

Forum

As a regular feature of *Religion and American Culture*, the editors invite scholars to comment from different perspectives upon an issue or a problem central to the study of religion in its American context. This FORUM format is designed to foster the cross-disciplinary study of religion and American culture and to bring to the readers of the journal the latest thoughts of scholars on timely, substantial topics. Contributors to the FORUM are asked to present brief essays or "thought pieces" instead of carefully documented articles.

American Civil Religion Revisited

The term "civil religion" has long constituted part of the vocabulary used to describe the role of religion in the civic dimensions of Western, specifically American, culture. With the publication in 1967 of Robert Bellah's essay "Civil Religion in America," however, the phrase attained a new and widespread currency among scholars and the larger public. Bellah's essay also spawned countless critical responses, extending analyses, and cross-cultural comparisons. Current discussions of civil religion and American culture seldom fail to invoke the idea of a civil religion or Bellah's formulation of the idea (even though Bellah himself no longer uses the term).

The editors of *Religion and American Culture* believe that it is time to take stock of the concept of American civil religion a quarter of a century later. We have invited four scholars to contribute to this FORUM by reflecting on: (1) the possible continuing utility of Bellah's formulation of the concept for understanding American religion; (2) events between 1967 and the present that, in the authors' judgment, alter, challenge, or reinforce Bellah's way of framing the concept; and (3) how the idea of an American civil religion might be employed, perhaps with modifications, in future teaching and research in the fields that comprise the study of religion in America.

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I first became interested in the American civil religion as a graduate student in the late 1950's. The Warren Court had embarked on the

activist course that dominated that institution for a number of years, attempting to bring our society closer to the ideals embedded in the U.S. Constitution. Many were thrilled as well as edified. The major cries of anguish ("Impeach Earl Warren") came from "curdled indignants" who were antidemocratic in spirit and, therefore, easily dismissed. The cheerleading was headed by such persons as Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*, whose coverage of the Supreme Court helped us understand the powerful moral role the judicial system was playing in our lives. Of course, folk wisdom typically had seen churches playing that role, so I began to wonder . . .

Churches clearly were not the authoritative voice that courts were, whatever the case may have been. I argued along these lines in my 1960 dissertation and developed the argument further in a 1963 article, "Religion and the 'Informing' of Culture," in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. The term I used then was "civic religion," but when Bellah's *Daedalus* essay came along a few years later, I knew exactly what he meant by civic religion.

Hardly anybody else did, however. Or so it seemed. A flurry of civil religion studies followed; civil religion (along with new religious movements) became a major research topic in the sociology of religion for the next decade. But little of an accumulative nature resulted. Historians and other religion scholars were equally confused and, therefore, largely unproductive in the sphere. Indeed, much ink was spilled over what civil religion is, even whether it exists. Since we published our collection of essays (*Varieties of Civil Religion*) in 1980, neither Bellah nor I have made much use of the term. I now prefer "legitimizing myth," not because its ontological status is clearer than the term "civil religion," but because "legitimizing myth" invites the question "How do you understand it?" rather than "Does it exist?" So, after about 1980, research and writing on civil religion declined, and a first explanation for that decline might be the conceptual fog that has surrounded it from the beginning. Bellah's anguished complaint that he had not been talking about the idolatrous worship of the state is but one despairing response to this fog.

A second challenge to the civil religion concept as Bellah presented it came from "established" religion. Misguided, perhaps, by the temporary popularity of neoorthodoxy, many theologians and church leaders were prepared to look upon anything called civil religion as mere "culture religion" and, therefore, necessarily idolatrous. Will Herberg led the way here, but many others also conceived of "authentic" religion as necessarily putting "Christ above culture." Thus, any notion of a "civil" religion—a religion that, as Bellah put it, "actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches"—was anathema. This kind of suspicion (perhaps "incredulity" is better) appeared well before 1967, to be sure, but I

believe it helped shape the response that civil religion received, especially from those most disposed to take religion seriously.

A third source of trouble for the concept of civil religion at the time of its rebirth in 1967 was the quagmire created by a war in Vietnam and the correlative decline of a civil rights movement very much inspired by and reflective of the American civil religion. A roster of blameworthy is available here: people such as Lyndon Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, H. Rap Brown, and Richard Nixon, not to mention Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, and James Earl Ray. Whatever the combination of causes, however, a disillusionment had set in among Americans by the late sixties that made any nation-centered religion suspect. Bellah, of course, called the period a "third time of trial," invoking a prophetic, judgmental version of the American civil religion. But few heard *that* message. Instead, much as President Carter discovered a decade later when he called attention to America's "malaise" (rumor has it that Bellah had a hand in the preparation of that speech at Camp David), Americans preferred not to be judged; they voted into office a civil religious adolescent. Tocqueville had warned that democracy—unless bridled by self-interest *rightly* understood—leads to self-absorbed social atoms, concerned chiefly to use law and order to protect what is theirs. How likely is an appeal to "republican virtue" going to sound to such a people? How likely, similarly, will such a people be drawn to a perspective that declares them selfish and their leaders corrupt?

These three explanations for the failure of the civil religion concept to take root and flourish as an academic endeavor are quite straightforward. Weight cannot be put on the importance of each, and one or another may have little weight at all, but at least they are understandable and readily identified.

Two more explanations, a bit more complex, however, can be offered. They, too, have challenged the anchoring of civil religion in academic waters. One—the difficulty of studying civil religion via survey research—is technical. The other—debate over the ontological status of civil religion—is philosophical. We take these up in sequence and at some greater length.

The positive dogmas of a civil religion, Rousseau told us, need to be simple and few in number: "The existence of a powerful, wise, and benevolent Divinity, who foresees and provides the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws." The only negative dogma, he said, is "intolerance."

Americans would seem likely candidates to be devotees of this kind of civil religion. Belief in God is nearly universal (94 percent). Seventy-one percent believe "there is a Heaven where people who had led

good lives are eternally rewarded." More than eight in ten (84 percent) agree that "Depending on how much strength and character a person has, he can pretty well control what happens to him." Moreover, almost as widespread (79 percent) is the conviction that "there are clear guidelines about what's good and evil that apply to everyone regardless of the situation." As for the negative dogma, 81 percent agree that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues." (These figures are from various Gallup polls.)

