

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

Robert N. Bellah is Ford Professor of Sociology and Comparative Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Phillip E. Hammond is Professor of Religious Studies and Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara. Copyright by Robert N. Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond.

Chapter 8: Civility and Civil Religion. The Emergence of Cults

On recent occasions one or another university student has asked if I am a Christian, a question I find bothersome. Anyone who words the question that way in my campus office is, I assume, possessed of a world view different from mine, so I have resisted answering with a single word. But, it has not seemed appropriate to square off and establish ground rules for moving from theology to metaphysics and back to theology again. Instead I mutter something about heritage and background, culture and socialization, and current denominational affiliation. Questioners walk away with *an* answer but not *the* answer; they must still try to decipher whether I am *with them* or not, for that is what such a question is really asking. It is not my parish affiliation but my tribal loyalty they inquire about by asking if I am "a Christian." In questionnaires that ask if one is Christian, Jew, Hindu, or whatever, I employ no circumlocution. But the answer marked there is not a satisfactory response to the question these occasional students ask. They can already infer, of course, that I grew up a "Judeo-Christian," and the church of my choice is not really of interest to them. What they seek, in asking the question, are my convictions. Are they Christian convictions?

Any reluctance I feel in answering a question about my Christian identity is not because it pries into my convictions, however. It stems rather from two things: first, from my impatience with the forced-choice nature of the question -- either yes, my convictions are adequately conveyed by this single word, or no, Christianity has nothing to do with my convictions -- second, from my impatience (perhaps irritation is a better word now) with the assumption that convictions are real if declared but are not otherwise knowable through behavior, everyday speech, general intellectual stance, and so forth.

No student has ever asked if I "believe in" the American civil religion. If that were to happen, I think I would be forthright in my declaration of assent. Oddly enough, I would not stumble about for a way around that question.

Why this difference? The answer lies in an irony: The commitment I feel to the civil religion (and thus the commitment I am willing to express in a single word) is the very sentiment that makes awkward any forced-choice inquiry into my Christian commitment. The public civil religion, in other words, presumes a private church religion. Indeed, as I have argued in other chapters in this volume, the tolerance many church religions developed toward each other is itself one of the central tenets of a robust American civil religion. But this tolerance developed at the cost of making church religion a private affair and thus in some measure made church religion off limits for casual inquiry. One's religion did not necessarily become politically irrelevant, but only the quaintest of civic claims could be made in its name. (As I write this, for example, I am in Honolulu, and the local newspaper carried a story of some construction workers who walked off the job. Their task was to erect a chain link fence around an ancient *heiau* [Polynesian temple] site, but enough strange events occurred that the workers walked away, fearful they were disturbing the gods. The president of the contracting firm thus called in a Pentecostal clergyman to "pray a little to purify the place and chase the evil spirits away," and the workers resumed working, "very relieved."¹ Had the job been bigger, it is not too cynical to suggest, such consideration probably would not have been shown; conscientious objection is allowed only if it isn't too inconveniencing.)

The religious freedom resulting from this tolerance is real enough; what is unreal is the assumption that religious convictions that cannot be acted on in public will nonetheless continue to function in private as if they could be. Instead there develops a commitment to what John Murray Cuddihy calls the Protestant etiquette -- a ritualized belief that no religion should offend another -- and this commitment constitutes a major plank in the American civil religion. It is a point, moreover, where civil religion and civility become much the same thing.² I do not feel comfortable with the student's question of whether I am a Christian because the claims I make in the name of Christianity, while real, are nevertheless importantly limited. By knowing that label, the student may legitimately infer little else about me and thus should not inquire into the label in so casual a manner. This rule of etiquette, when elevated to a matter of principle and thus of religion, becomes a commitment to which I readily pledge allegiance.

