

CIVIL RELIGION

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Generally speaking, the term *civil society* refers to all the various practices, institutions, and voluntary associations that fill out the social spaces between the official political apparatus of the government and the private sphere. Examples include schools, voluntary organizations based on religion or ethnicity, churches, sports clubs, unions. Some accounts of civil society include “private” associations, such as the family. In any case, *civil society* is a flexible—and at times even vacuous—term. An examination of religion in civil society might reflect upon the different ways that carriers of the particular religious traditions present in a given society interact within the civil sphere. It might also examine civil society as the space in which religious institutions and practices are formally separated from politics. This essay approaches the topic by examining the complex ways that US civil society institutes certain “religious” dimensions and features for the purposes of legitimating itself and maintaining itself as a cohesive whole. For the purposes of this analysis, the term *civil religion* refers to the religious dimensions and features of civil society.

OVERVIEW: CIVIL RELIGION

This article treats *civil religion* in light of the etymology of its constituent parts—the root *religare* means “to bind together”; *civitas* refers to the shared, public life of a community of fellow citizens. Used in this way, *civil religion* broadly refers to the practices, symbols, myths, rituals, and consecrated spaces and times that serve to unify and integrate the disparate parts and individuals of a society into a cohesive whole. It also invests that societal whole with overarching significance. Civil religion generates a sense of membership or participation in the society’s identity, integrating differences into and legitimating that shared identity and symbolically representing the values that ground and orient the society.

This term applies a *functionalist* definition of religion to the processes that constitute civil society. It is functionalist because the features that constitute a society’s civil religion are identified in virtue of the ways they function in the life of that society. The features of civil religion may take the form of symbols, mottos, narratives, and

holidays and festivals—usually official, although sometimes informal—that commemorate the origin or founding of the society and reenact the journey by which it came to be what it is. Typically, these represent the values and ideals that the society claims to embody and to which it holds itself collectively responsible.

Conceived in this way, civil religion might not identify with any particular historical religious tradition or employ what is typically considered to be explicitly religious language or symbols. At the same time, however, it need not exclude specific features of various religious traditions that are present in a given society—in as far as those features can be recruited for the purposes of integrating, unifying, legitimating, and amplifying the significance of the public life of a particular society.

For an example of a ritual practice of civil religion common in US civil society, consider standing to observe the national anthem at the start of a baseball game. This action momentarily unifies an otherwise disparate group of people by highlighting—in some cases magnifying—a background identity they share. It illuminates the common allegiances against which more particular team loyalties and regional attachments clash.

Examining such ceremonies and symbols as instances of ritual practice illuminates their more subtle functions. Perhaps they confer a sense of matter-of factness to typically unarticulated notions that US society actually embodies the values by which it claims to identify itself (values such as fair play and equal standing before the rules). Such ceremonies might emotionally confirm the idea that US society is driven by a work ethic of individual effort and achievement, but one that nonetheless aims to contribute to the overall success of the team. They may evoke impressions that the ideals symbolized by the flag and valorized in the lyrics of the national

anthem—ideals of individual liberty, courage and justice—do, in fact, constitute “the American way of life.”

Although pregame rituals occur across the full range of athletic events in US society, the example of baseball is uniquely illustrative because it is associated with the history, leisure, athletic cultures, and civil cohesion of the United States. Its legendary heroes (Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jackie Robinson, among others) are often taken to personify national motifs: epitomes of heroic perseverance in the face of tragic adversity (for which Gehrig is celebrated), and triumph over unjust limitations (Robinson’s defeat of racial segregation in major league baseball). At the workaday level, ceremonial observance of the national anthem is a mechanical part of going to a baseball game, no more conspicuous than pausing to sing “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” during the seventh-inning stretch or standing in line at the concession stand. And yet, a common paradox of the practices of civil religion in everyday life is that the deeper and more pervasive the hold by which such rituals, symbols, and stories bind together and unify a society, the more inconspicuous they tend to be. They may appear ordinary, unimportant, or even trite, making it easy for practitioners to be unaware of the influence that they exert.

The usually taken-for-granted symbolic powers of civil religion become anything but mundane under certain circumstances. Because anthems, pledges, and flags function as identity markers for a group or society, they quickly can become charged with conspicuous political significance as objects of patriotic zeal or even nationalist fanaticism. The political valence of such practices surfaced in recent years. Perhaps most notably, during the year following the terrorist attacks of September 11, Major League Baseball stadiums replaced the traditional song

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Of course, the symbolic sanctity of national and civic identity markers also makes them potential objects for expressing dissent. During the international hockey matches between US and Canadian teams that coincided with the start of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a stadium of Montréal Canadien hockey fans booed throughout the playing of the US national anthem.³ Such was perhaps most famously the case at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games, when African American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Gold and Bronze medalists in the two-hundred-meter race, bowed their heads and raised their fists in the form of the Black Power salute from the medal podium throughout the US National Anthem. At the time, this act was denounced as blasphemous for exploiting a moment considered sacred in the context of US civil religion. Smith and Carlos refused to endorse the ideals that the flag and the anthem purported to represent, given that the social realities in US society were characterized by white supremacy, economic injustice, and violent unrest.⁴

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in broad and everyday terms of "religion," it is because they are simultaneously interwoven with symbols, myths, and meanings. To treat any of these particular ingredients of civil religion in abstraction from the others would result in a partial account. Thus, the following discussion addresses the myths, narratives, symbols, and significances—as well as the practices—that make up civil religion in North American society.