Perhaps more significant, these "common denominator" religious items elicit far more agreement than religious items with any sectarian flavor. This is important because a civil religion must to some extent be independent of churches and synagogues; it must, so to speak, provide independent access to the transcendent, and the Gallup data just reviewed suggest that this condition is met in the American case. But a civil religion must also be independent of the ruling regime. That is to say, the society as an agency of the transcendent must be seen as somehow "above" the government in power and, thus, be capable of judging the regime in terms of the civil religion.

It is with respect to this second kind of independence that the empirical—especially the quantitative—study of American civil religion has stumbled. How can questions be framed that would reveal whether Americans really believe their nation to be God's agent, a beacon to all nations, and to be judged accordingly? The answer appears to be that such questions cannot be asked without being contaminated by current events. Thus, some may want flag-burning declared unconstitutional because the flag is sacred, while others may burn the flag in protest because the flag is sacred. But probing that subtlety is difficult, if not impossible, at least using survey research. Bellah has routinely rejected such efforts as irrelevant to at least *his* discussion of the American civil religion. Correlatively, surveys have generally yielded findings quite at odds with predictions drawn from theoretical discussions of the American civil religion (leading, among other things, to the useful distinction between "prophetic" and "priestly" civil religion, which helped some but not enough). This anomalous situation has no doubt inhibited rather than advanced the scholarly conversation about the topic. We are left with ample evidence that Americans are indeed "religious," but how much of that religiousness is civil religious remains unclear.

A final challenge to civil religion scholarship goes by various labels: multiculturalism, poststructuralism, neo-Marxism, to name but a few. To discuss this challenge is, thus, to invoke a great range of issues and a virtually unlimited literature bearing on the topic. I raise it here not in the belief that clarity and resolution can be reached in a few paragraphs, but because this challenge is, I think, the one that most profoundly disturbs critics of Bellah's formulation of the American civil

religion. It is the challenge he has devoted most of his rebuttal time to, the one with respect to which his passion has been most evident. Briefly, it is the challenge, "Is the American civil religion TRUE?" Bellah (and a few others) often appear to be true believers, a posture that some challengers cannot abide. In my view, the controversy is real but misplaced.

Sociologists of knowledge have long understood that cultural products, including religious products, are of human creation. They have long understood also that, while all such products are malleable, all are not equally so. Thus, what passes for good taste in food, clothing, or art may change relatively quickly, whereas scientific knowledge is relatively constant. Change goes on in science, of course, but more often than not it adds to, rather than replaces, the knowledge preceding it. Law, as Karl Marx himself noted, has much the same character as science in this regard. Religious knowledge, it might be conceded, does not resemble science so much as it does taste.

What accounts for this difference in malleability?

One answer surely is found in the "engineering" potential of a body of knowledge. We know (or at least *believe* we know) certain things are true in science because we can, with that knowledge, build bridges, fly airplanes, etc. Moreover, by demonstrating concretely this engineering potential, science can more readily achieve widespread agreement that its claims are true. New knowledge helps us build better bridges, but not by declaring the older bridge-building knowledge to be false; it is merely less adequate.

With ultimate salvation as its primary goal, religion has relatively little engineering potential, and what it does have is difficult to demonstrate concretely. Thus, religious agreement must be achieved through early socialization, coercion, or trust in others' testimony. But the American *civil* religion resembles "religion" in this regard less than it resembles law and science. It is relatively doctrine-less, for example, permitting more agreement than is generally possible in religions. More important, civil religion has some engineering potential because it is a religion not of salvation but of the good society. "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" is the goal identified in the Declaration of Independence, derived from "Nature's God" and "the Laws of Nature," among which is the "self-evident truth" that "all men are created equal." The middle two-thirds of the Declaration is an indictment of King George III for violating such laws of nature, i.e., for failing to engineer the good society. A few years later, the Constitution elaborated on the characteristics of the "more perfect Union": establish justice, insure tranquillity, etc.

Granted, this project is less concrete than building a bridge, but it does have demonstrable qualities. Indeed, the social sciences grew out of Enlightenment thought precisely to discover what keeps life from

being nasty, brutish, and short. And it is no accident that the founders of the American civil religion were much influenced by those Enlightenment thinkers who touted "natural" religion, by which they meant very much the credo Rousseau advocated, the same credo that we saw above is widely held by Americans. Is this credo TRUE? Instead of answering either "yes" or "no," suppose we alter the question. Do laws govern social relationships? Do these laws exist independent of people's knowledge of them? Is it possible, nonetheless, for people to discern these laws, even as their knowledge is malleable and, thus, changes with time? Did the persons who shaped the United States and wrote its foundational documents have such discernment? Might governments that recognize equality of persons, acknowledge the existence of inalienable rights, and take on the tasks of administering justice and insuring tranquility be governments that govern best as measured by social harmony?

I have just briefly identified what might better be called America's "legitimizing myth" rather than its "civil religion." That is because it is not something we *believe* so much as something we *understand* in some fashion. Even persons who deny the reality of any laws governing social relationships have to admit that people generally behave as if such laws exist. Likewise, persons firmly convinced of the reality of such laws have to admit that, whatever those laws' ontological status, our knowledge of them changes. Therefore, as I said at the outset of this essay, I prefer the question, "How do you understand the American legitimizing myth?" over the question "Does an American civil religion exist?"

The one place where the issue as I have framed it is regularly addressed is in jurisprudence and constitutional law. Fundamental to that enterprise, for one school of thought, at least, is the question of how "natural" the laws of human manufacture are. That is, how correctly have Constitution writers and lawmakers discerned the "real" laws that govern social relationships, and, thus, how closely do enacted laws resemble moral laws? Writers in this field do not regard themselves as theologians, of course, and "religion" seldom appears in their analyses. It is the nature of the good society, not the nature of God, that occupies them. As was mentioned above, however, discussions of civil religion are likewise largely devoid of theological doctrine.

