

Steven M. Tipton

## Civil Religion in the Making

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Flashback / “Heritage and Choice in American Religion”:  
An Unpublished Essay by Robert N. Bellah

# Civil Religion in the Making

by Steven M. Tipton

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## From First to Final Draft

The first draft of a scholarly masterpiece brought to light a generation later usually invites comment for its promise of what is to come next. This certainly holds true for Robert Bellah’s previously unpublished “Heritage and Choice in American Religion,” drafted two years before “Civil Religion in America” saw publication in 1967.<sup>1</sup> But this draft reveals a larger prospect, including Bellah’s view of American religion as a whole and clues to his further development of the civil religion thesis after its initial formulation.

The section on “The Civil Religion” at the center of the 1965 draft contains almost verbatim the opening statement of the public aspect of religion in America and its lead example of President Kennedy’s 1961 Inaugural Address that make up the first quarter of the 1967 article [cfr. Bellah 1965, 7-14; Bellah 1970, 168-172]. That article goes on to follow out the reference at the end of this central section of the 1965 draft to Lincoln and subsequent thinkers who have helped to define American civil

<sup>1</sup> Bellah [1965], hereafter cited as “Heritage and Choice,” with page references to the original 19-page, double-spaced typescript. Bellah [1967] was originally written for a *Daedalus* Conference on American Religion in May, 1966. It was then reprinted with comments and a rejoinder in Cutler [1968]. It appears as chapter 9 in Bellah [1970, 168-189]; and as chapter 9 in Bellah and Tipton [2006, 225-245]. Hereafter cited as “Civil Religion,” with page references to Bellah [1970] and Bellah [1991a], where it is most widely accessible in print.

religion in its complexity and depth as the religious dimension of American public life in major chords that resound in the authentic note Kennedy struck.

An elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion “actually exists alongside of and clearly differentiated from the churches,” begins Bellah’s 1967 article before turning directly to a crystal clear and compelling interpretation of the Kennedy Inaugural address to introduce this complex subject [Bellah 1970, 168]. By striking contrast, “Heritage and Choice in American Religion” begins with a remarkable account of “private” religious organizations and traditions in America that situates them in relation to the nation’s public faith much more fully than does the 1967 article [Bellah 1967, 1-7]. The draft does so in terms that draw directly from Bellah’s characterization of the “modern stage” of “Religious Evolution” and its “early modern” antecedents, but here Bellah brings together the two typological stages in an all-American snapshot [Bellah 1964]. It focuses on the profoundly transformed yet continuing vitality of “traditional religion” in modern American society, by critical counterpoint to conventional secularization theories, a perspective Bellah develops further in “Religion and Belief” [Bellah 1970, 216-229] and “Between Religion and Social Science” [*ibidem*, 237-259], both written as formal papers for delivery in 1969.

“Nothing is ever lost” in religious evolution, as Bellah conceives it, across overlapping, interacting stages of social and cultural development, with all their historically diverse dynamics of conflict and combination [*ibidem*, 21-25]. Given the brief political and economic history of the United States, Bellah underscores the importance of the historical identity of American religious bodies that ritually re-enact the living truth of eons-old events – the Exodus of Egypt, for example, or the Crucifixion of Christ – to reveal the true nature of reality and how to live in accord with it [Bellah 1965, 1-2]. For all the enormous variety of American religious bodies, each can be seen responding to some aspect of almost every phase of Reformation history – whether extending, resisting, or altering it – in the course of inhabiting an institutional and cultural milieu so deeply influenced by the Calvinist and sectarian wings of the Protestant Reformation [*ibidem*, 2-3].

Reformed and dissenting Protestantism have played a central role in shaping the ongoing development of modern American society as a whole. So Bellah argues along lines set out in Weber and Troeltsch, and worked into the American grain by H. Richard Niebuhr, Perry Miller, and Talcott Parsons among others [see, for example, Weber 1958; Weber 1946; Troeltsch 1931; Niebuhr 1929; Niebuhr 1937; Miller 1956; Parsons 1960]. In just a few pages Bellah balances themes of progress and paradox. Even as Reformation churches sought to return to the apostolic purity of early Christianity, Bellah nods toward Weber, rationalizing tendencies within Protestantism inform the anti-traditional stance of modern society that in turn un-

settles the outlook of American Protestant churches and shifts their organizational structures and practices [Weber 1946].

On the other hand, Bellah observes with a turn toward Parsons, American religion today orients individual identity in light of eternal verities for the faithful in the pews of a society in rapid motion [cfr. Parsons 1963; Parsons 1961; Parsons 1968].<sup>2</sup> It embraces the family, and expresses its continuity across generations in baptisms, weddings, and funerals. It creates Durkheimian moral community in congregations made up of like-minded persons of usually similar social backgrounds, ingathered across the wide range of denominational pluralism in America. It sustains a generalized sense of moral order in American culture without religious groups directly imposing specific norms of behavior across the institutional boundaries of a complex society. However close the meshing of such “private” religious life with traditional “overtones of home, mother, and childhood,” religion in America is neither “privatized” nor captured by a secularized alien culture, Bellah argues in terms consistent with the modern stage of “Religious Evolution” [Bellah 1965, 6; 1970, 39-44]. American religion is public as well as personal, and religious tradition has generated much of American culture in both realms, as “The Civil Religion” section at the center of the 1965 draft makes evident [*ibidem*, 6-7].

