

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

College of Communication Faculty Research and
Publications

Communication, College of

3-1-2002

Official and Unofficial Civil Religious Discourse

Steven R. Goldzwig

Marquette University, steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu

Published version. *The Journal of Communication and Religion*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March 2002): 102-114.

[Publisher link](#). © 2002 Religious Communication Association. Used with permission.

This article was published as Chapter 13 of the book *The Political Pulpit Revisited*. Eds. Roderick P. Hart and John L. Pauley II. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press 2005: 151-160. [Publisher link](#).

Official and Unofficial Civil Religious Discourse

Steven R. Goldzwig

This essay discusses Roderick P. Hart's unique contribution to the scholarly investigation of civil religion in America. The essay also comments on traditional rhetorical constructions of civil religious discourse manifest in the presidential public address of George W. Bush. The essay concludes by offering evaluative commentary on three sets of innate tensions that complicate rhetorical constructions of civil religion: Church and state, republicanism and liberalism, and pluralism and secularism. Keywords: Rhetoric, civil religion, civil religious discourse, civil religion and the presidency, church, state, republicanism, liberalism, pluralism, secularism, Robert N. Bellah, Roderick P. Hart.

[W]e Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time, we bear the ark of the liberties of the world

Herman Melville¹

Rod Hart's (1977) *The Political Pulpit* remains a landmark work in rhetorical studies. Hart's analysis of civil religion and his characterization of the rhetorical properties of American civic piety still have resonance some twenty-five years later. Perhaps Hart's greatest contribution is the careful case he presents for the unique contribution rhetoric (and a rhetorician) can make to the discussion and understanding of civil religion in America. In pursuing this goal, Hart added a dimension to American, political, and religious studies that had been largely ignored. Like some other scholars at the time—and Robert Bellah (1967) was first among them—Hart set about arguing the importance of American civil religion as a heuristic metaphor and, going further, isolated its perdurable rhetorical features. In specific terms, Hart's careful argument on Bellah's misappropriation of the term "religion" as the larger umbrella term for the phenomenon under study

was and remains a significant contribution to the literature on civil religion.² The term "civic piety" was effectively argued as a more felicitous nomenclature. Moreover, Hart, unlike Bellah, was able and willing to distinguish between "official" and "unofficial" civil religion. However, the bulk of Hart's study focused on "official" or "mainstream" civil religious discourse. Those civil religious speakers, groups, and organizations displaying sectarian, partisan, and overtly ideological proclivities were largely beyond the scope of Hart's study.³

Hart's alternative to Bellah's model was a rhetorical model: "Civic piety, in America at least, emerges not so much from blind momentary passion, but from a knowing, practiced, thoroughly pragmatic understanding of the suasive arabesques demanded when God and country kick up their heels rhetorically" (p. 45). Part of the relationship described here is one of unstated contract between the political and religious establishments. Hart employs the contract metaphor as a heuristic device. That contract provides that each party adopt the "guise" of separation, that employment of mainstream religion by the politician will be mainly rhetorical, and that each party will refrain overtly overstepping its bounds rhetorically (pp. 43-44). Rabid "public theologians" are prone to do violence to this contract. The contract is informed by three primary principles: "that religion can provide an ultimate meaning system for its adherents, that government is able to exert coercive influence on the affairs of its citizens, and that both government and religion wield considerable rhetorical power" (p. 53). As Hart summarizes, "In short, religion gives us faith in faith. And when religion shares the motivational cosmos with government, it becomes only a short emotional step from faith to patriotism and from God to country—presuming, of course, that our political leaders have their rhetorical wits about them" (p. 53). Thus, "the philosophical power of religion and the coercive influence of the state are buttressed equally by their ability to use *rhetoric* often and well" [emphasis added] (p. 54).

