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Civil Religion as Myth, Not History

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Abstract: This article draws upon recent historiography to critique the concept of "civil religion", and argues that it should be replaced by nationalism. Its central point is that there is indeed a dominant language of American nationalism and one that has largely reflected the culture of the Anglo-Protestant majority, but that it has always been contested and that it has changed over time. Civil religion, by contrast, is a far more slippery concept that elides questions of power, identity, and belonging that nationalism places at the center of inquiry.

Keywords: civil religion; American nationalism; Christianity; race; citizenship; whiteness; social movements

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When Ray Haberski asked me to contribute to this discussion of civil religion, I first demurred. As a historian who received her training in the 1990s, at the height of the so-called "history wars", and whose work has focused on cultures of dissent, the idea that there was a universal civic discourse, and one that had the qualities of a religion, seemed anachronistic. But Ray was persistent and so I have spent the last few months familiarizing myself with some of the literature on civil religion and reflecting upon the concept's usefulness for understanding the history of American political culture. In the essay that follows, I draw upon recent historiography to suggest that it should be discarded and replaced by nationalism. My central point is that there is indeed a dominant language of American nationalism and one that has largely reflected the culture of the Anglo-Protestant majority, who have argued vigorously over its meaning and implications for the national project, but it was far from universal and often rested upon the exclusion and repression of alternative and oppositional identities and solidarities. Civil religion, by contrast, is a far more slippery concept that elides questions of power, identity, and belonging that nationalism places at the center of inquiry.

In his famous 1967 essay, sociologist Robert Bellah set the terms of the debate over American civil religion. He observed, insightfully, that U.S. political culture had long reflected the religious beliefs of the Anglo-Protestant majority, and that dissenters had often drawn upon the "Judeo-Christian" prophetic tradition to critique power and inequality in U.S. society.[1] But his argument—and that of others who later took up his cause—that American civil religion was uniquely generative of a process of reform and renewal of the national project, which he understood as expanding democracy and extending liberty, is problematic on multiple levels. For one, it is historically inaccurate. There have been times, particularly at moments of crisis and mass mobilization, when prophetic demands for justice and equality were incorporated into the national culture—antislavery, labor reform of the 1930s, and civil rights legislation of the 1960s come to mind—but rarely on their own terms.[2] Second, although

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[1] There is a vast literature on the role of Christianity in shaping American reform and radicalism. For synthetic overviews, see (Craig 1992) and (McKanan 2011). On the prophetic tradition and radical politics, see (Danielson 2014), (Gutterman 2005), and (Chappell 2004).

[2] As Michael Kazin has pointed out, "when political radicals made a big difference, they generally did so as decidedly junior partners in a coalition driven by establishment reformers … only on a handful of occasions has the left achieved such a victory, and it never occurred under its own name". See his (Kazin 2011), p. xiv.

Christianity has often been a seedbed of American reform, it has also, and perhaps more frequently, served to define the boundaries of nation and citizenship in ways that were coercive and exclusionary. Recent scholarship has persuasively argued that the notion of American religious liberty is, in fact, a myth. The constitutional separation of church and state freed the various Protestant denominations to regulate the health and morals of their fellow Americans at the state level. This "moral establishment", as historian David Sehat calls it, was never consensual, and he applauds the secularization of American public life in the post-1945 era as a victory for individual rights and minority populations.[3]

Finally, and perhaps more fundamentally, as Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, "no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist. Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so. As [Ernest] Renan said: 'Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.' Historians are professionally obliged not to get it wrong, or at least to make an effort not to".[4] Insofar as proponents of civil religion are themselves prophets of their own religion, they are not historians, but rather mythmakers. Myth, as Roland Barthes observed many years ago, is a mode of communication that disguises something that is contingent and socially constructed as natural and timeless.[5] As Bellah's contemporaries observed, and as critics have pointed out since, the notion that Americans had been unified by a common civil religion until the 1960s was a nationalist myth that erased the history of coercion, conquest, and exploitation that have often been at the center of U.S. nation formation and U.S. religious history. To call for its revival over and against overwhelming contrary historical evidence is to engage in a nationalist project, not a historical one. Indeed, a more interesting line of inquiry is how and why civil religion appealed to Bellah and other liberals of his generation as both an organizing framework for American history and as a resolution to the cultural and political crises of the 1960s and 1970s. By highlighting Bellah's positionality, I hope to encourage present-day proponents of civil religion to become more self-conscious of their own.

