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For God and Country: Religion and the U.S. Military

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The longer I study religion and the military, the more the topic draws me in. Part of this is certainly due to the fact that, as a historian, I am a storyteller and the stories in which religion and the military converge are almost inevitably compelling. But as a student of religion I can't help but notice and attempt to make sense of the myriad ways in which military cultures and religions mirror each other. They are similar in being most recognizable within clear and familiar boundaries: churches, mosques, or temples; service academies, bases, ships. They are similar also in that they both exert influence far beyond these walls and fences and interact in these less recognizable forms in ways that ought to matter to us.

So my talk today is part of an on-going effort to think in broader terms about religious dynamics and cultural assumptions connected to the military and the ways in which these admittedly powerful forces connect with and shape the lives and bodies of American soldiers. My approach to religion and the military is thus somewhat different than Father Erikson's in that while I share his interest in

the faith lives of soldiers (more on that later), I am most interested in placing these faith lives within the context of the mythological and ritual structures that mediate the relationship between America and the military and that inform our understandings of the soldierly ideal.

As a historian who has spent some time thinking about the Great War, I want to point out that “For God and Country” is the motto of the American Legion, founded by American veterans of the Great War in the spring of 1919. Those men and women imagined that they had fought a war for God and country, that their friends had died for God and country, and that their job was to continue struggling in the world for God and country. Moreover, they believed that having been to war and been with those who died in war, their interpretations of America’s past, their reading of America’s present, and their vision for America’s future were especially authoritative if not definitive. They believed, in short, that the fires of combat had presented soldiers with special revelations regarding God and country.

However one feels about this logic—and about the motto—it certainly makes sense to look more deeply and to think as carefully as we can about this coming together of God, country, and the soldier. What assumptions make such a phrase as “for God and country” coherent? What kinds of things do both God and country require? Does the phrase have a specific meaning within the American context? If so, what are the implications of this specificity for a diverse nation and a diverse soldiery? What do answers to these questions tell us about the religiousness of soldiering as imagined and as lived?

To begin answering these questions, I would ask you to think about the similarities between God or gods and the nation, in this case, the United States of America. How is America like God? We can talk about the common attributes of each: power, compassion, wrath, capaciousness, jealousy,

powers to create, powers to destroy, imagined as both within and outside of history. We can also talk about the emotions deity and nation can inspire: love, devotion, awe, pride, anger, frustration, confusion, rebellion. But let's not stop with attributes and interior states. There are also similarities between modes of human interaction with the divine and with the nation. People direct hymns, feasts, holidays, and Sabbaths toward both. In some cases, such as the Battle Hymn of the Republic, God and country are so tightly interwoven that they are impossible to tease apart. People seek the will of God and the will of the nation in writings imagined as particularly sacred; they strain themselves to discern the "true" meaning of those texts. Sacred space is also important in the proper expression of reverence for nation and deity: from Golgotha to Gettysburg, Notre Dame to Normandy. People also imagine that symbols that capture the essence of the divine or the nation are particularly sacred, even holy. The Christian cross and the American flag leap to mind. Finally, devotees and citizens tend to imagine figures living and dead as particularly "holy" or "saintly" and to celebrate or honor them.

I am far from the first person to draw comparisons between human interactions with the divine and with the nation. Most people who study this phenomenon in the United States refer to it as "American civil religion." A common critique of American civil religion in many of its forms is that it elides God and country; this is an elision that scripture and history show to be both appealing and profoundly dangerous. The highways of history are of course littered with the remains of leaders and governments that claimed divine blessing and knowledge of the divine will and brought sacrifice after sacrifice to the altar of national triumph. But I am more interested in a critique from below. One that begins with the bodies of the men and women who protect the interests of the nation.

The soldier clearly occupies a special place within American civil religion as an object of veneration or utopic imagination. “Soldiers” broadly understood, symbolize honor, nobility, courage, self-sacrifice. By association many Americans think of the military as a bastion of much that is truly great about America. The military itself takes American civil religion quite seriously both in obvious and in more submerged ways. An awareness of and respect for national symbols and heroes is more robust in the military than outside of it. Very few Americans swear the oath to “support and defend” that soldiers swear, and even fewer are committed as a matter of their profession to the possibility of dying and killing in that effort. Then, too, there are the myriad ways that those entering and living within the military are asked to subordinate individual will to the common good and, ostensibly, to the good of the nation. Soldiers, again broadly understood, are particularly intense embodiments of devotion to the state and, therefore, of American civil religion.