As in the 1967 article, Bellah singles out in the 1965 draft the three references to God featured in Kennedy’s Inaugural address. At the outset Kennedy tells the American people that he has “sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed,” and he reaffirms their revolutionary “belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.” He concludes by calling on citizens of America, and of the world: “With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own” [Bellah 1965, 7-8; Bellah 1970, 168-169]. These references show how civil religion relates to political society on the one hand and private religious organizations on the other, Bellah explains. Separation of church and state, each governed by its own members in a religiously diverse society, guarantees freedom of religious belief and association to all citizens to take part in the political process.

At the same time, civil religion provides “a religious dimension to the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere,” and it orders the ultimate

<sup>2</sup> Parsons [1968, 447] cites Bellah [1965] by reference to “civic religion” [Parsons 1968, 442-443] as articulating with and legitimating the broad moral consensus in American society on “the pattern of institutionalized individualism.”

legitimation of political authority [Bellah 1965, 11; 1970, 171]. Beyond upholding the Constitution, the President's obligation extends to doing the will of the people, judged by a higher moral criterion in light of the ultimate sovereignty of God. The rights of man as given by God, not the state, offer a moral axis of revolutionary leverage to judge and change any state structures that violate these rights. The religious conviction that "here on earth God's work must truly be our own" provides a transcendent goal for the political process, Bellah points out, rooted deep in the American tradition of a collective and individual duty "to build the Kingdom of God on earth" [*ibidem*, 12-13; 1970, 172; cfr. Niebuhr 1937, xix-xxvi, 1-44, 184-198].

The first two sections of the 1965 draft deal with "heritage," with what is established and functioning in America's diverse religious groups and its shared civil religion. The final third of the draft turns to two related "Problems" in American religion, of intellectual relevance and social change, and to the choices they entail. Modern theological disarray in reformulating traditional religion, and distance between the study of religion and other disciplines in the university, pose problems that reach beyond educated elites. So Bellah argues in terms that prefigure decades of research into cultural and political polarization in American religion across generational and educational dividing lines [see, for example, Hadden 1969; Kelley 1977; Wuthnow 1988; Hunter 1991; Smith 1991]. "Too deep a split between an enlightened intellectual elite and a believing mass" threatens the moral coherence and shared aims of a society deeply grounded in religious orientations and value commitments, Bellah [1965, 18] judges. It also obscures the moral depth of public debate over America's massive international responsibilities, leaving it vulnerable to political cynicism, masked as *realpolitik* calculation of victory in a Cold War between "the free world" and godless communism.

This second problem of discerning the moral meaning of revolutionary change in the contemporary world thus proves inseparable from the first problem of uncertainty and division over Americans' deepest visions and values [*ibidem*, 18-19]. In terms that anticipate studies of conflict between "new breed" liberal clergy and more culturally conservative congregants, the rise of the religious right, and culture wars waged among mushrooming religious lobbies and parachurch groups, Bellah observes that clergy witnessing boldly in behalf of civil rights, nuclear disarmament, and Cold-War peacemaking must also recognize that many churchgoers seek security, stability, and the pastoral care of souls more than prophetic exhortation to racial justice or world peace [see, for example, Cox 1967; Hadden 1969; Wuthnow 1988; Tipton 2008]. Enlightening education on social issues must be matched by powerful appeals to the deepest religious and moral commitments Americans hold rather than frontal assaults on the status quo.

Bellah cites the example of President Lyndon Johnson's civil-religious appeal to Congress to pass the 1965 voting-rights bill to fulfill the nation's God-given purposes, an example he later elaborates in the 1967 article [Bellah 1965, 18; Bellah 1970, 181]. Since virtually everything good about American society grows from the religious and moral roots of its institutions and communities of character, concludes the 1965 draft, the middle-class majority of Americans can and should recognize moral mandates for social change at home and abroad arising from the heritage of organized religious communities and civil religion that they share. "But the traditions will solve nothing automatically. It is up to us to choose what we will make of it" [Bellah 1965, 19].

The two problems sketched in the final third of the 1965 draft are spelled out in the 1967 article's penultimate section, entitled "The Civil Religion Today" [cfr. Bellah 1970, 179-183]. There Bellah observes that no formal creed defines the civil religion. But "God" is just as central to it as to Judaism or Christianity, and if the meaning of God undergoes profound symbolic reformulation, "there will be obvious consequences for the civil religion, consequences perhaps of liberal alienation and of fundamentalist ossification that have not so far been prominent in this realm" [*ibidem*, 183]. Just such consequences will, in fact, later prompt Martin Marty's nuanced articulation of "Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion" in 1974, and the dialectical cultural analysis of civil religion in Bellah's own key sequel, "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic" in 1978 [Marty 1974; Bellah 1978]. Eventually such consequences will also spur construals of civil religion that recast its dialectical coherence into a unitary consensual foundation once fundamentally fixed and now fragmented by culture wars between orthodox defenders of "one nation under God" and progressive prophets demanding "liberty and justice for all" [Wuthnow 1988b; 1988a, chs. 10-11; Hunter 1994<sup>3</sup>].

