

Few concepts have made a quicker transition from the nation's scholarly journals to its op-ed pages than civil religion. Although the phrase has a long European pedigree, "civil religion" was given special American meaning toward the end of the 1960s, a decade that reaffirmed our political ideals even as it witnessed a deepening sense of political conflict. Civil religion seemed an idea whose time had come, a source of unifying hope in the midst of fragmentation and despair. Since then, the concept has become almost self-illustrating as its very use tends to create the reality it describes. It has become a kind of intellectual incantation on behalf of our cultural virtues, whatever our structural liabilities.

Rather than another celebration of the concept and the collectivity for which it stands, this article offers a more critical perspective. Indeed, in offering a critique of the literature concerning American civil religion, it cannot avoid a critique of contemporary America itself. The article begins by tracing the roots of civil religion as a concept, noting two quite different traditions. It then considers the evidence on behalf of a civil-religious syndrome in this country, noting its limitations. An examination of recent political developments suggests that civil religion may no longer be functioning as its more idealistic proponents have portrayed it. This leads in turn to the relationship between the civil religion and an increasingly fractured culture. It is here that the tension between what the nation ought to be and what it has become emerges with special poignance.

BACKGROUND AND CURRENT CONCEPTIONS

Like one of its principle icons, the Statue of Liberty, the American concept

of civil religion comes from France. The term itself was coined by the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He intended it to denote a constructed religion, a form of deism that would instill in citizens a love of country and a motivation to civic duty. It was to be a religion both of and for the state. Most Enlightenment thinkers predicted and applauded the demise of traditional Christian orthodoxy that was to accompany surging education, democratization, and industrialization. They considered reason the only necessary and emancipating replacement. In fact, France's First Republic even attempted to institutionalize worship of the goddess of reason. But Rousseau had realized that reason alone was insufficient to bind the masses to the state. There was still a need for religion, albeit of a new type. He described its purposes and forms in this way:

But there is a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it behoves the Sovereign to fix, not with the precision of religious dogmas, but treating them as a body of social *sentiments* without which no man can be either a good citizen or a faithful subject.

The dogmas of this civil religion should be few, clear and enunciated precisely, without either explanation or comment. The positive clauses are:—the existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent and bountiful God: the reality of the life to come: the reward of the just, and the punishment of evil-doers: the sanctity of the Social Contract and of the Laws. The negative element I would confine to one single article:—intolerance, for that belongs to the creeds which I have excluded.¹

More than a century later, in the early 1900s, another French thinker gave the

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Of Civil Religion," in *Social Contract*, ed. Ernest Barker (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 107.

Civil Religion in an Uncivil Society

By N. J. DEMERATH III and RHYS H. WILLIAMS

ABSTRACT: Civil religion denotes a religion of the nation, a nonsectarian faith that has as its sacred symbols those of the polity and national history. Recent scholars have portrayed it as a cohesive force, a national canopy of values that helps foster social and cultural integration, but this perspective may now be at odds with a complex reality. Ours is an increasingly differentiated society with the rise of group politics and subcultures. The forms of civil religion remain, but the cultural cohesion it purportedly reflects is dissolving. Civil-religious discourse has become a tool for legitimating social movements and interest-group politics. A critical examination of the current uses of civil religion must lead to a critical reanalysis of the society at large as well as the concept itself.

N. J. Demerath III is currently professor and chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Previously, he taught at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is author or coauthor of several books and articles concerning the sociology of culture, religion, and political movements.

