

God's Federal Republic

God's Federal Republic

Reconstructing Our Governing Symbol

William Johnson Everett

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By Everett, William Johnson
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Cum Sylvia
Ad Lucem Publicam



Preface

This book is addressed to people who wish to think afresh about the religious depths of public life. Among them are ministers, politicians, theologians, teachers and students concerned about public affairs as well as many others in the professions and politics.

While the vision developed here is clearly indebted to the historical experiences of the Mediterranean and North Atlantic peoples, I hope it will not be reduced to them, for many of the symbols, perspectives and concepts nourished there have found root in many other societies, there to take on their own configurations. I hope that readers from other regions will find in these efforts a stimulus and a challenge to their own religious and political reflection.

Every book has its generative contexts. This one has many. While my experiences in Church efforts to transform neighborhoods, workplaces, and public institutions have been formative, three arenas have been especially important for this volume. The first is the OIKOS Project on Work, Family and Faith, which I conduct with my wife, Sylvia Johnson Everett. Through it we seek to help people and institutions work out more effective patterns for integrating these three dimensions of their life. The second is the Society of Christian Ethics, whose members have enriched and shaped not only this book but my life as well. The third is the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, whose collegial support and criticism coached the final labors of this book. In particular I am indebted to Carol Newsom, James Fowler and Steven Tipton for their critical assistance. From all these springs I taste most deeply what I have come to anticipate through the symbol of God's Federal Republic.

William Johnson Everett
Atlanta, March 1987

Introduction

Robert Bellah and his associates have recently urged us to reclaim and reconstruct our biblical and republican heritage in order to overcome a private individualism that is killing American public life.¹ This is not an easy task. Many people want to reconstruct public life without appeal to any religious roots or transcendent loyalties. Others flee directly to traditional faith without dealing seriously with the visions as well as limits of our historical publics. Some want a public without confusing pluralism. Others want pluralism without a genuine public order.

Public life cannot be sustained without visions grounded in people's deepest faith commitments. However, fervent faith often destroys politics in order to save it. Thus, faith itself needs some politically relevant visions that enable us to entertain God's future within the actual world we inhabit. To hold these two dimensions apart is disastrous. To bind them too closely is dangerous. Our task demands a complex yet compelling interplay of both. Both liberal and socialist partners have now shown their many deficiencies. Many and various religious movements compete as chief matchmaker in the public sphere. In this struggle we face at least three contenders to preside over faith and public life: neo-conservative liberalism, political-religious fundamentalism, and Marxism.

In some ways Marxism is the oldest of the three, for it arose as a critique of the political economy of nineteenth century industrialism. While popular Marxism has often degenerated into sectarian terrorism or ossified into academic and bureaucratic clichés, there is still a body of insights and claims which can exercise powerful influence. The power of Marxism in this sense is its critique of domination, especially

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as this is rooted in economic structures. Its greatest weakness is its inability to develop an approach to public life which can undergird the rights of dissenting minorities, voluntary association, public persuasion, and pluralism. Without these provisions, religious faith cannot exist as a partner in public argument but only as a tool of administrative policy. Religious faith must exist privately, its catacomb existence an object of deep suspicion.

Gathered at the opposite end of the field we find those loosely assembled under the banner of neo-conservatism, which is in fact a reworking of nineteenth century liberalism. Its appeal, as enunciated by people like Michael Novak or Milton Friedman, lies in its affirmation of individual creativity and responsibility.² Its limitation appears in its refusal to grant to public processes the right to represent the common good, which, they feel, has to arise simply out of the mutual accommodation of private interests. Like Marxism, it has an inadequate understanding of public life and is too easily reduced to an ideology for the accumulation of wealth. Their chief difference revolves around who should control economic life. Like Marxism it also tends to reduce religion to being a private interest, though in the hands of some apologists, like Richard Neuhaus, it seeks to become an active participant in the public square.

Fundamentalism, which tends to fuse religious and political life, stands apart from these because of its ostensible rejection of modern economy and mores.³ Its power arises from its attack on the aimlessness and casual violence of modern life. In replacing these with an absolutist concept of public truth and manners, however, it represses the freedom of conscience and pluralism intrinsic to public life. It robs both faith and politics of their capacity for transcendence by rooting us in a set of revealed propositions that eliminate the freedom of the present.

