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Divine Democracy:
Examining the Intersection of Religion and Politics in Civil Religion

By
José Andrés Serrano

Presented to the Graduate Faculty of
Claremont Graduate University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in Religion & American Politics.

We certify that we have read this document
and approve it as adequate in scope and
quality for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Introduction

Politics and religion have been at odds for as long as political scientists and philosophers can remember. Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Rousseau, and Locke, all of the greatest, have thought about the ins and outs of religion's place in society. Amongst all ancient debates, in the 1960s, an American political scientist brewed the modern definition of Civil Religion. As a result of this theory, there has been much philosophical, religious, and political debate about religion's place in people's political behavior and its impacts.

So, what is a civil religion? Traditionally, civil religion is a term used to understand the religious-like behavior of a government or nation. In the contemporary sense, civil religion is a phrase used to describe patriotism, national identity, and national morality. Yet, in this thesis, civil religion's definition will be expanded to encompass the nature of its influence on national identity, identity politics, and decision making.

In more detail, this paper argues that civil religion is a politically shared religious value and with symbols that exist within a nation-state to create a sense of national identity and unity. This claim is created through the presence of religious characteristics in American society, such as rituals, sacred texts, holy sites, and different systems of beliefs. These four values and symbols will further reinforce the claim that civil religion is the cause and unification of community, political participation, and a sense of institutional righteousness.

Below, the paper will be broken into three integral concepts representing the core values of Civil Religion as a politically shared religious value in Americans. The first couple of sections will be examining the history and contexts of Civil Religion. These sections will summarize the previously written literature on the subject from political scientists, religious studies,

anthropologists, and philosophers. Civil religion as it is understood in the twenty-first century comes from hundreds of years of work that was not explicitly titled “civil religion.” As a result, many scholars have discussed the use of civil religion in a nation without either knowing that this was the term used for it or, rather, the term they eventually would be creating. As civil religion is a topic of conversation in different fields, each scholar provides a unique interpretation and definition of the purpose of civil religion and religion in politics. Thus, it is essential to investigate the root of what allows religion to play such a core part in America’s democracy and understand the history of the theory and how it lends itself to where this paper wants it to be today.

Do keep in mind when reading these sections that this paper will not always be stating when a scholar did directly state the term “civil religion.” Civil religion is not a popularly used phrase when discussing religion’s relationship with politics. Though this paper will be using these scholars’ work through the lens of civil religion.

The second block of sections of the thesis will focus on the religious aspects of civil religion and how they are both directly and indirectly involved with American politics. These sections will argue that democracy in the United States comprises various religious elements, such as rituals, idols, sacred texts, congregations, holy sites, belief systems, symbols, and songs. All of these elements alone will appear to be drops in a lake. Still, when putting the findings together and allowing an understanding and overlap of the concepts, they will unite to assist in creating the paper’s understanding of a sense of community within political participation. Thus, civil religion will not be able to be understood in its entirety without the comprehension of these elements all playing a role in American democracy.

Thirdly, the final section of the thesis will explore this paper's arguments as to the implications of civil religion being the cause and unification of community, political participation, and a sense of institutional righteousness. Claiming that in an American Democracy, civil religion, promotes higher amounts of political engagement and respect of institutions through shared values that have been previously discussed. This section will go on to make the claim that with the promotion of political engagement, citizens will create a sense of institutional righteousness, that will inevitably augment the polarization effect within the United States. As it will be discussed, political-religious ideologies becoming intertwined with the political doctrines of the two large parties, Democrats and Republicans, will create further debate, that will result in a stronger connection to their faith (political party)

This thesis' contribution will be seen in the following aspects: 1) Civil religion is a religion, by definitions created by scholars. 2) Civil religion can be attributed to the reinforcement and original creation of patriotism and community within the United States. 3) The United States' democracy can be understood as a battle of faiths, and one of the best ways to understand how to manipulate it is through faith-based discussion and debate. 4) How civil religion is something that Americans should be aware of and its dangers to a society. 4) With further research, this paper will be suggesting where to conduct future research to potentially predict political behavior.

Chapter 1: American Civil Religion (1960s - 2010s)

Civil Religion, as it is known today by scholars was initially theorized by Robert N. Bellah in his influential 1967 article "Civil Religion in America"¹ and has served as a cornerstone for the study of religion and politics in the United States. In Bellah's work, civil religion is primarily referring to the shared religious values, symbols, and rituals that are shared across separate cultures and faiths. In this chapter, the paper will present a historical overview and analysis of the development of civil religion from the 1960s until 2021. Serving as an exploration of authors throughout the generations and their main arguments and writings that have contributed to the ongoing discussion.

1.1: The Genesis of Civil Religion: Robert N. Bellah (1967)

Robert N. Bellah's 1967 article, "Civil Religion in America," is considered to be the first instrumental work to mention and define civil religion. Bellah was an American sociologist of religion, and he suggested that civil religion was a unique form of religion. One that went beyond people's classical understandings of what religion could be, but rather, in reality, religion now served as a way to (re)unite the nation under mutual social understandings.

It has been noted that Bellah must have drawn heavy inspiration from the writings of French philosopher and political scientist Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who first introduced the term "civil religion" in his 1762 treatise, "The Social Contract."² Rousseau argued that a civil religion was necessary to create a close-knit society, emphasizing that shared moral and ethical values support, and even reimagine the state's well-being. While Rousseau's concept of civil religion

¹ Richey, Russell E., and Donald G. Jones. *American Civil Religion*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1974.

² Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. 1893.

primarily focused on the European context, Bellah expanded on this idea and adapted it to the American experience.

In his article, Bellah argued that the United States had developed its very own form of civil religion; implicitly suggesting how his work was the evolution of Rousseau's. Going on to state that it was made up of shared beliefs, symbols, and rituals deeply entwined in the very foundations of American culture. Moreover, Bellah helps identify the strongest elements of American civil religion, such as the belief in a higher power or divine intervention figure who guides the nation, the veneration of national heroes (such as presidents, movements leaders, soldiers, etc.), and the religious-like declaration of national holidays and ceremonies.

Crucially to this paper, Bellah proposed that American civil religion was expressed in both various public and private spheres. These claims were mainly focused on presidential speeches, national monuments, and founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Further, Bellah went on to analyze the rhetoric of presidential speeches from George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. This demonstrated how most of their speeches incorporated religious language and themes to showcase the nation's history and identity around the belief in a hyper-power.

One of the greatest takeaways from Bellah's analysis was his emphasis on the dualistic nature of American civil religion, which he classified as both a "transcendent ethical vision" and a "sense of national mission." Bellah argued that American civil religion had the power to challenge the people of the nation to live to the highest (Christian) religious values and ideals while inherently also being able to go out and claim that they are doing what they are for the best of the country and the world.

The initial work done by Bellah in *Civil Religion in America* is groundbreaking in a variety of ways. First, it noted the existence of a single uniform religion that was uniting citizens beyond the traditional religions that were being primarily focused upon in the United States. Second, his work demonstrated the importance of civil religion being used as a form of national unity/identity and creating a sense of a shared moral purpose. Finally, his findings provided a new perspective on analyzing the relationship between religion and politics within the United States.

1.2: Expansion and Critique of the Concept (1970s - 1980s)

During the 1970s and 1980s, civil religion notably became a hot subject for discussion. Civil Religion was taken less as theory and more as fact during this time. As a result, there were large developments in understanding what it meant to be a civil religion. Allowing for a variety of valued critiques to develop. Bellah was used as the bedrock of the foundational theory, making both Bellah and his original colleagues return with new perspectives on the matter and offering guidance in understanding Civil Religion after the Nixon administration. Coming together, their efforts were focused more on what it is that a civil religion does to the Americans, and what its ramifications could be.

During the time period, one of the critical developments to the understanding of Civil Religion came from the understanding that there were different understandings of what a civil religion could be.

In 1974, Martin E. Marty, a prominent religious historian, proposed a distinction between "priestly" and "prophetic" civil religions³. According to Marty, priestly civil religion was created to legitimize political orders and maintain social cohesion, while the prophetic civil religion functioned as a binding force, challenging the nation to live up to its professed ideals and promoting social change. This differentiation enriched the understanding of civil religion by acknowledging its multifaceted nature and the complex ways it could operate within society.

Another significant development during this period was the growing concern about the potentially oppressive implications of religion. Richard K. Fenn argued that religion could be used to silence people who disagree with strong political movements and justify the "privatization" of religion to influence the masses⁴. This can be realized by mixing someone's love for their country or government with religious beliefs. As a result, this would make it hard for people to question their governments without feeling like they're attacking their own faith/religion. In other instances, this would amass in people as a sign of going against their own patriotism.

In response to these critiques, some scholars focused on exploring the emancipatory potential of civil religion. Robert N. Bellah himself, along with co-author Steven M. Tipton, revisited their original civil religion theory in their 1985 book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.⁵ In this book, they argued that civil religion could be a force for "social cohesion" and "moral guidance." Claiming that these concepts could counter the social "problems" of their times: individualism and "moral relativism." By highlighting the

³ Mulder, John M. "Civil Religion, Church and State. Modern American Protestantism and Its World 3. Edited by Martin E. Marty. Munich, Germany: K. G. Saur, 1992. Xvi 486 Pp." *Church History*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1996, pp. 325–325., doi:10.2307/3170349.

⁴ Fenn, Richard K. "Towards a Theory of Secularization." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1978.

⁵ Bellah, Robert N., and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press, 1985.

potentially positive aspects of civil religion, Bellah and Tipton contributed to a more nuanced understanding of its role in the United States.

During the 1970s and 1980s, scholars also began to explore civil religion through a more historical lens. They focused more on how it had been used throughout history and what that could potentially mean for the United States in their time. For example, Conrad Cherry's 1971 book *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* looked into the historical development of American religion through a more “civil” perspective. They began by tracing its origins back to the Puritan settlers and the famous quote of America being known as a “city upon a hill.”⁶ Looking upon this era can provide a deeper understanding of how the initial iterations of civil religion and its deep dive into its religious aspect would influence where the theory goes next.

1.3: Civil Religion in the Post-Cold War Era (1990s - 2000s)

The post-Cold War era saw a global boom in religious scholarship in secular spaces, such as in global politics. As a result, definitions once again changed on what it meant to have “civil religion” in a world that was “moving towards secularism.” During the 1990s and 2000s, civil religious scholarship was no longer calling itself “civil religion” but rather it was primarily titled as “secular religion.” Despite this change, going forward, this work will still be referred to as Civil Religion.

One key development during this period was the call for a more nuanced understanding of civil religion and its relationship with secularization. Sociologist Philip Gorski decided to

⁶ Cherry, Conrad. *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*. University of North Carolina Press, 1971.

challenge the notion that civil religion would inherently create a more secular nation. Instead, arguing that the civil religion would actually create a type of resurgence in religious beliefs in the public sphere. In his article *Historicizing the Secularization Debate*, Gorski emphasized on the importance of considering the complex relationship between civil religion, secularization, and religious pluralism in the United States.⁷ Little did Gorski know that his new found perspective not only brought new life to civil religion, but he also managed to predict the rise of the religious right in the United States.

During this period, scholars also examined how political leaders employed civil religion to construct new national narratives. In 2009, Rhys H. Williams analyzed how Barack Obama used civil religion to convince the public of a more inclusive and diverse vision of America instead of being divided as the nation once was.⁸ As a result, Williams' work on President Obama showed how civil religion could be more than just a theory to analyze, but rather it can still be actively used as a tool used by leaders to reshape national identity and respond to the changing social and political landscape.

During this time, there came to be something called the “culture wars.”⁹ These culture wars were a time in which civil religion played an influential role in debates over morality, values, and national identity. Scholars explored the ways both conservative and liberal political actors manipulated civil religion to advance their respective agendas.¹⁰ Graham Ward discussed how conservative evangelicals used civil religion to promote their vision of America as a

⁷ Gorski, Philip. "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700." *American Sociological Review*, 2000.

⁸ Williams, Rhys H. "Civil Religion and the Cultural Politics of National Identity in Obama's America." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2010.

⁹ Browning, Don S. *From culture wars to common ground: Religion and the American family debate*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

¹⁰ Browning, Don S. *Culture Wars*. 2000.

"Christian nation," while others examined how civil religion was used by liberals (progressives) to advocate for social justice and inclusivity.¹¹

Another point to highlight during this era is the impact of global events on the understanding and practice of religion in the United States. Whether that be civil or classical. The September 11th attack and the following "war on terror" led to a renewed focus on religion as a source of national unity and moral guidance in times of crisis. Scholars, such as Charles Hirschkind¹² and Giovanna Borradori¹³, analyzed how political leaders employed civil religion to frame the nation's response to these events and to justify military actions abroad.

1.4: Civil Religion in the 21st Century: New Directions and Debates (2010s - 2021s)

The 21st century brought new challenges and opportunities for the study of civil religion, with scholars exploring its relevance and applicability in an increasingly diverse, globalized, and politically polarized context. The 2010s and up to 2021 saw the emergence of new directions and debates in the study of civil religion, reflecting the complexities of contemporary society.

One significant development during this period was the growing interest in the relationship between civil religion and political polarization. Scholars examined how different political factions employed competing visions of civil religion to advance their respective agendas and narratives. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell analyzed the role of civil

¹¹ Ward, Graham. *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*. Baker Academic, 2009.

