

What is civil religion and how does it affect christians

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Abstract: What is civil religion and how does it affect Christians? That is the question that this paper will examine. This paper identifies what civil religion is and how it has evolved over the years. In the Literature Review, this paper examines and summarizes the different sources' opinions and definitions of civil religion. It also discusses how politicians do not actually use the term "civil religion," but imply it in their speeches. This paper discusses the themes of civil religion and how various authors predict that this may become a universalized religion. Then it will discuss all four authors' different conclusions on civil religion and how they think that civil religion will affect America and religion. The paper concludes by looking into the future and explaining how civil religion does and might affect Christians. Introduction: Robert Bellah defines civil religion as "the public religious dimension that plays a crucial role in the development of American institutions that is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals"(228). The term "civil religion" was first coined in the 8th chapter of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *The Social Contract* (1762).

For Rousseau, civil religion was simply a form of social cement, providing the state with sacred authority to help unify itself. Rousseau's simple outline of the principles of civil religion is: (1) Deity, (2) life to come, (3) the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and (4) the exclusion of religious intolerance (252). Rousseau believed that this group of religious beliefs is universal and that the government has a right to sustain it. He also said that individuals' religious opinions are outside the bounds of the government (252-253). History has made many different references to forms of civil religion, but the main study done by Robert Bellah and Martin Marty took

place in the 1960s and 1970s. They studied civil religion as a cultural phenomenon in an attempt to identify the principles of civil religion. In the United States, civil religion is commonly referred to as “Judeo-Christian tradition,” intended to include several monotheisms that are practiced in the United States (Wikipedia). While looking into civil religion, we will see different scholarly arguments and the affect it may have on Christianity.

Summaries: In researching civil religion, I found many books and essays that give definitions and views on civil religion. Robert Bellah is the main voice of this movement and has written many articles on this topic. In the article “Civil Religion in America” by Robert Bellah, civil religion is defined as “the public religious dimension that plays a crucial role in the development of American institutions that is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals”(228). Bellah claims that civil religion has its own seriousness and integrity and that it requires the same care in understanding as any other religion does (225). In his article, Bellah tells us where the idea of civil religion comes from. He claims that the Declaration of Independence has four references to God, and that the founding fathers’ words and acts are what shaped the form and tone of civil religion today (231-232). He continues with the description of civil religion today. Bellah argues that civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen through the experience of the American people (238).

He predicts that American civil religion may become a part of a new civil religion of the world. The difference being that instead of it being drawn from Biblical traditions, it would be drawn from religious, non-biblical traditions

(245). Later Bellah wrote “ American Civil Religion in the 1970s” in response to the criticism he had received from his previous article “ Civil Religion in America. ” He begins with claiming the rights to the term “ civil religion”. He claims that although there are many references to “ civil religion” in previous years, he is the one who coined the term (255). There is some disagreement on this claim. Some agree with Bellah, but others argue that Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined the term in his book *The Social Contract*. Although Rousseau might have coined the term, Bellah’s and his definitions of civil religion have some differences. While Rousseau saw it as a form of social cement that provided the state with sacred authority to help unify itself, Bellah views it as a public religious element that is vital to the maturation of American institutions. Rousseau’s definition is simpler, because the year in which he defined civil religion, allowed a simpler definition. Bellah says that the distinction between civil religion and public theology is a major contribution to the discussion of civil religion (258). Bellah further claims that a variety of public theologies is a guarantee to the honesty of civil religion (259). He suggests that American civil religion is a current reality and one that we will probably grapple with in the future (264). Bellah does not think that American civil religion is dying, but it is rather pointing to the fact that some linkage between religion, morality, and politics seems to exist (270). He closes by stating that “ the crisis in the civil religion is deepening even more rapidly than I had expected” (272).

