

Chapter 8

A New Scholarly Dispensation for Civil Religion

Carolyn Marvin

Ever since Robert Bellah introduced the term “civil religion” in the late 1960s to describe the transcendent communal impulses of patriotic rituals and speeches, American scholars have debated its existence and place in our national life.¹ Despite the pointed suggestion of the label, most scholars who use the term “civil religion” have backed away, often emphatically, from calling it a “true” religion. This includes Rod Hart, who portrays civil religion as explicitly rhetorical in his 1977 book *The Political Pulpit*.² In one of the periodic reconsiderations that Bellah’s notion has occasioned, Hart joins in viewing civil religion as the poor and ineffectual pretender to religion it has been seen as by most of its commentators.

There are other views. Following the Gulf War, David W. Ingle and I argued for a bolder concept of civil religion.³ We argued that nationalism, patriotism, or civil religion—all descriptors of the same thing—is religion through and through. In fact, civil religion may be the most authentic religion in the modern West. In the wake of events of 9/11, it may be time to look at these arguments again.

Whatever the status of civil religion, religion as a category of human endeavor is never gestureless rhetoric cast adrift from human actions. It is a system of lived engagement grounded in the most profoundly meaningful of acts—offering up the real lives of true believers to secure the moral and physical survival of the group. Religion is what Jesus did on the cross, what holy warriors undertake for Islam. Religion is the bodhisattva renouncing his own salvation for that of others.

I believe scholarly ambivalence about the status of civil religion turns less on the adequacy of notions of civil religion than on Americans’ historically conditioned experience of religion, the model that underlies our understanding of civil religion. At this historical moment, American denominational faiths occupy a morally diminished historical status. Designed to separate national from sectarian religious authority, disestablishment as constitutional doctrine weakened U.S.

denominational faiths at their core by depriving them of authority to command the sacrifice of their followers' lives. Though it may seem disrespectful to say so, I contend that contemporary American notions of religion are hard pressed, in consequence, to project a compelling vision of sectarian faith as the source and guarantor of group life.

It is no surprise that scholarship in the Bellah mold fashions U.S. civil religion as a pale echo of already pale denominational faiths. By describing denominational religion as pale, I mean it acquiesces in its state-mandated role of offering little more than a carefully contained system of polite ethics. I will argue that a rhetorically focused conception of civil religion follows quite comfortably from denominational religion's self-conscious retreat from life and death authority over believers. As part of this aloofness, denominational faith cultivates an aversion to violence that is at odds with religion historically considered. This is central to the practice of modern denominational faiths in the United States and flows from the historical deference of denominational to civil faith as a system of blood sacrifice.

If denominational religion is pale, U.S. civil religion is bright in American life. It is expressed through an elaborate system of sacrificial and regenerative beliefs, gestures, artifacts and words that bind citizens into a community of moral obligation. Though aspects of this obligation are articulated in law, its spiritual compellingness depends on the affective submission of citizens, their willingness at any moment to be so bound.

Religion certainly has a rhetorical face. But if rhetoric were the essence of religion, it would be hard to distinguish from advertising. Genuine religious expression is always connected to real stakes of death and sacrifice. These invest religious rhetoric with truth and moral authority. Gestures of life and death are primary in religion; rhetoric is secondary.

Two conditions are especially important for generating and sustaining the religious impulse. One is that the survival of enduring groups depends on the willing and, if necessary, coerced expenditure of members' blood and treasure (though acknowledgements of coerced sacrifice always signal a crisis of faith). The second is that death, the most serious threat to group existence, is mostly beyond our control. Religion is the search for the true source of killing power. Surrendering to it, we hope, will secure its blessing or its mercy, or harness it against other, illegitimate killing powers.

In the industrialized West nations take the decision to wage peace or war. On the grand scale life seems secure or chaotic largely in concert with the fortunes of the nation to which we belong. For contemporary Western sensibilities, legitimate, demonstrable authority to kill is claimed primarily on behalf of the nation. The U.S. looks with horror on those who attack it while claiming God for authority. Though our own killing often makes an ally of God, it is ultimately justified by appeals to national authority. This is so despite the strong connection of American culture to sectarian traditions from which it has historically wrested the power to enforce ultimate truth on the bodies of believers. Relations between

civil religion and its sectarian adversaries or allies do fluctuate. Civil religion may amplify, compete, or cooperate with sectarian religion. It may do all these things at once. If truth in any culture is very simply what is worth dying for, the crucial point is that civil religion is the dominant partner in any contest between national and sectarian power. At least, this is the case wherever the group as a whole grants the nation the final power to decide which citizens will be sacrificed and when. To sustain itself as the embodiment of unassailable truth, the nation calls for citizen sacrifice. The discourses that support this claim may fairly be called religious rhetoric, but their moral authenticity rests on a foundation of past blood offerings. These are enlisted to create a willingness to offer more blood in the future.

