

# Varieties of Civil Religion by Robert Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond

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## Chapter 2: The Japanese and American Cases

Sidney Mead has emphasized the uniqueness of the American solution to the religiopolitical question. In so doing he has contrasted America to the long preceding history of "Christendom." The American republic has not had a state church in part because it has not had a state or church of traditional type. The "religion of the republic" is to be identified with neither state nor church in their conventional form.<sup>1</sup> Phillip Hammond in Chapter 3 and John Coleman elsewhere argue American civil religion is distinct from other forms of civil religion in that it is differentiated from both church and state.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Hammond wonders whether the term "civil religion" ought not to be restricted to Situations typologically similar to the American case, which would make the term rather restrictive and perhaps therefore stronger in comparative perspective. Both Coleman and Hammond offer suggestions for a typology of possible civil religions. James Wolfe has developed a typology of civil religions linked to my typology of the stages of religious evolution.<sup>3</sup> This chapter builds on these previous efforts to develop a comparative perspective. Not only are comparisons interesting in themselves; they often reveal new dimensions to the cases being compared. I hope some refractory features of the American case may be illuminated by a comparative context.

It has seemed useful, following Wolfe, to consider civil religions as varying with the stage of religious evolution. In this regard the contrast between Japan and the United States may be especially instructive since in Japan in the recent past and to a certain extent even today there seems to have survived a civil religion of archaic type (involving a fusion of divinity, society, and the individual), whereas the United States has a civil religion of distinctly modern type (with a high degree of differentiation between divinity, society, and the individual).<sup>4</sup>

In setting up my problem this way I am tentatively rejecting Hammond's restrictive use of "civil religion." There is warrant for this broader usage in the

origin of the term itself, in that "civil religion" is pretty clearly an outgrowth of the term "civil theology" that Augustine used to characterize the religion of pre-Christian Rome.<sup>5</sup> That religion was, in terms of my typology, distinctly archaic. Whether the term may be usefully generalized beyond these two types of cases remains to be seen. Now I assert every society must link religion and politics somehow, though that assertion itself, I have learned, is somewhat tendentious.

One way to contrast archaic and modern society, or rather the modern West and all traditional societies, archaic or historic, is to point out, as Louis Dumont following Alexis de Tocqueville has been doing in recent years, that traditional societies are characterized by hierarchy whereas modern societies are characterized by equality -- at least in ideal.<sup>6</sup> This contrast is rooted not just in political ideology but in fundamental conceptions of the nature of reality. It will therefore affect the nature of civil religion in the contrasting cases. Indeed, hierarchy or equality may be at the core of the respective civil religions. I can illustrate the difference by quoting from two fundamental documents from Japanese and American civil religion.

The first is article three of Shōtoku Taishi's seventeen-article "constitution" of AD. 604 (though it may be later). This is one of the earliest conscious documents of what we might call Japanese civil religion. It is more a declaration of principles than what we would normally consider a constitution and in this regard is comparable to the American document I will turn to shortly.

Article Three. When you receive the imperial commands, fail not scrupulously to obey them. The lord is Heaven, the vassal is Earth. Heaven overspreads, and Earth upbears. 'When this is so, the four seasons follow their due course, and the powers of Nature obtain their efficacy. If the Earth attempted to overspread, Heaven would simply fall in ruin. Therefore is it that when the lord speaks, the vassal listens; when the superior acts, the inferior yields compliance. Consequently when you receive the imperial commands, fail not to carry them out scrupulously. Let there be a want of care in this matter, and ruin is the natural consequence.'<sup>7</sup>

In contrast consider a long sentence from the charter document of American civil religion:

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundations on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

It is clear in the Japanese case that all men are *not* created equal. Society is embedded in the natural cosmos. Just as heaven is naturally above the earth so are superiors naturally above inferiors. Any attempt to tamper with this natural hierarchy can only produce chaos and ruin. The ideas expressed in article three are clearly Confucian, but this ideology blended easily with Shintō mythology in terms of which the Japanese emperor is descended from the sun goddess and takes his preeminence on earth just as she takes hers among the gods. Hierarchy is rooted in genealogy, which goes back to the so-called age of the gods.