In the 1967 article's concluding section, entitled "The Third Time of Trial," Bellah develops the problem of responsibly engaging revolutionary social change in the modern world within a larger conceptual framework for civil religion as a cultural dimension of depth, which the 1965 draft implies in its concluding call to rework the meaningful resources of America's religious traditions to meet the challenges of the present. This framework is developed in the central three sections of the 1967 paper, and elaborated in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* in 1975 [Bellah 1975; Bellah 1970, 172-183]. Its dialectical logic is articulated further in "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic" in 1978, and then exten-

<sup>3</sup> Especially chapter 4, "Competing Moral Visions," seen as "public theologies" by reference to Bellah on civil religion (p. 346n1), while complementing the view of Wuthnow [1988b] and extending the argument of Wuthnow [1988a], as Hunter notes at pp. 346n1 and 329n19 respectively.

ded into the model of cultural conversation and argument across moral traditions in *Habits of the Heart* in 1985 [cfr. Bellah *et al.* 2008, esp. chs. 2, 9-11; Bellah 1978<sup>4</sup>]. Seen within this larger conceptual framework, civil religion offers modes of moral discourse, syntax, and imagination to enable public argument and coherent cultural conflict in key “times of trial,” beginning with the Revolution and turning on the Civil War, which give rise to contrasting public theologies that contest the meaning of civil religion and rework it in turn [Bellah 1970, 181-186; Bellah 1978, 10-18].

“The Idea of a Civil Religion,” as Bellah sets it out in the second section of the 1967 paper, stems from Rousseau’s usage in *The Social Contract*, but it spreads in the late 18th century cultural climate that America’s founders shared, with its deist stress on the moral utility of religion as indispensable for political prosperity [Bellah 1970, 172-173]. In the Declaration of Independence, the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” entitle any people to be free, and all persons “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” [*ibidem*, 174]. Thus Jefferson legitimates the new nation in a conception of higher law based on both classical natural law and biblical religion, Bellah makes clear. By appealing to “the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions” and relying on “the protection of divine Providence,” Jefferson affirms a biblical God of history who stands in judgment over the world [*ibidem*].

By closely interpreting these founding texts and showing their striking continuity with the religious rhetoric of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, the 1967 article arrives at a formal definition of civil religion with a distinctly Durkheimian ring: “What we have, then, from the earliest years of the republic is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity” [*ibidem*, 175].<sup>5</sup> This definition of civil religion is fully consistent with the 1965 draft and its reference to “a religious dimension to the whole fabric of American life,” which Bellah rehearses in the 1967 article and underlines by adding in apposition, “This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion” [Bellah 1965, 11; Bellah 1970, 171].

<sup>4</sup> Bellah 1978 as reprinted in Bellah and Hammond [1980, 3-18], and hereafter cited as “Legitimation.” Reprinted as the “Afterword” to the University of Chicago Press 1992 edition of *The Broken Covenant*; and later reprinted in Bellah and Tipton [2006, 246-264].

<sup>5</sup> Durkheim [1995, 44] similarly defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Bellah [1970, 187n1] refers to the “Durkheimian notion that every group has a religious dimension” to clarify American civil religion, and he specifies it as one instance of the inevitable phenomenon that “every nation and every people come to some form of religious self-understanding,” as noted in Bellah [*ibidem*, 168].

This formulation of civil religion in 1967 features a unitarian, austere vision of God centered on moral order, law, and right, by contrast to personal salvation and love, who acts in history with biblical authority and a covenantal concern for America. It shares much in common with Christianity, but it is not specifically Christian nor does it substitute for Christianity, Bellah emphasizes in line with his earlier interpretation in 1965 of Kennedy's references to God without mention of Christ or the church [*ibidem*, 175; Bellah 1965, 9-11]. Civil religion is nonetheless specific enough to serve as a "genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding," with a clear division of function between it and voluntary bodies of faith under a doctrine of religious liberty grounded in 18th century Protestant and Enlightenment ideals that endure into the American present [Bellah 1970, 176].

The Civil War deepens the meaning of civil religion, Bellah argues in the third section of the 1967 article, entitled "Civil War and Civil Religion," by expanding its focus from the event of the Revolution seen as the final act of the Exodus, with Washington as Moses leading his people out of tyranny according to the sacred scriptures of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution [*ibidem*, 176-179]. Lincoln heeds Jefferson in engaging the task of saving the Union and facing up to slavery before the judgment and providence of a biblical God. With the Civil War, new themes of death, sacrifice and rebirth enter the civil religion through Lincoln's words and martyr's example in all their Christian resonance. Memorial Day and the Fourth of July ritualize these themes, and they join with Thanksgiving Day to anchor an annual liturgical calendar for civil religion.

