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Victor Lidz

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(doi: 10.2383/33644)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)
Fascicolo 3, novembre-dicembre 2010

Ente di afferenza:
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Flashback / "Heritage and Choice in American Religion": An Unpublished Essay by Robert N. Bellah

Civil Religion: On the Emergence, Development, and Importance of the Concept

by Victor Lidz

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Introduction

Robert N. Bellah's celebrated and yet controversial essay, "Civil Religion in America," led after its publication in the Winter, 1976 issue of *Daedalus* to a turning point in his career. As Bellah has explained himself, he undertook writing the essay with misgivings over his relative lack of expertise in the scholarship on American society and on American religious culture and institutions. Given the high level of expertise generally expected of contributors to *Daedalus*, his recollection of misgivings is probably correct despite the evidence reported in Matteo Bortolini's accompanying essay that Bellah had previously written an interesting, insightful, and learned working paper on American religion [Bortolini 2010a]. When the essay on civil religion attracted a great deal of attention, most of it favorable, across several disciplines – sociology, American history, religious studies, theology, political science, and others – and when the basic idea of civil religion later came under fire from diverse quarters, Bellah was drawn into further research on American religion, its varieties, its prospects, and its cultural and institutional consequences for the nation and its civilization. Although he continued research and publication on Japan, on modernization in Asia, and other matters within the purview of his prior calling as a scholar of the comparative sociology of religion, American religion, culture, and social institutions soon became the major concern of his publications.

The fame that followed among social scientists and among American intellectuals more broadly derived primarily from Bellah's books on religion and American society, including *The Broken Covenant; American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, *The New Religious Consciousness* (edited with Charles Y. Glock), *Habits of the Heart; Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (with Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton), and *The Good Society* (with the same co-authors) as well as many essays published in a wide range of religious and social scientific venues, many later collected in *The Robert Bellah Reader*, edited by Bellah and Tipton. Given the role that the essay on civil religion played in this turn in Bellah's intellectual career, it is most interesting for admirers of his work – among which I have counted myself since, as a senior in Harvard College, I took the first of what became several courses with him – to have the original draft of the essay, prepared for the conference sponsored by *Daedalus* and held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in October, 1965, to examine and compare with the published version.

The Two Versions

The reader observes immediately that the two versions of the essay differ in the manner in which the concept of civil religion is introduced. The published essay begins almost immediately with a discussion of President Kennedy's inaugural address, the ways it invokes God, and the idea of civil religion. Thus, as the essay's title suggests, it begins directly by presenting the concept of civil religion as applied to American society. By contrast, the draft essay, with the more general title, "Heritage and Choice in American Religion," discusses several basic characteristics of American religion and the religiosity of Americans before it introduces the concept of civil religion.

The draft essay begins by observing that the various mainstream denominations in the United States have retained considerable vitality even though intellectuals have increasingly expressed skepticism about religion. Bellah then notes that the predominant denominations, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, are characterized by strong senses of their own historical continuities with truly ancient events deemed to have transcendent and foundational significance – the Last Supper of Jesus and the Apostles, the Crucifixion of Jesus, or the Exodus from Egypt. Among these senses of historic continuity, the perspectives of the Reformed churches deriving from Calvinism – those that Max Weber labeled "ascetic Protestantism" – have been most important for the society as a whole. The religious ethics of Calvinist denominations have been the predominant source of the ethos of American life since early colo-

nial times. Their religious ethics also underlay the American Revolution as a social movement and the institutionalization of key features of that movement during the founding of the Republic and the writing of the Constitution. In part, this was due to the demographic fact that ascetic Protestants comprised a substantial majority of the population down to the Twentieth century. But more deeply it reflects a similarity in pattern of meaning between ascetic Protestant values and basic institutions across all major spheres of American society. When other religious groups have immigrated to the United States, it is that ethos that they have confronted in employing organizations, voluntary associations and local community institutions, public political life, educational institutions, and so forth. Immigrant groups have tended over time to adopt or at least accommodate to the predominant ascetic Protestant-based ethos.

A major feature of the American ethos has been its broadly positive orientation to social change. It has generally endorsed principles of reason regarding the design of social institutions and has fostered expectations that society can and should be improved by a progressive series of changes. In contrast to much of European and Asian religion, it has eschewed the sorts of traditionalism that oppose social change and seek to reestablish the institutional frameworks of prior times. Thus, American religion has not in general been opposed to the crystallization of modern institutions, but has been a force driving processes of change and development. Even the fundamentalist movements found among Protestant and Jewish denominations as well as elements of the Catholic Church have been quite selective in the qualities of modern life to which they express opposition. The religious life of Americans has not, again in contrast to many Europeans and peoples elsewhere in the world, perpetuated senses of alienation from "modernity," but rather a positive engagement with it. As Americans have increasingly led lives fully engaged with modern social institutions, religion has, in Bellah's incisive phrase, provided a "generalized sanction for morality." Religion has been viewed as establishing "eternal verities" for individuals and groups caught up in a rapidly changing social environment. A deep commitment to build "the Kingdom of God" on earth has provided a religious foundation for expectations of "progress" or continuous improvement in secular life. In these respects, Bellah argued in the draft essay, if I understand him, that American religion with its ascetic Protestant origins has tended to transcend the dichotomy of "tradition" and "modernity" by maintaining a tradition that endorses modernity.