The concept of civil religion dates back to Enlightenment France and philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau's argument that a republic would need a transcendent faith to gain popular appeal and allegiance over and against the Catholic Church.[6] Bellah drew upon Rousseau and contemporary sociological research on the public role of religion to argue that American civil religion was, firstly, uniquely imbricated with revealed religion, and, secondly, an actual religion with its own access to universal and transcendent values that had served as a source of democratic renewal throughout U.S. history.[7] From the outset, the former claim was less controversial than the latter; as Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones pointed out in their important 1974 anthology *American Civil Religion*, American sociologists in the 1960s had recently "rediscovered Max Weber and Emile Durkheim and thereby interest in the broader societal roles of religion".[8] But Bellah was adamant that the latter meaning of the term was $_{\text{imperative}}$ for understanding the "truth" of U.S. history and for resolving the social crises of his own time. I would like to suggest that his insistence on this point is best understood as a manifestation of growing concern by many white Americans in the 1960s and 1970s that the social fabric of the country was unravelling, becoming corrupted, and that the solution was to revive

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3 (Sehat 2011). See also (Wenger 2017). On Christianity, race, and American nationalism, see, for example, (Stephanson 1995), (Blum 2005), (Lears 2002), (Baker 2011), and (Hixson 2008).

4 (Hobsbawm 1992, p. 12). See also (Anderson 2016).

5 Barthes was interested in the ideological dimensions of myth; he sought to demystify—or deconstruct—the signification process that "transforms petit bourgeois culture into a universal culture". See (Barthes[1957] 2012): p. ix.

6 (Rousseau 1968), especially part 4.

7 (Bellah 1967).

8 (Richey and Jones 1974, p. 5).

patriotism and "traditional" religious and moral values.[9] We tend to associate this structure of feeling[10] with conservatism and the rise of the New Right, but Bellah shows us that it was also the concern of liberals as they struggled to redefine American identity and purpose in light of the American defeat in Vietnam, the declining influence of mainline Protestant churches, and the rise of feminism and black power.[11] Civil religion, in other words, is most useful as a primary source that sheds light on the nature of the political and cultural divides of the late 1960s and 1970s, rather than as a paradigm for understanding American history.

Bellah's essay sparked intense debate and launched a cottage industry of social scientific research, with some rejecting civil religion outright, others modifying it, and still others adopting it wholeheartedly.[12] Bellah was most bothered by scholars who adopted the term only to use it interchangeably with nationalism, interpreting it as a cultural and ideological system that created a sense of community over and against realities of conflict, exploitation, and hierarchy.[13] Consider, for example, Will Herberg's definition of it as "'the possession of a common set of ideas, [ideals], rituals, and symbols' that provide 'an overarching sense of unity even in a society otherwise riddled with conflict.'"[14] The U.S.'s civil religion was "the American Way of Life", a quasi-religious faith in democracy, free enterprise, pragmatism, social egalitarianism, the constitution, religion, and "an extraordinarily high moral valuation of—sanitation!" For Herberg, in other words, American civil religion was something quite distinct from authentic religion, and might be more accurately understood as nationalism—or, as Herberg put it, "idolatry".[15]

Herberg understood American civil religion as culturally and historically specific and constructed. The same was true of another Bellah contemporary, the religious scholar Charles H. Long. Observing that the phrase was exceedingly ambiguous, Long suggested that it might be best understood sociologically as "either a correlate of the structure of a society or as a projection of the image of society into objective and sacred symbols". Like Herberg, then, Long was suggesting that there was perhaps a crucial distinction to be made between "revealed religion", which offered salvation to all, and civil religion, which offered salvation "within the context of belonging to the American national community".[16] Long's main point, however, was to raise the methodological problems that arose in speaking of American religion (understood as either revealed or civil) in singular or universal terms:

> What is meant by 'American' and 'religion' in the phrase 'American religion'? If by 'American' we mean the Christian European immigrants and their progeny, then we have overlooked

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[9] For the origins of the conservative resurgence of the 1970s and 1980s, see, for example, (Cowie 2010), (Self 2012), (Kruse 2007), and (McGirr 2001). On the history of the culture wars of the 1970s and 1980s, see, for example, (Rodgers 2011) and (Hartman 2016).