Where citizen bodies are not fully committed, rhetoric may well be in play but not religion, since the most moving rhetoric cannot hold a society together on its own. Societies are held together by believers who so agree on what is fundamental (namely, who has the right to sacrifice group members) that they will offer their own lives and their children's to defend it. To this end the nation cultivates a sacrificial class tasked to lay down its lives whenever group killing authority is in peril. This special class is the military, organized along lines familiar to any monastic community. It patrols the physical and psychic borders of the group and defends them with blood. (The home front brigade of this class consists of policemen and firemen. During the 9/11 crisis, which lacked significant sacrifices of U.S. lives abroad, firemen and policemen played the most visible and mythically compelling sacrificial roles.)

The abiding focus of civil religion, like that of religion generally, is death. So understood, civil religion is no set of optional beliefs for its citizens. In moments of crisis, disloyalty to the national god is intolerable. The need for devotion to the national purpose and its instruments is so compelling and immediate that action may righteously be taken against those who fail to demonstrate sufficient piety. More important is that the authority of the national god to dispense life and death to believers is at stake. Threat therefore provides the crisis and justification for the nation to sacrifice its own. Sacrificing citizen lives on behalf of the national god re-claims for the nation the sole prerogative to control the life and death of its own members from false gods who challenge it. By this means the national god reigns supreme.

Because their models of sectarian faith have been de-fanged and domesticated, scholars of American civil religion have underestimated its hold on believers. When denominational religion went head to head with nationalism beginning roughly in the seventeenth century in Europe, denominational religion lost much of its power to command or inspire sacrifice. Disestablishment was the settlement of that struggle in effect if not always in name. In consequence of this historical process, denominational religion in the U.S. was constrained to avoid armed challenge to the killing authority of national religion. Though it fights a rearguard action for moral superiority by arguing that violence is never justified, it is expected to rally round, and usually does, when the national god asks for sacrifice.

If less orthodox denominational offshoots occasionally venture forth from their subordinate place to try and seize killing authority for themselves, as David Koresh did in the 1993 Branch Davidian uprising, the national god stands ready to demonstrate whose killing authority is supreme. Though denominational religion retains elaborate rituals for commemorating the sacrifices that anchor its past, and though on occasion it enters the political arena to cheer on or criticize civil religious practice, its claims on believers are subjunctive and metaphorical. Few in the U.S. truly expect believers to give up their lives for the Methodists or the First Church of Christ.

Rendered weak, denominational religion allows national religion to exercise unrivaled command of group hearts, minds, and bodies. Indeed, it has little choice. Denominational religion is not so much protected by the state as carefully monitored to make sure it stays within the boundaries assigned to it. So constrained, denominational religion may offer profound meaning to its own faithful. But it is so inessential for the life of society as a whole that it is a matter of official indifference whether or not people believe in it. Belief systems of such casual consequence are not fully realized religions in the sense argued here, but simply among the available options for U.S. citizens within the bubbling stew of pluralism.

Denominational religion offers meaning, comfort and solace. These are not small gifts. Nevertheless, contemporary U.S. sectarian faiths demand little from their followers beyond piety and occasional volunteer efforts. Where religion demands more, as democratic civil religion does, spiritual doubt is a constant danger. Belief that demands the bodies of believers is serious business. It must be vigilant against skepticism concerning the ends for which death is demanded. Such skepticism is salutary and risky. It is salutary in providing a popular check on the sacrificial demands claimed by leaders for the national god. Only causes for which believers will actually sacrifice their children can be thoroughly prosecuted. This inhibits, if it never quite banishes, a level of adventurism that heedlessly spends blood and treasure. But such skepticism is also risky. Where groups are unwilling to undertake critical sacrifices, their prospects for survival diminish.