It is surprising, therefore, that civil religion analysts and legal scholars have not made common cause, a goal I saw as worthy in my 1963 article and a direction I have gone several times since. To my knowledge, however, few other efforts have been made by social scientists of civil religion to probe the area of the law. Similarly, few jurisprudential writers have taken up the civil religion issue. Of course, before the emergence of the modern civil religion debate was Lon L. Fuller's

The Morality of Law (1964), a seminal analysis showing how religion, morality, and law intersect. More recently has appeared Sanford Levinson's *Constitutional Faith* (1988), a book equally capable of contributing to the conversation about civil religion. However, as I said in a review essay of that book ("Constitutional Faith, Legitimizing Myth, Civil Religion" in *Law and Social Inquiry*, Spring 1989), the concept "civil religion" may now obscure more than it illuminates. Oddly, Levinson claims to believe that "no necessary connection" exists between law and morality, but I think his book demonstrates eloquently their inextricable unity. Laws and the courts are not just entangled in particular religio-moral issues; in a religiously plural society like the United States, they are also a major arena for airing transcendental issues. By whatever label it is called, the stuff of civil religion can be found there.

AMANDA PORTERFIELD

I find the term "civil religion" especially useful for discussing such things as Lyman Beecher's *Plea for the West*, the Custer memorial at the Little Bighorn, commercials for the National Rifle Association, and air shows on Memorial Day. Robert Bellah would consider these perversions or, at best, low forms of civil religion, and he might reiterate his dismay at historians of American religion who persist in associating the term with political, moral, and military chauvinism. He would rather have us associate civil religion with the republican virtues of enlightened, activist citizenship and with the commitments to social egalitarianism expressed in the Declaration of Independence and in our most eloquent presidential addresses. These virtues and commitments are among the greatest treasures of our inheritance as citizens of the United States, and appreciative, widespread understanding of them should be a national priority. But, in my opinion, to treat them as aspects of a religion that can be analyzed like "any other religion," as Bellah urged us to do in his famous essay of 1967, is to overlook the tension in which these virtues and commitments exist with respect to religion. Such treatment also overlooks the principles on which these virtues and commitments rest.

I take these principles, and their importance, to be acknowledged in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which divests the federal government of any religious authority and affirms its obligation to protect the right of individuals to express whatever religious beliefs they hold. In its prohibition of religious establishment and guarantee of religious freedom, the First Amendment presumes that responsible citizenship derives from religious freedom, which in turn is contingent on a secular state. This set of presumptions has contributed to the development of a diversified society in America in which the

absence of religious requirements for engaging in discussions of law and social policy accommodates participants from a wide variety of religious backgrounds.

A defense of this arrangement was outlined by James Madison in his "Memorial and Remonstrance" of 1785, which provided much of the conceptual justification for the First Amendment. Madison identified religious freedom as the most fundamental of all human rights; the state could "sweep away all our fundamental rights," Madison argued, including freedom of the press, trial by jury, and the right to vote, if it did not "leave this particular right untouched and sacred." But religious liberty did not imply antinomianism, Emersonian mysticism, or Laschian narcissism, and it was more than the absence of religious repression. Religious liberty laid responsibility for defining and pursuing religion on individuals and thereby made room for individuals to pursue the social responsibilities they associated with religion without having to conform to an overarching standard of religious belief that excluded a wide range of religious expressions from consideration as resources for public life. Hoping to avoid the inhibition of overarching responsibility that is associated with the establishment of overarching religious standards, Madison argued that it was "the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him."

Madison was under no illusion that religious freedom would guarantee moral virtue or responsible citizenship. He was aware that it would often lead to social disorder. But he also believed that the suppression of religious freedom was divisive, ultimately ineffective, and hereby conducive to disrespect for law. All in all, the suppression of religious liberty "slacken(ed) the bands of Society"; moral virtue and responsible citizenship could not flourish without religious freedom or the divestment of religious authority from the state that religious freedom required.

While we are all much indebted to Bellah for bringing the important issue of civil religion into our discussions, some confusion might have been avoided if the conflict between his concept of civil religion and arguments for the contingency of religious freedom on a secular state had been more clearly defined. Bellah referred to this confusion and the bad feeling it generated in his recent introduction to *The Broken Covenant* (1991). There he described how his frustration grew over the years as he watched "the whole issue" of civil religion "bogging down into arguments over definition." More specifically, he reported that "What was particularly distressing to me was the almost inveterate tendency in some quarters to identify what I called civil religion with the idolatrous worship of the state." But in his use of the term "idolatrous" to describe civil religions he considered bad, Bellah introduced theolog-

ical principles that he presumed overarched the state and the religions it protected. One way of pursuing the discussion of civil religion further is to appreciate the difference between Bellah's assumption of such overarching theological principles and the Madisonian argument linking the absence of such principles with the exercise of religious responsibility among citizens.

In its appeal to an overarching set of theological principles, Bellah's concept of civil religion can be seen as a vestige of the de facto religious establishment supported by U.S. courts throughout the nineteenth century. This de facto establishment avoided state support of any particular church, while at the same time it supported a set of religious beliefs on which a particular notion of American society rested. For example, Lyman Beecher expected courts to support the patriarchal Anglo-Protestant values on which his concept of American society rested and to recognize the moral inferiority of Catholics and "infidels." Similarly, Native Americans were schooled for U.S. citizenship by teachers who punished them for speaking their own languages. And the Supreme Court outlawed Mormon polygamy in 1879 on the grounds that society was based on heterosexual, monogamous marriage. As these examples suggest, religious loyalty to a particular concept of American society had the same chilling effect on the expression of religious diversity and its potential for nurturing responsible citizenship as the investment of religious authority in the state. By excluding or devaluing Catholics, Mormons, Native Americans, African Americans, and women of all cultures, the de facto establishment of religion inhibited these groups from the full exercise of U.S. citizenship.