I begin with a historical overview of the events and concepts that have come to constitute the "founding myth" or "myth of origin." I then demonstrate how this mythical framework gives rise to symbols, spaces, and practices that exhibit an "exceptionalist" account of US civil society. The second part of this essay explores how these features of civil religion have exerted themselves in recent decades and what their impact has been on the United States post-September 11.

HISTORY: ROOTS OF CIVIL RELIGION IN THE MYTHICAL ORIGINS OF US SOCIETY

A primary means by which civil religion integrates difference into a shared identity and then legitimates that identity at the level of civil society is by providing a mythical account of the society's origins. In the case of the United States, for instance, a primary "myth of origins" in the popular imagination centers on the story of a group of the earliest European settlers in North America, Puritan Separatists from the Church of England, who fled religious oppression in the early 1600s. Their passage from bondage to freedom led them first to the Netherlands in search of religious freedom and then to North America.

The civic and political practices established by these Puritans were motivated by several motifs from biblical narratives and from specifically Christian theological concepts. Such conceptions included "election," an understanding

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Of course, the symbolic sanctity of civil religion and civic identity markers also make them potential objects for expressing dissent. During the international hockey match between the US and Canadian teams that coincided with the start of the US-led invasion of Iraq, a stadium of Montréal Canadien hockey fans booed throughout the playing of the national anthem.³ Such was perhaps most famous in the case of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, when African American sprinter Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Gold and Bronze medalists in the two-hundred-meter race, raised their heads and raised their fists in the Black Power salute from the medal ceremony throughout the US National Anthem. At the time, this act was denounced as blasphemous for exploiting a moment considered sacred in the context of US civil religion. Smith and Carlos refused to endorse the ideals that the anthem purported to represent, and the social realities in US society were exposed by white supremacy, economic inequality, and violent unrest.⁴

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of having been specially chosen by God; “providence,” or a sense of God’s intervention in history to fulfill God’s purposes; “vocation,” or having received a special purpose or “calling” from God within that providential plan, and understanding one’s life—or the life of one’s group or community—as an instrument by which God works God’s purposes in history. These concepts were oriented by the biblical motif of “covenant”—a relationship voluntarily entered into by two parties and based upon the shared commitment that the promises made by each party to the other will be fulfilled. On the basis of these concepts and motifs, the Puritans understood that their fledgling society in the New World had a unique significance in the sight of God and a special role in history. The Puritan Christians, for instance, viewed their flight in 1620 from England through the wilderness to their settlement in the New World as a new form of the people of Israel’s flight from slavery in Egypt, as chronicled in the biblical book of Exodus. As the Sons of Israel were led by God across the Red Sea and Sinai wilderness to the promised land of Canaan, so the Puritans understood the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to have led them safely across the treacherous Atlantic Ocean, to arrive safely in the wilderness of Cape Cod.⁵

Despite what this complex of theological concepts and biblical motifs might suggest, the New England Puritans understood their role in history as much more than special recognition and preferential treatment from their God. Central to the Puritan understanding of covenant with God was a conception of divine judgment. To be named among God’s elect conferred profound responsibilities upon them and constrained the ways that they could carry out their errand into the wilderness. At the same time, the New England Puritans understood their duties of faithfulness to be more than matters of personal piety and individual morality. These duties

were equally central to the formation of civil and political practices that the Puritans established in New England. God had commanded them to raise a “city upon a hill” that the eyes of the world would look upon and give glory to God.⁶

With this mission in mind, John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for several terms, invoked the warning of the Hebrew prophets to the people of Israel as a warning that applied directly to the Puritans, in a sermon that he preached en route to the New World. The Puritans, he said, had been called by God to keep the commandments by doing justice, acting mercifully, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Unfaithfulness would jeopardize the covenant that their God had graciously entered into with them and instead reap God’s judgment and wrath. As God sent the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for forty years for their idolatrous worship of the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, if the Puritans were unfaithful to God, their errand into the wilderness would become yet another cautionary tale about what happens when a people trifles with God’s blessing.

In practice, many of the Puritans’ founding narratives were used to underwrite the spread of the English colonies in the New World. Eventually, those stories came to legitimate the establishment of the United States of America as a sovereign territory and provided a historical narrative that justified its expansion to the Pacific Ocean. This account of its origins became a central feature of the stories and symbols by which the United States—in both state and civil society—has come to represent itself to itself and to the world. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson each proposed on separate occasions that the Great Seal of the United States include a depiction of Moses, leading the children of Israel across the Red Sea. Although both proposals were eventually lost in committee, their

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In time, explicitly biblical stories and motifs were gradually absorbed into US civil society, and the significance of what were originally tradition-specific narratives, symbols, and theological concepts expanded to accommodate more than meanings that were specific to the Jewish and Christian traditions. They came to be applied in broadly spiritual or mythical ways, to justify political and civic practices and institutions. For instance, what began as a strictly theological understanding of God's providential attention to the United States evolved into a framework of political legitimacy, social integration, and mythic representation known as "American exceptionalism." This framework invested the civic and political life of the American people with extraordinary—or "exceptional"—importance.