Within this swirl of arguments this book responds to Bellah's invitation with a challenge to think about public life and faith in the light of a particular symbol with ancient roots and a long but tortured history—the symbol of God's Federal Republic. It is this symbol which should play in religious life the role long exercised by "Kingdom of God."

Federal and republican symbolism has come to the forefront of people's political experience in our time, whether in India, Germany, South Africa, or the Soviet Union. Federalism is rooted in the covenantal heritage of biblical faith. Republicanism and the Church are rooted in the Greek and Hebrew assembly. These are symbols with religious depth as well as political relevance. They constitute a complex symbol that can help us bridge the enormous gaps between our faith convictions and our

public action, between our private lives and our public performances. It is a symbol that can grasp our aspirations as well as stand in judgment on our arrogance.

All three of the protagonists to my own effort settle for solutions that neglect the dynamic complexity of the relation between faith and public life. The first two options tend to relegate religious symbols to the private sphere for the sake of a “secular” state. The third seeks to impose religious symbols and values on the public from some absolute perch outside it. The symbol of God’s Federal Republic identifies elements within both the religious and political sphere which need to be combined in a complex way. The richness of this composite symbol reflects the critical engagement which is necessary to the life of faith and public action. This kind of symbol stands at the motivational as well as intellectual heart of an adequate public theology.

The point of this project is not so much to deny the validity of these other claims but to reconstitute the public argument about how we should see the interconnection of our faith and our public life. The major way I will do this is by lifting up a rich symbol to focus and guide our loyalties, our intellects, and our actions. Key symbols do this by bringing together rich emotional associations as well as models for action and understanding.

This book is therefore not so much an exercise in argument as it is an exercise in symbolization. Rather than rehearse all the rational arguments which might constitute the public discourse it attempts to cultivate a rich symbol which undergirds the very possibility of that discourse. Decisions about such symbols are not the result of argument but its beginning. They define the options for action and discourse. Our loyalty to key symbols arises from the discernment of an organizing image for what fits our experience, hopes, and fundamental convictions.

The symbol God’s Federal Republic has ancient roots in our human experience. In the course of its long development it has cultivated hard won values we want to preserve even as we reshape our fundamental orientations—values of sexual equality, participatory governance and ecological responsibility. The growth of these values is due in no small part to the traditions behind this symbol. The effort to preserve them as well as to reconstruct them demands a deep awareness of this history.

Before embarking on this journey I need to explain briefly what this approach to a new vision involves. Let us recall two major efforts to reshape our public life in recent decades—black liberation and women’s liberation. Both of these have been enormous struggles to introduce the majority of the American population into a public sphere long domi-

nated by white males. While this demanded economic changes, legal reforms, rearrangement of household life and the reconstruction of many conventions of social interaction, it finally demanded that we resymbolize the nature of our existence. Without changing these symbolic foundations of our culture, all the other changes would be unenforceable and unrealizable.

Black liberation forced us to resymbolize the meaning of black and white, of Jesus' ethnicity, and the nature of God's action in judgment and liberation. Without this powerful resymbolization Afro-Americans could never really share power, change the public discourse, and lay claim to equal public recognition. Similar observations can be made about the movements for liberation in other parts of the world—movements which demand that we as well as they change the basic symbols by which we approach life.

Similarly, the entry of women into fuller public life demanded not only medical advances like contraception, economic changes in employment, the disruptions of World War II, and new legislation. It also demanded that we resymbolize our ultimate loyalties, whether that be to introduce gender-inclusive language or to lift up new symbols of God, and new, feminine models of courage and public service.

Like many Christians I have spent some years trying to eliminate gender exclusive language from Christian worship. In many cases this has only required substituting a word like "people" for "men." In other cases, however, we stumble into greater complexities. People begin substituting "sovereign" for the word "lord," because lord connotes feudal patriarchy. At this point I begin to feel uneasy. The project of sexual equality breaks through into the language of political theory and organization.

Do we believe in a "sovereign"? What form does and should sovereignty take in our own time? What then are the proper forms of political order? What symbols should members of religious associations use to express their longing for God's perfect order? Behind the struggle to eliminate sexism lies the need for a critical appropriation of political symbols in theology and worship.

This is a problem for all groups seeking liberation from oppressive structures, whether they be due to gender, racism, age, or class. Both black and women's liberation movements lead us to the common need for symbols that guide us in our search for a new public order. What shall guide us beyond the act of liberation? What models of life shall shape our relationships beyond the revolution? What emotional symbols should be sown in our hearts so that they flower in a garden of greater

justice? Behind the struggles for liberation lie our loyalties to the ultimate symbols of God's intentions for our common life.

