

CIVIL RELIGION: PROPHETIC FREEDOM OR CULTURAL CAPTIVITY?

A decade has passed since Robert Bellah discovered in the inaugural address of John Kennedy an "example and a clue" to what he called American civil religion. He voiced surprise then that this "religious dimension in [American] political life" had gone unattended by the academic community. "Few have realized," he announced in his opening paragraph, "that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America."¹

In the nearly ten years since that opening declaration there has been at least one decided change. Civil religion may be no closer to clear definition, and signs of religion in American politics in this election year may elicit a certain skepticism. But at least, and quite certainly, civil religion in America no longer suffers from inattention. In fact, the academic community has talked so much about it that we very well may have talked it into existence, even over the protests of its critics.

The popularity of the topic in academic circles is certainly a result of the general tone of American life these past years. The decade just completed has been a kind of national watershed on the order of the years surrounding World War I. In that period, America got its first taste of international power. American opinion and material strength was mobilized. Politicians and preachers alike presented arms. In the midst of massive social change—immigration, big organization, the city, new technology—there was a sense of cohesion, a thrill of power and a loud patriotism.

This watershed of our present experience, while on the same order of magnitude, is a reversal rather than a repetition of that Great War time. American power which has developed in the intervening half century has come to term and given birth to a seemingly unending procession of capital sins. Ebullient optimism has been replaced by harsh self-criticism and rear-guard self-defense. To sum up the "decade of civil religion" in its own terms, 1967 was a moment of awakening or "calling forth." The religious

¹Bellah's article entitled "Civil Religion in America" first appeared in *Daedalus*, 96, 1 (1967). The essay appears with several other important essays on civil religion in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). The page references to this initial essay of Bellah's will be taken from the Richey and Jones collection.

dimension of our experience as Americans was pointed out by members of the academic community and acted out by war protesters and countercultists. For all its bicentennial sentiment, 1976 is marked by apostasy and a widespread loss of faith in the America that civil religionists have attempted to call to mind.

The overwhelming sense is that the future is not given, that progress is neither inevitable nor unambiguous. We are awash in events. Vietnam, Watergate, ecological and fiscal crises, poverty and hunger and nuclear threat whirl around us until we begin to feel like Dorothy swept into the totally unfamiliar terrain of Oz by that Kansas twister. We are in need of a Wizard who can put it all to rights again, who, even if he cannot return us to Kansas, can at least tell us where we can expect to go.

There have been, of course, numerous candidates for the role of Wizard—many prophetic voices, cultural seers, a charismatic political leader or two, and a number of cult leaders with devoted followings. In Robert Bellah, we find a candidate for the role who has based his reflections on America's future in the academic discipline of sociology. In a series of essays, written in the course of the decade, Bellah has turned the working hypotheses of sociology of religion into a theological statement about America. More than that, in *Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, his latest essay on the topic, he has produced a jeremiad in the fashion of the old New England Puritan preachers, who, when they looked about them at the trials and tribulations suffered by their congregations in seventeenth century America, claimed that God was punishing his people for their infidelity to his covenant. As in its seventeenth century counterpart, Bellah's jeremiad argues from the nature of the perceived punishment to the nature of the sin. In *Broken Covenant* Bellah claims that our present troubles indicate that America has broken faith with its own transcendent goals. The consequences are dire, for America in apostasy engenders its own destruction. Bellah, of course, is not the only voice in the decade speaking of civil religion. But he has provided the language for the discussion and continues to dominate it. An account of his contribution is therefore in order.

First of all let us acknowledge that the term civil religion is open to a wide range of interpretation. Obviously it can mean the apotheosis of the American Way of Life, the divinization of capitalism, class distinctions, the political process, even the peanut farm. Short of this idolatry, civil religion can also be taken

to mean what Rousseau intended when he originated the term in the *Social Contract*, i.e., those areas traditionally designated as religion in which the state can properly claim some interest. Rousseau believed that religious opinions are of interest to the state insofar as they concern the common good of the community, and he named the state's formulation of those areas "civil religion." In addition to the possibilities for idolatry and the original meaning in Rousseau, there are several other possible interpretations of the term: as Protestant civil piety, as American democratic faith, as folk religion, for example.²

But Bellah intends something else in his appropriation of the term. He begins his discussion on the basis of a sociological view of reality which is the particular creation of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.³ In this view reality is "socially constructed," i.e., that which we take to be reality is in fact the product of human social ordering. To put the same thing in a different idiom, we might say that meaning is man-made. In this process of constructing reality or making meaning, religion is that function which gives a transcendent or sacred quality to the basic values of the social construct that emerges. Whatever, therefore, serves to authenticate the meanings and values of a society in the eyes of its members is a religion.⁴ In this sense, then, all societies and groups have a religious dimension, and America is no exception.