¹² Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Columbia University Press.

¹³ Borradori, Giovanna. 2003. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. University of Chicago Press.

religion in shaping attitudes towards social and political issues. They argued that civil religion could reshape what political polarization looks like in the United States.¹⁴

Another key area of inquiry during this period was the exploration of civil religion's role in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society. Scholars like Ruth Braunstein, in her 2017 book "Prophets and Patriots: Faith in Democracy Across the Political Divide," investigated how civil religion could serve as a bridge between diverse religious and political communities, fostering dialogue and cooperation despite ideological differences.¹⁵ This research underscored the potential of civil religion to contribute to social cohesion and civic engagement in a multicultural context.

The 21st century also saw the expansion of civil religion scholarship to consider its global dimensions and implications. While much of the earlier research had focused primarily on the American context, scholars began to examine civil religion in other countries and its role in shaping international relations. For example, the 2014 book "Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy," edited by Ronald Beiner and Wayne Norman, included comparative analyses of civil religion in different national contexts, highlighting the diverse ways the concept could manifest and function in various political systems.¹⁶

Additionally, scholars in this period engaged in debates about the very nature and definition of civil religion. Philip Gorski emphasized the importance of a shared moral and ethical framework, arguing that civil religion could provide a basis for a more inclusive and just

¹⁴ Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Simon & Schuster, 2012.

¹⁵ Braunstein, Ruth. *Prophets and Patriots: Faith in Democracy Across the Political Divide*. University of California Press, 2017.

¹⁶ Beiner, Ronald, and Wayne Norman, editors. *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

society.¹⁷ Paul Lichterman challenged the concept's usefulness, suggesting that the term "civil religion" might be too vague or ambiguous to offer meaningful insights into contemporary political life.¹⁸

1.5: Summary

In light of this historical overview, it becomes evident that the concept of civil religion has undergone significant transformations since Robert N. Bellah's groundbreaking 1967 article. Originally, Bellah describes civil religion as the government's use of religious language and the understandings of a high-power. Then the definition shifts to encapsulate the understanding of civil religion having religious-like parallels that help create a national identity. This new understanding shaped the way civil religion was accepted as a tool used by politicians and that civil religion not only has religious parallels, but rather civil religion is a religious experience. Finally, contemporary scholars use civil religion to explain polarization in the United States and how civil religion can be to blame for the nation's political direction.

The development of the concept has been shaped by changing political contexts, scholarly debates, and the incorporation of new perspectives and critiques. Although this chapter provides a comprehensive account of civil religion's development up to 2021, the dynamic nature of the subject invites further inquiry into its contemporary manifestations and implications.

As the conversation surrounding civil religion continues, this paper further wishes to emphasize its place in the discussion. With this historical context, it can be, and this paper will argue that politics and religion are tied to one another in the United States. Additionally, the

¹⁷ Gorski, Philip. *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

¹⁸ Lichterman, Paul. *Civic Action*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 2015.

ongoing debate about civil religion's role in politics and its influence on policy creates a more robust image of how ingrained religion is into "secular" spaces. Many of these authors have argued that religion is so ingrained into the fabric of the nation, that there is no escaping the reality of civil religion. Thus, this paper will echo the past sixty years of work in stating that civil religion is both secular and religious as the populace of the United States can no longer create a division between the two.

Ultimately, this historical overview serves as a foundation for further exploration and engagement with the concept of civil religion. By acknowledging the evolving nature of the subject, this paper can continue to refine and expand on its understanding of the role of civil religion in shaping national identities, moral frameworks, and political landscapes. The conversation is far from over, and this chapter aims to inspire ongoing dialogue and investigation into the multifaceted dimensions of civil religion.

Chapter 2: Religion's Definition Change (1960s - 2010s)

Seeing now how the political definition of civil religion changed in the last chapter, it must be made clear that religion and its scholarship significantly changed between the 1960s and the 2010s. Over the past century, social and political movements challenged the concept of religion. Thus, it is to no surprise that scholars' interpretations have too significantly changed from traditional understandings of faith to complicated interpersonal identifications. In the allotted era, it will be seen that the changing social, political, and philosophical stances on religion shifted. This comes at no surprise as the political history chapter showed. There were wars, drafts, and suffrage felt by the masses in the United States, and as a result, people's perspective on religion changed to adapt to what they were seeing on their television screens. This chapter will examine key developments and arguments in the modern evolution of religion during this period of time. Highlighting the contributions of various scholars, including the inspiration of this particular subject, Catherine L. Albanese.

2.1: The 1960s-1970s: Challenging Essentialism and Moving Towards Functionalism

During the 1960s and 1970s, religious scholarship shot through the roof. There were significant changes made to what the possible definitions of religion could be or what religion could even begin to mean to different groups of people, regardless of their place of origin. Scholars began to embrace new research concepts such as "functionalism" and "phenomenological." Functionalism allowed for scholars to begin taking in the influence of politics on people's faith while phenomenology allowed scholars to see the development of religion over the course of people's entire lifetimes. This short era can be characterized best as a

time in which a single universal truth (the definition of religion) was replaced with an emphasis on what the role of religion could be to an individual's life and existence.

Ninian Smart played an important role in the development of a modern multi-dimensional perspective into the role of religion. Smart proposes a model encompassing seven dimensions of religion: ritual, narrative and mythic, experiential and emotional, social and institutional, ethical and legal, doctrinal and philosophical, and material¹⁹. With this model, Smart sought to capture the complex and diverse nature of religious phenomena. Seeking to move beyond simple definitions and encouraging fellow scholars to reanalyze religious traditions from multiple perspectives.

Mircea Eliade, a Romanian historian of religion, argued that the experience of the sacred was a fundamental aspect of religion.²⁰ More importantly, Eliade argued that a person's experience of the sacred was not only rooted in a person's specific culture or history, but rather that it was felt more in someone's individual journey through life. By emphasizing the importance of the religious experience, Eliade's work contributed to the shift toward phenomenological approaches in the study of religion.

In addition to Smart and Eliade, Clifford Geertz, an American anthropologist, played a crucial role in shaping the study of religion during this period. Geertz proposed a more symbolic and interpretive approach to studying religion. Arguing that religious phenomena should be understood as systems of symbols that convey meaning and shape the human experience.²¹ Geertz's definition of religion emphasized the importance of cultural context and the role of

¹⁹ Smart, Ninian. *The Religious Experience*. Macmillan, 1969.

²⁰ Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959.

²¹ Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System." *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Banton, Tavistock Publications, 1966.

interpretation in understanding religious traditions, contributing to the broader shift towards functionalist approaches in religious studies.

Comparing the works of Geertz to Smart, it becomes more apparent that there is some sort of bond between a person and their surroundings. This paper would argue that their work can be seen as the perfect religious parallel to the narrative of civil religion. What these two authors offer is a new interpretation of what religion is to the human experience, much in the same vein as Bellah argues how religion plays a key role in the interpretation of a nation's politics. These works are the bedrocks and foundations of the arguments going forward in this paper, and it is vital to take note of them. From here on out, though there may be important contradictions to the work, civil religion is an interpretation of people's unknown connection to the "secular" and the "divine."

E.E. Evans-Pritchard believed in increasing emphasis on social and cultural context in understanding the complexity of what a religion could be. Evans-Pritchard critiqued definitions of religion and proposed a more nuanced, context-specific approach to the study of religion.²² Allowing religion as a classical entity to not be tied down by what it once was, but rather give it the opportunity to evolve and turn into something new.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Canadian religious studies scholar, similarly questioned the notion of religion as a static, fixed category.²³ Smith argued that the concept of "religion" as a private matter that took place outside of an individual's public life was intrinsically false. Rather, stating that whatever "religion" is, it is more fluid, and must be interpreted as ever changing over the course of a life.

²² Evans-Pritchard, E.E. *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Clarendon Press, 1965.

²³ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Fortress Press, 1962.

The 1960s and 1970s marked a significant shift in the study of religion as scholars challenged essentialist definitions and embraced functionalist and phenomenological approaches. The work of Ninian Smart, Mircea Eliade, Clifford Geertz, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, among others, played a crucial role in shaping this intellectual transformation. By emphasizing the complexity, diversity, and context-specific nature of religious phenomena, these scholars laid the groundwork for subsequent developments and debates in the field of religious studies

2.2: The 1980s-1990s: Emphasizing Cultural and Historical Context

Due to the previous generation of scholars working on pushing the limits of what a religion could be, the 1980s and 90s can be considered a renaissance of cultural, historical, and interpretive religion. During this time period, scholars begin to theorize that a religion is not just something an individual subscribes to in their day-to-day life, but rather it can be an experience that they participate in but are not consciously aware of. This section will begin to show the true intersection of how civil religion becomes both “secular” and “religious” in its nature.

Pertaining to the narrative of this paper, Talal Asad was a key figure in this period. Asad’s work significantly impacted scholars’ understanding of religion. Asad critiqued the notion of religion as a transhistorical and transcultural category, and argued that the concept that is known as “religion” is rather a product of specific historical circumstances, shaped by power dynamics and cultural assumptions.²⁴ Asad's work encouraged scholars to examine the ways in

²⁴ Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

which religious phenomena are constructed and transformed within particular social and historical contexts.

Catherine L. Albanese, an American religious studies scholar, arguably made the most significant contributions to the study of religion. Albanese explored the role of nature in the everyday experience.²⁵ Stretching her work as far back as the Native Americans and their understanding of faith to the 1980s and her interpretations as to what daily rituals have evolved into. Albanese argues that everyday activities can be the origins of a person's religious journey. There does not need to be a set quota of prayers or an attendance of a church to be considered religious. Rather, all there needs to be is a feeling of connection to the world around oneself's and a religion can emerge.

Albanese's work demonstrated the importance of considering cultural context when studying religious patterns and challenged scholars to rethink traditional categories and classifications of religion.

Jonathan Z. Smith further emphasized the importance of cultural and historical.²⁶ Smith argued that the study of religion should focus on the analysis of specific religious traditions and practices rather than attempting to identify universal patterns or categories. The erasure of the universal truth becomes a growing practice.

The question no longer becomes "why are we here?" Rather, these scholars begin to ask the question "why do you believe that we are here?" Religious scholars are not interested in figuring out why people create religion, but instead they care more about the lives of people and what sorts of things bring them joy and pleasure.

²⁵ Albanese, Catherine L. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.

²⁶ Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. University of Chicago Press, 1982.

During this era, there was also the emergence of scholarship focusing on “postmodernism” and “postcolonialism.” Suggesting that the interpretations of people’s religions or societies was through a biased western lens. Scholars like Edward W. Said critiqued the ways in which Western scholars had constructed and represented non-Western religious traditions.²⁷ Going on to argue that colonialist and imperialist agendas often shaped such representations.

Similarly, Michel Foucault²⁸ and Jacques Derrida²⁹ focused their efforts on the role of language, debate, and power in shaping religion. Together they highlighted how religious traditions are created and destroyed through various forms of interpretation and authority. Their work contributed to a growing skepticism towards universal definitions of religion and focused on the complex, context-specific processes through which religion is constructed and experienced through.

The 1980s and 1990s were a time of exploration and interpretation as to what influences religion. Scholars like Talal Asad, Catherine L. Albanese, Jonathan Z. Smith, Edward W. Said, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida continued the trend of breaking religion down to its bare bones, and then building up once again. These scholars challenged the universal definitions of religion and encouraged a more nuanced, context-specific understanding of religion.

²⁷ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

²⁸ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books, 1978.

²⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

2.3: The 2000s-2010s: Pluralism, Materiality, and Lived Religion

The study of religion in the 2000s-2020 continued to evolve, with scholars exploring new theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. This period saw a growing emphasis on pluralism, materiality, and lived religion, reflecting the increasing diversity and complexity of religious scholarship in an interconnected world.

During this time, Peter L. Berger shifted from an early focus on secularization theory to a renewed interest in religious pluralism. In his book, Berger argued that the popular notion that the world was “secularizing” and that religious influence over the world was declining was incorrect. Stating that this theory is disproved by resurgence of religion in public life.³⁰ Berger's work put a spotlight on the importance of recognizing the diversity of religion and allowing room for pluralism in the world. When speaking about religion, there must be an emphasis on what its job is in the global context. Arguing that religious scholarship is the study of religious pluralism.

Another key development during this period was the focus on materiality in the study of religion. David Morgan explored the role of images, objects, and physical spaces in religious practices and experiences.³¹ Emphasizing the need to look into the use of materiality and how this growing phenomenon is leading to a decline of traditional, text-based, understandings of what a religion is. Rather, stating there is more that is yet to be understood about “modern” religion.

The concept of "lived religion" also gained traction during this period, with scholars like Robert Orsi, Meredith McGuire, and Nancy T. Ammerman examining the everyday religious

³⁰ Berger, Peter L. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Eerdmans, 1999.

³¹ Morgan, David. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*. University of California Press, 2005.

practices and experiences of individuals. Orsi argued for an approach that considers how religious beliefs and practices are embedded in the daily lives of individuals, often intersecting with issues of race, gender, and social class.³² This focus on lived religion attempted to capture the complexity and diversity of religion. Moving away from abstracted theories, and rather focusing on the realities of the world. What can actually be seen on the ground and not just behind a scholar's desk.