5 American exceptionalism claims that the United States of America has a unique role in the political and social histories of the world. In particular, it is to be unique as a transmitter of such social and civic values as individual freedom and democratic forms of association. It is to be a caregiver to the less fortunate or a defender of the weak against injustice. This concept of American exceptionalism is nowhere more famously symbolized—and still revered by millions of visitors each year—than in the statue, “Liberty Enlightening the World,” which stands just inside the entryway to New York Harbor. The sonnet engraved in bronze on the exterior of the statue’s pedestal—written in 1883 by poet Emma Lazarus, a daughter of Portuguese

Of course, as often as such ideals are enshrined and heralded in the symbols, rituals, and sacred spaces of civil religion, they have been flouted in practice. Occasionally when severe discrepancies occur between the values that civil religion claims to espouse and its actions, the terms of civil religion have been used to denounce national hypocrisy. Consider, for instance, perhaps the most famous instance of a prophetic use of civil religion—President Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural Address, delivered at the close of the US Civil War. Many Americans had justified slavery with biblical passages and religious justifications. The Confederacy had invoked the Christian God to aid them in a war fought to preserve their alleged right to enslave people. Both sides in the conflict appealed to God's will to vindicate their struggle.

In his second inaugural, Lincoln depicted this tragic conflict within a framework of cosmic



The Statue of Liberty, officially titled Liberty Enlightening the World and dedicated on October 28, 1886, is a monument commemorating the centennial of the signing of the United States Declaration of Independence. Given to the United States by the people of France, it represents the friendship between the two countries established during the American Revolution. (Photo by Hemera Technologies/www.photos.com.)

significance by framing it with biblical themes and motifs. He oriented the war by concepts of historical purpose and a higher conception of justice. Lincoln spoke of God's judgment upon a people who had sinned gravely by profiting from the ownership and abuse of other human beings. He invoked Christian Scripture to convey the idea that the North's victory did not place it in a position to mete out judgment upon the defeated; nor did it absolve the victors from God's judgment themselves.

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men

should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." [Matthew 18:7] If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom

the offense came, shall we discern wherein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" [Psalm 19:9]. With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

In these lines, Lincoln interprets the Civil War as an instance of divine judgment upon a wayward nation. Such an interpretation was pivotal for restoring the unity of a society on the brink of being torn apart. The engraved text of this address now orients perhaps the most famous of sacred spaces in US civil society, spanning the north wall of the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The memorial itself commemorates what is broadly recognized as Lincoln's own "sacrificial death," in exchange for the continued unity of the life of the nation. A few feet away, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, are bronze footprints marking another prophet and martyr of US civil religion, Martin Luther King Jr. These footprints mark the spot from which he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963. On that occasion, King invoked Lincoln's legacy of issuing the Emancipation Proclamation of black slaves in the United States—to challenge the US legal

system and the daily life of US civil society to embody in practice the ideals of liberty, equality, and mutual respect that it claimed to espouse.

SACRED TIME IN US SOCIETY

The founding myths and narratives of US civil religion converge with shared conceptions of "sacred time" in US civil society. Civic holidays are designated to observe, remember, celebrate, mourn, or reenact the pivotal events, values, figures, and narratives that are central to the society's conception of itself. In the United States, civil religion has been instituted in a series of holidays that are set aside to commemorate and celebrate the many people who fought and died while serving the nation and state (Veterans and Memorial Days), pivotal figures and events in the founding narratives (Columbus Day), the survival of the Puritan settlers after their journey to the new world (Thanksgiving), the declaration of independence from Britain (Independence Day). These holidays also honor particular individuals who have been elevated to saintlike status for their devotion and sacrifice to their country (Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday; Presidents' Day commemoration of the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln).

Thanksgiving may be the "high holy day" of US civil religion, in part because it refracts like a prism the nebulous ways that "religion" manifests itself in the civic life of the nation. Instituted by law as a federal holiday, Thanksgiving is officially "secular," that is, not formally affiliated with a particular religious tradition or institution (as are Christmas, Easter, Hanukkah, or Ramadan). It commemorates one of society's founding myths of origin that is ritually reenacted at "Thanksgiving dinner."⁸ The holiday is oriented around a set of values understood to be rooted in that founding myth. These values purport to provide

collective meaning and reflect basic claims about the identity of this particular society, and they do so vaguely enough to encompass both specifically religious and explicitly nonreligious interpretations.

At the same time, the origins of the Thanksgiving holiday were Christian in character and continue to reflect a mythical representation of the Puritans at Plymouth, as previously discussed. Having gathered their first harvest in 1621, the legend goes, the fifty Pilgrims who had survived the treacherous journey and first months in the New World rested and gave thanks to their God for leading them through the wilderness to the new promised land.

The practices of designating days of prayer, giving thanks to God, and even fasting quickly became a common practices in US civil society. On October 3, 1789, President George Washington declared the first Thanksgiving Day observance for the fledgling nation, officially recognizing the “religious” values on which the commemoration centered—gratitude, piety, humility, and rest. Washington declared:

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor, and whereas both Houses of congress have by their joint committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.⁹

Although days of thanksgiving and prayer were observed intermittently (not necessarily in autumn, and sometimes more than once per year), this practice was taken with great

seriousness, as though the very well-being of the nation depended upon it. Many of Thomas Jefferson’s Federalist critics blamed his refusal to designate any official days of fasting and thanksgiving for the outbreak of a yellow fever epidemic that occurred in and around Philadelphia in 1799.¹⁰ Abraham Lincoln designated the Thanksgiving holiday as the final Thursday in November. However, the holiday was not established in its contemporary form until Franklin D. Roosevelt set the next-to-last Thursday of each November as a national holiday in 1939.