With this as his presupposition, Bellah set out, in his first essay on civil religion, to describe the specific or special nature of American civil religion. "Civil religion at its best," he wrote, "is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people."⁵ This religious reality is clearly differentiated from the churches and the more traditional religions and is well-institutionalized in its own right. As a religious

²Richey and Jones provide five types of civil religion in their introduction to *American Civil Religion*: transcendent universal religion of the nation, folk religion, religious nationalism, democratic faith, Protestant civic piety.

³Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1966). For an elaboration of this thesis in a context of religious studies, see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1969).

⁴The problem of the relationship between religion and the social sciences is further developed by Robert Bellah in his collection entitled *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). See especially the essay entitled "Between Religion and Social Science," pp. 237-57.

⁵Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in Richey and Jones, p. 33.

form, it is something "genuinely American and genuinely new." It is a complex of beliefs, symbols and rituals generated out of the American experience which authenticates or legitimates American life.

It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations.⁶

Bellah recognizes that much of the symbolic content of this American civil religion is "selectively derived" from the Judaeo-Christian tradition as that has been embodied in the American experience. Puritans, for example, analogized their experience in the American wilderness on the basis of the Exodus and regarded America as the New Israel. They provided subsequent generations of Americans with the language of covenant; they spoke of chosenness and promise. Quite clearly, however, the central symbol of the Christian religion, namely Christ, is missing from the language and events in which Bellah finds the sources for civil religion. Americans may accept "in God we Trust" on their coins, but would obviously balk at a joint declaration of Congress claiming that Jesus is Lord. Again then, in Bellah's mind, American civil religion is not merely an amalgam of rituals and beliefs adapted from the prior traditions of Christianity and Judaism. It is essentially a new form.

If we further pursue the relationship that exists between civil religion and Christianity according to Bellah, we find him arguing that Christianity was not and need not be eclipsed by civil religion. Precisely because it is "civil" this religion is concerned only with those events which are public in nature, and it may bring meaning only to and through the political order. In reviewing the attitudes of the Founding Fathers, he insists that they saw "an implicit but quite clear division of function between the civil religion and Christianity." In this division "an exceptionally wide sphere of personal piety and voluntary social action was left to the churches."⁷ This statement has a ring about it of relegating Christianity to the sandbox, but it reflects Bellah's eagerness to establish the differences between American Christianity and American civil religion. The distinction, however, fails to remain as distinct and tidy as it appears to be when Bellah presents it. In fact, there continues to be

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 41

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 29

a dependence of civil religion on the major traditional faiths in the United States.

To develop this point, let us first explore further the symbols that Bellah uses in explaining civil religion. "God" or "the transcendent" is undoubtedly the most important of these symbols. Civil religion has a God-image; its term or end is a transcendent one. Bellah invokes a theme that he discerns to be very deep in the American tradition, namely "the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth."⁸ This goal motivated the first generations of settlers and has been present in every generation since. Civil religion as he describes it is

the religious dimension of American political life that has characterized our Republic since its foundations and whose most central tenet is that the nation is not an end in itself but stands under transcendent judgment and has value only insofar as it realizes, partially and fragmentarily at best, a "higher law."⁹

Bellah provides some clues as to the nature of this God which is the transcendent referent of civil religion. Civil religion's God is "vaguely unitarian," a God of history who is "actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America."¹⁰ He is a God of justice and order rather than a God of love. The analogy is made to the God of Israel, whose image arose in intimate connection with the political life of the Hebrew people.

There are, however, some serious difficulties involved in the effort to give substance to the God-image of civil religion. Having argued that "God" has been such a central symbol in civil religion from the time of origins to the present, Bellah then gives recognition to the fact that contemporary theologians are dealing at great length with the relative and metaphoric nature of God-language. The meaning of the word "God" is by no means as clear and obvious, even among ordinary believers today, as it seems once to have been. Bellah wonders then if civil religion too will have to pass through some theological crisis in which its central symbol would be radically transformed.¹¹ Are the theological images of civil religion already outmoded in the light of contemporary theological insights, and must civil religion pay heed to the theologians of the major traditional faiths if it is to survive?