Rhys H. Williams is a graduate student in sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His interests include politics, religion, and culture.

concept a somewhat different bent. The sociologist Emile Durkheim agreed with Rousseau that society could not be held together by reason and practical political motives alone. Yet Durkheim went further in arguing that it was absolutely essential to any social order that it have at its core the cohesion and shared values fostered by religion. After studying accounts of a traditional Australian tribe without marked differentiation between its religion and its politics, Durkheim concluded with his classic circularity: "If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion."²

Of course, Durkheim was not naive enough to believe that a large and complex nation-state could have the same type of religious system as an aboriginal tribe. His point was more subtle. A healthy society depends upon the affection and respect toward the collectivity fostered by religious sentiments and rituals. At the deepest level, religion is a basic component of any society's deep culture, its irreducibly preconscious core. But this must be continually re-enacted and reinforced:

There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and collective ideas which make its unity and personality. Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies, and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments; hence come ceremonies which do not differ from regular religious ceremonies, either in their object, the results which

2. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1912), p. 419.

they produce, or the processes employed to attain these results.³

Thus Rousseau and Durkheim produced the two classic accounts of civil religion, although their differences are critical. For Rousseau civil religion was to be constructed and imposed from the top down as an artificial source of civic virtue. For Durkheim civil religion welled up naturally from the bottom, from the very depths of the social experience itself. From this perspective, religious society and civil society were coterminous; the polity was but another extension and representation of a collectivity that was nothing if not religious at its base. Rousseau and Durkheim represented two quite different intellectual traditions in Enlightenment political philosophy and functionalist sociology. Not surprisingly, the result is a conceptual legacy in logical tension as civil religion becomes a canopy of common cultural values extended over a structurally differentiated and secularizing society. We shall return to this tension later.

Meanwhile, accounts of American civil religion have been disproportionately Durkheimian. As early as 1953, W. Lloyd Warner described the religious properties of our Memorial Day observances from the social-anthropological perspective he shared with Durkheim. Others have described the consensual residue of our Judeo-Christian heritage, including Will Herberg in his description of our much-diluted "religion in general."⁴ But surely the most provocative analysis of American civil religion

3. *Ibid.*, p. 427.

4. W. Lloyd Warner, *American Life: Dream and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

5. Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955).

came from Robert Bellah in 1967.⁵ Bellah's seminal article has spawned a considerable literature of debate, extension, and reconsideration.

Richey and Jones examined this literature and extracted five major uses or connotations of civil religion.⁶ These include folk religion, religious nationalism, democratic faith, Protestant civility, and the transcendent universalist religion of nation. While all have a certain validity, the last is the most central. This is the meaning originally stressed by Bellah and then refined in the conceptual reviews of Coleman,⁷ Gehrig,⁸ and Hammond.¹⁰ It is certainly the

6. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, 96:1-21 (Winter 1967), reprinted in R. N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). By referring to the sociological work on civil religion generally as the work by Bellah, we are masking much variation in the work of several different, creative scholars. In fact, there are several sources devoted to historical and conceptual nuances only briefly mentioned here. See Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Sidney Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); and Gail Gehrig, *American Civil Religion: An Assessment*, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Monograph Series, no. 3 (Storrs, CT: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1979). Readers interested in subtler shades of meaning are encouraged to consult these sources; we wish to settle on a more or less majority definition and then deal with the substantive issues of civil religion in the current body politic.

7. Richey and Jones, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 4-18.

8. John A. Coleman, "Civil Religion," *Sociological Analysis*, 31(2):67-77 (Summer 1970).

9. Gehrig, *American Civil Religion: An Assessment*, p. 18.

10. Phillip E. Hammond, "The Conditions for Civil Religion: A Comparison of the United States and Mexico," "The Rudimentary Forms of Civil Religion," and "Pluralism and Law in the Formation of American Civil Religion," in *Varieties of Civil Religion*, ed. R. N. Bellah and P. E. Hammond (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

meaning that is most squarely within the Durkheimian tradition, hence the one to which most sociological allegiance has been pledged.