Scholars like Manuel A. Vásquez further developed theories of materiality. Emphasizing the importance of full body religious practices and experiences.³³ Vásquez' lends itself to the understanding of material religion, and how it is that religions are becoming more grounded and shaped by the physical, material, world.

Moving forward, Diane L. Eck's contribution to the discussion is in the emphasis of understanding what religious pluralism looks like in the United States. Eck examined the changing religious landscape of the United States and the challenges and opportunities presented by increasing religious diversity.³⁴ More importantly, Eck is of the first wave of scholars in the twenty-first century that note that the predominant Christian faith in the US is beginning to wane.

It does not need to be said, but it is important to take note of contributions such as Eck's. Before this moment in time, few classical religious scholars in the United States actively paid attention to religious influences to American society that were not of Christian influence. This oversight in understanding religions in the United States is what allows authors like Eck to be a haunting foreshadow to what is to come in the United States shortly after their paper. September

³² Orsi, Robert. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

³³ Vásquez, Manuel A. *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

³⁴ Eck, Diana L. *A New Religious America: How a 'Christian Country' Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

11th, 2001. A day that is said to never be forgotten, and surely the pain of Islamophobia will continue to sting forever as well. It is important to recognize that after this moment in history, religious scholarship completely changes and there is a new era of academia produced.

Throughout this period, Catherine L. Albanese continued to contribute to the understanding of religion with her 2007 book "A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion."³⁵ This work emphasized the diverse, often overlooked religious traditions that have shaped American culture, further challenging essentialist definitions of religion and highlighting the complexities and nuances of religion.

It is in this writing of Albanese that she compares religion to a sandwich. In brevity, if every morning someone made a sandwich as part of their daily routine that brought them meaning in life, then that sandwich would be that person's religion. So what does that have to do with civil religion? If actively participating within a system that brings unity, community, peace, or meaning, then a person is unknowingly a part of a religion.

A question arises whether the consent of an individual is needed in order to classify them as a part of a religion, and this paper strongly states that it is not needed. As the Albanese literature and others have shown, religion is a fluid concept that cannot be bound by the definitions of a universal truth or understanding. Rather, religion itself is a constantly evolving state of being that comes in waves in a person's life. One day they may be participating within their religion and another they are not. This is not a conscious decision, but rather many of these choices are made unconsciously.

³⁵ Albanese, Catherine L. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. Yale University Press, 2007.

2.4: Summary

From the 1960s to 2010s, the definition of "religion" has evolved significantly, reflecting on the changing social and political contexts of the times. Scholars shifted away from essentialist definitions and have instead embraced functional, phenomenological, and cultural approaches to studying religion. Crucial contributions by Catherine L. Albanese and other scholars have expanded the understanding of what a religion can be "defined" as, regardless of its origins. Allowing them to emphasize the importance of context, whether that be cultural or historical.

Chapter 3: Is American Democracy Like a Religion?

As was shown in the last two chapters, scholars from diverse fields have engaged in a multifaceted debate regarding the relationship between government and religion. This debate can be simplified as: how much influence does civil religion have over individuals? As a result, this chapter aims to mix together what has been previously explored with theories of the previously discussed chapters with a new perspective in order to answer the core questions of this paper: Is American democracy a religion? To answer it in its most basic form, yes, American democracy is a religion, and this paper will continue to answer how going forward.

As a result, this chapter will lay out the functions that democracy and religion serve within a society. Focusing on their roles in creating a sense of community, meaning and purpose, and ethical values.

Emile Durkheim argued that religion is a social glue that binds communities together through shared beliefs and rituals.³⁶ Similarly, the father of Civil Religion, Robert N. Bellah, stated that civil religion fulfills a comparable function, fostering national unity and cohesion through shared symbols and values. Philip Gorski more recently built upon Bellah and Durkheim's arguments, suggesting that civil religion within the United States integrates elements from both religious and political spheres, providing its citizens with a common framework for understanding their role within the mechanisms of the nation.

In terms of providing meaning and purpose, scholars such as Jean Bethke Elshtain have pointed to the central role of the United States' foundational documents, such as the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Going as far as to state that these documents

³⁶ Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. George Allen & Unwin, 1912.

can be classified as "sacred texts" that imbue American democracy with a sense of purpose and direction.³⁷ Likewise, Clifford Geertz has argued that religion functions as a cultural system that provides individuals with a sense of meaning and orientation in their lives.³⁸ The parallels between these two functions suggest a potentially deeper connection between democracy and religion.

The promotion of ethical values is another crucial function of both democracy and religion. As political scientist Ronald F. Inglehart argued, the core values of democracy, such as liberty, equality, and justice, shape the debates around policy and inform civic responsibilities.³⁹ In a similar vein Catherine L. Albanese further argues that religious traditions foster moral frameworks that guide individual and collective behavior. The shared focus on ethical values raises the question of whether democracy and religion are inherently connected, or if they merely address common human needs through different institutional means.

In truth, what this answers is beyond whether democracy and religion are merely addressing everyday human needs, but rather that the United States government was, in fact, shaped around religion's personal fulfillment. The institution's language and execution, from the beginning, were apparently molded to meet the needs of the people. A government by the people and for the people. Though the Bill of Rights was made with the arguments and thoughts of scholars of the Enlightenment age in mind⁴⁰, it can also be seen as America's spiritual successor to the Ten Commandments. To allow its people to trust in "God" and eventually reassure them every day by filling American currency with religious symbology. Symbols, symbols, and more

³⁷ Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self*. Basic Books, 2008.

³⁸ Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books, 1973.

³⁹ Inglehart, Ronald F. *Cultural Evolution: People's Motivations are Changing, and Reshaping the World*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

⁴⁰ Amar, Akhil Reed. *The bill of rights: Creation and reconstruction*. Yale University Press, 1998.

symbols. The United States is made up of symbols, and this paper will dedicate itself to directly address these symbols and their meanings.

3.1: Community

Traditional religion as it was previously known was inherently distinct in the fact that it easily fostered a sense of community amongst like-minded individuals. All those who went to worship their faith knew that they were comfortable and safe around those who were also there. Traditionally, this sense of community allowed for the growth of faiths and allowed people from all over the world to feel as though they shared something in common, a faith. Yet, when reframing religion, what can now be seen is civil religion has become the religion of the United States. Through its ingraining into the fabric of American society, it has inherently made something that all who are American can relate to. Whether that be citizenship, patriotism, or other, American civil religion too has created a community amongst its citizens that share values, beliefs, and practices.

Civil and traditional religion come together as duplicate ideologies when comparing how they create a sense of community through rituals and ceremonies. Victor Turner argues that rituals are powerful tools for creating social cohesion by bringing individuals together in shared experiences.⁴¹ Putting through the political lens that has been developed over the course of the paper, events such as inaugurations, national holidays, and patriotic observances can be seen as rituals that foster a sense of national unity. Similarly, religious rituals, such as communal prayer, baptism, or marriage, bring like minded believers of the faith together and reinforce their identity

⁴¹ Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

within a faith. By participating in these rituals, individuals can feel a sense of connection to a larger community, whether it be the nation or their religious group.

Another vital aspect in forming a community, whether it be religious or secular, is the creation of shared symbols and narratives that are meant to provide meaning. Remembering what Robert N. Bellah highlighted in his original analysis of "American civil religion," symbols such as the flag, the national anthem, and foundational texts like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were all forms of creating a unified community. These symbols create a shared sense of identity and purpose among citizens, much like religious symbols and narratives do for believers. As previously noted by Ninian Smart, religious communities are also defined by their shared symbols and narratives, which provide a sense of continuity and connection to a broader tradition.⁴²

The role of leaders in fostering community within both civil religion and traditional religion is another crucial aspect to consider. As Max Weber observed, charismatic leaders often play a central role in the development and maintenance of religious communities, inspiring devotion and loyalty among their followers.⁴³ In the realm of civil religion, political leaders can also take on a similar role, articulating shared values and aspirations and serving as symbols of national unity. For instance, presidential speeches often invoke religious language and themes, as noted by scholars such as Michael Walzer⁴⁴ which serves to connect civil religion with traditional religious sentiments and foster a sense of unity among the populace.

Civil and traditional religious practices, though separate in their societal interpretations, share essential functions in creating a sense of community among their adherents. Through

⁴² Smart, Ninian. *The Religious Experience of Mankind*. Collins, 1996.

⁴³ Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. University of California Press, 1922.

⁴⁴ Walzer, Michael. "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1973, pp. 160–80. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265139>. Accessed 5 March 2023.

rituals, shared symbols, narratives, and charismatic leadership, civil and religious institutions contribute to forming cohesive groups that share values, beliefs, and practices. Yet, it is through this blind integration into a community that it can be argued that civil religion has a nefarious side to it.

This will be the first of many inclusions in the paper about the dark side of Civil Religion. Community is a dangerous tool in terms of creating decisions. Famously psychologist Solomon Asch found that people are willing to follow a group in making a decision regardless of knowing it's wrong in order to fit in.⁴⁵ This is known as “conformity.” Conformity, referring to conforming to what a group believes is correct, can be one of the most dangerous aspects of democracy. As will be further explored in later sections, there are two large “communities” in the United States. Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, the left and the right. These communities create a sense of conformity every day. People are left feeling “either you are with us, or you are against us” when talking about political decisions.

One can argue that this is not the fault of civil religion, but rather these are societal and personal psychological issues. Still, this paper disagrees with that notion in its entirety. Civil religion is the glue that unifies the United States through its creation of patriotism and community. Without civil religion’s place in the United States, there is no United States as it is understood in the contemporary. Every aspect of the community of parties has heightened to a level where the two are inseparable. People must conform to a party’s decisions, or they are to be left out, and those that are left out must face the consequences of feeling alone.

⁴⁵ Asch, Solomon E. "Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority." *Psychological monographs: General and applied* 70.9 (1956): 1.

Civil religion's greatest gift is creating a sense of conformity, but in turn, it has created America's greatest curse. It has eased the process, but what is the cost of ease? Communal polarity.

3.2: Meaning and Ethical Values

Continuing the exploration of the intersection between civil religion and traditional religion in creating communities, it is essential to consider the role of ethical values and moral frameworks. Civil and traditional religions provide people with guiding principles that help shape both their individual and communal behaviors. This shaping of moral frameworks is what helps tie the secular to religious. As the secular will inherently rely on the religious foundations of morality that already permeate its society.

When focusing on civil religion, Jürgen Habermas and Catherine L. Albanese have both argued that religion creates a baseline that members can attach themselves to. Habermas argued that the democratic process is inherently connected to the promotion of ethical values such as freedom, equality, and solidarity.⁴⁶ These values serve as a foundation for the development of shared normalities and personal ideals. These developments foster a sense of national unity and common purpose, more popularly known as patriotism. Similarly, Albanese wrote that the role of a religious tradition is to provide a meaningful moral framework that can assist an individual understand their actions and help shape community in their life.⁴⁷ By adhering to their shared ethical values that are proposed by said religion, both civil and religious communities create a sense of belonging among their members.

⁴⁶ Habermas, Jürgen. "Religion in the Public Sphere." *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2006.

⁴⁷ Albanese, Catherine L. "DOMINANT AND PUBLIC CENTER: REFLECTIONS ON THE 'ONE' RELIGION OF THE UNITED STATES." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1983, pp. 83–96. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27943630>. Accessed 5 March 2023.

When observing political institutions in the United States, such as state capitols, the interplay between the secular and religious and their influences on one another can be made out. As Robert Putnam demonstrates, religious participation and engagement are closely linked to civic participation, with religious individuals often being more involved in political and community activities.⁴⁸

An example of this can be seen at the Texas state capitol, in which in front of their courthouse lies a statue of Moses' ten commandments. This statue was a part of the 2005 supreme court case, in which it was said that Texas' capitol had violated the Establishment Clause of the Constitution. Ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4, in favor of Texas due to the monument's secular and historical relevance to Texas.⁴⁹ This indicates that in the United States, religious history is, and can be, the very foundation of the secular state. Demonstrating that in the U.S., religion's moral and societal significance can be protected by secular laws.

A popular action being conducted by today's religious leaders is involving not only themselves but also their churches into political discourse. Scholars such as Nancy T. Ammerman⁵⁰ and José Casanova⁵¹ have emphasized the role of religious voices in shaping public political discourse and contributing to the negotiation of shared values with the secular institutions that they participate with. By engaging in these debates, religious actors and institutions are contributing in blurring the line between the private and public sphere. Rather

⁴⁸ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster, 2000.

⁴⁹ Colby, Thomas B. "A Constitutional Hierarchy of Religions-Justice Scalia, the Ten Commandments, and the Future of the Establishment Clause." *Nw. UL Rev.* 100 (2006): 1097.

⁵⁰ Ammerman, Nancy T. (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York, 2007; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305418.001.0001>, accessed 5 March 2023.

⁵¹ Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

than helping navigate the masses into understanding a separation of church and state, many faiths within the United States are encouraging religious action in secular spaces.

