

Rally-'Round-

Religion

By Scott L. McLean

Civic faith in moments of national crisis



After the horrific attacks on New York and Washington DC on September 11, 2001, Americans “rallied ’round the flag,” displaying temporarily increased patriotism, approval of leaders, community feelings and voluntarism. They also rallied around religion. Temporary increases in religious feeling, attendance at worship services and prayer after 9/11 gave fresh meaning to G.K. Chesterton’s observation that America is “a nation with the soul of a church.”

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It is no surprise that Americans would turn toward religion after such a shocking and traumatic moment. A review of historical data archived by the Roper Center indicates this phenomenon has occurred in other international crises. However,

when a “rally-’round-religion” happens, it is brief, and, unfortunately, surveys can be infrequent; sometimes they do not ask Americans about their religion immediately before or after major foreign policy crises. Polls cannot tell us, for instance, whether religious rallies took place during the Cuban missile crisis or the Tet Offensive.

In other cases, though, like the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassination, the Iran hostage crisis, and the Persian Gulf War, polls give indirect evidence of a religious rally. And then there are times, such as the 1960 U-2 incident or the 1999 Kosovo War, when polls show Americans rallied around the flag and the president, but not around religion.

Why does rally-’round-religion occur after some crises but not after others? All of these events offer clues.

My idea of “rally-’round-religion” is inspired by sociologist Robert Bellah’s portrait

of a patriotic “civil religion.” In “Civil Religion in America,” which appeared in the Winter 1967 issue of *Daedalus*, Bellah identified an “elaborate, well-institutionalized civil religion” standing separately from private “church religion” and ritualized and publicly professed by leaders and citizens in national holiday observances, presidential inaugurations or other ceremonies. Bellah noted that in times of trial, the civil religion offers an opportunity for leaders to reinterpret the national saga of national destiny and divine protection in light of new national challenges.

Rally-’round-religion often accompanies the “rally-’round-the-flag” effect, in which presidents receive higher job approval ratings during a crisis. Suzanne L. Parker, a Florida State University political scientist, has pointed out a “spillover” effect, where the public begins to view not only the president but also other national institutions in a more positive light. Her analysis, which appeared in the Winter 1995 issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, suggests that religious institutions—when they are connected to patriotic symbols—gain in prestige during a crisis even when relatively few are actually worshipping.

Bellah contended that, in theory, religious feeling and behavior can take on patriotic qualities during a national crisis or trauma. Often, people facing a personally traumatic experience isolate themselves and seek private solace from religion. A collective trauma differs in that social life is disrupted on a massive scale even though few directly experience the loss of a loved one. Thus,

rather than isolating themselves, people are drawn together in public ceremonies to reconstruct social routines and meanings. In practice, however, both processes are at work during an international crisis, as people pray and reflect in private but also look for comfort in public demonstrations of collective sorrow or sympathy.

Even though formal religious involvement has been generally declining since the 1960s, something like a civil religion is thriving in the United States. According to a 1999 Pew poll, 75% of the public believed God's will was the reason for America's success. A plurality of Americans (45%) told *Newsweek* in June 2002 that they thought the character of the nation was defined by a belief in the teachings of the Bible, and 60% believed it was "good for the country" when leaders publicly expressed faith in God. As late as March 2002, *US News and World Report* was still finding 27% saying the 9/11 attacks had strengthened their faith in God, while 84% of those in a Pew poll who thought religion's influence over the nation was declining lamented this as a bad thing.

Yet there is a wide chasm between beliefs and belonging during a religious rally. As Michael Dimock, Peyton Craighill and Melissa Rogers have pointed out [*Public Perspective*, September/October 2002], the increases in religious behavior after 9/11 were brief, and mainly limited to those who already felt highly religious and were frequent attendees at religious services.

Dimock and his colleagues are right in that formal religious behavior is not vastly increased at such times—indeed, measures of religious attendance are useful as indicators of religious rallies only when no other data are available. The usual measures of religiosity also tend not to show much change among people who were not very religious to begin with.

However, the polls do indicate that an upsurge in religious *feelings* is widespread, as well as the perception that religion is gaining in influence, among the less religious as well as the more devout.

If Bellah and Parker are right, this upsurge tends to enhance religion's public role as a national unifier during a crisis, even though increased attendance at religious worship is less widespread or durable. Thus, we should not conclude that religious rallies are based on the mere reflex action of religious people who see a national crisis as an occasion to

radio and television as the president preached from the pulpit:

We pray that [God] will comfort and console those who now walk in sorrow.... We thank Him for each life we now must mourn, and the promise of a life to come.... Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.