In the final two sections of "Civil Religion in America," Bellah develops the definition of civil religion with significant shifts in emphasis. First, in "The Civil Religion Today," he replies to religious critics of civil religion reified into "the religion of the 'American Way of Life,'" by arguing that "the civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in, or one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people" [*ibidem*, 179]. Granted that civil religion at its worst, like all religions, has suffered demonic distortions in seeking to set American society above universal human values, including efforts to justify and bless the evil of American slavery. But the problem of a civil religion seems quite general in modern societies, Bellah notes, with a spectrum of solutions and difficulties that persist in the institutional arrangements of societies as diverse as Japan and France. America's "democratic and republican religion," in Tocqueville's phrase, has enabled American civil religion to draw from religious tradition to symbolize national solidarity without setting a militantly secular state in opposition to religious communities, as in the French case, for example [*ibidem*, 180]. But, for better and worse alike, this tradition has also sustained the pervasive



influence of its predominantly activist, moralist, and social spirit within the sphere of organized American religion.

The vitality of civil religion has continued to work in behalf of civil rights and social justice in the 1960s, Bellah observes. But ideologies that fuse God, country, and flag have also arisen to oppose democratic causes [*ibidem*, 181-183]. The theme of the American Israel has been invoked to justify genocidal domination of native Americans and ownership of African slaves almost from the nation's beginning, to celebrate the manifest destiny of an expanding American empire since the early nineteenth century, and to rally Americans to defend the free world by overpowering force of arms since World War II, as *The Broken Covenant* spells out in historical detail [Bellah 1975, chs. 2-6]. Finally, in the last section of the 1967 paper, "The Third Time of Trial," Bellah traces the arc of civil religion as it moves from contesting the question of American independence in the first time of trial during the Revolution, through continuing to wrestle with the question of fully institutionalizing democracy, sparked by slavery and Civil War in the nineteenth century but enduring through the twentieth century, when it is overtaken by the third great problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world. Bellah ventures no prediction on how long the Cold War's Manichean confrontation of good and evil will persist, or whether it will give way to Kennedy's pledge to the American people to join with citizens of the world to fight against "the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself" [Bellah 1970, 184].

But negotiating this third time of trial to attain a more viable and coherent world order, Bellah concludes, would precipitate new forms of vital international symbolism that can fulfill America's heritage as an "almost chosen people" rather than deny it, since "the American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality" [*ibidem*, 186]. A generation later, amid growing recognition of universal human rights, economic globalization, environmental climate change, and nuclear proliferation that transcend national interests in an era of shifting political alliances, multiplying NGOs, and zealous asymmetrical warfare, this hope remains, sustained by a living faith in no less critical need of continual reformation.

### **Civil Religion and Public Theology**

In "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic", Bellah elaborates the idea of civil religion in terms that clarify its relationship to public theology and point away from its construal as a unitary moral template or a fixed foundation of

public faith [Bellah 1978, 7-15].<sup>6</sup> They point toward the contested interplay of biblical, civic republican, and modern individualist traditions in the cultural conversation and moral argument of American public life, as later charted in *Habits of the Heart* [Bellah *et al.* 2008, vii-ix, 27-51, 250-96]. Lacking both an established church and a classic civil religion on the model of Plato's *Laws* or Rousseau's *Social Contract*, America has institutionalized the free exercise of religion in ways that mediate but never resolve the tension between a civic republicanism and a constitutional liberalism in its ambiguous political identity. The American polity embraces a religiously resonant republic that depends on the participation of public-spirited citizens for its shared self-government, and a liberal constitutional democracy that pledges to secure the individual rights of self-interested citizens who pursue wealth and wisdom through free markets for economic and intellectual exchange [Bellah 1978, 7-15].

Religion mediates this tension, first, by fixing a "super-structural" locus of moral sovereignty above the sovereignty of the state and the people. Thus "the laws of Nature and of Nature's God" stand above the laws of humankind and judge them, according to the Declaration of Independence [*ibidem*, 11]. But civil-religious ideals are thinly if securely institutionalized *within* American government, without explicit legal sanction or support in the Constitution or the liberal side of the American cultural heritage that it expresses. It follows, argues Bellah, that the religious needs of a genuine republic would hardly be met by the formal and marginal civil religion that has been institutionalized in the American republic. "The religious superstructure of the American republic has been provided only partially by the civil religion." It has been provided mainly by the religious community entirely outside any formal political structures [*ibidem*, 11-13].

To refer to this symbolization of the ultimate order of the national moral community which frames the civic virtues and values of a republic, states Bellah, "we can speak of public theology, as Martin Marty has called it, in distinction to civil religion. The civil millennialism of the revolutionary period was such a public theology and we have never lacked one since" [*ibidem*, 14]. From the beginnings of the American nation, the diversity and range of its public theology are significant morally as well as analytically, Bellah reflects, since "most of what is good and most of what is bad in our history is rooted in our public theology" [*ibidem*, 15]. Every movement to make America more fully realize its professed values has "grown out of some form of public theology, from the abolitionists to the social gospel and the early socialist party to the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King and the farm workers'

<sup>6</sup> For further development of this interpretation of civil religion and public theology, see Tipton [2008]; Tipton [2005].

movement under Caesar Chavez.” But so has “every expansionist war and every form of oppression of racial minorities and immigrant groups” [*ibidem*].

The “infrastructural” role of religion in the American republic likewise combines civil religion and public theology, according to this account [*ibidem*, 16-17]. While the liberal state is constitutionally incapable of inculcating civic virtue in its independent citizens, federalism permitted the nation to foster schools of republican virtue in the institutions of state and local government, in the public schools, and most of all, in religious congregations and denominational bodies. In addition to teaching republican values, religious communities nurtured the mores of their self-governing members through offering them practical lessons in public participation. Precisely because it contributed so centrally to creating the character and conscience of American citizens and the moral order of the life they shared, Tocqueville concluded that religion should be considered as the first of their political institutions.