[10] Raymond Williams uses "structure of feeling" to draw a distinction between ideology and the deeply felt aspects of consciousness. As he put it, "We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective aspects of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought . . . We are then defining those aspects as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension". See (Williams 1977, p. 132).

[11] Indeed, the phrase "the unraveling of America" comes from Allen J. Matusow, who used it to describe the conflicts within the American liberal-left in the 1960s. Matusow, like many other historians writing in the 1980s, presented a declension narrative in which the interracialism, nonviolence, and idealism of the early sixties had been fatally undermined by the rise of black power, the growing appeal of Marxism, and the spread of the counterculture later in the decade. His goal was to provide a "cautionary tale" to liberals in the present. See (Matusow [1984] 2009, p. ix). Historians writing in a similar vein include (Gitlin 1987) and (Miller 1987). More recently, historians have challenged this narrative, suggesting that it reflects the resentment of a white male left toward the feminist, LGBTQ, environmentalist, and black power movements of the 1970s that challenged the primacy of class. For this critique, see (Kelley 1997) and (Echols 1992). On the decline of mainline Protestantism, see (Hollinger 2013). In some ways, it might be illuminating to compare Bellah to George McGovern and his 1972 campaign for president, which echoed similar themes of America's decline and invoked the prophetic tradition with McGovern's assailing of American wickedness in Vietnam. See (Keys 2014), especially chapter 3.

[12] On the reception of Bellah's essay, see Richey and Jones's introduction to *American Civil Religion* (Richey and Jones 1974), (Haberski 2018), and (Bortolini 2012).

[13] See (Bellah [1975] 1992, pp. ix–x).

[14] (Herberg 1974, pp. 76–77). Here, Herberg was quoting the sociologist Robin Williams.

[15] Ibid., pp. 79, 86. Will Herberg had made a similar argument in his enormously popular book (Herberg 1956).

[16] (Long 1974, p. 212).

> American Indians and American blacks. And if religion is defined as revealed Christianity and its institutions, we have again overlooked much of the religion of American blacks, Amerindians, and the Jewish communities. Even from the point of view of civil religion, *it is not clear that from the perspective of the various national and ethnic communities that there has ever been a consistent meaning of the national symbols . . . . In short, a great deal of the writings and discussions on the topic of American religion has been consciously or unconsciously ideological*, serving to enhance, justify, and render sacred the history of European immigrants in this land.[17]

In Long's reading, American civil religion was the cultural language of racial nationalism. It understood U.S. political culture and history from the perspective of white Christian European immigrants, whose "freedom" was based upon the exploitation of African labor and expropriation of Indian lands and cultures.[18] Founding myths, such as the Puritan "errand into the wilderness", and documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, depended upon the erasure of African-American and Indigenous history and indeed denied their very humanity. This problem would not be resolved by "adding" multicultural perspectives, but only through a radical revolution in American hermeneutics and epistemology that placed black consciousness at the center. As he explained, "The religion of the American people centers around the telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors. This hermeneutic mask thus conceals the true experience of Americans from their very eyes. The invisibility of Indians and blacks is matched by a void or a deeper invisibility within the consciousness of white Americans".[19] There had been moments in American history when these contradictions had erupted, providing an opportunity for "a change of the ritual . . . . It was first present in 1776, and then again in the bloody Civil War, and then again in the 1960s with the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X; "but at each of these junctures the American revolution is aborted and the clever priests skillful in the ways of ritual purity and manipulation come upon the scene to ensure the repetition of the American ritual".[20]

