From Civil to Political Religion

The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics

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INTRODUCTION

In "Civil Religion in America," published in the winter 1967 issue of *Daedalus*, Robert N. Bellah affirmed: "few have realized that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well institutionalized civil religion in America" (1967: 1). Quoting from John Kennedy's and Lyndon Johnson's inaugural addresses, Bellah argued that these speeches, and those of the founding fathers, provided a clue to understanding the relationship between religion and politics in the United States. The speeches, which often mentioned God, revealed a profound religious spirit in American society. "What we have," Bellah noted, "is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity" (1967: 8).

Bellah observed that civil religion in the United States was independent of religious and political institutions and, at the

Notes to Introduction are on pp. 243-44.

same time, not in competition with either church or state. While this religion included many Christian symbols and themes, it was "neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian" (1967: 8). An important aspect of the American political tradition, he observed, is the belief that Americans, individually and collectively, have an "obligation…to carry out God's will on earth" (5). Bellah claimed that since the early days of the Republic, Americans have interpreted their history essentially in religious terms. In his view, civil religion served and still serves "as a genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding" (8). Bellah concluded that civil religion provided a "transcendent goal for the political process" and contributed to the unity and collective identity of Americans as a national community (4). The principal effect of U.S. civil religion had been to generate powerful symbols of national solidarity and to encourage Americans to achieve national aspirations and goals.

Bellah's article galvanized many in the scholarly community and resulted in scores of subsequent articles about his thesis, initiating a debate over civil religion in the United States. Others before him had advanced similar ideas, and had spoken of the "religion of the Republic," "the religion of the American Way of Life," even of "American Shinto," but they failed to provoke substantial discussions or analysis (Bellah, 1974b: 255; Jones and Richey, 1974: 3-4). As Bellah himself acknowledges, it was the expression "civil religion in America" that acquired "a life of its own, that [was] picked up by *The New York Times* and by the popular news weeklies, that has inspired books, essays and symposia" (1974b: 255). Bellah's interpretation of a "national faith," or of a religious dimension of American society, generated concerns about the actual meaning and definition of the term, its applicability as a sociological concept, and whether it could be considered a religion or not (Gehrig, 1981a: 51; 1981b: 1). After the publication of Bellah's article, the sociological landscape (particularly the sociology of religion) divided in two camps: those who enthusiastically accepted Bellah's thesis, and those who simply dismissed the notion of civil religion. The latter not only questioned Bellah's interpretation, but doubted the very existence of a civil religion in America (Bellah, 1974b: 255).

More than three decades after Bellah's publication, the notion of civil religion remains ambiguous and ill-defined. On the one hand, the term "civil religion" has been applied to a wide range of phenomena, as will be explained in chapter 2. On the other hand, the idea of civil religion appears under a variety of different terms, such as public religion, public philosophy, public theology, political religion, republican religion, civic faith, and so on. I understand civil religion in terms similar to John Wilson's, but with a fundamental modification. Civil religion as a concept, Wilson notes (1986: 111), "concerns the possibility that specific social and cultural beliefs, behaviors, and institutions constitute a positive religion concerned with civil order in the society." This definition leaves aside the political dimension, which I consider essential for an understanding of the civil religion phenomenon. Thus, while agreeing with Wilson, I expand his definition and argue instead that civil religion is concerned with both the social *and* the political order. Civil religion tends to sacralize certain aspects of civic life by means of public rituals and collective ceremonies. In so doing, beliefs and behaviours, acquire a "religious" dimension. As such, civil religion may be considered a belief system or, a surrogate religion, that expresses the self-identity of a collectivity. Yet, like secular ideologies of different kinds, civil religion may also attempt to force group identity and to legitimize an existing political order, by injecting a transcendental dimension or a religious gloss on the justification. This latter manifestation I call political religion.

It seems to me that any acute reader of the theoretical developments and disputes engendered by the civil religion thesis will be forced to recognize that the concept, as used by Bellah and other American sociologists, is often not useful for the study of civil religion in other countries, nor for the study of certain types of civil religion in democratic societies, including the United States. Bellah's notion is especially difficult to apply in cases where the state seeks to use civil religion as a political tool to further national policies or programs. The same reader will probably find that many of the claims on which the notion of civil religion rests do not always hold true. Again, this is partic-

ularly evident in authoritarian societies, but to a lesser extent in democracies as well.