Article two of the "constitution" of 604 brings in still another element of legitimation. It begins "Sincerely reverence the three treasures" and goes on to speak of the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. Here the emperor as protector of the sangha is the recipient of the divine protection of the Buddha and the dharma. But Buddhism, with its doctrine of individual enlightenment and its recurrent teaching that a monk should not bow down before a king, is only ambiguously supportive of political hierarchy. Even Confucianism, with its doctrine that the lowliest peasant could become, through virtue, a sage, has a nonhierarchical side, one that would be realized much later in the Tokugawa period when someone like Ishida Baigan could proclaim, "Every man is a small heaven and earth" and thus a focus of individuality and dignity.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that in Japan monks usually did bow down before political authority and sages from the common people were rare indeed. But one could give examples to show that nonhierarchical tendencies were never entirely absent. There are clearly egalitarian elements even in the overwhelmingly hierarchical context of Japanese culture and civil religion.

Conversely, there are hierarchical elements in the American symbolism. Human equality is asserted not only as self-evident but as the result of the action of a divine creator. Further, the declaration has spoken in its opening lines of 'the laws of nature and of nature's God.' There is thus a cosmic, divine hierarchy in which human values, including equality, make sense and there is a clear notion that God is above and superior to men just as the laws of nature transcend and take priority over the laws of political society.

If the Japanese case has egalitarian components, even if relatively minor ones, and the American case has hierarchical components, even if largely confined to the background, we might wish to consider that the contrast hierarchy/equality is a polarity or a continuum rather than an absolute antinomy.

It is easy for us as Americans and for modern Japanese influenced by Western ideologies to view the hierarchical aspect of Japanese ideology and civil religion as sheer defensive rationalization for political rule. There is much to support such a view. For one thing Japanese civil religion seems to be subject to conscious manipulation at least as early as the sixth or seventh centuries. The degree of self-

consciousness in the process does not fit well with the picture of traditional *Gemeinschaft* society, changing by slow unconscious accretion. Neither does it fit well with the claims of modern spokesmen for State Shintō that it has existed "for ages eternal" and has been "true at all times and in all places." Conscious rational manipulation seems more "modern" than "traditional." And yet conscious rational manipulation characterizes Japanese civil religion at crucial turning points throughout its history.

Not only do we find in the seventh century the conscious Importation of the continental religious ideologies of Confucianism and Buddhism -- mainly to bolster the position of the imperial lineage -- we find considerable evidence of conscious manipulation of Shintō mythology. Indeed, the significance of the sun goddess, Amaterasu, and her shrine at Ise may have been sharply upgraded at this period to strengthen the position of the imperial lineage relative to other aristocratic lineages claiming divine descent. This flurry of conscious manipulation continues in the eighth century with the codification of the Shintō myths in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi* and with the further spelling out of the implications of Confucianism and Buddhism for the Japanese context.

Another period of conscious concern for matters of civil religion extends from the later Sengoku period in the sixteenth century to the early Tokugawa period in the seventeenth century. Here particularly the development of an ideology of public Confucianism helped to bureaucratize the samurai -- turn them from private military henchmen into public servants -- and to bring the common people actively into the Tokugawa consensus through the idea of benevolent rule (*jinsei*). The rulers, who, as in Shōtoku's constitution, represent heaven, are to provide a nurturant and paternal regime under which the people can flourish. In addition, thinkers associated with the Tokugawa House refurbished the somewhat tarnished image of the imperial line and derived the legitimacy of the Tokugawa regime from an emperor who was himself an embodiment of heaven and even, in Shintō terms, a divine king. Thus much that we attribute to the Meiji period at the end of the nineteenth century was prefigured two and a half centuries earlier.

But clearly the prime example of conscious manipulation is modern Japanese civil religion, composed of the modern emperor system and its pervasive ideological influence, of which state Shintō was only a part. Winston Davis, one of the chief American students of this development, has recently given a condensed account:

During the decades of hyperventilated nationalism which preceded the Pacific War, being Japanese was itself a kind of religious affiliation. One of the major problems for the new Meiji government was how to generate a truly national spirit that would be strong enough to rechannel the particularistic loyalties symbolized by the local *ujigami* [village deities]. The government was also concerned to prevent the growth of class consciousness in villages which were being exploited by landlords, industry

and government alike. The aim of the government's ideological program during these turbulent years was the creation of a patriotic but depoliticized village symbolized by the so-called "imperial farmer." After the effects of the world depression of 1929 began to be felt in Japan, many of the urban unemployed sought to return to their families in the countryside. Often they found the way barred by the elders of the village who claimed that the village was too poor or its land too scarce to support the urban refugees. They feared that city ways might corrupt village morals. For this reason, many of the uprooted were unable to return to the village *Gemeinschaft* which had been the traditional solace of the Japanese folk. Instead, at every turn -- in factories, schools, and on the street -- they were treated to the Siren's song of the family-state. Officially at least, the nation came to regard itself as one extended family or village. Since both family and village had been in some sense religious corporations, the sacred nature of the emerging family-state was obvious.

