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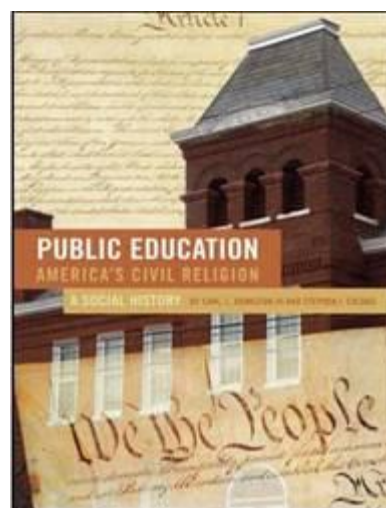
Bankston III, Carl L. & Caldas, Stephen J. (2009). *Public Education America's Civil Religion: A Social History*. NY: Teachers College Press.

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The U.S. has a long-standing vision of itself as a nation consecrated to a special destiny united by a commitment to public institutions, a reverence for national saints and martyrs, and to civic rituals and ceremonies. First coined by Jean-Jacque Rousseau, civil religion has been conceptualized as a belief system that transcends denominational sectors of society. Rousseau argued that a civil religion was needed to increase national solidarity and produce good citizens. He believed that to attain solidarity activities such as festivals were needed to provide entertainment and enable citizens to identify with other citizens of the same nation. In 1915, Emile Durkheim expanded on



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this and introduced the notion that the primary means to binding individuals into a community was through the sacrilization of shared ideas unified by rituals, rites, and festivals. Durkheim argued that, "...without a communal faith, without rituals, without symbols, there could be no polity" (p. 12). Following Durkheim, Robert Bellah (1967) also drew on the view of a shared belief leading to a civic social solidarity. Bellah believed that a religion provided identity and motivation to groups and to individuals. He argued that an American civil religion was critical for meeting national challenges, as well as for integrating individuals into the national community (p. 15). Bellah claimed that the, "...supposedly secular American state rested on a foundation of shared sacred beliefs that could be characterized as a civil religion that existed alongside of churches and synagogues" (p. 16).

Expanding on Robert Bellah's description of American civil religion, Carl L. Bankston III and Stephen J. Caldas delve into the underlying beliefs that make up the American civic faith. In *Public Schools American Civil Religion: A Social History*, Bankston and Caldas, like Bellah, have drawn the idea of the sacrilization of the nation's dominant values and political life into a specifically American setting, tracing its stages through American history. However, unlike Bellah, they argue that belief in education developed as a central part of the belief in the American nation. As schools became the focal point of national belief and commitment throughout the decades, Americans placed tremendous faith in education to solve its social, economic, and political problems. Bankston and Caldas argue that the best way to understand the American devotion to education as the primary means to solving the concerns of society is to examine schools as the temple of a civil religion. They identify the main characteristics of civil religion in America and examine how our unfaltering faith in the power of schools to change society may lead us to exaggerate what schools can actually accomplish. The authors do not seek to discredit this national faith so much as to call readers to examine it with skepticism and to consider its contradictions and limitations.

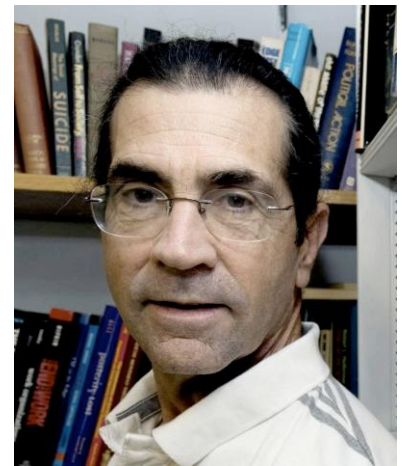


Carl Bankston received his PhD from Louisiana State University in 1995. His teaching and research interests include international migration, Asian and Asian American studies, and racial and ethnic relations. He is chair of the Department of Sociology at Tulane University.

Sketching a chronology, Bankston and Caldas present major events in the history of the U.S. as a catalyst for expanding on education as a civil religion. Believing in an ideal national image, prominent Americans in the early 19th century saw schools as a way to remake the nation as well as their fellow citizens. At that time, when the American education system was limited by local and regional differences and divisions, Bankston and Caldas argue that beliefs about the purpose of education already reflected beliefs in the ways in which individuals could be shaped for communal life. Prior to the Civil War, as society became increasingly pluralistic, disparate communities began to unite and thoughts about schooling invoked images of the new American nation. Schools became a place where a more perfect union could be achieved. “Building a new people through schools became as much a part of the American national project in the first half of the 19th century as building new political institutions and a new transportation infrastructure” (p. 27).