Public theology in this view has always unfolded as an argument and a conversation within communities of faith as well as among them, and in their relations to public dialogue in the polity. Diverse and often contrary public theologies contest the construal and content of civil-religious ideals by this account, even as civil-religious ideals and modes of discourse frame the differing moral judgments public theologies make on specific issues such as slavery, civil rights, or nuclear arms. This kind of reciprocal contesting and justification, syntactical ordering and axiomatic reshaping, sheds light on a picture of civil religion conceived less like a single template or fixed foundation for the moral order and authority of American society, however fragmented or divided, than a dimension of depth extending through the society’s multiple moral traditions, practices, and institutional arrangements. This religious dimension frames the multivocal moral argument of public life, and its contested ideals embody the object of this argument’s ongoing evaluation of how Americans should govern their lives together. In this light it is more apt to ask how civil-religious ideals and modes of discourse have shifted shape and refocused the point of new cultural conflicts and common assumptions than to ask whether civil religion in some singularly fixed form has survived or indeed ever really existed in seamless unity once upon a time [Bellah 1967, 181-186; Bellah 1978, 14-22; Bellah *et al.* 2008, vii-ix, 27-51, 250-96].<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a related view of the multivocal, multilayered nature of civil religion unfolding in dialectical cultural conversation and argument in the case of Italy, see Bellah, “The Five Religions of Modern Italy,” in Bellah and Hammond [1980, 86-118]. Cf. the concluding chapter of Bellah [1975, 142-44, 162-63], for Bellah’s judgment, “Today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell,” and his call for its radical renewal by critically reappropriating its tradition in “a new conception of the ordering of liberty” and a new awakening to heed Winthrop’s biblical injunction: “Let us choose life.”

In times of trial, according to Bellah's 1967 formulation of civil religion, it enables Americans to contest the meaning of lawful liberty and independence in the American Revolution, slavery and sovereignty in the Civil War, and America's responsible action in a post-colonial world after World War II. Dialectically developed ideals of civil religion unfold from this initial formulation and its elaboration in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* toward a model of cultural conversation and conflict among contrasting moral traditions in *Habits of the Heart*. Biblical religion and civic republicanism no longer lie joined in the embrace of civil religion. Instead they emerge as "second languages" at odds yet engaged with two forms of individualism, utilitarian and expressive, which have grown into the first moral language of contemporary American culture.<sup>8</sup>

Thus freedom of conscience to worship God in common prayer and follow reason in republican debate comes to be contested and recast as freedom of choice to pursue one's own interests and express one's own feelings, respectively attuned to the arrangement of modern economic and bureaucratic life and to lifestylish leisure and romance. Can an individualism centered on the self as a nexus of interests and feelings, and counted as a free-market entrepreneur and a client-citizen of the welfare state, actually sustain a public *or* a private life coherently, asks *Habits of the Heart*. If not, can civic and religious forms of individualism be critically reworked through communities of shared memory, moral practice, and argument to rebalance private and public life by renewing genuine individuality within a larger social whole and a deeper cultural conversation? [Bellah *et al.* 2008, chs. 2, 6, 9-11].

Harking back to the problems posed by "Heritage and Choice in American Religion" and the modern stage of "Religious Evolution," these questions persist through Bellah's later work on themes related to the rubric of civil religion, and their answers remain open.

In counterposing biblical religion and utilitarian individualism as two contrary moral traditions entwined around the cultural roots of American civil religion, "The New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis in Modernity" [Bellah 1976] follows on

<sup>8</sup> See Bellah [2002a] on the continuity and contrast of this model in relation to the earlier rubric of civil religion, including the treatment of organized religion and the church as an institution in Bellah *et al.* [2008, ch. 9] and Bellah *et al.* [1991, ch. 6]. These chapters offer points of comparison to "Heritage and Choice in American Religion" on the paradoxical progress and polarities of organized American religion a generation later, set within a larger account of its historical segmentation, differentiation, and reintegration through voluntarist patterns of congregationalism and denominational pluralism that span church, sect, and mystical individualism as Troeltschean dimensions of religious community, which extend to the social activism and national moral advocacy of "the public church." For related discussion of the ambiguous place of religion in American life, see Bellah's introduction to "Part II. American Religion," in Bellah and Tipton [2006, 221-223]. For reasons why Bellah dropped the term "civil religion" after 1978, see Bellah [1989].

*The Broken Covenant* [Bellah 1975] and “Reflections on Reality in America” [Bellah 1974], and it anticipates *Habits of the Heart* [Bellah et al. 2008] in depicting multiple moral languages coexisting and contesting with one another in American culture. We are an almost-chosen people bound by a biblical covenant into a conscientious community with charity for all the members of one body. And we are an association of individuals set up by a strategic social contract to advance their interests, secure their rights, and express their feelings.