Bellah's account of civil religion used words that come directly from Durkheim: What we have, then, from the earliest years of the republic is a *collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity*. This religion—there seems no other word for it—while not antithetical to and indeed sharing much in common with Christianity, was neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian.¹¹

For Bellah American civil religion is a self-contained religion, with its own set of sacred symbols, distinct from any particular sectarian or churchly meanings. While grounded in the Christian tradition, its symbols and meanings are uniquely American, transcending denominational or religious differences. The churches have helped to bolster civil religion, but they are not the primary guardians of its traditions. Similarly, although government and political acts and rituals are a part of the civil-religious institutional base—for example, presidential addresses, Fourth of July celebrations—the civil religion does not depend on any particular administration or political institution for its support. Bellah is explicit and adamant that American civil religion is not to be confused with national self-worship. Civil religion, being transcendent and universal, is an understanding of America's role in history and each person's role as an American citizen. Certainly it goes beyond mere nationalism by placing the nation before a God who is both Author and Judge. It also goes beyond the various folk religions investigated by

11. Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, p. 175, italics added.

Warner and others, as well as the general way of life embodied in American religion according to Herberg.

Bellah noted more recently that the crux of the civil religion issue is the "religio-political problem."¹² That is, what stance are religion and politics, faith and power, to take toward each other? In contrast to the form of power at the disposal of the state, religion draws upon an authority that transcends worldly matters. To what degree and under what conditions does religion lend an aura of legitimacy to political power, and to what extent can the state enact the shared values and moral order at the religious core?

There is another problem at the heart of civil religion. In addition to Bellah's concern over religion and politics, there is the question of religion and culture. In both cases, there is a danger of assuming relationships that are at best problematic. Indeed, another Durkheimian characteristic of the American civil-religious literature is the tendency to define a phenomenon in terms of its consequences. This often produces a near-tautology by limiting analysis to only those cases that fulfill the conditions set. For example, Gehrig draws on Bellah and others in defining our civil religion this way: "American civil religion is the religious symbol system which relates the citizen's role and American society's place in space, time, and history to the conditions of ultimate existence and meaning."¹³

But does American civil religion in fact fulfill these tasks? In seeking an answer to this critical question, we must first establish the independent existence

12. Bellah and Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion*, p. vii.

13. Gehrig, *American Civil Religion: An Assessment*, p. 18.

of a civil religion and then ask how it relates to both politics and culture in the contemporary United States.

EVIDENCES OF AN AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

Like any complex social phenomenon, civil religion may exist in different ways at different levels of a society. It may also be sought through different strategies with differing results. So far, it has been most commonly cited as a dimension of our national political ceremonies, using evidence that is part historical and part anecdotal. Warner found it in the religious tone of local Memorial Day observances,¹⁴ and Conrad Cherry has identified it in the funerals of political leaders.¹⁵ Others have commented on the invariant references to a general God—but not a sectarian Christ—in presidential addresses, Supreme Court decisions, and legislative declarations. The written words of American statesmen, politicians, and religious leaders often place the nation in a direct relationship with divinity, whether asking for its blessings or calling the body politic back to its founding values. And certainly the elevation of many political leaders to the status of quasi-saints—Washington and Jefferson—or martyrs—Lincoln and John F. Kennedy—has a distinctly religious cast.

As intuitively important as all of this is in establishing the case for an American civil religion, questions remain. One concerns the degree to which civil religion is actually experienced by individual Americans as part of their own lives

14. Warner, *American Life*.

15. Conrad Cherry, "American Sacred Ceremonies," in *American Mosaic*, ed. P. E. Hammond and Benton Johnson (New York: Random House, 1970).

CIVIL RELIGION, UNCIVIL SOCIETY

and life decisions. Work in the Bellah vein has been criticized for being too elitist and too historical while neglecting the contemporary citizen in the street and suburb. Thus, Bellah analyzes national documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the inaugural addresses of American presidents as well as the writings of various founding ancestors. There is little evidence, however, of the general public's adherence to civil-religious principles; there is no attempt to measure its degree of urgency. Perhaps this is why Bellah discerns the "transcendent universalist" ethos in his civil religion. By focusing on elite political sources, Bellah finds a prophetic theology not uncovered by Warner, Cherry, and others in their ethnographies of small-town America and its folk-religious rituals. Further, Bellah's elite perspective leads him toward a normative stance on civil religion. Rather than determine what people believe and act upon in their daily lives, he discovers what we, as a people, are called to be in the nation's best and brightest historical moments. America ought to have a civil religion of such worth and urgency; indeed, this is Bellah's overriding implication.

