

Civil Religion Redux

Michael Angrosino

University of South Florida

The events of September 11, 2001 have led to a public display of unity unseen for nearly four decades in fractious, pluralistic America. The response could be dismissed as simple reactive patriotism at a moment of crisis, and given the nebulous and attenuated nature of any likely "war on terrorism," one might guess that the fervor will be difficult to sustain at the level apparent at this moment. But American patriotism has always been a more complex matter than the stereotype of unthinking, jingoistic flag-waving might suggest. According to the political historian Richard Reeves, writing in the *New York Times* on October 1, 2001, "We are a self-created nation driven to defend our own masterwork. Being an American is not a matter of geography or bloodlines. America is a matter of ideas, the rejection of an Old World standards we thought corrupt." He cites De Tocqueville, who wrote that Americans "have been repeatedly and constantly told that they are the only religious, enlightened, and free people," and as a result, they "have an immensely high opinion of themselves." This attitude has been contextualized by a variety of social scientists within the concept of an enduring American "civil religion."

It might be argued that American civil religion became something of a joke in the era of political cynicism associated with Vietnam and Watergate (although [End Page 239] it was revived very briefly during the Bicentennial). (See Jorstad 1990 for a more complete analysis of the transformation of the traditional American pieties into what he calls the "awakening to peace and justice" issues in the 1970s.) It certainly has not been a conspicuous element in the national consciousness during the subsequent decades of increasingly bitter interest-group politics. Social scientists, heir to the positivist traditions of Comte and Marx, accepted as a given the trend of modern societies toward "secularization," and hence have grown increasingly impatient with the notion that religion—even a "civil" one—has any place in a modern polity (Wilson 1998). Nevertheless, troubled people in a secular society may seek meaning and solace in a civil religion in response to the same motives, emotions, and associations that lead people in traditional societies to the standard sacred religions. The historian Joanne Freeman (2001: B6) has noted that "in a way no one ever wanted or imagined, the events of this month [September 2001] have taken us back to the mindset of an earlier time, when the American nation was newly formed." It was a time when "only a deep and abiding loyalty to the nation's founding principles of governance prevented the early Republic from dissolving into civil war." Another historian, Richard Slotkin, reminds us that a society experiencing trauma may come to believe that a certain shocking event upsets its fundamental ideas about what can and should happen. Such a challenge to the authority of its basic values leads people to "look to their myths for precedents, employing past experience—embodied in their myths—as a way of getting a handle on crisis" (2001: B11). This process, regardless of the form it might take in secularized societies, is a fundamental process of any religious system in any culture.

Culture is, after all, more than simple behavior (e.g., patriotic flag-waving). Behavior always flows from a complex of attitudes, beliefs, and values that derive from a common historical tradition. The concept of a civil religion allows us to interpret current behavior—which may appear superficially to be transitory and shallow—in light of historical tradition and values that have historically held meaning in American culture. At the same time, the concept allows for the analysis of particular values and behaviors in the larger context of cross-culturally salient categories of ideology, ritual, and myth-making. For anthropologists trying to get a grip on a huge and somewhat amorphous entity like "American culture," the concept of civil religion may be a reasonable point of entrée, particularly at a moment in history

when the residual commonalities of the culture loom larger than its otherwise more prominent divisions.

It is, however, no easy task to deal with civil religion; as an analytical concept that attempts to make sense of a great diversity of social and political behaviors, [End Page 240] civil religion seems to give a coherent reality to a set of attitudes and behaviors that some observers would prefer to treat as separate (and hence less meaningful). Moreover, even those who accept the possibility of that coherent reality have used the term "civil religion" in such diverse ways that the concept has come to seem impossibly vague. This paper aims to clarify the concept by reviewing its philosophical roots and historical applications; the paper also explores the reasons civil religion might remain salient in a multicultural society that, on the surface, would seem to be infertile ground for its (temporary?) resurgence. Social scientists may well hesitate to adopt American civil religion in any of its extant forms as a value system to which they personally wish to pledge allegiance. I hope, however, that this essay will at least convince them that the concept of civil religion is a useful analytical tool by means of which a number of sociopolitical trends can be put into cultural and historical context. It certainly possible to use the insights of Marxist analysis to aid in understanding the relationship between economic forces and sociopolitical trends without thereby endorsing the applications of Marxist philosophy to structures of governance. It should therefore also be possible to use the insights of civil religion theorists to aid in understanding the relationship between religious ideals and sociopolitical trends without thereby endorsing that religion as a personal creed.

American civil religion is an institutionalized set of beliefs about the nation, including a faith in a transcendent deity who will protect and guide the United States as long as its people and government abide by his laws. The virtues of liberty, justice, charity, and personal integrity are all pillars of this religion and lend a moral dimension to its public decision-making processes quite different from the *realpolitik* that presumably underlies the calculations of states not equally favored by divine providence. American civil religion is clearly an offshoot of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but it is not confined to conventional denominational categories. And while the concept of divine providence implicitly stands behind American civil religion, its character is, by definition, secular—it functions through such institutions as the branches of government, patriotic organizations (e.g., the Daughters of the American Revolution, Veterans of Foreign Wars), and outlets of popular culture (e.g., music, movies). American civil religion is thus best understood in light of Geertz's position that a religion is any "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [a people] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations [End Page 241] seem uniquely realistic" (1973: 90). This definition, which also underlies Jorstad's detailed analysis of religion and politics in the modern U.S. (1990: xv), explicitly avoids concepts of the supernatural, so important in other theorists' views of religion, in favor of a framework for studying how people are made to feel and understand, and then to act on their feelings and understandings. What makes American civil religion "religious" is not that it is always, or even necessarily, conducted in the context of the institutions or philosophical assumptions of any organized religious body, but that it, like other religions, creates potent, compelling, and "uniquely realistic" moods and motivations in its adherents.

In recent decades, theologians and social scientists have grappled with the problem of organized religion (or of more generalized spiritual faith) in the modern, secular state. On the one hand, it is patently obvious that the doctrine of the separation of church and state imposes certain limitations on the ways in which religious voices can contribute to the public discourse, as well as on the topics they can legitimately address. As Hammond (1999: 30) has noted, "the public square does not rule out religious

words and motives; it simply does not accord them authority until they are translated [into terms readily understandable even by the non-religious]." On the other hand, it is equally obvious that for all its secular materialism, the United States still struggles to define a moral dimension when formulating public policy. And despite their outer show of cynicism, Americans seem to feel that their political and social institutions are doing the "right" thing, and not simply the expedient thing. It may be presumptuous to assume that we know what Americans feel, but it might be possible to gauge those feelings by comparing the positive responses to a "righteous" call to war (the War on Terrorism as an act of self-defense) with the ultimately negative responses to an ambiguous war (Vietnam, which came to be seen as an expression of an outmoded, Cold War ideology rather than as a virtuous act of self-protection or as a way to help other people lead better lives). If this sense of American idealism must necessarily be divorced from specifically sectarian roots, how can we explain its enduring hold on the political imagination of the nation? And how is it possible for a set of professedly secular institutions to assume the character of a church?

