

Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion?*

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The year 1987 marked the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Robert N. Bellah's provocative essay "Civil Religion in America." Because of that anniversary and because we have read less about civil religion lately, an assessment of the status of American civil religion, especially during the 1980s, is in order. This article has three purposes. The first is a bibliographic review of the American civil religion literature, with emphasis upon the 1980s. The second is an argument for four phases in, or a periodicity of, discussion about American civil religion since 1967. The third purpose is a brief explanation for the waning of discussion and the current state of American civil religion.

Thirteen years ago, Phillip Hammond attempted a "sociology of American civil religion [ACR]" by means of a bibliographic essay. He observed that "the *Daedalus* article of 1967 by sociologist Robert Bellah set off a word explosion of American civil religion" (1976:170). He shifted metaphors to declare that although "ACR is many things, . . . even a river, while taking many forms as it flows oceanward, has an identifiable current, and so it is with ACR" (1976:173).

1987 marked the twentieth anniversary of the *Daedalus* article "Civil Religion in America." Because the identifiable current of ACR, which would swell to a veritable torrent of intellectual activity and discussion, has since tapered to a trickle, it is appropriate that we assess it once again.

This discussion has a three-fold purpose. First, I wish to extend the bibliographical assessments of ACR to bring us up-to-date on the cumulative literature. Second, I will argue for a periodicity scheme of four phases in the academic discussion of ACR. Third, I will offer brief comments about why ACR has been less visible during the 1980s and the nature of its current state. In the process, I shall also argue that ACR exists in three dimensions that overlap, but must be kept distinct conceptually: (1) ACR as historical reality — what Americans have long assumed theologically about their place in the world; (2) ACR as social construction — what Bellah (1973:8)

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has claimed "existed from the moment the winter 1967 issue of *Daedalus* was printed" and subsequently "took on a life of its own"; and (3) ACR as academic discussion — what the journals and books said about ACR after 1967.

A BIBLIOGRAPHIC REVIEW OF AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION IN FOUR PHASES

Several bibliographic articles on ACR appeared early in the discussion, notably Kathan and Fuchs-Kreimer (1975), Hammond (1976), and Gehrig (1981a). Hammond provided a review essay and a list of significant books and articles, and Gehrig wrote a doctoral dissertation on ACR, revised subsequently as a monograph. The cumulative literature on ACR suggests a periodicity scheme, however, whereby the academic treatment of ACR in the past 20 years can be divided into four phases as follows:

- 1967-73: Setting the Ground Rules for ACR Discourse
- 1974-77: The Golden Age of ACR Discussion
- 1978-82: A Plateau of Evaluation and Integration of ACR
- 1983-88: The Waning of ACR Discussion

Setting the Ground Rules for ACR Discourse, 1967-73

Robert Bellah first wrote about ACR in 1965 and presented his ideas at a conference on American religion in May, 1966 (Bellah, 1976:72; 1970:168).¹ The year following its appearance in *Daedalus* (1967), Bellah's article was reprinted, along with "commentaries" by Brogan, Pfeffer, Whitney, and Hammond (Cutler, 1968:365-88). These helped formulate the ground rules of early ACR discourse. Bellah noted an immediate difficulty in his "response" to those commentaries. "It is clear that which I mean by 'civil religion in America' is not exactly what most of the commentators mean, nor do they agree one with another. The notion needs further clarification" (1968:388). Later, he added that he had had to "defend [himself] against the accusation of supporting an idolatrous worship of the American nation" (1970:168).

What Bellah had proposed was the existence of an "elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America" (1967:11), such as that articulated in John Kennedy's and Lyndon Johnson's inaugural addresses. Those speeches alluded to "a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity" that serves Americans "as a genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding," enhancing a "genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality . . . as revealed through the experience of the American people" (Bellah, 1967:8, 12). Bellah saw a present time of trial for ACR issuing from

America's role in the world, specifically in the Viet Nam War; thus he questioned whether "a major new set of symbolic forms" might emerge which "would result in American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion of the world" (1967:18).

What Bellah suspected a year later was true. That is, disagreements among those discussing ACR in that first period were dominated by three emphases — definition, description, and history (cf. Bellah, 1976a:235). Sociologists, religionists, rhetoricians, political scientists, and others all groped to define and describe ACR on the bases of their own assumptions and discipline-specific points of view. For example, Coleman (1970) identified the variety within civil religion, plus the need to look at other cultures. Cherry (1971) argued for differentiating ACR from both civil piety and denominational religion. Those themes, plus the need for empirical verification of what Bellah intimated (Thomas and Flippen, 1972), would be pursued during phase two.

