice and Peace*, "Why the Christian Church Ought to be Pacifist" (10/2: 2002). His demanding and stimulating book, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (Brazos Press, 2003) captured the attention of many devoted to the recovery of costly service to Christ. Dr. Camp and his family are members of the Otter Creek Church of Christ in Nashville. He was well-prepared to select the contributors to this issue.

Before Dr. Camp introduces our theme, we would remind you of *Leaven's* future issues: "The Gospel of John," "Ephesians," "The Future of the Restoration Movement," and "The Church." Please continue to keep *Leaven* in your prayers.

President Eisenhower once claimed, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is." He thereby gave official recognition to what many theologians and philosophers have suspected about western democracies for a great while: that though they may

sing the glories of religion, God, and the free exercise of religion, they are ultimately parasitic, *using* “religion” for their own ends.

Almost four decades ago, a number of historians and sociologists began a lengthy discussion of “American Civil Religion.” Robert Bellah’s 1967 essay on American Civil Religion¹ suggested that a “well-institutionalized civil religion” has existed in the United States from the earliest days of the young republic. This “religion,” Bellah insisted, was not merely a collection of lowest-common denominator beliefs among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, but a distinctive set of beliefs held by a majority of Americans. He traced the content of the American Civil Religion back to Rousseau and his notions of a God, an afterlife, an otherworldly reward of virtue and punishment of vice, and an exclusion of religious intolerance. Bellah noted forthrightly that the American Civil Religion is not Christianity, though much of the Civil Religion may have been derived thence. Its content, he summarized, is more “Unitarian,” and its Unitarian God more austere—concerned with law, order, and might, as opposed to redemption and grace.

Bellah, and other sociologists following his cue, strikingly conjectured that a set of rituals and practices perpetuated these convictions: for the American Civil Religion, Easter and Christmas—while protected as “private” beliefs—would not suffice for the religion of the republic. Indeed, anything too particular, too much rooted in claims of historical revelation, would not suffice for the Civil Religion. Consequently other holidays would have to tell the American story, would have to re-enact the drama of the American God. Thus, Independence Day, Veterans’ Day, Memorial Day, and Presidents’ Day serve in roles analogous to those of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. By the end of the century, I might note, there could be no ordained prayer practice in school, but we required our children to practice the daily liturgical act of the Pledge of Allegiance. Much debate ensued in response to Bellah’s description of the American Civil Religion. A great host of well-known historians, sociologists, and theologians have debated the meaning of the assertion that America *has* any substantive Civil Religion; and beyond that question, there has been debate about whether that religion is good, or not. But one thing is clear: though we live in an age which the theological pundits call the post-Christian era, “American Evangelicals” appear to have carried the most recent presidential election, and since 9/11, have intermingled the cross and the flag, “God and country,” with renewed vigor. Similarly, the Oval Office has freely mixed the rhetoric of the Christian canon with the agenda of the American empire.

Some celebrate these developments, as if these somehow vindicate Christianity in an increasingly pluralistic and antagonistic age. But, it’s not quite so clear that we should celebrate these things; in fact, it may be a time necessitating very serious, deliberate discernment; it may be a time necessitating repentance. This issue of *Leaven* allows us space to explore these questions.

At least since the Ten Commandments, Israel’s faith prohibited idolatry. A relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob permits no allegiance to other gods. We serve a “jealous God.” The Ten Commandments also prohibit the making of “graven images,” so as not to reduce God to some lesser, reductionistic god, fit for our purposes. Idolatry plays about with a Sovereign Lord, domesticates the transcendent, reduces the Almighty to something tame, like a lap-dog, fit for our purposes, trained to attend to our whims—rolling over, staying, coming, playing with the children, barking at enemies—all at the master’s, the idolater’s, beck and call. Note that the second commandment is particularly concerned with the manner in which we *depict* God. One might use the right “name,” might even say the right words, but the *depiction* might still defame this Holy God. “Depiction” might be understood literally, as in image-making and idol-carving, or figuratively, as in preaching, teaching, and singing. In both of these senses, MICKI PULLEYKING and CRAIG WATTS raise for us questions, out of their own experiences, about the display of patriotic symbols and the display of nationalistic rhetoric in our worship assemblies: what place do these things have, if any, when we assemble as the trans-national people of God? Micki’s story and reflection opens, and Craig’s

1. Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967) 1-21.

closes, our issue. Sandwiched between their fine articles and story telling, our other writers have explored a variety of intersecting themes from different perspectives.

Reflecting particularly upon the Old Testament narrative, **MARK HAMILTON** explores a variety of strategies employed by the people of Israel as they lived under various empires. Empires inevitably usurp their authority and might, claiming an authority that is due only to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; that is, empires constantly find themselves tempted to idolatrously set themselves forward as worthy of unmitigated allegiance. An exploration of such themes from the Old Testament is particularly important, it seems to me, because it often gets co-opted as a collection of proof-texts for waving the nation's flag, especially in war-time. Mark questions whether such a move can be so easily made.

