119

<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html>

**Is America a Particular Civilization?**

*The New York City Council last week voted to add two Muslim holidays to the city's public school calendar, citing the annual observance of Christian and Jewish holidays. Mayor Bloomberg objects, saying the city isn't obligated to accommodate all faiths: "If you close the schools for every single holiday, there won't be any school." Who's right? In a country with so many faiths, should public schools observe any religious holidays?*

To this question, any answer I give will divide my friends and multiply my enemies. You, too. But the social sanction is not ultimate; some things are more important than friends and enemies. For example, *what's happening to America?*Federal decisions on holidays is one indicator of what's happening to America.

1.....During the '20s, every public-school classroom of mine had nothing on the wall above the front blackboard but two portraits representing holidays: Washington's Birthday (the father of our country) and Lincoln's Birthday (the savior our union).  
While there is no consistent legal pattern of holiday-names changes, the names Washington and Lincoln are fast fading into "Presidents' Day." One wonders whether any public-school classroom in America still has the portraits of those old dead white males....

2.....But thousands of public-school classrooms today have the portrait of a young dead black male, and he is presently the only American to be honored by name with a national holiday (by the year 2000, so officially celebrated in all 50 states). He was an upper-class black who came late to the black movement (dragged into it by a parishioner of his, Rosa Parks). His PhD dissertation was on ideas of God, not social justice. And he was as much into recreational sex as was John F. Kennedy (in both cases, hidden from the public). But he could out-speak all the black leaders who had done the heavy lifting, so he became the front-man in public attention, then the movement's personal symbol, then a world hero, then a postage-stamp image, then a holiday for public school kids.  
I was a supporter of the black movement before Kingappeared and participated in the drive he led toward the civil rights act of '64 and the voting rights act of '65. And I recognize that a movement has more penetrating power if it has a personal symbol as its spear-tip. But a national holiday? No school today? A bridge too far. In our national consciousness, the name "King" swells and the names "Washington" and "Lincoln" shrink.

3.....The calendar of American holidays should represent what America has been and is and should be. But what is that? *What is "America"?*It is geography (garrisoned by the American military), history (existing as remembrance and celebration), people (more various than people anywhere else), and values with attendant virtues (rooted in the Bible and the Enlightenment). I'm repulsed by boasts that we are "the greatest country on earth"; but we are unique, "a peculiar [particular] people." "Peculiar" is said of the Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish people in the Old Testament and of the Christian people in the New Testament. Peculiar not in the secondary sense "odd" but in the primary sense of "distinctive, with a special purpose." Because the early Americans were a Bible-saturated people (over against Europe's church-and-state saturated peoples). They and their descendants, as well as waves of immigrants, increasingly saw themselves as a peculiar, distinctive, special, exceptional people with a world mission to witness to "the American way of life" (with, of course, baneful as well as beneficent consequences in past and present).

4.....But a quite different notion of "America" has been spreading in our country in the past half-century. It is the crypto-imperial notion that Americans are world-citizens with the right and even the duty to live as everybody in the world should live, unfettered by any provincial, "peculiar" values. It was a philosophical notion that acquired a religious aura and then became pop. Celebrating "multiculturalism" (one of the notion's names), in 1985 Michael Jackson, the King of Pop (whose extravaganza funeral occurred today) wrote "We Are the World" (his most remembered song). Let's call it *the Second America*.

5.....We of the First America believe in "equality before [or under] the law for all persons" as a principle authorized - as our Declaration of Independence says - both by God and by "we the people." This (after much spilled blood) eliminated legal slavery, because an owned person and the owning person cannot stand "equal before the law" if the law does not assumes slavery. Indeed, it implicitly declares illegal all crimes against humanity, which we of the First America see also as sins against God.

6.....The Second America diffuses, confuses, and corrupts this founding American principle by expanding the legal equality of PERSONS in America to the legal equality of CIVILIZATIONS in America. A current ACLU campaign aims to eliminate crosses from the graves in Arlington National Cemetery: as Christian, the crosses are offensive to the "multicultural" sensibilities of the Second America. In New York City, Second American egalitarianism won the battle to eliminate school days on the holidays of another civilization.

