

~~nation building in the eighteenth century, the role of religion in public life received much attention. And while there was no systematic discussion of civil religion in Rousseauian terms,~~ there is ample evidence that the Founding Fathers assumed religion would play a formative role in the new American society. John Wilson suggests that Benjamin Franklin may have been the earliest "to advocate serious attention to the public import of religion," when in his 1749 "Proposals" he "urged the founding of an academy in Philadelphia for the education of youth," taking special note that the study of history would be one of the most important disciplines because it would "afford frequent Opportunities of showing the Necessity of a *Publick Religion*" (1979, p. 7).

There was nothing novel in believing that a public religion was necessary because of its usefulness to the social order. The common assumption of the time was that government could not survive without an established religion and that religion could not survive without the support of government. But what would happen to that common assumption when the Founding Fathers erected a formal wall of separation between organized religion and the state?

Thomas Jefferson and other advocates of Enlightenment religion believed that in a pluralistic culture a common rational religion would emerge as a commonly held public religion. Evangelical Protestants believed that disestablishment of religion provided an opportunity to Christianize American society and to make Protestant Christianity the public religion. The civil religion that emerged in the nineteenth century, according to most scholars, was a combination of Enlightenment religion and evangelical Christianity—some called it republican Protestantism.

The importance of religion in nineteenth-century American public life was observed by many foreign visitors, most notably by Alexis de Tocqueville. Unlike Rousseau, who developed an abstract definition of civil religion, Tocqueville observed, firsthand, what he termed republican religion during his tour of America in 1831. He discovered a unique form of civil religion that developed out of religious pluralism and voluntarism. It was a fusion of democratic values and generalized Protestant beliefs that influenced politics and cultural mores, without being tied to any sect or denomination. He called religion

"the first of American political institutions." He saw the function of religion in America to be a public one—"its chief aim being the making of citizens."

Tocqueville's contribution to the intellectual background of the civil religion discussion is significant because his was the first description of a generalized republican religion—or what is now called civil religion—that was structurally and functionally independent of religious and political institutions.

James Bryce, a visitor from England toward the end of the nineteenth century, found that contrary to the predictions of many Europeans, not only did Christianity survive, but it appeared to be an established religion. He recorded that each house of Congress "has a chaplain" and, like all of the state legislatures, its proceedings open "each day with prayers." The army and navy have "religious services, conducted by chaplains of various denominations," and in most "States there exists laws punishing . . . swearing by the name of God" and laws "forbidding trade or labour on the Sabbath." Bryce then summed up his impressions:

Christianity is in fact understood to be, though not the legally established religion, yet the national religion. . . . They deem the general acceptance of Christianity to be one of the main sources of their national prosperity, and their nation a special object of Divine favour.

(*The American Commonwealth*, 1893, pp. 769, 770)

Twentieth-century historians of American religion have, through numerous studies, confirmed what these and other foreign visitors observed firsthand. Franklin's assumption that public religion was a necessity was confirmed in the American experiment. The debate over whether this American civil religion is rooted primarily in the Enlightenment or in evangelical Protestantism goes on. Most have been convinced that it is an amalgam of both, with evangelical Protestantism the dominant force, at least in the nineteenth century.

Historians of American religion have critically discussed the emergence of this unique kind of national religion with its strong Protestant coloring, described by Tocqueville, Bryce, and others. Numerous books support its influence in Ameri-

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

can history: Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation* (1968); Winthrop Hudson, *Nationalism and Religion in America* (1970); Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire* (1970); Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel* (1971); Robert Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (1971); Sidney Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (1975); and John Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (1979).

In addition, there have been numerous other books, monographs, and articles by historians who have contributed significantly to American civil religion studies. Daniel Boorstin, Ralph Gabriel, Richard Hofstadter, and Yehoshua Arieli, in different ways, delineated the religious dimension of American nationalism, patriotism, the American creed, and the democratic faith. Much of their work, as well as that of other historians, took place before, or at least independent of, the civil religion proposal by Bellah in his 1967 *Dædalus* article, where he wondered why something so obvious as civil religion had escaped the attention of scholars. A review of the literature shows that the sociologists were far less ready to entertain the idea of a common religion in America than were historians and theologians, and that a number of books and articles had already been written pointing to the phenomenon Bellah labeled civil religion.