The central focus of Bellah's thesis is that there is a set of national symbols and rituals in the United States that transcends and neutralizes differences in beliefs and values of American citizens, irrespective of their religion or social position. From Bellah's standpoint, civil religion effectively balances, or even deactivates, the multiplicity of religious, ethnic, political, and ideological discourses found in America.

If one accepts Bellah's theoretical position, as we will later see, it becomes extremely difficult to discern ideological types of civil religion, or to analyze variations within and among societies with regard to the way they tie their political experiences to religion (Markoff and Regan, 1982: 334). Frank Reynolds's work on Thailand is a case in point. His research led him to conclude that there was a significant difference, in "certain important respects," between the Thai situation and Bellah's theoretical position. As a result, he chose to dispense with the notion of civil religion and opted to identify the Thai religious expression as "civic" rather than "civil" to distinguish it from the American phenomenon (1977: 268, 281).

I believe that problems such as the one encountered by Reynolds could be resolved by conceptualizing civil religion as a phenomenon that manifests itself in two forms: as "culture" (the Durkheimian "civil" approach) and as "ideology" (the Rousseauan "political" approach). These forms are not opposites; they are part of a continuum. This means that they are distinguishable conceptually but cannot be separated in reality. Thus conceptualized, civil religion may be seen either as a phenomenon expressing an inward conviction on the part of members of a certain group (implicit culture), or as a political resource, a form of external compulsion or force used to support an existing political order. In the former case, civil religion is assumed to be a "cultural given" (Demerath, 1994: 113) or an "emergent property of social life itself" (Hammond, 1980c: 138). In the latter, it is a premeditated political ideology, constructed by the state and its political leaders, which members of a collec-

tivity are expected or even forced to accept. In line with my understanding that civil religion can be conceived as a political resource at the service of the state, I briefly examine, in chapter 4, some cases of state-directed civil religions from a comparative perspective, in different societies, and at different times.

This book should be read as a critique of civil religion, particularly as interpreted by American scholars, who have set the tone and established the direction of the civil religion debate. I believe that their interpretation of civil religion (the way it has been portrayed as operating in the United States) has been unifocal and, to a certain degree, incorrect. American scholars have tended to concentrate primarily on value consensus, to the relative neglect of conflict, exclusion, and disharmony.

A review of the literature indicates that the notion of civil religion as used by Bellah and others rests on some basic and broadly accepted assumptions that stem from the Durkheimian tradition. This perspective seeks to explain religion in terms of an alleged integrative role. Thus, the integrative function of civil religion has been considered crucial to understanding the civil religious experience in the United States and elsewhere. It should be noted that when dealing with the civil religion issue, neither Bellah nor the most representative scholars in this field (such as John Coleman or Phillip Hammond, among others) have restricted their focus to the United States. Expressions of the civil religion phenomenon have been said to exist in different societies (Markoff and Regan, 1982: 334). But despite Bellah's or Hammond's good intentions in developing cross-cultural research (see, for example, Bellah's discussion of civil religion in Japan [1980d], and Hammond's [1980a] comparison of Mexico and the United States), and despite Coleman's (1969) equally good intention to formulate "a more universal civil religion typology," their basic approach to other forms of civil religion has been elaborated primarily in relation to the American case (Reynolds, 1977: 282). Indeed, the American case has been taken to be the paradigm of civil religion. But the concepts and theoretical logic characteristic of the Durkheimian tradition are of limited use when we try to understand how civil religion works.

Hammond, for example, locates civil religion in the "modern" stage of religious evolution, which is characterized by a differentiation of religious and political organizations (Markoff and Regan, 1982: 334). Modern, advanced societies, especially the United States, would exhibit a fully independent civil religion (or belief system) controlled neither by the church nor by the state. This position dismisses, in one sweep, the political, ideological, and sometimes coercive potential of civil religion, and wrongly relegates the coercive type (i.e., political religion, whose theology is dependent on the state) to Third World countries (essentially "premodern" societies). I reject the claim that political religions belong to communist regimes or dictatorships found in the Third World, while civil religions are an expression of modern industrialized societies (Zuo, 1991). I also disagree with those who claim that the political religions of totalitarian regimes are not civil religions (Giner, 1993).