The success of religion in sustaining stable frameworks of meaning is indexed by the continuing expectations of Americans that major life transitions – births, weddings, and deaths – must be celebrated with religious ceremonies. However much they differ in the degree to which religious observations are part of their daily and

weekly rounds of activity, Americans seem to require validation of the events of life transitions in religious terms. This pattern of religiosity has led many to emphasize that for contemporary Americans the religious life is bound to the sphere of private life – of family, kinship, and personal circles of friends and associates – with a deep gulf separating religion from public life and institutions. The First Amendment is often cited in support of the idea of profound separation. Does not the clause preventing the establishment of religion not block all religion from public life?

Bellah directly challenges this understanding of the relation of religion to public or civil affairs, but in a subtle way. He does not question the importance of the First Amendment or the separation of church and state. Later in the essay he emphasizes that the First Amendment secures freedom of religious belief and membership in religious organizations to all citizens through separation of the sphere of religious belief, activity, and association from the state. Yet, he asserts that there is a latent connection of public institutions to religion that does not involve the denominational sphere of religion. This connection concerns the embrace of public institutions in the positive orientation of American religion toward the general institutional make-up of modernity. Only after presenting this broad analysis of religion's involvement in American public life did Bellah, in "Heritage and Choice," introduce the conception of civil religion. The clarifying frame of that preceding discussion remained largely implicit in the published essay on "Civil Religion in America."

The central section of "Heritage and Choice" [pp. 7 to 14 of the typescript] is titled "The Civil Religion" and introduces that concept. Bellah quickly turns to President Kennedy's inaugural address as an example of the ways in which Americans invoke religious ideas on solemn public occasions. He quotes the beginning and concluding paragraphs of that address, the only passages that refer to God, as a text of the civil religion, a text that he then interprets with care. He suggests that the opening and closing passages, in significant degree because of their invocations of God, establish "a sort of frame" for the remainder of the speech and the large issues of national purpose and policy that it discusses. Routine work documents of presidents, such as, messages to Congress concerning matters of the budget or specific public policies, do not include references to God, but such references seem to be requisite for such solemn ceremonies as inaugurations. They have been included in the inaugural addresses of all presidents.

Bellah proceeds to emphasize that Kennedy's references to God were not connected to his personal faith as a Catholic, but to statements of a faith shared by Americans across their denominational differences. They invoke a special sphere of belief separate from the diverse religious beliefs of the various denominations and pre-

sumptively shared by practically all American citizens. Moreover, the invocations of God are in close association with statements of some fundamental American values. Kennedy characterized his inauguration as a "celebration of freedom" and "renewal" of principles embodied in the oath of office. That oath had been prescribed by the Founding Fathers and involved upholding the Constitution and therefore its protections for the rights of citizens. Kennedy emphasized that even though embodied in the Constitution and traditions of the nation, the "rights of man" are the gifts of God, not of political systems, and hence transcend the human order. God-ordained principles of right and wrong stand above the sovereignty of the people and their polity, and we as people and citizens are ultimately answerable to Him above all human authority. Kennedy concluded his inaugural address by asking for God's blessing on the efforts of Americans and others to carry out His work on earth – a clear reference by the nation's first Catholic president to its traditional, ascetic Protestant-ordained mission of building the kingdom of God on earth. Bellah argued that for the nation's first Catholic president to have articulated this activist religious duty, with origins in ascetic Protestantism, indexed its hallowed place in American tradition. We might add that the non-religious content of the speech – its declarations of national purposes and directions of national policy, especially foreign policy – were widely understood by Americans and other peoples to be energetically activistic, indeed, to be revitalizing a characteristic American activism after the less venturesome Eisenhower presidency, and thus consistent with its religious framing as interpreted by Bellah.

Analysis of Kennedy's inaugural address occupies almost all of the section of "Heritage and Choice" on civil religion, although Bellah concludes it with a claim that Lincoln is the central figure of American civil religion. In the published essay, Bellah adds historical depth to his analysis of civil religion in a discussion that comes to focus on the Civil War and on Lincoln – both his thought, particularly his understanding of the national trial represented by the tragically fratricidal war, and the meaning of his life and death.