The impressionistic and mythical character of the US founding stories enables these tales to orient and reflect popular imagination through various rituals and holidays. It is this same impressionistic quality, however, that conceals divergent and dissenting accounts of the events they portray and hides how these stories have underwritten some of the most destructive chapters in US history. As we saw previously, for instance, the separatist Puritan settlers envisioned their journey to the New World as a reflection of the Israelite’s exodus from Egypt to the land of Canaan. When celebrated solely as a narrative of liberation from bondage, the story of the Hebrew people’s exodus from slavery obscures the part of that story that describe the fates of the people already living in the land that had been promised to the Hebrews by their God—Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. The flight from Egypt recounted in the book of Exodus tends to be celebrated in isolation from the story’s continuation in Deuteronomy (Chapter 20, in particular). There, God gives the Hebrews a mandate to lay siege to the cities of the inhabitants who are already living in the land, destroying those who do not accept their terms for peace and enslaving those that do.

In a parallel fashion, versions of the Puritans’ arrival in the promised land of the New World that prevail in the popular imagination

obscure the fact that the alleged uninhabited wilderness in which they arrived was, in fact, already populated by vast numbers of indigenous peoples. Mythic representations of the "First Thanksgiving" of 1621 portray as one of friendship the Puritan affiliation with Wampanoag Indians of Massachusetts. And even though the Pilgrims had entered into treaties with some Native American tribes of the region, assuring some degree of mutual aid in the case that either group came under attack, the full details of the story are much more disconcerting.¹¹

In addition to their sense of vocation to settle and subdue the wilderness of the new world, the Pilgrim settlers brought smallpox with them. Between 1633 and 1644, thousands of the indigenous population died from smallpox outbreaks that accompanied the increasing numbers of Puritans settlers (their numbers had reached two thousand by 1632). Although the Puritans offered aid to an Indian population decimated by disease, they did not hesitate to view the epidemic as an act of God on behalf of the chosen people. "If God were not pleased with our inheriting these parts, why did he drive out the natives before us?" John Winthrop wrote in 1634. "And why dothe he still make roome for us, by diminishinge them as we increase?"¹²

Colonists from England brought to the New World King Charles I's "right of discovery"—a provision in British law that permitted a monarch to claim possession of any land not already occupied by Christians. As such, it applied to all the lands on which Native Americans lived and allegedly provided the settlers with legal claim to the lands that they settled.¹³ By 1675, the population of New England immigrants had grown to seventy-five thousand whereas the number of Indians in New England diminished to fifteen thousand. Altogether, the displacement of the New England Indian population by European settlers occurred through the combined effects

of epidemics brought by the settlers, settlement expansion, and warfare against the Indians. In 1675, the colonists went to war against large segments of the indigenous population, which largely completed the settlement of New England by the New World colonists. The Puritans were inclined to interpret these events as the unfolding of God's plan for a chosen people who had been called to establish a nation in the new world.

RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE: DETACHING PRACTICE FROM BELIEF

The concept of civil religion provides a descriptive category by which to make sense of what has been called the spiritual dimension of the motto *E pluribus unum*, "out of many, one."¹⁴ Somewhat paradoxically, the symbols, rituals, and myths of civil religion could serve such edifying functions in the public life of civil society if religion were legally disestablished. Because it was relieved of the capacity to assert itself coercively, religion was thereby made available to serve, unify, and maintain civil society in informal and cultural ways. Of course, if the symbols, myths, scriptural allusions, and sacred time can be made flexible—to accommodate some degree of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in civil society—they can also be employed in ways that divide and exclude. Some argue that the cultural force and social pressures, generated in the name of civil religion, in the United States infringe upon the separation of church and state *in practice*. According to this argument, these pressures institute distinctively theistic (predominantly Christian) practices in civil society, when they ought to be kept as matters of private belief and personal practice. Some of the most difficult challenges to the establishment clause of the First Amendment have occurred over issues of practice of religion in civil society that broadly fall within the category of civil religion.

One of the first tests of the Free Exercise clause occurred in 1879, in the Supreme Court case *Reynolds v. United States*. George Reynolds, a Mormon residing in the territory of Utah, was convicted for marrying multiple wives. He appealed his conviction on the grounds that he was obligated to enter into multiple marriages, owing to his religious duty as a Mormon. The Supreme Court upheld the conviction. The significance of the ruling was not so much its particular result as the court's justification for limiting the way Reynolds practiced his religious beliefs. The laws of the land could restrict certain religious practices, because "laws are made for the government of actions, and while they cannot interfere with mere religious beliefs and opinions, they may with practices." With this, a basic distinction between religious belief and religious practice was written into law. "Belief" on this account operates along the lines of personal opinion—it is an interior act of cognitive commitment or emotional conviction that occurs within the inner recesses of individual conscience. It presumes a clear and distinct division between private conscience and public space. Within the framework established by the court's ruling, a citizen is free to "believe" whatever he or she wants, and the government cannot rightly coerce belief. Religious actions, practices, or institutions, by contrast, are considered to operate in the public space and are thus candidates for restriction. In other words, the laws can restrict what a believer can or cannot actually do in the name of religious conviction or duty, beyond the notion of exercise carved out by the free exercise clause of the First Amendment. The state restrains itself from interfering with religious practices, insofar as participation in them is voluntary and legally uncontroversial. If some practice conflicts with the laws of the land, however, the state is within its right to prohibit or circumscribe that practice.