The term *civil religion* was coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, so it is not surprising that almost all theoretical or empirical studies on civil religion start by mentioning his name. In his original article, Bellah (1967: 5) acknowledged that the term "is, of course, Rousseau's," and mentioned, in passing, that *The Social Contract* outlines the dogmas of the civil religion. While not necessarily arguing "for the particular influence of Rousseau" on the founding fathers and presidents of the United States, Bellah claimed that "similar ideas" to the ones advanced by Rousseau were part of the political and cultural climate not only of eighteenth-century America, but of the contemporary United States as well. He was referring, in particular, to references to God made by public officials and political authorities, and to the "active" role God was supposed to play in American political life.

To be sure, the belief in a divinity is the first dogma of Rousseau's civil religion, but civil religion as understood by him involves much more than this. Rousseau's intention was to create a religion that would not be attached to any particular religious belief or organized church. Rather, it should be a religion designed and controlled by the state. It is particularly important

to keep the latter point in mind, for the Rousseauan version is fundamental to an understanding of why civil religion may be consciously used in democratic societies for political ends. In a true Rousseauan sense, civil religion is essentially a coercive political device—a fact that most sociologists have been either unable or unwilling to fully understand.[1] However, the emergence of civil religion, as Rousseau understood it, is not a phenomenon peculiar to authoritarian regimes or to developing nations alone.

By contrast, Durkheim conceives civil religion as essentially a *spontaneous* phenomenon, whose natural "function" is to provide a people with a common morality and loyalty to the group. Durkheim holds that every relatively healthy society is based on a set of shared beliefs, rituals, and symbols that express its most fundamental values. These values, Durkheim argues, acquire a transcendental meaning, for they are considered sacred by members of the group. They serve to bring the community together. In so doing, they "naturally" provide for the order, stability, and integration of the society as a whole. In Durkheim's terms, civil religion *acts* upon the individual.

Although Bellah mentions Rousseau, he has been strongly influenced by Durkheim. Most students of civil religion, in turn, have opted to take the Bellah/Durkhemian route. As a result, the sociological literature shows a serious lack of understanding concerning the full political implications of a Rousseauan type of civil religion. This oversight has produced a conceptual and theoretical impasse "obscuring almost all contemporary analyses of modern-day civil religion" (Hammond, 1980c: 138). Not surprisingly, many aspects of civil religion have simply been taken for granted, and many others inherent in the notion of civil religion have never been made problematic in theory.

Indeed, hundreds of articles and books make vague references to Rousseau, but these give little evidence of an effort to comprehend what he really meant by civil religion. Most authors seem content to quote him on this issue, or to start their publications with remarkably similar sentences, acknowledging that Rousseau coined the term civil religion. They then take a solidly

Durkheimian approach (see, e.g., Bourg 1976: 141; Coleman, 1969: 67; Gehrig, 1981a: 51; Zuo, 1991: 99). As far as I know, in a truly voluminous literature, only one scholar explicitly acknowledges that Rousseau conceived civil religion "in a way that was fundamentally different from Bellah's understanding" (Wilson, 1971: 14). And, although a distinction between Rousseau's and Durkheim's theories is implicit in the works of some writers (Casanova, 1994; Giner, 1993; Luke, 1987), only a few scholars such as Willaime (1993), Demerath and Williams (1985), or Hammond (1980c) briefly attempt to discuss what this difference entails. It is my conviction that a theoretical clarification of these two traditions is absolutely essential, for most other problems and deficiencies in the literature stem from the failure to make this distinction.

Simply put, American students of civil religion have hardly ever directed their attention to the ideological, manipulative intent (or potential) of civil religion. They have not only accepted the Durkheimian proposition that a stable society is based on a commonality of shared beliefs and symbols, but have also embraced the idea that the general integrative function of civil religion is capable of transcending any particular social structure, political regime, and even historical circumstances. As I indicate in chapters 2 and 3, the Bellah tradition neither considers the possibility that the state (or its political and intellectual leaders) may shape the direction of civil religion, nor does it confront the likelihood that civil religion or religious beliefs may help legitimize the domination of the most powerful cultural or social group in society.[2] In other words, the idea that the state may use civil religion politically is absent from the traditional theories and models of civil religion. With theorists unilaterally adopting the classic "consensual" tradition, the question of legitimation and integration, often considered an essential part of the civil religion phenomenon, has been disengaged from issues of power and conflict associated with the problem of order.

