America’s Global Civil Religion: Making the UN Sacred in the Postwar US

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Abstract

The founding of the United Nations represented not only a new venue for international cooperation, but also an opportunity for re-thinking the place of America in the world. This report attends to the religious dimensions of that recalibration, highlighting especially the role of the Rockefeller family in crafting a civil religion of the United Nations in the late 1940s. Drawing on longstanding aspects of American civic culture that placed the nation in sacred history, the religion of global community, presented to the American people in hymns, prayers, and community celebrations, was both deeply familiar and altogether new. Letters to the Rockefeller family from ordinary Americans, and the family’s own administrative records, reveal both the popular appeal of this reformulated civil religion and the tremendous efforts exerted to bring it to life. In the end, it never quite became fully realized; “the flickering flame of the United Nations burn(ed) too low,” in the words of Robert Bellah. But UN civil religion mattered all the same, as both a tool of Cold War nationalism and a springboard for new modes of spiritualized global consciousness.
In the summer of 1948, the great American philanthropist and businessman John D. Rockefeller, Jr. received an urgent letter:

You of course know as well as I do, and more, that there are certain elements in our country—in high places in our Administration in Washington—and several foreign Governments, who for their respective vicious reasons want either to destroy the U.N. or, out of jealousy, want to deprive us of our deserved privilege and advantage of making New York the Capitol of the World.

The letter writer, a building contractor and amateur inventor from Flint, MI, wrote to Rockefeller because he, like many Americans, saw Rockefeller as the UN’s greatest champion. Rockefeller had famously purchased and then donated to the United Nations, in December 1946, the land on Manhattan’s East Side where the UN Headquarters would soon rise. But as the letter-writer knew, construction funding in the summer of 1948 was still uncertain, and there was talk of moving the UN elsewhere, perhaps even overseas. The writer urged Rockefeller to act, to ensure the UN stayed where it belonged, in New York—and even pledged his modest life savings to the cause.

The UN belonged in New York—in America—for reasons both mundane and profound. “Our country is in itself somewhat of a UN, built by and composed of various nationalities from the whole world,” the writer contended. The ties between the US and the UN, however, reached beyond American diversity, and even beyond American power and prestige. The mission of the UN, its ideals and purpose, were in deep, even spiritual, ways consonant with the ideals and purpose of America. To this writer, it was as if the United Nations were a God-ordained global fulfillment of America’s sacred story. The “ideals we cherish” as Americans, he noted, were the very same ideals “which the UN is designed to carry out.” He went on, in language both rousing and ominous:

At a time when even Governments are permeated with abject cynicism, whose overt and covert acts and aims are glaringly criminal and godless and have lost the respect for God and common decency... And all this in an age of Atomic Bombs, bacteriological and
supersonic warfare... In this godless world the UN is needed more than ever and RIGHT HERE, IN GOD’S BLESSED COUNTRY, THE USA.

The United States, after all, he wrote, is “governed by a Constitution that was inspired by the Bible,” a providential history that had “made our country the finest, greatest, most powerful” nation on earth. “Thus, for the benefit and glory of our Country and the good of the World,” he concluded, “our country deserves and MUST maintain its MORAL and political leadership, must be the Capitol of the World.”\(^1\)

To twenty-first-century ears, this letter sounds strange, mixing as it does strains of Christian nationalism, American exceptionalism, and conspiracy theories with vigorous support for the United Nations. But in the immediate postwar period, such mixings were not uncommon. Indeed, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a robust if now little-remembered, civil religion of the UN emerged in the United States, an effort to sacralize the new global body in ways entwined with the long-standing American practice of sacralizing the nation. From the time of the Puritans, Americans had seen their nation as God-blessed, as a chosen nation, a “city on a hill” in John Winthrop’s famous formulation, and therefore a beacon of light for the whole world.\(^2\) Over decades and centuries such notions had evolved into a public theology and a set of ritual practices and cultural norms that scholars have come to call “civil religion,” the unique religio-political idiom of American public life.\(^3\) What is less well-recognized, however—and what the Rockefeller Archive Center’s holdings reveal in exquisite detail—is how, in the postwar period, the sacralizing power of American civil religion was mobilized to enlist ordinary Americans, like the contractor from Flint, to support the United Nations. Political and religious leaders and ordinary Americans across the country collaborated to craft a religion of global citizenship in postwar America. And the Rockefeller family stood at the center of these efforts, utilizing their vast wealth and deep ties to both government and the Protestant establishment to aid the cause.

