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“And I Don’t Care What It Is”: The Tradition-History of a Civil Religion Proof-Text

Patrick Henry

John Gager (xi) asks why the study of Christian origins has been so carefully protected from the methods of anthropology and sociology used in the study of modern religious movements. The question can be turned around. Why have methods applied to the study of ancient sources—*Formgeschichte*, *Redaktionsgeschichte*, *Ueberlieferungsgeschichte*, or just plain *Geschichte*—not been focused on contemporary scholarship? I recently had occasion to work through the transmission-history of one of the classical proof-texts of American civil religion, and found the territory remarkably like that of the Bible and church fathers where I usually roam.

I had reached a point in writing an article at which President Eisenhower’s famous/notorious remark about “wanting everybody to have faith but not caring what it was” would make a neat transition. I was tempted to leave it at that, since the general thrust of the remark was all I needed, and I had heard it referred to often enough to be confident that I had got its gist. But I decided that a footnote would lend a certain cachet to the article, so I went in search.

The various dictionaries of quotations (Bartlett’s 14th ed., Oxford 3rd ed., etc.) were no help. I remembered hearing a friend mention the Eisenhower remark and asked if he recalled where he had seen it. He thought it was probably in Ahlstrom, and sure enough it was.

This is what we read in Ahlstrom: “In all of these modes, religion and Americanism were brought together to an unusual degree. This was especially true of the 1950s, when President Eisenhower served for

Patrick Henry is professor and chairperson, Department of Religion, Swarthmore College. He has published in patristics, especially early Byzantium, and is the author of *New Directions in New Testament Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979; London: SCM Press, 1980). He is currently at work on a comparative study of Buddhist and Christian monasticism with his Swarthmore colleague, Donald K. Swearer. This article is his first (and last?) foray into the field of American religion.

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