This individualist vision, institutionalized chiefly in the practices and structural arrangements of the market and the state, informs a powerful American monoculture that threatens to drown out our second moral languages, Bellah later argues in answer to the question, “Is There a Common American Culture?” [Bellah 1998]. The freedom that this common culture so prizes stems from religious freedom predicated on the sacredness of individual conscience in matters of religious belief and practice. Eventually it comes to charter an economic individualism that sanctifies money as the measure of success and devalues solidarity as the matrix of civic virtue. Championed by the radical sects of the Protestant Reformation to become the most basic Right of Man as a citizen freed from the compulsion of an absolutist state and an established state church, the sacredness of the individual person and the sovereignty of individual choice underpin the rise of identity politics and multiculturalism in response to the individual’s concern for dignity and respect at the core of America’s common culture. Nonetheless its contrary inflections still enable Americans to work through their cultural contradictions to clarify public morality, Bellah concludes, and to enact it as well, for example, in the continuing struggle to keep money from buying votes. Religious and civic institutions still inspire Americans to congregate with one another in communities of worship and learning, and act together in the world to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and work for the justice essential to sustain market economies as well as democratic government.

Written in the winter of Watergate, continuing war in Vietnam, and stymied social progress at home, “Reflections on Reality in America” holds out the hope of radical religion to help Americans repent and reverse the republic’s drift toward a military-industrial welfare state for the fortunate few. A quarter-century later “Flaws in the Protestant Code” [Bellah 2000] calls on the Protestant churches to be true to their own ideal of *semper reformanda*, and re-animate the body of the Church as a community of worship and witness. It lies weakened by a theological individualism that enshrines human self-sufficiency in the sufficiency of scripture and vacates the Church by the right of private judgment defended in the name of sovereign conscience and reason. Flaws in the cultural code of American Protestantism lead first to nationalism and then to individualism. They fuse the glory of an incarnate God into

the glory of a redeemer nation. They turn individuals away from the conquest of the self to become transparent to God, and toward the triumph of a sovereign self served by community, church, and family but not bound by them. The deep cultural code of Protestantism has brought America prosperity through an ethic of hard work, and nurtured ideals of a democracy of all citizens born of a priesthood of all believers. It has inspired the sin-and-salvation gospels of contemporary environmentalism as well as Evangelicalism. It can also help Americans renew and transform a truly catholic sense of themselves as belonging to one body through critically re-engaging bodies of worship in both Word and Sacrament, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist and holy communion, where the Word leads to the Sacrament instead of displacing it.

Religion has provided American public life with a language of empire, not only a language of nation and a language of faith, Bellah demonstrates in “The Kingdom of God in America” [Bellah 1988]. Elaborating H. Richard Niebuhr’s inquiry into this kingdom as American Protestants have understood it in successive terms of divine sovereignty, the reign of Christ, and the coming kingdom, Bellah traces how a language of faith that puts God above Pharaoh as king of kings at Sinai and crowns Christ crucified on Calvary as king of the Jews, can come to crown America with a global mission from God to conquer the world in order to save it [Niebuhr 1937, 51, 105, 159, 179, 193]. If the self-righteous nation requires faithful judgment, then all the more does the coercive empire, judges Bellah by reference to Reinhold Niebuhr’s call to repentance in *The Irony of American History* at the height of the Cold War, and the Catholic Bishops’ calls to peace and economic justice during the Reagan era [Niebuhr 1952, 149-150; see also National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1983, 17-18; National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1986, 182-183]. As epitomized by these pastoral letters and theorized by public philosophers from Royce to John Courtney Murray, the quest for the common good is both possible and necessary in a pluralist society, proposes “Citizenship, Diversity, and the Search for the Common Good”, in building on this theme in *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*. [Bellah 1991b; cf. Bellah *et al.* 1991, chs. 4-8]. Members of multiple communities in a complex modern society can search in common for moral goods diverse and practical enough to share in meeting their interdependent fate.

Since September 11, 2001, the United States has pursued a global war for the third time, Bellah [2002b] reflects in “Seventy-Five Years”. The nation won the “good war” against European fascism and Japanese militarism in World War II. But it was defeated insofar as it became like the enemies it opposed, judges Bellah, particularly by conducting from Dresden to Nagasaki the most terrible bombing of civilians in history. The U.S. won the Cold War. But here, too, it grew more like its adversaries by dancing with anti-Communist dictators from Chile to the Congo,

and by centralizing military-political power within a national-security state beyond the normal Constitutional reach of democratic accountability in order to defeat its totalitarian enemies. In declaring war on terror as a crusade “to rid the world of evil,” the Administration of President George W. Bush echoed its jihadist enemies. In campaigning against them under the flag of liberty, it once more pledged allegiance to dictators as allies and clients. The end of World War II left the U.S. holding great global power, and the end of the Cold War left the U.S. standing alone as the world’s only great power. Since the Vietnam War era, Americans have come to doubt that the nation has exercised its power only for good, and since 9/11 they have wondered why others in the world hate them. Can we reform ourselves to work for a more civilized world, Bellah asks, or would it be better for faithful reformers to try to build an alternative city within the very pores of a political-military empire?