It seems to me that, in this passage, Long was suggesting that Bellah was one of these "clever priests", attempting to integrate the cultural and political rebellions of the 1960s into "a normative historical judgment and ideology of the American experience".[21] Indeed, the main purpose of Bellah's 1967 essay was to find a usable past for a country engulfed in a "moral crisis". As he later recalled, he was motivated by the question of "was there anything in our past that would help us avoid this catastrophe we were in?"[22] Civil religion was his answer; while he conceded that it had informed "an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag", he insisted that its "central and normative tradition" worked to restrain nationalism, to hold Americans to account for the republican values that they claimed to embody.[23] Like Long, he identified the Revolutionary era, the Civil War, and the 1960s as critical transitional periods. But unlike Long, who saw the first two as unfinished revolutions, Bellah argued in his 1967 essay that they had been resolved through civil religion, sacred narratives that had placed Americans under a "higher criterion in terms of which [the people's] will can be judged".[24] As he explained, the Puritans and the founding fathers equated the new country with the story of Israel escaping Egypt and entering the Promised Land where they would be under

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17 Ibid., p. 213. My emphasis.
18 He might have added discrimination against Asian immigrants. They were the first group to be explicitly excluded and made "illegal", through the Chinese Exclusion Acts, Gentleman's Agreements, and the Asiatic Barred Zone. And, along with Latinos, they have been the largest group of immigrants since 1965. See, for example, (Lee 2016; Lowe 1996; Young 2014; Ngai 2004).
19 (Long 1974, p. 214).
20 Ibid., p. 216.
21 Ibid., p. 219.
22 Bellah, quoted in (Haberski 2018, p. 4).
23 See (Bellah[1975] 1992), p. x. See also his (Bellah 1978).
24 Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", reprinted in (Richey and Jones 1974, p. 25).

the judgement of a jealous God. At the end of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln provided "national self-understanding" with his interpretation of the Civil War as the nation's punishment and ultimate redemption for the sin of slavery.[25] Bellah identified the Vietnam War as the third and final crisis. While civil religion had achieved more "humane . . . treatment of the Negro American", it had not solved "the problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world", by which he meant most immediately Vietnam. "Fortunately", there had been no shortage of "prophetic voices" denouncing the war, who he hoped would help lead the country out of the wilderness and make the United States a light "for all the nations".[26]

As he was forced to defend his definition of civil religion, Bellah's reading of American history became more critical. His understanding of this "third crisis" in American history also shifted from a preoccupation with war to "the inner problems we face at home", which he identified as corporate rapacity, ecological devastation, rampant individualism, and social and cultural disintegration.[27] We can see this in a series of lectures he gave in the early 1970s that were collected in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Bellah[1975] 1992). In contrast to his 1967 essay, which suggested that civil religion had been a rather seamless process, *The Broken Covenant* attempted to provide a more clear-eyed reckoning with American history. He highlighted how the notion of "chosenness" had a dark side, justifying the maltreatment of racial others at home and abroad with the presumption that "what is good for America is good for the world". This notion, rather than declining, had reached its apogee in Henry Luce's notion of "The American Century" and "John Foster Dulles's easy identification of the 'free world' with those nations willing to do the bidding of the American government".[28] Nativism, moreover, had reared its head time and again in American history, providing opportunities for those able and willing to conform to Anglo-Saxon notions of success, and harshly and brutally excluding racial others upon whom were projected "every rejected impulse in the unconscious white mind".[29] The toll was heaviest on women and people of color, but also poor whites and, with a perhaps too-obvious reference to himself, "the white Anglo-Saxon boy who thinks or feels too much, who hears a different drummer, or sees a different vision".[30]

But if American civil religion had its dark side, it also had its redeeming qualities. It had inspired a jeremiad tradition that came alive during periods of religious revival, which in turn spawned social movements, holding "forth a utopia of the Kingdom of God on earth that undercut any simple commitment to the status quo".[31] The biblical language of the nation had been "used to quite critical effect by black Americans", and was capacious enough that Catholics and Jews had easily adopted it to their own ends, making America more pluralistic over time. Although more inclined to stress the biblical and republican traditions in American political thought, Bellah also emphasized how the liberal language of the revolutionary era had been expanded and universalized by oppressed groups in their own struggles for freedom.[32]

