

FRANK CAPRA: FROM POPULISM TO CIVIL RELIGION**Ofelia Tofan (Al-Gareeb), PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

Abstract: Frank Russell Capra, “the American dream personified”¹, was one of the best American movie director and the creative force behind major award-winning films during the 1930s and 1940s. His movies, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Meet John Doe, together with It’s a Wonderful Life are often included in the category of the greatest films ever made. And movies, like religion, with their symbols exerted a profound influence upon the American imagination. Making from turning movies a profession, a creed, Frank Capra transformed cinema into a (civil) religion. Film genres are generally defined by a prominent auteur, and Frank Capra’s name is nonetheless associated with the populist comedy movie. Obviously, Capra’s populism is more cultural than political, but it is no wonder since his “weapons” are the reiterating and glorifying the virtues of America’s symbols and praising the common American. Capra’s movies can be approached in terms of civil religion, too. Civil religion deals with such symbols as historic figures (Washington, Jefferson, Grant, Lincoln, etc) as prophets; sacred places (Grant’s Tomb, Lincoln’s Memorial and others) as shrines; celebrations (Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day, Fourth of July, Veterans Day, birthdays of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and so on). Frank Capra expressed his creed at full in the film language making it crystal-clear – American perennial values are the means by which one person can recover his or her moral strength, can help the community, can help the society, can be a real American, a true believer in the precepts of civil religion, a patriot. In his movies, Capra kept reminding the Americans of their ideals.

Keywords: Frank Capra, populism, civil religion, symbols, patriotism

INTRODUCTION

“A great man and a great American, Frank Capra is an inspiration to those who believe in the [American dream](#)” (John Ford)

Considered to be the “American dream personified”², Frank Russell Capra was one of the best American movie director and the creative force behind major award-winning films during the 1930s and 1940s. The Italian-born American director, writer and producer was more a patriot than many other American-born citizens.

America in the 1930s, traversing the Great Depression, was facing a time of economic, political and social hardship. Yet, the 30s were also the era of the great Studios who fulfilled their role of entertainers – the audience went to movie-theatres where screwball comedies, glamorous musicals and fantasy movies meant to divert the grim realities of the time were shown. Generally, Hollywood released escapist movies, in optimistic tones and with no criticism vis-à-vis society, state authority, government, political institutions, and so on. But

¹ According to Ian Freer, film historian.

² *Idem.*

among the filmmakers of that period, Frank Capra, alongside with very few others, can be considered an anti-establishment director.

Frank Capra's movies, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Meet John Doe*, together with *It's a Wonderful Life* are often included in the category of the greatest films ever made. These can be watched and enjoyed on a simplistic entertainment level, but there are also some more things told "between the lines", so that they cannot be any longer mere escapist films, created for mere enjoyment. There are strong issues being dealt with about man and his relationship within the society he lives in, starting from the most elemental problems concerning individuals, going to political corruption. There is a pervasive sensation that city people are corrupt and vitiate all that they come in contact with, whereas the simple, innocent country people are good-natured and un-perverted. The point is that it is not the individual that is corrupted, but the society that corrupts the individual. Both protagonists in the first two above mentioned movies live undisturbed in their small towns. Things change when they go to city.

As a matter of fact, Capra's characters are modelled on the belief that one man can make a difference and help society, a sort of "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."³

Movies, like religion, exerted a profound influence upon the American imagination. We are surrounded by images. Images are but things representing something else, things standing for something else. And when images are used to represent, they symbolize, and symbolizing is the basis for (inter)communication. Cinema is a sort of communication presenting us with recognizable figures, objects, and situations. And the symbols Frank Capra used to render his ideas are by far recognizable – they all refer to the American mode of being, to the forefathers of the nation, to the most valuable reference points that marked the becoming of the United States as it is. So, it becomes quite obvious why the Capra-esque style won the hearts of the audience back in the 1930s, but not only then. As long as true love for one's country will exist, and Americans will love their country, no matter what generation is referred to, such movies will exert a certain influence upon those watching them.

As to the symbol-values Capra praised in his films, since he considered them as being an important part of the America's "creationist" myth, he must have had in mind George Santayana's words: "He who forgets history is doomed to repeat it" and paraphrased it: "A country which forgets its past loses its identity", and definitely wanted to deter from occurring such a thing and thus he brought his modest contribution to the process. Making from turning movies a profession, a creed, Frank Capra transformed cinema into a (civil) religion.