Both religion and the state are sources of power. Yet they remain unequal partners. The state has coercive power while religion can only revert to symbolic influence. Thus, Hart argues, the state has existential jurisdiction over the citizenry and various institutions while the church

has rhetorical jurisdiction over the American people. The rhetorical strategies of civic piety as gleaned from "official" sources—i.e., expedient complexity, nonexistential content, ritualistic presence, and prosaic animus, help ensure that the contract survives. In Hart's view Americans revel in talk and that symbolic state is the key to preserving the contract. As Hart notes, "should some far-sighted prelate or politician fail to notice the fine print imbedded in the civil-religious contract and . . . misperceive its rhetorical nature, the American people will come a-marching . . . [S]o let both clergyman and congressman be warned—civic piety, not civil religion, is the order of this and every day in these tenuously united states of ours" (pp. 106-107). These insights and conclusions, among others, represent a major contribution. Hart taught us how such discourse functions and why it is indeed a significantly powerful form of "talk" in the national religio-political and cultural lexicon.

Civil Religious Discourse and the Presidency

One need only consult traditional public sources to confirm that "official" civil religious discourse as described by Hart perseveres. Perhaps the most dominant public source of "official" civil religious discourse inheres in the national consciousness through the auspices of the presidency. Richard Pierard & Robert Linder (1988) maintain that, "historically speaking, the presidency has been intimately linked to civil religion, and this has bonded the presidency to religious Americans" (p. 19). Whether encountered in a prophetic or priestly version, civil religion "represents an alliance between politics and religion at the national level, resting on a politicized ideological base: (1) there is a God; (2) his will can be known and fulfilled through democratic procedures; (3) America has been God's primary agent in modern history; and (4) the nation is the chief source of identity for Americans in both a political and religious sense. According to this outlook, Americans are God's chosen people, a New Israel which made the exodus to the promised Land across the sea and became a 'city on a hill,' a light to the nations, proclaiming the message of democracy as the salvific doctrine that will lead the human race to freedom, prosperity, and happiness"

(p. 25). The President is the "pontifex maximus" of American civil religion (p. 25). According to esteemed church historian Martin E. Marty, Ronald Reagan "politicized and exalted civil religion to its highest point in American history" (qtd. in Pierard & Linder, 1988, p. ix). But all presidents have carried on the tradition of civil religious discourse.

In his inaugural address, George W. Bush (2001a), like his predecessors, resurrected obligatory "official" or "mainstream" civil religious discourse. Bush identified God as the source of our national unity and indicated that God's work must truly be our own: "Our unity, our union, is the serious work of leaders and citizens in every generation. And this is my solemn pledge: I will work to build a single nation of justice and opportunity...I know this is in our reach because we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us in His image." God's hand is upon this nation and guides its efforts: "Americans are generous and strong and decent, not because we believe in ourselves, but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves. When this spirit of citizenship is missing, no government program can replace it. When this spirit is present, no wrong can stand against it." This is reinforced with biblical allusions: "And I can pledge our nation to a goal: When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side."

God's hand in directing America and its cause is the same now as it was when our forefathers founded this nation: "After the Declaration of Independence was signed, Virginia statesman John Page wrote to Thomas Jefferson: 'We know the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong. Do you not think an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm'.... Much time has passed since Jefferson arrived for his inauguration. The years and changes accumulate. But the themes of this day he would know: our nation's grand story of courage and its simple dream of dignity... We are not this story's [A]uthor, who fills time and eternity with [H]is purpose. Yet [H]is purpose is achieved in our duty, and our duty is fulfilled in service to one another.... The work continues, the story goes on. And an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm.... God bless you all, and God bless America." Thus we have an amorphous God calling us to unity and purpose, self-

sacrifice and mission, setting us upon a path of rebirth and renewal and a president, in highly recognizable form of symbolic summons, coaxing us to our better angels in the practice of republican virtues. There is classic symbolic inducement in the words and mythic construction in the interpretation.