Meanwhile, historians of American religion snickered, while attempting to assess the fuss over Bellah and ACR (cf. Mead, 1967). Historians suspected that ACR (whatever it might be) is "episodic" (Marty, 1976:187, 190; cf. Wilson, 1979:21), had been prominent recently during the Eisenhower Presidency, and had been duly noted by scholars who labeled it with various terms. Furthermore by the mid-1960s, it had declined noticeably. "Is it possible that here we have evidence of a familiar fact — namely, that we often study the history of something only after its demise?" (Ahlstrom, 1972b:10). Hence, an irony of the early ACR discussion, especially from the historians' perspectives, is a "cultural lag," a point Bellah readily conceded later (1976e:72; cf. 1978c:320). By contrast, the early responses "of sociologists of religion to Bellah's thesis [were] almost complete acceptance of it" (Thomas and Flippen, 1972:218).

An incident arousing further interest was the July 4, 1970 Honor America Day celebration in Washington, D.C. Later discussion centered upon the rally as an occasion "to call upon the American civil religion for integration and for support of the state" (Thomas and Flippen, 1972:200; cf. Streiker and Strober, 1972).

Once can infer, however, that ACR was not uniformly judged a significant part of the American religious scene during phase one. In an issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* on "The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion" (387), editor James Gustafson semi-apologized for not including an essay on "what sociologist Robert Bellah has called 'civil religion'" (Gustafson, 1970:ix). Among the 14 essays included, only Neuhaus (1970:128) paid much attention to ACR, arguing that "religious opposition to the [Viet Nam] war has more to do with ACR than with explicit "formulations of theology and ethics."

Bellah had ample opportunity to respond (1968, 1970, 1973) and to clarify what he had meant. He did distinguish, for example, epistemological issues from evaluative problems, asserting first that ACR is "a present fact and one we will likely contend

¹Linder and Pterand have placed the 1970 rally in the context of Richard Nixon's exploitation of "civil religion to rally support for his policies." Nixon and Billy Graham recruited Bob Hope, Hobart Lewis of *Reader's Digest*, and hotelier J. Willard Marriott to organize the rally (Linder and Pterand, 1978:108-109). They also cite the recollections of aide Jeb Magruder who, along with other Nixon aides, saw it as "a political event" in support of Nixon's Viet Nam policy (Magruder, 1974:119).

with in the future . . . in a whole series of competing and conflicting versions" (1973:14); but second, we learn from civil religion only after subjecting it to merciless criticism, while relativizing and supplementing our American tradition.

The body of literature on ACR from that first phase of seven years of setting the ground rules for the ensuing discussion of ACR was surprisingly scant. What lay ahead would be noticeably different.

The Golden Age of ACR Discussion, 1974-77

Drawing a line between 1973 and 1974 to separate phase one from phase two in the ACR discussion is an arbitrary choice, but not without support. By 1976 the *Annual Review of Sociology* provided a status report.

It is fair to say that few recent works have struck a more resonant chord (than has Bellah, 1967) within the scholarly community. . . . At this point the debate over the nature and existence of a civil religion remains very much unresolved. . . . In sum, the dispute concerning civil religion is not just a war of words or a bicentennial theme, but a potentially far-reaching conflict of basic theoretical conceptions with a capacity for reorienting the field as a whole (Demerath and Roof, 1976:29-30).

Clearly, the stakes were higher than during the first phase of discussion.

One gets a sense of those higher stakes first from the plethora of new materials on ACR — major books by a single or multiple authors, special review issues of journals, symposia, and many key articles. Beginning in 1975, journals began special issues on the topic of ACR: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1975, 14[4]); *Religious Education* (1975, 70[5]); *Forward* (1975, 1[3]); *Sociological Analysis* (1976, 37[12]); *Journal of Religion* (1976, 56[3]); *Religious Education* again (1976, 71[3]); and *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (1977, 14[4]). These issues included many fine articles, plus the early attempts at bibliographic assessment (Kathan and Fuchs-Kreimer, 1975; Hammond, 1976). Meanwhile, the *Journal of Church and State* published four major articles plus an editorial between 1974-77 in what has been the most consistent contribution by any journal throughout the ACR discussion.