In those early years, to be sure, the UN needed the help. As the letter sent to
Rockefeller indicated, from the moment of its inception, the UN had been mired in controversy, its success far from assured. Membership in the global body seemed, to its many detractors, to violate longstanding American norms dating all the way to George Washington's warning, in his farewell address, to avoid “foreign entanglements.” Pre-war isolationism, driven underground during the war itself, re-emerged with renewed force soon after the Allied victories in Europe and the Pacific. Both supporters and critics of the UN recognized that the United States stood unrivaled as the world’s sole superpower, yet the implications of that great power remained unclear.

Two horrific world wars had revealed the fearsome destructiveness of modern weaponry, epitomized by the atomic bombs the United States used to decimate the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. This much was clear to all. Supporters of the UN saw now that not even two oceans and America’s unprecedented wealth and might could ensure peace and security. Decades of war and revolution had demonstrated, as well, the threat to humanity posed by the unchecked competition of nations, competition fueled by a toxic brew of imperial ambition, ideological fervor, and notions of racial superiority. The revelation of atomic power showed the threat of unfettered nationalism now to be truly existential. The only solution was a new era of international cooperation and law coordinated through global frameworks and institutions. The new world body would succeed where the prior League of Nations had failed because, this time, the United States would lead.

To detractors, such rhetoric represented not hope but folly. Grand dreams of international law and global cooperation, perhaps even world government, sounded less like the fulfilment of American values than their betrayal. Soon fears of diminished American sovereignty were compounded by Cold War anxieties of communist expansion. Was the UN a bulwark for peace, or an open door to communist subversion? Widespread recognition of the religious meaning of the UN, supporters hoped, might rally ordinary Americans around the UN and its mission of peace. Even more, a UN civil religion would ensure that the UN itself, in its ideals and values—in its spirit—remained somehow
deeply and essentially American. The future of the nation and the world just might depend on it.

Scholars describe civil religion, most simply, as the cultural mechanisms by which the nation acquires and maintains its ultimate significance. Through rhetoric from presidents and other public officials, through holidays, memorials, parades, and inaugurations, and through the prayers of ordinary citizens in churches and homes across the land, the story of the nation is made sacred, made into an enfolding work of divine providence. The sociologist Robert Bellah penned in 1967 the most widely cited assessment of American civil religion, in which he outlined the broad themes of American public theology, especially its deep reliance on biblical ideas and images. Yet, in a seldom remembered passage, Bellah also speculated on the possibilities for a civil religion that extended beyond the nation, a civil religion of global citizenship. “The attainment of some kind of viable and coherent world order,” he mused, “would precipitate a major new set of symbolic forms.” New holidays would be needed, new patriotic hymns, perhaps even an expanded sacred vocabulary that reached beyond the language of the Bible. “It would necessitate the incorporation of vital international symbolism into our civil religion, or, perhaps a better way of putting it, it would result in American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion of the world.” And yet, Bellah thought, most tellingly, “A world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion. Indeed,” he concluded, recognizing the universal “city on a hill” dream at the heart of American exceptionalism, “such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning. To deny such an outcome would be to deny the meaning of America itself.”

The writer from Michigan certainly saw things this way, and many other writers to Rockefeller in the early years of the UN agreed. Writers expressed gratitude to Rockefeller for his founding gift to the UN, and likewise expressed the hope that American religious ideals would permeate the world body. The US ambassador to the UN, Warren Austin, weighed in, telling Rockefeller he had “a keen sense of the spiritual value of your philanthropic act.” But recognition
of the spiritual value of the UN extended beyond the corridors of power. “Our Church,” wrote a Presbyterian minister from tiny Republic, Washington, “is proud to have one of its fellow Christians make this gift to the cause of peace and world order.” Another pastor, this one from Euclid Avenue Baptist Church in Cleveland—the home congregation of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.—wrote to Junior, “Our congregation has been watching with eagerness the progress made in building the United Nations.” “I think many of our people are genuinely concerned and so personally committed to the ‘One World’ idea that they would gladly offer their own homes if that would make any difference,” he continued. His congregants had proudly “watched you do, with forthright consecration, what they were praying for.” Rockefeller sent a revealing personal reply. “If the Christian people throughout the length and breadth of this land,” he wrote, “were as deeply interested in the United Nations organization and in furthering its efforts as is the group for which your letter speaks, the peace of the world would be assured.”