In 2002 Bellah probes the history of “The New American Empire” to press the question of whether traditional forms of public virtue and their religious grounding in America are still adequate to meet the challenge of 9/11 and its aftermath [Bellah 2002c]. From dissenting Protestantism Americans have inherited an aversion to government and a conviction that people should do things for themselves through voluntary associations much like dissenting churches. Although the “strong society, weak state” structure of the U.S. in 1800 has given way to the “weak society, strong state” reality of America in the 21st century, these voluntarist, anti-government ideals have endured, Bellah observes, in terms that fit anti-government movements in American cultural politics up to today’s Tea Party.

The sect-like model of the dissenting church has also endured in America as an egalitarian circle of saints that excludes the reprobate. While established churches seek to incorporate everyone in their differences within a moral hierarchy of saints and sinners, dissenting churches seek to transform a society split between the righteous and unrighteous by converting sinners into the image of the saved. American’s historic self-understanding as a dissenting city on a hill has left many of its citizens in deep denial that the nation now stands at the center of a world empire, argues Bellah, and ill prepares them to recognize its responsibilities or bear its burdens. However opposed Americans may be to nation-building overseas and however divided they stand at home over adequate public provision, fair taxes, and living wages, the U.S. claimed the right to wield coercive military power over the world to enforce “freedom, democracy and free enterprise” as “a single sustainable model for national success,” according to the 2002 National Security Strategy set out by the Bush Administration. Instead, urges Bellah in terms that link “The New American Empire” to “God and King” in anticipating the promise of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign and 2009 Cairo University address, American citizens can affirm a moral vision of

society truer to its actual interdependence [Bellah 2005]. They can help build a world in which citizens of every nation can see that they need one another. They can commit themselves to bearing one another's burdens, with the mutual recognition and care embodied in every one of the world's great religious traditions.

### Global Prospects and Problems

An increasingly international kind of social life, gradually developing through the global expansion of the division of labor in the world's economy and its political-legal regulation, would universalize forms of religious belief, judged Émile Durkheim a century ago [Durkheim 1995, 446]. If a genuinely transnational sovereignty emerged with the attainment of some kind of coherent world order, Robert Bellah likewise concluded in 1967, it would precipitate new symbolic forms of civil religion, whether they were to grow from the flickering flame of the United Nations or from the latter-day light spread by thousands of multiplying NGOs such as those in the human rights and environmentalist movements [Bellah 1970, 186].

Over the past half-century the globalized division of labor in the world's economy has grown into an unarguable fact of social life, from the export of American films and arms around the world to the import of OPEC oil, consumer goods from China and NAFTA, and software from Bangalore. The shifting forms of its political-legal regulation, however, remain open to argument as matters of historical reason, comparative jurisprudence, social theory, and moral judgment. So, too, do the religious roots and moral implications of such regulation with respect to conceptions of both civil religion and public theology, seen not simply as creeds and codes but as Durkheimian dimensions of depth in public institutions understood as practical moral dramas born from the womb of religious rites and myths.

Robert Bellah's account with Phillip Hammond of the "varieties of civil religion" in comparative context probes the unique character of American civil religion and the special conditions that bring it about, by contrast to Italy and Japan, for example [Bellah and Hammond 1980].<sup>9</sup> But in the early modern and modern stages

<sup>9</sup> Bellah and Hammond [1980], incorporating "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic" as chapter 1 and "New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis of Modernity" as chapter 7. In these two chapters, as in *Habits of the Heart*, cf. the dialectical dynamics of American civil religion, public theology, and multiple moral traditions in cultural conversation and public argument in America, and "The Five Religions of Modern Italy" (pp. 86-118), all seen as civil religions. Liberalism, socialism, and fascistic activism as "religiopolitical organisms" compete with Catholic civil religion in a counterpoint played out in historically shifting keys over a pre-Christian "religious ground bass" that resonates through particularistic loyalties to family and pseudo-kinship groups in Italy in deep tones akin to folk Shinto in Japan. In comparing "The Japanese and American Cases" of civil religion



of religious evolution, Bellah holds, there emerges in every society the possibility that “a distinct set of religious symbols and practices may arise that address issues of political legitimacy and political ethics but that are not fused with either church or state” [Bellah 1980, xi]. Needed now more than ever to sustain that distinctiveness and the authority of civil religion to judge a nation as well as justify it, Bellah stresses, are the critical traditions of public theology and public philosophy that have marked American public life from their beginning, opposing unjust wars, demanding racial and social justice, and insisting on fulfillment of the economic promise of American democracy as well as its political compact. Nation-states remain the most important centers of power in the late Twentieth century, Bellah acknowledges, but none of them alone can resolve the military, economic, and environmental problems that demand new forms of global concord for the very survival of humankind. “We have at last for many purposes a world *civitas*,” Bellah judges, but its lack of civility and justice point toward the need for dimensions of a world civil religion that would transcend American civil religion yet make the most of its traditions of openness, tolerance and ethical commitment [*ibidem*, xiv].

The diverse forms of popular nationalism with religious roots evident among multiple modernities emerging around the world today tie into the dialectical interplay of civil religion and public theologies, as Bellah has conceived it over the course of his work on faith in public since “Heritage and Choice in American Religion” [see Wiebe 2002; Ignatieff 2003]. This body of work develops a central conception of ongoing moral argument, civic debate, and social reform in representative polities ordered in common by diverse constituencies thinking and acting within cultures conceived as dramatic conversations. These moral dramas are made up of many voices contesting the construal of multiple traditions and remaking them together by the inspiring force of enacting good examples as well as the persuasive force of giving good reasons. This contrasts with state-centered views of civil religion celebrating an ostensibly universal moral consensus in support of the state’s compulsory legal authority [see Meyer 1987].

