

Fantasy land: Civil religion is alive and well

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Speakers at the Republican National Convention mentioned God 43 times; speakers at the Democratic Convention, 22 times. One thing was clear: American civil religion is alive and well. At both events God was regularly invoked as the guide and protector of American greatness.

John McCain declared in his acceptance speech: “I’m going to fight to make sure every American has every reason to thank God, as I thank him: that I’m an American, a proud citizen of the greatest country on earth.” Barack Obama concluded his speech with biblical language, referring to “that American promise . . . that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen. . . . Let us keep that promise, that American promise, and in the words of scripture hold firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess.” The politicians tied God closely to American greatness and to the promise of America; the hope and faith they confessed was hope and faith in America.

Judging from the speeches at the two conventions, the promise of America is primarily the promise of individual achievement. Countless stories were recounted of individuals rising above circumstance and triumphing against the odds. We were repeatedly told that such stories could happen “only in America.” And we heard again and again that in the U.S., if you work hard enough, success is assured. “Anyone can make it if they just try hard enough,” declared Joe Biden, the Democrats’ vice presidential nominee. “With work, strong faith and a little courage, great things are always within reach,” stated McCain—the faith referred to being a generic faith, or just faith in hard work.

Of course, hard work should be affirmed. But it is simply not true that anyone can make it with hard work. What about the single mother who works two jobs to pay the bills and is desperate for child care—do we say to her only, “Work hard”? Is that all we have to say to the youths who attend dismal public schools? To the veteran who

can't afford college? To those without health care insurance?

While we can hardly expect political conventions to articulate a tragic sense of life, the unrelenting celebration of American possibility and God's blessing on it has an infantilizing effect. Civil religion encourages us to live in a fantasy world in which the U.S. is the country that counts most and individual effort conquers all obstacles. The Christian religion, by contrast, would encourage us to be in solidarity with those who are not making it, and help us fashion a politics courageous enough to talk soberly about the country's distinct failings.