Religion and patriotism merged as employers gave workers time off at noon to attend memorial services, and

"We should not conclude that religious rallies are based on the mere reflex action of religious people who see a national crisis as an occasion to pray more and attend services more frequently."

pray more and attend services more frequently. If this were the case, we ought to see religious rallies in practically every national crisis—yet we don't.

While polls suggest that religious rallies do often coincide with presidential rallies, they seem to run their course differently, dissipating more quickly, or appearing even when presidential job approval seems unmoved by an international situation, or not appearing at all. What factors dictate which of these scenarios will occur in a given crisis?

According to an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, on the day of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, 91% of the public prayed for the victims and their families. The next day, President Bush called for a "National Day of Prayer and Remembrance." And on September 14, millions listened on

people packed into mosques, temples and churches to offer prayers. Candlelight vigils began as evening fell. In the days and weeks that followed, the seventh-inning stretch of Major League Baseball playoff games became brief rituals of civil religion, complete with flag-waving renditions of "God Bless America," and people reported feeling more spiritual.

Poll results supported the perception of high religious fervor during this period:

- On September 14-15, Gallup found that 60% of Americans had attended or planned to attend a memorial service, and 74% had prayed or planned to pray more. (Eighty-two percent said they had displayed a flag.)
- Fifty-two percent told Fox News that they had made or renewed a commitment to their religious faith during the week after the services.

• The day after the president's sermon, 49% in a Wirthlin poll expressed a great deal of confidence in the church or organized religion, a tremendous jump from Gallup's usual level of 30%.

• As late as mid-November, the *Los Angeles Times* found 14% saying they were more involved in their religion since the attacks.

• In Gallup polls, the proportion of the public saying that religion was very important in their own lives rose from 55% the February before the attacks to 64% on September 21-22, and it hovered at that level through its September 2002 reading.

• Gallup's September 21-22 poll, taken after Bush's "axis of evil" speech, found 47% reporting attendance at worship services that week—a six-point increase over February 2001.

In general, the rally-'round-religion effect was over by the end of the year. Although *Newsweek* was finding in mid-November that 47% were still focusing more on the spiritual side of life because of the terrorist attacks, it also found far fewer people reporting that 9/11 made them pray and attend services more. According to Gallup, weekly attendance at services had dropped back to its February 2001 level of 41% by mid-December, and confidence in organized religion returned to normal in its June 2002 reading.

The majority of the public had the perception of a longer rally, and not until Pew's March 2002 survey did most notice a decline in the national influence of religion. Fox News found in June that 84% felt patriotism was fading, too.

The events of September 11 sparked inevitable comparisons with the December 7, 1941, attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor.

Pearl Harbor, like 9/11, came without warning and caused high casualties, and afterward President Roosevelt fiercely invoked the American mission of defending liberty. The president's job approval the week before the attack was 73%, according to Gallup. Gallup's next poll in January 1942 reported a rise to 84%.

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Gallup did not ask about church attendance right after the attack, but the percentage of Americans who perceived an increased interest in religion due to the war went from 31% in November 1941 to 46% the June after Pearl Harbor. Twelve percent reported going to church more often in 1942, and 5% said they read the Bible more often as a result of the war.

Between November 1942 and November 1943, Bible reading among Americans in their twenties increased from 48% to 57%. Still, as the war began to wind down, indicators of religiosity started to return to pre-war levels.

The crises of the Cold War period produced somewhat different results.

Surveys of religiosity are not available for the time around the early Cold War crises, such as Truman's "containment of communism" speech during the Greek crisis or the outbreak of the Korean war. However, Gallup's reading of religious attendance remained at

its then-usual level of 47% in the December after the Soviets shot down a U-2 spy plane on May 1, 1960 and captured the pilot, Gary Powers, even though President Eisenhower's approval rating went from 67% to 76%. Neither were there any noticeable changes in religious behavior after the two Berlin Wall crises or the Bay of

Pigs invasion of 1961. No readings were taken immediately after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Although the Kennedy assassination in 1963 might not count as an

international crisis, it provoked both a patriotic rally and a religious one. The Harris poll found that 52% felt more patriotic as a result of the shooting, and 34% felt more religious. A National Opinion Research Center (NORC) study found 16% saying they had attended religious services more than usual right after the assassination (although 34% had attended no more than usual, and 50% did not attend), and 75% reported saying "special prayers" the weekend after the shooting.