The published paper begins with a discussion of the Kennedy inaugural that is a lightly edited version of the discussion in "Heritage and Choice." However, it then introduces the historical dimension, analyzing ways in which civil religion has developed over time. Bellah begins by noting that Washington, Adams, and Jefferson all invoked God in their inaugural addresses, but in a manner that seems more Unitarian than directly Christian. In their accounts, His interest seems to focus on "order, law, and right" rather than grace, salvation, and love. They never mention Christ, but do invoke a God who has a special interest in America, echoing in Protestant terms the way in which the God of the prophets held a special concern for the historical fate of ancient Israel. He quotes Washington's invocation of "that Being (…) who led our

fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a land flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life." America thus has the significance of a new "promised land" where the people are ordained by God to establish a new type of society. But the God that has so ordained the efforts of Americans is a stern and disciplined God of order and law, not a Christian God of salvation, mercy, and love.

If the era of the Founding Fathers with the Revolution and the establishment of an independent nation and republic stands for a first time of trial requiring a resolution in terms of a civil religious beliefs, Bellah proposes that the Civil War represented a second. Its tragic losses of life and vast suffering induced the deepest sort of anxieties and profoundest doubts about the meaning of a nation that had comfortably regarded itself as a promised land. He emphasizes that Lincoln, especially in the Gettysburg address and in his second inaugural address, gave the deaths and suffering of the war a deeply Christian meaning of sacrifice for the nation. Lincoln characterized the war as a punishment visited on the nation by God for the great offense of slavery. The war was His judgment and thus had to be endured by the nation however horrific it was to become. Implicit in this understanding of the war was that the nation, like the Israel of antiquity, held a special relation to God and a special collective destiny, even if one that could be realized only through an awful divine judgment and immense suffering. Yet, the civil belief system in this understanding of the Civil War retained a vital conception of a God who imposes transcendental standards of conduct by which the nation and its people are judged. With his assassination, Lincoln became the personal symbol of Christian sacrifice in the service of the American union in a newly direct way. He took on the meaning of a secular Christ sacrificed that the reunited republic might experience a rebirth. He has remained a uniquely pivotal figure in the American civil religion ever since, one embodying complexities of meaning that the nation's intellectuals still struggle fully to comprehend. It is no wonder that more books continue to be written about Lincoln and his significance for American culture and civic life than any other figure.

In a last major section of the published essay, Bellah discusses what he calls a "third time of trial" for the nation and its significance in terms of the civil religion. This time of trial concerns the nation's involvement in the revolutionary situation of the post-World War II world with its divisions between East and West and between the economically developed, generally democratic world and the world of nations struggling in development. Bellah is aware that this trial has had antecedents. He notes that the French Revolution precipitated sharp divisions in the United States between sympathizers with its effort to establish a new social order in an old European nation and opponents who were repelled by its violence. A strong sense of God-ordained national mission underlay the doctrines of "manifest destiny" that im-

pelled the nation's westward spread in the Nineteenth century, its conquests of native American tribal peoples and of Mexican territories, and eventually the war with Spain and the imposition of hegemony over its former colonies. However, since its involvement in the First World War, that "war to end all wars" and to make the "world safe for democracy," and especially since its mobilization to defeat Nazism, Fascism, and Japanese militarism in the Second World War, the U.S. has projected its religiously grounded sense of national mission onto the international arena in expansive and entangling ways.

Bellah was concerned about the *quality* of the sense of mission that had engaged the nation in the Cold War and, through it, in the Korean War and then the War in Vietnam. Had that sense of mission lost connection to reasoned judgment about ultimate purposes and limitations? Had it been cut free from transcendental principles and standards, imparting an antinomian character to national policies? The long and convoluted engagement in the War in Vietnam, a war in which the nation's leadership and citizenry seemed incapable of freeing itself from Cold War ideology to grasp the cultural and political realities of struggles in a distant civilization, seemed an antinomian extension of the Cold War. In a later continuation of his analysis, Bellah argued that awareness of "higher judgment" [Bellah, 1970, 185] is essential for the nation to avoid the jingoism of the Mexican-American War and the Manichean logic that justified supporting a military dictatorship in Vietnam as part of the "free world" simply because it was at war with a communist state. He noted that the religiously-grounded and widespread civil disobedience of the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and early 1970s invoked the prospect of higher judgment of the nation's policies and laws.

Now that Americans have seen a "War on Terror" replace the former Cold War as a national fixation, again with great costs in blood and treasure, Bellah's worries over antinomian and Manichean elements embedded in the civil religious tradition retain their salience. The embroilment with Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and other parts of the Muslim world shows many of the same features of limited understanding of a foreign civilization, overly ambitious efforts to remake alien political orders, and militarily aggressive interpretation of the national mission that made the War in Vietnam so tragic. Americans are still captives of their civil religion's third time of trial more than a generation after Bellah wrote his essay.