More important than the sheer volume of materials on ACR were the growing diversity and significance of the issues in question. Several important books appeared, including one that may yet be the best collection of essays on ACR (Richey and Jones, 1974). Key commentators on American religion — Novak (1974), Neuhaus (1975), and Marty (1976) — made major contributions during that second phase. Moodie's analysis of the "religious dimension of the state" of South Africa was the first cross-cultural test of Bellah's "unsystematic description" of ACR (Moodie, 1975:296). Then Hart (1977) extended Bellah's use of Presidential Inaugural Addresses in his interpretation of ACR rhetoric. Religionists joined the fray and offered a variety of theologically-oriented reactions (cf. Richardson, 1974; Barnette, 1976; Osborn, 1976). One major point of contention was the nature of the relationship (positive or negative) that ACR could have to orthodox faiths and church expressions. Empirical studies also emerged, mostly favorable to the social reality of ACR (cf. Wimberley, 1976; Wimberley, Clelland, Hood, and Lipsey, 1976).

Two conceptual clarifications of the diversity within ACR were offered by Jones and Richey and by Marty. Jones and Richey "located" Bellah's ACR as one of five "interrelated meanings of civil religion" (1974:14). As had Mead (1967), Bellah referred to ACR as a "transcendent universal religion of the nation" which provides meaning, solidarity, and understanding of the American experience (Jones and Richey, 1974:15-16). Bellah's ACR contrasted with similar, but differing ideas such as civil piety or religious nationalism. Meanwhile, Marty (1974b) proposed a matrix of "two kinds of two kinds of civil religion," having both priestly or prophetic styles plus emphases on either national self-transcendence or a transcendent deity. Marty placed Bellah in the self-transcendent, prophetic cell of his 2 x 2 matrix of civil religion.

For every Hammond or Wimberley supporting Bellah, several critics took issue with his notions. Two articulate opponents during this phase were Wilson (cf. 1971, 1974) and Fenn (1974, 1976). Wilson's critiques were based on both conceptual and historical differences with Bellah's reading of a structured civil religion, and he opined that "the evidence is inadequate to sustain [Bellah's ACR] hypothesis" (Wilson, 1974:133). Fenn differed with Bellah on questions of values and on levels of individual, societal, and cultural differentiation in ACR, especially in their lively exchange in *Sociological Analysis* (1976:160-68).

In retrospect, the Bicentennial observance of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1976 stands near the apex of the significance of ACR as a social construction but also is an early indication that academic interest in ACR was not likely to increase further. Bellah had rejected earlier suggestions that ACR was declining by challenging, "If you think the civil religion is dead, just wait until 1976" (1973:14). But the Bicentennial was not as significant a civilly religious spectacle as anticipated. Although

the Fourth of July was to be the peak of the yearlong celebration. . . . the bicentennial caught many Americans not in the mood for celebration. . . . In the atmosphere of the late twentieth century, the civil millennial dream had been interrupted, if not ended. A new national consensus about the meaning of America had not been formed (Albanese, 1981:305-06).

Later Bellah looked back on the Bicentennial and the Presidential campaigns of 1976 and remarked, "In 1976 what we got was vague and listless allusions to a largely misunderstood and forgotten past, and an attitude toward the present that seems to be determined, above everything else, not to probe beneath the thinness of surfaces" (Bellah, 1978b:22).

Bellah kept the discussion alive throughout the second period, in part by emphasizing the evaluative aspects of ACR, especially in their potential for cultural conflict alongside their integrative function (1974c, 1974d, 1975a, 1975b, 1976a, 1976b, 1976c, 1976d). His 1971 Well Lectures at Hebrew Union College published as *The Broken Covenant* in 1975 demonstrate his efforts to combine cultural analysis of ACR with prophetic warning. Eventually we read, "Today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell. . . . The main drift of American society is to the edge of the abyss" (1975a:142, 158). Those who had read Bellah carefully since 1967 were not totally surprised (cf. Stauffer, 1975). Others were shocked, and at least one consequence of

The Broken Covenant was a continuation of the academic discussion of ACR in terms of Bellah's "revised position."

The volume of books, journal issues, and articles devoted to discussion of Bellah and of ACR, as well as the diversity of issues raised and the heightened interest, clearly support designating the years 1974-77 as the golden age of discussion of American civil religion.

A Plateau of Evaluation and Integration of ACR, 1978-82

Although the debate over ACR may have peaked in 1976-77, that did not mean things subsided rapidly. Indeed, during a third phase of response in 1978-82, the journals issued a variety of discussion, much of which has not been cited elsewhere in a coherent bibliographic sense.

Two small-scale examples illustrate how discussion of ACR had reached a plateau, then declined gradually, almost imperceptibly, over the several years of phase three. First, Wimberley and occasional co-author Christenson published six more articles, half in *Sociological Analysis*, usually as empirical refinements in support of ACR. These stopped in 1982. A second example of the plateau of ACR interest after 1977 was the role of the *Journal of Church and State*. In 1979-80, it published six more articles, including five in a valuable 1980 issue on ACR (cf. especially Hughes; Mount; Rice; and Warrs — all 1980). Although that JCS special issue on ACR was later than those of the golden age of phase two, it was also one of the best. Thus both Wimberley and JCS demonstrate how the phase three literature continued to explore issues raised previously in the ACR debate.