And it is a perilous place, this place of veneration and embodiment; this place of being a symbol for the nation and living out service to it. It is especially perilous because of the forces of self-emptying exerting themselves from all sides. Treated as symbols, asked to subordinate, it is easy for all involved to lose track of the value and integrity of that which is individual or to recall the individual only as convenience dictates. One can see the tension that develops as a soldier attempts to navigate the demands of service, the imagined exemplary nature of the military, and the irreducible, some believe eternal, nature of the “self.” Many cases demonstrate this point, but for the sake of the contemporary let’s talk first about Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta.

Salvatore Giunta is the now twenty-six-year-old soldier who received the Congressional Medal of Honor in November 2010 for actions in eastern Afghanistan. He was the first living recipient of that honor since the Vietnam War. An article from the AP wire last January described his life since news

of the award began to break. People suddenly wanted him everywhere. And not just any people, cool people: the President, David Letterman, Stephen Colbert; when he wasn't appearing on national television he was attending receptions in Times Square, at the Iowa State House, the Super Bowl. Giunta went to these events because this is what heroes do. But he spoke also of the burdens he feels in this new role. She quoted him, "I've never seen anyone else asked what was the worst day in your life and let's break it down piece by piece and please go into detail ... For some reason they continually ask me every single day and multiple times a day." *What's the problem?* one might ask. *We want to thank you.* Giunta continues, "I lost two friends that day. They mean absolutely everything and people brush by their names. And they keep saying 'Giunta. Staff Sgt. Giunta.' That doesn't feel right." (AP Wire, 2 January 2011)

As it turns out, ritual celebrations of war heroes are complicated matters. It is easy—too easy—to think of them as moments in which we "honor," "remember," even "worship." But when those moments of celebration and worship bewilder and exhaust the person or people at whom they are directed, it makes sense to ask, "What else is going on?" One interpretation is that people want Giunta near them not because of who he is but because in doing what he did and surviving he validated beliefs about the best of America; because, to put it in Christian theological terms, he is the "Word" of America made flesh.

Let me switch now to another Staff Sgt: Staff Sgt. David Senft. The story of Staff Sgt. Senft made the front page of the *New York Times* the same day that the profile of Giunta appeared on the AP wire. Senft, two years Giunta's senior and the product of a tumultuous California childhood, joined the Army following the September 11th attacks and eventually deployed as a Blackhawk helicopter crewman, once to Iraq and twice to Afghanistan. It is reasonable to believe that he, like Giunta,

encountered recruitment pitches to be an Army of one, live the adventure, aim high, etc. and found those pitches not incompatible with his desire to grow, mature, accomplish, even escape. But according to his family Senft was a sensitive kid and was deeply troubled by some of the gruesome scenes he encountered in Iraq. Friends and family could tell that wartime service was not changing him for the better. Fellow soldiers also noticed that he was struggling. He spoke of suicide and attempted it twice; he missed a deployment to Iraq because of his mental health. He deployed to Afghanistan in 2010, came home on leave, married, and then returned to complete his tour. On November 15, 2010 he was found dead in an SUV on Khandahar Air Base, a single bullet hole in his head. His suicide note was a text message.

Much has been written about the increased suicide rate in the military since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began almost ten years ago. One theme that emerges in the reporting is captured well by General Peter Chiarelli, Army Vice Chief of Staff, “Each suicide is as unique as the individuals themselves.” While it is hard to disagree with that statement completely, something about it strikes me as shallow, if not self-serving. Self-sacrificial heroes—Salvatore Giunta—capture and express a national and communal ideal. Suicides, those who literally self-sacrifice, are “unique,” they are “individuals”; they are, we might conclude, separated from or anomalies in the midst of the heroic enterprise of waging war.

Finally and most famously, there is the case of Corporal Pat Tillman who, as many of you know, left his career as a professional football player to become an Army Ranger. He and his brother Kevin deployed first to Iraq and then to Afghanistan where, on April 22, 2004, Tillman was killed by so-called friendly fire (a misnomer if ever there was one). The true circumstances of his death

were covered over by a standard narrative of what Drew Gilpin Faust has labeled, a “good death”—he died fighting, sacrificing his own life to protect fellow soldiers from harm.¹

In the spring of 2004, in the midst of a heated election season, members of the commentariat couldn’t resist preaching on the lessons they took from the text of Tillman’s life and death. Ann Coulter, writing for the conservative FrontPageMagazine juxtaposed then presidential candidate John Kerry with Pat Tillman. Tillman was like Kerry, she wrote, in that he was awarded a Silver Star, but “he did not write his own recommendation or live to throw his medals over the White House fence in an anti-war rally.” She continued, “The stunningly handsome athlete... died bringing freedom to 28 million Afghans ... There is not another country in the world ... that could have produced a Pat Tillman.”²

When the Army began to revise its account of Tillman’s death and the complexities of Tillman’s politics began to emerge as well, the political left rushed in as quickly as had Ms. Coulter. Writing for the *Nation*, David Zirin described a man who was critical of the war in Iraq, strongly anti-Bush and “an avid reader whose interests ranged from history books ... to the works of Noam Chomsky.”³ In Zirin’s eyes these qualities—as much as Tillman’s ability to make Ann Coulter “seethe”—marked him as a hero. “Pentagon spinmeisters and their media stenographers” engaged in “callous manipulation” by committing themselves too much to the narrative of football hero turned soldier hero.

¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

² www.frontpagemag.com, 31 December 2004, “Highlights and Lowlifes” by Ann Coulter

³ *Nation*, 6 October 2005, “Pat Tillman, Our Hero.”

Tillman's story is both tragic and profoundly accusing. For if there is any commonality among those who praised him it is that the praise was never about the whole Pat Tillman (which, to be fair, Tillman worked hard to obscure). Tillman veneration was about weaponizing his memory and using it against political opponents with little regard for the complex man or for his family's desire to be precise in their memories of him.

The question that has been gnawing at me is this: what connects the man who risked his life to save a fellow soldier, the man whose being collapsed under the strain of war, and the man shot to death by fellow soldiers in the actually quite unfoggy fog of war? What can we say about the hero, the suicide, and unintended sacrifice? Is one a success? Are the others failures? Are two of them "true" American soldiers and the other ... something ... else, something half-baked, impure? Could it be the case that American civil religion needs Giunta and Senft and Tillman in roughly equal parts? Giunta to confirm that the American spirit can be made flesh; Tillman as a sacrifice for the sins of the people; Senft to demonstrate that not all are strong enough to keep faith.

Taken together these stories help us to think through the place of "the soldier" in American civil religion. Whether at the dedication of a national shrine, in a Fourth of July parade, or at the Super Bowl, the nation often appropriates the bodies and occasionally the stories of soldiers to validate a symbol, an enduringly incarnate ideal; one can almost hear the voice of the God of the Israelites proclaiming, as recorded in Matthew 3:17, "This is my son in whom I am well pleased." The military is deeply complicit in and the beneficiary of this veneration and the mythology that accompanies it but, at the same time, must engage in the hard work of making soldiers and must struggle with suicides and other tragedies of war as it hopes for heroes and, more frequently, finds common human decency and persistent human fragility. Individual soldiers, it seems, live their lives

in conversation with these pressures more often than not accepting and shouldering their burden but also in meaning-laden moments diverging from and even contesting them.

I would offer thoughts on the ability of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism to guide soldiers as they interact with these civil religious dynamics, but the person speaking next is far more qualified than I am to do just that. I will note in closing that the study of the faith lives of American soldiers can—depending on methods—restore some sense of the particularity, the individuation, the specificity that the patterns of ritual and mythology woven into the military itself and into America’s reverence for the military do so much to erase. At the same time familiar religious categories—Protestant, Catholic, Jew, other—have their own flattening generalizing power and are in their own way imprecise and untrue to the rich diversity of religion in the military.

Thank you.

David Hollenbach, SJ, is the Director of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice and the University Professor of Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College, where he is based in the department of theology. His scholarly work brings theological ethics to bear upon international politics, with a strong focus on human rights in theory and practice. His most recent books are *The Global Face of Public Faith: Politics, Human Rights, and Christian Ethics* (2003) and *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (2002); and he is the editor of two recent books on refugees: *Driven from Home: Protecting the Rights of Forced Migrants* (2010), and *Refugee Rights: Ethics Advocacy, and Africa* (2008). He teaches every other year at Hekima University in Nairobi, Kenya. His Ph.D. is from Yale University.

Mahmood Mamdani is the Herbert Lehman Professor of Government at Columbia University, where he holds appointments in anthropology, political science and the School of International and Public Affairs. He specializes in the study of African history and politics, and has written extensively on colonialism, genocide and human rights. A native of Uganda, Prof. Mamdani taught at universities in Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa before joining the Columbia faculty in 1999. Among his many books are last year's *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (2009) and *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror* (2004). His Ph.D. is from Harvard University.

Alan Wolfe is the founding director of the Boisi Center and Professor of Political Science at Boston College. A widely known public intellectual and frequent contributor to the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The New Republic* and *The Atlantic*, his scholarly work focuses on the relation of religion, politics and culture, in practice and theory. He is author of more than a dozen books, including the forthcoming *Political Evil: What It Is and How to Combat It* (2011), as well as *The Future of Liberalism* (2009), *The Transformation of American Religion* (2003), and *One Nation After All* (1999). His Ph.D. is from the University of Pennsylvania.

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Each speaker will have about 15 minutes for their remarks, followed by *very brief* responses if appropriate, and the remaining time will be available for questions and conversation with the audience. We will end at 7:00pm. So let's begin with Fr. Hollenbach.