George W. Bush (2001b) also performed the priestly function often required by American civil religion in his moving call for a "National Day of Prayer" in his address at the National Cathedral on September 20, 2001. Indeed, in times of national crisis and national shock, grief, and mourning, civil religious discourse provides a rhetorical call to recommit ourselves to national purpose and resolve: "America is a nation full of good fortune, with so much to be grateful for. But we are not spared from suffering. In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom. They have attacked America, because we are freedom's home and defender. And the commitment of our fathers is now the calling of our time." And: "On this national day of prayer and remembrance, we ask almighty God to watch over our nation, and grant us patience and resolve in all that is to come. We pray that He will comfort and console those who now walk in sorrow. We thank Him for each life we must now mourn, and the promise of a life to come." Bush dutifully and fittingly performs his priestly function of national assurance and national blessing by concluding: "As we have been assured, neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, can separate us from God's love. May He bless the souls of the departed. May He comfort our own. And may He always guide our country.... God bless America." Bush's words confirm the following claim offered by Pierard & Linder (1987): "One must not forget that American society contains a significant religious component and civil religion plays a key role in establishing national unity by promoting a common religious faith" (p. 28).

Having confirmed that civic piety as outlined by Hart and as described by Pierard & Linder is still fully alive and healthy in America, the question of why such discourse perseveres is open to dispute. So too, of course, are the judgments and evaluations regarding the proper

interpretation of this discourse. Scholarship on civil religion has occasioned ongoing, often vexing disputes over the originality, definition, existence, and efficacy of such a concept. Given space constraints, I have neither the hope nor the intention of doing justice to this large body of scholarly work. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to direct my comments to three sets of innate tensions which inhere in civil religion and its narratives: (1) church and state, (2) republicanism and liberalism, and (3) pluralism and secularism.

Church and State

The dual obligations posed by religion and the state place the religiously inclined into a de facto dual citizenship. As individuals presumed under allegiance to the service of two masters, it is not surprising that there will be, at times, and under certain circumstances and situations, divided loyalties and inevitable conflicts. While some argue that church and state might work best if each acknowledges its own limitations and neither oversteps its proper boundaries and interests, it is a difficult terrain to navigate in a circumspect fashion.

Let the sacred serve the secular when it seems propitious, and the secular will defer by adumbrating a "hands off" approach to religious affairs, verbally promoting both separation of church and state and a concomitant advocacy of religious freedom. But in any particular era, this "silent agreement" sometimes seems strained; at times, the covenant can even seem "broken." At such times, scholarly attention to civil religious narratives is even more necessary and our critical interpretations are perhaps more immediately relevant. When civil law conflicts with religious conscience and the rhetorics of the state are at loggerheads with the rhetorics of religion, the more unsavory, hard to navigate undercurrents of civil religion are sometimes laid bare. The teeming contradictions, inconsistencies, and sometimes, downright unparallel universes can be exposed like live wires whipping in a virulent thunderstorm.

My own take on developing a useful method of accounting for civil religious discourse is to investigate the ways and means the state

and/or its surrogates appropriate and employ religious symbols as a means of pursuing particular interests. In turn, we also must address how religious sects, groups, or individuals try to influence the state. Thus, part of the task of exploring the rhetoric of civil religion in general is to characterize and catalogue state-inspired-and-led references to God and godly-values that imbue the state with transcendent appeal *as well as* religious-inspired-and-led references to God and godly values that either bless or challenge the political status quo. I believe these discursive activities vitally affect our interpretations of civil religion in any particular era and they have significant implications for church-state relations.