As mentioned earlier, the most important study predating Bellah was Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, in which he identified a functionally and structurally differentiated civic religion that he called the "American Way of Life." His study focused not so much on the history of public religion, but on its mid-twentieth-century expression. He believed that civic religion, shaped by the contours of American Protestantism, especially the Puritan dream of a new "Israel" and a new "Promised Land," was a kind of "secularized Puritanism," the content of which was shared by both Catholics and Jews. Herberg relied on such prior studies as Robin Williams' chapter "Religion in America" in his book *American Society* (1951) and J. Paul Williams' *What Americans Believe and How They Worship* (1952). Robin Williams pointed to a "common faith" of Americans, while J. Paul Williams observed a "societal" religion he called the "democratic faith," which was different from denominational religion.

Following Herberg's study there appeared a

spate of books that further identified a public religion in America. Martin Marty, in *The New Shape of American Religion* (1959), called American public religion "Americanized State Shinto" and "Religion in General." Peter Berger, in *Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (1961), referring to "Culture Religion" and "Religion of Democracy," likened the American public religion to the Roman imperial cult. A. Roy Eckardt's *The Surge of Piety in America* (1958) contained an analysis of a "Folk Religion," existing alongside and within traditional faiths. In "Constitution and Court as Symbols," written in 1947, Max Lerner alluded to the emergence in American history of what amounts to a "state church," the study of which would produce the "real religious history of America," in contrast to a narrowly misguided focus on "formal churchgoing religion."

Because many scholars advanced the scholarship of a public religion, or what has now come to be called civil religion, Bellah's claim to discovery is unfair. The public cults of antiquity, the imperial cults of Rome, the public religion of Franklin, and the civil religion of Rousseau and Herberg all received attention before the Bellah article. In another sense, Bellah is right, for scholars had been without a commonly accepted concept as a basis on which description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation could proceed. Scholars awaited a more refined concept. Bellah's civil religion has become that concept. It has brought together sociologists, historians, and theologians to a more refined, coherent, and common discourse. It renewed the discussion in the late 1960s and 1970s, engendering scholarly publications, numerous conferences, and considerable press coverage, especially as the peak of the discussion took place during the 1976 bicentennial celebration. While a consensus as to what civil religion is, how it should be studied, and whether it is desirable has not yet been achieved, these are goals receiving serious attention in the mid-1980s.

MODES OF ANALYSIS

Much of the confusion in the civil religion discussion results from the variety of ways civil religion has been understood and analyzed. In their 1974 essay "The Civil Religion Debate," Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones sort out five ways

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

civil religion has been interpreted. This fivefold typology has been used by other scholars to organize the literature and has instigated some discussion as to which type should be developed as the normative conceptual scheme for civil religion studies. The five characterizations are: folk religion, transcendent universal religion of the nation, religious nationalism, the democratic faith, and Protestant civic piety.

The idea of civil religion as folk religion emphasizes the actual common religion emerging out of the life of the "folk." Will Herberg, Robin Williams, Lloyd Warner, Martin Marty, A. Roy Eckardt, Peter Berger, and Andrew Greeley represent this category by looking not at historical texts and speeches, but at the actual life, ideas, values, rituals, symbols, and loyalties of a people. The starting point is not a normative view of what civil religion is at best—the starting point for both Rousseau and Bellah—but rather what it actually is, based on empirical studies, surveys, polls, and phenomenological investigation. This approach is the most amenable to behavioral analysis.

One of the most notable studies cited as evidence for the existence of civil religion, and as representative of this mode of analysis, is Lloyd Warner's Yankee City series. In this study of social systems in a New England town, he provides an analysis of "An American Sacred Ceremony," a Memorial Day celebration. By observing the phases before, during, and after the celebration, he discerned beliefs in intricate fashion and the commingling of sacred and secular symbols. He concludes that these symbols and beliefs functioned to organize and integrate various religious, national, and class groups into a sacred unity. Memorial Day is a cult of the dead evoking images of the sacrifices soldiers made for the living, and the concomitant obligation of the living to sacrifice their individual purposes for the good of society, "so that they too can perform their spiritual obligations" (Richey and Jones, p. 91).

The other study most often cited as representing civil religion as folk religion is Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, which analyzes the religious dimension of the American folkways. Relying on surveys, polls, and prior studies concerning beliefs and values of Americans, Herberg concludes that Americans do have a "common" religion and that "religion" is the system famil-

arly known as the "American Way of Life." It is this American Way of Life, he believes, that supplies American society with an overarching sense of unity amid conflict.