For Bellah, the late 1960s and 1970s represented the most critical "third time of trial" because a large swath of Americans had come to question the "the old verities" of Anglo-Saxon domination and the American ideology of "success", with its excessive materialism and individualism; they were involved in a "cultural revolution", experimenting with new forms of community and religious life, and reasserting ethnic and racial identities that had long been repressed by assimilative notions of Americanism. Some had even come to question the guiding values and structure of American society, and looked to indigenous and non-western cultures for alternative cultural norms. Bellah saw these

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[25] Ibid., p. 30.
[26] Ibid, pp. 36, 38.
[27] (Bellah[1975] 1992), pp. 1–2, 149.
[28] Ibid., pp. 82, 39.
[29] Ibid., p. 102.
[30] Ibid., p. 82.
[31] Ibid., p. 48.
[32] Ibid., pp. 96–97.

developments as exciting, promising a greater cosmopolitanism and new collective ideals,[33] but he also feared that, without discipline and external structures, they might devolve into ethnic and religious atavism, individualism, and nihilism. He gave the example of Larry Casuse, the Navajo activist whose efforts to restore unity between Mother Earth and humanity involved dehumanizing "false people" such as Gallup mayor Emmet Garcia, who Casuse had kidnapped only to be killed himself in a police shoot out.[34]

In any event, a genuine cultural revolution was impossible without a major restructuring of the economy. The challenge was that socialism had failed to take root in American society because of its association with atheism and because of the ideological power of individualism. There were deep ironies here because, as Bellah noted, "the American tradition . . . was not one-sidedly individualistic but always involved a balance of concern between the individual and his community".[35] Figures like Jefferson and Orestes Brownson had clearly articulated that democracy was dependent upon "an essential equality of social position" and could not survive in the context of concentrated capital.[36] Moreover, there had been an indigenous socialist tradition represented by Eugene V. Debs, who "presented socialism in a very American rhetoric, full of biblical imagery and steeped in American history". Unfortunately, both the Communist Party in the 1930s and the New Left in the 1960s had failed because of an inability to connect with "any genuinely American pattern of values and attitudes, and the use of foreign categories to analyze American society". [37] Without a viable socialist tradition, corporate capitalism had triumphed with devastating consequences for society and the environment, and for "public morals and republican virtue".[38]

With socialism a taboo, and with the best and brightest of America's young people alienated from American culture and its institutions, what was to be done? It was imperative "that serious men, responsible men" come together with new, far-reaching proposals.[39] As one such man, Bellah called for a critical re-appropriation of the American past and a re-imagined, more inclusive covenant. It was true that the original covenant "was broken almost as soon as it was made", but this did not mean it should be discarded; rather, just as Americans had done before, they should "pick up the broken pieces" and start again, trying "once more to build an ethical society in the light of a transcendent ethical vision".[40] This would involve, first, a reaffirmation of the "central external forms of covenant" by demanding that the individual rights embedded in the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Fourteenth Amendment be fulfilled. But since these were largely negative freedoms, Americans must also create the conditions of positive freedom, an internalized, deeply spiritual sense of community that would come through idealism and religious revival. This would involve channeling the "spiritual ferment" of the sixties and the new religious movements into a new synthesis; the feminine, communal, expressive "earth goddess" religion of the counterculture would be integrated with biblical religion, with its father-head, hierarchy, legalism, and asceticism.[41] Americans must, in short, reinvent civil religion, defined as a dialectical process in which moments of crisis are resolved or institutionalized through covenant, a sacred and collective agreement that held Americans responsible for their actions and helped them move constructively forward.