Through the extended discussion of the civil religion and its three times of trial, Bellah's basic idea gains a force and an immediate salience not conveyed in the original draft. In developing the notion of civil religion more thoroughly, however, Bellah missed the opportunity to connect it to other elements in the analysis of American religion. The strength of the "Heritage and Choice" draft is that it places greater

emphasis on the connections between civil religion and religion as Americans have conventionally understood it – the plurality of sects and denominations, the separation of religious organizations from state structures, and the emphasis on autonomy of the individual conscience answerable directly to God.

Neither "Heritage and Choice" nor the published essay addresses the theoretical background or significance of the concept of civil religion at any length, although both note that the term was originally used, though given a different meaning, by Rousseau. Both versions of the essay let the concept stand on its own, as it were, fortified principally by the empirical understanding that it provides. Yet, it is apparent that the concept derives from Durkheim's sociology of religion, and we know that Bellah was deeply interested in his sociological analysis of religion and morality during the 1960s. The basic idea is that the solidarity of a collectivity or community so important in the lives of citizens as a nation requires a foundation in religious beliefs and in such rites as presidential inaugurations and celebrations of national holidays. This functional requirement is all the more important in the American case due to the nation's origins in the turmoil of a revolution and the essentially contractual act of the adoption of the Constitution by the respective original states. This historically voluntaristic basis of the nation's solidarity has been sustained and, indeed, amplified by the emphasis in its traditions on what Durkheim might have considered an extreme form of the "cult of the individual," namely, the ascetic Protestant-derived belief in the ultimate autonomy of the conscience of each individual, to which Americans have generally added the secular belief that each citizen should show voluntary commitment to the Constitution and the legal order it establishes. The voluntaristic and individualistic cultural context for the solidarity of the American nation has thus amplified the need that the shared commitments of citizens have a grounding in civil religion and one that is both independent of particular denominations and yet articulating with the more general frames of American sacred beliefs. Such is the Durkheimian rationale for Bellah's conception of the chief characteristics of the American civil religion.

While the Durkheimian origins of the conception of civil religion have been generally acknowledged in the secondary literature, the Weberian origins have been discussed less frequently. However, Bellah's analysis obviously draws on Weber's discussions of American ascetic Protestantism and its worldly commitments to build the kingdom of God on earth. He also draws on historians' discussions of the American sense of a divinely ordained national mission, as in the idea of Manifest Destiny, that are at least consistent with Weber's analysis. What is perhaps equally Weberian, but perhaps less often traced to that source, is Bellah's apparently categorical inclusion of social and ideological discontents in the very conception of civil religion. In this re-

spect, the idea of civil religion is in the mold of Weber's emphasis on the "iron cage" discontents inherent in the basic institutions of modernity, such as, alienated labor, boom-and-bust capital markets, the disciplines of bureaucracy, and the impersonal relationships of *Gesellschaft*, as well as on the surpassing intrinsic capacities of modern institutions. It is notable that Bellah discusses problematic features or discontents in each of his analyses of civil religion, whether in America or in other nations.

We have seen that the published essay highlights the nation's then-current political difficulties that derived from Manichean and antinomian qualities in at least aspects of the civil religion's orientation to the third epoch of trial. In the "Heritage and Choice" essay, the discontents of the civil religion are addressed in the context of problematic features of American religion more generally. Principal among these are the doubts and "intellectual uncertainties" concerning even such conceptions as God. Although these difficulties are troubling primarily to religious intellectuals, they have become a significant cause of people leaving the ministry, priesthood, and rabbinate, and therefore create potential problems for the future. For most people, the difficulties in religious culture perceived by intellectuals have not created problems of belief. Their social conduct and their engagement in religious institutions generally continue to thrive, resting on belief systems widely accepted within their respective denominations. However, the intervening years have shown that in fact the scarcity of people entering, and sustaining careers in, the clergy has become a problem having large effects on the American Catholic Church and to lesser degrees on several large Protestant denominations and in Reformed and Conservative Judaism. (In the village in upstate New York where I am presently writing, the Episcopal Church has in the last generation gone from having its own minister to having difficulty in filling a shared position with the church in a larger village nearby. The Presbyterian Church has had a succession of ministers after a long-serving – over 35 years – minister retired fifteen years ago. It has not been able to find and keep a minister who is thoroughly pleasing to the congregation. The Baptist Church is seeking a new pastor after its popular and entrepreneurial pastor of the previous decade left to a new calling.) Thus, the future difficulty in sustaining belief among religious intellectuals is now, as Bellah anticipated, creating problems for common members of the various denominations.