A summary of the values and beliefs of the American way reveals that, on the spiritual side, Americans place an extraordinarily high valuation on religion itself, with belief in a supreme being nearly a must. On its political side the American way means "democracy" and the Constitution; on its economic side, "free enterprise"; on its social side, the American way is pragmatic, dynamic, and optimistic, with a fervent belief in the supreme value of the individual. Culturally, the American way exhibits intense faith in education and an extremely high valuation of sanitation, where cleanliness is not merely next to godliness, but "virtually on the same level, as a kind of equivalent." Morally, Americans are idealistic, needing to justify political causes and materialistic pursuits in "higher" terms—in terms of a crusade, in terms of service or stewardship.

Even though Warner stresses the importance of symbols, while Herberg emphasizes values, they both share Durkheim's assumption that every society has a common religion which functions as a social bond. Such a common religion can be investigated in America the way a folk religion in an undeveloped village can be studied. They also assume, along with Durkheim, that aspects of society—or the society as a whole—become sacred. For Herberg, in American civil religion, "national life is apotheosized, national values (such as sanitation) are religionized," and national history is experienced as "a *Heilsgeschichte*," a redemptive history.

Civil religion discussed in this way functions to integrate a widely diverse American society; it provides identity and meaning. Finally, it is capable of being a source of limited judgment on society, because of the idealized content of American values, and a transcendent dimension in the sacred symbols that may evoke guilt or motivate effort toward the public good.

The second meaning of civil religion has been categorized as the transcendent universal religion of the nation. This is the categorization of Sidney E. Mead, who preceded Bellah by several years in articulating a "religion of the republic" that is a real, universal, and transcendent religion, hovering over folk religion and church religion. He describes this transcendent "cosmopol-

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

itan" religion in terms of Enlightenment faith, similar to Rousseau's concept. He evaluates this public or civil religion as superior to particular sectarian religion because unlike church religion, which divides, the religion of the republic unites precisely because of "a universal principle which is thought to transcend and include all the national and religious particularities" (*Church History*, 36, 1967).

In like fashion, Bellah describes a civil religion that exists alongside of and transcends the American Way of Life and church religion. He then makes a normative claim that American civil religion is a "genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality," which is "revealed through the experience of the American people," but not to be identified with American folkways. And, like Mead, Bellah advocates this civil religion "at its best" as a source of judgment and redemption for America in a time of "trial" and "crisis." Because of its transcendent universality, Bellah entertains the possibility that American civil religion could become "simply one part of a new civil religion of the world." In his pivotal 1967 essay, he concludes: "A world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion." Such an outcome, he believes, has been the hope of American civil religion from the beginning. "To deny such an outcome would be to deny the meaning of America itself." In *Varieties of Civil Religion* (1980), Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond struck the same note. Thinking about a troubled world facing the possibility of nuclear holocaust, they wrote:

American civil religion with its tradition of openness, tolerance, and ethical commitment might make a contribution to a world civil religion that would transcend and include it. . . . It is time that we raise our sights to consider the relation of religion and politics in a global order of civility and justice.

(p. xiv)

As representatives of the folk religion approach, Warner and Herberg are not interested in such global considerations. They focus, rather, on the religion of a particular people and attempt to discern how values and ritual behavior function to achieve social unity and spiritual meaning for a specific nation or culture. In con-

trast, Mead and Bellah are less concerned with the culture-specific expressions of civil religion and more concerned with a theoretical framework of symbols, beliefs, and ethical norms that point to a transcendent deity acting upon the civil order in judgment and redemption. According to this approach, there is a notion of heresy, idolatry, and profanation. When symbols are misused for narrow political purposes or national self-aggrandizement, or when the god of civil religion becomes identified with cultural values, civil religion is reduced to an apostate status. In this sense, it is possible to see that in the transcendent universal religion of the nation model, there can be an apprehension of folk religion. Some, such as Gail Gehrig and John Wilson, believe that because this mode of analysis is more comprehensive, it has more promise as a functioning concept for further studies in civil religion. The problem for followers of Mead and Bellah is that of objectivity. It is difficult to study a common religion of the people with fairness and scholarly openness when the version being studied represents a violation or banalization of the normative religion of the investigator. In spite of this problem, this transcendent universal model of civil religion has, in Gehrig's words, "stimulated the greatest amount of contemporary inquiry."

A third meaning of civil religion is indicated by the phrase *religious nationalism*. In this usage the nation itself takes on a sacred and self-transcendent character, becoming the object of reverence. Religious nationalism implies fervent patriotism, glorification of national heroes, and sacralization of national purposes—real or pretended.