In “ Civil Religion and America’s Inclusive Faith,” Barry Hankins seeks to give us a better understanding of what civil religion is, its evolution into what it is today, and its role in politics. Hankins claims that most American presidents

“ have integrated religion into their political speeches” and that scholars have labeled this integration “ civil religion. ” He defines civil religion as the blending of religion and patriotism to the point that it is impossible to separate them from another. Hankins says that this occurs when either politicians discuss religion or when pastors discuss political or national affairs. He continues with how in a country like the United States, civil religion can potentially fail if it excludes too many people; therefore, it needs to be an inclusive faith. Hankins claims that in the evolution of American civil religion, it has employed five themes consistently: the first theme is the “ chosen nation theme”, second is “ civic millennialism”, third is the theme that there must be “ a form of religious consensus or common thread that binds people together religiously”, fourth theme is a “ fusion of biblical beliefs with a deistic notion of God that is very general”, and fifth is the theme of “ historical authentication. ”

Hankins continues with the discussion on how different presidents have employed civil religion and its themes throughout the years. He ends with the claim that the form of civil religion that best fits the description in his essay is a priestly or pastoral civil religion (Hankins). Hankins and Bellah discuss the different presidents who have mentioned civil religion in passing. Though the presidents may not have used the term “ civil religion,” these writers assert that it was implied. They use quotes from these presidents for the benefit of their own argument. Those presidents are John F. Kennedy, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, George W. Bush, and Ronald Reagan. Bellah and Hankins claim that because of their attempt to integrate politics and religion, and their vague

references to God, these men unconsciously advocated civil religion (Hankins). The interesting thing about Hankins is that he does not limit civil religion to politicians, but rather includes pastors in his discussion as well.

Hankins tells us that the definition of the integration of civil religion is when either politicians mention religion or when pastors mention political or national affairs (Hankins). The Pew Forum panel discussed the topic of " God Bless America: Reflections on Civil Religion after September 11. " There are seven participants in this discussion panel, who are: Peter Berkowitz, Derek Davis, Amber Khan, Richard John Neuhaus, Clarence Newsome, Manjit Singh, and Melissa Rogers. As the moderator of the panel, Melissa Rogers begins by giving us a brief overview of the term " civil religion. She says that most people identify the term " civil religion" with the work of Robert Bellah, who says that civil religion in America is an understanding of the American experience in light of ultimate or universal reality. The panel continues with the different participants' views and thoughts on civil religion. Civil religion is described as a confused subject, with the confusion starting at the very term itself and that, for the most part, it is all about meaning. The panel continues on to claim that civil religion becomes extremely broad and very generic in its expression.

At the end of the discussion, the panel claimed that with civil religion " we are making a distinction between discovery of certain political values and systems as distinct from the moral justification (Pew Forum Panel). One may agree with this statement, while others may not. Those who don't agree may argue that while there needs to be a separation between " church and

state”, there also needs to be a connection. If we did not have a form of connection between the political and religious realm, we would not have the religious freedom that we enjoy today; because if the politicians did not believe in God, they would not care if we had or did not have religious freedoms. In “ Bellah’s Civil Religion,” Robert Stauffer begins by giving us a summary of Robert Bellah’s essay “ Civil religion in America”. Then Stauffer proceeds to discuss some of the problems that he sees in Bellah’s work. Stauffer does not cover Bellah’s historical rendition, but rather assumes that American historians will deal with it and leaves the task to them (392). He claims that Bellah’s work is styled in a Durkheimian perspective. Stauffer is also concerned with Bellah’s verdict of our current American condition.

He says that Bellah moves too fast from the judgment of corporate hegemony, worry over the cult of success, and the disregard for those who are reduced to penury, to the presumption that America is portrayed by a widespread despair and sense of direction. Stauffer concludes by claiming that Bellah’s evolving opinions about civil religion serve as an inspiration to scholars of religion and society (393). Stauffer also states that while he is grateful to Bellah for his contribution in this area, he is worried that Bellah’s growing stature might prevent us from questioning and criticizing his assumptions, claims, and hopes 394). Literature Review: As civil religion has evolved over the years, there are different trends and themes in its patterns. We read Hankins’ claim that civil religion has employed five themes consistently through the years, and that he is worried that civil religion could potentially fail. He claims that this will happen if American civil religion excludes too many people. Hankins says that civil religion needs to be an all

inclusive faith. In Bellah's first article on this topic, he predicts American civil religion may become a part of a new civil religion of the world. Then a couple of years later, Bellah wrote another article entitled " American Civil Religion in the 1970s. " In this article, he suggests that American civil religion is a current reality and one that we will continue to deal with in the future.