When Bellah speculated about the possibility of a global civil religion in the late 1960s, he considered its realization only a distant dream. “So far,” he wrote, “the flickering flame of the United Nations burns too low to be the focus of a cult.” Bellah’s assessment was undoubtedly correct—the UN flame did burn low in the late 1960s, battered by decades of Cold War conflict and struggles over decolonization. But the failure of the UN to become “the focus of a cult”—meaning an object of ritual devotion and deep affection—was not for lack of trying. The Rockefeller family played a central role in bringing such a UN civil religion to life—to enlist “the Christian people throughout the length and breadth of this land” in the cause. They were far from alone. Mainline Protestant denominations and the Federal and National Council of Churches significantly aided the effort, alongside leading Catholic and Jewish civic organizations. Church Women United, a major Protestant parachurch body, and other major women’s religious and secular groups, along with countless other local and national religious and civic organizations, also contributed. The Laymen’s Movement for a Christian World, for example, a New York-based organization that aimed to bring Christian values into the ostensibly secular realms of business and politics, orchestrated national prayer campaigns on behalf of the
United Nations across the late 1940s and 1950s. But in the early years especially, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and his son Nelson played central roles.

Most significant among the efforts of the Rockefellers was the campaign to establish United Nations Week as a period of public education and celebration, and United Nations Day, the centerpiece of UN Week, as a public holiday. Holidays are vital to the ritual life of civil religion, moments of sacred time set aside for reflection, commemoration, and ceremony, and the Rockefellers along with other promoters of the United Nations quickly understood the necessity for a national UN holiday if Americans were to ever develop not just understanding of but devotion to the global body. Such devotion could co-exist with devotion to country but would, supporters hoped, dampen the worst manifestation of virulent nationalism but instilling in Americans a living and heart-felt sense of global citizenship.

UN Week commemorations began in the fall of 1946, to mark the UN’s first anniversary and its first General Assembly session held in the United States. (The UN met in London in the fall of 1945.) In 1946 and again in 1947, UN Week coincided with the start of the General Assembly in September. Starting in 1948 the festivities moved to October after the General Assembly declared October 24, the anniversary of the implementation of the UN Charter in 1945, as the official UN Day, a designation it has held ever since. The General Assembly encouraged all member states to mark UN Day, and political and civic leaders in the United States, as the host nation, stepped up to the task. Crafting a new holiday from scratch was a steep challenge to be sure, requiring funding and careful coordination but also, and more importantly, a vast educational enterprise to inform the American public about the workings of the UN, and the emotional appeals necessary to move them to care.

The American Association for the United Nations (AAUN) spearheaded national UN Week efforts. An outgrowth of an earlier organization that had worked on behalf of the League of Nations, the AAUN was led by the indefatigable and well-connected Clark Eichelberger, who enlisted the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the National Education Association (NEA)
as lead partners starting in 1946. Eichelberger also convinced Nelson Rockefeller, already an accomplished statesman, to serve as chairman of UN Week 1946. The tasks Eichelberger asked of the younger Rockefeller were primarily publicity and ceremonial duties—to make a radio speech, to preside at luncheons, and to send letters to governors and mayors across the country asking for official proclamations of support. No entreaties were necessary at the federal level, however, as President Truman had already written Eichelberger a strong letter of encouragement. “The plans for a United Nations Week promise an important contribution to public education about the United Nations,” he wrote. Such public outreach mattered deeply to the President and the nation, for “only through an increased understanding of the United Nations and a resulting support of its purposes and principles can we establish the solid foundations of peace upon which we must all place our hope for the preservation of our civilization.”