The "immanent theocracy" which the government concocted in order to achieve these ends was as artificial and contrived as the mythology of the *Kojiki* itself. While the imperial family had existed for well over a millennium the imperial *system* which now emerged as an ideological technique for controlling the entire populace was something rather new. Mass media were employed to spread among commoners the archaic imperial mythology which in the past had been the serious make-believe of aristocratic and military alone.

After 1887 when Japan failed to win a revision of her "unequal treaties" with Western powers, a host of religio-political societies began to spring up throughout the land until, by 1936, they numbered nearly 750. By seeking to reassert the spiritual unity of the nation in the face of the double threat of Western imperialism and internal disintegration, these groups mediated between traditional religious and political outlooks and the emerging state cult. Since nearly all religious and political bodies contributed to the generation of the symbols and slogans of the new ideology, clearly more was involved in prewar Japanese patriotism than "State Shintō" or "Shintō Nationalism." Too complicated to be identified with Shintō alone, the halo of symbols and slogans and emotions which congealed around Japan in those years would better be denoted by some more general term such as "civil religion." The pivotal symbols in this religion were the sacred ancestors of the imperial family. By homologizing these deities (i.e., the lineage ideology of ancient Japan) with the ancestor worship of the common people, the government thought to create a feeling of national unity and dedication. The machinations of Japan's new industrial and military leaders which caused such suffering and deprivations among the rural masses, were now beautified as the "wish" of the imperial ancestors.<sup>9</sup>



This description is suggestive in the vehemence of its hostility. In the face of such a powerful attack from the point of view of modern egalitarian ideology it is a thankless task to defend the hierarchical aspect of Japanese civil religion, and I will not attempt to do so. Nonetheless, since modern ideology obscures many of the meanings of the system it criticizes, I shall reiterate some of those meanings. Hierarchy in Japan as elsewhere is linked to an ethical system and a set of values. Clearly, from the Confucian point of view, which has been most explicit about these matters, the legitimacy of rule is contingent upon the embodiment of values. Rulers who are not benevolent and righteous do not deserve to rule, Only virtuous rulers deserve respect. Though in Japan the enormous importance of lineage muted this ethical conception of politics, it did not entirely destroy it. Not only did ethical conceptions moderate the behavior of rulers, but, very explicitly in the Tokugawa period, complaints from commoners and even revolts were justified in the name of ethical failure of those above -- their lack of "benevolent rule." Finally, as I have already noted, the assertion of values left open the possibility that those of any class or status might claim to embody them. The rise of new popular religions in the nineteenth century and again after 1945 gave practical expression to that possibility.

I have shown that the strong assertion of individual equality in America took place against the background of religious hierarchical ideas -- the Christian conception of divine/human relations -- and classical philosophy, as in the idea of natural law, also ultimately hierarchical. Both Christianity and classical philosophy had clear sets of values around which society could agree as well as a principle of equality in that anyone, however humble, who embodied those values was worthy of dignity and respect.

But the Declaration of Independence does not spell out those ethical values very clearly. What is essential is the inherent right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and the necessity of government by the consent of the governed. "Liberty" is as close as we get to an ethical norm, and that term is deeply ambiguous, depending on whether it is, in John Winthrop's words, freedom to do the just and the good (Christian freedom) or freedom to do what you list (the freedom of natural man).<sup>10</sup> While American civil religion remained extremely vague with respect to particular values and virtues, the public theology that fleshed it out and made it convincing to ordinary people used it with more explicitly Christian, particularly Protestant, values. But even here the great stress of the Protestant clergy on the providential, indeed millennial, meaning of the American republic was on the triumph of "civil and religious liberty," with all the usual ambiguity about that central term.

