

CHAPTER 3



RELIGION AND AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE

Introduction

Research Pieces

- 3.1 Robert N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America* (1967)
- 3.2 Grace Y. Kao and Jerome E. Copulsky, *The Pledge of Allegiance and the Meanings and Limits of Civil Religion* (2007)
- 3.3 Michael F. Bailey and Kristin Lindholm, *Tocqueville and the Rhetoric of Civil Religion in the Presidential Inaugural Addresses* (2003)
- 3.4 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000)

Primary Sources

- 3.5 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, Book IV, Chapter VIII: Civil Religion* (1762)
- 3.6 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1833), Chapters 2 and 5
- 3.7 President Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address* (March 4, 1865)
- 3.8 General Dwight D. Eisenhower, *D-Day Message* (June 6, 1944)
- 3.9 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *D-Day Prayer* (June 6, 1944)
- 3.10 President John F. Kennedy, *Inaugural Address* (January 20, 1961)
- 3.11 President Bill Clinton, *Oklahoma City Speech* (April 23, 1995)
- 3.12 President George W. Bush, *Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance* (September 14, 2001)

Introduction

Since colonial governor John Winthrop first described the New World as a “city on a hill” in the seventeenth century, scholars have noted the centrality of religion in American public life and considered its philosophical and practical consequences. Generally, the discussions of its philosophical uses analyze religion in the terms of civil religion—beliefs, symbols, and rituals connected to a specific nation that tend to encourage patriotism and place that nation in the larger context of eternal truths and values. Much of this chapter focuses on this major use of religion in American public life. But religion also has more practical utility to a nation. Its organizations are central to American civil society, a phenomenon noted by as early an observer as Tocqueville and chronicled by recent scholars such as Robert Putnam. Religious groups and people help government in two ways: first

by encouraging civic skills in individuals who practice similar skills in religious bodies, and, second, by creating voluntary associations that perform many of the functions that other nations would assign to government. Together, religion can make citizens more loyal to, as well as less demanding of, government.

Robert Bellah's "Civil Religion in America," written over forty years ago, remains the cornerstone of scholarly thought on civil religion. He offers the classic definition of civil religion: "a collection of beliefs, symbols, and ritual with respect to sacred things and institutionalized into a collectivity" that exists alongside organized religion. This definition lays the groundwork for the discussion that follows.

Grace Kao and Jerome Copulsky turn our attention to the rhetoric of civil religion. They distinguish between the goals of preservationists who view civil religion as essential for cultural coherence and advocates of a more expansive and pluralist rhetoric. They also examine the "posture that civil religion takes toward the state," comparing priestly and prophetic modes of discourse.

In the next selection, Michael Bailey and Kristin Lindholm analyze one of the ceremonial staples of American political life: the presidential inaugural address. The authors examine how civil religion has changed from the early days of the nation to the present: from God's blessing to God's sanction, from a calling to live faithfully under a higher power to assuming the role of being "the cutting edge of history, the light that illuminates the path for others to follow," from success contingent upon obedience to exemption from the restraints of others, from looking to God to looking to humanity for national salvation. They caution against the dangers of self-justification and question the difference between idealism and utopianism.

More practically, religion can be a major source of social cohesion for ordinary Americans, providing both important identity and practical purpose to their lives. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam finds religion to be the "central fount of American community life and health." How does religion bind people together, and how might that be useful in civic life?

We then turn to a series of primary sources, both old and new.

Long before Bellah popularized the term, Jean-Jacques Rousseau described civil religion in his *The Social Contract*. Rousseau advocates the deliberate formation of a distinct civil religion that can coexist with any multitude of mutually tolerant religions. His arguments are interesting to consider alongside contemporary discussions of the role and place of religious ideals in the public square.

From this piece predating America's establishment we turn to one of the first outsiders to chronicle the American political philosophy, French historian Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville found central, common beliefs necessary for social unity. Human action has its roots in man's idea of deity, Tocqueville argues; thus, the religious sphere is essential for political unity and should be overseen by the government. This idea raises interesting questions about the role of government and public opinion in the formulation of religious beliefs, and contrasts sharply with contemporary understandings of the role of religion in formulating political beliefs.

From these scholars of political thought we move to evidence of civil religion at work in America, with a series of speeches by American political figures spanning the last 150 years. From Abraham Lincoln to George W. Bush, we witness substantiation for the claims made by these scholars.

President Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address makes an interesting statement regarding the use of God for political ends: "Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other." With the knowledge that supporters of

vastly differing perspectives find theological support for their actions, how might this change our view of civil religion and its uses in our political society?

Eight decades later, General Eisenhower and President Roosevelt both delivered public prayers on D-Day. Each spoke in sanctified terms of his undertaking: the “Great Crusade,” accompanied by the world’s “hopes and prayers” (Eisenhower); the “mighty endeavor . . . to set free a suffering humanity” (Roosevelt). This is priestly civil religion at its best. Does such rhetoric, sincere or not, belong on the national scene?

President Kennedy takes a step further down this path. In his inaugural address, he attributes near-divine power to the American people themselves, saying that “the energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world,” hearkening back to Winthrop’s city on a hill.

The final two entries, by President Clinton and President Bush, demonstrate the role of civil religion and the national impulse to appeal to patriotism in the face of tragedy. The Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 attacks were dark moments in national history; in both situations the president sought to comfort and unite Americans in civic faith by appropriating scriptural terminology—the rhetoric of sin, God’s divine purposes, the forces of evil, and the overcoming of evil with good.

Civil religion raises many questions: When, where, and in what forms are references to civil religion appropriate? Does such rhetoric provide, in the words of Kao and Copulsky, a “sacred legitimization of the social order”? Does it have inherent dangers, such as fostering undue pride and false utopianism, as Bailey and Lindholm warn? Is religion the source of communal bonding that Putnam discusses?

Each of these selections illuminates different aspects of religion in political life—whether by showcasing civil religion, pondering the potential for national self-critique, or examining the practical implications of a connection between religion and the nation. Collectively, they demonstrate that the state and religion have a pervasive influence in providing and maintaining order in American society.

Research Pieces

3.1

Robert N. Bellah

CIVIL RELIGION IN AMERICA (1967)

While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith, and others that church and synagogue celebrate only the generalized religion of “the American Way of Life,” few have realized that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America. This article argues not only that there is such a thing, but also that this religion—or perhaps better, this religious dimension—has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does. . .¹