This is not to imply that normative religious judgments have no place in American life; quite the contrary. But normative religious judgments made by spokespersons for particular religions function rather differently than normative religious judgments made by spokespersons for civil religion or de facto religious establishments. It is one thing for American Jews to think of American Christians as Gentiles, for American Christians to think of American Jews as unconverted, or for American Muslims to think of both as infidels; but it is quite another thing for any of them to think of the others as un-American. When public life becomes a domain of religious contention, as it often has in America, the people with the most power end up defining religious values for all and thereby alienating a wide cross section of American people who might otherwise participate vigorously in public life.

In identifying Bellah's concept of civil religion as a vestige of the de facto religious establishment of the nineteenth century, it is important to note that its most direct influence is on the study of religion rather than its practice. The effects, however, are still real; by appealing to a set of overarching religious values, Bellah's concept of civil religion

encourages us to make presumptive religious judgments about what it means to be an American. Yet, it is precisely the restraint from making such judgments that allows us to see the contributions religious diversity in America has made to social equality and to social activism. This is not to claim the possibility of some perfect objectivity for studying religion, civil or otherwise, or to discourage analysis of either the prosocial or antisocial implications of particular religious beliefs. Rather, it is to commend restraint among scholars of religious studies from introducing religious principles to define American identity. Such efforts involve the selection of one set of beliefs as a standard for the rest and raise the question of how one might be qualified to make such a judgment.

Bellah's reliance on religious judgments about who best represents America raises questions about the unity of civil religion in America as well as its inclusiveness. How does Lyman Beecher's civil religion relate to Bellah's concept, and how do each of them relate to the civil religion of Orestes Brownson? If Bellah allies his concept of civil religion with some of the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, how are we to understand the important differences between those speeches of Lincoln's and the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., or of Marilyn Quayle? The few points of agreement we might identify among the civil religions of these individuals would water down their beliefs past recognition and fail to constitute a phenomenon with anything close to the strength, vigor, and complexity of the religions with which we are familiar in America. Thus, Bellah offers a pale abstraction of the relationship between religion and public life that overlooks the great variety of religious visions of America that have sprung up here and neglects the contributions to American life and love of country that have characterized many particular religious traditions.

Bellah's excerpts from addresses by Lincoln, Kennedy, and Johnson certainly qualify as religious utterances; they refer to God's providential watch over America and call citizens to renew their commitment to social equality under that watch. But these historic speeches may have been unattractive to Americans who invoked God to justify the very inequalities that Lincoln, Kennedy, and Johnson spoke against. For other Americans, the same speeches have stirred commitment to ideals of social justice that are nurtured by various religious traditions. But the conceptions of God involved in these commitments to social justice are so diverse, as are the religious rituals that feed those conceptions, that it seems more accurate to speak of a concurrence of various religious feelings around an important speech than of a civil religion distinct from these. Similarly, the reference to God in the Declaration of Independence is better understood as an interpretive summary of beliefs about the divine origin of human equality held by a great variety of American religious people rather than as the centerpiece of a holistic

religious system. This is to deny neither the significance of the Declaration for U.S. citizens or for people of other nations nor its theological aspect, but rather to emphasize the plurality of religious beliefs it accommodates and the causal relationship between its lack of religious specificity and its inclusiveness.

It is equally important to admit that ideals of social equality do not require assent to any religious belief. Indeed, the First Amendment's prohibition of religious establishment has contributed, over time, to the creation of an impressive body of secular legislation and social policy with respect to the affirmation of social equality. To be sure, concerns for social justice in America have historically been inspired and continue to be partly maintained by a plurality of religious beliefs. But much can be said on behalf of the secular framing of law and social policy. If Americans expected religious consensus on matters of social policy, it is hard to imagine how anything could be accomplished; our ability to define and establish just social policies has involved our acceptance of a pragmatic, secular language that people of various religious beliefs can speak. Thus, many Americans expect certain standards of social justice to be upheld, whatever religious beliefs are involved. For example, most health care workers and government officials regard the mutilation of girls' genitals, practiced as a religious ritual by Somalian immigrants to the United States, as child abuse. As in many other areas of social policy, consensus has resulted from separating an issue from discussions of religious freedom and comparative religious practice and framing it in secular and pragmatic language.

For all this insistence on the importance of secular discourse in discussions of social policy and on the tendency to chauvinism inherent in any form of civil religion, I also believe that civil religion has a role to play in American life that merits appreciation as well as considerable analysis. There are situations, especially in wartime, in which civil religion effects a unified resolve, and I think it important to appreciate both the utility and the power of civil religion in those situations. For example, when Whitney Houston sang her clear, confident "Star-Spangled Banner" at the Super Bowl during Operation Desert Storm in January 1991, many Americans felt great pride and concern for their troops in the Persian Gulf. Houston's "Star-Spangled Banner" also contributed to the morale of American servicemen and women in the Persian Gulf who knew it was sung for them. But however thrilling such experiences of civil religion, and however useful they may be in times of crisis, they are at most the experiences of a majority and at least tinged with chauvinism.

Bill Clinton's inauguration is another example of the inevitably partisan nature of civil religion. The event inspired religious feelings among his supporters, including feelings of rededication to America's

egalitarian ideals. But it also inspired impatience among Republicans who were known for their friendliness to religion in other situations, one of whom likened the event to the excessively long halftime of a Bowl game that her team was losing. In its effort to make America an object of religious feeling for its viewers and to link Clinton's election to that feeling, the inauguration exemplified the universalizing tendency characteristic of many religious events. But however useful in galvanizing energy, this partisan overreaching so characteristic of religion is counterproductive when it spills into discussions of law and social policy where more than one set of views have to be negotiated.

