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For God and Country: Religion and the U.S. Military

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2012
5:30- 7:00 PM

DEVLIN 101, BOSTON COLLEGE
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powers to create, powers to destroy, imagined as both within and outside of history. We can also talk about the emotions deity and nation can inspire: love, devotion, awe, pride, anger, frustration, confusion, rebellion. But let's not stop with attri

The soldier clearly occupies a special place within American civil religion as an object of veneration or utopic imagination. “Soldiers” broadly understood, symbolize honor, nobility, courage, self-sacrifice. By association many Americans think of the military as a bastion of much that is truly great about America. The military itself takes American civil religion quite seriously both in obvious and in more submerged ways. An awareness of and respect for national symbols and heroes is more robust in the military than outside of it. Very few Americans swear the oath to “support and defend” that soldiers swear, and even fewer are committed as a matter of their profession to the possibility of dying and killing in that effort. Then, too, there are the myriad ways that those entering and living within the military are asked to subordinate individual will to the common good and, ostensibly, to the good of the nation. Soldiers, again broadly understood, are particularly intense embodiments of devotion to the state and, therefore, of American civil religion.

And it is a perilous place, this place of veneration and embodiment; this place of being a symbol for the nation and living out service to it. It is especially perilous because of the forces of self-emptying exerting themselves from all sides. Treated as symbols, asked to subordinate, it is easy for all involved to lose track of the value and integrity of that which is individual or to recall the individual only as convenience dictates. One can see the tension that develops as a soldier attempts to navigate the demands of service, the imagined exemplary nature of the military, and the irreducible, some believe eternal, nature of the “self.” Many cases demonstrate this point, but for the sake of the contemporary let’s talk first about Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta.

Salvatore Giunta is the now twenty-six-year-old soldier who received the Congressional Medal of Honor in November 2010 for actions in eastern Afghanistan. He was the first living recipient of that honor since the Vietnam War. An article from the AP wire last January described his life since news

encountered recruitment pitches to be an Army of one, live the adventure, aim high, etc. and found those pitches not incompatible with his desire to grow, mature, accomplish, even escape. But according to his family Senft was a sensitive kid and was deeply troubled by some of the gruesome scenes he encountered in Iraq. Friends and family could tell that wartime service was not changing him for the better. Fellow soldiers also noticed that he was struggling. He spoke of suicide and attempted it twice; he missed a deployment to Iraq because of his mental health. He deployed to Afghanistan in 2010, came home on leave, married, and then returned to complete his tour. On November 15, 2010 he was found dead in an SUV on Khandahar Air Base, a single bullet hole in

were covered over by a standard narrative of what Drew Gilpin Faust has labeled, a “good death”— he died fighting, sacrificing his own life to protect fellow soldiers from harm.¹

In the spring of 2004, in the midst of a heated election season, members of the commentariat couldn't resist preaching on the lessons they took from the text of Tillman's life and death. Ann Coulter, writing for the conservative FrontPageMagazine juxtaposed then presidential candidate John Kerry with Pat Tillman. Tillman was like Kerry, she wrote, in that he was awarded a Silver Star, but “he did not write his own recommendation or live to throw his medals over the White House fence in an anti-war rally.” She continued, “The stunningly handsome athlete... died bringing freedom to 28 million Afghans ... There is not another country in the world ... that could have produce

Tillman's story is both tragic and profoundly accusing. For if there is any

in conversation with these pressures more often than not accepting and shouldering their burden but also in meaning-laden moments diverging from and even contesting them.

I would offer thoughts on the ability of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism to guide soldiers as they interact with these civil religious dynamics, but the person speaking next is far more qualified than I am to do just that. I will note in closing that the study of the faith lives of American soldiers can

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