The essential and religiously significant conflict of our time is between those who struggle for a public world and those who would restrict or extinguish a life lived in openness, argument, and mutual promises. This, baldly stated, is the central issue behind our search for a liberation from the bondage to race, gender, nationality and age. Unless we reconstruct the core symbols of our faith our efforts to engage the publics of our world will be but a nostalgic lullaby in the storm of revolution. Unless we change our basic symbols for organizing our emotions, thought and action such social changes remain on the surface only to be washed away in the next torrent of change.

It is at this symbolic level that we must work in reconstituting the relation of faith and politics. That is the burden of this book's approach to the question raised by Robert Bellah and his associates as well as by many others. My own contribution to this discussion is the presentation of a key symbol deeply rooted in our religious and political history. It contains a theology which places the symbols and concepts of public action at the center of our faith vision. It implies a political theory which focuses on the processes of covenant and public action.

This book is an effort to engage in fundamental theological and political reconstruction. It presents a "public theology"—that is, a vision of life which is both religious and political. It is a statement which seeks to speak to religious audiences as well as the general public. It recognizes the marginalization of the pivotal patriarchal and hierarchical symbol in Christian life—the kingdom of God—and unearths an alternative governing symbol from our tradition's covenantal and conciliar heritage. As a composite symbol in our own time it emerges as God's Federal Republic. The following chapters are an apologetic for refurbishing our religious speech, worship and action with that symbol.

This presentation begins in Chapter One with an examination of the role of symbols in religion and its interaction with society. A key symbol is a two-way street. Symbols are highly charged metaphors which take familiar objects, experiences, or images and bind them to more transcendent intimations beyond our normal grasp. Symbols transmit models from life experience to the visionary longings of faith. Our faith life is infused with symbols from the common world. Family images have shaped our relationship with God and Jesus. Even our usual formulation of the Trinity is an image of family inheritance, in which the Father bequeaths his domain to the Son who is bound to him in the Holy Spirit of perfect devotion. Similarly, political images of elections and parliamentary process shape the way we order our Church life.

Religious symbols also reframe our ordinary way of approaching life. The dramas of Christian worship, for instance, yield new themes, roles, and scripts for the wider world as well. Notions of mutual service raised by a Communion service can inform our approach to professional obligations. Belief in our equality before God and the sacredness of each soul informs and conditions our commitments to democratic liberties. This process of reciprocal transformation deeply shapes the selection of a key symbol ordering our lives.

The symbol of God's Federal Republic supplants another symbol intoned in prayer, evoked in sermons, sung in anthems, choruses and hymns—that of the kingdom of God. One of the arguments of this book is that this symbol utilizing kingship metaphors is no longer appropriate for bridging faith and public life. In the revolutions of our time kingdom metaphors have lost their savor. They no longer can nourish us in a post-monarchical life, whether politically or religiously. In the decline of kingship images we gain new appreciation of the covenantal and conciliar themes embedded in the symbol of a Federal Republic. The clarification of the meaning of this symbol can have enormous impact not only on Christian faith and worship but on public life as well.

In order to grasp the significance of God's Federal Republic as our central symbol we must understand why kingship symbols endured so long, even beyond their rejection in public life. In the second chapter, therefore, we will survey the history of kingship in order to assess its enduring contributions as well as its shortcomings. We will have to see the functions it served in order to ascertain how federal republican symbolism can take them up in a new way.

Then, in order to begin our reconstruction of a central governing symbol we will do the same with "Republic" in the third chapter, tracing its early formulation in Greco-Roman life, its suppression in the feudal era and its revolutionary resurgence in modern times. We will seek to identify the enduring distinctives that commend it for our adoption as a key symbol for ordering our lives. In exploring its own limitations and ambiguities we will open up the need for a complementary symbol—that of covenant, the root of federalism.

The fourth chapter will rehearse the career of covenant and its descendant, federalism, in order to lift out key characteristics that correct the deficiencies in republican thought. Both of these historical chapters do not pretend to completeness as histories. My purpose here is to illuminate the critical components necessary for an adequate reconstruction of a central religious symbol for today. Rehearsal of these histories also enables us to feel our way into their power and meaning. In reclaiming the symbol of covenant, we discover implications for our under-

standing of federalism. This renewal of federal theory then becomes the major contribution which biblical faith makes to the composite symbol, God's Federal Republic.