In preparation for UN Week itself, which ran from Sept. 3 to Sept. 9, 1946, NBC aired five special series on its nation-wide radio network, each starting in June. Four of the programs highlighted aspects of US foreign policy or international engagement, while the fifth, the Concert of Nations, featured music from around the world. The NEA provided programming for local public schools to hold during UN Week. The AAUN, meanwhile, produced one-half million pieces of literature publicizing national and local events for distribution through local AAUN chapters to communities across the country. The AAUN encouraged local communities to form UN Charter study clubs; to erect window displays in shops and libraries; to plan UN balls and block parties; to display UN and member nation flags at city hall; and even to “use sound trucks or automobiles gayly decorated with colorful flags and banners to bring home the message of the United Nations to every corner of your community.” More seriously, the AAUN asked local communities to organize a signature campaign, using forms that locals would sign “to pledge their support to the United Nations and welcome them to the United States.” And of course, churches were asked to hold special services to offer prayers of support for the UN.
Nelson Rockefeller arranged for the lower plaza at Rockefeller Center, in the heart of midtown Manhattan, to serve as the focal point for the largest UN Week festivities in the nation, those in New York, the host city. And he hosted a grand gala at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, in October 1946, to celebrate the achievements of this first year of UN Week. “In the schools and colleges, in the churches and synagogues, over the radio and in the press, in meeting places in small towns and in the big cities throughout the United States,” Rockefeller proclaimed at the start of the evening, “the nation has paid tribute to the opening of the General Assembly, and to the delegates of the nations who are joined together to plot the course for the future peace and security of the world and the freedom and welfare of mankind.”

Such work mattered deeply, he knew. In a democracy, after all, “support rests on an enlightened public opinion,” and for the global body to succeed, it needed “a support growing out of the ability of the people of the world to see their interests as citizens of the world community as well as citizens of the individual nations.”

Other speakers included Clark Eichelberger; James Rowland Angell, the former president of Yale; the secretary-general of the UN, Trygve Lie of Norway; and Warren Austin, the US ambassador to the UN. Each in his own way echoed Rockefeller’s call for enlightened world community, with Angell and Austin framing this solemn task in especially spiritual terms. Angell spoke of the delegates gathered in New York as the “corporate conscience of mankind,” noting, “upon their patience, fortitude, wisdom and moral courage rests the future of civilization. They need our prayers and sympathetic support.” Austin argued that the UN, to truly be an instrument of peace, must exert its “spiritual influence” and thereby earn “the consecrated care and service and determination of people all over the world.” More than anything, hope for the UN rested on divine protection and favor. God, Austin proclaimed, “leads us beside the still waters, and we depend upon that.” “We are going to have that blessing,” Austin concluded to applause for the assembled dignitaries, “and prayers all over the world are raised to Him.” Such “benevolence that will surely make the United Nations strong.”
Though Eichelberger and Rockefeller declared UN Week 1946 to be a rousing success, they recognized the need to expand—to get even more large-scale national partners, but also to garner greater engagement from local communities. The goal, after all, was not merely to host dignitaries and make speeches, but to win the hearts and minds of the American people for the UN—to craft that civil religion of the world. Nationally, the AAUN secured agreements with the major airlines—Pan Am, Eastern, American, and United—to distribute UN Week literature on flights, and with major hotels to help promote the event as well. The AAUN, working with a Carnegie-funded organization called the Church Peace Union, crafted more deliberate programming suggestions for churches and synagogues. “All three faiths,” meaning Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, planning documents reported, “are preparing special services.” And as in 1946, Rockefeller Center served as the hub of activities in New York. Every day from Sept. 14 to Sept. 20, the lower plaza hosted dances, concerts, choral music, and speeches.

The highlight of UN Week 1947, however, was not any of these national programs. Eichelberger and the AAUN decided to focus closer to home, to select an all-American small town to host a model UN Week celebration, one that might serve as a template for other communities in coming years. The slogan for 1947, “There’s a U in the United Nations,” reflected this redoubled focus on the local and personal. The place chosen to host this model celebration was the picturesque Hudson River hamlet of Tarrytown, NY and its neighbor, North Tarrytown—the famed setting of Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and, not coincidentally, the home of the Rockefeller family.

“American communities have shown impressive capacity to unite their people in support of the war effort,” organizers declared in the festival program. “But how near can they come to generating equal unity and force in supporting the efforts to create a world of peace? Only a full-scale ‘pilot’ experiment could furnish the answer. This program represents what is believed to be the first such all-out community drive in support of world understanding and peace.” The celebration in the Tarrytowns, festival leaders boasted, “is worthy of emulation by other cities, towns and villages throughout the United States and the
And indeed it had all the trapping of a grand American civil-religious celebration, a 4th-of-July for the world. All week long ran art exhibits produced by local high school and college students, floral and horticultural shows arranged by local garden clubs, and arts and craft fairs. Each weekday featured a different region of the world, with music, dances, parades, crafts, films, and much more, highlighting the distinctive cultures and nations of the world.