Film historians and critics analyzed his movies and aligned him with various cultural movements, such as Transcendentalism/Romanticism, Populism, Modernism, etc. True as it is, civil religion made its "debut" in the world of humanities in the 1960s, and Capra stopped directing in 1961, but nonetheless, Capra's movies can be very well approached in terms of civil religion. Civil religion deals with such symbols as historic figures (Washington, Jefferson, Grant, Lincoln, etc) as prophets; sacred places (Grant's Tomb, Lincoln's Memorial and others) as shrines; celebrations (Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day, Fourth of July, Veterans Day, birthdays of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and so on). All the stock is as well the "property" of the American state, of the American people, of the American patriotism too, and, why not, of the American political movements.

Perhaps Capra was not truly a populist, in the political sense of the word, but definitely he was a true patriot. He loved America and the Americans:

³ From famous President John. F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address on January 20th, 1961 <http://www.famousquotes.me.uk/speeches/John_F_Kennedy/5.htm>.

I fell in love with Americans, just fell in love with them. These goddamned Americans I thought, they were so free on their own, individuals, not taking their hats off to anyone. If somebody got sick they'd do something about it, I thought Americans were the gods of the world.⁴

Rather abruptly said and on a rough language, but the love he felt oozes through each and every word, a real love affirmation made in the sincerest and limitless admiring manner. And he loved America and the Americans not sententiously, not only on a level of making affirmations, but he proved it to the full with each movie he made. What else such movies as *Why We Fight* series⁵, for instance, or *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* or *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* are if not instances meant to remind his fellow country people how great America is and how they could find support and examples to follow in the great historic past, piled out with numerous heroic figures?

Although among some critics Frank Capra does not have a reputation equal to those of other directors, his best films are still popular with the audience. Probably it is his simple vision, combined with a mastery of the film form itself that has made him so long-lastingly popular. He will be always remembered and praised for his contribution to the American thinking about individualism and democracy, for his optimism reflected in his movies (explained in a way by his background: that of an immigrant who succeeded in climbing the social ladder, and who sincerely loved his adopted country). Capra expressed his faith in democracy, his confidence that good people could really reform the society and government, and make things go well. He expressed his belief in the common man, often referred to in his movies as “the little guy/people.”

In his movies, Capra kept reminding the Americans of their ideals.

FRANK CAPRA AND THE POPULISM

*“The perennial American ‘ism’ with its roots extended at least as far back as the American Revolution”*⁶ (George McKenna)

All dictionaries define populism as being a political philosophy, supporting the rights and power of the people in their struggle against the privileged elite; the movement organized around this doctrine; a political discourse that appeals to the general mass of the population.

However, the term populism derives from the Latin *populus*, “people”, in the sense of “nation” and not in the sense of “multiple individual persons”, and, throughout history populism has been a common political phenomenon.

In the United States of America, the movement has as starting point the principles and doctrines of the late nineteenth century Populist Party, especially its support of agrarian interests, opposing large business and financial interests, and combining elements of the left and right, given its central tenet that democracy should reflect the pure and undiluted will of the people.

⁴Walter Karp, “The Patriotism of Frank Capra,” *Esquire* 95 (February, 1981), 34<
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Ma97/halnon/capra/capra.html>>.

⁵ When Capra was assigned the mission to make some series which were supposed to motivate the U.S. soldiers, he confessed to have tried to create “one basic, powerful idea” that would spread and evolve into other related ideas: I thought of the Bible. There was one sentence in it that always gave me goose pimples: “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

⁶ Wes D. Gehring, *Populism and the Capra Legacy*, apud George McKenna, *American Populism*, Greenwood Press, 1995, p.1.

Deriving from the political doctrine, the other sense of populism, as seen by Wes D. Gehring, is that of “a celebration of rural and/or small-town life, mythic-like leader sense who have risen from the people (also reflecting the movement’s often patriotic nature), an adherence to traditional values and customs (mirroring the phenomenon’s strong sense of nostalgia), anti-intellectualism (in an elitist sense), a faithfulness to honest labour, and a general optimism concerning both humanity’s potential for good and the importance of the individual.”⁷

Film genres are generally defined by a prominent auteur, and Frank Capra’s name is nonetheless associated with the populist comedy movie, a combination between the power-to-the-people genre and the romantic screwball comedy.

The political involvement is more obvious in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, starting with the protagonist’s name – Jefferson Smith (the role being played by Jimmy Stewart), a combination between the name of the real American hero, Thomas Jefferson and one of the possible names of any American common man, Smith – and going to the populist belief in the Jeffersonian democracy, the core of the populism, the faith in a rural and small-town America, with very little need of government interference.