Although I argue that civil religion was myth, not history, Bellah's claims about the American past were not entirely apocryphal. American nationalism was not exclusively racial; as historians such as Gary Gerstle and Eric Foner have shown, immigrants, African Americans, workers, among

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[33] Ibid., pp. 103–11.
[34] Ibid., pp. 146–49.
[35] Ibid., p. 124.
[36] Ibid., pp. 118–19.
[37] Ibid., pp. 128–30.
[38] Ibid., p. 133.
[39] Ibid., p. 136.
[40] Ibid., pp. 139–42.
[41] Ibid., pp. 151–60.

others, constructed an alternative notion of citizenship that drew upon the universalistic language of the nation's founding documents. Gerstle calls this creed "civic nationalism", and argues that, at its most expansive, it envisioned "political and social equality for all, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or nationality, and a regulated economy that would place economic opportunity and security within the reach of everyone". Still, civic nationalism had its own exclusions, because it depended upon affective ties to the nation. "During periods of perceived national crisis", Gerstle observes, "nonassimilating immigrants and political radicals became the targets of state-sponsored coercive campaigns to strip them of their now alienable rights to free expression and free assembly?" [42]

Bellah was also right to point out that American political history was more diverse than the liberal tradition. As historians have shown, republicanism was an ideology in which freedom was understood as the ability to deny one's self-interest in favor of the common good. Jefferson's vision of a country of yeoman farmers was based on the notion that economic independence was the precondition for acting virtuously in the public sphere, of restraining individualistic tendencies of democracies.[43] Republican ideology offered a powerful critique of the emerging industrial order, as deskilled artisans and indebted farmers viewed capitalism and the wage system as threats to their economic independence and thus their freedom.[44]

But the republican tradition was not as straightforward as Bellah suggested. Republicanism from the beginning was for white men only. At first, the association between economic independence and freedom automatically excluded dependents like wives, children, and slaves. But as property qualifications gave way to the enfranchisement of all white men in the early-to-mid nineteenth century, natural incapacity increasingly provided the justification for exclusive notions of citizenship and national belonging. "How did woman first become subject to man, as she now is all over the world", asked the *New York Herald* in 1852. "By her nature, her sex, just as the negro is and always will be, to the end of time, inferior to the white race, and therefore, doomed to subjection".[45] The labor movement, more often than not, imbibed this racial exclusivity. The notion of wage slavery, for example, served as a powerful critique of capitalism precisely because it suggested that wage labor was rendering white men into black slaves. Ultimately, as the work of David Roediger and others has shown, white workers were appeased through the "wages of whiteness", a process that in varying degrees shaped the assimilation process of European Americans. As Eric Foner observes, "democracy in America was capable of absorbing poor white men at home and waves of immigrants from abroad, yet erected impenetrable barriers to the participation of women and non-white men".[46]

If race was embedded in republican discourse, so too was empire, albeit in a more complicated way. Bellah's formulation relied upon a division between the "domestic" and "foreign" that recent scholarship has deeply problematized.[47] Thomas Jefferson's vision was of an "empire of liberty" that stretched across the North American continent, a project that involved the subjugation of Native Americans and, later, the conquest of northern Mexico.[48] The settler colonial society that was established in the U.S. West was a "variation on a global theme" that appeared in places like South Africa and Australia at around the same time.[49] Rather than stopping at the Pacific, the U.S. continued its expansion into the Pacific and the Caribbean. In the twentieth century, the American imperial project

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[42] (Gerstle 2001). On the origins and development of civic nationalism, see also (Foner 1998, especially pp. 86–88, 185–89).
[43] On Thomas Jefferson and political economy, see (McCoy 1980).
[44] See, for example, (Fink 1985; Wilentz 2004). For a helpful overview of the historiography of republicanism, see (Rodgers 1992).
[45] Quoted in (Foner 1998, p. 71). On whiteness and republicanism, see also (Morgan 1975; Harris 1995).
[46] (Foner 1998, p. 69). The classic account of white racism and the labor movement is (Roediger 1997). On whiteness and the assimilation of European immigrants, see (Matthew 1998; Roediger 2018; Ngai 2004).
[47] Comparative, transnational, and international approaches to United States history are too extensive to cite here. For helpful reflections on the new historiography, see (Tyrrell 2009; Seigel 2005; Perez 2002; Bayly et al. 2006; Manela 2011).
[48] On "empire of liberty", see (Onuf 2000). See also (Tucker and Hendrickson 1990; Stephanson 1995; Horsman 1981).
[49] (Kramer 2011, p. 1370). For comparative accounts of settler colonialism, see, for example, (Ford 2010; Jacobs 2009; Maybury-Lewis et al. 2009).

shifted from territorial control to "empire through the states of others".[50] Seen in this light, the war in Vietnam was less exception than the rule, a point made by radical anti-war protestors at the time.