In justifying its verdict in *Reynolds v. United States*, the court appealed to a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut in 1802, which Chief Justice Waite referred to "almost as an authoritative declaration of the scope and effect of the [first] amendment." The letter contains the two lines that have been perhaps as influential, controversial, and contested as the Free Exercise and Establishment clauses themselves. The opinion quoted Jefferson.

Believing with you that religion is matter which lies solely between Man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.¹⁵

Jefferson's reference to a "wall of separation" has been taken by many to capture the limits of religion's role in the political sphere in the United States, as well as in public life and civil society. However, this is an idyllic and highly theoretical articulation of principle of free expression. This principle obscures the informal power and influence that religion exerts.

Jefferson thought that the public practice of certain forms of religion was indispensable for cultivating the civic virtue necessary for the proper functioning of society. In Jefferson's view, the ethical instructions of rationalist

Enlightenment deism was ideal to the ethical substance of civil society.¹⁶ It included the moral teachings of that remained after human reason shed the claims of "special revelation" of miraculous events in the bible, the Ten Commandments, and the "Rule" (Matthew 7:12). Jefferson's principles were basic enough to encompass diversity and yet remain fully committed to the foundational moral principles evident to natural reason. These principles find their most widely recognized expression in Jefferson's preamble to the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson's moral dimensions of religion to the operation of a healthy republic, however, this view enshrined a general Protestant Christianity (generalized into deism) in the symbols, rituals, and practices of the republic.

The practical import of this view has perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the comment by the then-president Dwight D. Eisenhower that the United States government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply held religious belief. "What it is,"¹⁷ Eisenhower's remark suggests, is a deeply held religious belief in the sense of US government—what might be—again suggests the religious beliefs, and practices of US civil society, are vague enough to accommodate a wide range of religious belief. And yet the elements that are central to the United States' national identity are in spite of intention to accommodate Citizens who explicitly refuse to

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Enlightenment deism was ideal to provide the ethical substance of civil society.¹⁶ Its contents included the moral teachings of Jesus (those that remained after human reason cut away all the claims of "special revelation" and reports of miraculous events in the biblical accounts), the Ten Commandments, and the "the Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12). Jefferson thought these were basic enough to encompass a great deal of diversity and yet remain fully consistent with the foundational moral principles that are self-evident to natural reason. These basic principles find their most widely recognized articulation in Jefferson's preamble to the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson believed the moral dimensions of religion to be indispensable to the operation of a healthy society. In effect, however, this view enshrined a mild form of liberal Protestant Christianity (gradually shading into deism) in the symbols, rituals, and values of the republic.

The practical import of these values is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the comment by the then-president-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower that the United States' "form of government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply held religious belief, and I don't care what it is."¹⁷ Eisenhower's remark that some deeply held religious belief is necessary to make sense of US government—whatever those beliefs might be—again suggests that the rituals, stories, and practices of US civil religion should be vague enough to accommodate most any particular religious belief. And yet, the mildly theistic elements that are central to civil religion in the United States alienate members of the citizenry, in spite of intention to achieve the opposite. Citizens who explicitly refuse to ascribe to some

"religious affiliation" or a framework of religious beliefs have protested that even society's association with the most broadly construed conception of a God and religion positively excludes them.

Arguably, Eisenhower is the figure who is singly most responsible for the form and content of civil religion in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁸ He oversaw the insertion by the United States Congress of the words "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 ("One nation under God"). He was also pivotal in selecting the phrase "In God we Trust" as the US national motto in 1956, and he vied for its eventual inscription on US currency in 1957. Prior to "In God we Trust," *E pluribus unum* ("out of many, one") had served informally as the national motto. The change overseen by Eisenhower made explicit the tacitly theistic (or deistic) presuppositions of what was required in order to fashion "one from many." Motivated by Cold War patriotism, these additions intended to distinguish the religious heritage and identity of US civil society from the self-described materialist atheism of Soviet Communism.

Criticisms arise that, in practice, the mildly theistic taint of the symbols and rituals of civil religion discriminates against nonbelief or against those who deliberately choose not to affiliate with any religion. Arguably, it sanctions a range of informal exclusions, even though exclusions on the basis of religious affiliation—or refusal thereof—are formally illegal. Legally speaking, for instance, the establishment clause of the First Amendment to the US Constitution prohibits uses of religious criteria to determine whether or not a candidate is eligible to hold public office. Critics ask whether it is even conceivable that a "professing atheist" could be elected to high office in the United States. "We atheists . . . think it bad enough that we cannot run for public office without being disingenuous about

our belief in God," the social critic and philosopher Richard Rorty commented in recent years. "No uncloseted atheist is likely to get elected anywhere in the country. We also resent the suggestion that you have to be religious to have a conscience—a suggestion implicit in the fact that only *religious* conscientious objectors to military service go unpunished."¹⁹ In practice, the United States has had enough of a struggle to move beyond a default limitation of its presidents to being adherents of Protestant Christianity. The first Roman Catholic who was elected president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, was not elected until 1960, and he came under intense scrutiny about whether his allegiance to the pope would interfere with his loyalty to his country. These are cultural and social forces that exert themselves informally and, in practice, often toward the very ends that legal disestablishment is intended to evade. In the remaining pages of this essay, I examine the ways that such social and cultural forces have exerted themselves legally and institutionally in North American civil society.