Sunday, September 14, and Saturday, September 20, however—the opening and closing days of UN Week in the Tarrytowns in 1947—followed a different plan. Sunday was the day for religious observances. Special Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant services were held in the morning, while the afternoon was dedicated to solemn opening ceremonies. After the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner and a specially commissioned “United Nations Song,” a local rabbi offered an opening invocation. A memorial to war dead was dedicated and Gold Star mothers were honored, followed by a “scriptural reading,” presumably from the Bible. After a blessing of UN Flags and a prayer for “eternal peace” came next, the featured speaker, the prominent Presbyterian layman, lawyer, and diplomat John Foster Dulles, gave the keynote address, which was carried nationally on the NBC radio network. A final prayer of benediction closed the opening ceremony. On Saturday, to bookend the festivities, the focus turned to the United States itself, framing UN Week between God and country. The Saturday ceremonies featured a US military parade and a speech from a US general on the prospects for a world police force.

Nelson Rockefeller himself delivered a sermon on Sunday, to start the week, that deftly articulated the fusion of religious and political frames of meaning that had long defined American civil religion, and that UN Week organizers hoped to transfer to the global body. Speaking from the pulpit of the family church, Union Church in Pocantico Hills, Rockefeller, according to news reports at the time, “outlined a code for Americans who desire the success of the United Nations.” Speaking plainly of America’s newfound global pre-eminence, he said, in plain terms, “We have little to guide us in the role as an international power because most of our people left the old world and came here to escape the confusions of the old world.” And yet, he went on, faith can guide us all the
same. “While we have nothing to guide us in international politics, but we have the teachings of Christianity which know of no national boundaries.” “Other religions,” he graciously acknowledged, “have tenets that serve humanity, but we must think of our own.” Passages from Scripture — “Depart from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it” from the Psalms and “Love thy neighbor as thyself” from the teachings of Jesus—these should be the rules of American engagement the world. The United Nations charter, he declared, was a “pact of faith,” a faith in the possibility of human brotherhood, the self-same faith that had guided Americans all along.

In the years to come, a genuine civil religion of the United Nations did grow in the United States, even if it never quite fully flourished. New hymns were written, proclamations and prayers offered, flags saluted and speeches made—but a central tension always remained. How might this emerging “cult” of the United Nations co-exist with American nationalism, with American civil religion? Could it truly be the fulfilment of the meaning of America, as Robert Bellah dreamed? And what would that mean? Would it become simply another instrument for the projection of American power—nothing more than the religious rationalization of a now-global manifest destiny? Or might UN civil religion offer something else, perhaps a perspective beyond the narrow confines of nationalism, a check on the worst aspects of American exceptionalism? In the decades to come, of course, the answer would be both, as the spiritualization of global citizenship became both weapon of Cold War ideological warfare and a platform for peace. But that is a story for another day.

1 David Paul Joffo to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., June 21, 1948. Rockefeller Archive Center, Office of Messrs. Rockefeller—World Affairs, Record Group III 2Q, Box 26, Folder 229.
5 Warren Austin to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., December 13, 1946. Rockefeller Archive Center, Office of Messrs. Rockefeller—World Affairs, Record Group III 2Q, Box 29, Folder 250.
10 Clark M. Eichelberger to Nelson Rockefeller, June 5, 1946. Rockefeller Archive Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller—Personal Projects, Record Group 4, Series III4L, Box 249, Folder 2489.
11 Memo, “Major Tasks for Mr. Rockefeller,” undated but labelled UN Week 1946. Rockefeller Archive Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller—Personal Projects, Record Group 4, Series III4L, Box 249, Folder 2489.
14 Untitled transcript of remarks, October 25, 1946, 1. Rockefeller Archive Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller—Personal Projects, Record Group 4, Series III4L, Box 249, Folder 2489.
15 Untitled transcript of remarks, October 25, 1946, 2. Rockefeller Archive Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller—Personal Projects, Record Group 4, Series III4L, Box 249, Folder 2489.
16 Untitled transcript of remarks, October 25, 1946, 8. Rockefeller Archive Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller—Personal Projects, Record Group 4, Series III4L, Box 249, Folder 2489.
17 Untitled transcript of remarks, October 25, 1946, 32, 30. Rockefeller Archive Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller—Personal Projects, Record Group 4, Series III4L, Box 249, Folder 2489.
20 “Tarrytowns Model Community UN Week, Sept 14-20, 1947.” Rockefeller Archive Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller—Personal Projects, Record Group 4, Series III4L, Box 248, Folder 2482.