The concept of civil religion provides a set of criteria, as well as an analytical vocabulary that has made it possible to deal with these questions. Interest in civil religion as a way to come to grips with the interface between divinely inspired morality and the sociopolitical realm peaked in both theology and the social sciences (especially sociology, and, to a lesser extent, political science and cultural anthropology) during the 1970s, around the time of the American **[End Page 242]** Bicentennial. But it has been argued (by Williams 1999, among many others) that the particularly American form of civil religion is too exclusivist/elitist. It has been seen as an offshoot of Judeo-Christian theology and as the preserve of a presumed WASP establishment even as the United States has become a multicultural, religiously pluralistic society. Like many handy labels, it has also come to be applied to far too many disparate referents; American civil religion is sometimes seen as too diffuse an entity to make any real difference in American public life. Its generality has meant that it cannot be pinned down in such a way as to permit the formulation of hypotheses that might help us predict the further evolution of those trends. It has been charged that it cannot even help us understand who among us are actually believers or, more to the point, how (of even if) those believers will translate their faith into action for social justice.

Nevertheless, well before President George W. Bush declared a War on Terrorism, the philosopher Leroy S. Rouner (1999: 4), in a series of lectures delivered in his capacity as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar in 1998-99, suggested that American civil religion had not, in fact, lost its salience, and that it might be an opportune time for scholars to pay attention to it once again. It has become commonplace, he claims, to decry the ascendancy of "special interest" influence in American life even as the political system seems increasingly to operate in a context of fragmentation in which all policy decisions must be made in the interest of one group or another, there being no real common ground on which to stand. The gist of Rouner's argument is that there continues to be an American civil religion that undergirds a persistent collective identity even in the face of the increasing heterogeneity of the body politic. He notes that critics have scorned the very concept of American civil religion because in the past it has been misused as a way of promoting a mindless "Americanism" as a club to beat us all into conformity. But as he points out, it is a grave mistake (and an ethnocentric judgment to boot) to condemn any religion because of its misapplication by misguided adherents. And in this specific case it is an even more serious error to assume that the capacity of a religious tradition (most assuredly including a civil religious tradition) to stake out "common ground" is somehow incompatible with the maintenance of a proud multiculturalism.

Civil Religion: A Brief Orientation

The sociologist Robert N. Bellah is perhaps the most prominent analyst of American civil religion. His seminal 1967 article on the concept inaugurated the contemporary exploration of this theme. In a later work (1975: ix) he explained that: **[End Page 243]**

. . . [A]ny coherent and viable society rests on a common set of moral understandings about good and bad, right and wrong, in the realm of individual and social action. It is almost as widely held that these common moral understandings must also in turn rest upon a common set of religious understandings that provide a picture of the universe in terms of which the moral understandings make sense. Such moral and religious understandings produce both a basic cultural legitimization for a society which is viewed as at least approximately in accord with them, and a standard of judgment for the criticism of a society that is seen as deviating too far from them.

In other words, social policy is a statement about the good/desirable/feasible. Expedient self-interest is certainly one way to judge what is good/desirable/feasible; but there are usually broader, more transcendent values that help a political system (certainly any democratic one) arrive at such judgments. The notion of civil religion provides a context for understanding how such broader values shape the decisions that lead to policy. To the extent that social policy is developed by, with, and/or for "the American people," it behooves us to understand what motivates that large, abstract, somewhat amorphous mass. To the extent that such policy seeks ultimately to bind the nation together rather than drive it further into corners of self-interest, it becomes necessary to deal with the qualities and characteristics that constitute the admittedly shrunken patch of common ground. For Bellah (1999: 66), there remains a "deep inner core" of American culture, one that is "ultimately religious: the sacredness of the conscience of every individual." This author does not in any way mean to suggest that the concept of civil religion explains everything about American social policy, let alone defines some sort of monolithic American character; but it may be seen to provide some fruitful leads as we seek to understand the directions of such policy as we cope with the present crisis and perhaps even look beyond it to the coming, presumably multicultural, millennium.

The Concept of Civil Religion

The concept of civil religion entered modern political thought via Jean-Jacques Rousseau's discourse on republican government in his essay *The Social Contract*. Rousseau's argument was intended as a challenge to the Platonic idea of a "civic religion." Plato saw the latter as a means by which the *polis* freed itself from factions and saw to the right development of character, goals with which **[End Page 244]** Rousseau generally agreed. But Plato's civic religion was based on strict state control and explicit dogma (Rouner 1999: 4) whereas Rousseau argued for a polity based on the sovereignty of the general will of the people and the necessity for the voluntary agreement of individuals to the conditions of the social contract. Religion was a key element in that social order, although Rousseau was certainly no advocate of the traditional organized religions, which, he believed, had led only to division, strife, and oppression. He preferred a purely civil religious faith that would support the social order, and he advocated a system of religious sentiments, convictions, and commitments that could only emerge from the separation of church and state. The doctrines of such a civil faith would, of necessity, be "few, simple, and clearly stated" (Chidester 1988: 82).

More specifically, Rousseau's ideal civil faith should affirm the existence of a powerful, intelligent, and good divinity, who should be regarded as exercising foresight and providence in the destiny of the

community. Rousseau also believed that this faith should also include a belief in the survival of the soul after death, as a belief in the ultimate happiness of the just and punishment for the wicked would provide necessary supernatural sanctions for a just social order. Moreover, a civil faith should be committed to the sanctity of the social contract and the laws of the land. In this civil religion, the social contract is sacralized (i.e., infused with religious power because its authority derives ultimately from the Divinity). These very general doctrines notwithstanding, Rousseau believed that the civil religion should be tolerant of the diversity of private religious opinions, as long as they were not allowed to disrupt the unifying sentiments generated by the "faith" of the entire polity.

Echoes of Rousseau's ideas have appeared in various formulations of the role of religion in modern, secular society, such as Martin Marty's concept of "religion-in-general" (1959) and Sidney Mead's exploration of the "religion of the republic" (1963). But by general agreement, the most significant theoretical and descriptive work on the concept of civil religion has been that of the sociologist Robert Bellah, whose 1967 article, "Civil Religion in America" appeared at the height of the Vietnam War in an atmosphere of anguished national reappraisal. As such, it struck responsive chords among theologians and social scientists alike. As Rouner interprets Bellah:

American civil religion is not what we believe in our heart of hearts about the destiny of our immortal souls. It is, rather, the beliefs we share with our fellow citizens about our national purpose and about the destiny of our national enterprise. Vague and visceral it may be, but there is an **[End Page 245]** American creed, and to be an American is to believe the creed. America is, in this sense, a religious venture (Rouner 1999: 3).

But, of course, the religion at the core of the venture is Rousseau's brand of civil faith.

Types of Civil Religion

Three major strands of thought have emerged in the analysis of civil religion: (1) civil religion as culture religion, (2) civil religion as religious nationalism, and (3) civil religion as transcendent religion. There is considerable conceptual overlap among these three, and it may well be that the different aspects of the American civil religion have recombined with one another, producing distinctive constellations at different points in the nation's history. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish the three trends for purposes of this overview discussion. *Civil religion as culture religion* is a position that derives from classical French sociology and its insistence on viewing society itself as a set of collective representations symbolizing a common identity. The symbols of a culture religion are independent of church and state, but their symbolic resonance permeates both religion and politics. This diffuse set of collective representations can be described, interpreted, and analyzed in the same way that a cultural anthropologist might try to reconstruct the religious perspective that gives a certain coherence to a traditional folk or tribal society. Culture religion theorists (see, e.g., Williams 1951) contend that every functioning society has its own religion insofar as it possesses a common set of rituals, ideas, and symbols that supply an overarching sense of unity even in a society riddled with conflicts. Particularly in a society with the potential for fracture, the common culture religion can provide a more or less systematic vocabulary of sacred symbols, allowing for a degree of cooperation, integration, and solidarity.