Some have called this kind of civil religion the religion of patriotism. In the late nineteenth century, articulating a strong religious nationalism typical of his time, Archbishop John Ireland said that the "religion of patriotism is not sufficiently understood," and yet, he believed, that it was "this religion that gives to country its majesty, and to patriotism its sacredness and force." Elton Trueblood (*The Future of the Christian*, 1971) claims that patriotism inherently involves a religious dimension because sacrifice and dedication are its powerful ingredients. Thus it is not uncommon when a traditional faith, with themes of sacrifice and dedication, gets blended into patriotism during or after times of war.

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

The sanctification of the nation and the fusion of religious fervor and patriotism are common themes in civil religion studies. For instance, Charles Henderson's 1972 treatment of Richard Nixon's theology shows how the concept of "a nation under God" can easily shift to the notion of a nation becoming godlike, as when President Nixon took sacred language and applied it chiefly to his personal vision of the nation.

The analysis of civil religion as religious nationalism also figures in assessments by James Smylie, Conrad Cherry, Martin Marty, Herbert Richardson, and Carlton Hayes, all of whom make the point that when traditional religions move out of the civil order, the nation moves in and assumes functions normally associated with church religion. One of the major themes of this type of analysis is that nations can be seen as the primary agent of God's activity in history, which, from the standpoint of traditional religion, inevitably leads to idolatry; that is, a sacralizing of the nation and politics.

The analysis of civil religion as religious nationalism focuses on elements that are analogous to traditional religions, such as holy days, parades, pilgrimages, solemn feasts, relics, and shrines. The flag receives attention as the most sacred symbol of fervent nationalism; presidents are studied as high priests; national documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the addresses of Washington and Lincoln, are called "holy scriptures" and sources of national "theological doctrine."

For political society, nationalism achieves a sense of unity and grand mission. To individual citizens, it gives an emotional lift and meaningful identity. However, unlike transcendent universal civil religion, religious nationalism is tribal and exclusive, representing a reaction against notions of universality. Moreover, it elicits sacrifice and dedication for narrow national interests, and it tends not to encourage a sense of universal justice and benevolence. Many interpreters view religious nationalism as fundamentally intolerant and with an inherent predisposition for war. Hence, there are those who do not think civil religion is a good thing when it is defined as religious nationalism, which is the extreme expression of folk religion and the exact opposite of the transcendent universal civil religion of Bellah.

A fourth meaning of civil religion has been

designated as the democratic faith. This model is represented in the writings of humanistic scholars who have a stake in promoting democracy or "republican virtue" as a unifying common faith. The humane values and ideals of freedom, equality, benevolence, fraternity, and justice, without necessary reference to a transcendent god or a spiritualized nation, represent the core of a civil religion creed according to this model.

Democracy as a religion has been consciously promoted by a number of thinkers in twentieth-century America. J. Paul Williams said that Americans must look upon the democratic ideal "as the Will of God" and must be brought to the conviction that "democracy is the very law of life." He believed that the government, through the public school system, should teach the democratic ideal "as religion." Horace M. Kallen, in referring to the "communicants" of the democratic faith, said that they were believers in the religion of religions, where, despite particular faith commitments, "all may freely come together in it." The "common faith" of John Dewey and the "public philosophy" of Walter Lippmann are classic examples of democratic faith.

According to this model, the democratic faith encompasses these beliefs: that individuals are born to be free and equal; that human rights are universal; that justice is the animating principle of politics; and that benevolence and loyalty are duties of citizenship. Thus its main function is to produce civic virtue and public cohesiveness.

This concept of civil religion is similar to Rousseau's vision. Rousseau eschewed chauvinistic nationalism, was not concerned with shared cultural values, was not interested in rituals and symbols, and did not emphasize a transcendent god as a source of judgment on national life. He was concerned with civic virtue, rights, duties, and the principles of democracy.

This fourth model represents a civil religion tied to a particular society and applicable only as a theoretical construct to democratic societies. The underlying assumption of this model is that a differentiated set of beliefs, loyalties, and behaviors can be recognized, analyzed, and studied as constituting one type or expression of civil religion. This type may be included in all of the other types. Indeed, it does appear in Herberg's folk religion analysis and Bellah's transcendental universal civil religion, but it is distinct and does

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

not require any of the other models to study civil religion effectively.

The fifth meaning of civil religion has been called Protestant civic piety. It is applicable as a model only to the United States, because the literature representative of this type concerns the Protestant origins of, and influence on, American civil religion. Catherine Albanese uses the term *public Protestantism* in discussing how dominant Calvinistic Protestant religion was in the public domain during colonial America. Yehoshua Arieli calls the nineteenth-century blend of Christianity and public life "Protestant nationalism" (*Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*, 1964). Denis Brogan, in agreeing with Bellah that there is a civil religion in twentieth-century America, says that it is not wrong to call this country a "Protestant country," and that the "public civil religion is Protestant" (*The American Character*, 1944).