But Bellah is by no means alone in the vineyard of civil-religious scholarship. He has stimulated considerable activity in others, including researchers who have used questionnaires and sample surveys to examine the prevalence of civil religion at the individual level. With rare exception,¹⁶ these studies have supported the existence of an American civil religion.¹⁷ Without belaboring the

16. Michael C. Thomas and Charles C. Flippen, "American Civil Religion: An Empirical Study," *Social Forces*, 51(2):218-25 (Dec. 1972).

17. See Ronald C. Wimberley et al., "The

statistical details or the validity of the various questions developed and combined into summary indexes, several general findings are consistent and significant.

First, people's civil-religious attitudes cling together while standing apart from other church behavior and religious belief factors, indicating a syndrome somewhat distinct from sectarian/denominational religiosity. Second, civil religion does not stand so far apart as to be disqualified as a truly religious phenomenon. People who score high in other aspects of religiosity, such as church attendance and religious belief, also tend to score high here. In fact, the more conservative persons are in churchly religion, the more likely they are to score high on civil religion. While this last finding should give pause to those who identify civil religion with the liberal prophetic thrust in American history, the overall pattern is encouraging. Civil religion emerges from survey data as a genuine religious dimension, distinct from but related to traditional and conservative religious outlooks.

The relationship between civil religion and what can be called creedal or sectarian religion is critical. The case for civil religion would be damaged if either no relationship at all emerged or if the relationship was so close as to suggest that the two are one and the same. Here is a rare case in which a theory can be sustained by ambiguity, and surely there

Forces, 54(4):890-900 (June 1976); William A. Cole and P. E. Hammond, "Religious Pluralism, Legal Development and Societal Complexity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13(2):177-89 (June 1974); James A. Christenson and R. C. Wimberley, "Who Is Civil Religious?" *Sociological Analysis*, 39(1):77-83 (Spring 1978); and R. C. Wimberley, "Civil Religion and the Choice for President: Nixon in '72," *Social Forces*,

is more than enough ambiguity to suffice in the results we have summarized. But there is another problem lurking here. Any long-term cultural motif or ideology must have an institutional base to provide organized and ritualized reinforcement. If civil religion's base is not creedal religion, what is it? There are various possibilities. For example, Hammond sought to uncover the institutional roots of American civil religion in the courts and the universalistic ethos of American law. As he put it, "If civil religious ideologies are thought of as balloons I am asking who is able and willing to hold the balloon strings."¹⁸ Alas, Hammond's data suggest that Americans do not regard the law and the courts in the way he hypothesized. Whatever the potential of the legal system to be the "churches of the civil religion," it does not now function in that capacity. Meanwhile, another possible institutional base is the American political system.

POLITICS AND CIVIL RELIGION: WHO'S USING WHOM?

Like its relationship with creedal religion, civil religion's relationship with politics and government must tread a narrow line. Too distant and it is only a marginal irrelevancy; too close and it becomes an idolatrous cloak of transcendental rhetoric tossed over the pursuit of momentary ends. Bellah insisted that America's civil religion was not mere national self-worship. However, as civil religion seeks political succor, it is vulnerable to being co-opted altogether. It is important to distinguish between civil religion as discourse and as determinant. Various groups may use the

18. Hammond, "Conditions for Civil Religion," p. 44.

discourse as a way of articulating their special values and agendas. Few may be truly impelled by its deeper claims.

America is often understood not as striving to understand and follow God's will, but as the very embodiment of that will. It is no accident that the original prophetic quotation "My country, right or wrong; when right to be kept right, when wrong to be put right" was popularly shortened to only the self-congratulatory first phrase. The message was clear: my country is always right. The transcendent universalist aspect may be too challenging and too subtle to survive the bumper-sticker world of political rhetoric. Still, after originating in the Puritan vision of a moral covenant between God and civil society, it remains a latent strain in American religio-political legitimation that surfaces in the midst of crisis and charisma. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ringing words—"thank God Almighty I'm free at last"—united the message of black evangelical Protestantism with a vision of a socially and politically integrated nation; Jesse Jackson built a presidential campaign on the civil-religious values of democratic inclusion and just retribution, all in the rhythmic cadences of the pulpit; Jerry Falwell has delineated a plan of political action that assumes an omnipotent God seated in judgment over the nation. The fact that both Left and Right use a civil-religious discourse to frame their political visions may suggest universality. On the other hand, it may also mean the civil religion has become a sophisticated gloss.