It can be misleading to call this civility/civil religion the Protestant etiquette, however, for that allows the impression that the phenomenon might just as well have been the Catholic etiquette or Jewish etiquette but happens in America, because of who got established first, to be Protestant in flavor. In fact the relationship between Protestantism and the civility/civil religion of which I speak is far more than coincidental. Edward Shils explains the relationship this way: "The

notion that every man has a spark of divinity in him, that all men participate in a common substance -- sacred in the last analysis but civil in its concrete and mediated forms -- has grown out of the conjunction of the modern national State and Christian Protestantism. From this conjunction grew the idea of citizen, and from it our modern idea of the civil order as a stratum of being in which all the members of a state participate."³

Of course Protestants have no monopoly on this civility, nor is there reason to suppose they necessarily possess it in greater proportion than non-Protestants. What is reasonable to suppose is that the separate loyalties citizens feel -- to religion certainly but also to class, ethnic group, profession, party, or whatever -- will be regulated on behalf of the common good. Insofar as this regulation is self-imposed, it can be called civility, and insofar as this civility is believed to inhere in the nature of social life itself, civility merges into civil religion.

Thus civility means far more than good manners. Granted, democratic society requires manners if it is to contain diverse religious, ethnic, or party groups. But it also requires an orientation that locates these manners in the moral order. The democratic citizen must be partisan if politics is to function at all, but partisanship must be pursued under rules so important, so sacred, they apply to oneself as well as to one's opponents.

Whether called Protestant, middle class, or bourgeois, therefore, the civility that becomes the civil religion is a set of ground rules permitting civil harmony in the midst of political diversity, religious peace in the midst of ecclesiastical pluralism. In its particulars it can no doubt be tinkered with, but in its fundamentals there exists an immutability so inherent in the process itself that it warrants the label of natural law. And it is this fundamental, immutable, "natural" quality that so readily encourages a religious orientation toward what otherwise appear to be mere rules of order. One does not believe in this kind of civility because it is convenient, middle class, or Protestant but because it is true. (One view has it that sociology is the discovery of the natural laws underlying this civility, that is, the principles governing persons' behavior in social settings that inhibit conflict and promote harmony. It is perhaps odd that those sociologists most ready to accept the mantle of "science" for their work are least comfortable with this view of sociology.) Civility is true, as Lon Fuller reminds us, in the same sense that the rules of carpentry are true ("natural"); if the house is to stand, the rules must be followed.

Does this mean for full citizenship in a democracy a person must be civil? Does this mean for full ecclesiastical rights a person must relinquish all unique social claims for his religion? The answer is deceptively simple: Yes. Moreover the answer is yes in at least two senses. One of these senses is almost mechanical in that without *behaving* in a civil manner toward others' claims a person is restrained from exercising his own claims. At the extreme this means that even the defendant in a murder case, if he is to have a fair trial at the bar of society, must behave as if

he believes in observing proper procedure. (Thus the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1970 *Allen* decision [164 US 492] ruled that until a defendant agreed to refrain from further disruptive courtroom tactics, his constitutional right to confront his accusers could be waived, and the trial could proceed without him.)

The other sense in which one must relinquish superior claims for one's own stance in favor of the civil procedure whereby all stances are at parity is often called secularization. That is to say, the certainty with which we hold *our* convictions is eroded when we find ourselves according others equal right to *their* convictions. "All of us," writes Cuddihy, "are witness to the profanation of our sacred particularities; all of us suffer the pathos of the secularization process."⁵ It is not that sacred particularities disappear altogether but rather that they become private or non-civil, matters of preference only and thus no longer socially compelling. The Protestant doctrine that only Jesus saves, the Catholic doctrine that salvation is only through the Church, and the Jewish doctrine of the Chosen People do not disappear. Instead, as Cuddihy shows, those doctrines in American society get transformed; their hard edges get softened; their claims and implications get muted. In short they cease to be central identifying ideologies for their respective devotees and become instead part of the history of people who "happen to be" Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. What was once sacred is now secular.

What is not so clear is why people, having secularized their various sacred particularities, would sacralize the very procedures that brought about the secularizing. Why, in other words, would civility become civil religion? I have tried elsewhere in this volume to answer this question and won't repeat all the reasoning here. Briefly put, the argument follows Emile Durkheim's observation that even the contract has a noncontractual element. If a people who are so diverse that pursuit of their commonwealth would be precluded learn ways to engage in that pursuit, it is not surprising to find them honoring-even worshipping -- those "ways." The collective, Durkheim insisted, *will* be represented. (Mystery surrounds not so much *this* process, then, but rather the process by which a collective determines what its boundaries are.)