Bellah was unable to see these connections because of his methodological nationalism. As historian Paul Kramer observes, "while nation-states are often seen as the antithesis of imperial formations, it is more useful to approach U.S. global history through the concept of nation-based empire". Puzzling over the reluctance of American historians to use the imperial as a category of analysis, he suggests that it has to do with "the vital and complex role played by empire in republican political discourse". Some, like Jefferson, embraced the term, but more often empire "figured in American thought as caution, premonition, and moral boundary. Empire was the tragic fate of republics that, in pursuit of expansionary power crushed their own definitional freedom and virtue". Ironically, "fears and denials of American empire" increased in the twentieth century, precisely at the time when the U.S. emerged as a global power. Just as the U.S. began "mobilizing state power to achieve territorial footholds and access to the commodities, markets, and labor power needed for industrial-capitalist competition . . . 'empire' retreated as description and hardened as admonition".[51] Kramer's analysis helps us to see that Bellah's sense that the republic faced imminent decline and corruption was less a description of reality than a trope that depended upon the erasure of a longer imperial history.

Just as the history of "the republic" was more complex than Bellah recognized, so too was the relationship between religion and American politics. He was surely right that Christianity—and especially Protestantism—helped to give meaning to the new nation, and that notions of chosenness (or exceptionalism), of covenant have shaped its self-understanding. Religion also inspired movements for reform and radical change, from abolitionism and temperance to prison reform and women's rights in the nineteenth century, to peace activism and socialism, to civil rights and feminism in the twentieth century. Prophets like Frederick Douglass, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, George Herron, A.J. Muste, Dorothy Day, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Jim Wallis invoked the jeremiad in their denunciations of injustice and calls for social transformation.[52] Today, the Reverend William J. Barber, Jr. has sought to resuscitate this tradition in his Repairers of Breach campaign, which draws upon "moral traditions rooted in our faith and the Constitution . . . to stand up for justice and tell the truth".[53]

Yet, the role of religion in American public life has also functioned to limit democracy and freedom. As historian David Sehat has shown, the separation of church and state was not intended to isolate politics from religion, as many liberals today believe. Rather, it was designed to ensure the freedom of Protestant denominations to regulate morality and ensure social order in a society based on egalitarian ideals. Most states in the early Republic restricted citizenship and/or office-holding to professed Christians or even more narrowly to Protestants. Christians used their power to maintain a "moral establishment" that coerced nonconformists and others using the power of the state. The early abolitionist movement, with its goal of making the U.S. truly a "Christian nation", was part of this establishmentarian tradition, but this began to change as figures like William Lloyd Garrison recognized that ties between religion and the state served as justification for the subordination of slaves to their masters and women to their husbands. This more civil libertarian tradition continued through the post-Civil War period in Freethought and the women's rights movement, and was institutionalized in the founding of the National Civil Liberties Bureau (later known as the American Civil Liberties Union or ACLU) during World War I. Notably, radical Protestants dominated the early civil liberties movement, as they insisted upon the right of conscientious objection to war. Still, civil liberties was an

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[50] (Kramer 2011, p. 1370). There is an extensive literature on American imperialism, though some historians remain reluctant to use the term "empire", as Kramer discusses in this article.

[51] Ibid., pp. 1357–59.

[52] See, for example, (Craig 1992; McKanan 2011). See also (Danielson 2014; Danielson et al. 2018; McNeal 1992; Ransby 2005; Garrow 2004; Barger 2018; and Swartz 2014).