This point of view is predicated on religion being understood to be the meaningful inner core of culture, and on culture being the outer manifestation of religion, an idea developed extensively by the theologian Paul Tillich (1959). Religion, for Tillich, is the ultimate power that drives the shared, common

life of a community. That power need not be identified exclusively with organized religious institutions, however, since it is an inherent force that finds expression in the basic patterns of a culture—as likely to be revealed in the activities surrounding economic exchange or family life or artistic endeavor as in formal religion per se. In this respect, culture religion is the "invisible religion" of a [End Page 246] community (Luckmann 1967), which is manifested in its shared symbols, values, and ideals.

Culture religion can be analyzed in terms of its interrelated aspects of belief, practice, and experience—or, in other terms, its myth, doctrine, and ritual. There is, in addition, a strong ethical component to the culture religion, in the sense that it fosters a more or less systematic set of standards for ordinary action. These standards must ultimately be translated into "meaningful" experience—i.e., those experiences that can be communicated and shared, as opposed to those that are purely mystical and interior. The most common meaningful experience in culture religion is patriotism, which in this sense is more than simple adherence to a body of laws and a respect for certain institutions. It is, rather, "a dynamic power, energy, and enthusiasm awakened through personal involvement" with the culture (Chidester 1988: 91). Military service, jury duty, and voting are all activities that make "patriotism" meaningful in the experience of most citizens; those experiences can then be symbolized by such things as flags, certificates, or membership cards that serve to remind people of their mutual bonds.

The second strand of thinking is that of *civil religion as religious nationalism*, a perspective that draws from the German, rather than the French school of sociological theory. This viewpoint focuses on the power of religion to legitimize the state, to the extent that the state itself came to be defined by its sacred power. In modernizing societies, traditional religious institutions lose their force. As Bellah and Hammond (1980: 77) put it, "religion declines as power coalesces in the institutions of the state." But religious feelings are not eliminated—they are simply displaced to the state. Such a tendency was a feature of the "state Shinto" of Japan in the first several decades of this century (Kitagawa 1987), although it took its most extreme form in the Soviet Union, and, perhaps even more self-consciously, Nazi Germany. At such extremes, religious nationalism can become "the idolatrous worship of national identity purposes, and destiny" (Chidester 1988: 84), although it can more benignly be a way to mobilize symbolic resources to legitimize the aims, goals, and purposes pursued by the nation.

Finally, it is possible to view *civil religion as transcendent religion*. When civil religion involves what Bellah calls a "genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in, or . . . as revealed through the experience of the . . . people" (Bellah 1979: 179), then the historical experience of the society provides the context for the relationship between God and the world. In such a transcendent religion, the nation's history takes on the character of a sacred myth and is expressed in terms of powerful religious values and [End Page 247] sacred ideals. The collective experience of that nation therefore "stands under transcendent judgment and has value only insofar as it realizes, partially and fragmentarily at best, a 'higher law'" (Bellah 1970: 255). In the transcendent religion, religious and political spheres interpenetrate in the formation of collective symbols that do not only evoke certain moods in people, but actually motivate them or impel them to action (see, e.g., Geertz 1973). Transcendent religion is distinguished from religious nationalism, which it superficially resembles, insofar as it is less a form of national self-worship and more the subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend it and in terms of which it should be evaluated (Bellah 1970: 168).

Civil Religion in America: Concept in Action

The American prototype of Rousseau's image of civil religion was provided by Ben Franklin, in whose *Autobiography* we find the following avowal:

I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing of good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtues rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteem'd the essentials of every religion (in Wentz 1998: 53).

Franklin considered these elements of a general religiosity to be necessary to the creation of a unified social order. Religious doctrines supporting morality, virtues, and dedication to public service were deemed to be necessary for the unity of the republic (LeBeau 2000: 68). As Wentz notes, "There is a story to tell [about the translation of Franklin's vision into the fabric of the American polity] that sheds light on the origins of the American people" (Wentz 1998: 53), and it is certainly no accident that the American Bicentennial of 1976 was the "golden age" of civil religion inquiry (Mathison 1989: 130), with Bellah's own reassessment, *The Broken Covenant*, as its centerpiece.

Civil religion in America has displayed persistent elements of theism and even theocracy, in the sense that the government was, in a way, held to be divinely ordained, and given a role as protector and arbiter of morality that Europeans even today find perplexing (Novak 2000: 165). It has nurtured a sense of a unique American destiny and a type of civil millenarianism that leads Americans to view the nation as the focus of God's work in human history. **[End Page 248]** Moreover, American civil religion has been based on the elevation of the democratic system to a sacred status. In treating democratic principles, institutions, and the voice of the people as sacred elements in an overarching religious faith, civil religion in America has infused the democratic system with an aura not shared by most other civil polities. It has also made it difficult for Americans to understand how people of good will and intelligence could choose to be anything but democratic. Non-democratic states have typically been held to be, at best, the products of uncritical adherence to tradition and, at worst, the results of systematic brainwashing.

American Civil Religion as Culture Religion

If we define a myth as the imaginative truths by means of which people construct their lives and order their thinking, then there is a foundational myth that tells the story of who the American people are, why they came to the New World, and what they stand for. John Locke, the British philosopher, consciously used Biblical imagery in his famous statement, "In the beginning, all the world was America." His point was that America, for Europeans at least, has traditionally been the pure Eden, a place of innocence and fresh starts. The myths behind American civil religion all speak to this presumed primordial condition. The story includes an event similar to the Exodus (the migration of people from oppression in tradition-bound societies to freedom in the New World). There has always been a sense that those who came to America were a new kind of people—freer, larger in spirit, more open, more honest, more pure than those made small and bitter by tyranny. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address spoke of the bringing forth on this continent a "new nation" that was explicitly trying to forge a union out of a multiplicity of peoples and religions. To be sure, this mythology applies only to those who migrated voluntarily. The involuntary migration of the slaves has been conveniently ignored in the foundation narratives of American civil religion. The American story begins with the "discovery" by Europeans—another convenient lapse of historical memory common to the myth-making process, for just as the slaves were excluded from the great narrative of Exodus, so the Native Americans were excised from the

process of the "discovery" of the New World Eden. In any event, the Europeans (both the Catholic Spaniards and French and the Protestant English) often acted as if they were divinely commissioned in their quest. In finding a "new world," they established the physical context in which a "new people" could flourish. In such a context, there was no room to acknowledge the presence of an ancient people with a very different outlook on life. **[End Page 249]**

The process by which myth becomes a civil religion also includes processes of investing symbols with transcendent significance, translating ordinary people into heroic legends, and creating rituals that encourage the celebration of those symbols and people.