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹Robert Bellah, "American Civil Religion in the 1970's," in Richey and Jones, *American Civil Religion*, p. 255.

¹⁰Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in Richey and Jones, p. 28.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 37.

As Bellah's thought develops, however, it becomes clear that it is not simply a matter of civil religion taking lessons from conventional theology in order to weather an impending crisis, but that civil religion's own "God" symbol is in fact an empty category and that it depends for content on images of God generated by the traditional faiths. Civil religion, in other words, may not be in the business merely of borrowing scholars; it may also receive the substance of its central symbol from the particularist or explicit religions of the United States. Let us see how this possibility unfolds.

According to Bellah, some notion of transcendence is essential to the democratic process. If the will of the people is not to be made absolute there must always be a perceived Other which stands over against and passes judgment upon the history of the nation. Virtually all other commentators dealing with the concept of civil religion make the same claim. Bellah argues that this transcendent must be without official content. In his phrase it must remain "symbolically empty" in order to guarantee the openness of the political process. If any particular image of God were to be officially sanctioned, its very specificity would eliminate from the political process all those who, for reasons of personal experience, home training, or what have you, could not accept such an image.

Richard Neuhaus in his recent work entitled *Time Toward Home: the American Experiment as Revelation*, argues that the emptiness of the transcendent referent of civil religion has made it dependent upon the "explicit" or traditional religions for content. Civil religion, which he describes as a "half-way house of belief and morality," is inexplicable apart from the explicit religions.¹² Speaking of the "liturgies of Americanism" such as Memorial Day and Thanksgiving, he argues that those liturgies:

were never self-contained and integral. The signals of transcendence were borrowed from other, explicitly religious, traditions that provided a transcendent content. That is, they provided not simply an amorphous feeling of "something" transcendent, but belief about the nature of, and the experience of communion with, the transcendent. During most of American history, the churches have been a ready lender of the signals of transcendence.¹³

¹²Richard John Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 188. Neuhaus has provided an important new expression of the issues raised by the notion of civil religion. He deals here in detail with the question of the relationship between American civil religion and Christianity.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 196.

These "signals of transcendence" sustain the civil religion and provide it with substance in order that it may function to construct our national political reality. One may argue, then, that the explicit religions in America bear a sizeable share of the burden for the direction of national life.

The question that inevitably arises is this. If it is the case that civil religion exists in such a symbiotic relationship with the major faith traditions, if it depends on them for the content and impact of its central symbols, then can civil religion properly be called a religion at all? Bellah is arguing in effect that civil religion *is* a religion because it acts like one.

Specifically, civil religion defines an "America" which stands as a medium, or middle term, between God and the people of the United States, between ultimacy and the historical everydayishness of American life. Civil religion therefore is not merely a religious dimension of national life in the same way that politics and culture are dimensions of national life. The "America" of civil religion mediates between man and God in the same way that Christianity or Judaism does. The "America" intended by civil religion functions not only in a general sense as a kind of social glue or legitimation, but as a *revelatory form*. Authentic America in Bellah's description of it, mediates God's will to Americans. It manifests this will especially in the political and social dimensions of the national life, which it renders coherent. Thus although Bellah writes in the adjectival form—saying that America has a religious dimension—he clearly intends the noun: "America" *is* a religion.

Critics of civil religion disagree. Richard Neuhaus and John F. Wilson both argue that civil religion is not a religion, that it fails to meet the necessary requirements of a religion.¹⁴ In particular, Neuhaus is critical of the "borrowed" nature of civil religion's contents. It is not enough in his mind to say that civil religion functions as a religion. It must also have religious substance. Civil religion's referent has no content of its own. By contrast, the explicit religions represent something more than a "social construction of reality." According to Neuhaus, "they treat of things that are at the edge or beyond our ordinary perception of reality . . . in a communal, systematic and ordered way—each claiming to

¹⁴*Ibid.*, esp. chapters 19 and 20. Also, see John F. Wilson's excellent critique of Bellah's concept in Elwyn A. Smith, ed., *The Religion of the Republic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), entitled "The Status of 'Civil Religion' in America."