AUTHORITY: CIVIL RELIGION AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

The diversification of the North American public in terms of ethnicity, religious and cultural background, and language has increased exponentially since the 1960s. This has made it difficult for the earlier variations of the religious dimensions of civic life to suffice any longer as vehicles for social integration of difference into the civic unity promised by "American values." To many, it appears that the "sacred canopy" that previously encompassed, integrated, and legitimated the social, civic, and legal worlds of US society is falling apart at the seams. The increasingly diluted potency of the distinctively Christian symbols, values, and practices that accompanied the heretofore unseen scope of religious, ethnic,

and cultural diversification of US society in the post-Vietnam era has inspired many segments of US Christianity to assert themselves politically and, perhaps more controversially, legally.

The result has been twofold. On one hand, this rapidly increasing diversification has hindered the capacity of the inherited Judeo-Christian symbols, ritual, and myths of civil religion to generate solidarity and integrate difference. The capacities of the traditional symbols and emotional influences to generate an imagined community have diminished and thereby compromised the "religious identity" of the American people as a "Christian nation" or as a "Judeo-Christian civilization." This has inspired an effort to politicize the religious identity of this country, its people, its history, and its role in world affairs. An ebbing cultural dominance has given rise to political and legal assertion, as a means of effecting cultural resurgence, as well as a xenophobic retrenchment of Judeo-Christian values in civic life. Arguably, a new great awakening has occurred in the United States since roughly 1980, one not simply concerned with personal piety and devotion, but a legal and political awakening mobilized in the name of US Judeo-Christian cultural origins and heritage.

In the wake of bitter disappointment over a series of court decisions, legal statutes, and shifts in the cultural ethos of US society,²⁰ conservative Christians in the United States hoped that electing a self-identified "born again" Christian and active member of a Southern Baptist church to the presidency would vindicate US identity as a "Christian nation" and correct the wayward course of US civil society. President Jimmy Carter, however, disappointed Christian conservatives. In response to Carter's presidency, evangelical televangelist Jerry Falwell ^a formed the political action movement and lobby group calling itself the "Moral Majority," a group that ultimately claimed responsibility for

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delivering two-thirds of the vote of white evangelical Christians to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election. This movement took quite literally the mythical and moral dimensions of US civil religion. The Moral Majority mobilized politically in order to reassert culturally the values that were associated with the origins of the United States as a Christian nation, and to institute them legally.²¹

Falwell's Moral Majority understood the "exceptional" role of the United States in history as being grounded in the origins of its Judeo-Christian identity. This identity was something to be defended, at all costs, against the encroachment of multiculturalism and secularism. In the following sermon, directed to the US public, Falwell made his case in terms that are distinctly reminiscent of John Winthrop's jeremiad to his fellow Puritans.

Our nation's internal problems are direct results of her spiritual condition. America is desperately in need of a divine healing, which can only come if God's people will humble themselves, pray, seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways. . . . It is God Almighty who has made and preserved us as a nation, and the day that we forget that is the day that the United States will become a byword among the nations of the world. We will become nothing more than a memory in a history book, like the many great civilizations that have preceded us. . . . I do not believe that God is finished with America. Yet America has more God-fearing citizens per capita than any other nation on earth. There are millions of Americans who love God, decency, and biblical morality. North America is the last logical base for world evangelization. While it is true that God could use any nation of means possible to spread the gospel to the world, it is also true that we have the church, the schools, the young people, the media, the money, and the means of spreading the Gospel worldwide in

our lifetime. God loves all the world, not just America. However, I am convinced that our freedoms are essential to world evangelism in this latter part of the twentieth century. I am seeking to rally together the people of this country who still believe in decency, the home, the family, morality, the free-enterprise system, and all the great ideals that are the cornerstone of this nation. . . . But when you ask the average person what can be done about revival in America, he will often reply, "I'm just one person. What can I do anyhow?" As long as the average moral American believes that, the political and social liberals in this society will be able to pass their socialistic legislation at will. We are late, but I do not believe that we are too late. It is time to put our lives on the line for this great nation of ours. . . . I am convinced that God is calling millions of American in the so-often silent majority to join in the moral majority crusade to turn America around in our lifetime.²²

In the decades that followed, the symbols and rites of civil religion served as trappings for a cultural movement.²³

These symbols, rites, and stories have achieved nearly sacrosanct status throughout US civil society since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. One explanation for the post-September 11 upsurge in civil-religious devotion states that, as a matter of general sociological principle, during national "times of trial," the symbols, stories, and rituals through which a society understands itself become especially charged with meaning, whether patriotic, nationalistic, or some combination of all of these. These revitalized values might serve as compensatory resources for dealing with periods of national adversity. The perceived common threat to the American way of life, conjoined with a segment of the population united in their commitment to the identity of the United States as a Christian nation or Judeo-Christian civilization, has led to

a reassertion of the practices, symbols, and stories of US civil religion.

The clause "One nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance was challenged in Federal Appeals court in 2002 as violating the separation of church and state. The suit was filed by a California man—and self-identified atheist—whose daughter attended a Sacramento elementary school where recitation of the pledge was compulsory. Although his daughter was not actually forced to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance (the result of a 1943 Supreme Court ruling that prohibits compulsory participation in the pledge), the girl's father argued nonetheless that the practice infringed upon his daughter's First Amendment protection from being forced to participate in a religious rite. She was required to "watch and listen as her state-employed teacher in her state-run school leads her classmates in a ritual proclaiming that there is a God, and that ours is 'one nation under God.'"