In short, the overemphasis given to the Durkheimian conception of civil religion has left the civil religion thesis open to fundamental criticism. This book questions, or at least makes prob-

lematic, the cohesiveness attributed to civil religion in the United States and its inevitable, spontaneous nature. It addresses the possibility that civil religion can exist as a consciously orchestrated and state-controlled political phenomenon. It also calls into question the idea that there is a highly differentiated civil religion in America. At the heart of my criticism is the question of the underlying and widely accepted assumptions on which the traditional civil religion thesis rests. These assumptions clearly illustrate the pre-eminence scholars have given to Durkheim's account of religion. Although a critique of these assumptions (which are intimately related and to some degree overlapping) will reappear throughout this work, I will here briefly summarize some of them and indicate my difficulties with them.

First, civil religion is assumed to be, by definition, an essentially integrative force in society. I dispute the idea that civil religion is a set of religious symbols which *by definition* serves to integrate society. Civil religion may give rise, under certain conditions, to social conflict, tension, and division. Its values and its ritual manifestations may be meaningful only to certain segments of the population, or they may benefit certain groups at the expense of others. Allegiance to certain types of civil religion may also conflict with social cohesion. In other words, civil religion is more likely to produce a "qualified consensus" rather than total social integration (Wimberley and Christenson, 1981: 98). The Durkheim/Bellah interpretation of civil religion does not adequately allow for either the potentially abusive nature of civil religion or for the potentially conflictual diversity (ideological, social, ethnic) of modern society.

Second, civil religion is assumed to reflect the values and beliefs of the society as a whole. This implies that, by definition, civil religion is a national religion. However, civil religion need not be *per force* a national religion. Here the objection I raise against Bellah's thesis is its implicit identification of American civil religion with the alleged religious self-definition of the American people as a whole.

Third, civil religion is assumed to provide legitimating functions. To be sure, while the legitimating capacity of civil religion

may not be too significant, or even too effective, there seems to be enough evidence indicating that civil religion is used as an instrument of legitimation, both in democratic and undemocratic societies. Bellah (1974b: 255) claims that civil religion, at least in the United States, performs the function of a "higher law." The nation is subordinated to, and judged by higher ethical principles that transcend it. Thus, in Bellah's view, civil religion explains and justifies society and the political order in transcendental terms (i.e., in terms of an ultimate set of values). Other scholars agree and claim that the nation is the "primary agent of God's meaningful activity in history" (Coleman, 1969: 74). The assumption here is that civil religion not only legitimizes the social order but, at the same time, acts as a check against deviations by confronting the nation and reminding its citizens to uphold its most fundamental moral ideals. If we accept this proposition, civil religion can be only upright or morally justified—a conclusion that contradicts the role civil religion may have in different polities, or at different times within the same polity.

To be sure, in its Durkheimian variety civil religion may be what some authors refer to as a "potentially enduring form of overarching cultural legitimation," at least for some groups in society (Gehrig, 1981b: 36). But I reject the assumption that civil religion is always a positive force favouring cultural integration and pluralistic ethics. Analyses of civil religion, both in the United States and in the comparative cases which I discuss in chapters 4 and 5, belie such a formulation. The coercive, divisive side of civil religion will be discussed at various points in the book. It will be argued that civil religion, as an ideological and political tool, rather than being a permanent legitimator of power and authority in the polity, may be seen as an "episodic" phenomenon emerging during unsettled political times in response to crises of legitimation, both national or international (see Marty, 1974; Purdy, 1982; Regan, 1976).