Civil-religious language has long enabled Americans to use religion in defining themselves politically. It was, and is, a language decidedly Christian in tone and assumptions, but cleansed of references that are too specific or nat-

row. It was a way of certifying political morality without violating the separation of church and state and the etiquette of nonsectarian pluralism, whatever the sectarian power configuration might be. Indeed, civil-religious discourse produced a particularly American response to the religio-political problem: a culturally legitimate religion of the nation that transcended sectarian differences while justifying a social order at least partially based on those differences. The civil religion never became the civil church. But several developments have pushed the nation past the conditions that allow a truly unifying civil religion. Politically there has been an over-heralded but nonetheless real de-alignment of traditional parties and coalitions. There has occurred a growing issue awareness and group consciousness as various constituencies have begun to refashion their political identity in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, and/or a single salient issue.

In all of this, the relationship between politics and religion has taken a paradoxical turn. Richard Neuhaus has recently deplored the "naked public square" or the absence of true religious sensibilities in political decisions of moment.¹⁹ At first blush the charge seems peculiar and perhaps self-serving. Neuhaus laments the lack of input from his own former religious allegiance—liberal Protestantism—as a way of justifying the influence of his current religious community—the new conservatism. Surely few national political campaigns in recent history have been more "religionized" than those of Ronald Reagan. And yet the religious significance of the Reagan campaigns is deceptive.

19. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

Of course, to many it seems strange that religion should have played any role at all in the Reagan-Mondale contest. After all, were church and state not formally separated nearly 200 years ago? And for at least the last 100 years, has the trend not been one of increasing secularization, a process by which traditional religion of all sorts loses public power and private urgency?

One could understand Reagan's campaign if it were in the great tradition of American third-party politics—fascinating but losing appeals to small constituencies out of step with the larger electorate. But Reagan is anything but a loser. Political analysts continue to disagree on how much the Moral Majority factor contributed to his win in 1980. Meanwhile, he ran even stronger while using religion all the more in 1984. The reason may be less apparent than has met the ear.

Reagan's rhetoric has undeniable appeal for evangelicals, fundamentalists, and others whose religious commitment is the pivotal point in their lives. But these remain a minority of the electorate, and many are traditional Democrats. More critical and more surprising is Reagan's appeal to those caught up in the currents of secularization, those whose ties to religious tradition are uncomfortably weak and generally not as strong as their forebears'. This larger voting bloc is confused about the relationships between religion, morality, and politics in both their personal lives and the public arena. And who can blame them?

Issues such as prayer in the public schools, aid to parochial education, and cooperation between state and church in matters such as welfare and refugee services have bedeviled the nation's finest legal minds for years. Recent statements

of church leaders may have muddied more than clarified the waters, especially when the Catholic bishops move simultaneously to the right on abortion and to the left on nuclear freeze. In truth, church and state have never been fully separate in this country, nor have religion and politics. While there are certainly differences between Reagan's views of their inseparability and those of, say Khomeini, Kahane, or Cotton Mather, the distinctions are elusive.

In addition to confusion, secularization produces guilt. Religion is not easily neglected or shucked off in a country that has long prided itself on the paradox of great religious freedom combined with strong religious observance. There remains something primordial about religion in American culture. Even where religion has lost its compelling salience, we tend to hang on to the form if not the function. Indeed, this is partly a matter of good form, as well as continuity with generations past and a hedge against future crises not yet imaginable. In all of this, secularization breeds uneasiness and a guilt that requires expiation. Here Reagan performs a special service.