And if Jefferson Smith succeeds in stopping the corruption in the United States Senate, the protagonist with the same name in *Meet John Doe*, played by Gary Cooper, stops a fascist-like organization, whereas Longfellow Deeds (again a combination, this time the first name being that of a patriotic poet of the people, and the surname being the noun “deeds”, describing a man of action), the hero in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, stops a corrupt banker by offering his money to the people for building small farms. Moreover, through their political involvement, Capra’s protagonists celebrate real American heroes’ commonsense wisdom, heroes such as Davy Crockett, Andrew Jackson, Daniel Boone and Abraham Lincoln, the national treasure and model to be followed by every American. The scenes with Deeds visiting Grant’s Tomb and Jefferson visiting Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, respectively denotes Capra’s patriotism, his creed in American tradition and values, and his strong conviction that children should be educated in the respect of all these – and to this purpose he must have created the memorable scene in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* with the little boy reading The Declaration of Independence for his grandfather, providing an authentic history lesson.

Obviously, Capra’s populism is more cultural than political, he made an apolitical populism part of his everyday vision, but it is no wonder since his “weapons” are the reiterating and glorifying the virtues of America’s symbols and praising the common American, as he admits:

The strength of America is in the kind of people who can plant a seed and sow the grass. I wanted to glorify the average man, not the guy at the top, not the politician, not the banker, just the ordinary guy whose strength I admire, whose survivability I admire.⁸

FRANK CAPRA AND THE CIVIL RELIGION

“We are a nation formed by a covenant, that is, by dedication to the libertarian and egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence, and those principles comprise the standard by which we must judge ourselves.”⁹ (Leo Marx)

⁷ Wes D. Gehring, *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁸ See Capra’s interview with John F. Mariani in *Focus on Film 27* (1977), 46-47 qtd. <<http://www.classicmovies.org/articles/aa083197.htm>>

⁹ John Schar, *apud* Leo Marx, “The Uncivil Response of American Writers to Civil Religion in America”, *American Civil Religion*, ed. by Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, Harper & Row, Publisher, New York, 1974, p. 244.

Religion has been defined in many ways, for instance, starting from the Latin root *re-ligere*, to “bind together”, religion is defined as the totality of those feelings, symbols, and acts that bind a group together. In Denis Fustel Coulanges’s *The Ancient City*, as well as in Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, it is defined as “either a correlate of the structure of a society or as a projection of the image of society into objective and sacred symbols”.¹⁰

As to civil religion, its definition varies; thus, in the case of sociology of religion, civil religion is the folk religion of a nation or a political culture. As a political philosophy, civil religion is a ritual expression of patriotism. In terms of sociology of religion, civil religion comprehends the veneration of the past (political) leaders and of veterans, founding and other national myths, and the religious manifestations (invocation of God in political speeches, quotation of religious texts on public occasion or by political leaders) as well; whereas in terms of a political philosophy, it encompasses parades, the display of the national flag, singing of the national anthem, inaugural ceremonies, building monuments to commemorate great leaders and events, the Pledge of Allegiance of the United States. Generally, the manifestations overlap and include religious elements too.

According to William H. Swatos, Jr. Editor (Hartford Institute for Religious Research), the notion of civil religion originates in the work of Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, with echoes in Tocqueville. On the pages of Rousseau’s work the simple doctrines of the civil religion are outlined, namely the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance.

Civil religion began to have a major importance in the social scientific study of religion when Robert Bellah published the essay, “Civil Religion in America”, in *Daedalus* in 1967. It refers both to a form of civic faith within a republic, and to public expressions of religious faith in cultures where religion is more familiarly categorized as a private affair. In respect to civic faith, the term derives from a phrase by Benjamin Franklin, when he made “proposals” for an educational academy in Philadelphia in 1749 - the study of “history”, he argued, would “afford frequent opportunities of showing the necessity of a public religion”.

Bellah’s definition of American civil religion is that it is “an institutionalized collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation”, which he sees symbolically expressed in America’s founding documents and presidential inaugural addresses. It includes a belief in the existence of a transcendent being called “God”, an idea that the American nation is subject to God’s laws, and an assurance that God will guide and protect the United States. He sees these beliefs in the values of liberty, justice, charity, and personal virtue and concretized in, for example, the words “In God We Trust” on both national emblems and on the currency used in daily economic transactions.

As Robert Bellah asserts, “behind the civil religion at every point lie Biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, sacrificial Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God, as men can make it, and a light to all the nations.”¹¹

As religion operates with symbols, civil religion has its own stock: its prophets, saint-like historical figures, such as Grant, Jefferson, Lincoln, Washington, “the divinely appointed

¹⁰ Charles H. Long, “Civil Rights – Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion”, *American Civil Religion*, p. 212.