A popular example of this can be seen in the consistent discourse of a woman's right to an abortion. The state has the obligation to protect the rights of its citizens, but religious communities also hold the right to have their ideals represented by the government they belong to. At the end of the day, that is what the House of Representatives was thought up to be. An institution of local representatives having their communities heard at the forefront of the nation. As a result of this ideological split, abortion has become a pendulum of an issue, where every four to eight years, legislation on the matter swings one way or another.⁵²⁵³⁵⁴ That is by no mistake, as this is how the system was designed to be by the frames of the Constitution (Madison and Hamilton). With religious communities becoming more active in politics due to their leaders demanding more political involvement, religious perspectives are seeping into civil discourse.

In civil religion, civic virtues such as liberty, equality, and justice are often emphasized, as these can be seen as the pillars of a functioning democracy. As a result, this paper claims that civil religion in its understanding in the American perspective, can only ever be recreated in a democratic system of government. This does not mean that civil religion cannot exist outside of a democracy, but in cases of authoritarianism, regimes are purposefully creating a system that is meant to feel like an obligation to serve.

John Rawls popularly argued for the importance of the three primary principles in his work. Rawls highlighted their significance in creating a just and stable society.⁵⁵ Often, these

⁵² Sanger, Carol. *About abortion: terminating pregnancy in twenty-first-century America*. Harvard University Press, 2017.

⁵³ Dubow, Sara. *Ourselves unborn: A history of the fetus in modern America*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁵⁴ Gold, Rachel Benson, and Elizabeth Nash. "TRAP laws gain political traction while abortion clinics—and the women they serve—pay the price." *Guttmacher Policy Review* 16.2 (2013): 7-12.

⁵⁵ Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press, 1971.

values can be found within a nation's constitution or foundational documents. Allowing for an easily accessible common ground for citizens to unite and develop a sense of shared purpose.

In contrast to secular constitutions of a nation, traditional religions offer their followers a set of moral obligations that its followers must adhere to. For instance, in many Christian sects, there are ethics that often emphasize love, forgiveness, and humility. Believing that one must live their lives as though “God” and Jesus would have wanted. Buddhist ethics similarly focuses on compassion, nonviolence, and mindfulness. A tradition that has been passed down through generations, and in many cases, reaching as far back to the first Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Despite these textual differences, Margaret P. Battin has argued that there are underlying commonalities among various religious ethical systems. Going on to say that concepts such as the Golden Rule can be found across a variety of faiths.⁵⁶

Margaret P. Battin's assertion that there are underlying commonalities among various religious ethical systems, despite their differences, provides an insightful perspective on the shared human values that transcend specific religious traditions. By examining commonalities such as the Golden Rule and the call for empathy or compassion, it can be better understood how shared ethical principles create a sense of community within a civil religion.

The Golden Rule, which is more of a moral principle can be found in religious doctrines across cultures. As a result, the Golden Rule is a prime example of how there can be a mutual understanding of an ethical code. Being able to easily relate in the fact that both the Christian and Buddhist faith, for example, ask their followers to be compassionate human beings simplifies the unity within a government. There is a shared language between two, regardless of them knowing

⁵⁶ Battin, Margaret P. “Age Rationing and the Just Distribution of Health Care: Is There a Duty to Die?” *Ethics*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1987, pp. 317–40. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381351>. Accessed 5 March 2023.

it or not. This in turn creates a loop where these individuals go on to create a system that mimics their ethical rules. Creating a system that makes more people who follow the Golden Rule.

The popular mantra “treat others as you would like to be treated” did not gain popularity simply because it is an easily understandable phrase. Rather, its popularity comes from the fact that it echoes back to fundamental religious and philosophical ethical codes. For example, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism all contain this doctrine within them in some way, shape or form. This is reinforced by Karen Armstrong, who has claimed that the Golden Rule is a shared moral foundation across diverse religious contexts.⁵⁷

The presence of these shared ethical principles across religious traditions can be understood as an expression of what philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich referred to as the "ultimate concern."⁵⁸ Tillich argued that all religious systems, regardless of their specific beliefs and practices, are grounded in a concern for what is ultimately meaningful and valuable in human life. In this sense, the common ethical values found among various religious traditions can be seen as expressions of this shared "ultimate concern," pointing to a fundamental human desire for connection, empathy, and moral guidance.

The recognition of these commonalities among religious ethical systems has important implications for the relationship between civil religion and traditional religion in creating communities. As religious scholar Diana L. Eck has argued, the awareness of shared ethical values across religious traditions can create a sense of pluralism and mutual respect among diverse religious communities, promoting social cohesion and tolerance. Through this new found perspective of how religion can allow for a shared sense of understanding, religions can work together to contribute in the development of civil religious practices. When one religious group

⁵⁷ Armstrong, Karen. *The Case for God*. Knopf, 2009.

⁵⁸ Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*. Harper & Row, 1957.

amasses enough popularity to rise into a position of power, the legislation they pass will reflect their core values. The act of passing more religiously grounded bills would further encourage the ethical unity of religious communities.

Now, comparing what was previously understood about civil religion with the new understanding of ethical values will allow for the conclusion that religion influences and creates a civil religion and in turn civil religion reinforces the ideals of religions.

Emile Durkheim claimed religion serves as a source of social solidarity, providing societies with shared moral values and norms that contribute to social cohesion. In this sense, religious values inform the ethical foundations of a civil religion. Going back-and-forth, contributing to the development of a nation's moral compass. In example, Martin Luther King Jr.'s engagement with the civil rights movement in the United States demonstrated how religious ethics can inspire social and political change. Dr. King drew on his Christian beliefs and mobilized communities around shared ethical principles⁵⁹ such as justice, equality, and love. Becoming a successful force as the words he preached resonated with Americans in a broader sense than just civil religious values. Rather, Dr. King knew that the best way to unify the nation was to touch on the core values that all people understood.⁶⁰ Through Dr. King's actions, he illustrated the potential for religious ethics to be brought to the forefront of secular reason.

As previously stated, civil religion can also serve to shape religious ethics within a specific national context. Grace Davie observed the interaction between civil religion and traditional religion, and determined that this engagement can result in the process of "negotiation and accommodation." Whereby religious communities adapt their ethical teachings to align with

⁵⁹ Baldwin, Lewis V. *There is a balm in Gilead: The cultural roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Fortress Press, 1991.

⁶⁰ Baldwin, Lewis V. *Never to Leave Us Alone: The Prayer Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Fortress Press, 2010.

the prevailing civil religious values.⁶¹ This unique process is the culmination of all the work that has been discussed on the ethical values of civil religion being formed by traditional religion.

Traditional religion and civil religion both equally contribute to a shared sense of identity.

Yet, just as the creation of ethical values can be applauded by its positive impacts upon the United States, it can also be seen as a cultural corruption. When rely on established ethical values, in the case of governments, laws, what occurs is that there is an established rule. If one follows this law, one is doing good, if one is breaking this law, one is doing back. “Bad people get punished,” is what many would probably believe in terms of the law, but it is not so easy.

The greatest pitfall of established ethical values is in a concept named “moral licensing.” Moral licensing refers to the idea that if an individual follows moral codes, over the course of their life they are far more willing to break these codes as they get older.⁶² As individuals grow more into the comfort of pushing the boundaries of set rules, people are more capable of breaking and justifying why they did this. The same is true in the United States. The more ethical and moral codes the nation creates (i.e. laws), the more people will wish to break free in the name of freedom.

There also comes the struggle that ethical codes are judged individually. A judge in California will rule on the exact same crime differently than a judge in Florida. Why? As stated in this section, interpretations of ethical and moral codes come from personal life experiences. Civil religion’s push for more individuals to take all perspectives and filter them through their own team’s lens allows for unequal treatment of the masses. Not all things must be ethical questions, and some of these ethical values can have long-lasting effects on society.

⁶¹ Davie, Grace. *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. Blackwell Publishers, 2000.

⁶² Blanken, Irene, Niels Van De Ven, and Marcel Zeelenberg. "A meta-analytic review of moral licensing." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41.4 (2015): 540-558.

3.3: Summary

The exploration of ethical values and moral frameworks within both civil religion and traditional religion highlights their indispensable roles in fostering a sense of community and social cohesion. The examination of scholarly works by prominent thinkers such as Rawls, Battin, Durkheim, and Davie demonstrated the intricate relationship between civil religion and traditional religion, revealing how these domains can complement and enrich one another in terms of ethical principles.

Inherently, the human experience is about finding peace in this world⁶³, and what was found is that religions across all cultures wish for the same thing.⁶⁴ Resulting in a mutual growth between the ethical principles of both civil and traditional religion. They contribute to their development of inclusivity and create a benchmark that all people can equally comprehend and meet.

Something that must be crucially discussed is the lack of interdisciplinary work. Across this paper, the theories and arguments of political scientists, religious scholars, philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, musicologists, and more were brought in to discuss a question that all fields attempt to answer. What is religion's role? One may argue that they are all answering their questions within the perspective of their field, but this argument falls flat. When writing from the perspective of only one particular field, authors are leaving out the hard work of others that could reinforce their very own arguments. Is the role of education and scholarship not to create a trail so that others can catch up and surpass one's own work?

⁶³ Hocking, William Ernest. *The meaning of God in human experience*. 1912.

⁶⁴ Smith, Huston. "The World's Religions (Plus)." *New York, NY: HarperOne* (2009).

Ultimately, the exploration of the ethical values of traditional religions assisted in painting a clearer picture of how civil religion is morally framed. Through their symbiotic relationship, both civil and traditional religions create a back-and-forth style of working that can help cultivate inclusion, community, and compassion.

Chapter 4: Religious Characteristics in the American Government

The religious characteristics embedded within American democracy have long been a subject of scholarly inquiry. This chapter will examine the various religious elements that can be identified within the “secular” aspects of the United States. Being observed will be American rituals, idols, sacred texts, congregations, holy sites, belief systems, symbols, and songs. By further linking the comparisons between civil religion and traditional religion, this chapter will demonstrate how these eight characteristics prove definitively that the American people belong to a civil religion, without being aware.

4.1: Rituals

When using the term ritual, it is often associated with a religious practice or function; most people would be correct. Recalling back to the work of Catherine Albanese and the sandwich discussed in Chapter 2, rituals are religious in nature. Albanese argued that if a ritual brings some sort of cohesive meaning to a person’s life, then that ritual becomes a religion in itself.

In the US, rituals have been woven into the nation's very foundations. In many instances, rituals are conducted in a rhythmic pattern. Examples are the Pledge of Allegiance, presidential inauguration, and national holidays such as: Independence Day and Memorial Day. Rituals such as these exist to unite the American people under a shared sense of national identity. The nation's people cannot be afraid of fellow individuals who, too, swear their allegiance to the flag. The Pledge of Allegiance, a prayer, is ritualistically done every morning in public schools nationwide. The inauguration of a president is a ceremony done every four years, rain or shine, to bring together the people of the U.S. to celebrate yet another successful cycle.

In traditional faiths, practices like prayers, sacraments, and ceremonies play an essential part in practicing a religion. traditions and fostering a sense of togetherness.⁶⁵ For instance, within Christianity, rituals such as baptism, communion, and marriage ceremonies function to signify noteworthy life occurrences and impart spiritual significance; in Islam, the daily prayers (Salat) and the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) represent vital demonstrations of reverence and dedication.⁶⁶

Robert Bellah highlighted the importance of public rituals in American democracy, noting that these events often incorporate religious language and symbolism, such as prayers and invocations, to invoke a higher moral authority. Bellah argued that this blending of civil and religious elements serves to sanctify the political sphere and imbue it with a sense of sacredness and legitimacy.

Furthermore, Victor Turner explored the concept of "communitas" in ritualistic settings, describing the sense of unity and social bonding that emerges during collective ritual performances. Turner's work suggests that civil and religious rituals can foster this sense of communitas, strengthening social ties and reinforcing group identity.

4.2: Idols

Idols can serve as potent symbols that inspire a sense of devotion, reverence, and loyalty among followers, in both civil religion and traditional religions.

In traditional religion, idols typically denote tangible portrayals of deities, saints, or other esteemed figures, frequently utilized as objects for worship or veneration. For instance, within

⁶⁵ Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁶⁶ Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

Hinduism, the employment of murtis (sacred images) is a prevalent practice that enables devotees to connect with the divine. As Ananda K. Coomaraswamy elucidates, these images act as a "visible symbol of the divine reality" and offer a palpable focus for worship and contemplation.⁶⁷

In civil religion, idols are less likely to take the form of religious icons but can still embody a nation's ideals, values, and aspirations. According to Robert A. Orsi, "idols" in civil religion might include national symbols, monuments, or historical figures who represent the nation's identity and shared cultural heritage. For example, the Statue of Liberty serves as an emblem of freedom and democracy, while figures such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln embody the virtues of leadership and integrity.

David Morgan argues that both traditional religious idols and civil religious icons possess a "sacred aura" that can evoke a sense of awe and reverence among believers. This sacredness is often derived from the belief that these images and symbols are imbued with an inherent power or presence that transcends the material realm. Furthermore, Emile Durkheim posited that idols and symbols can act as "totems," representing a community's collective identity and shared values.

Similarities between idols in civil and traditional religions can also be found in the rituals and ceremonies surrounding them. As observed by Catherine Bell, the veneration of images and icons in both contexts often involves a set of prescribed actions, such as offerings, processions, or the singing of hymns. These rituals reinforce the symbolic power of the idol and facilitate the expression of communal devotion and loyalty.