In some contexts, "myth" connotes a fanciful, unhistorical—and hence irrelevant—belief (see, e.g., Swift 1998: 262). But anthropologists certainly do not underestimate the power of myths to create their own reality. Myths are formed by symbols, and also give rise to new symbols. Every nation symbolizes itself in a flag, but the United States has compounded that symbol by choosing as its national anthem a song about the defense of one particular flag that was in physical danger. It is probably no accident that "The Star-Spangled Banner" became the national anthem, despite being notoriously difficult for untrained singers to perform. Both "God Bless America" and "America the Beautiful" (the latter with its invocation, "God shed his grace on thee") have been far more popular as songs, and both have figured prominently in public expressions of national solidarity since September 11, 2001. But in a civil religion, a totemic figure such as the national flag is a safer and more unifying symbol than God, who is, after all, subject to so many different sectarian interpretations. (During the recent crisis, people in my southern state have been writing letters to the editor and besieging call-in talk shows with requests that folks put away their Confederate flags—in calmer times defended in some quarters as symbols of "heritage"—for the duration, as a sign of national unity.) It is a measure of the intensity of the current crisis that God is once again a rallying cry and not a cause of division. We should, however, keep in mind that the God of Irving Berlin is not any recognized sectarian deity, but more akin to the principle of Divine Providence as it might have been understood by the American founders (or Rousseau, for that matter).

America has been particularly rich in the symbolism entailed in the legendary embroidering on the lives of actual historical people, places, and events that are believed to embody the story of the national identity. George Washington is conventionally referred to, without apparent irony, as the "Father of the Country," and his presumed qualities of courage, dedication, and honor stand for the typical American virtues. Washington's role as both symbol and secular saint is as important as his actual historical role as a military and political leader. In the stories enveloping other the other Founding Fathers (like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who died within hours of each other on the Fourth of July, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence), as well as later heroes like Lincoln, we can see the ideas basic **[End Page 250]** to the civil religious tradition. We can see that Americans believe in equality, and that they constitute a leveling society in which citizenship is valued for its ingenuity, native intelligence, effort, and private initiative (Albanese 1976).

There are also, to be sure, written texts analogous to sacred scriptures that embody and preserve those teachings that construct the American world view and its sense of what is ultimately meaningful. We revere, for example, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, and the orations of the great patriots. It is interesting to note that in his "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used the Declaration as a homiletic text, much as he might have used the Bible when preaching in his church. The rhetorical pattern of the "Dream" speech is rooted in the language of the Declaration as much as it is in the cadences of the African American Baptist sermon (Wills 1978: 175; see also Raboteau 1990; Spillers 1998). But King's use of the Declaration also echoed Lincoln's use of that

same document in his Gettysburg Address, where it stood for the moral underpinning of his vision of the renewed nation. Any religious tradition, after all, builds through a process of accretion and cross-referenced allusions across the generations.

The mythologizing of Washington is illustrated by a story that involves the Marquis de Lafayette, the French aristocrat who fought in the American Revolution. In 1824, the elderly Marquis returned to the United States for a triumphal farewell visit. While he was paying his respects at Washington's tomb, an eagle was spotted soaring on high—the traditional symbol of the apotheosis of the Roman emperors. And then about a decade later, Washington's remains were placed in a new marble coffin; it was widely reported (and widely believed) that although the great man had been dead for nearly forty years, there was no bodily corruption or odor. "The wholeness of Washington's body seemed a sign of the wholeness of America grounded on its past" (Albanese 1981: 302).

If Washington is the quasi-divine embodiment of American virtue, Lincoln may well be the American Christ figure. Assassinated on Good Friday, he was a sacrificial victim who in death succeeded in a way he never had as a living politician—in helping to heal the wounds of civil strife. He died so that there might be a Union, a compact among diverse peoples who had torn the nation apart for the sake of their unrestrained self-interest. Lincoln's blood was shed for his people, sanctifying the very ground that had so recently been saturated with the blood of fratricides.

Like any people, Americans needed to translate their myths into rituals through which they continually celebrated, and thus reaffirmed, their common values. In their various ways, the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving, and **[End Page 251]** the birthdays of great presidents and patriots, all are occasions for acting out what it means to belong to America. Many holidays have been detached from their original historical meanings, but even if young people have to be constantly reminded of why it is important to celebrate such days, the fact remains that these celebrations of the national identity continue to figure prominently on our annual calendar of remembrances. Moreover, social institutions, such as the public schools, have historically functioned to instill a general, shared religious commitment to a common national identity. Public institutions (and even some private enterprises) for example, typically are closed for business on such holidays, which is usually not the case for strictly sectarian religious days of observance, such as the Feast of the Assumption, or Divali, or Rosh Hashanah. Believers may be granted days off for such observances, but the enterprise as a whole does not shut down. At its core Christmas is, of course, a sectarian observance. But it has been translated into a major public holiday through celebration of the generalized civic virtues of "peace and good will."

G.K. Chesterton once quipped that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed," a creed shaped by two major sources of religious belief: the Enlightenment ideals embodied in the Declaration of Independence, and the persistent, residual traces of a Puritan covenant theology. According to Chesterton (in Mead 1975: 20):

The creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence. It enunciates that all men are equal in their claim to justice, and that governments exist to give them that justice, and that their authority is for that reason just. It certainly does condemn anarchism, and it does also by inference condemn atheism, since it clearly names the Creator as the ultimate authority from whom these equal rights are derived.

The principles of equality, liberty, and justice thus take their place with the traditional Scriptural "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and charity, because they are all believed to derive from the

authority of a divine Creator. Doctrines of divine election, special providence, and manifest destiny reflected the influence of Puritan covenant theology. These elements do not, to be sure, form a systematic formulary of belief, but they have been of enormous influence in shaping American self-understanding as a nation. These elements "create a theological vocabulary for achieving ideological consensus and for conducting ideological conflicts in American culture religion" (Chidester 1988: 88). In an important **[End Page 252]** sense, the philosophical and theological constructs of Puritanism were transformed by the architects of the American civil religion, who believed that "the whole society, not merely some of its parts [i.e., its specifically religious institutions], constituted the bedrock of the future" (LeBeau 2000: 67).

This American ideological vocabulary has been encapsulated in the term "utilitarian individualism" (Bellah and Hammond 1980: 170). This orientation to personal and social ethics in American society reflects a generally practical set of standards, suggesting that things are to be used and people are to be useful. Utilitarian individualism looks beyond any presumed intrinsic value in people and things, and instead finds value in the measurement of their usefulness as resources. This practical orientation has been certainly been abused—there has been a longstanding tendency to "objectify" the human that is clearly at variance with the tendency of Judeo-Christian anthropology. Nevertheless, utilitarian individualism has obliquely contributed to the establishment of an ethical dimension in American collective life. The organized conception of how things ought to be, or how people ought to act and interact, may be defined as the *ethos* of a culture. The distinctive *ethos* of American civil religion has been shaped by the cultural forces of pragmatism, materialism, and an abiding faith in human progress through technological development. The result of American pragmatism is that any religious value must ultimately be measured and justified in terms of its practical consequences. Bellah has come to identify the tendency to calculate such consequences in narrowly, selfishly individualistic terms as a perversion of this orientation. "Utilitarian individualism" in its best sense allows the individual to understand that his/her best individual interest lies in upholding the common good. In America, "religion" can only be tolerated to the extent that it is capable of cultivating both individual self-improvement and civic virtue.