Unfortunately, there are no surveys for locating religious rallies during key Vietnam crises. The next major event for which such data are available is the Iran hostage crisis.

After the American Embassy in Teheran was seized in November 1979, there was evidence of the usual rally-'round-the-flag effect, with President Jimmy Carter's job approval going from 38% to 51%. However, there was no accompanying jump in religious indicators.

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In fact, there was a religious rally, but it occurred only after Carter's disastrous rescue attempt in April 1980. Although the eight US casualties were relatively few, it was in many ways far more humiliating to the public to watch the Iranians put the bodies of the soldiers on public display and to seek their return through Red Cross negotiations. In his televised address May 25, Carter did not directly invoke civil religion, but he did speak of the courage and sacrifice of the lost men.

Civil religion was fully invoked at Carter's May 9 eulogy for the lost soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery, and once again a religious rally happened in tandem with an increase in support for the president. Gallup found Carter's job approval rising only slightly, from 39% to 43%, but large majorities approved his vain attempt to do something about freeing the hostages.

And the week after the fatal rescue attempt Gallup found almost half the nation saying they had attended worship services—an astounding jump of 11 points from its previous reading a few weeks earlier. By mid-May, Gallup found that confidence in organized religion was eight points higher than NORC's reading just before the rescue attempt.

The case reinforces the idea, suggested by 9/11 and Pearl Harbor, that the loss of American lives, followed by presidential pronouncements about patriotic sacrifice, are the key factors moving a crisis toward a religious rally.

The Persian Gulf War included these ingredients. During the three days after the air war against Iraq was launched on January 16, 1991, Gallup found 58% of US respondents praying more than usual as a result of the war. In the Times Mirror poll a week later, 65% said they were praying more.

With President George H.W. Bush's approval rating soaring from 64% to 83%, Gallup found attendance at religious services spiking by seven points between November 1990 and February 1991, and AP measured a nine-point increase in the percentage of those who believed religion was increasing its influence over the nation. The percentage of Americans who said religion was very important in their lives shot up nine percentage points at the start of the air war, and it did not return to pre-war levels until just before Bush declared a cease-fire on February 27.

The NATO war in the Balkans of April-May 1999 is important because it may illustrate why religious rallies often do not materialize. If the Gulf included the key ingredients of rally-'round-religion, the NATO war in the Balkans lacked them.

Survey organizations did not poll very much on religion during the Kosovo war. Gallup asked about people's perceptions of the influence of religion in the country and about attendance at religious services, but found no significant changes. President Clinton's job approval increased when troops were committed to the region, but he faced serious opposition to the war in the Senate and was mired in the Lewinsky scandal. Another tragedy—the school shooting massacre in Littleton, Colorado—also competed for headlines.

In addition, the Balkan air war was exceptionally quick, successful, and free of US casualties. Media coverage focused on Clinton's religious speech in response to the Littleton massacre, but the president chose not to depict the war in Kosovo as a moral crusade. Instead he concentrated on explaining America's interests in securing European stability and human rights, and portrayed Slobodan Milosevic merely as a petty disruptor of that stability, not as evil incarnate.

Given all the stark differences between the Kosovo War and World War II, the Gulf War and 9/11, it is no surprise that the religious rally was absent in the Balkan crisis.

Like a rally-'round-the-flag, a rally-'round-religion does not occur as a sheer reflex action to just any military attack, or a sudden loss of lives alone. A serious loss of American lives (or presidential assassination), a major presidential speech invoking civil religion themes and rituals, and a return to previous patterns of religious practices in one to three months are common features of the religious rallies I have been able to document.

Suspension of political criticism of the president during a crisis occurs during a religious rally, but it also occurs in crises without religious rallies. Likewise, a boost in presidential popularity often occurs in crises regardless of whether there is also a religious rally. Perhaps a president's standing in the polls or his relationship with Congress affects whether he decides to invoke civil religion.

Are religious rallies in a national crisis generated more by private feelings or public invocations of civil religion? Polls cannot answer this question. However, my cursory review of polling trends suggests that a traumatic national event can set the stage for both private prayers and public ceremonies, with an event or a president—or both—creating a connection between religion and civil religion in the public mind.

Beyond that, we can only speculate that rallies in presidential job approval during a crisis seem to offer a point of intersection with a religious rally, yet do not necessarily produce one. A crisis offers a president the opportunity to assume the role of "preacher-in-chief" and to point the nation's private religious feelings in a more public direction. ●