⁶⁷ Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. *The Transformation of Nature in Art*. Harvard University Press, 1934.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the differences between idols in civil religion and traditional religion. While traditional religious idols are often directly associated with the divine or the supernatural, civil religious icons are more rooted in national history and secular ideals.

4.3: Sacred Texts

The role of sacred texts in both civil and traditional religions is pivotal, as these texts shape the beliefs, values, and practices of their adherents. Sacred texts function as repositories of collective wisdom and historical memory, providing guidance and direction for both personal and communal life.

In traditional religious beliefs, holy texts frequently serve as essential sources of divine insight, ethical direction, and spiritual guidance. Texts like the Bible in Christianity, the Qur'an in Islam, and the Vedas in Hinduism are considered sacred because they're thought to be inspired by a higher power or contain eternal truths surpassing human comprehension.⁶⁸ As Ninian Smart explains, sacred texts function as "repositories of the sacred," enabling religious communities to conserve and convey their teachings and traditions across generations.⁶⁹

In a similar vein, within civil religion, specific texts hold a revered status as foundational documents encapsulating the core principles, values, and ideals of a nation. As for American civil religion, documents such as the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Federalist Papers are frequently considered sacred texts, representing the nation's political philosophy and democratic principles.⁷⁰⁷¹ These documents act as touchstones of national

⁶⁸ Smith, Jonathan Z. *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. University of Chicago Press, 1991.

⁶⁹ Smart, Ninian. *The World's Religions*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁷⁰ Bellah, Robert N., and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press, 1985.

⁷¹ Gorski, Philip. *Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700*. *American Sociological Review*, 2000.

identity and sources of civic motivation, nurturing a sense of collective belonging and mutual purpose among citizens.

Nevertheless, there are significant distinctions in how sacred texts are approached and interpreted within civil religion and traditional religion. Paul Tillich underlines the difference between "heteronomous" religious texts, which obtain their authority from an external source like divine revelation, and "autonomous" texts, which derive their authority from their inherent rationality or moral insight. While traditional religious texts are often viewed as heteronomous⁷², civil religious texts, like the U.S. Constitution, are generally perceived as autonomous, reflecting the humanist and Enlightenment ideals foundational to modern liberal democracies.

Additionally, the hermeneutics of sacred texts in civil religion and traditional religion diverge in crucial ways. In traditional religious settings, sacred text interpretation is frequently directed by particular theological frameworks, exegetical traditions, and authoritative interpreters (e.g., clergy, scholars) who aim to ascertain the texts' meaning and implications for religious belief and practice.⁷³ Conversely, interpreting civil religious texts, such as the U.S. Constitution, is typically more pluralistic and disputed, mirroring the varied perspectives and interests that animate democratic societies.⁷⁴ As Ronald Dworkin notes, interpreting constitutional texts necessitates balancing fidelity to their authors' intentions and adapting to the evolving requirements and aspirations of contemporary society.⁷⁵

⁷² "the cultural and spiritual condition when traditional norms and values become rigid external demands threatening to destroy individual freedom." Unhjem, Arne. "Paul Tillich". Encyclopedia Britannica, 18 Oct. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paul-Tillich>. Accessed 5 April 2023.

⁷³ Esler, Philip F. *The Early Christian World*. Routledge, 2005.

⁷⁴ Sunstein, Cass R. *One Case at a Time: Judicial Minimalism on the Supreme Court*. Harvard University Press, 2001.

⁷⁵ Dworkin, Ronald. *Religion without God*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Considering the parallels and disparities between civil religion and traditional religion in terms of sacred texts, it's apparent that both domains utilize these texts to foster social cohesion, transmit values, and guide conduct amongst its followers. However, the nature and authority of these texts, as well as the hermeneutical methods used to interpret them, differ considerably between the two realms.

4.4: Congregation

Congregations hold a key position in both civil and traditional religions, offering a gathering place for individuals with shared beliefs, values, and practices. This section delves into the roles of congregations in civil and traditional religions, scrutinizing the similarities and differences in their structures, functions, and societal implications.

In traditional religious environments, congregations often denote groups of individuals who regularly assemble to partake in religious rituals, engage in communal worship, and receive spiritual guidance from religious leaders.⁷⁶ Such gatherings play a pivotal role in reinforcing shared beliefs, fostering social connections, and promoting moral and ethical values among members. In this context, congregations act as the backbone of religious communities, facilitating the transmission of religious traditions across generations.⁷⁷

Regarding civil religion, congregations can assume a more diverse and less formalized nature. For instance, political gatherings such as town hall meetings, electoral rallies, and legislative assemblies can be seen as civil congregations, uniting people to discuss, debate, and embody political values and principles. Moreover, national celebrations and commemorative

⁷⁶ Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. University of California Press, 2000.

⁷⁷ Chaves, Mark. "Congregations and Religious Change." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2004.

events, like Independence Day, Veterans Day, and presidential inaugurations, can also function as civil congregations, offering a platform for expressing shared national identity and patriotic sentiments.⁷⁸

While distinctions exist in the structure and objectives of congregations within civil and traditional religions, several shared features can be identified. Both types of congregations are vital in forming a type of social cohesion. They both uniquely offer safe spaces for individuals to connect, develop a sense of belonging, and reinforce their commitment to their found shared values.⁷⁹ Additionally, civil and traditional religious congregations both play a role in the socialization process of individuals. This is done by familiarizing them with the norms of their respective practices, expectations, and values that govern behavior within their specific communities.⁸⁰

While civil and traditional religious congregations share some common features, it is vital to recognize the distinctions between the two. Traditional religious congregations often concentrate on spiritual matters and emphasize personal salvation or enlightenment, whereas civil congregations prioritize civic engagement and the promotion of shared political values.⁸¹ Furthermore, traditional religious congregations are generally organized around specific religious doctrines, rituals, and authorities, while civil congregations may encompass a wider range of political ideologies and affiliations.⁸²

⁷⁸ Marvin, Carolyn, and David W. Ingle. "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion." *Sociological Analysis*, 1996.

⁷⁹ Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Simon & Schuster, 2012.

⁸⁰ Djupe, Paul A., and Christopher P. Gilbert. *The Political Influence of Churches*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁸¹ Bellah, Robert N., and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press, 1985.

⁸² Gorski, Philip. "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700." *American Sociological Review*, 2000.

It is noteworthy to consider how these gatherings contribute to the formation of collective identities. In the congregations of traditional religions, participants frequently develop a sense of belonging and group identity through their shared beliefs, rituals, and practices.⁸³ This collective identity can offer a sense of security, purpose, and meaning and serve as a source of social support and comfort during crises.⁸⁴

Conversely, civil congregations often work to consolidate national identity and encourage a sense of patriotism among citizens.⁸⁵ By gathering to celebrate national holidays or participate in civic rituals, individuals can express their loyalty and dedication to the nation and its core values. Such events can generate a sense of unity and shared purpose among citizens as they remind participants of their common history, culture, and aspirations.⁸⁶

Moreover, the interaction between civil and traditional religious congregations can play a role in shaping public conversation and negotiating societal values. As Habermas suggests, civil congregations can act as arenas for deliberative democracy, where individuals gather to discuss and debate the ethical and moral challenges confronting their community.⁸⁷ In this setting, traditional religious congregations can offer significant insights for moral contemplation and ethical discussion, as they rely on the abundant traditions of religious thought and practice to inform their viewpoints on social matters.⁸⁸

⁸³ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Fortress Press, 1962.

⁸⁴ Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. George Allen & Unwin, 1912.

⁸⁵ Huntington, Samuel P. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. Simon & Schuster, 2004.

⁸⁶ Ammerman, Nancy T. (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York, 2007; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305418.001.0001>, accessed 5 March 2023.

⁸⁷ Habermas, Jürgen. "Religion in the Public Sphere." *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2006.

⁸⁸ Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

4.5: Holy Sites

In examining sacred sites, the concept of sacred space is fundamental to both civil and traditional religion. Eliade argues that the sacred-profane dichotomy is crucial for understanding how humans perceive and distinguish the world.⁸⁹ For Eliade, sacred spaces are locations where the divine or transcendent intersects with the profane realm, forming an axis mundi or center that links heaven and earth. In both cases of traditional and civil religion, this notion can be found. In traditional religion, this would be seen in religious sites such as churches, temples, and shrines. In civil religious sites, what would be found are “secular” monuments, memorials, and landmarks.

In traditional religions, holy sites frequently act as hubs for worship, pilgrimage, and ritual. Sacred spaces can acquire spiritual importance through historical occurrences, religious stories, or the presence of relics and artifacts.⁹⁰ Turner underscores the significance of pilgrimage in traditional religion, emphasizing the transformative impact of journeying to a sacred site and the sense of *communitas* that develops among participants.

Likewise, civil religious holy sites function to memorialize notable historical events, honor national heroes, or represent foundational values and principles.⁹¹ These sites can evoke a sense of national identity, pride, and unity by recalling a collective history and shared values.⁹² Like their traditional counterparts, civil religious holy sites can also draw pilgrimages, with

⁸⁹ Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959.

⁹⁰ Chidester, David, and Edward T. Linenthal. *American Sacred Space*. Indiana UP, 1995.

⁹¹ Linenthal, Edward Tabor, 1947-. *Preserving Memory : the Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*. New York :Penguin Books, 1997.

⁹² Foote, Kenneth E. *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*. Texas UP, 2003.

individuals visiting monuments and memorials to pay tribute, celebrate their heroes, or partake in commemorative rituals.⁹³

The interrelationship between civil and traditional religious holy sites is apparent in instances where sacred spaces cross the boundaries separating the two domains. For example, the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., serves as both a religious institution and a pillar of American freedom and expression.⁹⁴ Additionally, Ground Zero, the location of the September 11th attacks, has evolved into a sacred space for both religious and secular reasons, illustrating the intricate blending of civil and traditional religious values.⁹⁵

4.6: Belief Systems

At the core of both civil and traditional religion lie belief systems, providing a framework for understanding the world and guiding individual actions. In American democracy, belief systems center on fundamental principles like liberty, equality, and justice.⁹⁶ These values are often deemed sacred and inviolable, much like the principles of traditional religious belief systems, such as the doctrines of salvation and divine revelation in Christianity, the Five Pillars of Islam, or the Eightfold Path in Buddhism.⁹⁷ By presenting a consistent worldview and ethical guide, belief systems in both civil and religious contexts enable individuals to address intricate social and ethical issues.

⁹³ Savage, Kirk. *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*. University of California Press, 2009.

⁹⁴ Inbody, Tyron. "The Contribution of Bernard Meland to the Development of a Naturalistic Historicist Concept of God." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1999, pp. 259–279.

⁹⁵ Krauthammer, Charles. "Sacilege at Ground Zero." *National Review*, National Review, 29 July 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2010/08/sacrilege-ground-zero-charles-krauthammer/>.

⁹⁶ Lipset, Seymour Martin. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. WW Norton & Company, 1996.

⁹⁷ Prothero, Stephen R. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--And Doesn't*. HarperOne, 2007.

These systems consist of doctrines, dogmas, and ethical tenets that mold religious thought and practice (Geertz). In the case of traditional religion, belief systems often focus on the presence of a divine being or beings, moral directives, and cosmological narratives that elucidate the nature of the universe, the genesis of humankind, and the meaning of life.⁹⁸

In civil religion, belief systems similarly offer a collection of guiding principles and values that unite the nation. However, these beliefs are generally more secular, concentrating on the nation's collective history, political ideals, and cultural values.⁹⁹ For instance, the American civil religion is firmly rooted in the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, and individual rights, which are enshrined in foundational documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution (Lipset). These values often intertwine with a sense of national exceptionalism or the conviction that the nation has a distinctive mission and destiny.¹⁰⁰

While civil religion and traditional religion may diverge in their theological foundations, researchers have identified considerable overlaps and interactions between their belief systems. For example, Robert N. Bellah famously claimed that the American civil religion incorporates elements of both Christianity and republicanism, culminating in a uniquely American fusion of religious and political beliefs. Similarly, Josiah Royce suggested that the American civil religion is marked by a "universal and religious consciousness" that surpasses denominational boundaries and unites the nation under a shared ethical structure.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Fortress Press, 1962.

⁹⁹ Bellah, Robert N., and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press, 1985.

¹⁰⁰ Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Edited by J.P. Mayer, translated by George Lawrence, Anchor Books, 1969.

¹⁰¹ Royce, Josiah. *The Problem of Christianity*. The Macmillan Company, 1913.

Other scholars have investigated how the belief systems of civil and traditional religions can interact and influence one another in various ways. For instance, Philip Gorski asserts that the American civil religion has historically fluctuated between two poles: a more inclusive, prophetic tradition that highlights social justice and universal human rights, and a more exclusionary, nationalist tradition that prioritizes national sovereignty and cultural uniformity. This dynamic interplay between civil and traditional religious beliefs can result in both conflict and collaboration, as different groups strive to define the moral and political identity of the nation (Albanese).

4.7: Symbols

Symbols play a critical role in both civil religion and traditional religion, as they act as potent vehicles for conveying meanings, values, and shared identities. In the American context, civil religious symbols are closely intertwined with traditional religious symbolism, reinforcing the idea that American democracy can be seen as a civil religion. In comparing the symbols of both traditional and civil religion, it will be better to extrapolate how similar they really are.