In a culture religion, civic virtue is ultimately embodied in a sense of patriotism, which in America, as elsewhere, also has a negative side, in that it can be used to inflame sectarian interests. In the United States, "the mantle of patriotism . . . has periodically been claimed as the exclusive privilege of particular social, political, and religious interest groups" (Chidester 1988: 92). Bellah and Hammond (1980: xiii) have noted "a pull toward archaic regression in the American civil religion," the tendency to identify a particular constellation of Americans (traditionally white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxons) as the exclusive representatives of a uniquely American community of righteousness; patriotism thus became a call to adhere to the standards of the elite. But American civil religion is more complex than that image might suggest, because an important element in American self-identity is the tradition of righteous dissent and the **[End Page 253]** obligation to speak out against mindless homogenization. Thoreau's civil disobedience in the face of unacceptable national policies represented a view that the "true America" was a notion open to different interpretations. The elite conservators of American patriotic civic virtue have certainly not always been kind to dissenters, but the right of people to dissent has never been expunged from the list of cherished American values, no matter how seriously it has been curtailed in practice. Wilson (1990), for example, argues that there have always been regional sub-varieties of the national civil religion, and Bellah (1999: 57) has pointed out that the sectarianism that has always characterized religion in the United States is a kind of template for a modern sense of multiculturalism. For these reasons, it would be incorrect to see American cultural religion as the homogeneous creation and tool of the elite; its expression also includes the "others" who have historically been "invisible" (Long 1974, 220). In effect, the tensions in American culture in general are also tensions in American civil

religion. The incorporation of those tensions into the set of expectations encompassed by the civil religion is what gives the concept its evolving dynamism as a way to come to terms with the emerging multicultural society.

It is therefore clear that the personal experiences of Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants, and women have revealed basic tensions in American culture religion. Although the overarching symbols of a civil faith provide the potential for a unifying, all-inclusive religious devotion to America, many have felt excluded by those very symbols. The voting booth was the great symbol of the triumph of democracy—but certainly not to the freed slaves who faced harshly discriminatory policies when they tried to exercise their new franchise. But because voting rights became a centerpiece of the early phase of the Civil Rights Movement, the voting booth was reclaimed as a potent symbol of American democracy. The symbol was not jettisoned—it simply expanded to include a greater diversity of American meanings, as a result of organized dissent conducted within the general parameters of the democratic process. The ability to continue to accommodate "otherness" within a unified culture religion is perhaps the greatest challenge facing American civil religion, although its historical tendency to do so provides grounds for hope that it may continue to be a vehicle for the nurturance of diversity without fragmentation.

American Civil Religion as Religious Nationalism

Although the United States has avoided the excesses of religious nationalism seen in totalitarian states, certain tendencies in that direction certainly exist. Bob Dylan's caustic Vietnam-era protest song, "With God on Our Side," is perhaps the [End Page 254] most famous pop cultural critique of the attitude that the institutions of the state were not, in fact, expansive systems of symbols (as the above discussion suggests) but actually embodiments of a divine will that could not be challenged. Those who have claimed to speak for the United States adopted an aura of sacredness relatively early in the history of the nation—long before it became a global military and economic power—and such voices continue to represent the U.S. in terms of a unique national destiny and as a locus of God's interaction with the world. The founding of the Republic was couched in terms of a chosen people and their millennial destiny. LeBeau (2000: 67), for example, contends that the Founding Fathers and most of their contemporaries accepted the idea that a successful republican society and government depended on a virtuous people, such that one of the functions of government was to inculcate those virtues in the populace. The impulse of religious nationalism has continued to be a powerful force in shaping American history; examples include the "manifest destiny" creed that fueled our westward expansion, and the intimations of fulfilling a divine plan that underscored a host of wars and imperial adventures. It even, for an unconscionably long time, buttressed both the maintenance of the institution of slavery and the genocide perpetrated on Native Americans. Closer to our own time, religious nationalism has found expression in the rhetoric of the Cold War and its "evil empire" imagery (Jorstad 1990: 1). The September 11 crisis has been explicitly cast as a battle of "good vs. evil"—moral, rather than political or diplomatic principles are at stake. The White House often refers to Osama bin-Laden as "The Evil One"—not merely a man who commits evil acts, but the very embodiment of evil, so transcendent in nature as to be literally unutterable. As the historian Elwyn Smith (1971: 155) has noted, "The Republic—both its morals and its unity, and therefore its power to survive—rested on a pervasive religious and moral consensus."

An important stream of American religious nationalism has been the "republican theocracy" (Smith 1971: 168) associated with Calvinist theologians of the nineteenth century (Timothy Dwight, Nathaniel W. Taylor, and Lyman Beecher among them). Rousseau's classic model of the civil religion had explicitly

excluded Christianity, since to him it was just one more "sect" that tended to divide rather than uphold the civil order. But the American Calvinists were interested in salvaging both Christianity and the sacred state, and so came to the conclusion that God exercises moral government over the state, although divine moral government in America is carried out by awakening "the voluntary energies of the nation itself" (Beecher in Chidester 1988: 96). As such, the democratic order was interpreted as God's theocratic order. God's divine laws for human **[End Page 255]** government were said to be embodied in the Constitution. "With a sophisticated theological precision, Lyman Beecher and the other republican theocrats affirmed a residual Puritan heritage in the notion of America as a chosen people with a unique destiny under the moral government of God" (Chidester 1988: 96).

The Civil War was a grave challenge to American religious nationalism, since two separate polities, both claiming the mantle of the divinely ordained state, were contending for power. The New England-based republican theocrats looked upon the secession of the Confederacy as a "cosmic disruption of the sacred order represented by national union. As the divine governor of that union, God could only be expected to restore order" (Chidester 1988: 96). But the southern preachers yielded to no one in their ability to cloak their cause in Biblical imagery. Particularly popular among the secessionists was the image of the Exodus—ironic in light of the fact that the descendants of the southern slaves were to use that same image in the course of their later struggle for civil rights. The southerners argued that the federal constitution had betrayed its mission by avoiding mention of God—an oversight corrected by the constitution of the Confederacy, which became the new embodiment of the chosen people. Strange as it may seem in our own time, when public religious rhetoric (if not religious feeling) has been considerably toned down, Abraham Lincoln was but the most prominent political figure of that era to spend a great deal of time in anguished effort to discern God's will in the midst of the political and military conflict. Lincoln has been described as the "greatest American civil theologian" (Rouner 1999: 5), and in his second inaugural address, he stated:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." **[End Page 256]**

American Civil Religion as Transcendent Religion

American civil religion has been described as a concatenation of the ultimate and universal principles of a republican form of polity, embodied in Enlightenment religious and political ideals as expressed by the Founding Fathers, with the character of biblical prophecy (Mead 1975: 65). Moreover, American transcendent religion is the "moral architecture" of the nation; the legal separation of church and state, combined with a vital, dynamic pluralism in American society, has supported a civil religion devoted to putting basic moral principles of republican government into practice (Bellah and Hammond 1980: 142). In effect, the overweening power of the state—the ugly potential end-product of religious nationalism—is always constrained by the recognition that there are principles that transcend the state, to which even the officers of government must bow. This principle was invoked to counter the so-called "Nuremberg defense."