Bellah also noted that by the latter part of the Twentieth century an "hiatus" had opened between theology and other scholarly fields. Religion that had been at the center of college and university curricula through the Nineteenth century no longer occupied a key place in either the humanities or the social sciences. Even in sociology, where the study of religion had been a chief interest of many of the classic theorists, from the Scottish moralists to Tocqueville to Weber to Simmel to Durkheim, religion has become a marginalized field of research and teaching. Bellah argued that

the yawning disjuncture between the faith of common citizens and the lack of attention to the intellectual foundations of religion has created a worrisome opening for irrationality. He held that the public respect for rationality and rational orientations toward common problems of American social life had declined to an uncertain, even precarious, state. Perhaps the prominence of fundamentalist movements in American religion and of fundamentalist understandings of its civil religious mission is a consequence of the intellectual abandonment of religion that Bellah analyzed in 1965. I believe that Bellah's critique of American civil religious orientations to the third time of crisis was animated in part by his previous analysis of the emerging difficulties in American religion and its declining status in the general culture.

Later Writings

Bellah extended his conception of civil religion in *The Broken Covenant; American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* [Bellah 1975], which set forth a more sharply critical stance toward American society. The preface highlights Bellah's personal conflict between "affirmation and rejection" of an American society grown "cruel and bitter" through decline from earlier principles. Bellah denounced the "distortions and perversions" of the nation's former millennial hopes. A corrosion of the common morality was bringing "a decline in all forms of obligation: to one's occupation, one's family, and one's country" [*ibidem*, x]. Commitment to freedom had devolved into liberty to pursue one's self-interest. There has been a notable liberation from the disciplines of Puritan ascetic Protestantism, but "virtue and conscience" have been replaced by utilitarian individualism and a widespread utopian reliance on technical expertise to manage policy without guidance from religious ethics.

The Broken Covenant reviews in compelling detail the biblical archetypes, figurations, and myths in terms of which Americans, from colonial times, have portrayed their collective identity and mission. Major themes include an Edenic view of the unspoiled New World, the Puritan settlers' Mosaic sense of an "errand into the wilderness," Americans as a Chosen People who have taken charge of a Promised Land, the society as a New Jerusalem or City on a Hill (a theme later revived in simplistic terms by President Reagan), and the Jeremiad tradition of sermonizing. All of these themes have in one context or another provided meaning to the purposes of life in America. The broad use of archetypes in American culture provided a depth of meaning that no other cultural resource could supply for a people whose literacy, until the Twentieth century, centered on the Bible. Bellah's mastery of the "logic" of figurational use of Biblical myths and his adept identification of instances of it in

diverse historical situations stands as unique in the sociology of religion. His analysis connects American civil religion to the nation's Protestant heritage with a new depth while it also maintains his previous distinction between civil religion and religion in a generic sense.

The doctrine of church polity and political organization among the New England colonies distinguished internal covenants of the heart among the presumptive elect from the external covenants binding all members of the community to church and government. The two types of covenant were complementary. The internal covenants did not bind all of society while the external covenants lacked commitment of moral direction. Bellah [*ibidem*, chapter I] proposes that covenant doctrine was long involved in the legitimation of the republic, with the Constitution understood to be, and to have the limitations of, an external covenant. He also cites Montesquieu's conception of republics as based on citizens' virtues as a source of legitimation. It supplemented the idea of a republic based on an external convenant by affirming that citizens, at least some citizens, have the virtue of accepting inner spiritual guidance. However, Bellah argues, the primary enduring source of legitimation for the Constitutional order has been utilitarian, Lockean, perhaps even Hobbesian. In utilitarian terms, the Constitution is morally neutral, a framework that merely mediates among conflicting interests, undermining all convictions that the republic needs citizens to be committed to substantive moral principles. The republic has thus become increasingly subject to the kind of corruption that the Founding Fathers most feared – dependence on the large, concentrated interests by the common citizenry. By way of qualification, I would note that Bellah reaches these conclusions without considering in any detail the importance of the broader Scottish moralist tradition to early American social and political thought, as emphasized by a number of recent historians, the philosophic, moral, and legal design of the Constitution, as in the Federalist Papers, or the cumulating legal heritage of Constitutional interpretation.

The republic's decline, Bellah emphasizes, has been related to a loss of the framework of meanings once embedded in the biblical heritage. The religious symbolism of biblical Protestantism has been "pruned"; its meaning made subservient to broader, less morally commanding pan-Judeo-Christian themes [*ibidem*, Chapter VI]. In former times, biblical figuration framed stimulus to redress wrongs, as in the anti-slavery and temperance movements. Bellah acknowledged the religious impetus to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, but worried that the tepid religion of the mainline denominations no longer gives firm moral guidance. The evangelical movements of the Nineteenth century gave moral direction to the nation, empowering common citizens and strengthened democracy. By contrast, Twentieth century evangelical preaching had become Arminian and carried little moral weight.