Several books made significant contributions between 1978-82, although usually expanding on earlier topics. Bellah with Hammond each contributed four essays to a book, one of whose strengths was its cross-cultural, comparative case studies of civil religion in Japan, Mexico, and Italy (Bellah and Hammond, 1980). Such contrasts of American civil religion with civil religion elsewhere were helpful. Fenn pursued his earlier differences with Bellah in a monograph on secularization (1978), arguing that "secularization makes ambiguous and problematical the symbols by which the nation expresses what is 'more than' the interaction of the state and the other parts" (Fenn, 1978:43). Cuddihy (1978) willfully misread ACR as the religion of civility, while posing that ACR is "intrusive, incivil" and "inherently subversive of the proud elitist core-claims" of traditional religious expressions (Cuddihy, 1978:2, 27).

The most significant judgment of the limitations of Bellah's ACR during phase three came from Wilson (1979) who had been a part of the ACR debate throughout the 1970s. Now Handy (1980:344) saw Wilson (1979) as an "important monograph," signalling a "decisive turn" in the ACR debate. Wilson argued that ACR must be interpreted as one possible construction of a larger public religion, rather than interpreted only on its own terms. By contrast, Bellah had been guilty from the outset of a systematic ambiguity and equivocation on whether a well-institutionalized civil religion ever existed (Wilson, 1979, esp. ch. 7). But what Wilson said was not new; he merely more fully articulated what he had been saying about ACR since 1971. Thus the golden age of ACR discussion was past; a plateau of reflection dominated the scene.

The most important theme in several books and articles from phase three was that of "integrating" the discussion of ACR into more broadly-based models and theoretical constructs. Thus Fenn (1978) located ACR within secularization theory; Markoff and Regan (1981) placed it within a theory of modernization of national states; Varelall (1983) used modernization theory to understand the relationship between ACR and liberal Catholicism; Noble (1982) tested "the fascinating evolution of Bellah's position" (1982:88) in terms of Bercovitch's (1978) characterization of the jeremiad of Puritan ministers; and Anthony and Robbins (1982) used ACR as a common conceptual thread through the "perspectives of secularization, the erosion of community, and the loss of value consensus" (1982:215-16). Conceptualizing ACR in terms of these various contexts demonstrates a maturity of interpretation not so evident in earlier discussions.

Another significant trend in the ACR literature during phase three came from political scientists looking at church-state and public policy issues besides those raised earlier in the *Journal of Church and State*. Levinson (1980) reviewed the Constitution as a "sacred" symbol in ACR. Fairbanks (1981) focused on the President in the priestly, leadership role. Bennett (1979) looked at the moral ambiguity surrounding potential abuses of ACR in public life. Gooding (1981) suggested models of ACR related to political witchhunts. And Robertson (1981) briefly noted civil religion in the context of church-state tension. Thus the political and church-state implications of ACR were examined more closely than they were earlier.

Concerns with perceived hidden agendas continued, but not with the same intensity as before. Baltzer (1979) favored "reflection and discussion of the religious and moral supports of American democracy" (1979:186) coming out of the ACR debate. Albanese (1981, 1982) was concerned with how ACR as a creed is translated into a code for Americans in their personal lives and in their understanding of how they should act nationally and internationally (1982:21-22).

Bellah wrote little about ACR during phase three. One important indication of his thinking, however, was his insight into uncertainty in the role of ACR in American life. He contrasted the historical uncertainty between emphases on America as a republic versus America as a liberal constitutional regime. "What we wanted was to have our cake and eat it too, to retain the rhetoric and spirit of a republic in the political structure of a liberal constitutional state. In so doing we blurred every essential political consideration including the place of religion in our political life" (1978b:18). The consensus within ACR in his thought of a decade earlier had given way to uncertainty and potential conflict for ACR.

But during the third phase of civil religion discussion, no new agenda items were suggested. Interest in ACR centered on integrative conceptual strategies and the political implications of ACR.

The Waning of ACR Discussion, 1983-88

By the time one observer lamented that the discussion of ACR had been "largely shaped by a distinct sociological perspective" (Little, 1984:401), in fact the majority of sociologists had withdrawn from the ACR discussion. The three major American

journals in sociology of religion — the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, the *Review of Religious Research*, and *Sociological Analysis* — virtually ceased publishing articles on ACR in 1981, with two exceptions (Toolin, 1983; Adams, 1987).