It is probably important to point out the obvious in this context. Some strains of what Hart might label "unofficial" civil religion take on a decidedly liberal or conservative character in aim or goal, if not tone. Certainly the civil religious discourse of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson, for example, differs markedly in its goals than that of the Reverend Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference is not the Christian Coalition. Having pointed out the obvious, it does seem to me a potentially useful scholarly enterprise to examine the inherent similarities and differences that might append here. At a minimum, detecting and accounting for the differences between the prophetic and priestly voices reverberating in these liberal and conservative strands of discourse may contribute to a further understanding of the phenomenon discussed in these pages. In addition, rhetorics of "rights" and "virtues" both potentially contribute to "national moral character" and thus are *both* worthy of further investigation. Moreover, whether the unofficial strain is "liberal" or "conservative," the discourse and the actions of the interlocutors involved may at times impel the state into coercive action. That is, when pressed, the state has few qualms about suppressing religion when necessary. As Thomas Jefferson remarked, "it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order" (qtd. in McConnell, 2000, p. 96).

Reference to the coercive power of the state occasions another vexing thought. It seems that not all forms of "official" civil religion promote benign republican virtues, nor do all "serve the people." Some

have proposed that this is also true of civil religious discourse in the United States. Even those who firmly believe that civil religion is a harmless piece of manipulative stitchery that helps attach delicate patches to the intricate mosaic of the national quilt must admit that there is no inviolate guarantee that this will always be the case. What seems beyond dispute is that civil religious discourse can be employed by the state to mask and sometimes advance raw power. Rather than being "amicably divorced" from political society, civil religion might be integral to advancing the aims of repressive regimes. Marcela Cristi (2001) cites such cases in Spain, Malaysia, Chile, and China (see, e.g., Cristi & Dawson, 1996; Regan, 1976; Stevens, 1975; Zuo, 1991).

Republicanism and Liberalism

Susan Okin (1997), in a review of Michael Sandel's (1996) *Democracy's Discontent*, notes that in America, historians have bemoaned the eclipse of community by individualism at least since 1650. Okin argues that Sandel approaches the latter part of the 20th century as demonstration of the failure of individualism. More precisely, Sandel contrasts republicans with liberals. Sandel valorizes republicans, who through the practice of civic virtue, come to understand the importance of self-government as a means of serving the common good. Republicans thus are portrayed as focused on character and civic virtue. Republican virtue comes from the distinct understanding that citizens are "obligated to fulfill ends we have not chosen" (Sandel, 1996, p. 12). This view adumbrates the concept of the "encumbered" self, i.e., the creation and implementation of a self that recognizes and enacts innate fundamental duties to others.

For Sandel, liberals value and defend "free and independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties they have not chosen" (Sandel, 1996, p. 6). Here individual rights are said to have precedence over majority decisions. Okin asserts Sandel locates liberalism's "great error" in its failure to engage the great moral issues in political life. If Okin is correct (and I believe she states the case well), Sandel's polarized, manichaeian account of "good" republicans and "bad" liberals, certainly

can be related to the discussion of civil religion. It matters very much if "rights" discourse is *actually* trumping that of traditional "republican virtues." How this plays out and what difference it will make in the 21st century version of the American dream is, to my mind, quite consequential. Nevertheless, as Okin (1997) rightly observes, the fact of the matter is "there have always been strong liberal and republican currents in U.S. political discourse ... and ... these currents often coexist in the beliefs of the same thinker" (p. 442). Okin (1997) poses the following question: "What civic virtues matter here and now?" Another "tough question" is: Can "the independence required of republican citizens ... co-exist with capitalism on any scale at all[?]" (p. 442). One might also add that increasing globalization will impact the concept and the conduct of nationhood. The unique forms of civil religion in the United States and those of other nations in the international community need to be monitored, analyzed, and evaluated, especially for major changes in both the strength and contour of civil religious discourse. Transnational developments in civil religious discourse may affect the U.S. of the future.