Since 1967, events have conspired to make many Americans wary of civil religion. Recent "ethnic cleansings" and other forms of violence following the collapse of the Soviet Union have underscored the dangers of grounding political identity in religion. The growing diversity of religious and ethnic populations in the United States and the technological sophistication that has brought other populations into closer proximity with ours have also drawn our attention to the need to accommodate pluralism everywhere. In the United States, attempts to revive civil religion after it had lost its Communist animus have often fallen flat, perhaps because they seemed so self-righteously oblivious to the diversity of American society that many Americans want to affirm. And in colleges and universities in the United States, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have become increasingly attentive to religious and cultural pluralism and increasingly concerned to affirm them. This development has been stimulated by the increased awareness of social diversity among Americans generally and also by programs, courses, and writings in women's studies, African American studies, and Native American studies that have called attention to the presumptuous, exclusionary implications of many forms of rhetoric. In the halls of academe, unified religious visions of America seem out of touch, patriarchal, and condescending.

In religious studies, this growing affirmation of diversity has involved a growing freedom from Paul Tillich's theology of culture, upon which Bellah's concept of civil religion partly depends. The first paragraph of Bellah's 1967 article invokes Tillich's belief in a religious dimension inherent in many forms of cultural expression. In the 1991 introduction to *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah invokes Tillich more explicitly, calling that book "an expression of what Paul Tillich called the protestant principle" and categorizing it, "with its emphasis on the common good," as "an expression of what [Tillich] called the catholic principle."

Ironically, Tillich's theology of culture exemplifies the very subjectivism that Bellah associates with the loss of social responsibility in America. Thus, Tillich's theology, with its ubiquitous protestant and

catholic principles, presumes a unified realm of religious experience, which spiritually insightful people may penetrate, that links all the most significant forms of human expression. This subjective idealism is only superficially pluralistic; while it embraces all cultures and welcomes discovery of the religious dimension in previously unsuspected quarters, Tillich's religious dimension is ultimately a singular, gnostic, and elitist phenomenon.

In recent years, the authority of Tillich's theology of culture has declined as scholars in religious studies have become more interested in the historical particularities of religion. In the area of American religion, studies of particular religious movements and communities have proliferated, and wide-sweeping claims about American culture are often greeted with suspicion.

With regard to the question of how best to treat the commitments to responsible citizenship and social equality that Bellah rightly prizes, I believe it is important to study how various religions have nurtured these commitments while, at the same time, continuing to show how the existence of any religious standards for participation in public life has inhibited a wide cross section of Americans from the full exercise of their citizenship. We need to understand more about how particular religions encourage or discourage participation in public life. We need also to understand more about how individuals and groups have surmounted inhibitions that restrain their exercise of citizenship and the alienation such inhibitions have produced.

Finally, and most generally, I hope that religious studies will continue to foster appreciation of the prosocial aspects of various religious traditions and understanding of the religious self-restraint often entailed in active and effective engagement in public life. By helping students to develop the skills and knowledge they need to make useful decisions about their own religious beliefs and to identify vestiges of religious establishment in American life that undermine the free exercise of those skills and knowledge, religious studies will continue to contribute to the historical development of First Amendment principles.

JAMES G. MOSELEY

Twenty-five years ago, sociologist Robert Bellah observed that "there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America." Looking beyond the country's churches and synagogues, Bellah located a set of religious beliefs and ultimate values wrapped in, with, and under the political ideals that guide national policy and shape American social institutions. Although this ongoing tradition differs in significant ways from the churchly conventions of American Protes-

tants, Catholics, and Jews, civil religion "has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does." It is appropriate, indeed necessary, to recognize this tradition as a religion, Bellah contended, because the principles and commitments underlying American public life have been symbolically articulated in distinctly religious terms.

This "religious dimension," Bellah proceeded to argue, has been most clearly expressed by the leaders whose wise resolve enabled the nation to endure "times of trial" associated with three critical episodes in American history. Civil religion played a vital role in the creation of the republic during the Revolutionary period and in the tragic rebirth of the nation during the Civil War. As in these two former periods, when the nature, purpose, and meaning of American life were defined and refined, therefore, Bellah hoped and believed that American civil religion would guide the nation to face successfully the challenge of responsible action in a revolutionary world during the Vietnam era (*Daedalus*, Winter 1967). In some ways a trenchant analysis of American history and in some ways a stirring call to arms, Bellah's argument was richly thought provoking for scholars and cultural critics alike.

By virtue of the discussions and debates they engendered, Bellah's claims about civil religion helped to revitalize the study of religion in America. In addition to examining ecclesiastical patterns and theological debates, scholars began to pay increasing attention to the ways in which America itself, as an ideal and in its public life, resonates with religious meaning. Bellah's civil religion hypothesis helped consideration of "American religion" to supplant more conventional studies of religion in America. Given the important ways in which Bellah's views have enlarged and enhanced scholarly thinking, it is now appropriate to assess the continuing utility of the idea of civil religion for understanding the role of religion in American life. In this regard, despite its verve, the idea of an American civil religion, it seems to me, needs to be evaluated chiefly in terms of the confusions it may entail.

On the one hand, Bellah's formulation of the concept of civil religion may be confusing to people who would describe themselves as religious, since to them religion is a matter of how human life is related to a reality beyond itself. For many believers, religion is conventionally understood as having to do with such things as God, the church, and life after death. Religious people may recognize that certain of the beliefs, attitudes, and practices that have been closely associated with the publicly expressed ideals of American civilization do, from time to time, look, sound, and feel very much like religion, even though religion itself involves matters qualitatively different from the symbols, rituals, and values of their nation's public life. Because the principal articulations of American civil religion—as expressed, for example, in the rhetoric of

presidential inaugural addresses—utilize some of the terminology of Protestant Christianity, people within the mainline churches of the United States may hear resonances of conventional faith in civil religion's claims about the "covenant" or "mission" of the republic. However powerful such rhetorical cadences may feel, to interpret the public ethos as religious may strike the faithful as missing the real point about religion.

To the extent that images and symbols of divinity are used to empower political agendas, such as recalling a temporarily misguided nation to its true destiny, what might have been a useful analogy may appear to religious people to be an unfortunate, perhaps even a dangerous, confusion. When one movement, one party, or the nation as a whole—even in an idealized vision—is identified with the will, action, or purpose of God, a margin of difference that is essential to religious experience is jeopardized. However intimately the human and the divine are understood to be related, a concurrent sense of otherness is necessarily also an aspect of religious life. When a lively sense of this difference between the human and the divine is muted, human institutions may be invested with an authority, perhaps even an implication of sanctity, that conventionally religious people believe belongs to God alone.