Then Bellah decides that there is some linkage between religion, morality, and politics that exist and are needed. At this point, Stauffer steps into the scene. He finds irony in the fact that much of the criticism of civil religion, implicitly of Bellah's work, has centered on the success of maintaining commitment to the social order, the success of utilitarian culture in the United States, and the divisiveness that comes from the imposing new, holistic systems of belief. Stauffer argues that in a society with revolutionary origins, this problem of civil meaning will be both primary and repetitive. The Pew Forum panel concludes their discussion by stating that civil religion is a confused subject - the confusion starting at the very term itself - and by claiming that it becomes extremely broad and generic in its expression.

Hankins claims that civil religion can come in the form of priestly or pastoral religion, because politicians have used it to soothe and comfort American people in times of distress. Bellah concludes both of his articles by mentioning what he calls the " third crisis". The " third crisis" is the attainment of some kind of viable coherent world order that would ensue from the universalizing of civil religion. Looking towards the future of civil religion, we ask, " what does civil religion mean for Christians and how does it affect us? " Civil religion acknowledges that there is a God, but does not

make any mention to Heaven. With civil religion, we realize that there is a God and that any different beliefs, symbols, and rituals go with each religion. But that is as far as it goes.

There is no faith or spiritual things. Faith requires a belief in God and in Heaven. It requires us to put our trust fully in Christ and go beyond the term " religion" to a relationship with Him. The Bible says in Hebrews 11: 6, " But without faith it is impossible to please him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. " Faith is believing. Civil religion is not believing, but rather is admitting that there is a " higher power" ver us. While we need a form of civil religion to allow us to mingle with people of different religious beliefs, as Christians we need to be wary of civil religion. We need to be vigilant in our endeavors to not allow civil religion to become the " main stream" of religious beliefs.

If it become the " main stream", it will become the unified religion of the world and faith in Christ will be lost. Civil religion is unsustainable because it is trying to be pluralistic. This pluralism seeks to unify all religions (muslim, hindu, catholic, protestant, baptist, mormon, etc) into one, ut this is not possible without the different religions giving up their differences. In giving up these differences in the various religions, we would give up our faith in God, our belief in Heaven, and in everything that distinguishes us from other religions. This would be a negative affect on Christians, because we are to be the " light of the world" and the " salt of the earth" as God calls us to be. If we give these up for civil religion, we will no longer be what God has told us to be. Yes, we need to have some religious understandings amongst all

religions, but we need to be cautious as Christians to not lose our faith in Christ.

Future Directions: In the future, I believe that civil religion is going to begin posing major problems for Christians. As of now, not many Evangelicals have said anything on the topic of civil religion beyond identifying it, but soon they are going to need to. Beliefs and faith are beginning to be pushed out of the picture and the more universal civil religion is stepping in. We can see it happening throughout the country as more laws are being instituted that reduce our religious freedoms. Though the term "civil religion" is not usually used by lawmakers and the government, it is implied and is a danger to Christians.

I believe that within a few years, civil religion is going to become the norm and we are going to lose our religious freedoms as a push to a universalized religion is made. I also believe that we are going to see more articles on this topic, and that Evangelicals are going to become involved in trying to stop this "third crisis" in America. Works Cited Bellah, Robert. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 96. 1 (1967): 1-21. Print. Berkowitz, Peter, et al. "God Bless America: Reflections on Civil Religion after September 11." *The Pew Forum* .

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