For political interests to establish themselves in or near the center of the American political arena, they are obliged to make some claims to transcendent symbols. In recent times, such diverse "religiopolitical" figures as Jerry Falwell and Jesse Jackson have "quoted in prophetic tones from the Bible, and claimed special access to the inner significance of transcendent civil religious principles of American government" (Chidester 1988: 105). Even politicians who lack official clerical status know how to invoke those symbols. Henry Kissinger, for example, that master of *realpolitik*, claimed that the only justification he could think of for the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia was in order to demonstrate that NATO was still a viable organization. But President Clinton knew better than to try to rally support for his policy with such a self-serving argument. Instead, he focused on the humanitarian catastrophe, implying that a failure on our part to act decisively would allow a wicked dictator and his morally bankrupt henchmen to continue to perpetrate evils unknown in Europe since the end of the Second World War. The image of the western democracies' craven appeasement of Hitler looms large in the moral vocabulary of our times. Although a historian might logically point out numerous flaws in the presumed analogy between the Nazis and the Serbs, the fact that such an analogy had widespread resonance made it possible for the NATO response to be tolerated (albeit grudgingly) by public opinion. This is hardly the place to debate the merits of American policy in the Balkans; the point is that once that policy had been decided, it could only be successfully "sold" in the loftiest moral terms, on the assumption that Americans (and the people of the other western democracies who have begun to adopt American attitudes toward "foreign" policy) would be [End Page 257] unwilling to think of themselves as people who commit the ultimate violence of war in anything but the most transcendently unambiguous terms of good confronting evil.

By the same token, Slotkin (2001: B11) points out that one of the myths evoked since September 11 is that of Pearl Harbor—the ultimate justification of the "good war." Since the enemy in both cases could, in the shock of the moment, be dehumanized as the very embodiment of treachery and evil, America-the-victim by contrast must therefore be the embodiment of good, or else why would the powers of evil hate it so?

To be sure, one person's transcendence can be regarded by another as oppression, illusion, or heresy. Consider, for example, the public policy debate on abortion; the dread word itself rarely appears, supplanted by the imagery of either "choice" or "life," both values that transcend ordinary political discourse (and, for that matter, the ordinary discourse of medical procedure) in their appeal to higher moral concerns of which the American state is expected to be the defender.

Former Senator and presidential candidate George McGovern (1977: 34) has clearly expressed the relationship between transcendence and political experience in the American context:

The study of [Hegel and Marx] forced me to think seriously about the political process, but neither of them captured my interest with anything approaching the enthusiasm I experienced in discovering "The Social Gospel." This effort to find in the New Testament and the Hebrew prophets an ethical imperative for a just social order strongly appealed to me. To know that long years of familiarity with the Bible and the idealism nurtured in my public-school years were resources that I could direct to humane political and economic ends was a satisfying discovery. Religion was more than a search for personal salvation, more than an instantaneous expression of God's grace; it could be the essential moral underpinning for a life devoted to the service of one's time. Indeed, one's own salvation depended upon service to others.

American Civil Religion: The Current Status of the Concept

According to Wentz (1998: 57), American civil religion is "that cluster of ideas and convictions, the special practices, and the sense of peoplehood that belong to America." American civil religion emerged from a many-faceted world of ideas and practices that had to be reconciled with each other in a land with no provision for the legal establishment of religion. As a result, the principles of **[End Page 258]** government have been couched in terms suggestive of transcendent, rather than sectarian religious doctrine. The democratic social contract has become a civil religious contract that embodies sacred principles to be enacted in the political order. The civil religion is sometimes difficult to apprehend because it is like a church with no buildings or membership statistics; moreover, it has appropriated so many of the symbols of Christianity and Biblical Judaism that it is sometimes easy to forget that in the United States the image conjured up by the phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" refers not so much to ancient Canaan as to America itself. Moreover, "civil religion in America . . . may be considered as a religiopolitical system, independent of both organized religions and the institutions of government, which represents a set of collective religious symbols, a sacralized national identity, and a system of transcendent, quasi-religious principles of political order" (Chidester 1988: 83).

Civil religion in America can be analyzed in at least three dimensions: as the folk religion of a people; as the religious legitimization of a nation; and as a set of transcendent ideals against which the American people and nation have been assessed. These aspects of the civil religion have in their own ways affected the distribution of power in the United States. The plurality of civil religions should not disguise the fact that these systems of power in America have often achieved a relatively unified consensus by excluding "others" from full participation, even as they have incorporated the professed ideal of legitimate dissent into the creed.

Detailed sociological research has tended to confirm Bellah's insight that civil religion is a distinct cultural component within American society that is not captured either by party politics or by denominational religiosity. Americans do, indeed, affirm civil religious beliefs, even though most of them would not recognize the label. Surveys summarized by Wimberley and Swatos (1998: 95) indicate that Americans generally endorse such sentiments as, "America is God's chosen nation today," or "Holidays like the Fourth of July are religious as well as patriotic," or even "Social justice cannot only be based on laws; it must also come from religion." Studies have also found, however, that adherence to the civil religious norms varies across the population. In general, college graduates and those identifying themselves as political liberals appear to be less imbued with civil religious principles than others. Members of several religious bodies having denominational roots within the United States (e.g., Mormons, Adventists, Pentecostals) are the most apt to identify with civil religious values, while Jews, Unitarians, and those with no religious preference are the least apt to do so. Wimberley and Swatos (1998: 96) conclude that the extant research demonstrates **[End Page 259]** that "religious beliefs do exist in people's minds, that these beliefs are widely shared and provide a basis for pluralistic social integration across the society, and that a civil religious beliefs may be a relatively important factor in making a difference in public preference for presidential candidates and social policies." Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson (1999: 260) lend cautious support to this conclusion, admitting that the civil religious concept "does tell us something about what may still bind many Americans politically," although they are not confident that this binding effect will survive in the face of the strength of cultural pluralism and "political cynicism." They are downright skeptical of the utility of the concept in helping us understand such specific aspects of political life as voting patterns or the agenda-setting of various interest groups. In a similar vein, Wuthnow notes that "America's secular legitimating myths" have been in the ascendancy during times of American supremacy in the world; Americans lose faith as the nation's

position declines (Wuthnow 1988). Writing in a period of economic uncertainty and the last phase of the Cold War, Wuthnow implied that Americans no longer believed that our system and its values could solve all problems. Subsequent economic, political, and military successes—and the image of a nation supposedly besieged by the force of unreasoning evil—may well have reversed this trend, leading to a renewed salience of the civil religious faith of the nation.

Reflections on American Political Theology

There is an extensive literature in which the impact of specific denominational bodies on public policy is documented and interpreted. But the tendency to view religious organizations in the United States as essentially a sub-species of the more general special-interest category can obscure the possibility that some responses to policy initiatives are better understood in reference to a civil religious creed that transcends denominational special interest. As Bellah (1978: 21) has noted, "every movement to make America more fully realize its professed values has grown out of some form of public theology." Those values, as the previous discussion has shown, are not denomination-specific, and the "public theology" of which Bellah writes is not sectarian doctrinalism but the civil religion—admittedly amorphous, but still highly influential.