The notion of a transition from the phase three "plateau" to the phase four "waning" in the discussion of ACR is supported with a brief case study of how ACR was treated in two editions of an introductory sociology of religion text from the two phases. Although McGuire treated ACR in both editions (cf. McGuire, 1981:151-58; 1987:158-64), what is significant is the material not common to both editions. Mention in the 1981 edition of Bellah's 1974 and 1975 contributions and of empirical evidences of ACR was eliminated in 1987. Bellah's role in the social construction of ACR and description of the priestly and prophetic modes of ACR were minimized. Instead, the discussion of religion and nationalism was expanded significantly, and new material was added to support a thesis that "civil religion is clearly an element in nation building" (McGuire, 1987:161). Cross-cultural studies, including Muslim and Zionist versions of civil religion, were featured. Comparing these editions of the same text from the last two phases of the ACR discussion suggests how issues important in 1981 were no longer central in 1987. Bellah's role and the descriptive distinctions within American civil religion had given way to civil religion in its relation to other issues and new contexts.

Books analyzing civil religion during phase four continued, although typically in the comparative or integrated senses. The Liebman and Don-Yehiya (1983a) case study of Israel linked versions of national identity and religious heritage within the civil religion motif. Woocher also explained the significance of civil religion for American Jews (1985, 1986). The best book on "American" civil religion, however, was about 30% of *Civil Religion and Political Theology* (Rounner, 1986a), an edited volume from a lecture series dedicated to Bellah, who also contributed an essay — but not on ACR.

It is difficult to make thematic sense of the smaller number of articles on ACR as the literature declined since 1982. A first theme is a rhetorical-literary-metaphorical one (cf. Toolin, 1983; Eslinger, 1984; Parkinson, 1983). Toolin returned to Presidential Inaugural Addresses in pursuing their rhetorical functions. A second, more serious, theme is the development of the church-state and public policy issues raised earlier. Dean (1983), Flowers (1983), and Stahl (1984) all were concerned with legal and national emphases in ACR. Flowers, for example, concluded that Jimmy Carter had not been a representative of an "underside" of civil religion, "principally because of his belief in religious freedom" (Flowers, 1983:130). This relationship of ACR to the Presidency has been surveyed again recently (Pierard and Linder, 1988). Demerath and Williams (1985:166) suggested re-examining uses of ACR to determine "whether the United States is any longer a civil society."

Mirsky addressed specific Constitutional concerns with a helpful distinction between ACR as a secular, political phenomenon versus traditional, sacral religion (1986:1247-53), with the resulting suggestion that "courts can make better sense of existing public religion and avoid undue and constitutionally illegitimate inferences from civil religion to traditional, sacral religion" (1986:1255).

We have now proceeded well into the fourth phase of waning ACR discussion since 1983. Bellah is gone from ACR. His apologists are gone. Most of his critics are

gone. Fewer books are being written. Articles have declined in number and in the significance and intensity of their arguments. One possible exception is the ongoing political and legal concern of how ACR relates to church-state and constitutional issues.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION DISCUSSION

Since 1967, American civil religion has existed in three dimensions — as historical reality, as social construction, and as academic discussion. In the first dimension of ACR as historical reality, suggestions of when it achieved its peak of visibility and influence range from 1958, when John Kennedy was acknowledged as a serious candidate for the Presidency (Wilson, 1979:14), to the early 1960s, before a series of crises "tore at the national fiber" (Linder and Pierard, 1978:100); to as late as a "climax" of ACR about 1967 (Marry, 1976:187). Bellah favored the early 1960s, with the Viet Nam trial the "occasion," but not the cause, for the end of an era (Bellah, 1978c:319-20). Thus, "civil religion came into consciousness just when it was ceasing to exist" (Bellah, 1976c:72).