7.....But First American Mayor Bloomberg is correct. America is not "the world" but*a particular civilization*alongside and to varying extents in competition with other civilizations. While members of other civilizations, moving to America, are free to continue their cultural-religious practices to the extent that they make no demands for equality of recognition, America's calendar of public holidays should be limited to the cultural-religious roots which account for America as a distinct civilization, namely, the Bible (Christianity and Judaism) and the Enlightenment.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  JULY 8, 2009; 9:24 AM ETSAVE & SHARE:  [Send E-mail](http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/emailalink?sent=no&link=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html&title=Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?)   [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html&t=Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?)   [Twitter](http://twitter.com/home?status=Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20-%20http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html)   [Digg](http://digg.com/submit?phase=2&url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html&title=Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?)   [Yahoo Buzz](http://buzz.yahoo.com/buzz?publisherurn=washington_po284&guid=washington_po284:http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html)   [Del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us/post?url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html;&title=Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20-%20On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog;)   [StumbleUpon](http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html)   [Technorati](http://technorati.com/search/http:/onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/07/is_america_a_particular_civilization.html)    
PREVIOUS:**[**AMERCAN HOLIDAYS, NOT RELIGIOUS ONES**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/leith_anderson/2009/07/amercas_history_religious_holidays.html)**| NEXT:**[**MUSLIM HOLIDAYS MAKE SENSE FOR NYC SCHOOLS**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/feisal_abdul_rauf/2009/07/muslim_holidays_make_sense_for_nyc_schools.html)

**Comments**

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TO MONO1

No Christian holds to your first mind, & I've never heard of your second mind.

As for the third mind you mention, namely,"science and technology," it arose within a civilization taking the first two minds (properly defined, not as you characterize them) seriously.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JULY 17, 2009 8:14 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20elliottwl%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204693954&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4693954%26blog_id=618)

bible mind,

for so god love the world he nailed his only begotten son to the cross for the love and the sin of mankind ?

enligtment mind,

strangle the last king by the entrails of the last preist?

please study the above ^2 mind ^and see how they runied and destructed the race of mankind.

dark ages still exist in the above 2 mind zone and hemispher despite the fact that divine enligtment came to mankind long time ago.

people in the above 2 mind zone are still digging in the relics despite the advancement in science and technology.

**POSTED BY: MONO1 | JULY 16, 2009 7:42 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20mono1%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204693702&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4693702%26blog_id=618)

It overstates the case to say the christian bible is one of only 2 sources of our civilization. The Founding Fathers deliberately excluded the bible from the Constitution ins spite of strenuous efforts by the religious right of the day to incorporate it into our laws. Religious freedom itself is not possible in a truly christian nation, one where the bible is 1 of 2 fundamental wellsprings of society. The First Amendment is a rejection of religious influence. Consider that the Founding Fathers deliberately had the Post Office deliver mail on Sundays to prove the point.

The writings of the classical philosophers and the European Enlightenmentists (if I may coin a word) were far more influential than the protestant bible.

Further, it would be more accurate for Mr. Elliot to refer to the protestant bible, as America was overwhelmingly protestant and anti-catholic. Yes, Maryland was catholic, but catholics in the other colonies suffered legal disabilities. Their bible had even less influence on the Founding Fathers.

**POSTED BY: GARAK | JULY 14, 2009 1:45 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Garak%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204693453&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4693453%26blog_id=618)

TO COMMENTERS TO DATE:  
1  
You object to my emphasis that America is a "particular" civilization with particular values, rather than the world in miniature with all civilizations/cultures/religious of equal value. This is a fundamental & abiding divide in the American mind.  
2  
The American particularity is within another particularity, viz. "the West." In the West's structure of the week, only two religions are honored, one on Saturday and the other on Sunday (both, from the Bible). Israel, which is between East & West, honors a third religion, so has a three-day weekend. In the West's structure of the week, I'm for honoring only our two founding religions: I'm for continuing the five-day workweek, not reducing it to four. Are YOU?  
3  
Though "democracy" is general as a theoretical category, all democracies are particular, the character of each dependent on its particular provenance, the values honored in its origins and history. Democracy in America, if America fails to remember & honor its history, will become something very different from what we now call "American democracy."  
4  
I do not devalue the Enlightenment, but honor it as one of the two formative influences of the American mind, the other being the Bible.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JULY 14, 2009 7:13 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20elliottwl%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204693405&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4693405%26blog_id=618)

"1985 Michael Jackson, the King of Pop (whose extravaganza funeral occurred today) wrote "We Are the World" (his most remembered song). Let's call it the Second America."