In many ways, Reagan is a prototype of the secularizing—although not fully secularized—person. With only vague denominational ties, his own religious practices are unclear and unintimidating. Some on the religious Right are unsure if he is born again. According to others, he may be the least personally religious president in recent memory, and one for whom religion could be almost entirely a matter of form without function. Of course, such things are hard to know, especially since, in Peter Berger's terms, private religious virtues are often lost amid public religious rhet-

oric.²⁰ Meanwhile Reagan's statements on religion, morality, and politics imply a syllogism that is difficult to rebut without being cast as anti-Christ. Thus, (1) religion and morality are inseparable; (2) the government—especially its current administration—is nothing if not moral; hence (3) there must be religion in government. If morality and religion are inextricable, we can demonstrate our morality by supporting religion. Conversely, a vote against religion is a sign of immorality itself.

Of course, all of these linkages are forced to the point of spuriousness. Like many political bubbles, they burst when analyzed closely. Nevertheless they add to the confusion and guilt. Even among the 60 percent of the nation who do not attend religious services regularly, there are many to whom religious rhetoric sounds reassuring, as do pro-family and other traditionalist values. Somehow symbols become more important than substance, and Reagan himself may be the very best symbol available. He won considerable support from those who disagreed with him on specific issues—for example, from the substantial numbers of young Catholic women who are pro-choice on abortion. In a secularizing America, a vote for Reagan may have become the political equivalent of attending church only on Christmas and Easter. And politicians are less likely than clergy to look gift parishioners in the mouth.

The point is not that recent presidential elections have hung in the religious balance. However affected by the religious rhetoric—either "vague beliefs firmly held" or "firm beliefs vaguely acknowledged," according to Kenneth

20. Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979).

Woodward²¹—most voters have responded more to their perceived self-interest as reflected in the consumer price index. This itself is a commentary on the decline of civil religion as a mobilizing force. Indeed, all of this suggests a quite different interpretation of politics, religion, and civil religion than has been common in the literature to date. Insofar as religion's influence is due to secularization rather than the sustained traditions of the sacred, civil religion seems to be losing both emotional depth and historical continuity.

It may help to explain why the language and discourse of civil religion have become more of a portable facade than the surface reflection of a core commitment. Without arguing that this interpretation is either definitive or exhaustive, it is worth noting that it would lead us away from Durkheim and back in the direction of Rousseau. Such movement, however, requires an examination of still one more critical relationship—namely, that between American civil religion and American culture.

CIVIL RELIGION AND A CULTURAL CENTER NOT HOLDING

One of the dangers of working in the wake of Durkheim is the tendency to blur the differences between simple societies such as his Arunta and complex societies such as our own. Thus, there has been a persistent strain toward unity and consensus in the theory of civil religion. The literature is pervaded by a tendency to assume that all cultural elements, including civil religion, are bound together; that any value that has a wide resonance in the

21. Kenneth L. Woodward, "Faith, Hope and Votes," *Newsweek*, 17 Sept. 1984, p. 34.

culture at large is part of our civil-religious heritage; and that civil religion both stems from and shores up a cultural consensus and moral unity that society requires for its very existence. But it is doubtful whether America ever existed as an ideological whole; it is implausible that any religion can now provide our secularizing society with the moral integration necessary to make civil religion a compelling national creed. Indeed, as Richard Fenn has pointed out so trenchantly, not all societies may require a religiously grounded cultural consensus at their core.²² Assuming so risks explaining too little by attempting too much. An adequate theory of civil religion must allow enough latitude and offer us enough analytic tools to make useful distinctions between, say, the Arunta, seventeenth-century New England, and twentieth-century United States.

Many proponents of a civil religion have recalled the social cohesion of Puritan New England. Although the covenanted character of these early communities is itself being called into question,²³ it is clear that greater dissensus and conflict have emerged with greater complexity over time. From the seventeenth century to the current threshold of the twenty-first, America may have come full circle from a congeries of small communities through a more or less integrated society and now back toward an uneasy coexistence of splintered groups differing as to race, ethni-

22. Richard K. Fenn, *Toward a Theory of Secularization*, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Monograph Series, no. 1 (Storrs, CT: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1978).