Fourth, civil religion is assumed to be a spontaneous social phenomenon. In reference to its alleged spontaneity (Durkheim's idea), I contend that we need to confront the issue of the imposed nature of civil religion as well (Rousseau's idea). Western democ-

racies, characterized by a high degree of pluralism and institutional differentiation, are undoubtedly less likely to develop a totalitarian political religion than those societies in the process of modernization or ruled by an autocratic and monolithic state. Clearly, the latter are often confronted with the urgent necessity of legitimating the state before the people. In such cases, the governing elite may be more willing to manipulate cultural and religious symbols to arouse mass support. Having said this, it should also be emphasized that the democratic or anti-democratic potential of civil religion is grounded in the political processes and the uses of civil religion by particular political figures, at particular times, and not in the stages of cultural or religious evolution as some scholars have argued (Bellah, 1980a; Coleman, 1969). One has only to think of Hitler, Franco or Mussolini. This suggests that there is no such a thing as a simple developmental progression or evolution of civil religion, with the most advanced societies having the most advanced levels of civil religion (a structurally differentiated symbol system). Rather, the way civil religion operates has more to do with the type of politics and the type of government under consideration, and less to do with the level of religious development.

Finally, civil religion is assumed to be (in the United States) a belief system fully differentiated from church and state—that is, not tied to any particular denomination or ruling regime. I reject the alleged structural differentiation of American civil religion. In chapter 3, I demonstrate that civil religion in the United States has been closely associated with social and political institutions such as the educational, political, and legal system.

In other words, the notion of civil religion, as it appears in the literature, has been too narrowly conceived. An understanding of the civil religion phenomenon in all its complexity is essential if it is to be applied cross-culturally, or from one era to another within the same society.

In seeking to facilitate the analysis of civil religion, I offer a model that orders civil religion in a continuum in terms of its theoretical sources and its cultural or political significance.[3] The continuum is understood in the Weberian sense of two "ideal

types." At one end of the spectrum is the classical Durkheimian position which asserts that each collectivity has a common religion. At the other end, civil religion is conceived in terms of a particular political order, as advocated by Rousseau.

A Durkheimian type of civil religion exhibits strong cultural elements and seems to be, to some degree, more spontaneous than that posited by Rousseau. There is no centrally regulated apparatus to ensure compliance with the tenets of faith. Within the Durkheimian framework, civil religion is the product of collective thought. Moral understandings, beliefs, and values would "make sense" to the collectivity. Civil religion would be a "natural" expression of group life (whether of the nation or a smaller collectivity or group). In this sense, we can refer to civil religion as a cultural force. One may say that as a cultural phenomenon, civil religion only gradually takes on form and becomes institutionalized.

A Rousseauan type of civil religion, by contrast, is a consciously "designed" religion that leaders have to create and encourage. It is intended to exert strong control over the citizenry. Despite Rousseau's democratic intentions, this type of civil religion appears to be closely associated with particular unstable political situations, or with authoritarian and despotic governments. As a political phenomenon, civil religion may be used as a conscious tool to further political purposes (e.g., to foster national integration, to restore social and political stability, and/or to legitimize a particular political order). This implies that civil religion has the potential to be an *imposed* phenomenon rather than a permanent *spontaneous* force in society. The nature of the state and of society are crucial factors determining the character and shape civil religion may assume in a particular society at a particular time.

My work does not imply that Durkheim's and Bellah's theories should be dismissed. Rather, it suggests that students of civil religion (in particular American scholars) have not done their homework properly. By neglecting to understand civil religion as originally intended by Rousseau, they have unintentionally encouraged a misinterpretation of this phenomenon. If the

notion of civil religion is to remain a useful sociological concept, we need to stop conceiving it in exclusively Durkheimian terms—as something that springs spontaneously from the culture itself, and spontaneously binds people together. The notion of civil religion needs to be framed at a higher level of generality—that is, as a phenomenon that is neither just civil, nor just religious, but also essentially political. By conceptualizing civil religion this way, and by using it in its dual manifestation—as *culture* and as *ideology*, many of the problems encountered in the literature may be avoided. It is my hope that this broadened conception will enrich the study of civil religion by providing a better sociological tool with which to compare shades and types of civil religion both within societies and between them. I stand with Michael W. Hughey, who, in reexamining the Durkheimian theory of religion wrote: "it is with the limits of the conclusions reached, not their falsity, that the present study is concerned" (1983: xvi).