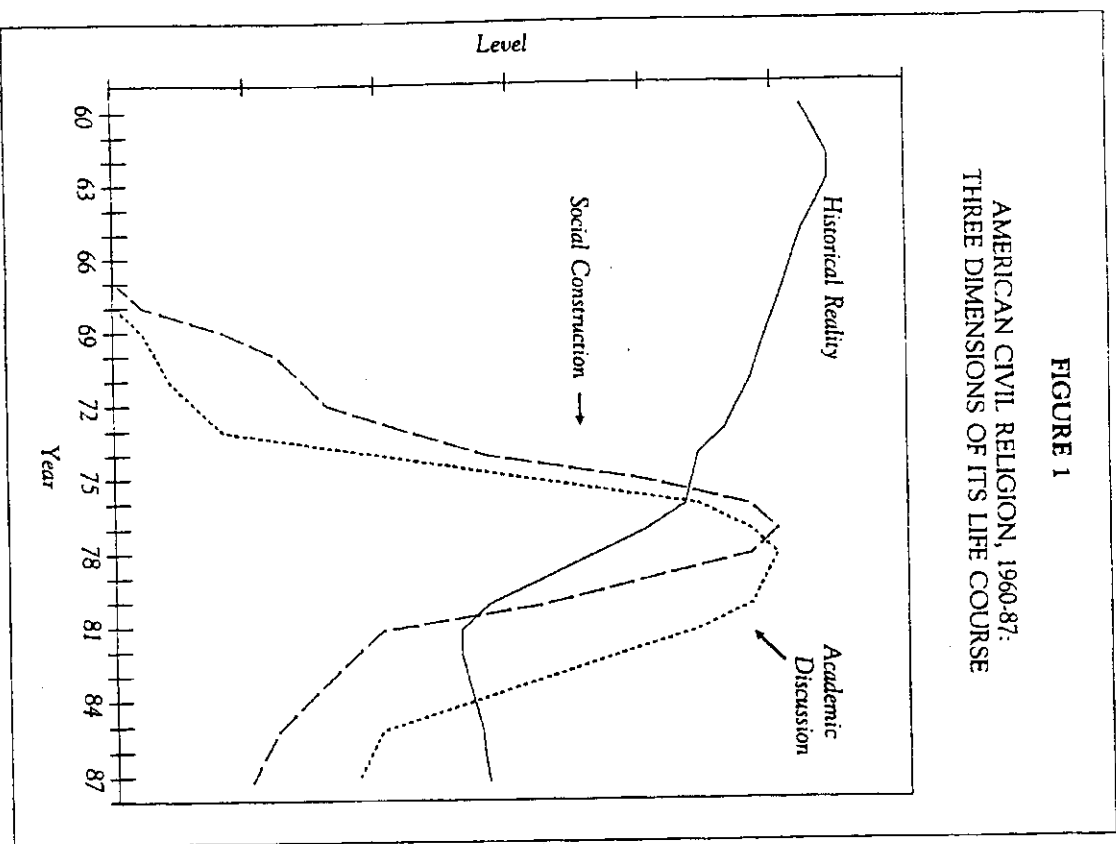
In its second dimension — ACR as a social construction existing since the 1967 *Daedalus* publication — the periodicity scheme above suggests ACR reached a peak about the time of the 1976 Bicentennial observance. Thus Bellah had allowed, "The bicentennial will inevitably be less a time for national rejoicing and self-congratulation than it will be a time of national self-questioning and repentance" (1974a:272).

In its third dimension of academic discussion, however, ACR remained a significant topic, with major books appearing through 1981 and journal articles even later. Thus, I am juxtaposing the "life course" of ACR in its three related dimensions — as historical reality, as social construction, and as academic discussion (see Figure 1). This picture of four phases among the three dimensions of ACR leads to noting several factors which contributed to the unusual life course of ACR. I will suggest briefly four influences which affected the story of ACR.

First, Robert Bellah presided over and then withdrew from the ACR discussion. If ACR "existed" from the time of the *Daedalus* article, then ACR ceased to exist after Bellah stopped writing about ACR in the late 1970s. *The Broken Covenant* (1975) represents a transition in his thought during phase two, just when the articles and books on ACR were proliferating, and indirectly it contributed to extending the discussion of Bellah's changing position. Later in the 1970s, Bellah (1978b) argued for uncertainty and conflict within ACR as depicted in the historical tensions between republicanism and liberalism, a position often overlooked in relation to his earlier views. When his book with Hammond appeared (1980), most of the essays in it were revisions of earlier originals. By then Bellah had moved on to the project which resulted in *Habits of the Heart* (1985). In one sense, Wilson (1979) appears both as a significant critique and as a conceptual obituary of ACR. Bellah had stopped writing about it, did not respond to Wilson, and does not mention ACR in *Habits*.

Second, ACR was an ambiguous social construction which was both its strength and its weakness. Wilson, for example, placed "ambiguity at the heart of Robert Bellah's original essay" (Wilson, 1979:145; cf. 1979:148). Originally, that ambiguity was a stimulus

FIGURE 1
AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION, 1960-87:
THREE DIMENSIONS OF ITS LIFE COURSE



to provide conceptual clarity, empirical support, and reasoned critique. But eventually, responses shifted in intonation from, "What is Bellah writing about?" to a more frustrating "What is Bellah writing about?" For example, apparently Bellah wrote, "I do not think the American civil religion is dead or dying" (1973:19) about two years after saying in the 1971 Well Lectures, "American civil religion is an empty and broken shell" (1975:142). But the perceived need to define and clarify with consistency even-

tually led to doubts about whether clarity, precision, and consensus were possible.