23. Stephen Innes, *Labor in a New Land: Economy and Society in Seventeenth Century Springfield* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

city, gender, economic position, and, of course, religion. These new structural conditions cast severe doubt on the prospects of any single civil religion. American society may be becoming too fragmented, polarized, and secular for a substantive consensus to remain at its core. In Richard Merelman's terms, American culture has become too "loosely bounded" to support a coherent canopy of meaning.²⁴ It is in this sense that the center may be giving way.

Of course, such changes have accelerated since World War II. Within the sphere of religion alone, the most significant religious development may be the rise and mainstreaming of American Catholics. In addition, there have arisen new religious movements with both Western and Eastern roots, a resurgent fundamentalism, a tendency toward religious privatization, and a variety of humanistic options. All of these have challenged the cultural dominance of a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite. Consensual religious norms legitimizing one and only one civil religion have become progressively more hollow.

Ironically, the same ferment of the 1960s that created a need for a reassuring and reunifying civil religion also eroded the conditions for its existence. Broad coalitions dissolved; interest-group and issue politics emerged; many centers replaced the center. Pluralism became contested, and the American mosaic began to resemble the fractured vision of cubist art. While civil-religious discourse continued to use the culturally resonant language of cohesion, it seemed increasingly a rhetoric without a reality.

24. Richard M. Merelman, *Making Something of Ourselves: On Culture and Politics in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Indeed, cynics began to envision such fragmentation that even the concept of America itself was becoming an abstract fantasy insofar as it referred to a unity beyond the superficial boundaries of the state. Perhaps the most saddened and disappointed of all was Robert Bellah himself. Once a source of buoyant hope, only eight years later he was lamenting our "broken covenant."²⁵

Of course, the nation has not dissolved. Indeed, when compared to such truly splintered societies as Northern Ireland or Lebanon, the United States has remained firmly united. But deepening structural and cultural divisions suggest that our recent political displays of patriotism and national pride are a form of bravado from a confused body politic rather than a true reaffirmation of civil religion itself.

The liberal political and social agendas of the 1960s were fueled by a rapidly expanding economy. Economic contraction has led to the politics of scarcity. The prophetic civil-religious currents of the civil rights movement now confront such intractable issues as affirmative action and comparable worth. Reagan himself has legitimated a me-first survival ethos while tying it to older traditional values associated with religion, the family, and economic entrepreneurship. As the white upper-middle classes have reasserted their hold on American politics and economics, the dominant discourse of civil religion has also changed. Jesse Jackson notwithstanding, it has become again a religious nationalism, justifying and legitimating the status quo. Conservative Protestantism has articulated its political demands in nationalist terms, linking the a priori

25. Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

approval of the Almighty with the actions of the American body politic. It is worth repeating how ironic it is that this most sectarian of religious communities has chosen for its political standard-bearer one of the most generically religious presidents in U.S. history. Yet, such is the potential of civil-religious discourse, regardless of the reality behind its symbols.

Once again it appears that the American tradition of civil-religious analysis may have taken the wrong French fork in moving more in the direction of Durkheim than Rousseau. Rousseau's view of a civil religion imposed from the top as a way of manipulating public loyalties may have more validity than Durkheim's more trenchant conception of a culturally grounded civil religion, tied to a deep and underlying set of shared values and moral commitments. And yet Durkheim was aware that no complex society could constantly experience the sort of perfervid civic faith that has been so often idealized. Indeed, he commented this way on the France—and Europe—of the early 1900s:

We are going through a stage of transition and moral mediocrity. The great things of the past which filled our fathers with enthusiasm do not excite the same ardour in us, either because they have come into common usage to such an extent that we are unconscious of them, or else because they no longer answer to our actual aspirations; but as yet there is nothing to replace them. . . . In a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born. . . . This is what rendered vain the attempt of Comte with the old historic souvenirs artificially revived; it is life itself, and not a dead past which can produce a living cult. The day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence, in the course of which new ideas and new formulae

are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity.²⁶

Perhaps our own day of "creative effervescence" will also come again. However, any reversal of our recent pattern of differentiation and dissensus is more likely to come about through calamity than through any collective act of spiritual will. There is nothing like disaster to temporarily breach divergence. Hence the wag's remark that an unpopular president up for reelection must be watched very carefully lest war break out with Canada.