A Note on the Future

The future, of course, is filled with new challenges. In the aftermath of September 11, Americans are discovering that the traditional three-faith system (Protestant-Catholic-Jew) identified by Will Herberg (1955) may have to be revised. The traditions of Islam have become important, not just because Americans are newly curious after having experienced immense tragedy, but also because there is now a significant portion of American citizens who identify with and practice Islam. There are now over 7 million Muslims in the United States. Many experts believe that the increasing Muslim numbers are eclipsing that of the U. S. Jewish population. In the process of opening up to the changed religio-cultural terrain and in response to the terrible events of September 11, Americans from the comfortable traditions of the three-faith system have also had to confront their own limited understanding of the religious tenets and cultural practices of American citizens who are simultaneously

practicing Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs. While a religion like Islam may be able to comfortably engage "official" forms of civic piety, it is unclear how well it can or will live with "unofficial" sources of civil religious discourse, especially the more virulent strains. In any event, the increasing presence of differing religious confessions is likely to affect, if not alter, certain interpretations and audience reactions—and, therefore, has the potential to alter rhetorical pronouncements. How this takes place and how we as a nation reinterpret civil religious discourse in the face of these changes, of course, remains an open question.

Pluoralism and Secularism

One likely place where changes in religious lexicons might be detected is in the dispute over the integrative and legitimation functions of American civil religious discourse as handed down by tradition. Two very large trends could tend to further mitigate or vitiate those functions: the increased internal religious and cultural pluralism alluded to above and increased secularism. While Americans are overwhelmingly religious, they are also increasingly wooed by the secular culture and its material enticements. Brief examples will have to suffice in this context. Increasing pluralism, on its face, can be viewed as a force in mitigating the purported integrative and legitimation functions of civil religion. As Cristi (2001) points out, the "positive" attributes of American civil religion, including its alleged role in "nation-building, moral order, national identity and solidarity, and its purported function in building and sustaining community have yet to be empirically verified" (p. 70). Perhaps, Cristi theorizes, civil religion plays such a role with elites, but the jury is still out on how powerful and effective civil religious discourse is with marginalized peoples both in the United States and elsewhere. Peoples of color and those in underresourced communities may have very different interpretations of civil religious discourse. Rhetoricians need to take notice of and document such differences. One thinks of the patriotic tunes "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "God Bless America" as ultimate expressions of civil religion. Yet those songs have not produced totalizing identifications. In America, we still have the ongoing

phenomenon of the African American "national anthem," the perennial song sung at many Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebrations across this nation, "Lift Every Voice."

Acceptance of civil religious discourse as a viable American discursive practice seems to require a faith that people find assurance in appeals to the sacred in promotion of the secular. In giving ourselves over to the rhetoric of civic piety, for example, we are somehow involved in both condoning and promoting a community of values important to a democratic state, important, in particular, to a uniquely American vision and set of values—liberty, freedom, equality, justice, and fair play. As previously discussed, it is assumed that religion-inspired virtues can sustain democratic republics. The values associated with civil religion, however, compete with other important value clusters and they often compete internally as well. Indeed, secular values have played a key role in competing against, if not diminishing republican virtues. As Richard Fenn (1972) has made clear, consensus in America may as easily be forged on efficiency, rule of the experts, and the demands of the market (Cristi, 2001, p. 75). While George W. Bush has played a key role as interpreter-in-chief of the new American civil religion of the 21st century, that role was occasioned by the crisis of 9/11. As Cristi (2001, p. 76) observes, civil religion "may be something that varies with particular historical or national circumstances. Consequently civil religious themes would tend to emerge or become more visible in periods of national or international crises." But even here Bush's "value message" was mixed. One method Bush recommended for helping America "get back to normal" was for each American to resume his or her role as a consumer as an antidote to the damage done by September 11 and a flagging economy. While his recent calls for self-sacrifice through a two-year pledge of public service (utilizing the existing Peace Corp and Americorp) are in line with republican virtues, the former call seemed geared toward "individualism" and free enterprise. Thus, selfish motives seem destined to compete with the selfless in the new world order of civil religion.