Historians such as Robert Handy, Winthrop Hudson, James Smylie, James Maclear, and Robert Michaelson, among others, emphasize the fusion of Protestantism and nationalism, and the pervading Protestant coloring of the American ethos. Herberg employs the concept of Protestant civic piety when he says, "America's civil religion is compounded of the two great religious movements that molded America—the Puritan way, secularized; and the Revivalist way, secularized."

Scholars who emphasize Protestant moralism, individualism, activism ("deeds not creeds"), hard work, religious liberty, democratic equality, the quest for simplicity, and the grand motif of "missionizing" the world as characteristics of American civil religion are representative of this type. Also, those who stress the importance of such national self-images as the "New Israel," the "Chosen People," the "Promised Land," and this nation as a "Light to the World," both in terms of tracing the origins of civil religion in America and the ongoing self-understanding of the American people, are emphasizing themes that flow out of the Protestant concept of civic piety.

While this model is a less comprehensive characterization of civil religion, what it loses in general applicability it may gain in historical and sociological precision. For instance, it may be useful in understanding the differences and commonalities of northern and southern civil reli-

gion during the Civil War, certain aspects of public religion in frontier America, and elements of common religion in rural and suburban America from the 1950s through the 1980s. The categorization also may be particularly apt for understanding the blend of evangelical Protestantism and Americanism in the Moral Majority movement of the 1980s. One way of viewing this group is to see that it wants a return to a Protestant public religion. The model helps to illuminate an ongoing, albeit changing, Protestant coloring in the American experience by emphasizing the historical role Puritanism and revivalism have played in shaping aspects of the American culture.

All of the aforementioned models may encompass assumptions, themes, and the distinct focus of this fifth type. While there is some overlapping of categories with the other four meanings of civil religion, Protestant civic piety, as a distinct theoretical framework, has made its unique contribution.

The main problems still confronting scholars of civil religion relate directly to the diversity of conceptualization illustrated by these five types. The diversity expresses also the complexity and pioneer nature of the subject.

SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL EXPRESSIONS

According to Durkheim, religion must have social and institutional expressions. He says that in all history there has never been a religion without a church. A virtual consensus exists among scholars that Durkheim is right: religion, by definition, is social in nature. Theorists of civil religion take for granted this proposition, but disagree whether there is such a thing as a "clearly differentiated" civil religion, as proclaimed by Bellah in "Civil Religion in America." John Wilson, in his seminal study *Public Religion in American Culture*, concludes that the case for a developed and differentiated civil religion in American history is highly questionable, but that it is possible to identify a religious cultural reality in various social structures which may be identified as civil religion. While the issue of a "clearly differentiated" civil religion has not been settled, its social and institutional expressions have been investigated, mainly in these

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

seven social locations: organized religion, public school systems, legal institutions and traditions, presidential speeches, patriotic rituals and symbols, patriotic voluntary societies, and sports.

That American civil religion had its beginnings in Protestant Christianity and continues to be expressed in various formal religions is a commonplace notion. Civil religion has even been located in a new religion, the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon. One of the major themes of Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* is that these three main faiths embody and maintain the American Way of Life as a common religion, that to be religious is considered a patriotic duty, and that patriotism is a fruit of religious piety.

There are many examples of how the civil order and formal religion become intertwined and function as agents for each other: religious leaders of inaugural ceremonies; prayers for public figures; chaplains in the military and the Congress; celebration of religious holy days in public life; religious marriages accepted in lieu of civil services; and the blend of nationalistic and religious language in both patriotic and religious hymns. A complete explication of these and other similar connections between formal religion and the civil order makes a compelling case for the existence of a civil religious dimension, maintained and elaborated by formal religion.

The public school system is a place where Americans for a long period of time experience civil religion. Some have even said the public school system functions as "the church" of American civil religion. In the nineteenth century, public schools were not only in the business of inculcating patriotism, the American way, and reverence for national heroes, but also of promoting what has been called "practical Protestant morality." This combination of nationalism and Protestant piety has become the central spiritual structure of American civil religion, according to Herberg and others.