CONCLUSION

In his thoughtful book on the social history of Western and moral philosophy, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that breakdown of the consensual *polis* as the main unit of social and cultural life has produced a fragmentation of meanings attached to moral concepts.²⁷ Moral arguments now often speak past each other because the participants are using different discourses rooted in different notions of the moral society. Moral philosophy must therefore examine the context and uses of moral concepts in political debate; the search for invariant meanings is fruitless.

So it is with civil religion. The breakdown of eighteenth-century Puritan religious consensus in the United States has been followed by a breakdown of the moral and cultural consensus that it left as legacy. As a result, discussion of the universal meanings of civil-religious tenets has become an enterprise in scho-

26. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, pp. 425-28.

27. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

lasticism. Instead, analysis should focus on the contexts and uses of civil-religious language and symbols, noting how specific groups and subcultures use versions of the civil religion to frame, articulate, and legitimate their own particular political and moral visions. As Samuel Huntington points out in his work on the "American Creed" and its political passions, Americanism is not a logically consistent intellectual ideology.²⁸ It is an emotive, affective, normative vision; it reflects both the consensus and dissensus on key values that define the nation. It can live with logical inconsistencies because at base it is illogical. In Richard Fenn's evocative terms, there has been a "trend toward abstractness" in our definitions of national purpose.²⁹ This is the result of an increasing disjunction between our culture and our structure, between our traditional systems of meaning and the existential reality of our current lives.

And yet it is not surprising that, in Phillip Hammond's phrase, "civil religions are found where they are sought."³⁰ This is not just a matter of analytic wish-fulfillment. The symbols, language, and forms do remain. As the cultural center dissolves, however, its expressions are increasingly adopted by those on the

flanks who find them useful for legitimizing programs of reform or retrenchment. As Huntington notes, the gap between the political ideals of the American creed and political reality is readily available weapon to those who challenge the status quo. This is not to say that the use of civil-religious symbolism by social movements is necessarily cynical or hypocritical. Movements must interpret and legitimate themselves to their own members, as much as to the cultural mainstream. People must be motivated to act politically; the resonant symbolism of civil religion helps serve that purpose by placing the movement's goals within the frame of legitimate political discourse. Ideally this may motivate members, neutralize opponents, and co-opt the sympathies of neutral onlookers. The forms of cultural consensus again mask the structural divergence in group and issue politics.

The relationships among civil religion, creedal religions, and culture have changed significantly in the 200 years of American national life. Rather than try to resurrect a moral and cultural cohesion as an act of faith, we need to examine it anew as an act of scholarship. The debate over whether there is any longer a civil religion is to some degree superficial. The more basic question is whether the United States is any longer a civil society. From Durkheim's standpoint, a society that is not bound by a single civil culture is not a single society at all. Perhaps we are becoming not only the United States of America but the United Societies of America, in quite a different sense.

Religion in America

By GEORGE GALLUP, Jr.

ABSTRACT: This article reviews recent survey indicators on religious life in America. Generally the surveys reveal a rising tide of religious interest. The "highly spiritually committed" are more satisfied with their lives, more tolerant of others, and more concerned with the betterment of society. Despite the high interest in religion, there are glaring inconsistencies: levels of morality and ethics remain low, hunger is a reality for many Americans, and levels of self-esteem are low for many persons.

28. Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981).

29. Richard K. Fenn, "Bellah and the New Orthodoxy," *Sociological Analysis*, 37(2):160-66 (Summer 1976).

30. Phillip E. Hammond, "The Sociology of American Civil Religion: A Bibliographic Essay," *Sociological Analysis*, 37(2):179 (Summer 1976).