The uneasy conviction that there are few causes for which U.S. citizens are willing to shed their own blood demonstrates a classic dilemma of empire. Historically, empires have failed to inspire the intense loyalty of national faiths whose believers share a common language, land, and blood. Client or slave states typically provide the blood that secures the borders of empire. Hesitation to offer the faithful in defense of empire hints at a limit to spiritual commitment that will sooner or later be tested by those who serve other gods. Nor can advanced technologies of communication and travel provide a cohesion that will match the unifying intensity of blood ties. Indeed, technologies of distance are likely to increase rather than reduce the scale of blood sacrifice in the long run. If Clausewitzian total war has been necessary to generate a sacrificial scale adequate to tribally bind the citizens of industrial nation-states, what will global communities need to unify in their own defense? Empire builders facing the dissolution of communities made fragile by technological links operating in the

absence of bodily intimacy may be tempted to call forth unity through sacrifice amplified on a terrifying scale.

Whatever the future of American empire, American civil religion has been resilient within its national borders. Like other religions, it has seen periods of more and less active belief and commitment. Since World War II unified a generation, devotion to U.S. civil religion has been manifest in short-lived bursts of solidarity engendered by presidential elections, the moon landing, the Gulf war and 9/11. It has also been marked by periods of malaise and divisiveness. The most visible class of apostates in contemporary American civil religion is found among intellectuals. This is partly because current intellectual modes of analyzing culture are not well equipped to recognize or credit genuine religion. The unfashionable master narrative, for example, constitutes the heart of religious thinking.

Still, the discomfort of contemporary scholars with the idea that civil religion exists, or ought to, suggests more than the vagaries of intellectual fashion in two important ways. The first is that intellectual authority proceeds from a textual rather than bodily base. From this perspective modernity may be seen as a struggle between textual classes that preserve the bodies of their own members from being used up for group survival by means of their skills in producing and manipulating texts, and body classes whose cultural value is the muscle-work they perform, particularly in war. Textual authority conceals, even from the textual classes, their dependence on and domination of the body classes who are required to expend their blood in the service of the group.⁴

There is a more profound reason that scholars have failed to recognize or respect the religious intensity of U.S. nationalism: namely, the official testimony of patriotism that it is not religious at all. This is the claim of the U.S. Supreme Court, the highest arbiter of the Constitution as the most sacred and foundational American holy charter. In *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, (1943) the Court refused to make flag worship compulsory for schoolchildren by granting a constitutional right not to say the Pledge of Allegiance. The first time it faced the question of the pledge in *Minersville School District v. Board of Education* (1940), the Court ruled that schoolchildren could be compelled to say the pledge. It recanted in *Barnette*, recognizing that compulsory flag worship explicitly equated civil religion with denominational faith. In twice deciding by the narrowest possible majority (*Texas v. Johnson*, 1989; *Eichmann v. United States*, 1990) that citizens could legally burn the American flag, the Court barely refused to establish a category of desecration that would render officially holy the central artifact of U.S. civil religion.

Perhaps this refusal to confer official sanctity on U.S. civil religion is the best evidence of its secular nature and a decisive challenge to the account of civil religion I propose. Durkheim famously defined the sacred as what is kept apart from the profane. He regarded this distinction as the bedrock of all social organization. By refusing to call itself sacred, civil religion cannily distances itself from what is conventionally considered religious in U.S. life, though this conventional faith makes no compelling claim on the lives of believers. By officially repudiat-

ing its own religious status, civil religion protects the sanctity of the national god by refusing to speak its real name. Thus it separates itself from proximate religious competitors. This is the deep structure of disestablishment. The national god tolerates denominational gods if they agree not to demand believers' lives to guarantee their own claims to truth. So long as custom confers the title "religion" on sectarian faith, civil religion has reason to distance itself. To do otherwise would cede moral equivalence to competitor gods. Meanwhile, the sanctity of civil religion is gesturally manifest in ceremonial acts from naturalization to war. Language, too, offers clues to the real situation. "God may show you mercy," said Sen. John McCain, of Osama bin Laden's heretically monstrous challenge to the killing authority of the United States, "We will not" ("Terrorist Attacks"). In a moment of crisis, a sacrificial war hero asserts the respective killing authority accorded to national and sectarian religion.