In American civil religion, symbols such as the American flag, the national anthem, the bald eagle, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the Statue of Liberty draw out feelings of patriotism and allegiance. Robert N. Bellah stated that these national symbols carry religious nuances. For instance, the phrase "one nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance directly connects the nation's civil with the traditionally religious.

Similarly, traditional religious symbols like the Christian cross, the Star of David, and the Islamic crescent communicate powerful messages about their respective religious identities and

values. The cross, for example, symbolizes the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, while the Star of David denotes the Jewish people's connection to God.

For both the civil and traditional forms of religion, symbology is an instrument used to create a form of community. Allowing there to be a spiritual connection between individuals and a set of core beliefs. Emile Durkheim suggests that symbols are vital in promoting social cohesion by linking individuals to a common set of values and beliefs.¹⁰² Mircea Eliade contends that religious symbols bridge the sacred and the profane, allowing individuals to experience the transcendent and reaffirm their sense of belonging to a specific religious community.¹⁰³

A recurring theme in the literature on civil religion and traditional religion is the idea that symbols function as both a "model of" and a "model for" reality (Geertz). In both domains, symbols act as a "model of" reality by representing shared beliefs and values and as a "model for" reality by guiding behavior and social norms. For instance, the American flag serves as a "model of" national unity and a "model for" patriotic behavior, while the Christian cross operates as a "model of" spiritual salvation and a "model for" Christian conduct.

4.7.1: Types of Symbols

It would be difficult to state the term “America” without at least one of the following popping up in someone’s head: the American flag, the national anthem, the bald eagle, the Pledge of Allegiance, or the Statue of Liberty. Symbols hold immense significance in creating a sense of patriotism for citizens. In the United States, to be a patriot is to love and respect these symbols. Robert N. Bellah argued that these national symbols have religious undertones, which

¹⁰² Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. George Allen & Unwin, 1912.

¹⁰³ Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959.

contribute to the perception of American democracy as a civil religion.¹⁰⁴ Delving deeper into these symbols, we can uncover the religious connotations they embody.

With its 13 stripes and 50 stars, the American flag is a potent symbol of national unity and democratic ideals. However, its religious significance becomes apparent when considering its origin. According to some interpretations, the red stripes represent valor and bravery, while the white stripes symbolize purity and innocence—qualities often associated with religious virtues. Furthermore, the blue field signifies vigilance, perseverance, and justice, which can be viewed as moral imperatives stemming from religious doctrines.

The national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," written by Francis Scott Key during the War of 1812, is another symbol with religious undertones. The anthem's lyrics evoke divine protection and guidance, as seen in the lines "And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust,'" suggesting that America's success and strength are attributed to divine providence.

As the national emblem, the bald eagle symbolizes strength, independence, and freedom. The eagle often represents divine power, protection, and spiritual ascent in religious symbolism. In this light, the bald eagle can be perceived as a symbol connecting the nation's political ambitions to a loftier spiritual authority.

The Pledge of Allegiance, recited by countless Americans each day, contains the phrase "one nation under God." This explicit reference to a higher spiritual power emphasizes the religious nature of American civil religion. The pledge's confirmation of the nation's reliance on divine guidance aligns with traditional religious convictions and further illustrates the link between civil religion and traditional religion.

¹⁰⁴ Bellah, Robert N., and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press, 1985.

Finally, the Statue of Liberty symbolizes freedom, democracy, and the welcoming of immigrants. The statue, a gift from France, is inspired by Libertas, the Roman goddess of freedom, linking the symbol to ancient religious iconography. Furthermore, the torch held by Lady Liberty represents enlightenment and divine guidance. At the same time, the tablet in her left hand, inscribed with the date of American independence, signifies the sacred nature of the founding principles.

4.8: Songs

In traditional religion, hymns and chants are often used to praise deities, convey religious teachings, and facilitate spiritual experiences. These songs are considered integral to religious rituals and ceremonies, reinforcing religious beliefs and fostering a sense of unity among worshipers. Walter Brueggemann suggests that religious songs function as vehicles for religious expression, allowing individuals to "articulate their deepest hopes, fears, and commitments."¹⁰⁵

Comparably, in American civil religion, tunes like "The Star-Spangled Banner," "America the Beautiful," "God Bless America," and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" fulfill various functions, such as conveying national identity, promoting patriotism, and uniting people around common values. Philip V. Bohlman argues that these melodies contribute to the formation of a "national soundscape."¹⁰⁶

One striking similarity between traditional and civil religion songs is their ability to evoke strong emotional responses, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared experience. Sociologist Emile Durkheim recognized the power of collective rituals, including singing hymns

¹⁰⁵ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Augsburg Publishing House, 1984.

¹⁰⁶ Bohlman, Philip V, et al., editors. *Music in American Religious Experience*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

or anthems, to create what he called "collective effervescence," a heightened emotional state reinforcing social bonds and shared values.¹⁰⁷

Another commonality between the two is incorporating religious language and themes into their lyrics. For instance, the national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," contains the phrase "In God is our trust," while "God Bless America" appeals to divine blessings and protection. These expressions demonstrate the blending of religious and national themes, echoing the functions of hymns and chants in traditional religion.

4.8.1: Songs and Community

Daniel Ramirez delved deeply into the impact of music within religious contexts, specifically examining the early 20th-century Pentecostal movement in the United States and Mexico. In his publication "Migrating Faith: Pentecostalism in the United States and Mexico in the Twentieth Century," Ramirez investigates how music cultivates a sense of identity, community, and spiritual experiences among followers.¹⁰⁸

Ramirez maintains that music was central to shaping and disseminating Pentecostal beliefs and customs, with hymns and other sacred tunes functioning as essential vehicles for conveying religious experiences and doctrines. Consequently, music facilitated the creation of a community among Pentecostals and contributed to the cross-cultural transmission of their faith as it expanded beyond national and linguistic borders.

While Ramirez's work is primarily focused on the Pentecostal tradition, his insights on the role of music in religious communities can be applied more broadly to the study of civil

¹⁰⁷ Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. George Allen & Unwin, 1912.

¹⁰⁸ Ramirez, Daniel. *Migrating Faith: Pentecostalism in the United States and Mexico in the Twentieth Century*. UNC Press Books, 2015.

religion. Just as sacred songs within religious contexts foster a sense of shared identity and values among adherents, national anthems and patriotic songs in civil religion can unite citizens around a collective set of political principles and commitments.

In civil religion, national anthems and patriotic songs, such as "The Star-Spangled Banner" or "God Bless America," unite citizens around a standard set of political ideals and commitments. These songs often evoke strong emotions and foster a sense of national pride, loyalty, and shared identity. By singing these songs during public ceremonies or events, citizens participate in a collective ritual reaffirming their connection to the nation and its values.

Drawing on Ramirez's work, we can understand the role of music in civil religion as transcending mere entertainment or artistic expression. Instead, it functions as an essential national identity and political culture component. Music contributes to forming a sense of community among citizens, reinforcing their shared values and beliefs while fostering emotional connections to the nation and its symbols.

4.9: Summary

To conclude, this composition has scrutinized the diverse religious aspects that pervade American democracy, including rituals, icons, sacred texts, assemblies, holy sites, belief systems, symbols, and songs. By drawing parallels between civil religion and traditional religion, it has shown how these religious aspects contribute to American democracy operating as a civil religion. The analysis of academic works, sources, and citations has illuminated the complex relationship between religion and democracy in the United States, underscoring the significance of comprehending the religious dimensions of democratic systems. These components create a sense of community, encourage political involvement, and nurture respect for institutions.

Rituals, such as inaugurations, presidential funerals, and the State of the Union address, function as important events that connect citizens to their political culture. Comparable to religious ceremonies, these rituals foster a sense of unity and collective identity.

Icons in American civil religion include national symbols and figures, like the Founding Fathers and American presidents, which can be likened to the reverence of religious deities or saints. These icons personify the values and principles that the nation cherishes.

Sacred texts, including the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, act as fundamental documents that delineate the nation's core beliefs and principles, much like religious texts do for traditional religions.

Assemblies in civil religion consist of the collective gatherings and civic organizations that unite citizens around shared political values and cultivate a sense of belonging to the broader national community.

Holy sites, encompassing national monuments and historical landmarks, represent the physical spaces that bear particular importance for the nation's history and identity, analogous to the way followers of traditional religions esteem religious sites.

Belief systems in American civil religion include the essential political ideals, values, and principles that guide the nation, such as democracy, individual rights, and equality.

Symbols, like the American flag, the bald eagle, and the Statue of Liberty, function to provoke feelings of patriotism and loyalty, much like religious symbols hold profound meanings for believers.

Songs, encompassing national anthems and patriotic hymns, contribute to establishing a shared national identity and reinforcing the emotional connections between citizens and their nation.

American democracy exhibits numerous religious elements that contribute to its operation as a civil religion. By examining these elements, the understanding of the role religion plays in shaping the nation's political landscape and fostering a sense of community and shared identity among citizens can be enhanced.

Chapter 5: American Democracy as a Civil Religion

This chapter explores the implications of American democracy as a civil religion for political participation, institutional respect, and the adaptability of the Constitution. As Robert N. Bellah outlined, civil religion integrates religious principles into political life, functioning as a unifying force that fosters a sense of shared values and purpose.¹⁰⁹ The chapter posits that American democracy, as a civil religion, promotes political engagement and respect for institutions. Additionally, it contends that the Constitution's inherent flexibility constitutes a religious characteristic, enabling the evolution of American democracy as a civil religion.

5.1: Civil Religion and Political Participation:

It can be inferred that a strong sense of shared identity stemming from religious and political values can similarly encourage political participation. Civil religion unites citizens under a common set of beliefs and principles that surpass partisan divides, fostering a sense of national cohesion and purpose. This sense of collective identity can inspire citizens to become politically active, as they view their engagement as vital for upholding and promoting the values defining their national identity.

For instance, civil religion in the United States often emphasizes the importance of democracy, liberty, and equality. All of which are fundamentally found in religion according to this paper's chapter three. These "God-given" values inspire citizens to engage in voting,¹¹⁰ attending political events, and advocating for policies that align with their beliefs. Once again

¹⁰⁹ Bellah, Robert N., and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press, 1985.

¹¹⁰ Green, John C., and John Clifford Green. *The faith factor: How religion influences American elections*. Praeger, 2007.

demonstrating that civil religion functions as a community-driven force. One that encourages citizens to actively participate in the political process to uphold and protect their shared values.

Additionally, civil religion fosters political participation by providing citizens with a moral framework for understanding legislation. Regardless of which political party an individual belongs to, they understand the necessity to create policy. This moral framework helps citizens make sense of complex political issues by echoing back to their core religious beliefs. As was discussed earlier, if an individual were to see legislation on abortion, they will filter their thought process through their ethical framework.¹¹¹ If the bill aligns with their ethical framework, citizens will understand that legislation further reinforces their beliefs. If the bill were to contradict the citizens' framework, they would fight to ensure that their perspective is the championing view.¹¹² As a result, civil religion serves as a powerful catalyst for political participation. Citizens are motivated to act by their individual interests and a shared sense of moral duty and responsibility.

Similarly, Margolis's *From Politics to the Pews* thoroughly investigates the reciprocal relationship between religious affiliation and political attitudes.¹¹³ Margolis argues that religious identity can influence political behavior and vice versa, revealing a complex and dynamic interplay between these two aspects of social life. This relationship is also evident in American civil religion, where religious and political values intertwine to encourage political activism.

Margolis's research demonstrates that religious beliefs and values significantly shape individuals' political attitudes. As was previously discussed, people who identify with a religious

¹¹¹ Haidt, Jonathan. *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. Vintage, 2012.

¹¹² Madison, James. "The Federalist No. 51." Independent Journal 1788-02-06 : . Rpt. in *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*. Vol. 16. Ed. Gaspare J. Saladino and John P. Kaminski. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1986. 43-47. Print.

¹¹³ Margolis, Michele F. *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*. University of Chicago Press, 2018.

tradition may be more likely to support policies and/or candidates that align with their religious beliefs. This comes from something James Madison discussed in *Federalist 51*, in which he argues that people will always fall into the Principal-Agent Theory¹¹⁴. Stating that the Principal, the one who represents the agent, will always fulfill the needs of the people. If the politician does not align with the beliefs of the people, they will be removed. As a result, politicians may seem to have strong stances on traditionally religious issues, such as: abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, or social justice issues. This connection between religious affiliation and political attitudes highlights the potential for religious identity to serve as a driving force for political engagement.

Conversely, Margolis also contends that political attitudes can influence religious affiliation. For example, if someone were to identify as a Republican or conservative, they are more likely to identify with Calvinism. Calvinistic doctrine states that local governments can have a better understanding and control of a people, versus laws that would rule over the entire nation. As a result, the Republican Party, which believes more in state rights, would align more with Calvinistic individuals. Suggesting that political factors can always play a significant role in shaping individuals' religious identity.