Sydney V. James has indicated one important way traditional conceptions of virtue could be reconciled with the new civil religion.<sup>11</sup> He speaks of a shift from organicist to individualist conceptions of religious unity. In the organicist view (almost inevitably traditional and hierarchical) all must agree on common

conceptions of ultimate truth and good. But in the individualist conception religion is seen as contributing to social order not through the assertion of truths all must believe but, with acceptable theological variations among all the religious groups, through the inculcation of virtues in individuals that would make them good citizens. Certain common beliefs remain -- such as belief in God. Sidney Mead even speaks of "some conceptions of the nature of man and his relation to the cosmos" as characterizing the "cosmopolitan, universal theology of the republic"<sup>12</sup> But if so, they remain sufficiently abstract and general that plenty of room is left for the churches as schools of virtue for the creation of democratic citizens -- as Tocqueville saw so clearly.

The egalitarian potentialities we saw as implicit and incipient in Japanese religion became explicit and fulfilled in modern Christianity -- without, however, breaking the hierarchical religious mold and its assumption that values have an objective existence in the world. Modern egalitarianism owes at least as much to modern secular philosophy as it does to Christianity. But when we look at the conceptual basis of modern secular individualism and egalitarianism, we find the hierarchical mold and with it any objective set of beliefs and values just about gone.

The degree to which modern philosophy represents a radical break with all traditional ideas is only gradually becoming clear, in part because the early modern philosophers were concerned to disguise the full implications of their teachings. John Locke in particular was extremely devious, and the theoretical incoherence of his *Second Treatise on Government*, so often noted, is produced in part by his attempt to obscure the Hobbesian radicalism of his thought with a cloak of references to the Bible and the Anglican theorist Hooker. For us as Americans, Locke's ambiguity may have been fortunate, for it allowed biblical Christianity and classical republicanism to coexist with what we might call radical liberalism, that is, secular atomistic individualism.

But for a variety of reasons the cloak has been more and more torn away in recent American history, leaving in its stead a radical secular individualism whose implications for social coherence are ominous indeed. Beneath the benign visage of John Locke the harsher face of Thomas Hobbes has grown ever clearer. And it is Hobbes's choice between the war of all against all and the absolute rule of the Leviathan state that begins to haunt us in the closing years of the twentieth century.

It has recently been argued that Locke's *Second Treatise* was itself an effort to provide a myth of modern society, indeed, a civil theology. If so, in its stark uncloaked form it is a strange civil theology indeed. Its first tenet is that individuals are equal not by dint of divine creation but because of their sheer biological similarity. Locke does not reiterate but perhaps implies Hobbes's argument for equality because each of us is capable, as a biological entity, of killing any other under the right circumstances. The primary relation is not that between individuals but between the individual and nature. Economics is prior to

society. Our appropriation of property is logically prior to our entry into political society, and indeed, the purpose of our entering into political society is "the protection of our property." Thus society is not an organic unity embedded in a divine or divinely created cosmos but rather a conscious creation of adult individuals designed for the rational end of the mutual protection of their interests. It is significant that the words "moral" and "morality" do not appear in the entire *Second Treatise*. Hobbes had already taught us there is no such thing as *the good*. "Good" is only a word individuals use to designate what they desire. Desires are as various as individuals. Thus it is possible to create a society based on the interests of individuals but not on common values or ethical norms, for there are none.

The Lockean doctrine of toleration that made such sense in eighteenth-century America, with its plethora of churches and sects, could actually operate to undermine any sense of common values or public morality, hardly a consequence anticipated by the Christians who embraced it. If matters of ultimate religious and moral truth are declared to be essentially private -- of concern only to individuals and not to society at large -- then their claim of public truth is sharply undermined. There is little doubt the modern philosophers considered the teachings of the religious bodies untrue.

Of course civil religion and, even more, public theology -- the noncoercive religious truths addressed by particular confessions to the nation at large or on occasion articulated by a great political leader such as Abraham Lincoln -- for a long time postponed the implication of modern philosophy that religious teachings are publicly untrue. But the rise of what Peter Berger calls the "cognitive elite" in the twentieth century, particularly in the universities and the mass media, has created a powerful group asserting the radical beliefs of modern philosophical liberalism. Indeed, through the pressure of such groups as the American Civil Liberty Union, philosophical liberalism is rapidly becoming our orthodox civil religion, if I may indulge in a contradiction interms, and traditional American views of the relation of religion and society are declared unconstitutional. The implication of philosophical liberalism is that all matters of religious and moral belief are purely private. Any attempt to articulate common beliefs and practices is an infringement on individual freedom.