This critical reconstruction begins in Chapter Five, where I develop a contemporary theory of public action underlying a Federal Republic. This effort requires not only a structural, sociological theory, but also a psychological theory of people as performers in that public. Moreover, it demands a cogent theory of covenant to complete the republican vision.

To develop the explicitly religious dimension of our symbol, I then engage in some reconstruction of key theological ideas under the impact of this contemporary theory of public and performer. Our new understanding of persons and publics requires changes in our understandings of sin, salvation, God, Jesus and the Church. These transformed perspectives and practices then provide the basis for supporting and criticising our efforts to become full members of God's Federal Republic.

We do not face a simple task. We all have a strong emotional investment in the faith symbols which nurtured us. They are objects of loyalty and orientation as well as reasoned argument. We respond emotionally as well as intellectually to proposals for changes like this. Nothing less, however, can respond to the challenges we face. We stand before the choice between the dark forest of nostalgia and the rugged mountain of hope. We can clutch the familiar breast of survival or reach out for the beckoning hands of risky anticipation. Standing before alternatives is nothing new to us. Occasionally, however, we are asked not merely to take another route, but to choose another map, another light, another means of transportation. It is this kind of choice that we face when we are asked to embrace a new symbol for our deepest commitments. That is the kind of struggle this book seeks to foster. It is an invitation to place a new symbol of God's governance at the center of our faith, thought, and action. For these moments I invite you to think through with me what it would be like to live in the light of God's Federal Republic.

1 | In Search of a Governing Symbol

The struggle for a vital engagement of faith and public life has many dimensions. Some people concentrate on clarifying the nature of the public discourse itself. Others focus on the cultivation of personal attributes, or virtues, that are necessary for public actors. Still others attend to particular institutional arrangements that are likely to enhance religious integrity and public responsibility.

This book has its own point of entree and contribution to these efforts. It seeks to lift up a transformation in fundamental symbolism that has been going on for the past two centuries—the shift from kingship to republican images for ordering the life of faith and public action. It seeks not only to identify a transformation in the foundations of our culture but to reshape it and commend it to people of faith and public concern.

Certain kinds of discourse should flow from an immersion in this symbolism. Certain ethical dispositions and habitual ways of approaching action should emerge from this way of grasping our ultimate loyalties. Certain kinds of models for public and religious life can arise from this vision. A renewal of the public philosophy, like the renewal of faith, must emerge from some key symbols guiding our emotions, thoughts and actions. That is why we turn to this task of symbolic transformation.

In this first chapter I want to clarify the meaning of a governing symbol and orient us to our task. With construction of our vehicle we can then begin our journey with the decision to explore a particular symbol—that of God's Federal Republic.

I. Symbols as Motivators and Models

Symbols preside over the marriage of thought and action. They are the bridge between emotion and behavior. They provide a focus for our deep loyalties as persons and as groups. Symbols like "kingdom of God," "body of Christ," "democracy" and "socialism" have shaped our religious and political life. Symbols like these define the nature of people's hopes and fears and therefore the shape of their argument about the future and the past. They define who can participate in the public debate and the boundaries of their discourse. Symbols do not answer particular questions of policy, strategy, and institutional arrangements. They shape the struggle to decide them.

To understand and discuss this peculiar power of symbols we need to define them more precisely. A symbol is a vivid perception (usually an image), rich with associations, which is strongly tied to basic human purposes.¹ A symbol may be a word, like democracy, a thing, like a flag, a sound, like a song, or an action, like bowing one's head in prayer.

It is rich with associations because it always has metaphorical qualities. It points to something beyond itself—the flag to the nation, the bowed head to the relation of believer and God, "democracy" to a whole set of images about governance. A symbol is usually a complex metaphor. Moreover, it is highly charged, so that it evokes action in witness to what is symbolized. As we grasp a symbol our consciousness of its metaphorical character begins to yield to devotion to its acquired meaning.

A symbol elicits deep and pre-rational responses. It is therefore a primary basis for human motivation. Symbols are highly charged because they trigger in some way an earlier pleasure, pain, fear or hope. They are locked into our own most fundamental strivings for survival, comfort, expression and acceptance. The white sheet of the Ku Klux Klan costume is a symbol of racist violence. The dove is a symbol of peace. Symbols awaken in us a sense of either advancement or repression. Our responses to them are usually positive or negative.