To achieve a national commitment to a set of political ideals through schools, the common school movement was initiated around 1830. This included providing a free elementary education for every white child, creating trained professionals, and establishing some form of state control over local schools. Bankston and Caldas claim that the common school movement in the three decades prior to the Civil War helped prepare the nation for public schooling as a central part of individual and public life. However, according to the authors, it was the post Civil War era that moved schooling to the center of American civil religion.

During Reconstruction, America experienced national unification and rapid economic progress. In the ensuing decades, the U.S. shifted from a mainly agricultural nation to a major industrial nation. The developing industrial economy required workers and the availability of jobs drew immigrants to the shores of America. In response to the rapid increase of foreign peoples, the public schools became the place to Americanize immigrants and inculcate American beliefs. Through public schools, educators sought to reconstruct and shape immigrant students to fit into an



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idealized version of American society. Americanization through schools became the central apparatus of the American civic creed. This was not only emphasized for immigrants, but for all school children. Education, therefore, was placed at the core of developing American social scientific thought during the Progressive Era.

Progressivism, according to Bankston and Caldas, was a pioneering movement in public education. It believed in the unification of the nation to forge a new social order. The intellectuals of the Progressive Era, the authors argue, envisioned schools that would become "...both temples of civic traditions and vehicles for changing visions of the Promised Land" (p. 39). Some educators at that time believed a new social order could come to fruition through cultivating the imagination and creative spirits of children. Others believed children should be indoctrinated to fit into a planned society. However, from both perspectives educators believed that education was the vehicle for the reformation of society. To social reformers, schools were the perfect place to redesign people and society.

Schools, once again, became the place where national ideals and values of American life could be realized. Themes of rebirth and national integration of the Promised Land came together in the celebration and cultivation of patriotic events in school. Mythical worship of the nation found in Thanksgiving Day, Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day and other "holy days" of the nation connected the beliefs of salvation in the Promised Land with the expressions of civic solidarity. Washington's Birthday became the first federal holiday to honor an American citizen. Bankston and Caldas emphasize that Washington thus became more of a saint than a mere political and military leader. Civic observances celebrated national ideals and unity. Flag ceremonies, in particular, took on a new importance as the Pledge of Allegiance became the accepted daily ritual in American schools in the early 20th century.

As civic faith in schooling became a celebration of nationality during the Progressive Era, schools became

increasingly institutionalized. It was believed that the future of America's Promised Land could be achieved through mass public education. Bankston and Caldas believe this was particularly stressed during the period between the two World Wars. Issues of managing and designing, what was now an urban industrial society, dominated thoughts concerning the vision of American society. Guided by a fundamental faith in education, Progressive, as well as Traditional, thinkers believed schools would be responsible for delivering this vision. The goal of both schools of thought was to produce a well-rounded citizen who could fully participate in the American experience.

During the period between the World Wars, rituals of adherence to a "sacred" nation became even stronger and more entrenched in schools. Bankston and Caldas present a convincing case that insidious foreign influences intensified the demands for membership of all citizens into a community of believers. "By the end of World War I, the nondenominational state cult of American civil religion entailed sacred objects and places (the flag and monuments), a set of rituals based on those objects and places, martyrs and holy ancestors (the dead of American wars and the Founding Fathers), sacred days of commemoration, a creed (the Pledge), and a strong sense of the transcendent nature of the nation" (p. 67). For many Americans, Americanization in the schools meant inculcating nationalistic beliefs to fortify solidarity. The school, once again, was firmly established as the way for Americans to reach all of its collective goals.

Turning their attention to post-World War I and II years, Bankston and Caldas emphasize the education boom, Cold War, and the growing calls for equality. This postwar political environment consisted of an intense, global ideological rivalry between the United States and the USSR. As the authors argue, communism was seen as a godless ideology. This "...encouraged a passionate sense of defensive nationalism, and a corresponding dedication to the cult of the nation, for which schools had become primary temples" (p. 79). Evidence of this is seen in the addition of "Under God" in the wording of the Pledge. Bankston and

Caldas posit that this was a direct result of Cold War pressures, explicitly leading to a belief in a national theological faith. Schools were now charged with not only the responsibility for providing traditional knowledge, citizenship training, and technical abilities, they were now also seen as defenders of the “sacred” American way of life.