Democratic ideals and democratic practice (as in student government activities) are reinforced by pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, the presence of an American flag, and celebrations of national holidays. There have been many advocates of the idea that schools should promote a common faith. Most notable have been John Dewey, Horace Kallen, Luther Weigle, and

J. Paul Williams. Weigle, former dean of the Yale Divinity School, believed that public schools should self-consciously promote the "common religious faith" of democracy. The future of civil religion and the public schools remains uncertain, but it seems clear that in the past they have been "temples of the democratic faith," to use Williams' phrase.

If free public education has been a vital force in orienting masses of people to this religion, legal institutions and traditions have functioned to adjudicate the right and wrong of its moral substance. Philip Hammond and John Wilson emphasize this area as an important social location of civil religion in America. Because Americans believe in God-given, natural rights and because the Constitution and the court system represent the highest criterion by which rights are to be judged, judicial structures, procedures, and persons take on a sacred quality.

• Max Lerner is the most famous of those who have observed that Americans tend to see a religious dimension in the legal system, regarding the Constitution as holy writ, the Supreme Court as a temple, and the justices as high priests. In "Constitution and Court as Symbols" (1937), Lerner says that for Americans the "Constitution and Supreme Court are symbols of an ancient sureness and a comforting stability." He points out that the Court as a sacred symbol goes hand in hand with the Constitution as a sacred symbol. Since the Supreme Court exercises a guardianship over the Constitution, the result "has been to invest the judges of the Court with all the panoply of sanctity with which the Constitution has itself been invested."

Lerner's conclusion that Americans actually worship the Constitution and the Supreme Court suggests that these judicial entities may be important institutional locations of American civil religion. Hammond's suggestion, following an appreciative interpretation of Lerner's thesis that law, in general, might be perceived as having sacred functions, has received positive responses from civil religion theorists. Though the study of civil religion focusing on legal institutions and traditions is undeveloped, enough has been done to encourage further investigation.

Another location of American civil religion is the presidential address, with special emphasis on the rhetoric of presidents on Inauguration Day. Bellah triggered the whole discussion by

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

claiming that a civil religious dimension could be found in inaugural addresses. He analyzed President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural speech and commented on addresses by Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Johnson.

Bellah's method was to look for specific references to a deity (e.g., Almighty God, the hand of God, God's work, almighty being, providence of God), religious metaphors and images (sacred fire of liberty, invisible hand, sacrifice, chosen people, promised land), and civic virtue (struggle, sacrifice, loyalty, justice, liberty). Bellah and Conrad Cherry both suggested that four major themes can be discovered in the civil religion rhetoric of presidents: the language of patriotic sacrifice, American destiny under God, exodus from the Old to the New World, and America as an international example.

Cynthia Toolin, in a 1983 study of forty-nine inaugural addresses, tested this hypothesis and discovered ample evidence of a civil religion. Most of the addresses refer to a deity, civic virtues of duty and freedom are espoused, and numerous religious metaphors and images are taken from the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, she also discovered that the Constitution, the Revolution, and George Washington—all representing a grand past—were dominant themes. This study also revealed that the exodus and sacrifice themes were minor. The most important themes pointing to a civil religious dimension were American destiny under God and international example.

Patriotic rituals and symbols—such as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day—and various ethnic day ceremonies, such as Columbus Day, represent another type of institutional expression of civil religion. The symbol of the unfinished pyramid under the all-seeing eye of God, which appears above the phrase *novus ordo seclorum*—a new order of the age—on the Great Seal of the United States, reflects the central theme of American civil religion. God chose America for a special destiny. That symbol receives added force from the slogan In God We Trust, found on all American coins and paper currency (mandated by an act of Congress in 1955, though it had appeared on select coins since 1873). The addition of the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance by an act of Congress in 1954 is further evidence of the continuing notion that God has smiled on America.

It is no wonder that the vast majority of Americans believe that national leaders should affirm their belief in God.

One ritual, which seems to be unknown in most Western countries, is that of flag worship in America. Surveys have revealed that the majority of Americans believe the flag is sacred. The British historian Denis Brogan said the “rabbinical rules” about raising and lowering the American flag are “unknown in Britain, where most people neither know nor care, and so innocently offended Americans in England during World War II by treating Old Glory as casually as they treated the Union Jack” (*Religious Situation*, 1968, p. 359). These public symbols and rituals are just a few among the many that function to maintain and express civil religion.