A symbol is thus an outward manifestation of an emotional bond. This bond may be peculiar to a single person, as in the rose that reminds a widow of her deceased husband, or, more likely, be common to a multitude and become a force uniting many people into an enduring body, as with a flag, a war memorial, or an anthem.

These commonly held symbols take our emotional bonds to familiar things and extend them to more abstract and distant objects. The symbol "fatherland" takes our bond with our father and extends it to

strangers and land we may have never seen. Symbols are key ways of transferring our allegiances and shaping our loyalties beyond the narrow circle we usually move in.

Once established, symbols can then convey wider loyalties back into this parochial frame. The Puritans, for instance, often spoke of the family as a "little commonwealth," because they wanted to cultivate certain behaviors there which would be consonant with a wider citizenship. Symbols thus reshape our perceptions about what is near as well as what is far away.

In doing so they also transform our way of thinking about things. Ways we may think about government become ways we think about family. Ways we think about family shape the way we think about church. Symbols mediate among the many patterns of thought and action that arise in our homes, workplaces, churches and governments.

Symbols are not only emotional lures and reflective images, however. Enduring symbols usually take on certain models for social life. They present vivid patterns for our common action. They become *symbolic models*. For instance, "king" not only draws on deep loyalties, it also carries with it some notion of right order. If one is English, it may invoke feelings of deference and awe within a social hierarchy. If one is an American, on the other hand, it may awaken the hope for racial equality and justice that inspired Martin Luther King, Jr.

Likewise, a symbol such as "family of God" not only evokes our loyalty to the group using the symbol. It also directs us to a pattern of authority drawn from family life, in which one or both "parents" make all the important decisions and control the "children," that is, the members of the group, in a way that they think is good for them. Such a symbol reinforces and legitimates a social pattern of paternalism or patriarchy (and sometimes maternalism and matriarchy).

As the examples indicate, a model is a somewhat abstract pattern of relationships bringing together a set of functions or elements in a coherent way. A model extracts from a complex situation, say a family altercation, and makes visible the main relationships sustaining the action. In the case of the family, the model may consist of a series of triangular and unstable relationships among parents, children, friends, and the family pet.

Thus we speak of a model of the atom, in which some tinker-toy structure seeks to visualize the sub-microscopic "whatever" that seems to be the building block of the universe. Likewise, we have models for defining what is or ought to go on in business organizations, skyscraper construction, and small group interactions. Models enable us to grasp what is going on in a situation and participate in it. They are crucial to

our activity in a complex world of many unfamiliar and different situations. Models, like symbols, help us to bridge the gaps between the familiar and the strange.

Symbols already imply in some inchoate fashion a model of action. "The human family" as a symbol invites us to apply to global relationships some of the patterns of family life. Symbols, however, always have a somewhat diffuse impact because of their many metaphorical meanings. Without a model we are unable to discern which patterns to advance. What is our model of family life and how can that model be activated among four billion people? A model explicates a recognizable pattern of action implied in the symbol.

Sometimes the same symbol may become associated with two or more social models. We may not have conflict between two symbols, but between two different models of action bound to the same symbol. "Body of Christ," for instance, has been used to justify a pattern of Church government in which the "head" tells the members, who are otherwise inert, what to do. It is a military model of the body. Conversely, others have used the body symbol to reinforce a political pattern of mutual communication and democratic feedback, as in Karl Deutsch's book, *The Nerves of Government*.² They have used a cybernetic model for the body symbol.

Symbols incorporate both the emotional and the rational dimensions of our lives. They not only evoke loyalty, they also guide action. They are a means of gaining group identity as well as group coordination. We often think of symbols only in terms of religion, where they receive heightened attention and clarification. But they are also essential to any enduring organization or culture. Symbols reach into the depths of commitment we associate with religion, but they also extend into the reason, common sense and strategies of everyday life. They are fundamental to action as well as to faith and thought. The choice of dominant symbol is crucial to an effective ethics that has cultural bite.

II. Governing Symbols

Sometimes a symbol may come to embrace many areas of life. It performs not only as a religious or political symbol, but also as a domestic, economic, and social one as well. Not only does it coordinate action within a group or institution, it helps people bridge the gaps among them. It can anchor the same model of action in many domains. Symbols that enable people to move easily from one arena to another are what I call *governing symbols*. Some people use the terms "master metaphor," "root metaphor," or "key symbol" to identify this phenomenon.