By the 1970s, the civil rights movement instilled a new vision of values in American society. The civil rights movement aimed at the inclusion and equality of the systematically excluded. Equality and inclusion became major themes of civic value and the government began a new campaign of assimilation. Under the direction of President Lyndon B. Johnson “...the assimilation of the disadvantaged became the idea underlying most educational changes from the mid-1960s onward” (p. 114). Educational policy makers tended to view inequality as a matter of unjust distribution of available products to those marginalized in society. It was believed this could be corrected through schools. Through such acts as the War on Poverty, attention was drawn to the poor in hopes of increasing their purchasing power and therefore pumping up overall demand. However, one of the difficulties with this expectation, according to the authors, is that poverty is relative in a society, especially one with rising expectations.

The War on Poverty was based on the ideas that a culture of poverty existed among the poor. It was believed that government programs could eliminate poverty. Thus education came to the forefront in an attempt to change the culture of the poor. At this point, the authors critically question whether Americans have placed too much faith in education and expect more than schooling can deliver.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*. This publication proclaimed that the educational foundations of society had eroded and further emphasized a commitment to a high standard of education for realizing American social and political goals. As in prior years, the national faith in education meant that schools became focal points for the failures of the American nation in general. “Because

schooling is so central in our national system of beliefs, our immediate response to the success of every other nation is to say: it must be their schools” (p. 141).

Faith in schools soared to new heights. As Bankston and Caldas examined the belief that America was in a state of decline, they believe the increased call for standards and testing in schools became a strategy for building an inclusive egalitarian national faith. In an effort to reform schools, which lay at the heart of the nation’s belief in the future, policymakers requested a uniform standard of curricula and testing to build national solidarity.

Bankston and Caldas offer the explanation that even as political administrations during the late 20th and early 21st centuries became more conservative than that of President Johnson, beliefs about education and American life directly correlated with Great Society programs. The authors write: “Though on the surface President Johnson’s Great Society and President Bush’s conservatism seem on polar opposites of the political spectrum, both actually reflect the same underlying faith in public education as a means of building an equitable society” (p. 154). No Child Left Behind, as with other policies, concentrated on the historically disadvantaged and educationally marginalized members of society. Teachers were expected to bring marginalized students up to the same measurable standards as majority students. Standardized curricula and testing became the means to eliminate inequalities in society.

Public Schools American Civil Religion: A Social History is a comprehensive, yet engaging read. From the onset it captured my attention as I considered the public’s optimistic faith in the ability of education to change society. I had assumed the celebrations of our nation’s history, heroes, and our daily ritual to the flag, were an innocent byproduct of an effort to bring solidarity among communities and individuals. As a student, and later as an educator, I never questioned nationalistic rituals nor associated a civic religious motivation with these acts. However, during the reading of Bankston and Caldas’s analysis of civil religion, I often found myself asking why certain events and policies in

history were ignored. From the late 19th century to the mid 20th century, federally recognized boarding schools set out to civilize and assimilate Native American peoples by enforcing American civic traditions. In addition, there was little mention of English Language Only policies that have been actively enforced on non-English speakers throughout the history of the United States. These education policies and practices essentially sought to erase and replace the languages and identities of marginalized groups in American society. Critically analyzing these concrete examples would have strengthened the authors' arguments.

Bankston and Caldas also fail to examine the exceptions to these civic myths. Did public schools have any agency and did administrators or teachers ever act apart from this faith in schools? By neglecting to explain counter-narratives, Bankston and Caldas limit our ability to question our faith in schools. In fact, they do not present an alternative to their vision until the last three pages of the book.

These criticisms aside, *Public Schools American Civil Religion: A Social History* is useful not only for educators and the general public, but also for challenging our belief in the power of education policies. First and most obviously it allows us to problematize and investigate our undying faith in public education's ability to change society. In addition, it demonstrates that throughout history both conservative and liberal administrations have developed policy intended to create an egalitarian utopian society. Indeed, this book gives us an expansive view of history's civic faith in the nation. Yet, the absence of major practices, policies, and counter-narratives leaves gaps in Bankston and Caldas's arguments. In spite of these gaps, the authors successfully challenge Americans to reconsider what education can accomplish for its citizens.

About the Reviewer

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