From a very different direction, **SHAUN CASEY** raises similar questions. Many assume only the pacifists in our midst will have anything critical to say about war-making or patriotism or flag-waving. But this is to miss the most fundamental ethical considerations of the just war tradition. That is, from the start, the just war tradition assumes that under certain conditions, war-making may be a faithful act of the Christian; but this tradition requires, from first to last, that hard and discerning questions be raised about such activity. In other words, the just war tradition may require more critique and investigation of governmental claims and assertions than Christian pacifism. It will not permit a mindless acceptance of the claims of leaders, even if those politicians go to church on Sundays and pray on weekdays. In other words, to simply do what we are told, to "shut up and support the troops," shows that the allegiance of just war Christians is not to a God of justice, but to some other limited political agenda.

While the American Civil Religion celebrates the allegiance we give to "one nation under God," Christianity has for two millennia now practiced another kind of "pledge of allegiance," that of baptism. When Ephesians celebrates "one baptism," it does so in the context of claiming the wondrous, given unity of the church: there is "one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:4-6). Against the Pauline claim, our nation today calls us to a different "oneness" and unity. "United We Stand" asserts bumper sticker theo-politics; or more pointedly, President Bush asserted in his 2004 re-election speech: "We have one country, one Constitution and one future that binds us." Thus **BETH PHILLIPS** explores the theological and political significance of baptism in her essay entitled, "Who are 'We'? Baptism as a Christian Practice of Trans-national Identity." "Identity determines loyalty," Beth reminds us, and we must be very careful to define the antecedents of our pronouns; it is a matter as serious as idolatry. "We" and "us" must be explicitly defined in terms of baptism, not in terms of the arbitrary geographical boundaries that happen to mark off what has come to be called the United States of America.

In the same vein as the first and second commandments, the third proscribes "taking God's name in vain," rejects the "wrongful use of God's name." This is no mere prohibition against "cursing." The third commandment is much more, teaching us to avoid an apparently perennial pitfall: the arrogance that uses God's name to sanction our interests, thereby overlooking the interests and concerns of the marginalized and weak. In other words, how we use "God" is terribly important: for our use of the word carries with it assumed commitments, value-judgments, and context. In this vein, **JEFF PHILLIPS** questions the very use of the word "religion" in the modern western world. He provocatively suggests that even the phrase "civil religion" is redundant—that is, western democracies have invented the realm of "religion" and the "secular," and by doing so have effectively rendered "religion" irrelevant to the "public" world, to the "real world." "Religion," from the start, has been used by western political orders precisely to sanction *our* particular political self-interest. It is this kind of confusion of allegiance and vocabulary that **RICHARD HUGHES** laments as well. Richard reminds us that in the early days of the Stone-Campbell movement, our forebears maintained a sharp distinction between God's Kingdom and the kingdoms of this world. But Hughes notes, "if Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century formed an outpost of the coming Kingdom of God, it might

be accurate to suggest that Churches of Christ by the twenty-first century formed an outpost for conservative Republican politics.” Indeed—in the nineteenth century, our movement had millennial hopes at its core—hopes that God’s Kingdom would come in its fullness, that God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven, a coming Kingdom that would ultimately demolish all earthly kingdoms, submitting all to the Lordship of Christ. But these days, we are rankled little by the conflation of such hopes, commingling the millennial hopes for God’s Kingdom with a millennial hope in our nation. If Hughes is not right, then why are Christians not raising a ruckus when President Bush places millennial hopes in the U.S.: “When we come together and work together, there is no limit to the greatness of America,” (reelection speech), or that the U.S. actually takes on the Messianic role of “ending tyranny in our world” (“The State of the Union,” 2005).

DAVID DARK closes the theme of our issue with a guide for further study and reflection. Author of the recently published *Gospel According to America*, David shares some of his favorite works that challenge civil religion and other forms of national idolatry. Weaving together fiction and theology, David’s bibliographical essay reads like a prayer, and would preach like a sermon.

Finally, and as one more excellent addition to all these helpful resources, **LEE MAGNESS** has provided a wonderful liturgical piece that incorporates readings from the entire narrative of scripture: from first to last, scripture reminds us of that most wonderful proclamation that we, as the people of God, are drawn from every tribe, every tongue, and every land, gathered by God to praise and worship the God who gives grace and transformation to all peoples.

I would like to express thanks to Drew Denton, who assisted in a variety of editorial tasks related to the production of this issue of *Leaven*. And I would like to thank Stuart and D’Esta Love who first approached me about editing this issue. It is a topic that needs much attention, and this issue is but a seed sown in a great field, riddled with weeds and tares. I pray, though, that the seed might bear some fruit, to the glory of God’s Kingdom.

LEE CAMP