This reciprocal relationship between religious affiliation and political attitudes in American civil religion can further encourage political activism. As religious and political values become increasingly intertwined in the United States,¹¹⁵ individuals begin to view politics as a fighting ground for their religion.¹¹⁶ The lines have blurred and there is a sense of duty to protect one's faith politically and vice versa. This leads to a greater sense of moral duty and

¹¹⁴ Madison, James. "The Federalist No. 51." Independent Journal 1788-02-06 : . Rpt. in *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*. Vol. 16. Ed. Gaspare J. Saladino and John P. Kaminski. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1986. 43-47. Print.

¹¹⁵ Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Simon & Schuster, 2012.

¹¹⁶ Juergensmeyer, Mark. *The new cold war?: Religious nationalism confronts the secular state*. Univ of California Press, 1993.

responsibility for participating in the political process. Allowing for more candidates and policies that reflect the beliefs of a religious community to appear more often.

By blending religious and political values in American civil religion, a powerful sense of shared identity and purpose among citizens can be created. This unity transcends traditional religious and partisan divides and can inspire individuals to become more politically active, as they see their engagement as crucial to upholding shared values defining their national identity.¹¹⁷ By fostering a sense of belonging and common purpose, American civil religion can effectively motivate political participation.

In *Nature's God*, Stewart delves into the philosophical foundations of American democracy, tracing its origins to the Enlightenment and the concept of a "nature's God."¹¹⁸ Stewart draws on a vast array of historical sources to determine the true meaning of founding American documents and thought. More importantly, Stewart examines how the work of scholars from the Enlightenment directly influenced the Founding Fathers and their moral principles when creating the United States. It is through this in depth analysis of the religious language in the founding documents that shows how these concepts continue to shape the nation into a civil religion.

“Nature’s God” refers to the concept that a higher power can be discovered not through divine intervention or revelation, but rather through the complexity and beauty of the natural world. Stewart did not simply stumble into this thought, rather this concept was championed by Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine. Together, they set the foundations of the importance of rational inquiry, individual liberty, and natural

¹¹⁷ Lau, Richard R., and David P. Redlawsk. *How voters decide: Information processing in election campaigns*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹¹⁸ Stewart, Matthew. *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.

rights in the American political tradition. Stewart argues that these foundational ideas have not only influenced the development of American democracy but have also played a crucial role in shaping American doctrine, which can be understood to be civil religion according to chapter 2 of this paper.

By setting America's fundamental doctrines at the center of Enlightenment philosophy, Stewart was able to highlight how the United States' political identity is grounded in "universal truths" that supposedly transcend religion. Unknowingly to Stewart, the United States' political identity being centered in a "nature's God" is no different than what has already been claimed. Rather, it is through his analysis of an emphasis on rationality that reinforces the claim that the United States is a civil religion. He finds that the fundamental values of the nation according to the Founding Fathers are: reason, liberty, and natural rights. All of which are already found in the fundamental roots of tradition. Once again demonstrating in this paper that religion and civil religion are in an infinite loop where one continuously reinforces the other. "Nature's God" unifies American citizens, not in the belief that rationality leads to a form of enlightenment, but rather that through enlightenment, debate is formed. Thus, recreating the cycle once more.

Stewart's analysis unveils how American civil religion has evolved as the nation has faced various challenges and social changes. According to Stewart, American civil religion's adaptability lies in its ability to draw upon Enlightenment principles of reason, progress, and human dignity while incorporating new ideas and insights from diverse religious traditions. This flexibility has allowed American civil religion to remain relevant and responsive to contemporary societal needs.

In *Politics is for Power*, Eitan Hersh emphasizes the importance of grassroots activism and political engagement in influencing policy changes.¹¹⁹ Hersh argues that political participation at the local level is essential for a functioning democracy. Stating that citizens should actively shape their communities and political landscapes. This is done through their warning that political hobbyism is killing politics as it is meant to be.

When putting civil religion through the lens of Hersh's work, it becomes clear that political engagement is civil religion. Every debate is a reinforcement of the faith; every politician is a clergyman. Political engagement is the prayers of a church full of devout followers. It creates a sense of shared values and purpose. Civil religion is the foundation upon which citizens convene and create. Unity and community through a diversity of thoughts are what create the United States, and its citizens are fighting every day to reach a political nirvāṇa. Engagement is the stomping ground of faith, and as a result, it transcends the simplistic costume it wears.

Political engagement/activism can be seen in a variety of forms in the United States. It can be seen in voting, attending town hall meetings, participating in a protest, or volunteering for a political campaign. These activities are crucial to maintaining a healthy democracy, as it ensures that the system is in a constant state of being checked and creating balances. By appealing to a sense of shared values and purpose, civil religion can motivate citizens to participate in these activities, thereby strengthening the democratic process.

The connection between civil religion and grassroots activism can be observed in how religious and politically motivated organizations work together to address social issues and promote change. For example, faith-based organizations often form relationships with local

¹¹⁹ Hersh, Eitan. *Politics Is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.

communities to provide resources and support for marginalized populations, tackle social injustices, and advocate for policy changes. Examples of this can be seen with organizations such as the NAE (The National Association of Evangelicals), ISNA (The Islamic Society of North America), AJWS (American Jewish World Service), and Catholic Charities USA. These collaborative approaches underscore civil religion's grip in the United States has in mobilizing citizens to participate in the political process.

Yet, to take a step back on the concentrated focus of grassroots activism in Hersh's book, it is also essential to talk about how Hersh believes that political hobbyism is detrimental to the nation. Unlike what was previously discussed, what Hersh warns about is being a social media lobbyist. That people who dedicate themselves to strictly posting about politics and sharing thoughts about politics online are helping no one but rather just creating tension that does not necessarily exist outside of digital spaces. This attack against the hobbyism of politics would be an attack on the speed civil religion is taking over people's lives. Civil religion would begin to slip back into the background without the constant reinforcement of ideals and creating a team-based mentality.

5.2: Institutional Respect and Civil Religion

Civil religion significantly promotes respect for institutions by linking them to a broader moral framework deeply rooted in the values and principles that underlie national identity. As Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck emphasize in their book *Identity Crisis*, identity politics play a pivotal role in shaping American political discourse, especially in the contemporary context.¹²⁰ This

¹²⁰ Sides, John, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

phenomenon is particularly relevant when examining how civil religion fosters respect for institutions. It underscores the importance of shared values and ideals in maintaining political stability and social cohesion.

In civil religion, the connection between religious and political values helps reinforce respect for institutions and establishes a solid moral foundation for their existence. For example, the Constitution, a fundamental element of the American political structure, is frequently regarded as a sacred text representing the essential principles of democracy, liberty, and justice. Much of this discourse has been done through a religious context in Chapter 3.

The admiration for the Constitution as a sacred text within the context of civil religion greatly influences the esteem given to the institutions it governs, such as the judiciary, the legislature, and the executive branch. Several factors foster this respect, including religious language and symbolism, connections to shared values and ideals, and the emphasis on the institutions' roles in maintaining social order and justice.

First, the employment of religious language and symbolism in relation to the Constitution adds to the perception of the document as sacred, thereby elevating the status of the institutions it governs. Phrases like "a government of laws and not of men" and "checks and balances," for instance, evoke divine order and rule of law ideas that resonate with religious sentiments. This link to religious principles reinforces the significance and legitimacy of the judiciary, legislature, and executive branches as institutions upholding these values.

Secondly, the connection between the Constitution and shared values and ideals in American civil religion further bolsters respect for its governing institutions. The Constitution embodies core principles such as democracy, liberty, and justice, central to American identity. The judiciary, the legislature, and the executive, as institutions responsible for interpreting,

enacting, and enforcing the Constitution, are seen as divine guardians of these fundamental truths. This perception warps respect for these institutions as vital components of the nation's moral fabric. Yet, unbeknownst to citizens born into such a society, these institutions are flawed and may be manipulated. This blindness to the truth can only be understood when a citizen steps away from participating in the religion, and begins to form their own.

Furthermore, civil religion reinforces respect for institutions by emphasizing their role in upholding shared principles and ideals. Institutions like the Supreme Court, for instance, are frequently considered the guardians of the Constitution, guaranteeing that the nation's laws comply with the core values defining American identity. This perception is reinforced through religious language and symbolism in the Court's proceedings and decisions, which emphasize the institution's moral authority.

Third, emphasizing these institutions' roles in maintaining social order and justice also contributes to their respect within civil religion. The judiciary, legislature, and executive branches are responsible for ensuring that the nation's laws and policies conform to the Constitution's principles, preserving the balance of power and protecting citizens' rights and freedoms. By performing these functions, these institutions are seen as vital to the proper functioning of American democracy and the conservation of the nation's moral framework. So long as they maintain their image to the general public, that illusion is never shattered. The institutions will continue to create a form of peace, and allow for citizens to not want to change the foundations of the nation. As the American colloquialism goes “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Meaning, that if the institutions continue to respect the demands of the masses, then the civil religion will continue to function and be unquestioned.

Moreover, civil religion extends beyond formal political institutions to encompass other organizations that are crucial in shaping society's moral fabric. This can be seen in the respect accorded to institutions such as religious congregations, community organizations, and educational establishments, which are vital for upholding shared values and nurturing civic virtues. Integrating religious and political values in the discourse surrounding these institutions further solidifies their role in sustaining the nation's moral framework.

Civil religion is a powerful mechanism for fostering respect for institutions by connecting them to a larger moral framework that transcends partisan politics. It is difficult, to put it simply, to be against the very institution your political team belongs to and swears to protect. "Teams" is referring to either Democrats and Republicans, the left and right, liberals and conservatives. When belonging to such a team, the ideals instituted within a citizen transcend any material purpose. Individuals will feel as though every decision they or their team make will have god-like ramifications in protecting the very essence of the nation. As a result, what civil religion creates is a challenge that is neverending, but demands its devote followers to attempt to fix or else the very nation will fail.

Deal and Kennedy's groundbreaking work, *Corporate Cultures*, delves into organizational culture and its significance for an organization's success and longevity.¹²¹ They state that in order to run a functional corporation, it must have built in values, beliefs, and rituals that can be shared amongst its members. Once a corporation has that, what they find is that there is a boom in loyalty, unity, and community amongst the team members. Creating a space that all that belong to it wish to continue to represent, and go out into their private lives and share the

¹²¹ Deal, Terrence E., and Allan A. Kennedy. *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*. Addison-Wesley, 1982.

connection they feel. This allows corporations to overcome any challenges that may arise as their members are willing to adapt in order to fix the issue.

By extending the concepts of organizational culture to the broader context of civil religion, it becomes apparent that civil religion can be viewed as a form of national culture that fosters respect for political institutions. Just as an organized culture allows a company to succeed, civil religions' flexible accommodations too allow citizens to easily feel as though they can influence the system they belong to. A reminder that this is done through shared values, rituals, and symbols that are easily recognizable.

In the United States, foundational documents and national symbols are venerated to reinforce the very respect that is expected of its citizens. There are no federal laws that tell citizens that they must respect the Founding Fathers, their works, or the symbols they create. Yet, there is an internalized duty of the citizen to do so without being asked. Not because they fear the law or those in power, rather citizens fear becoming an outsider. If and when there are people who step outside the norms of society, they immediately become a ridicule and an outcast. Famously, this was seen in American Football, when Colin Kaepernick decided to take a knee during the National Anthem. Whether it was right or wrong of him to do is a matter religious perspective, but what Mr. Kaepernick did that day was to step outside of the comfortable boundaries the nation had become accustomed to. When one steps outside these imaginative boundaries made by the religion in place, one is showing a *disrespect* to the institution.

Kaepernick would go from being known as an American Football player, to a civil rights activist. Through this very process, what he did was shift the narrative of the nation, and show what his religion is. He preached his beliefs, and he amassed a following. As a result, Kaepernick

became a symbol of the system. An opportunity for his team to rise up and change the system for their own “hope.” Thus, recreating the cycle that has been previously discussed.

“Respect for the institution” is a loose phrase that fits a vital role when discussing civil religion on a surface level of understanding. In reality, respect comes and goes as it does not exist. The respect made by some will become the disrespect of others. What this means is that the nation is always split. This is what allows it to function as there must always be debate and discourse for the system to work. As was mentioned, civil religion proposed a challenge that can never be done. Through the communities people form and the symbols they create, the religion is revitalized to take on a new meaning. People want to be a part of a system they cherish, a community, and thus they will always form one that they respect. Respect creates loyalty, but loyalty does not create respect. Allowing for the ever changing and evolution of the understanding of where civil religion is at any current moment in time.

5.3: Constitutional Adaptability and Civil Religion:

The adaptability of the U.S. Constitution is a crucial element of American civil religion, illustrating how the nation's seminal document shares a religious trait with traditional religions. Often considered a "living document," the Constitution has been crafted with an innate capability to change according to society's evolving needs, values, and priorities. This malleability is achieved through a mix of the amendment process, which permits the addition or alteration of constitutional provisions, and judicial interpretation, which allows courts to construe the Constitution concerning contemporary situations and challenges.¹²²

¹²² Sunstein, Cass R. *Designing Democracy: What Constitutions Do*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

The Constitution's capacity to adapt over time can be usefully compared to the development of religious doctrines and practices within traditional religions. As Casanova¹²³ notes, religious traditions often undergo reinterpretation and reformulation processes to maintain their ongoing relevance to the shifting needs and values of their followers. This ability to change is vital for the persistence and expansion of religious traditions, as it enables them to address emerging social, cultural, and moral issues over time.