For whatever reasons, Americans became religiously diverse and tolerant, and religious pluralism became a fact of life. It is therefore no more surprising to find Protestants uncomfortable with the particularistic claims of a Billy Graham, Catholics with those of a Father Feeney, or Jews with those of a Rabbi Kahane than it is to find lawyers embarrassed by the courtroom antics of their clients, politicians chagrined by the failure of election losers to acknowledge defeat, or members of the winning ball club joining those they defeated in complaining about the officiating. Who, after all, wants to win through broken rules?

There are pressures, then, both to relinquish particularisms and to exalt the procedures whereby diverse particularisms exist together harmoniously. There are reasons, in other words, why civility becomes civil religion. This might even occur

smoothly were it not for two problems. One problem arises because civility, while real enough, is easily ignored. Persons or groups *can* strive to achieve private goals at the expense of the collective welfare, bypassing procedural rules as they do so. Oftentimes those very rules delay or inhibit altogether challenges from those who otherwise would surely challenge. Civility is fragile, as is often noted, and one reason is because individuals who would dismantle it may protect themselves by the rules they would dismantle.

Another problem with the civil religious standing of civility is the constant tendency to trivialize civility, thus making it absurd as civil *religion*. This in turn happens in two ways. The first is by treating as sacred the trappings of civil religion rather than its principles, as in the case of superpatriots, for example. Persons can trivialize the civil religion through idol worshipping. Second, not civility as the natural laws of procedure but civility as merely etiquette can be elevated to sacred status, thus trivializing the civil religion by legalisms. In either case appearance predominates over principle, and civility, now corrupted, loses its transcendent quality.

It is my contention that the trivialization or corruption of the American civil religion has been an important factor in the explosion of cults in this society during the last fifteen years. There are several links in this relationship.

It is easy to forget that during the decade immediately before the mid 1960s the single most common observation about Americans dealt with their conformity or other-direction. The importance of sensitivity to others was stressed (and sometimes regretted) as necessary for advancement in the bureaucratic, corporate, button-down world. Suburbia was the great homogenizer. The middle class was on the march, drawing into itself members from both above and below, and if that meant everybody gave up some of his or her ethnic, class, and religious particularities, so be it. Middle-class morality called for politeness, gentility, and etiquette. In short it was trying to sacralize civility. Before the gray flannel suit became a monk's robe, however, the superficiality of this kind of civility was made obvious, and generations of unbelievers, not just nonbelievers, began to appear.

All this was set in the context of a cold war, however, in which a rhetoric of national honor, national security, and national purpose was everywhere. It was a period during which, in the name of democracy, our nation upheld dictators. Therefore when in the name of peace it waged war in Vietnam, that war became a symbol of the absurd to everyone. For supporter and opponent alike, the absurdity could be stated: If we're going to fight a war, then let's fight to win in the name of national honor, even if we don't know what it is we're fighting about.

Thus throughout a lengthy period the line was drawn between the "patriots" who defended such U.S. actions in the name of national purpose and those who, believing the national purpose was being violated, were forced by their protests to

be "unpatriots." Once again generations of unbelievers in the American civil religion had reason to appear.

The status quo always benefits some more than others. If the civil religion -- its symbols, rituals, and tenets -- are captured by those in power and invoked on behalf of present arrangements, it becomes all the more difficult to advocate change in the name of civil religion. If waving the American flag becomes a gesture only of those happy with the current situation, for example, then burning the flag remains a countergesture by those unhappy with the situation. But burning the flag gains neither converts nor an increased commitment to the civil religion for which the flag stands. Still again generations of unbelievers had cause to appear.

My contention is also exemplified, negatively, by the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., a person seemingly destined to go down in history as a true interpreter and prophet of the American civil religion. The nonviolent character of King's protests, his readiness to accept penalties imposed by the very system he was challenging, reflect precisely civility elevated to civil religion. There were moments therefore when optimism was justifiably high, when the bestowal of benefits was to be rearranged and the status quo altered in the name of America's noblest ideals. But it was not to be. A president, in the name of national honor, shoved civil rights off track by super-patriotic moves in Southeast Asia; an FBI director, in the name of national security, assisted in the derailment by sowing seeds of distrust in the civil rights movement; and others then "merely" committed the murder. Optimism easily gave way to despair, and the times were ripe for yet more unbelievers in the American civil religion.