According to Ronald F. Theimann (2000), "The greatest challenge facing American democracy today is to develop 'pluralist citizens,' people capable of living in a variety of different and sometimes

conflicting worlds of meaning while still maintaining a robust sense of personal and communal identity" (p. 83). How far present and future forms of civil religious discourse will go in helping Americans meet this challenge remains an open question. It is a question, however, that rhetoricians, following Rod Hart's legacy, still seem well-positioned to answer.

Steven R. Goldzwig (Ph.D., Purdue University, 1985) is a Professor at Marquette University. He can be reached at the Department of Communication Studies, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI 53201-1881 <Steven.Goldzwig@marquette.edu>.

Notes

¹Quoted in Bellah (1992, p. 38).

²Bellah's (1967) original article appeared in *Daedalus*. After numerous attacks on his discussion of civil religion, Bellah (1978) published a vigorous defense in *Society*. This article was reprinted in Bellah's (1992) *The Broken Covenant*.

³In this regard, I would like to publicly thank Rod Hart for inspiring me to investigate the more sectarian, partisan, and ideological forms of civil religious discourse. Some ten years after his book appeared, I was able to identify a rhetoric of "public theology," which I argued was different from (and perhaps almost an inversion of) what Hart would call "official" civic piety (Goldzwig, 1987). I defined public theology as "theologically-based discourse intentionally targeted for mass audiences in an attempt to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and values of both religious and secular publics on public policy" (p. 130). Overtly partisan in scope, I argued that public theology revealed three distinct rhetorical characteristics: expedient simplicity, existential content, and action rituals. I encountered these rhetorical characteristics in the "conservative" religious rhetoric of the Reverend Jerry Falwell and the "liberal" religious rhetoric of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. This article would have been impossible without Hart's pioneering work. Any mistakes in my 1987 piece are uniquely my own.

References

- Bellah, R. N. (1967). Civil religion in America. *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96, 1-21.
- . (1978). Religion and legitimation in the American republic. *Society*, 15/4, 16-23.
- . (1992). *The broken covenant: American civil religion in times of trial*. (2nd ed.) Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

- . (2001a). Inaugural address. January 20, Washington, D.C. Cited at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/print/inaugural-address.html>>.
- . (2001b). President's remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, National Cathedral, September 14, Washington, DC. Cited at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20010914-2.html>>.
- Cristi, M. (2001). *From civil to political religion: The intersection of culture, religion and politics*. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Cristi, M. & Dawson, L. (1996). Civil religion in comparative perspective: Chile under Pinochet (1973-1989). *Social Compass*, 43/3, 319-338.
- Fenn, R. K. (1972). Toward a new sociology of religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 11, 16-32.
- Goldzweig, S. (1987). A rhetoric of public theology: The religious rhetor and public policy. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 52, 128-150.
- Hart, R. P. (1977). *The political pulpit*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- Herberg, W. (1955). *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An essay in American religious sociology*. New York: Doubleday.
- McConnell, M. W. (2000). Believers as equal citizens. In Nancy L. Rosenblum, (Ed.) *Obligations of citizenship and demands of faith: Religious accommodation in pluralist democracies* (pp. 90-110). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Okin, S. (1997). Review of Michael Sandel's *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. *American Political Science Review*, 91/2, 441-442.
- Pierard, R. V. & Linder, R. D. (1988). *Civil religion & the presidency*. Grand Rapids: MI: Academie Books.
- Regan, D. (1976). Islam, intellectuals, and civil religion in Malaysia. *Sociological Analysis*, 37/2, 95-110.
- Sandel, M. (1996). *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stevens, E. P. (1975). Protest movement in an authoritarian regime. *Comparative Politics*, 7/3, 361-382.
- Theimann, R. F. (2000). Public religion: Bane or blessing for democracy? In N. L. Rosenblum, (Ed.) *Obligations of citizenship and demands of faith: Religious accommodation in pluralist democracies* (pp. 73-89). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Zuo, J. (1991). Political religion: The case of the cultural revolution in China. *Sociological Analysis*, 52/1, 99-110.