And various Europeans and others you aren't paying attention to \*funded and recorded and promoted it.\*

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 13, 2009 2:08 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Paganplace%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204693310&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4693310%26blog_id=618)

And, you know, Reverend: quite frankly, I think Dr. King, if he can be judged by how he spoke to the world... Was a true believer in real and unalienable human rights ...not negotiable or conditional ones \*for all.\*

For now, we should honor him. But I think he would be no less pleased than General Washington would, if all the pomp and ceremony comes to not be about a \*man,\* but about what he stood for.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 13, 2009 1:59 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Paganplace%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204693308&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4693308%26blog_id=618)

OK. This is one, Reverend, where I couldn't get through your article without having to say something.

MLK day, like Washington and Loncoln's birthdays as individual things, may well fade in particular relevance as we, as Americans take more and more for granted, as we do as the Founders intended and 'form a more perfect union,' establish \*true\* Justice, foster \*real\* domestic tranquility, keeping in mind both ourselves \*and\* our posterity (If you so happen to believe there'll be one)

That said, Reverend, here's more cultural imperialism for 'Judeo-Christianity.' Are you prepared to honor as well, the Classical, Native American, Masonic, and what you damn by faint praise, Enlightenment ideals that made, and make, what this nation is?

This is about more 'marking territory' for you. Indignant as you may be that we may honor a civil rights leader who said 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to Justice everywhere.'

You, Reverend, are always looking for a way to make a case that someone who just happens to be \*you\* has a right to say 'who's most equal.' Even retroactively.

Phooey.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 13, 2009 1:53 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Paganplace%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204693306&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4693306%26blog_id=618)

It's called evolution.

What is America?  
Of course, my grandfather who served in a Horse Cavalry Regiment, NJ NG, in the 20's and then OSS in the 40's , Counter Intel, would probably wonder, what happened. Narcotics...  
Being born in Washington and raised locally, I heard many stories about the Civil Rights marches ,H street.  
  
The SLC or SNCC , I don't know, I haven't gone back and researched the (abreviations)many groups that were active during King's time.

How may children actually get to see the Declaration. Teachers love Field Trips.

J

**POSTED BY: JAMES210 | JULY 9, 2009 7:50 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20James210%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204692517&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4692517%26blog_id=618)

I think America's particularity lies in its democratic mission, not all of its history, which does not speak well of its dream. It is true that MLK was far from perfect, but neither he nor the presidents are honored for a perfection, which they did not achieve. I would add that until this year, we had no black president to whom we might have dedicated a day. Indeed, none were able to run as the candidate for the major parties. Taken alone, that unfortunate fact argues eloquently for why MLK should be remembered with a holiday.

He is as important to the "whites" as to blacks, perhaps, more so. It is the souls of the former that his work and legacy may have saved. In the same way, the Holocaust should be more in the minds of Christians than of Jews, more in the minds of Christians than of the Roma, who were Roman Catholic, more in the minds of straights than of gays.

Finally, this is a secular, increasingly diverse society. So long as we claim to be a democracy, we must either expand the number of our religious holidays or dispense with them altogether. In New York City, they cost us two solid weeks of precious school time. IMO, this needs to end. Workers could be given extra vacation days that they could use to honor this or that sacred period. Students may take these days off without penalty.

The time for separation of church and state is long overdue.

**POSTED BY: FARNAZ1MANSOURI1 | JULY 8, 2009 3:42 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Farnaz1Mansouri1%20%20|%20%20Is%20America%20a%20Particular%20Civilization?%20%20|%20%204692104&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4692104%26blog_id=618)

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