Bellah and Hammond (1980) argue that every society must deal with the tension between religion and politics. In forms of society they label "archaic," the problem is solved by a fusion of the two sectors (theocracy). In "historic" or "early modern" societies, the two spheres are differentiated, but not separated (e.g., the "established churches" of post-Reformation Europe). But civil religion **[End Page 260]** proper comes into existence only in "modern" society, where church and state are separated as well as differentiated. In other words, "a civil religion that is differentiated from *both* church and state is possible only in a modern society" (Yamane 1998: 49).

But how does public theology in Bellah's sense really affect American politics? The literature suggests that the influence actually arises out of a constant and creative tension between conservative and liberal brands of civil religion (Wuthnow 1983: 1989; see also Reichley 1985). Conservative political theology is predicated on the assumption that the Bible should be the foundation of all law and that therefore any law contrary to Biblical teaching should be considered unconstitutional; in other words, the Constitution is tantamount to the Word of God. Liberal political theology, by contrast, does not assume that God stopped speaking to America in 1789; the Constitution is not the final revelation, but a work in progress. Liberal public theology tends to place a greater emphasis on human agency in the larger plan of God than does the conservative branch. For example, it has been pointed out that conservative theologians have been relatively uninterested in the attempt to halt nuclear proliferation, but not because they are inherently militaristic or unconcerned with the destruction of the planet. Rather, they look on God as sovereign, such that nuclear catastrophe could happen only if God allows it. Liberals, who preserve a role for human action within God's plan, are more prone to foster political or diplomatic efforts to halt or limit the spread of nuclear weaponry (Dunn 1984).

In the course of American history, the conservative type of civil religious theology thrived in the agrarian context, while liberal public theology has been influential in the urban, industrial sector. Conservative theology, however, periodically comes to the fore even though our nation is now predominantly urban/industrial. It happens when a stable and healthy economy allows conservative moral issues to be considered appropriate topics for public scrutiny, a point that has recently been advanced to explain why we were able to afford the "luxury" of the Clinton-Lewinsky debacle—a spectacle we might have been spared had there been more pressing (i.e., economically dire) things for us to worry about.

Unstable economic conditions, by contrast, usually lead to demands for a larger role for government and for the strengthening of the national over the local governments, an atmosphere in which liberal theology has traditionally flourished.

A case might therefore be made that although the current revival of American civil religion, albeit clothed in symbols traditionally appropriated by the political right wing, is actually a manifestation of the theological left wing, **[End Page 261]** since the rhetoric is all about people doing their part, pitching in, and contributing to the war effort. God may be on our side, but Americans are being called to step up and be the active agents of God's will.

Throughout American history, religious values have moved to the foreground as an impetus to political mobilization when a group falling outside the prevailing consensus assumes a highly visible role. In such a situation, religious values often are reaffirmed in public discourse as a means of defending a way of life that suddenly may seem threatened. The American civil religion was thus a source of the anti-immigrant fervor of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. But immigrants are not the only possible out-groups who provoke such a response. In the 1950s, the specter of communism occasioned the formation of groups such as the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade and the John Birch Society, both of which moved the political discourse in the direction of apocalyptic rhetoric, with international events often interpreted through the theological prism of the Book of Revelation. The atheism of communism came to be seen as a flaw just as heinous as communism's economic theories or its association with totalitarian political structures (Swift 1998: 261). In the 1960s and 1970s, conservative religious sentiment was mobilized by "lifestyle" issues, often in reaction to "countercultural" emphases on drug use, sexual permissiveness, feminism, abortion, and gay rights. There is currently a danger that the religious discourse may be mobilized to exclude American Muslims, as Islam has been widely stereotyped as an ideology that is inherently anti-democratic, irrational, and prone to violence. (It is ironic that conservative political commentators—in other times no friends of women's rights—have been pointing with horror at the Taliban's wretched treatment of women as evidence of the moral depravity of fundamentalist Islam.) On the other hand, national leaders have taken pains to distinguish law-abiding American Muslims from the crazed, evil terrorists who presume to speak for all of Islam. In other words, the current rhetoric insists that one can be a devout Muslim but still be a good American—a worshiper, as it were, in the church of the civil religion, expanded to accommodate a no-longer strictly Judeo-Christian nation.

It would be incorrect, therefore, to think of American civil religion as simply the vehicle for reaction against dissent or progressive initiatives. Sometimes the values implicit in civil religion can be invoked to call the citizenry to an enhanced vision of issues that have traditionally been very narrowly conceived. For example, some elements in the "pro-life" movement have adopted the rhetoric of the late Cardinal Bernardin; moving away from their almost exclusive focus on abortion, they have become more inclined to see "life issues" as a "seamless garment" encompassing such matters as opposition to the death penalty, criticism **[End Page 262]** of welfare "reform," and support for environmental protection, gun control, health care reform, and immigration rights. The term "right to life" is admittedly ambiguous, but it is language that is without dispute part of the "sacred writings" of our foundational national creed. In this case, the values said to be part of that creed can move public discourse in new, expansive, and creative directions, just as they have so often in the past been used to oppose change.

The threat of religious particularism to the agenda of public theology/civil religion led Ralph Reed, until 1997 the Executive Director of the Christian Coalition and still a visible and influential spokesman for the "Christian right," to a pragmatic compromise. To the extent that specifically doctrinal values are

potentially divisive, they should be kept in the sphere of private devotion, off-limits to public debate. Instead, Reed has offered a "new ecumenism" in which people of different religious traditions can work together for public policies designed to protect and enhance "family values." The latter term carries unfortunate political baggage that has prevented Reed's initiative from getting very far. But in the wake of September 11, there is a certain appeal to the idea of setting aside theoretical and ideological points of division and looking for common ground, particularly when it comes to morally approved actions like relief efforts or interfaith dialogue forums. (Johnston [1986] has argued that in fact the New Christian Right has always been a much more diverse group than it appears; it is perforce a coalition, since a tiny core of homogeneous "true believers" could never attain much political clout.) Such a strategy brings us full circle to Rousseau's original analysis of civil religion—the avoidance of sectarian disputation in favor of the unifying values around which a stable, solidary society could coalesce.

Conclusions

Bellah himself grew disillusioned with American civil religion in the midst of the post-Vietnam and Watergate malaise. In 1975, he declared it to be "an empty and broken shell" and apparently did not see that it had a continuing relevance in a changing American culture. Nevertheless, he continues to express the hope that the "biblical and republican" traditions of the United States can reassert themselves. Even if one does not share his faith in the phenomenon of American civil religion per se, one can certainly see the utility of the concept of civil religion as a way of understanding the relationships among a number of salient points in American history and culture.