This dialectical and dialogical view carries through Bellah’s original stress on the appeal of civil religion to a higher moral authority, which transcends the state and thereby enables free citizens to debate, criticize, judge, and reform the state and

(pp. 27-39), Bellah similarly shows that their contrasting emphases on hierarchy and equality are dialectically interrelated moral poles likewise linked to freedom. Individual equality is stressed in American civil religion against the background of hierarchical ideals of humanity in relation to biblical divinity and classical natural law, and public theology fleshes out the providential meaning of liberty without resolving its deep ambiguity in the usage of John Locke by contrast to John Winthrop. Also see Bellah [2003].

its policies instead of simply justifying and celebrating them. This process comes to a head in times of trial, when public theologies vie directly over decisive issues such as slavery in the Civil War or responsible American action in a revolutionary world. This original conception of “Civil Religion in America” faces toward the call to join in the multivocal moral argument of public life, as later set out by *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* [Bellah 1970, 183-186; Bellah *et al.* 2008, chs. 2, 9-11; Bellah *et al.* 1991, chs. 4-8].

“Can We Imagine a Global Civil Religion?” asks Bellah in a 2007 paper revised for publication in 2010 [Bellah 2007; for further development of this argument see Bellah 2011a; Bellah 2011b]. He answers the question of its title by distinguishing between the impossibility of a global civil religion and the necessity of strengthening global civil society to create a world order coherent enough to engage the grave problems of global warming, military-political strife, and economic inequality that interdependent nations now face. Any actual civil society will have a religious dimension, Bellah observes, not only a legal and an ethical framework, but some notion that it fits the nature of ultimate reality. In fact, religion-like values carried by an emerging global market culture may worsen international problems, and place greater weight on the actual beginnings of world governance evident in world law and economic regulation today. The nation-state itself, and the principled independence of the market from the state, have arisen as cultural forms and institutional arrangements transmitted around the world over the past few centuries. So have popular sovereignty and the public sphere of civil society, even where ideals of universal human rights, democratic elections, and the formation of public opinion freed from the state and the market are honored in principle but not in practice. Nationalism itself has always been an international phenomenon inspired by the right of every people to self-government and by the responsibility they share for their common fate.

Today global market ideologies and practices threaten the capacity of nations to carry out the responsibilities inherent in their ideals of common membership, Bellah argues by reference to Jurgen Habermas, including responsibility for their least advantaged citizens through sustaining fair wages and taxes as well as public provision [see Habermas 2002, 58-112]. What are the moral and religious resources we need to think about membership in global civil society profoundly enough to balance the autonomy of nation states and check the power of global markets? The religious roots of global ethics of human rights lead Bellah to ask if the world’s religions can mobilize their deepest commitments to universal neighbor-love and mutual recognition to give genuine institutional force to human rights regimes. Can they help turn ideals of world citizenship into practical willingness to share responsibility for the world of

which we are citizens instead of trying to transform the world into the naturalized image of our own nation? Religious motivation is needed to turn the beginnings of world law and the growth of global ethics into effective forms of global solidarity and governance. Religious insight is needed for us to recognize the primacy of the world instead of trying to force the world to recognize our primacy.

The nationalist aspirations and religious convictions of other peoples who want to govern themselves and worship as they please, and as they must, require our respect. They also require our recognition of the social and cultural diversity of these peoples [Wiebe 2002, 211-220; Ignatieff 2003, 53]. For such recognition is essential to justify our respect by grounding it in our common vision of the dignity and equality of all human beings and their rights to self-government. Such recognition is no less essential to guide our aim to realize these rights in a just and peaceful world of independent, equal, and self-governing states. That world still struggling to be born embodies ideals at the center of distinctive yet overlapping forms of civil religion emerging around the globe, and it marks the contested core of an ongoing argument among diverse public theologies and philosophies seeking to shape the world to come.

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## Civil Religion in the Making

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Abstract: The dialectical coherence of civil religion in the moral argument of American public life runs through the development of its formulation by Robert N. Bellah over the course of his work, beginning with the heretofore unpublished draft of "Heritage and Choice in American Religion" in 1965. Seen as a cultural dimension of depth, civil religion frames modes of moral discourse and imagination to enable coherent cultural conflict in successive times of trial, which give rise to contrasting public theologies that contest the meaning of civil religion and reshape it in turn. This dialectical logic extends to the model of cultural conversation and argument across multiple moral traditions seen as continuities of conflict in *Habits of the Heart* and Bellah's later work, by contrast to construing civil religion as a unitary moral foundation once fundamentally fixed and then fragmented by culture wars.

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*Keywords: Civil religion, public theology, religious evolution, globalization, nationalism.*

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**Steven M. Tipton** is Charles Howard Candler Professor of Sociology of Religion at Emory University and its Candler School of Theology, and co-author of *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* with Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan and Ann Swidler. His most recent book is *Public Pulpits* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).