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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The Weights of ACIR's Performance 1989-88

Impact and Implications of ACIR's Performance

ACIR's performance during the early 1980s was generally positive. There were, however, some areas where ACIR's performance could be improved. In particular, ACIR's failure to adequately address certain issues and its inability to adequately respond to changing economic conditions were concerns.

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The experience of the early 1980s highlighted the importance of ACIR's role in providing economic advice to the government. However, ACIR's performance during this period was disappointing. ACIR's failure to adequately address certain issues and its inability to adequately respond to changing economic conditions were concerns.

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ACCOUNTING FOR THE DEATHS OF THE

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

DISCUSSION

SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

TWENTY YEARS AFTER RIFT

since 1982, when it was first published, the book has gone on to become a classic in the field of religious studies. the book's thesis is that the civil religion of the united states is declining in prominence and influence, and that the declining influence of civil religion is one of the factors contributing to the rise of political activism and social unrest in american society. the book has been praised for its rigorous analysis of the relationship between religion and politics in america, and for its insights into the role of civil religion in shaping american culture and identity. overall, the book is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the complex relationship between religion and politics in america.
Comment

Robert Edmil

Laboratory of California Behavior

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James A. Meltzer

Reply