The US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled (2–1) that the clause "One nation under God" was, in fact, unconstitutional, because it violated the First Amendment prohibition of the state's endorsement of any particular religion. Writing for the majority, Judge Alfred T. Goodwin explained that the phrase "under God" is as problematical as the declaration that "we are a nation 'under Jesus,' a nation 'under Vishnu,' a nation 'under Zeus,' or a nation 'under no god,' because none of those professions can be neutral with respect to religion." He continued as follows:

In the context of the pledge, the statement that the United States is a nation, "under God" is an endorsement of religion. It is a profession of a religious belief, namely, a belief in monotheism. The recitation that ours is a nation "under God" is not a mere acknowledgement that many Americans believe in a deity. Nor is it merely descriptive of the undeniable his-

torical significance of religion in the founding of the republic. Rather, the phrase "one nation under god" in the context of the pledge is normative. To recite the pledge is not to describe the United States; instead, it is to swear allegiance to the values for which the flag stands: unity, indivisibility, liberty, justice, and—since 1954—monotheism. The text of the official pledge, codified in federal law, impermissibly takes a position with respect to the purely religious question of the existence and identity of God. . . . "The government must pursue a course of complete neutrality toward religion." Furthermore, the school district's practice of teacher-led recitation of the pledge aims to inculcate in students a respect for the ideals set forth in the pledge, and thus amounts to state endorsement of these ideals. Although students cannot be forced to participate in recitation of the pledge, the school district is nonetheless conveying a message of state endorsements of these ideals when it requires public school teachers to recite, and lead the recitation, of the current form of the pledge.²⁴

Had it stood, this decision would have had far-reaching implications. It outlawed the recitation of Pledge of Allegiance in public schools across the nine western states under the court's jurisdiction (Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington). At the time, twenty-five states required the pledge as part of the public school day, and six other states advocated that schools incorporate it into their daily schedules. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, lawmaking bodies in seven additional states introduced legislation that would make the pledge obligatory in school.

Upon hearing of the court's ruling, the US Senate unanimously passed a resolution denouncing the court's decision. Congressional representatives protested by convening on the front steps of the US Capitol building to

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recite, in unison, the Pledge of Allegiance and to sing "God Bless America." The ruling was quickly appealed and ultimately reversed by the Supreme Court on the basis of a technicality. As it turned out, the father who filed the suit lacked standing to sue because he did not have custody of his daughter at the time. The girl's mother did not object to her participation in the recitation of the pledge.

Three years later, another lawsuit was filed, challenging the use of the phrase "under God" in the pledge. A Virginia man, a father of three school-aged children, claimed that use of the phrase "under God" promoted religion unconstitutionally. In contrast to the prior California case, however, this time the suit was motivated by the father's theological convictions: he was a Mennonite. Mennonites are a nonviolent Christian community, originating from the Dutch and German Anabaptists of the Protestant Reformation, that takes its name from its first leader, Menno Simons (1493–1559). Historically, Mennonites have been distinguished by pacifism and principled refusal to participate in forms of state power. They have advocated for the strict separation of church and state and for conscientious objection during periods of war on the basis of Jesus's command in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38–39) not to resist evil. As early as 1548, Menno Simons argued for a "separating wall" that should stand between the church and the world—this was long before Thomas Jefferson made the phrase famous.

The suit charged that the invocation of God in the Pledge of Allegiance, in combination with its creedlike affirmation of the values of the US nation state, colluded to form a "civic religion" that he thought encroached upon genuinely religious identity and competed with the specific religious values that he sought to inculcate in his children.²⁵ The US Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that recitation

of the pledge is a purely patriotic exercise and neither affirms a particular religious view nor functions as a religious act, such as a prayer or the recitation of a creed or incantation. "Undoubtedly, the pledge contains a religious phrase, and it is demeaning to persons of any faith to assert that the words 'under God' contain no religious significance," Judge Karen Williams wrote. "The inclusion of those two words, however, does not alter the nature of the pledge as a patriotic activity."²⁶

Another reason for the upsurge in civic piety since the attacks of September 11 has been the positive use of national symbols, rites, and myths by political leaders to consolidate national identity over potentially divisive particular identities in US civil society. Such uses of civil religion seek to cultivate (or to manipulate) popular sentiment in order to mobilize antipathy toward a common enemy. Such mobilization of fear can fund a reactionary willingness to concede to the restriction or suspension of civil liberties (as in the Patriot Act, passed in October 2001) and/or the application of such extreme measures against that enemy as torture and suspension of basic legal protections, such as *habeus corpus*, in the name of protecting "our way of life."

For instance, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, George W. Bush juxtaposed "American values" and "the American way of life" with marginal factions in Islam that are uniquely "militant," frequently referred to as "fanatical Muslims" or "Islamic jihadists." Bush was quick to point out that it is entirely unproblematic to be both a good Muslim and a good American. Extremist Islamic factions, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, or terrorist Islamic groups, such as Al Qaeda, have hijacked a religion that is essentially peaceful. This refrain is generally followed with the proviso that, at its core, *true* Islam is a religion of peace and that violent struggle in

the name of Islam is, in fact, a contortion of that tradition.²⁷

As a matter of historical record, the latter claim is false. For example, Islam contains a "just war" tradition of argument that is comparable to the just war tradition in Christianity. In both cases, debate about when it is permissible or necessary to employ force and coercion or enter into violent conflict have been central to mainstream currents in the tradition. Resorting to war or violent means has, at times, been intertwined with the most peaceful features of the tradition. Moreover, Al Qaeda employs just war reasoning that is central to the Islamic tradition in its justifications.²⁸

