

I in doubt that pieties and religious episodes have been frequent and prominent. This conclusion does not imply that the civil religion discussion should be dismissed as unimportant. On the contrary, it has helped to render more subtle and nuanced the analysis of religion in a modern society readily accessible for close order analysis. If the case for a developed and differentiated civil religion in American history is at best questionable, that also does not foreclose the possibility that such a cult is now emerging or will in the future. Such a development remains hypothetical at this point. But what is established as a given is that the existence of American civil religion has been *proposed* at a particular point in the national experience. What religious interpretation should be placed upon that development will concern us in a brief concluding epilogue.

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Epilogue

THE CIVIL RELIGION PROPOSAL AS A REVITALIZATION MOVEMENT IN AMERICAN CULTURE

The preceding chapters have explored public religion in America in terms of the relationship between the society and its national polity on the one hand, and piety (or ritual practices and attendant beliefs) on the other. The procedure has entailed exploration of various aspects of the question, ranging from a survey of relevant phenomena (construed in looser as well as tighter frameworks of analysis) to review of the kinds of models in terms of which data might be interpreted. In conclusion, we return to an issue which emerged at the outset—namely, that within the last decade discussion of public religion has entered a new stage in the proposal that it be understood as a differentiated and institutionalized positive religious tradition, as in "Civil Religion in America." That thesis has already been reviewed as a construction put upon the data, but brief consideration of it from another point of view is appropriate. This is to ask several questions in the framework of religious analysis: How may we interpret the development of the proposal that there is a civil religion in America? What significance should we assign to the emergence of a religious movement based upon such a proposal?

Elaboration of religiously grounded claims frequently entails an explicit historical trajectory set out in terms of

origin and destiny. Under Robert Bellah's construct, the American civil religion is believed to point toward a world order; its destiny is to become transformed into a global civil religion. The religion of the republic, the construction proposed by Sidney Mead, is thought to carry the burden of a cultural revolution originating with the Enlightenment. This event, possibly the most momentous cultural event in history, is believed to reach fullest expression in the ideal of the American republic.¹ Thus, each of these particular constructs includes a historical interpretation placed upon public religion cast in terms of universalistic claims. When viewed with some detachment, however, both of these proposals appear to be highly ethnocentric. In the framework of a critical approach to religious movements, the logically necessary question is how such worldviews function as social constructions. How might we understand the appeal of civil religion, or the religion of the republic, as the basis for a social movement?

One of the conditions under which religious movements appear to develop is that of rapid social change, especially when an older and possibly waning culture is threatened by a newer and dynamic one. Anthropologists have identified numerous instances of this kind of phenomenon. The cargo-cults of New Guinea have become a classical example on the basis of the excellent field reports and associated analysis which we have about them. The cults are usefully understood as millenarian movements, as responses in the idioms at hand—so to speak—to perceived threats from superior cultures.² Movements for revival or renewal of North American Indian cultures developed under broadly comparable conditions. Anthony F. C. Wallace has suggested an analytical model of the revitalization movement as a means of conceptualizing how a beleaguered society reaches for religious self-understanding out of the past, in terms which are familiar

from the tradition at hand. This is a means of coping with an uncertain present and a threatening future.³ In this most general framework, revitalization movements are interpreted as attempts to recover, heighten, and strenuously advocate adherence to the religious legacy believed to be the center of the particular endangered culture. The anticipated outcome is preservation of that culture, possibly including the achievement of a more perfect embodiment of its central commitments. Of course, in a critical perspective, the recovered or revitalized culture is actually different from the older one. It has undergone a selective adaptation. In that process, elements have been damped or heightened and the whole reorganized, usually in response to particular interest groups in the society.

If we seek an interpretation of the recent proposals about public religion in America in terms available from critical studies of religious movements, we can probably do no better than to view them as potential revitalization movements occasioned by widespread loss of internal confidence in American society and changed external cultural relationships.⁴ It is obvious that sub-cultures, such as those of black Americans or Spanish-speaking Americans (and a host of others), have become ethnically self-conscious enough to call into question the viability of traditional American society. This is in part because a broadly Protestant hegemony is experienced as alien and oppressive. Those sensitive to this situation have responded in different ways. One kind of response to this perceived condition has been resonance to the call for recovery of a civil religion or religion of the republic. While the manifest symbols of these proposals may be universal and global, the latent basis for interest in and support of them has more likely been a concern that the old familiar ways are directly challenged and severely threatened.

Interestingly enough, from this perspective, the ideo-

logical contents of revitalization movements turn out to be culturally specific versions of American Protestant Christianity, more classical than modern, which have been given a content of broadly political symbols and events. These constructs, in line with accepted critical interpretations of such movements, probably have more currency as reconceptualizations of past ideologies than as direct continuations of them.