The frequent appearance of sectarian language in the ritual vocabulary of national appeals for God's favor and mercy also casts doubt on a religious account of patriotism. If national religion is paramount, why does it use the vocabulary of sectarian religion at all? One answer is that U.S. civil religion inherits the rituals and symbols of Christianity historically shared by the majority of its founders. Denominational language invests civil religion with familiar religious forms. Civil religion thus deploys a recognizable religious register while shielding itself from challenge and unbelief. It is also true that conqueror religions often incorporate the indigenous faiths they dominate. As Catholic Spain absorbed the gods the shrines and ceremonies of Aztecs and Incas in South America, American nationalism incorporates and pacifies Christianity.

The religious status of patriotic ritual and belief has been challenged on the grounds that it lacks cults of divine beings, organized churches and priesthoods or their equivalent, and doctrinal explanations and consolations for death. In fact, these elements figure prominently in U.S. civil religion. I have already discussed the doctrine of sacrifice. The state and its officers constitute the church and priesthood of the nation. In the broad sweep of religions, the expression of divine principle takes different shapes. Some religions model it as a single personality with human attributes; others (Roman Catholicism and the mystery religions of Greece, for example) boast multiple divinities. Other traditions treat the divine principle as a force immanent in nature or the universe. The divine principle of American nationalism is manifest in the nation and the flag. Mystically speaking, all citizens partake of the flag, the holy corporate body, the most sacred artifact of U.S. civil religion. As a non-material numinous entity, the flag encompasses all believers, living and dead. Material flags also stand in for sacrificed citizens who are joined to it in the role of supernatural, bloodthirsty guardians. In a group crisis these transformed but watching dead call for the sacrifice of living generations. The sacrificial class is ritually called to offer its blood to avenge and nourish previously sacrificed, now divinely embodied, generations. The occasion that demands this response is the sacrificial crisis described by Rene Girard.⁵ If false or competitor gods are permitted to challenge with impunity the nation that presides over life and death, the na-

tion as divine principle may not be all-powerful or worthy of obedience. The sacrificial blood of believers removes this threat and restores its power.

Debates about the existence and value of civil religion are especially compelling to those who engage them from the perspective of professing one or another sectarian allegiance. Civil religion may then be cast as earnest but second-rate—not, after all, impressive compared to earlier religious traditions. Seen in this light, American civil religion may appear theologically shallow and ignobly chauvinistic compared to denominational faiths. The usual conclusion is that in its weak state American civil religion aids communal solidarity, but claims to a more central identity or moral focus would be unfortunate. This analysis simply fails to acknowledge the religious dominance of U.S. nationalism, which justifies and explains the death of sacrificial believers in a way that sectarian faith has not been permitted for two centuries. Americans rightly cherish their country's avoidance of the corrosive sectarian strife that convulsed Europe from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The so-called wall of separation between state and religious authority in the U.S.—a phrase that both stands for and conceals the subordination of sectarian to national religion—secured internal peace through the triumph of national religion. Church and state separation is an article of faith in the democratic catechism and a source of national pride.

Rod Hart argues that the social contract between secular and religious authority is two-pronged. Sectarian religion provides a rhetoric of moral legitimacy, and the state provides enforcement. David Ingle and I argue that both the rhetoric of civil religion and its actions in the strong sense described here can be at least as usefully understood within a framework of religious nationalism. Denominational religion must bow to this authority in order to exist in the contemporary United States. Resistance by sectarian faiths within the national community is thus regarded with alarm. Witness the fate of David Koresh, who competed for killing authority with the nation. This is what denominational religion may not do. The fundamental elements of nationalism—rhetoric and action—may point less to the covenant between separate social domains that Hart argues for than to an integrated national system that makes patriotic sacrifice its religious focus.

That said, Rod Hart surely has a good part of the analysis of civil religion right. He convincingly argues that inferences from presidential rhetoric alone, from which Bellah and his colleagues made the case for civil religion, are evidentially inadequate. He calls for expanding the range of evidence within which civil religious talk and observance could be located. But he perhaps overlooks the limitless range of patriotic talk, rituals, and practices in which Americans daily ground and rehearse the claims of civil religion. To complicate Bellah's account of civil religion, Hart focuses on the indifference and hostility that are part of the social response to it and to all religion. And by limiting his observations largely to the comments of ecclesiastics competing with civil religion for the loyalty of believers, he leaves others to explore the implications of his insight that civil religion is society-encompassing, not simply a debate among presidents and clergymen. He discerns the elements of the settlement between civil and ecclesiastic

authorities, the one supplying the muscle of nationalism, the other offering go-along rhetoric—though I believe the rich rhetoric of patriotism is far more central. It is found in ceremonies and talk about the Fourth of July, in presidential elections, in rituals of war and every other national ceremony. It flourishes in mediated representations of American life including news, films, politics, advertising, and every form of popular culture. In this elaborated account of civil religion, ‘enforcement’ emerges not as a crude despiritualized violence, but as the sacralized focus of a grandly articulated system of religious meaning in which denominational religion takes second place. Civil religion and denominational religion are not, in this view, equal partners uneasily at peace with one another. Denominational religion tells us about civil religion only indirectly.