For Bellah, a public focus on commitment to the common good, as opposed to the excesses of utilitarian and expressive individualism is possible if the **[End Page 263]** once-dominant cultural language of that biblical and republican tradition (relegated for the past several decades to the status of "second language" but revived with much rhetorical fanfare after September 11) is reappropriated by citizens actively pursuing a semblance of the moral order. There are formidable obstacles to forging a national community based on common moral understandings drawn from the traditions of the American civil religion, although the obstacles seem to drop away as crisis makes it once more fashionable to "stand together." By the same token, there is a real danger in allowing these sentiments to slide into triumphalist, unthinking "America first"-ism. Bellah, who was strongly influenced by the theology of Paul Tillich, therefore sees the role of social science as that of facilitator of an evolving dialogue between discipleship and citizenship. American civil religion, as both a social movement and an analytical concept, is probably only salient in the current situation if it provides a moral basis for establishing a new coalition of interests grounded in the traditional values.

According to Novak (2000: 178):

Judaism and Christianity provided a great deal more than meets the eye . . . to the American founding. They reinforced in men's minds the role of reason in human affairs; the idea of progress in history (as opposed to a wheel of endless rotation); the centrality of personal dignity and personal liberty in human destiny; and the idea of a cosmic process conceived, created, and governed (even in its tiniest details) by a benevolent Deity: Lawgiver, Governor, Judge, gentle and caring Providence. This Deity would one day ask of each human an accounting for his thoughts and deeds. In other words, liberty is no trifling matter. How humans use this liberty matters infinitely. Liberty, so to speak, is the purpose for which the sun and the stars are made. In that respect, America's experiment in liberty is especially dear to Providence.

Richard Mouw (2001: B17), an evangelical Christian theologian, says that September 11 ushered in a "very important time for self-examination." He dismisses the statements of fellow evangelicals Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, both of whom claimed that the attacks in New York and Washington had occurred because God had withdrawn his protective shield in anger at America's moral lapses. Mouw prefers to see "every church service, every synagogue service, every mosque service" calling people to "look into their own hearts and lives" and to respond to a "religious call to self-examination." That religious call [End Page 264] is therefore clearly not based in denominations or on specific faith traditions; the religion of which Mouw speaks can only be that which unites America—the old civil religion. It is interesting to note how rapidly and thoroughly both Falwell and Robertson were ridiculed and marginalized, despite their prior claim to speak for America's "moral majority." The crisis situation made it clear to a great many Americans that their brand of narrow-minded religiosity is not, after all, the "American way."

References Cited

Albanese, Catherine L. 1976. *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

_____. 1981. *America: Religions and Religion*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Bellah, Robert N. 1967. "Civil religion in America." *Daedalus* 96: 1-21.

_____. 1970. *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*. New York: Harper.

_____. 1975. *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. New York: Seabury.

_____. 1978. "Religion and Legitimation in the American Republic." *Transaction* 15: 15-22.

_____. 1999. "Is There A Common American culture? Diversity, Identity and Morality in American Public Life." In *The Power of Religious Publics: Staking Claims in American Society*, ed. William H. Swatos and James K. Wellman, 53-68. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Bellah, Robert N., and Phillip E. Hammond. 1980. *Varieties of Civil Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chidester, David. 1988. *Patterns of Power: Religion and Politics in American Culture*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Dunn, Charles W. 1984. *American Political Theology: Historical Perspectives and Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Praeger.

Fowler, Robert B., Allen D. Hertzke, and Laura R. Olson. 1999. *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices, 2nd ed.* Boulder, CO: Westview.

Freeman, Joanne B. 2001. "The American Republic, Past and Present." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48 (5): B6.

Geertz, Clifford. 1966. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *The interpretation of cultures*, ed. Clifford Geertz, 87-125. New York: Basic Books.

Hammond, Phillip. 1999. "Can Religion Be Religious in Public?" In *The Power of Religious Publics: Staking Claims in American Society*, ed. William H. Swatos and James K. Wellman, 19-31. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Johnston, Michael. 1986. "The "New Christian Right" in American politics." In *The Political Role of Religion in the United States*, ed. Stephen D. Johnson and Joseph B. Tamney, 125-145. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Jorstad, Erling. 1990. *Holding Fast/Pressing on: Religion in America in the 1980s*. New York: Greenwood.

Kitagawa, Joseph. 1987. *On Understanding Japanese Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

LeBeau, Bryan F. 2000. *Religion in America to 1865*. New York: New York University Press.

Long, Charles H. 1974. "Civil Rights—Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion." In *American Civil Religion*, ed. R.E. Richey and D.G. Jones, 211-21. New York: Harper and Row.

Luckmann, Thomas. 1967. *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York: Macmillan.

Marty, Martin E. 1959. *The New Shape of American Religion*. New York: Harper.

Mathison, J.A. 1989. "Twenty Years After Bellah." *Sociological Analysis* 50: 129-46.

McGovern, George. 1977. *Grassroots*. New York: Random House.

Mead, Sidney E. 1963. *The Lively Experiment*. New York: Harper.

_____. 1975. *The nation with the soul of a church*. New York: Harper and Row.

Mouw, Richard. 2001. "A Time for Self-Examination." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48(5): B17.

Novak, Michael. 2000. "The Influence of Judaism and Christianity on the American Founding." In *Religion and the New Republic: Faith in the Founding of America*, ed. James H. Hutson, 159-185. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Raboteau, Albert J. "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Tradition of Black Religious Protest." In *Religion and the Life of the Nation: American Recoveries*, ed. Rowland Sherrill, 46-63. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Reeves, Richard. 2001. "Patriotism Calls Out the Censor." *New York Times* on the Web October 1. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

Reichley, A. James. 1985. *Religion in American Public Life*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Rouner, Leroy S. 1999. "Civil Religion, Cultural Diversity, and American Civilization." *The Key Reporter* 64(3): 1-6.

Slotkin, Richard. 2001. "Our myths of choice." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48(5): B11.

Smith, Elwyn A. 1971. "The Voluntary Establishment of Religion." In *The Religion of the Republic*, ed. Elwyn A. Smith, 145-60. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Spillers, Hortense J. 1998. "Martin Luther King and the Style of the Black Sermon." In *Religion in American History*, ed. Jon Butler and Harry S. Stout, 469-485. New York: Oxford University Press.

Swift, Donald C. 1998. *Religion and the American Experience: A Social and Cultural History, 1765-1997*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Tillich, Paul. 1959. *The Theology of Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wentz, Richard E. 1998. *The Culture of Religious Pluralism*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Williams, Rhys H. 1999. "Public Religion and Hegemony: Contesting the Language of the Common Good." In *The Power of Religious Publics: Staking Claims in American Society*, ed. William H. Swatos and James K. Wellman, 169-186. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Williams, Robin M. 1951. *American Society: A sociological Interpretation*. New York: Knopf.

Wills, Gary. 1978. *Inventing America*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Wilson, Bryan. 1998. "Secularization: The Inherited Model". In *Religion in American History*, ed. Jon Butler and Harry S. Stout, 336-344. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wilson, Charles Reagan. 1990. "God's Project": The Southern Civil Religion, 1920-1980." In *Religion and the Life of the Nation: American Recoveries*, ed. Rowland Sherrill, 64-83. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Wimberley, Ronald C., and William H. Swatos. 1998. "Civil religion." In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, ed. William H. Swatos, 94-6. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

Wuthnow, Robert. 1983. *The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine.

_____. 1988. *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

_____. 1989. *The Struggle for America's Soul*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Yamane, David. 1998. Robert Bellah. In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, ed. William H. Swatos, 48-51. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.