Why should an idealized past be so prominent in these proposals? Partly because particular versions of Protestantism have repeatedly proved to be divisive, especially in the American setting. But at least as important, the latent strategy of a revitalization movement is to counter a threat to the whole social fabric and, generally, to enlist Americans under more inclusive symbols and commitments than the narrower inherited construction would permit. In some respects, then, it may be helpful to interpret the civil religion phenomenon more properly as a latent political revitalization movement than as a manifestly religious one. At one level, this is because politics is the realm in which consensus is achieved in modern societies in spite of other divergent opinions. But at another level, the perceived threat may be that politics as a means of governing communities is proving to be anachronistic; societies seem less readily subject to control through classical political means. If this is the felt threat, the culture threatened is one in which the political process is taken seriously as a means of significantly affecting society.

On this view, it could be argued that we are passing beyond an era in which politics was the accepted means to resolve social conflict. This era began in the seventeenth century after the prolonged religious struggles in Europe seemed to demonstrate that institutions and practices based upon religious frameworks of intelligibility could

not cope with the deep changes wracking the social orders. The wars of religion, on this view, marked the end of an epoch in European history. Religious language proved unable to produce intelligibility in the social world, and religious ritual failed to bring tolerable coherence to society. The arena of political life in the modern world, one of compromise, manipulation, agreement, and, as a last resort only, force, developed to confront these issues directly. On this hypothetical scenario, the era of the world wars in the twentieth century might appear, in retrospect, to have been the period in which classical political skills proved to be outmoded as means of contending with social change. In the place of this outmoded world—of both intelligibility and action—a new one will undoubtedly emerge, likely predicated upon economic management. This would seem to be the effective means currently available to control societies which cannot be ordered through political action, in the way that the European lands of the seventeenth century could not be governed within essentially religious frameworks of belief and behavior.

This kind of perspective is interesting because the manifest ends directly sought through movements like an American civil religion—especially universal political communities—appear more likely to be achieved indirectly. Ironically, the maligned multi-national corporation may prove to be a more effective vehicle for achieving a stable world order than either ecumenical activities among the traditional religious communities or a vital United Nations (even one supported through global civil religious commitments). A broadly economic framework which seeks to relate perceived self-interests to awareness of interdependence probably has promise of being more effective than explicitly universal religious or political world views.

As a large framework, this is a suggestion that the civil religion proposal be viewed as a political-religious revitalization movement at a transition point to new global arrangements based on more strictly economic calculations. This may seem to be an interpretive framework which is implicitly based on a model in which a secularization of modern cultures is the central given. That is not necessarily the case. Such large-scale frameworks do entail many other issues than the ones strictly at issue in this discussion of public religion. It does seem possible to suspend judgment about whether such a hypothetical secularization framework. Instead, we might direct attention to more modest and more empirical observations, such as have formed the basic material of the study.

If by suggesting that the American civil religion proposal may be identified as the ideological core of a revitalization movement, we have seemed to diminish its significance (by associating it with the Ghost Dance movement, as an example), that is unfortunate. Better parallels to it might be found in such religio-social movements as pietism in the German Lands (and others) in the eighteenth century, or Stuart Puritanism in seventeenth-century England. Versions of millenarianism in nineteenth-century America may provide a yet closer parallel, even antecedent. The point is that in each case an older culture was deeply challenged by new social conditions, and its existence seemed to be threatened. As a cultural strategy, it moved to consolidate and reexpress what it took to be its essential commitments. Usually through a prophet or a cadre of leaders, the movement worked to conserve the old in the face of social change. So the civil religion proposal, or the advocacy of a religion of the republic, might be seen, finally, 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. The purpose is to conserve that culture even as it, and the associated establishment, is threatened from within and without. Should the political culture prove to be resilient and thus durable, it is likely that the American civil religion proposal will either be forgotten as a curious cultural episode, or celebrated as central to a renewed nationalism. Should the alternative scenario develop, and the political culture be finally displaced by a broadly economic culture, then we might expect it to remain as a fossilized ingredient in our society, though increasingly peripheral to central concerns of the latter and with progressively less influence upon it. In either case, the current study has argued that the civil religion proposal marks a particular construction of the public religion issue in American history and it must be set in that framework rather than interpreted in its own terms.

In a study of this sort, marked by the attempt to search beneath appearances to more fundamental if elusive reality, ironic detachment may seem to be the one constant. Accordingly, the concluding observation is properly ironic. Robert Bellah suggested that "Civil Religion in America" had gone undetected precisely because a western concept of religion as differentiated had pre-vented observers from recognizing something so obvious. Americans resist acknowledging in their own culture, he thought, something as obvious as Shinto in a foreign culture.⁵ But the further irony may be that emphasis upon civil religion itself betrays the other side of that same impulse—namely, to conceive of religion as developed and institutionalized. The materials reviewed in the course of this study seem not to require that interpretation, but are better understood as aspects of an incredibly rich and internally complex culture.