Once this line is crossed, citizens may inflict harm and suffering on other people in the name of a divinely sanctioned national will or purpose. From the perspective of Native Americans, for example, America's doctrine of Manifest Destiny has been neither civil nor religious. To the extent that a strong sense of the otherness of God is downplayed in the language of civil religion, a corresponding sense of the humanity of people who are not defined as citizens of the republic may also be lost, along with their rights, their property, and their lives. Religion is a dangerous, powerful business, and all religious traditions are subject to abuse; therefore, the well-being of all people may be better preserved when religious beliefs and particular national ideologies are not confused.

On the other hand, Bellah's idea of civil religion may be confusing to academic students of religion insofar as they think about religion primarily in terms of its relation to other aspects of human life rather than in terms of an experienced connection between human life and a reality beyond itself. In this regard, one of the strengths of Bellah's hypothesis may also be a weakness. For religious studies people, the concept of civil religion provides a means of comparing American life-ways with the patterns and practices of other cultures, which may or may not have features that are directly comparable with what American believers identify as religious. Such a perspective is potentially liberating for students who tend to identify their particular ways of being

religious with religion itself. Thereby, Bellah's hypothesis may help Americans—whether scholars or not—to understand the full humanity, including the authentic religiousness, of other peoples. However, to the extent that civil religion may then come to seem more significant, or more real, than conventional religion, the beliefs and practices of religious people may come to be interpreted principally in terms of the dynamics of political culture and social history. In the process, once again, something vital is overlooked.

The difficulty consequent upon this form of confusion becomes ironic when, as often occurs toward the end of analyses that depend on the civil religion hypothesis, cultural critics and scholars attempt to tap the resources of actual religion in order to bolster, repair, reorient, or otherwise improve the state of the nation. For example, in the final pages of *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, Bellah asserts:

It is our moral responsibility as Americans not to give up the struggle at the national level. . . . [N]o one has changed a great nation without appealing to its soul. . . . Culture is the key to revolution; religion is the key to culture. If we win the political struggle, we will not even know what we want unless we have a new vision of man, a new sense of human possibility, and a new conception of the ordering of liberty, the constitution of freedom.

He concludes by saying, "We do not know what the future holds and we must give up the illusion that we control it, for we know that it depends not only on our action but on grace. While recognizing the reality of death, we may return finally to Winthrop's biblical injunction: Let us choose life."

The rub here, of course, is that Bellah was hoping to revitalize America, while Winthrop's Puritans were aiming to renew the church. Bellah needs some religion in order to save America; the Puritans were willing to go to what became America in order to demonstrate to England how to worship God. The covenant that Bellah sees as broken is between contemporary Americans and the highest purposes of their nation. Winthrop owned a covenant made by God with his people. Puritan piety involved the confession of original sin, firm trust in divine providence, and other religious beliefs that had definite consequences for the order of civil society. Without some such actual religious faith, "a new vision of man" is merely wishful thinking. Advocates of civil religion seem to want the weight, as it were, without the freight of theology.

These two forms of possible confusion—on the one hand for religious people and on the other for scholars of religion—render the continuing utility of the concept of civil religion questionable as a theo-

retical tool for understanding religion in the United States. Moreover, in practical terms, several events in the course of the twenty-five years since Bellah's hypothesis was advanced have made the concept seem doubly problematic. Among these events are the following, cited as examples of a society in which the ideas of civil religion may have little cultural currency. First, as the Vietnam era slid into the Watergate debacle, doubts and divisions about the nation's international role led as well to despondency about the moral quality of the nation's leadership at home. Distrust about politics spread into skepticism about many American institutions. Second, growing deficit spending and deepening national debt made greed appear acceptable to many, giving an air of unreality to governmental, business, and even personal financial transactions and suggesting cynicism about public life as a refuge for those who had any values left. Third, rising consciousness about the environmental consequences of their way of life made it seem that Americans were living on borrowed time in the natural world. Fourth, the end of the Cold War removed any sense of a common enemy—without the jubilation of an earned victory—leaving only unfocused remnants of belief in American destiny. Finally, together with the ways the women's movement challenged patriarchal patterns in personal relations and social institutions, an increasing awareness of America's inescapable cultural pluralism undercut any shared sense of communal obligation, civic responsibility, and moral values. In the face of such major challenges, connections between politics and religion, if experienced at all, had tones of strident backlash or wistful nostalgia rather than a renewal of civil religion.

The confusions that are endemic to the concept of civil religion, when coupled with the practical challenges brought by major events in the last twenty-five years, suggest that significant modifications may be required if the idea of an American civil religion is to be employed constructively in future teaching and research in the fields that comprise the study of religion in America. It seems incontrovertible that such teaching and research must be oriented toward the varieties of religions and cultures in the United States rather than toward the concept of a universal civil religion in America. Such variety has always been present on this continent, however insufficiently recognized by the proponents of civil religion and however inadequately studied by historians. Native Americans inhabited the land for centuries before the Europeans arrived, for example, and Spanish Catholics preceded English Pilgrims and Puritans. The concept of civil religion would need to be expanded to include traditions other than those of mainline Protestantism, with which the concept has been so closely connected, for today's cultural pluralism is so well established—and, if anything, increasing in scope—that the heroic implications of Bellah's hypothesis have little cur-

rent explanatory power. In addition, we need concepts that embrace the "other" Americas, including Latin America, because they are increasingly important in the experience—religious and otherwise—of life in the United States. The terminology of "American civil religion" now sounds like a language of cultural imperialism, again requiring modification in order for Bellah's insights to be employed constructively in the future.