The result is we have individuals in society linked not by common beliefs and morals but only, if at all, through common interests. But whereas Locke could speak of the natural harmony of interests, that harmony has become dubious indeed today. Where common values and common religious beliefs have been banished and the natural harmony of interests has proven illusory, only naked interest is left and a society where there are great disparities of wealth and power. The great philosophy of liberation, classical liberalism, turns out to be a justification of the rule of the stronger. The ultimate individual right is the right to commit suicide.



And the alternatives seem to be, as I have said already, anarchic social war or authoritarian rule.

But in spite of the cognitive elite, philosophical liberalism has not completely destroyed biblical religion as public theology or republicanism as the ideology of the common good and the public interest. It has thus not wholly vitiated the traditional civil religion. Indeed, in the face of recent crises rearticulation of our traditional views has taken place. In response to the grave challenge of Watergate to the survival of our constitutional regime we reasserted the rule of law. But if law is, as the liberal utilitarians and positivists have told us, only the expression of the interests of individuals and groups, how could it prove superior to the machinations of Watergate? If law is only the rule of the stronger, how can it check the executive power? If the "rule of law" in the context of Watergate is to have any meaning, it is law as grounded in morality and morality as grounded in ultimate reality. It is the "higher law" of the eighteenth century, the laws of nature and of nature's God, to which we have to return.

Whatever we may think of the political consequences, it was probably not accidental that the first man to be elected president after Watergate was also the first in a long time to use the language of evangelical Christianity. Outside the cognitive elite beliefs in the objectivity of religion and morality are widespread. Tocqueville said religion is the first of our political institutions and our freedom depends on it, and perhaps that is still true. It is doubtful that any society, certainly any free society, could long persist on the basis of secular liberalism alone.

I have suggested that hierarchy and equality are interrelated poles rather than absolute opposites and their relation to freedom is dialectical and not linear. Too exclusive an emphasis on hierarchy results in the authoritarianism Japanese society in most of its history displays. But we would not understand the dynamism and vitality of Japanese society if we did not see that within the ideology justifying hierarchy there has been an ethic that encouraged a kind of moral heroism among the common people. Japanese society has seldom been a system of amoral exploitation, and individual Japanese have not been reduced to the fearful and spiritless automatons despotism classically creates. Indeed, the presence of public spirit and concern for the common good in Japan rivals the public consciousness of the great republics. Without facing this paradox Japan remains an enigma. And only in this context can we see the seriousness of the vacuum of moral values in Japan today.

But America, the very homeland of political freedom, has pushed egalitarian individualism almost to the point of no return. As Tocqueville pointed out so clearly, emphasis on individual interest with no ethical or moral restraint so each is "shut up in the solitude of his own heart"<sup>13</sup> is the road to a new despotism, perhaps far harsher than traditional authoritarianism.<sup>13</sup>

If this analysis is correct, the subject of civil religion and its environing climate of religious and moral belief is not something of mere antiquarian interest, a concern for a past now irrevocably lost. On the contrary, the health of our civil religion may be a subject intimately linked to the survival of our republic.

## Notes

1. Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), esp. chap. 4.
2. John A. Coleman, "Civil Religion," *Sociological Analysis*. 31 (Summer 1970), pp. 67-77.
3. James Wolfe, "The Kennedy Myth: American Civil Religion in the Sixties," Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Calif., 1975.
4. For a fuller development of this terminology see Robert N. Bellah, "Religious Evolution," in Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 20-50.
5. Augustine, *City of God* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1972), book VI, chap. 5, pp. 234-236.
6. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), and *From Mandeville to Marx* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).
7. Ryusaku Tsunoda, William Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene, *Sources of the Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press. 1958), p. 50.
8. Robert N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion* (New York: Free Press, 1957). chap. 6.
9. Winston Bradley Davis, *Toward Modernity. A Developmental Typology of Popular Religious Affiliations in Japan*, East Asia Papers Series (Ithaca. N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 68-70.
10. Winthrop in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965). pp. 138-139.
11. Sidney V. James, personal communication.
12. Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 69.

13. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1967). vol. 2 pt. 2. chap.2. p. 508.