Finally, among these links between an eroded civil religion and the rise of cults, can be mentioned the publicity of Watergate. The scandal itself was hardly significant; what it stood for was the depth of cynicism to which the American people had sunk. President Nixon happened to get caught but in getting caught forced on us all the recognition that "dirty tricks" had become our way of life. Fidelity to the rules of the game could not even be a pretense anymore.

Cynics argue that such events, while real, do not play the dramatic role I give them. The gray flannel suit, they point out, was a phenomenon in only a few urban areas and in only a few occupations. Most people, even if they know about it, don't regret US. support to dictators but applaud it in the name of anti-communism. Despair at King's murder was the response of many blacks and some white liberals, but others were not distressed, and most did not care. Watergate, these cynics admit, led to a decline in the prestige of the presidency, but then they point to how fast it was restored by Nixon's successor. Such matters, it is contended, are only superficial, easily swayed by headlines, but therefore not the stuff of which civil religion is made.

Although a little cynicism is always healthy, too much perverts the view. Civil religion, like any religion when it flows, flows in and through the interstices of life. It is not likely that any concrete event will by itself therefore significantly alter the status of America's civil religion. Rather, the civil religion is always in the process of accretion or erosion. Commitment to it and faith in it are always expanding or contracting, deepening or shallowing, being celebrated or being ignored. The events just reviewed, then, are more properly seen as symptoms, not causes of a trivialized and corrupted civil religion. If one thinks of synonyms for "civil religion" -- for example, belief in the good intentions of one's nation, optimism about the future of that nation, faith in the legitimacy of its historic institutions, conviction that its errors can and will be corrected -- then it is obvious that many events could and did trivialize the American civil religion. Some persons perhaps, crushed by the burden of medical expenses, had no objection to a cold-war garrison state as such, yet they could wonder about a nation that spent far more on weapons than on health coverage. Others, perhaps unmoved by any civil rights rhetoric, were nevertheless bewildered by their government's inability to guarantee jobs, create housing, or control crime in the streets.

It is my argument that in a period of a quarter of a century the American civil religion was eroded by many such events; it lost far more than it gained. But further, this loss occurred even as civil religious symbols and rhetoric were being self-consciously invoked. Thus in the 1950s we added "under God" to the pledge and "in God we trust" to our coins, perfectly innocent gestures in some contexts but trivializing in this instance because of their political, not religious, origins. Similarly with our national anthem, a sacred symbol trivialized. The national hymn of Mexico is considered so sacred that only on extraordinary occasions is it played (and never recorded), whereas the U.S. national anthem is commonly performed. Sports enthusiasts are expected to perform the ritual on a daily basis almost, and as a result even a star singer blowing out her lungs in Yankee Stadium stirs up not patriotic fervor but impatience with the game's delay.

During the twenty-five years following World War II, therefore, there was no letup in the use of civil religious symbols, but there was a series of events that trivialized those symbols, which made outright rejection of them attractive to some and idolatrous embrace of them attractive to others. The impact on successive generations of young Americans was a decline in their commitment to all kinds of practices reflecting mainline American values: from demure dress and gentle language to orderly career and civic responsibility. Included in these rejected practices -- regarded as hollow exercises in being "middle-class American" -- was, of course, churchgoing. Part of the attack on suburban conformity had included precisely the criticism that churchgoing was but a social ritual, not a sign of deep commitment. As Andrew Greeley and others make clear, the radical change in churchgoing since the 1950s has not occurred across the board. It is a change created almost exclusively by the young, who in great numbers just never started churchgoing.

Here, then, is where cults stepped in, offering an opportunity to commit oneself and to do so in ways that were neither middle class nor even particularly American. No doubt the cults of Eastern import illustrate the assertion best, but so do "cults" devoted to political radicalism, communalism, mind-altering drugs, or Protestant fundamentalism. Indeed, of all the cultish opportunities for the uncommitted to commit themselves, only the environmentally concerned groups, the women's movement, and the human-potential movement are designed to envelope people into mainline America, not alienate them further. Other cults are distinctive for being centrifugal, not enveloping forces; they are in significant ways therefore subversive of core American (that is, civil religious) values. In other words they are uncivil. They make outrageous claims. They demand their members be obsessed, when Americans are not to be religiously (or politically) obsessed. Civil religion (like civil politics) permits all beliefs to exist provided none makes excessive claims, but here are cults making excessive claims. They challenge the civil religion, therefore, but in order for that to have happened, the civil religion had to have been eroded through trivialization and corruption.