While the concept as originally articulated by Bellah may have little current utility as a heuristic device, the idea of an American civil religion can be instructive in showing how civic rhetoric makes use of religious symbols. Whether in service to the current majoritarian view of national purposes, or whether employed to criticize the shortcomings of the nation's behavior at home and abroad, civic ideals are most powerfully expressed by way of those particular religious images and symbols through which the society's principles of legitimacy are connected with divine—or otherwise ultimate—realities. In this sense, the concept of an American civil religion may serve as a case study in the semiotics of political culture. Such an observation suggests, however, that the concept is itself part of American history—something to be explained rather than something with new explanatory power. Reviewing the idea of an American civil religion twenty-five years after its initial articulation suggests, therefore, that the study of religion is itself historical, passing through changing times as do the religions it studies.

Given the characteristics of contemporary American life, I would conclude by suggesting that the quality of politics, on the one hand, and of religion, on the other, may be better for being unamalgamated. At least, the picture will be clearer if politics and religion are not commingled in an ideal mixture. To wish it were otherwise, as advocates of civil religion tend to do, is to reach for a dream that is already irretrievably behind us. Perhaps it always was. From Rousseau, where the term began, to Bellah, the idea of civil religion has been propounded in an effort to renew the current state of society by reclaiming a noble dream, a grand hypothesis in the nature of Gatsby's sense of wonder, "already behind him, somewhere in the vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night." Which leaves today's student of religion who contemplates the idea of civil religion to conclude, along with Gatsby's young friend, Nick Carraway, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." We can most appropriately and usefully honor the boldness of Bellah's idea of civil religion by moving toward interpretive schemes that more openly embrace the rich varieties of religion and politics, and the interplays between them, that characterize our national experience.

JONATHAN D. SARNA

The inauguration of Bill Clinton provides a welcome opportunity to look back at American civil religion a full generation after Robert Bellah, in his celebrated *Daedalus* article, taught us to read inaugural addresses as important ceremonial events in the American civil religious calendar. Bellah, it will be recalled, began his famous paper with an analysis of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address of January 20, 1961. He pointed out that Kennedy mentioned God three times in his brief address, and he suggested that "if we could understand why he mentioned God, the way in which he did it, and what he meant to say in those three references, we would understand much about American civil religion." To understand how our characterization of American civil religion has since changed, and where Bellah's analysis needs to be modified, the place to begin would seem to be another inaugural address—the address that Bill Clinton delivered on January 20, 1993.

Clinton, unlike John F. Kennedy, did not frame his address around references to God nor did he emphasize, as Kennedy did, divine transcendence as the ultimate source of human freedom. Instead, Clinton relegated religion to the back end of his speech and mentioned God directly only twice in passing:

And so, my fellow Americans, as we stand at the edge of the 21st century, let us begin anew with energy and hope, with faith and discipline. And let us work until our work is done. The Scripture says, "And let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not."

From this joyful mountaintop of celebration we hear a call to service in the valley. We have heard the trumpets, we have changed the guard. And now each in our own way, and with God's help, we must answer the call.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

While this might be understood, following Bellah, "as only the most recent statement of a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth," Clinton's address, taken as a whole, actually appealed to a quite different source of authority: American tradition itself. Clinton, in his speech, repeatedly hearkened back to "Our Founders," he cited by name both Washington and Jefferson, he invoked the nation's great historical turning points ("from our Revolution, to the Civil War, to the Great Depression, to the civil rights movement"), and he called on Americans to rededicate themselves "to the very idea of America." Belief in America, not belief in God, was the president's rallying cry. When he spoke of "faith" at all, it was a faith in the ability of Americans, "each in our own way, and with God's help," to live up to

the legacy of their founders and to unite around a common ideal of service.

The surprising dearth of religious references in Clinton's inaugural did not stem from any dearth of religious convictions on his part. To the contrary, we know that prior to becoming president he regularly attended services at the Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock and that he sang for more than a decade in its choir. In an address to the congregation on his final Sunday in Arkansas before moving to Washington, he characterized his church as "the place where I have come to seek divine guidance and support and reassurance." He urged his fellow parishioners to pray for him and thanked them "for always making me feel at home here even in the darkest days of my campaign."

In that same address, however, Clinton hinted that religion would not play the same role in his administration as it did in that of his predecessor. Where the Bush administration had purposefully injected religion into the public sphere, associating its own policies with the forces of good, characterizing its opponents as the forces of evil, and making common cause with those who espoused "traditional values" and "family values," Clinton played to the themes of liberty, diversity, and tolerance. "Our church, the Baptist church," he reminded his fellow worshippers, "has always believed in religious liberty. That does not mean we should take our values or our principles out of our politics. None of us can or should do that. But it does mean we should bring a great deal of humility in making moral judgements of others in public life" (*Boston Globe*, January 11, 1993, 12). Symbolically, he spent the very next Sunday worshipping at one of the great shrines to American religious liberty, Thomas Jefferson's home of Monticello. Having drunk from that well of tradition, he hit the road again for the final leg of his election-year odyssey: a ritual reenactment of Jefferson's journey into Washington followed by a grand ceremonial entry into the White House.

To reread "Civil Religion in America" against the backdrop of the Clinton inauguration reveals much about the strengths and the weaknesses of Bellah's analysis. On the one hand, the essay supplied a valuable methodology for analyzing American national rituals as well as an extremely useful conceptual framework for understanding a whole range of unquestionably religious phenomena that had not previously been studied in any systematic way. The lengthy bibliography of studies inspired by "Civil Religion in America" and the even longer list of publications that it indirectly influenced amply testify to the essay's remarkable fecundity. It surely ranks as one of the most influential essays in the whole study of religion.

On the other hand, Bellah's characterization of American civil religion seems, at this distance, to require substantial modification. The

begin with, Bellah focused on the continuities in American civil religion and on "the common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share." By implication, at least, he purported to find a hitherto overlooked source of national consensus, the religious equivalent of the "liberal tradition" that seemed at that time so powerful a bond between Americans of otherwise different persuasions. The few exceptions that Bellah noted—those who fused "God, country and flag . . . to attack non-conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds" and "the overt religiosity of the radical right today"—all were quickly dismissed. Lumping them together with "defenders of slavery before the Civil War," he portrayed them as modern-day infidels, enemies of democracy itself.