In another sense, ACR in its third dimension was a victim of its own success. ACR held our attention for nearly 15 years, as we examined it with great passion and from a host of perspectives. Eventually, we exhausted what could be said about it, or at least reached a point of diminishing returns in the discussion. Once we passed July 4, 1976, and realized we could get along without ACR, less urgency remained for keeping it on our agenda.

Third, we did not lose sight of ACR by 1987 as much as we reordered its place as a topic of academic priority. ACR was re-located among newer theoretical and integrative interpretations during phases three and four. Also, because academics work in a zero-sum setting, new demands for scarce resources arose, and ACR faded from view in part because new concerns crowded it out. ACR is still a part of academic discourse, but it occupies a lower priority among teaching and research interests.

Finally, ACR faded from our vision in part because it never affected the discipline of sociology in a broadly-based, significant sense. To my knowledge, the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review* have not published a single article on ACR since 1967. Among the "second level" of general, sociological journals, only *Social Forces* and *Sociological Quarterly* paid scant attention, and Wimberley et al. (1976, 1980) were as responsible as anyone for that. The point is that social scientists interested in religion tended merely to talk among themselves about ACR, for whatever reasons, including political ones. Interest in American civil religion, at least as measured by what was published in major journals after 1967, did not capture a sufficiently broad base of academic, sociological interest. When discussions of ACR waned among those in the sub-disciplines of religion and social science, it waned!

Last one overstate the case for a waning of the academic discussion of ACR during the 1980s, a note of caution is appropriate. In reviewing Bellah's thought and the various responses, one must place a possible "rise, plateau, decline" motif within the total periodicity scheme of the three dimensions of ACR. That is, any shifts in reaction to Bellah were elicited in part by a transition in his position from a consensus model of civil religion toward one characterized by critique and conflict. One way in which the academic discussion of ACR responded to ACR as social construction and as historical reality was to look more evaluatively, cross-culturally, and politically at the implications of civil religion, although those responses eventually declined in books or academic journals as well.

If we return to the historian's premise that civil religion is episodic (Marty, 1976:187; Wilson, 1979:21), then juxtaposing a rise and fall motif within a periodicity scheme provides a sense of the status of ACR twenty years after Bellah. Focusing on the first dimension of ACR as historical reality suggests that ACR was at a low ebb in the late 1970s, during the latter years of the Carter Presidency. "Carter's failure as a political leader was, in part, public rejection of his civil religion. . . . They turned away from Carter's prophetic view of power to Reagan's politics of nostalgia for the bygone America" (Pletard and Linder, 1988:255). On the one hand, Carter was too overtly sectarian in his religious pronouncements to be acceptable as a spokesperson for ACR; on the other hand, when he did invoke the rhetoric of ACR, he sounded too prophetic and so was rejected as a "modern civil religion prophet. . . . without honor in his own country" (Pletard and Linder, 1988:256).

Following Carter, Ronald Reagan offered a return to a conservative, priestly ACR reminiscent of that of a generation earlier. His penchant for ACR rhetoric (cf. Tipton, 1984; Adams, 1987; Pieterd and Linder, 1988) was reinforced by events such as the Statue of Liberty celebration in 1986 and the televised testimony of Oliver North in 1987, that reminded us that ACR has not disappeared, but reemerged episodically, in the 1980s.

Yet, as Wuthnow argues (1988a, 1988b), two ACR visions compete for our attention and may never be reconciled. Just as Marty (1974b) distinguished priestly from prophetic civil religion, and as Bellah (1978b) allowed that ACR has different relationships to the republican and liberal heritages in America, so Wuthnow suggests that in reality, "Two visions [of ACR] are fundamentally at odds, . . . divided along a fracture line long apparent in discussions of civil religion" (1988a:398). These two visions are theological opposites and parallel those of priest and prophet, or republican and liberal. As such, they "correspond in a general way with the ambivalent character of the state in American society" (Wuthnow, 1988a:399).

These two theologically-based versions of ACR — one conservative, one liberal — have, by virtue of their very tendency to dispute one another, become less capable of providing the broad, consensual underpinnings of societal legitimation that have usually been associated with the idea of civil religion" (Wuthnow, 1988b:266). While the conservative version of ACR fostering American identity has enjoyed greater episodic visibility recently, a persisting liberal desire to associate America with a broader vision of all humanity exists in tension with that view. Thus two visions of America persist, and they are remarkably similar to those Bellah (1967) suggested originally — one emphasizing the uniqueness of American experience and the other reinterpreting that experience in international terms.