Cults' outrageous claims are often enough benign. Being pressed with a flower petal in an airport is only irritating, not demoralizing or destructive. Chanting, sloganeering, even dominating certain airways or TV channels can be ignored as but the bizarre behavior of those on the fringe. Cultists can be dismissed, in other words, as eccentrics, the way their Hindu-flavored predecessors in America were dismissed before the 1960s.⁶

The extraordinarily negative response by many Americans to these cults in the present day suggests they are not merely being dismissed. Cult members are not simply eccentrics. Instead many are believed to be "brainwashed," forcibly enjoined from "returning" to society, "fooled" or "hypnotized" into their beliefs. They are, in short, threats to "our" values. The mass suicide in Jonestown is but the extreme case in point, with a general reluctance by the public to believe that hundreds of people would knowingly reject life altogether in favor of an ideal. But "moonies" who must be "deprogrammed," Children of God who must be parentally "kidnapped," or devotees who are "forced" into mass marriages are additional instances of our inability to think of cult members as just ordinary church members. They are instead subversives.

This changing role of cults -- from the haven of a few eccentrics to a real threat to core American values -- is possible because the American civil religion has itself been made precarious by trivialization and corruption. Younger generations, finding it precarious, are thus attracted by cults offering certitude of a particularistic sort; older generations, finding it precarious, respond with fear and hostility rather than with the certitude provided by a robust civil religion. What better example than a society prepared to violate the constitutional rights of its members (in some instances the rights of one's own sons and daughters) in the

name of "religious freedom"? Seeming success at being nervy leads to a nervy response -- and both because of a failure of nerve.

Of course that is an exaggeration. Many factors are involved in the rise of new religious movements and the reactions to them. Moreover, I have merged as cults a number of groups, many of which others would call something else and each of which would resist being classified with the others. It was not these differences I wanted to highlight here, however, but the characteristic these groups share. After all, the popularity, if not the origins, of all these groups dates to a relatively brief time span. All have been attractive primarily to young, not old, people. And all evoke in their followers if not total dedication, at least a fervor and commitment (I previously called it "obsession") uncharacteristic of major American religious bodies. Thus I offered as the common characteristic of these cults their un-Americanism, finding in that un-Americanism both some of the attraction to those attracted and the source of the hostility of those repelled.

Cultists are pushy, and Americans are not supposed to push -- at least not push ideologies. To do so is uncivil. But the ideology that says it is uncivil and thus makes possible the coexistence of many ideologies -- when conceived as in the nature of things and not just as a matter of etiquette -- is itself then a civil religion. Only if this civil religion is in reasonable working condition will civil order be maintained. We see around us that civil order is precarious indeed.

In 1960, when Daniel Bell published *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, he had in mind that Americans were more or less agreed on this ideology that makes civility possible. Thus no other, particularistic, ideology was likely to be pushed at the expense of the overarching ideology. We have seen since 1960 that is not quite accurate. In the decade following Bell's book all manner of ideologies burst forth. It is true that Americans did not long remain in open ideological warfare; there are too many cross-cutting and therefore self-restraining loyalties in America for that. So there is little reason to suppose any of these cultish ideologies now competing will ever win out. But in recent years these ideologies have ceased being the havens of mere kooks, which is the position they were assigned in the 1950s when those ideologies were believed exhausted. Instead that overarching ideology, the civil religion, has become exhausted. As a result some Americans are taking a new religious plunge while others regret how uncivil the plungers are. It is this lack of civility in the question of whether I am a Christian -- and all that such lack of civility might mean for the civil religion of the present day -- that bothers me.

Notes:

1. *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 1 August 1979.

2. John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury, 1978).
3. Edward Shils, "Ideology and Civility," *Sewanee Review*, 66 (Summer 1958), p. 480.
4. Lon Fuller, *The Morality of Law* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964).
5. John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 235.
6. For a vivid example see John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), an engaging analysis of a group of society's outcasts attracted by an oriental offbeat claiming to be the new savior but who a decade later turns out to be Sun Myung Moon. The revised version of this book (1977) has something to say about the transformation of Moon's public image from that of a harmless eccentric known only to a few to what some regard as a cunning, even dangerously conspiratorial, messiah.