Preachers no longer use biblical figuration, as their congregations lack the biblical knowledge to comprehend its meaning. In the 1970s, new religious movements, some drawing on Asian as well as European sources, experimented with communal forms and attracted fervent adherents, but remained tiny sects with minimal impact on the larger society [*ibidem*, Chapter VI; also Bellah and Tipton 2006, Chapter 11]. Religious commitment among the general citizenry is thin, as evidenced by the large numbers of citizens who frequently change denominations, often for reasons of simple convenience, such as proximity to home, but also often due to marketing efforts by particular churches.

Bellah [1975, Chapter VI] acknowledges that the civil religion's definitions of American identity have at times created outcastes and classes of individuals subject to immoral social controls. The Edenic conception of a wilderness to be occupied by new Americans has legitimated the take-over of lands from Native American peoples and the aggressive and bloody wars involved in the process. The saint versus sinner dichotomy in Protestant thought legitimated first the enslavement of African Americans and later the Jim Crow discriminations against them, remnants of which persist in the residential segregation of many communities and institutions. Discriminations against Catholics and Jews had roots in Protestant ethics, beginning in the case of Catholics with principles of church polity. Thus, The biblical underpinnings of the civil religion have long been entangled with the worst elements of the American experience.

The crux of Bellah's critique of American society in an era of weakened religion and, perforce, civil religion concerns a putative growing dependence on utilitarian individualism, with its devaluation of community institutions. Americans live, Bellah argues, basically as isolates who have become utterly dependent on dominant corporations. They live for "success" in their careers and show little concern for the larger meanings of life. Capitalism has evolved into "the great expropriator" of private property; citizens own less and less of the productive property and depend increasingly on serving corporations as bureaucrats [*ibidem*, 131]. Hence, corporate profits have come to outweigh interest in the public good in the minds of most citizens. The cities have devolved into domains of "ugliness, chaos, and despair" [*ibidem*, 132]. With poverty, powerlessness, and political vulnerability growing, Bellah declares that the nation's punishment is to be the most modern society on earth, with all the human costs that are entailed in its form of modernity.

In a later volume, Bellah and his co-author Phillip E. Hammond [1980] present civil religion as a general category for macro-social analysis and for the comparative study of society and civilization. Bellah contributed a chapter on the Italian civil religion, emphasizing its diverse and conflicting sources and the resulting difficulties it

creates for Italian national solidarity. In another chapter, he compared the Japanese and American civil religions, discussing the non-axial nature of the Japanese civil religion, rooted in Shinto with its archaic absence of and resistance to transcendental principles, along with its collectivist values. Hammond contributed a discussion of civil religion in Mexico, concluding that frameworks, despite significant potentials, had failed to crystallize as an effective contributor to the nation's solidarity. In the introduction, Bellah addressed controversies that his original published essay on civil religion had engendered. He acknowledged that in Rousseau's usage, civil religion is contrasted to Christianity and that dating back to the Roman Empire, Christianity had been in conflict with institutions that were ineffect civil religions. Yet, he noted, dating back to Savanarola and Calvin, there have been Christian republics. In important respects, the New England colonists saw themselves in the heritage of Christian republics, especially Calvin's Geneva. This heritage continues to influence many Americans in providing meaning to their collective life. Bellah emphasizes that the so-called separation of church and state is not actually part of the First Amendment, which both provides for the "free exercise" of religion and prohibits *establishment* of religion as well as religious tests for citizenship and public office-holding. However, a common understanding of the First Amendment and the imputation that it separates church from state in a radical way – Bellah cites the frequent use of an image of a "wall of separation" – generates suspicion about any relationship of religion to public authority [*ibidem*, 4-6]. This suspicion has been the source of much of the criticism of Bellah's conception of civil religion.

Bellah cites Tocqueville's discussion of religion's contribution to citizens' efficacy in the political processes of the republic. He adds that Nineteenth century revivalism promoted a sense of national community during crucial periods in the nation's development. In the decades following independence, both a revolutionary "civil millennialism" and rationalistic Deism amounted to public theologies. With the decline of biblical religion and rise of liberal individualism, republican moral frameworks as well as civil religion have become increasingly attenuated. To indicate the weakening of republican moral culture, Bellah compares the spirit and philosophic quality of the Lincoln-Douglas debates with the listless risk-avoidance of the televised debates in recent presidential elections. His conclusion is that the republic is now "corroded beyond repair" [Bellah 1980, 18], and that it will need a new Great Awakening to revive it.