Similarly, the adaptability of the Constitution allows American civil religion to progress in line with the nation's changing moral and social landscape. This dynamic aspect of civil religion permits it to tackle modern issues, such as civil rights, gender equality, and environmental concerns, by integrating new interpretations and values into its structure. This continuous reinterpretation process guarantees that American civil religion stays responsive to the diverse and evolving needs of its citizens while also preserving a sense of continuity with the nation's founding principles and ideals.

The adaptability of the Constitution as a religious characteristic within the civil religion context highlights the significance of change. It underscores the critical role of dialogue and consensus-building in both political and religious domains. This focus on dialogue demonstrates how civil religion can cultivate a sense of unity and shared purpose among citizens, despite the presence of diverse perspectives and contentious issues.

In religious communities, ongoing conversations and debates often transpire as adherents seek to reinterpret and reformulate their beliefs and practices in response to new challenges and changing conditions. This deliberative process allows religious traditions to remain pertinent and meaningful to their followers while also promoting the growth and development of the faith.

¹²³ Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Similarly, the American political system flourishes with the active involvement of citizens, legislators, and judges in shaping the interpretation and implementation of the Constitution. Processes such as public discourse, legislative deliberation, and judicial review involve various stakeholders in ongoing dialogue, ensuring the Constitution stays responsive to society's evolving needs.

This negotiation and compromise process, central to American democracy, mirrors the deliberative nature of religious traditions as they adapt to shifting circumstances. By engaging in open dialogue, religious and political communities can explore diverse perspectives, pinpoint common ground, and collaborate to build consensus on crucial issues. In civil religion, this approach fortifies the connections between citizens and fosters a sense of unity that transcends political and ideological divisions.

The focus on dialogue and consensus-building in American civil religion can contribute to creating a more inclusive and tolerant society. As citizens participate with one another in the political sphere, they encounter a variety of viewpoints and experiences that can challenge their assumptions and foster greater understanding. The dialogue process can nurture empathy, respect, and cooperation among citizens from different backgrounds and belief systems, helping to bridge the divides that frequently separate societies.

5.4: Summary

This chapter explored the implications of American democracy as a civil religion in relation to political participation, institutional respect, and the adaptability of the Constitution. We argued that American democracy, functioning as a civil religion, encourages political engagement and respect for institutions by fostering a sense of shared values and purpose.

Discussing how the sense of shared identity and values, as demonstrated by Margolis, motivates political engagement among citizens. Furthermore, we highlighted the role of grassroots activism and civic engagement in shaping political outcomes, as Hersh argued.

In terms of institutional respect, it was examined how civil religion contributes to a larger moral framework, with works such as Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck's *Identity Crisis* emphasizing the role of identity politics in reinforcing the personal beliefs people hold. Additionally, discussing the veneration of the Constitution and how it bolsters respect for the institutions it governs.

Drawing comparisons to traditional religions, we analyzed the adaptability of the U.S. Constitution as a religious characteristic within the context of civil religion. Arguing that the Constitution's inherent flexibility, similar to the evolution of religious doctrines and practices, allows American civil religion to evolve alongside the nation's changing moral and social landscape. The emphasis on dialogue and consensus-building in both political and religious spheres further strengthens the adaptability of the Constitution and the unity among citizens.

Chapter 6: The Darkness of Civil Religion

For the most part, this paper has painted civil religion as a neutrally positive force in the United States, but that would be the case if civil religion only remained so theoretically. In practice, civil religion is tearing the United States apart; not because it does not work but rather because it works too well. Civil religion's encouragement of community, ethical values, and fostering of participation has taken a radical turn. Instead of uniting for the embetterment of the nation, it is uniting those who wish harm unto others; something James Madison feared when warning the nation about factions.¹²⁴

First, *White Identity Politics* by Ashley Jardina must be discussed. Jardina states that for many years, "white" people in the United States have been developing a sense of threat from minorities.¹²⁵ This is owing to an increase in minorities in America and societal changes with which white people feel uncomfortable. Her book demonstrates in great detail that white identity is a powerful indicator of political attitudes and behavior.

What does that have to do with civil religion? In line with previous chapters, civil religion has been one of the causes of this group of individuals radicalizing in the past decades. This radicalization can be understood in Kelly Baker's *Gospel According to the Klan*. Kelly Baker writes about the rise of the Klan and racial hate in the early twentieth century. Crediting the rise of the Protestant understanding of the Bible.¹²⁶ Baker claims that one of the main reasons the KKK grew so popular is that they could unify under their white identity, as it was supported by their readings of the Bible.

¹²⁴ Madison, James. "The federalist no. 10." *November 22.1787 (1787): 1787-88.*

¹²⁵ Jardina, Ashley. *White identity politics.* Cambridge University Press, 2019.

¹²⁶ Baker, Kelly J. *Gospel according to the Klan: The KKK's appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930.* University Press of Kansas, 2017.

White identity created communities that were founded on race and religion. Two groups, when placed together, are hard to separate as both are very personal experiences.¹²⁷ So personal, Emerson et al. state that much of Evangelical religious foundations in the United States are based in race.¹²⁸

The nation was founded on religious ideals and even Bellah's initial understandings was that Presidents and documents referred to a higher power. Since then, it is hard to see any president that did not use religion in some sort of fashion to unite the nation. Richard Nixon referred to himself as a defender of traditional American values;¹²⁹ Gerald Ford talked about faith in speeches;¹³⁰ Jimmy Carter used religious language to promote his policy agenda;¹³¹ Ronald Reagan promoted a conservative political agenda that was sprinkled with religious language;¹³² George H.W. Bush frequently mentioned "God,"¹³³ Bill Clinton would speak about his own faith when campaigning,¹³⁴ Barack Obama would use religious rhetoric;¹³⁵ and Donald Trump portrayed himself as the defender of traditional Christian values.¹³⁶

Politicians indisputably use religion to manipulate people into following them and their agenda. Religion has become one of the greatest tools to unite people as has been repeatedly

¹²⁷ Emerson, Michael O., and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2001.

¹²⁸ Emerson, Michael O., and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith*. 2001.

¹²⁹ King, Andrew A., and Floyd Douglas Anderson. "Nixon, Agnew, and the "Silent Majority": A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Polarization." *Western Speech* 35.4 (1971): 243-255.

¹³⁰ Kahle, Lynn R., and John J. Berman. "Attitudes Cause Behaviors: A Cross-Lagged Panel Analysis." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 37.3 (1979): 315.

¹³¹ Berggren, D. Jason. "'I had a Different Way of Governing': The Living Faith of President Carter." *Journal of Church and State* 47.1 (2005): 43-61.

¹³² Roof, Wade Clark. "American Presidential Rhetoric from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush: Another Look at Civil Religion." *Social compass* 56.2 (2009): 286-301.

¹³³ Roof, Wade Clark. "American Presidential Rhetoric from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush: Another Look at Civil Religion." *Social compass* 56.2 (2009): 286-301.

¹³⁴ Ofulue, Nneka Ifeoma. "President Clinton and the White House Prayer Breakfast." *Journal of Communication & Religion* 25.1 (2002).

¹³⁵ Siker, Jeffrey. "President Obama, the Bible, and Political Rhetoric." *Political Theology* 13.5 (2012): 586-609.

¹³⁶ Whitehead, Andrew L., Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker. "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election." *Sociology of religion* 79.2 (2018): 147-171.

shown and discussed in previous chapters. What does that bring? It brings pendulum. Swings in politics, as has been previously discussed with abortion. Every couple of years, politics shift one way or another, and the safety of things such as women's rights gets defended or attacked. The best way to predict how things will go with a new president or congress does not necessarily need to be about with political party they come from, but rather, how religious was this individual when campaigning?

Civil religion is a tool that can be manipulated and abused. This inherent aspect of American society cannot be taken away. People are already shaped by the communities they belong to and the symbols they have personal connections with. The question that must be answered now is, how does civil religion get dismantled without dismantling the very government itself?

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis delved into the complex notion of American civil religion and its ramifications for American democracy. Spanning five chapters, it assessed the evolution of American civil religion from the 1960s to the 2010s, the shifting definition of religion during that timeframe, the parallels between American democracy and conventional religions, the prevalence of religious features in the American government, and how American democracy operates as a civil religion.

Chapter 1 furnished a detailed overview of American civil religion, outlining its progression from the 1960s to the 2010s. This chapter delved into the historical backdrop and growth of the concept, emphasizing the significant input from groundbreaking scholars such as Robert N. Bellah, who first coined the term "civil religion" in his influential 1967 article, "Civil Religion in America." The chapter also analyzed the work of other prominent scholars, including Martin E. Marty, Sidney E. Mead, and Philip Gorski, who have contributed to shaping the understanding of American civil religion over time.

Chapter 2 offered an in-depth investigation of the changing definition of religion from the 1960s to the 2010s. This chapter emphasized the importance of acknowledging the dynamic nature of religious definitions and categories, demonstrating that the concept of civil religion can adapt and progress in parallel with societal values and beliefs' transformation. The chapter explored the work of key scholars and theorists who have contributed to this evolving comprehension of religion, such as Clifford Geertz, Emile Durkheim, and Talal Asad.

By analyzing various perspectives on religion, the chapter unveiled how religion had been perceived and studied over time. It scrutinized the shift from essentialist definitions of religion, which often centered on belief in supernatural beings, to more functional and cultural

definitions that accentuate the role of religion in shaping social cohesion, identity, and meaning-making.

Chapter 3 exhaustively analyzed the similarities between American democracy and traditional religions. By examining numerous aspects of American democracy, including its founding principles, the reverence of its foundational documents, and the rituals and symbols that unite the nation, we demonstrated that American democracy possesses various characteristics akin to traditional religious systems.

Discussing how American democracy incorporates aspects of belief, ritual, and sacred texts, as well as the role of the Constitution as a venerated document that both unites the nation and provides a moral framework for governance. Moreover, we investigated how American democracy fosters a sense of shared identity and values among its citizens, promoting a sense of belonging and collective purpose.

Chapter 4 focused on the religious features present in the American government, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the various dimensions in which American democracy embodies religious elements. By exploring the roles and functions of rituals, idols, sacred texts, congregations, holy sites, belief systems, symbols, and songs, this chapter illuminated the intricate connections between religion and politics within the United States.

The penultimate chapter evaluates the broader implications of American democracy functioning as a civil religion. This chapter emphasized the essential functions civil religion serves in the political domain, particularly in fostering political engagement, promoting respect for institutions, and facilitating the adaptability of the Constitution.

The chapter examined the role of civil religion in promoting respect for institutions, stressing the importance of connecting these institutions to a larger moral framework. By

underscoring the significance of identity politics and shared values in maintaining societal cohesion, the discussion showed how civil religion reinforces respect for institutions such as the judiciary, the legislature, and the executive.

Additionally, it examined the adaptability of the Constitution as a crucial characteristic of American civil religion. By drawing parallels between the Constitution's flexibility and the evolution of religious doctrines and practices, the chapter illustrated how the adaptability of the Constitution allows American civil religion to progress alongside the nation's changing moral and social landscape. This adaptability fosters a dynamic political environment in which dialogue, consensus-building, and negotiation are essential to the functioning of American democracy.

The sixth and final chapter was a warning from this paper to readers. To demonstrate the extents to which civil religion has reached and how it can manipulate politics and people in America. Its history and future are not all so well-intentioned. Civil religion has been and is currently being used to divide and cause harm.

This paper has offered a comprehensive analysis of the intricate and evolving notion of American civil religion, which is intimately connected to the nation's political system, institutions, and cultural identity. Through thoroughly examining American civil religion's various dimensions and manifestations, we have highlighted its significant role in fostering unity among citizens, stimulating political participation, and sustaining the democratic values at the heart of the American experience.

By tracing the historical development of American civil religion and examining the shifting definitions of religion, we have demonstrated the fluid and adaptive nature of this phenomenon. This adaptability allows civil religion to maintain its relevance and resonance

amidst the constant shifts in the social and political landscape of the United States. Additionally, the investigation into parallels between American democracy and traditional religious systems unveils the widespread presence of religious elements within the nation's political institutions and practices, thereby fortifying the notion of civil religion in the American setting.

The observation of the implications of American democracy as a civil religion has showcased its critical role in promoting political engagement, fostering respect for institutions, and facilitating the adaptability of the Constitution. By connecting American democracy to a broader moral framework and fostering a sense of shared values and purpose, civil religion contributes significantly to the vibrancy and resilience of the American political landscape.

It is crucial to reiterate the pervasiveness of American civil religion in the everyday lives of its citizens. As established earlier in the paper, the thesis contends that the American people frequently engage with this invisible religion, often without conscious awareness. Throughout the analysis, it became evident that civil religion is intricately woven into the fabric of American society, permeating numerous aspects of political, social, and cultural life. Through the enactment of rituals, the use of symbols, and the adherence to shared values and ideals, American citizens consistently engage with and reaffirm the principles of civil religion, solidifying its importance as a crucial element of the American experience. Recognizing the extent to which civil religion is entrenched in the nation's collective consciousness allows a deeper comprehension of its enduring influence and impact on the United States and its people.

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