



Civil religion

A variously defined term used to talk about religion in the political sphere

“Civil religion” is a term that different scholars use in different ways. Basically, though, the term points to religious expressions in the political sphere—the sphere of government and citizenship.

Rousseau on civil religion



The term “civil religion” is attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Swiss-born Enlightenment thinker. Rousseau grew up in a Calvinist environment but came to adopt deistic beliefs. In 1762, he published *The Social Contract*, in which he advocated a society governed by the will of the people. One problem Rousseau discussed was how such a society could allow religious freedom while preventing the spread of atheism, which he believed would undermine society by undermining morality. His solution was that the government should require all citizens to hold certain very basic religious beliefs, on pains of banishment or even death, but people should be free to hold any additional religious opinions beyond those. The beliefs that Rousseau thought the government should require include that there is a God who expects people to do right, that there is an afterlife where wrongdoing is punished, that people have a sacred obligation to obey lawful government, and that religious intolerance is wrong. Rousseau called these government-mandated beliefs “civil religion.”

Bellah on US civil religion



In 1967, a white American sociologist named Robert Bellah published a very influential, but much debated, article in which he asserted that although the United States does not have a state church, it does have a civil religion, which Americans practice alongside whichever other religions they

may embrace. As Bellah conceived it, the US civil religion is grounded in beliefs about God that Americans have embraced since the Revolution: that God is the source of human rights and the highest political authority and has given the United States a mission for the good of the whole world. These beliefs undergird a story Americans tell about themselves: that God has been at work in their history to make them an inspiring model of a nation governed by the people, committed to freedom and equal rights for all. This religious understanding of the nation is expressed in frequently cited texts such as the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address (the civil religion’s scriptures, as it were) and in civic ceremonies such as the Pledge of Allegiance, presidential inaugurations, Thanksgiving Day proclamations, and Memorial Day observances (the civil religion’s rituals).

According to Bellah, the US civil religion is compatible with Christianity and has taken some of its elements from Christianity, notably a language about redemptive sacrifice used to glorify the nation’s war dead. Nevertheless, Bellah maintained, the US civil religion is not specifically Christian because it speaks of God but not of Christ and is “much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love.” Bellah called the US civil religion “deist in cast,” but with the qualifier that unlike deism’s “watchmaker God,” who sets creation in motion and then leaves it to run on its own, the God of the US civil religion acts within history to assist the United States.

Although Bellah adopted the term “civil religion” from Rousseau, there was a significant difference in how Rousseau and Bellah conceived of civil religion. For Rousseau, civil religion was imposed by the government. By contrast, Bellah’s conception of religion was heavily shaped by the thinking of Emile Durkheim, a

French sociologist who wrote at the beginning of the 20th century. Durkheim believed that religion came into being not as something imposed on people, but as a spontaneous ritualized expression of people's sense of group identity. Likewise, Bellah spoke of the US civil religion not as something imposed, but as something that organically arose from beliefs Americans share. (In his personal life, Bellah was a Presbyterian turned Anglo-Catholic Episcopalian. Arguably, this religious identity aligned with his professional attraction to Durkheim's theory of religion, which, like Anglo-Catholicism, emphasizes communalism and ritual.)

Bellah's conception critiqued



As a Durkheimian, Bellah assumed that Americans will share a civil religion by virtue of their identity as a nation: in Durkheim's view, all social groups are bound together by something like religion. Bellah assumed also that civil religion is positive in its social functions: it unifies Americans, sustains them through national crises, and provides a common morality they can appeal to in political discussions. Bellah lamented that the US civil religion has been misused at times to support manifest destiny and imperialism, but he saw this as a "distortion" of the civil religion, not its authentic form. Bellah expressed worry, in later writings, that Americans were flagging in their commitment to the values he had identified as their civil religion. In Bellah's Durkheimian view, this weakening of the civil religion was also a weakening of the US social fabric.

Other scholars, not working from Durkheimian perspectives, have faulted Bellah for paying too little attention to civil religion's political nature. That is: These scholars understand civil religion not as a spontaneous expression of beliefs and values shared by Americans in general, but as something whose content Americans have disagreed about and as something that may be imposed on people against their will and against their interests.

If we don't start from Bellah's Durkheimian—and normative—assumption that there is a single civil religion, to which Americans should remain faithful, then we can speak of multiple, competing US civil religions. The specific ways of speaking religiously about America to which Bellah pointed are certainly common in the historical record and could be said to occupy a privileged place in US political discourse. But there have always been other ways, as well, in which Americans have spoken religiously about their nation. Many have favored not just deistic but definitely Christian ways of talking about the nation's identity. American Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim voices have all offered distinctive ways of describing the United States' mission, of defining the nation's moral obligations, or of narrating its history through a religious lens. If we recognize all such discourses as varieties of "civil religion," then there have been proponents of racist or imperialist US civil religions as well as proponents of anti-racist or anti-colonialist ones.

Other conceptions of civil religion



In the aftermath of Bellah's 1967 article, many scholars have written about "civil religion," but they disagree about how extensively to apply the term. Some use a restrictive definition that differentiates civil religion from both a formal state religion and denominational religions. By this definition, the crowning of the English monarch by the archbishop of Canterbury is not civil religion because the archbishop acts as head of a state church. A Fourth of July worship service held by a particular American congregation would also not qualify as civil religion; it would be, instead, denominational religion. But deistic God-talk at a public Fourth of July celebration organized by a city government or the American Legion would qualify.

Other scholars refer to a wider range of religious phenomena in the political sphere as "civil religion." One typology, drawn up in

the 1970s by white Methodist church historian Russell Richey and white Methodist social ethicist Donald Jones, placed the civil religion Bellah had identified alongside four additional categories of US civil religion: “folk religion,” “religious nationalism,” “democratic faith,” and “Protestant civic piety.” Applied very broadly, “civil religion” becomes synonymous with “religion in politics.” Conceived thus, civil religion could include the use of any religious resource (vocabulary, teaching, ritual, imagery, objects, personnel, etc.) in government, in political advocacy or mobilization, in narrating or memorializing US history, or in inculcating a sense of what it means to be American, whether in spaces scholars call “public” or in those they call “private.” Civil religion in this broad sense would include, for example, all of the following (none of which are instances of what Bellah meant by the US civil religion):

- An allusion to the curse of Ham in an antebellum pro-slavery tract.
- A Baptist congregation deciding to let civil rights activists meet in their church.
- Members of a Christian Right organization praying for a national revival.
- Catholic bishops proclaiming the Virgin Mary to be the patroness of the United States.
- A Jewish family celebrating Passover by reading a haggadah that links their ancestors’ liberation from slavery in Egypt to freedom-seeking movements in US history.

Some scholars (Durkheimians especially) extend the term “civil religion” yet farther to include patriotic expressions which many people would not deem literally religious but which arguably function like religion in promoting reverence for the nation and its symbols. For example:

- The prescribed norms for showing respect to the US flag, reminiscent of how religions treat their sacred objects.
- Frequently retold stories about the nation’s founders, pioneers, or heroes that function analogously to myths.
- The treatment of the US Constitution as akin to scripture.
- The sacralization of the nation’s war dead and selected presidents.

Selected sources:

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