For *Habits of the Heart* [Bellah *et al.* 1985], a collaborative effort to update Tocqueville's assessment of American democratic society, Bellah drafted the key chapter on religion. The chapter has an empirical base in interviews with a small sample of subjects drawn from various communities across the country. The inter-

viewees differed in their occupations and in their ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds. The sample included people who were Catholic and Jewish as well as from various Protestant denominations. They differed markedly in the extent to which they were active in religious organizations. Their religious beliefs ranged from conventional to quite unique (one subject believed in her own religion), and they differed in the degree to which religious action was personally meaningful to them. Placing the interview materials against the historical forms of American religion, Bellah suggested that contemporary religious life has changed radically from its antecedents. He emphasized the decreased intensity in personal involvement in church activities, but equally the churches' remove from taking responsibility for the social lives of the communities in which they are located.

Bellah found that the religious lives of the interviewees fell on a continuum. At one end was an inner, vaguely mystical individualism concerned with self-realization. At the other end was an external religion oriented to a God who mandates an objective order for right living. The individual interviewees found their own positions somewhere on this continuum, and they generally associated with other people whose orientations somewhat matched their own. Yet, everywhere on the continuum the religious lives of the interviewees focused on personal morality and meaning largely divorced from involvement with non-religious institutions and relationships. A vacuity of meaning was thus unavoidable. That vacuity contrasts sharply with the historical efforts of mainline churches to relate their religious ethics and teachings to the whole of life. Bellah seemed somewhat optimistic that the Catholic Church relates Christian ethics more actively to the larger problems of the society. Yet, his hope appears to derive more from pastoral letters of Bishops than from interviews with lay Catholics regarding the meaning of their religious lives.

Bellah and his colleagues also conducted interviews with a small sample of clergy. On the basis of these interviews, Bellah suggested that American churches have been struggling to work out the degree to which they should be church-like and the degree to which they should be sect-like. The various denominations try to resolve this matter in terms of their own traditions and ethics, but generally they take positions that are church-like in some ways and sect-like in others. Bellah perceived an emerging tendency for Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish denominations to develop a broad central alliance or "communion of communions" [*ibidem*, 239] for exchanging outlooks and coordinating action on public matters, while also respecting their denominational differences.

In *The Good Society* [Bellah *et al.* 1991], Bellah was the primary author of a chapter on "The Public Church". He had by then ceased using the term civil religion, given the confusions it brought about [Bortolini 2010b]. However, the idea of the

public church is not a direct substitute for the concept of civil religion. It refers to beliefs and symbols by which religions in the generic sense give moral framing to public life. It thus is located within denominational religion, at least in the American context, not in the civil domain. By public, Bellah meant not pertaining to government, but to the institutional life of the citizenry independent of government. As he emphasized, religion has from the start of American history been engaged in public life, although the findings of *Habits of the Heart* might had led him to expect a diminished engagement in the late Twentieth century.

The chapter centers on the United Methodist Church, taken to be representative of mainline Protestantism, and its efforts to fulfill the role of a public church. Bellah and his colleagues had interviewed members of the Methodist clergy and the denomination's representatives in its Washington offices, where it pursues interests in national policy, often collaboratively with other denominations through the National Council of Churches. The interview data revealed a structural but also a cultural gap between the national organization of Methodists and local congregations. National officials were concerned immediately with issues of the public church and were troubled by an apparently declining energy for addressing such issues among local Methodist churches. However, local clergy saw their main duty as helping members with spiritual and practical needs. They were pleased with the energy and warmth of their congregations. They found that their members were responding to "prophetic" biblical preaching while also being open to modern theology, or at least elements of it. Where they felt called to go beyond attending to members' needs, they focused first on local charitable works and occasionally on local public issues that affected the churches and their members. By contrast, issues of the national political arena and the public church generally fell outside their circles of concern.

The church's national representatives were aware of the decline in the influence of mainline churches and the rising influence of evangelical churches. They and other leaders of the Methodist Church believed that their loss of influence was due to a lack of social vision among the mainline churches. They were also aware that the nation's religious pluralism has created a large number of churches too small and others too decentralized to exercise national influence. No strong leadership has arisen among the many churches, creating a concern on their part, one that Bellah had himself long voiced, that "the churches have lost their social mission" [*ibidem*, 192].

Bellah perceived a division in public church advocacy between the conservative-evangelical and liberal churches, a division that has probably deepened in the years since. Conservatives advocate hard work in economic roles, respect for governmental authority, and personal moral conduct. The liberals favor civil rights, world peace, overcoming poverty, and preserving the environment. Bellah stated a hope for

reconciliation. He suggested that excessive concentration on single issues narrows moral vision, thereby restricting the potential moral influence of the public church. He emphasized that religious commitment should transcend national loyalty. While all of the major denominations accept the legitimacy of the Constitution and the republic, their mission should require of them that they retain a transcending loyalty to God and, deriving from it, a capacity to critique national institutions and policies.