The most direct and explicit expression of civil religion in America is rendered in patriotic voluntary societies and lodges. At least five kinds of organizations are identified as agencies of civic piety. First are the veterans' organizations, such as the Grand Army of the Republic (1866), the American Legion (1919), and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (1913). Second are hereditary organizations, where membership is passed down through family or ethnic ties, such as Sons of the Revolution, Daughters of the American Revolution, Colonial Dames of America, and Society of Mayflower Descendants. Third, fraternal orders, like the Masons, Odd Fellows, Elks, and Rotary, freely mix aspects of traditional religion with civil religion. Fourth, scouting groups, which have God language and patriotism commingling in the socialization process, are very important agencies for citizenship training. Finally, there are the nativist groups (among them, the American Protective Association, the Supreme Order of the Star Spangled Banner, and the Ku Klux Klan) that were hostile to certain immigrant groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In recent years, white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and various groups hostile to communism qualify as analogues to the earlier nativist groups. What is common to most of these is the belief that America is a sacred society, deserving of good citizenship and ultimate loyalty.

Sports in America and many other countries are candidates for the social and institutional expressions of civil religion. In the United States, sports used to be primarily a male activity. With

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

cultural and legal changes, sports increasingly have become a central meaning system in popular culture for men and women alike.

Hammond was the first to identify sports as a channel of civil religion, when he suggested that in America, God's will is known "through majority vote, fair play, or some such enabling rules." The greatest glory, highest honors, and rewards of satisfaction go to those who have played hardest and fairest within the rules. This promise is central not only to the ethics of American sports, but to the common faith of Americans, according to those who see sports as a social structure for the transmission of that faith.

The ritualistic expression of this ethic and belief is found in the prayer before the game, which emphasizes sportsmanship, protection from injury, and competitive excellence. A common prayer that has been used before high school football games all over the country states: "Dear God, may this be a fair game, may no one get hurt, and may the best team win. Amen."

Not all teams pray, and not all teammates who pray are true believers, but the outward piety of American sports events is remarkable. At a typical Super Bowl football game, one finds American flags, patriotic bunting, clergy prayers, the national anthem, and sometimes military jets flying in formation overhead. Going to a stadium can be like going to a high mass or political rally.

The notion of sports as a civil cult goes back to Greek antiquity, when the gods and the state were honored at the Olympic Games festivals. This classic role of sports in bringing together the civil order and the religious order continues to this day.

The best contribution to the study of sports as a civil religion comes from Michael Novak, who insists in his 1976 book *The Joy of Sports* that in addition to the emphasis on rules, fair play, and outward rituals, sports are inherently religious, driving people "godward." He sees sports as a natural religion, with liturgies, organized institutions, and disciplines that "teach religious qualities of heart and soul." Because they speak a universal language, they function to bind a diverse nation together much as do other structures of civil religion.

All of the expressions and structures of civil religion in America, when taken together, provide strong evidence that it does exist in public life, but that the claim of a clearly differentiated

and well institutionalized civil religion remains questionable. Of all the expressions or structures of civil religion, sports probably come closest to being a differentiated civic cult. But at this point in the study, it is more accurate to acknowledge the existence of civil religion as more diffused than differentiated, and to say that it finds expression in a variety of social locations in episodic fashion.

DESIRABILITY OF CIVIL RELIGION

One of the most debatable questions is: Should civil religion be regarded as desirable? The answer depends on the definition of civil religion and the ideological assumptions brought to the discussion. In a general sense, both liberal and conservative camps can be identified with a large pluralistic group in between. There are three answers to the question: yes, no, and yes-and-no.

Those who think civil religion is a good thing represent two different types in definition and attitude. When defined as the transcendent universal religion of the nation, Sidney Mead, Robert Bellah, and others applaud civil religion as an authentic and positive dimension of political society. When defined as democratic faith, devotees of John Dewey think civil religion is not only a good thing but also a necessary feature of a democratic society. These positions represent the liberal camp.

On the right are those more identified with evangelical Protestant and conservative causes, who strongly endorse civil religion when expressed in terms of a Protestant civic piety. Though they may not use the language of academicians, they do promote vigorously a form of public religion that contains many of the features of religious nationalism, American folk religion, and, of course, Protestant civic piety. Representatives of this favorable view of civil religion are members of the American Legion, the Moral Majority, and some but not all Evangelicals and members of mainline religion in America. The themes *returning to traditional values, bringing prayer back in schools, and getting back to God in our national life* are expressions of this positive view of civil religion.

The question of civil religion's desirability is answered negatively in a variety of ways. What is

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

approved by the conservatives is precisely what is denounced by the liberals. If civil religion is expressed as a common denominator, folk religion, nationalism, or Protestant piety, then the liberal camp is repelled. In like manner, when civil religion is defined as democratic faith, in John Dewey's terms, or as a religion transcending and encompassing traditional religions, as with Mead and Bellah, it is rejected as a form of liberal humanism by evangelical conservatives.