¹¹ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 40 – 41.

Moses who led his people out of the hands of tyranny”¹²; its “scriptures”: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; its sacred places (Grant’s Tomb, Lincoln’s Memorial); its celebrations (Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day, Fourth of July, Veterans Day, birthdays of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, etc). It is the religion of democracy and, according to Horace M. Kallen, quoted by Herberg, “democracy is the religion *of* and *for* religions”; politically it means the Constitution; spiritually, the idealism, which is so characteristically American. In the civil religious perspective, America is a new order, initiated under God’s will and flourishing under His benevolent providence.¹³

Civil religion has five meanings: first is the notion of civil religion as folk religion; the second meaning is that of a transcendent universal religion of the nation; the third is that of religious nationalism; the fourth is the democratic faith; and the fifth is that of a Protestant nationalism.

As concerns Capra, the third and the fourth meanings prove to be the basis upon which he erected his altar for praising and glorifying America. In the acceptance of the meanings of religious nationalism, or the religion of patriotism, nation is not the church of national religion, but the object of adoration and glorification, therefore the civil religion, as archbishop John Ireland maintains, “gives America its majesty, and to patriotism its sacredness and force.”¹⁴ And this is precisely what Frank Capra wants to echo in his films. Nonetheless, movies, like religion, have exerted a profound influence upon the American imagination.

Civil religion is based upon symbols, and so is patriotism. In his films, Frank Capra pays homage to American traditions and values. He serves to his audiences from everlasting veritable history-lessons, “re-creating” and recalling at the same time, America’s if not great, at least better and more comprehensible past, expressing his faith in democracy, his confidence in the good, un-perverted people who are able to alter their society and their government. Capra tries to present American nation and the realities of the 30s, appealing to his contemporaries’ sentiment of patriotism and for this, he uses America’s most valuable treasures, namely the same symbols civil religion operates with, for developing and maintaining an American “imagined community”.

CONCLUSIONS

Civil religion is the celebration of democracy, of the Constitution and national unity, of social egalitarianism, of religion proper; it is the “religionization” of the national life and culture, somehow moulded upon Thomas Jefferson’s thought: religion, morality, and civic responsibility. And that is precisely what Capra suggests in his movies. Even the language he uses is the American vernacular: democratic, egalitarian, common, more colloquial, closer to the raw.¹⁵ It is as clear as possible – the worship of Constitution in America is not due to any legalistic propensity, but to the fact that the Constitution embodies the principles of the Declaration of Independence, where the individualistic and humanitarian creed, the faith in the power of the implemented moral will received its classical statement. In the proportion

¹² *Idem*, p.30.

¹³ Cf. Will Herberg, “America’s Civil Religion: What It Is and Whence It Comes, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 78 – 80. The author alludes to the one dollar bill. The reverse of the seal on the left features a barren landscape dominated by an unfinished pyramid of 13 steps, topped by the [Eye of Providence](#) within a triangle. At the base of the pyramid are engraved the Roman numerals MDCCLXXVI (1776), the date of [American independence](#) from [Britain](#). At the top of the seal stands a Latin phrase, “[ANNUIT COEPTIS](#),” meaning “He (God) smiled upon our beginnings.” At the bottom of the seal is a semicircular banner proclaiming “[NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM](#)” meaning “New Order of the Ages,” which is a reference to the new American era.

¹⁴ Donald G. Jones and Russell E. Richey, “The Civil Religion Debate”, *American Civil Religion*, p.16.

¹⁵ Cf. Donald G. Jones and Russell E. Richey, “The Civil Religion Debate”, *American Civil Religion*, p. 8.

America achieved a national consciousness, this creed and the faith became a national conscience.

And thus, the audience once again are given a history lesson, are given a lecture, nothing more but a sermon in terms of the civil rights. (Civil) religious faith is not only faith, but it is faith in the triumph of the good. Besides, Americanism consists not of what Americans believe to be true, but rather of what they believe *in* – their attitudes, their sentiments, their hopes and resolves, their scruples and maxims, or what are sometimes called their “valuations”. And that is a moral meaning comprised in the civil religious sermon Capra serves to his fellow country-people.

Frank Capra succeeded in being a poet, a poet of both the passionate American dream, and the actual expression of the real world as he knew very well. For him, America’s dream was the finest movements of desire and imagination can find expression in human live.

And for certain, Frank Capra expressed at full in the film language making it crystal-clear – American perennial values are the means by which one person can recover his or her moral strength, can help the community, can help the society, can be a real American, a true believer in the precepts of civil religion, in other words, a patriot.

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