The effect of the rhetorical function of the George W. Bush administration's claims to identify the true and peaceful essence of Islam is to expand the canopy of US civil religion from the Judeo-Christian parameters ascribed to it throughout most of the twentieth century to the even broader category of "Abrahamic faiths" or "religions of the Book." The latter designations refer to the fact that the Torah, the Christian Old Testament, and the Qur'an each identify Abraham as their founding patriarch. These religions share the basic values associated with Western monotheism—respect for the basic sanctity of life, grounded in its creation by a benign and loving Creator who, in turn, mandates mutual respect between individual people associated with "the Golden Rule," and in toleration of difference in the name of neighborly love. Thus, properly understood, "good Islam" fits comfortably under the canopy of "the American way of life" that is grounded in these values. When properly understood—so the argument runs—true Islam should have no difficulty affirming the broadly monotheistic values, rites, and symbols of US civil religion. Conversely, US citizens should have no difficulty affirming their Muslim fellow citizens.

The reality is much more severe. In 2003, sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow conducted the "Religion and Diversity Survey," which collected and assessed responses and performed in-depth follow-up interviews with a national sample of 2,910 respondents selected to be representative of the US adult population. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents in the survey agreed that the United States was founded on Christian principles, and slightly more than that (79 percent) agreed that the United States has been strong because of its faith in God. Fifty-five percent agreed that the democratic form of government in the United States is based on Christianity; just over 73 percent agreed that the United States is still principally a Christian society; and 63 percent agreed that US public schools should teach students the Ten Commandments. Although 85 percent agreed that religious diversity has been good for the United States, 20 to 23 percent of respondents endorsed restricting the basic rights of minority religious groups (Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims) to meet and worship altogether. Almost four of every ten Americans (38 percent) said that they would support making it more difficult for Muslims to settle in the United States, and 47 and 57 percent, respectively, associated the words "fanatical" and "closed-minded" with Islam. Sixty-six percent of respondents favored the US government "keeping a close watch on the all foreigners in the United States."²⁹

Wuthnow takes the results of his survey to reflect a public discourse about religion that is "schizophrenic." He writes as follows.

On one hand, we say casually that we are tolerant and have respect for people whose religious traditions happen to be different from our own. On the other hand, we continue to speak as if the nation is (or should be) a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles,

and characterized by public trappings of this tradition. The schizophrenia encourages behavior meaning people would war think about it. It allows the ed among us to get by with seriously at all. It permits r to occur without much outcry. The members of gions experience little in understanding. The ch seldom hear anything to forting convictions. The misunderstanding and, to prevent outbreaks of bigotry. It is little woncans retreat into their pr spirituality is mentione that than to confront th religious truth and our

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and characterized by public references to the trappings of this tradition. This kind of schizophrenia encourages behavior that no well-meaning people would want if they stopped to think about it. It allows the most open-minded among us to get by without taking religion seriously at all. It permits religious hate crimes to occur without much public attention or outcry. The members of new minority religions experience little in the way of genuine understanding. The churchgoing majority seldom hear anything to shake up their comforting convictions. The situation is rife with misunderstanding and, as such, holds little to prevent outbreaks of religious conflict and bigotry. It is little wonder that many Americans retreat into their private worlds whenever spirituality is mentioned. It is just easier to do that than to confront the hard questions about religious truth and our national identity.³⁰

Wuthnow concludes that the condition of religion in contemporary US civil society cannot be improved by simply retrieving conceptions of civil religion, as heretofore conceived, and then simply supplementing those with ideals of tolerance and diversity in civic life.

CONCLUSION: FROM CIVIL RELIGION TO PUBLIC RELIGION IN CIVIL SOCIETY

It should be evident from the preceding discussion that the kind of civil religion that has been traditionally understood to unify and legitimate US civil society is, yet again, facing a time of trial (to invoke the language of Robert Bellah, the sociologist most responsible for the form and content of the late twentieth-century discussions of civil religion). Unlike the crisis presented by the Vietnam War era, however, in the face of this trial, late twentieth-century civil religion asserted itself with the brazenness of a newly fashioned fundamentalism. Further exacerbated by September 11, US civil religion in the early

twenty-first century risks degenerating into a national cult.

And yet, the more aggressively the "American way of life" is heralded in symbol, song, practice, and (increasingly) law, the more the fraying and unraveling of its viability as an overarching social fabric becomes apparent. Arguably, the symbols, practices, and stories of the civil religion that "held the nation together" do not simply need consolidation or a "new great awakening" (which Bellah hoped for in his time)—but critical rethinking, reframing, and reimagining, an expansion of symbols and reform. If Wuthnow's study indicates anything, it is that religion in US civic life has to become an intentional, multilingual conversation of particular traditions and irreducible identities (religious and nonreligious, theistic and nontheistic) rather than restoration of a single, whole-cloth sacred canopy that professes to encompass the full scope of diverse constituents in their lowest common denominator and in the name of "holding civil society together."

GLOSSARY

American Exceptionalism: The view that the United States has a unique and/or divinely sanctioned role in the political and social history of the world.

Civil Religion: The practices, symbols, myths, rituals, and consecrated spaces and times that serve to unify and integrate the disparate parts and individuals of a society into a cohesive whole. Civil religion also invests that societal whole with overarching significance.

Establishment Clause: Clause in the First Amendment to the US Constitution that prohibits Congress from establishing an official state religion.