To exemplify the way in which nationalism triumphs over sectarian claims, I choose Hart’s discussion of the Rev. Billy Graham’s views about Dwight Eisenhower. As commander of World War II Allied troops in Europe and twice president, Eisenhower stands as one of the revered holy fathers of 20th-century U.S. civil religion. In a recurring homily of the faith, citizens are reminded of his observation that government should be founded in religion, and he didn’t care what religion it was.⁶ As Hart has it, Graham, a lifelong ambassador from denominational to national religion, made much of the fact that only after Eisenhower became president did he join a church and receive baptism. But Graham misunderstood Eisenhower’s gestures. In these acts the nation’s highest religious officer cultivated diplomatic relations with persisting native faiths. The foundation of Eisenhower’s civil devotion had been laid during his initiation as a West Point acolyte. He described this experience with the fervor of the spiritually transformed:

My first day at West Point—June 14, 1911—had been rough. My classmates and I had been barked at and ordered by upperclassmen to do all sorts of ridiculous chores, on the double. All 285 of us were weary and resentful.

Towards evening, however, we assembled outdoors and, with the American flag floating majestically above us, were sworn in as cadets of the United States Military Academy. It was an impressive ceremony. As I looked up at our national colors and swore my allegiance, I realized humbly that *now I belonged to the flag*. It is a moment I have never forgotten.⁷

Religion is not rhetoric. A religion constituted by rhetoric alone, as Hart argues in *The Political Pulpit*, doesn’t do anything.⁸ But U.S. civil religion does do things. It kills. It commands sacrifice. It transforms infants, non-believers, and converts from other national faiths into Americans. It even mobilizes churches, synagogues, and mosques. It offers patriotic instruction in efficacious spells and rituals that believers will put to work when crisis comes. This is why Eisenhower could say that government should be founded in religion and never mind which one. He believed that in the moment of group truth, all citizens would gather under the single tent of American sacrificial authority. The moral and physical continuation of the nation would depend on it.

Chapter 8

1. Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* (Winter, 1967), pp. 1–21.
2. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1977.
3. Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
4. See Marvin and Ingle, pp. 41–63, and Marvin, "The Body of the Text: Literacy's Corporeal Constant," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994).
5. Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
6. Quoted in Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, pp. 100–101 (this edition, p. 86).
7. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The Day I Knew I Belonged to the Flag," *Reader's Digest* 94 (March, 1969), p. 93.
8. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, p. 5.

Chapter 9

1. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, pp. 43–65 (this edition, pp. 43–59).
2. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, p. 5.
3. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, p. 44 (this edition, p. 43).
4. On the Jewish population and settlement of the colonies see any standard history of American Judaism. For example, Stanley Feldstein, *The Land That I Show You: Three Centuries of Jewish Life in America*, pp. 1–34.
5. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, p. 46 (this edition, p. 45).
6. All quotations in this paragraph are drawn from George W. Bush, "The Commitment of Our Fathers Is Now the Calling of Our Time," address at the National Cathedral, September 14, 2001.
7. See Kevin Eckstrom, "Poll: Religion Increasing in American Public Life."
8. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, p. 44 (this edition, p. 45).
9. Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," p. 5.
10. Rhode Island's history of religious tolerance attracted approximately 50% of the Jewish population of the colonies and three of the five synagogues in the colonies at the time of the revolution. See Jacob Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew 1492–1776*, vol. 2., p. 860.
11. For a brief overview of religious diversity in the colonies at the time of the revolution see Curtis P. Nettles, *The Roots of American Civilization: A History of American Colonial Life*, pp. 470–484.
12. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, p. 44 (this edition, p. 44).
13. Robert V. Friedenberg, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of Militant Decency*, pp. 15–17.
14. See Chapter 2 of Friedenberg, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of Militant Decency*.
15. Friedenberg, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of Militant Decency*.