CONCLUSION

American civil religion since Bellah (1967) has displayed an unusual life course. It can be conceptualized most adequately in terms of three distinct, but related, dimensions varying through four phases during the past 20 years. As a social construction brought into existence by Robert Bellah, ACR faded along with memories of the 1976 Bicentennial observance. Subsequently, as a topic of intense academic discussion, ACR nearly disappeared from the literature, was crowded aside by more pressing concerns, or was reinterpreted in terms of alternative conceptual schemes.

As historical reality, however, ACR has been resilient, episodic, and dualistic. After it declined in the 1970s, it reemerged in the 1980s. It continues to offer more than one vision of American history and experience that Americans never may perceive with a single eye. Hammond was right: ACR is a river with an identifiable current, but with more than one form.

This list of references is selected in that it does not attempt a comprehensive citation of all the literature on American civil religion. Consult Riehey and Jones (1974), Kahhan and Fuchs-Kretmer (1975), Hammond (1976), Wilson (1979), Gehrig (1981a), and Menendez (1985) as additional sources. Here are the significant sources from phases one and two (1967-77), plus as many relevant sources as possible from phases three and four (1977-89). Articles from popular magazines generally are not included. For convenience, citations are listed according to the periodicity scheme from the article above. Some authors appear in more than one phase.

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Comment

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I appreciate the careful review of the civil religion literature that James Mathisen has given us. I think his general picture of "what happened" is accurate, at least from my perspective. I do, however, have a few questions and comments.

It is accurate to say that I wrote the 1967 *Dialectic* article under some duress. I had no idea that it would stimulate the controversy and elaboration that subsequently developed. I had to give myself a quick course in American studies in order to respond to the many requests that the article generated. I was particularly dismayed by the strong negative reaction. The argument of the article seemed obvious to me. It is the sort of thing any Durkheimian would have said. I still think that is the case. I have never recanted my position on civil religion.

In retrospect, however, it appears that giving the phenomenon the name I did caused an unnecessary reification and then stimulated a negative overreaction. It is for that reason that I have stopped using the term "civil religion." I grew tired of arguing against those for whom civil religion means the idolatrous worship of the state, still the commonest meaning of the term. I also grew weary of the whole definitional debate, since I was always interested in the substantive issues, not in definitions.

Habits of the Heart is very much concerned with the same substantive issues as my writings on civil religion. Mercifully, I have been spared the irrelevant arguments about civil religion in comments on *Habits*, which confirms to me that I was right to drop the term.

Mathisen seems to believe that I started out thinking of civil religion as integrative and only with *The Broken Covenant* began to emphasize its critical role. But the 1967 article was deeply critical. It was an effort to argue that the civil religion required opposition to the Vietnam War, not support for it. I do not see any change over time on the consensus/conflict axis in my analysis of civil religion.

Finally let me say that Figure 1 is charming but bizarre. Mathisen's "Historical Reality" is itself his own "Social Construction" of civil religion. Any claim to a privileged access to "reality" seems to me quite unfounded. In any case the religio-political problem, as I referred to it in the introduction to *Varieties of Civil Religion*, will not go away, whether we use the term "civil religion" in thinking about it or not.

Reply

James A. Mathisen

Having Robert Bellah re-enter the conversation on American civil religion is both a pleasure and an affirmation, especially to those of us who read *Habits* and were puzzled over the omission of "civil religion" from that discussion. I agree that the substantive issues were nearly the same in 1985 as they had been in 1967, even if the terms changed. Perhaps what Bellah depicts is an era of American religion in terms of "civil religion to Shellatism."

I have two brief observations about Professor Bellah's response to my review of what happened to American civil religion. First, I did not intend to suggest that Bellah had recanted of his views on civil religion. I do assert, however, that as one reads him over a thirteen-year period, two transitions occur: One is from an emphasis on historical description to that of a normative critique of ACR; the other is from an ACR characterized by consensus to that of pluralism and conflict. The emphases are not the same in *Varieties* as in the original article.

Second, I would not have thought of juxtaposing adjectives such as "charming but bizarre" to depict my Figure 1. Again, I did not intend my own social construction, nor a claim to privileged access to reality. Rather, what Bellah calls "the religious political problem," I would suggest is the historical reality of ACR still with us. Historians identified it as part of the American religious scene in the 1950s, and it is distinctive conceptually from what Bellah brought into existence in 1967. Bellah is correct: The problem remains with us, regardless of the terms in vogue.