Today, particularly in the wake of the 1992 election, this sense of national consensus flies in the face of observed reality; there is substantial question, indeed, whether the "great majority" that Bellah pointed to was ever so large or so widespread as he and many others believed. Instead of a single civil religion harmoniously uniting all Americans, an alternative hypothesis rooted in the pervasive sense of cultural conflict that characterizes much of America's past seems, in the eyes of a new generation, far more persuasive. According to this view, debates over America's character and purpose have played themselves out on the altar of public religion throughout the nation's history. Highly charged conflicts concerning the nature and content of this faith—battles over rituals and symbols, beliefs and practices, traditions and values—reflect deep-seated cultural differences that continue even today to set Americans at odds with one another.

Robert Wuthnow, in *The Restructuring of American Religion*, came closest to this view when he described American civil religion as being "deeply divided":

Like the religion found more generally in the nation's churches, it does not speak with a single voice, uniting the majority of Americans around common ideals. It has instead become a confusion of tongues speaking from different traditions and offering different visions of what America can and should be. Religious conservatives and liberals offer competing versions of American civil religion that seem to have very little of substance in common.

Wuthnow identified the conservative version of American civil religion with the idea of "one nation under God" (a slogan, he pointed out, that carries many levels of meaning), and he equated the liberal version with the (no less polysemic) idea of "liberty and justice for all." Neither version, he observed, "can claim effectively to speak for consensual values. Each represents a constituency, but holds . . . no assumptions on which all can agree."

Wuthnow did not trace the history of these different versions of American civil religion, nor is this the place to do so. One need do no more, however, than reread Robert T. Handy's *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (1971) to realize that the "confusion of tongues" that Wuthnow alluded to has deep roots in the nation's past. To point, as Bellah did, only to those elements of American civil religion that have drawn Americans together is, thus, to distort the story. The divisive attempts by various segments of American society to forge a civil religion in their own image is, unfortunately, no less a part of the story. Civil religion, like all religion, turns out, upon close inspection, to promote both *communitas* and its opposite.

Bellah also exaggerated the unifying power of civil religion's rituals. The flag, the national holidays, the federal monuments—indeed, almost all of the rites and symbols of national unity and patriotic piety that he enumerated—have become, in recent years, far more divisive than his analysis predicted (while most of the rest, following the movement of national holidays to Monday, lost their sanctity altogether). This declension has traditionally been attributed to the trials and tribulations of the Vietnam era, when protesters spurned national symbols of unity as part of their expression of public dissent. In the post-Vietnam era, however, these symbols and rituals never regained their power to bring Americans together. This may be explained in part by the fact that social activists learned from the antiwar movement that disruptions of civic events and iconoclastic attacks on national symbols guaranteed them media attention. Even Thanksgiving Day, still the most durable holiday on the civil religious calendar, now regularly comes under attack from Native American protesters and their supporters. In the case of the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landing in the New World, a coalition of dissenting groups effectively thwarted commemoration plans even before they took shape. Where a century earlier the great mariner, cast as an authentic American hero, had been the object of almost cultic national veneration, in 1992, he—like so many other erstwhile symbols of the national consensus—had become a pawn in a divisive struggle for America's soul.

A second explanation for the decline of rituals and symbols once closely associated with "the national faith" stems from the close association that many of these symbols had with American Protestantism. John F. Wilson, in *Public Religion in American Culture*, goes so far as to suggest that civil religion may be seen "as the attempt, through a variety of particular forms, to distill the old political culture of the United States which was supported by a broadly Protestant establishment . . . [and] to conserve that culture even as it, and the associated establishment, is threatened from within and without." With the breakdown of Protestant hegemony, the growth of minority faiths (many of

them not Christian at all), and legal challenges to all forms of religion in the public square, symbols that Bellah could still (misleadingly) describe as all-embracing now appear decidedly sectarian and, thus, far more exclusive than he allowed. Christmas crèches, clergy invocations at high school graduations, wall plaques containing the Ten Commandments, and a wide range of other supposedly nonsectarian religious activities all fall into this category. While Bellah classified such symbols and rituals as part of civil religion, "not antithetical to, and indeed sharing much in common with, Christianity" but "neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian," others, convinced that these phenomena are indeed sectarian and antithetical to church-state separation besides, have in recent years challenged them in court—and won. As a result, the public schools, once the great temples of civil religion and a prime locus for "the cultic celebration of the civil rituals," have become increasingly polarized, and civil religion itself is today fiercely contended.

Given all that has happened to civil religion over the past generation, does Bellah's formulation of the concept hold any continuing utility? For the historian, the answer is, of course, "yes." If nothing else, "Civil Religion in America," read as a primary source, sheds enormous light on the culture of the sixties, with all of its contradictions, ambivalences, yearnings, and fears. The essay might also be viewed by students of American culture as a late manifestation of one of the oldest quests in the nation's religious life: the search for unity, the effort to find a faith sufficiently encompassing and inspiring to envelop all of "God's New Israel" under one snugly religious quilt.

Even read as it was intended to be read, however, Bellah's formulation of civil religion, notwithstanding the many weaknesses in the argument that subsequent students have discerned (and that Bellah, in his later writings, admits), and notwithstanding additional modifications that may yet be required, still has much to commend it. For the questions that he poses, the phenomena that he explains, the ideas that he draws upon, the insights that he offers, and the challenges that he sets forth all have continuing relevance. Nobody has thought more deeply than Bellah has about the dynamic relationship between religion, society, and government; nobody has written more eloquently than he about the role of religion as both legitimator and judge of state power. If, as I have argued here, Bellah's depiction of civil religion is, nevertheless, a product of its own particular historical moment and, as a result, insufficiently sensitive to clashing social values and to the forces of historical change, then what we need is an updated conceptualization—one that takes full account of recent events and explores the ongoing interplay between civil religion and American culture as a whole.