have singular insight into the nature of the Other to which it witnesses."¹⁵ In this sense, he says civil religion is not, and must not be permitted to become, a religion. At issue here is Bellah's functionalist approach. Neuhaus's point is that "the social phenomenon we call religion insists . . . that the existence of the Other is not posited in order to sustain the dynamics of religion, but that the meaning of religion is to acknowledge the existence of the Other."¹⁶

Even if we take civil religion on its own functionalist terms, there are problems in my mind with calling civil religion a religion. "America," theologized into a cipher of the divine, leaves the citizens of the faith on shaky ground.

"America" is offered by civil religion as a form of revelation, standing between God and American life, revealing God's will for the Republic. But that "America" depends on the continued existence of the American experience; it is distilled precisely out of that experience. And yet it is being called upon by Bellah, especially in his *Broken Covenant*, to redeem that experience, to sustain the American experience in its present "time of trial." There is a subtle circularity here. A revelatory form arises from a flawed experience, which experience that revelatory form is then expected to redeem. The circularity fails to become a creative dialectic because of the underlying perception of America's impermanence.

Quite clearly in the mind of Bellah and others, America is in trouble. Its future is uncertain; it is expected at some future time to pass away. For all that its past provides symbols which act to give this society shape and cohesion, for all that it creates order out of the whirl of contemporary events and gives some form to the longings of the hearts of its citizens, America, according to the civil religionists themselves, is not a lasting city. The present sense of crisis in American life, the obvious impermanence of its existence, undermine its function as redeemer. It lacks the dynamic of the explicit religions, namely a conviction in the minds of the faithful that there is a lasting basis to their faith. The spirit of Christ or the will of Allah are understood by believers to have wrought some permanent change in human experience. The faithful citizens of "America," on the contrary, are currently overwhelmed with the fragility of the American experience. This perceived lack of per-

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

manence itself warns us against the effort to understand America as a religion, even from a functionalist point of view.

If civil religion falls short of being a religion, then how is the "whatever we are talking about" to be understood?

I propose to call Bellah an intellectual according to Richard Neuhaus's definition of an intellectual as one who "mints and markets the metaphors by which a society understands itself." Bellah is engaged in a metaphor-making process which attempts to gather the familiar root elements of the American experience and to organize them in such a way that they shed light on contemporary events. Bellah takes the *known* of the past and shapes it into a metaphor—civil religion—which he hopes will shed light on the *unknown* of the future. Perhaps an example from one of Bellah's favorite poets will make this process clearer.

Wallace Stevens, whom Bellah calls the outstanding religious poet of our time, has written a poem called the "Anecdote of the Jar," in which he describes the process by which a human artifact, placed in the wilderness of things, organizes those things into a world of meaning.¹⁷ In a parallel sense, Bellah is placing a metaphor—civil religion—in the wilderness of contemporary events in order to render that wilderness into a world of human meaning and to insure its continued existence.

To approach the matter a bit differently, consider the notion that America itself is a social construction of reality, an invention of human imagination and activity. We are all aware that there was a time, quite recently, when America did not exist. In the time between its origins and the present, Americans have lived a story together, and it is not too much to say that America has foundation and future only if the essential elements of that story are remembered and re-told by new generations of story-tellers. In a sense then, America lives in the imaginations of its story-tellers, and under this rubric, Bellah may be seen as such a story-teller. He is developing a narrative for America around the central metaphor of civil religion.¹⁸

A final comment. This metaphor-making has obvious importance for the explicit religious traditions in American life. The logic

¹⁷Stanley Romaine Hopper presents an excellent analysis of this work in Giles R. Gunn, ed., *Literature and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) in an article entitled "The Poetry of Meaning," pp. 221-35.

¹⁸This process is perhaps most clearly seen in Bellah's book length essay *Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

of civil not-quite-religion dictates that the quality of our national life, of our domestic and foreign policy, is only as good as the "signals of transcendence" that our public piety borrows from the churches. The American experience continues to reflect the images of God which structure it.

Robert Bellah's civil religion may indeed be prophetic, precisely at this point, for it calls the attention of the churches to the importance of their role in this society and, by implication, criticizes them for their frequently-inadequate images of God.

ELIZABETH McKEOWN
Georgetown University