Another large pluralistic group that cannot be neatly categorized thinks civil religion is undesirable. The main charges against it are that it vitiates and trivializes traditional religions. It hurts the body politic by becoming a substitute for rational and ethical approaches to public life. And it is fundamentally idolatrous from the point of view of particular faiths.

Evangelical Protestants, such as Sen. Mark Hatfield, have opposed civil religion in no uncertain terms. In the midst of the Vietnam War, in 1973, Hatfield deplored the use of civil religion to sanctify the war effort, as though "it were spiritually ordained." He said that the God of American civil religion is a small and private deity and an "exclusive defender of the American nation." In contrast, he said, authentic faith must be in the "biblical God of justice and righteousness who is revealed in the scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ." For Hatfield, it made no difference how civil religion was defined; it was not a good thing.

Many other clergy, theologians, and lay people, from various confessional standpoints, have seen civil religion, however defined, as a competing faith to be rejected. Mary Schneider, a Catholic, comes out against civil religion, as currently defined, because of its strong Protestant coloring and link to American nativism. Drawing on Thomas Aquinas, Schneider proposes an approach to civil religion that would link it to natural law and a universal moral order, allowing for active patriotism, political loyalty, and national reverence without blending traditional Catholic faith with Americanism. She does open the way for a Catholic acceptance of civil religion by her own proposed definition.

Finally, there are holdout groups that oppose American civil religion. Most of the new religions are against civil religion, with the exception of the Unification Church. Minority religions such as the Amish, Jehovah's Witnesses,

and Hutterites would also fit into this classification. Some feminists think civil religion is just as sexist as traditional religions, and many blacks and other minorities consider civil religion another racist structure. Such groups either oppose civil religion or call for its reform.

Among those who give a yes-and-no answer to the question, Is civil religion desirable? is Martin Marty, with his balanced, appreciative, and at the same time skeptical descriptions of civil religion. Many others want to say yes to some elements and no to others. Will Herberg represents the middle dialectical position more dramatically than any of the others. For him, the normative evaluation of civil religion depends on the social role from which one speaks. As an ordinary citizen, he praises American civil religion as a "noble" religion and perhaps the best ever to appear in a mass society. As a theologian, working out of the traditional biblical faith, the claims to ultimacy of civil religion have to be absolutely rejected as idolatry. For him, the good citizen and faithful believer must live with this tension and paradox:

I . . . regard America's civil religion as a genuine religion; . . . The fact that . . . America's civil religion is congruent with the culture is no argument against it; . . . America's civil religion . . . strikes me as a noble religion, celebrating some very noble civic virtues. . . . I would regard the American Way of Life . . . the social face of America's civil religion, as probably the best way of life yet devised for a mass society. . . . So I certainly would not want to disparage America's civil religion.

("America's Civil Religion," in Richey and Jones, 1974, p. 86)

Herberg then registers a resounding no to the civil religion concept. Because Judaism and Christianity serve a jealous God who transcends and judges all human structures, claims to ultimacy in civil religion cannot be allowed: "To see America's civil religion as somehow standing above or beyond the biblical religions . . . as somehow including them and finding a place for them in its over-arching unity, is idolatry" (p. 87).

Not many scholars have been this overt in holding together civil religion and biblical faith in paradoxical tension, but it may not be wrong to assume that a host of Americans covertly are

CIVIL AND PUBLIC RELIGION

holding together traditional religion and civil religion in either tension or harmony.

While the debate about the desirability of civil religion continues, there are some scholars of American society who are still not sure there is such a thing. Some, like the historian Sydney Ahlstrom, allow that, while it may have existed once, civil religion did not survive the turbulent 1960s. Even Bellah now characterizes American civil religion as an "empty and broken shell."

What clearly has survived is the concept of civil religion and the conviction that it does describe a dimension of public life that cannot be equated with particular organized religions. Although this concept has been applied to other countries—South Africa, Mexico, Japan, and Sri Lanka, among others—the study of civil religion remains primarily an academic venture of a select group of American scholars with a focus on American history and contemporary culture.

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- [See also BIBLE IN AMERICAN CULTURE; CHURCH AND STATE; IMPACT OF PURITANISM ON AMERICAN CULTURE; THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS AND CRITIQUES OF AMERICAN SOCIETY AND CULTURE; and WAR AND PEACE.]