In the years since *The Good Society*, Bellah has continued to essay the relationships of religion to American public institutions [Bellah and Tipton 2006, Chapters 13-17]. With increasingly powerful rhetoric, he has elaborated his conviction that Lockean utilitarian individualism, atheistic and deterministic, and Constitutional liberalism have undermined the republic's religious and moral foundations. The consequencs are Hobbesian conflict and corrupting concentration of power in the large corporations. Government has been abandoning the poor, disabled, and disinherited. Meanwhile, the narrow expertise of policy specialists continues to lead the nation into debacle after debacle in both foreign and domestic arenas.

In his more recent discussions, Bellah develops new insight into the origins of American individualism. It has roots not only in Lockean utilitarianism, but even more radically in the ascetic Protestant conception of the individual conscience in immediate relationship to God and His commandments. This insight has deepened Bellah's perception of the morally ambiguous quality of American Protestantism from its earliest foundations. His story is no longer about declension, but of "flaws" in the basic religious ethics of ascetic Protestantism [Bellah and Tipton 2006, Chapter 15]. Although he does not specifically emphasize the point, these flaws necessarily carry over to the civil religion. Bellah's discussion of them adds a new dimension, I believe, to his earlier analyses of the antinomian and Manichean potentials of the civil religion and their consequences for the national and the world in this extended third time of trial.

Conclusion

Civil religion is a powerful concept helping us to understand the solidarity and the religio-moral culture of the United States and other countries as well. Its Durkheimian and Weberian sources provide a strong analytic foundation, imparting to it a capacity to lead us to a rich and multi-dimensional understanding of the grounds of orientation in modern societies. Bellah's analyses of the American civil religion – which have been our focus in this essay – have attended both to its solidarizing strengths and what I have called the discontents associated with it or perhaps

embedded within it. In some historical epochs the discontents have appeared more deeply embedded in or perhaps intrinsic to the civil religion than in others. Bellah's analyses have shifted over time to the view that the discontents are very deeply embedded and perhaps intrinsically characteristic of it. The long embroilments of civil religious beliefs in the Cold War and now in the unfortunately conceived War on Terror seem, for our own times at least, to lend weight to the idea that the antinomian and Manichean elements are profoundly entangled potentials of the civil religion. This is consonant, I believe, with the tragic view of religion and value-commitment that Bellah derives from Weber more than any other source. This view entails the understanding that a consequence of any fundamental religious commitment, insofar as accepted seriously and taken as a ground of determined action in the world, involves negative effects. That is, there are profound costs or discontents to any fundamental commitment.

From his first publication on the concept of civil religion, Bellah has faced a flood of criticisms of the idea. Most of them have been wildly misplaced, for example, claims that it fostered an idolatry of American society, suggestions that it condoned violations of the First Amendment, or arguments that it implicitly misinterpreted institutions of epochs and civilizations not under discussion. As Bortolini [2010b] has shown in a detailed discussion, Bellah eventually wearied of countering all of the allegations and began to avoid the term civil religion. I personally find that outcome unfortunate. I believe that the concept remains a major contribution to the sociology of religion and to the sociological understanding of American civilization, at least, and likely many other civilizations. I hope the concept will be revived and have a long future in sociological teaching and research.

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Civil Religion: On the Emergence, Development, and Importance of the Concept

Abstract: With the availability of Robert N. Bellah's original draft of his first published essay on civil religion, it is possible to gain new insight into the development of this key concept in the sociology of religion, political sociology, and related fields. Discussion begins with a comparison of the ways in which the two versions of the essay present the concept of civil religion. The draft provides a broad and insightful discussion of the nature of American religion before focusing specifically on civil religion, while the published essay begins almost immediately with illustrations of the civil religion, leaving the broader analysis of religion in Twentieth century America largely implicit, but providing more detail on the deep connections of the civil religion to American historical experience. Emphasis is then given to the Weberian as well as Durkheimian qualities of Bellah's concept of civil religion. Among these qualities is the attention in each of Bellah's discussions to the "discontents" of American civil religious beliefs and commitments. The various analyses of such discontents in several of Bellah's writings on civil religion are briefly summarized.

Keywords: Civil religion, ascetic Protestantism, tradition, modernity, morality.

Victor Lidz received his A.B. cum laude in Government 1962 and his Ph.D. in Sociology in 1976 from Harvard University. As a graduate student, he studied with Talcott Parsons, Robert N. Bellah, Erik Erikson, and others. He has held faculty appointments at the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania, and has served as a visiting faculty member at St. Joseph's University and at Haverford College, the latter on several occasions over 25 years. He is presently Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Director of its Division of Substance Abuse Treatment and Research at the Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia. He has published extensively on the writings of Talcott Parsons and made a number of contributions to the theory of social action in several areas.