[53] (Repairers of the Breach 2017).

extreme minority position in a country eager to maintain Anglo-Protestant control over an increasingly diverse immigrant population, particularly Catholics whose preference for parochial schools revealed their incapacity for democratic citizenship.[54]

The moral establishment faced its greatest challenge with the rise of industrialism. Reformers and social scientists, many of them from liberal Protestant backgrounds, eventually broke with religious claims to authority, and instead based their demands for social reform on "human science". In this, they were joined by Jews eager to disentangle Christianity from the state, and by liberal jurisprudence, which saw the law as a human construction rather than immutable truth. These "secularists" made the "positive" argument that pluralism was a precondition of democracy; notably, this commitment to civil liberties emerged in tandem with rulings that affirmed the regulatory powers of the federal government, suggesting that individual rights and social concern were not mutually exclusive. Sehat shows how these ideas further evolved in the postwar era, with sixties radicalism helping to bring the moral establishment to an end. Yet, as liberal Protestants gave up their "proprietary claim to the nation", evangelicals rebelled, drawing upon the very real historical links between Christianity and the state to bolster their claims to power.[55]

Sehat concludes that both modern-day conservatives and liberals are trading in "myths" in their competing claims about American history. In claiming that Christian domination of American society in the past was consensual, conservatives ignore "past coercion" and disguise their "coercive aspirations in the present". Liberals also mispresent the past in asserting that the First Amendment has always protected religious liberty; in so doing, they fail to make positive arguments in favor of religious and cultural pluralism.[56]

Bellah was, of course, a liberal, but he invoked the same myth that conservatives use today in imagining that the relationship between Christianity and democracy was, as he put it, "singularly smooth".[57] This may have reflected the historical and cultural context in which he had come of age. As historians such as Kevin Schultz have shown, an ecumenical movement had emerged in the 1920s in response to rising nativism. Efforts to persuade the dominant Anglo-Protestant majority to accept Catholics and Jews as equally legitimate, God-fearing Americans was no easy task, not least because it involved giving up Protestant authority. But the campaign received a boost during World War II when the "tri-faith ideal" provided ideological grist for the war against fascism and Nazism. Leaders in the National Conference of Christians and Jews refashioned American history as having been founded on common "Judeo-Christian" ideals that served as the bedrock of democracy. Although this was historically inaccurate, it worked well as a civic ideal for liberals and conservatives alike, particularly in the postwar era as the struggle against Communism assumed center stage. Some, like Will Herberg, scoffed that it lacked seriousness and depth, but most midcentury intellectuals, including his mentor Reinhold Niebuhr, saw the country's religious traditions as a source of vigor and critique.[58]

A similar ideological process was at work with the notion that Americans were unique in imagining themselves as the ancient Israelites, bound to a covenant with God to build a "city on a hill" that would

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[54] Ironically, Protestants thought that they were affirming separation of church and state in insisting that Catholics and other non-Protestant immigrants attend public schools, yet they also thought it was self-evident that American schoolchildren read verses from the Bible. As Sehat comments, "the friction between these two positions—both of which were authoritarian but only one of which acknowledged it—animated the debate over school control". See (Sehat 2011, p. 159). Tisa Wenger similarly emphasizes how religious freedom functioned to reinforce white Protestant domination of American society and its imperial holdings. See her *Religious Freedom* (2017). For the links between liberal Protestantism, pacifism, and civil liberties, see, for example, (Kosek 2009; Capozzola 2010).

[55] Ibid., p. 242. David A. Hollinger has emphasized the role of Jews and liberal Protestants in the secularization of American culture in the twentieth century. See, for example, (Hollinger 1998, 2017). David Sehat provides a helpful overview of this historiography of secularism and makes his own case for its origins and significance in (Sehat 2018).

[56] (Sehat 2011, p. 7).

[57] (Bellah 1967), reprinted in (Richey and Jones 1974, p. 34).

[58] See (Schultz 2011). Reinhold Niebuhr's religious views have been documented extensively. For a critical assessment of his "prophetic" approach to Cold War politics, see, for example, (Danielson 2014, especially chapter 9; Haberski 2012, especially chapters 1–2; Craig 2003, especially chapters 2 and 4; Boyer 1985, especially part 6).

be a light to all nations. As historian Daniel Rodgers has recently argued, John Winthrop's obscure, seventeenth-century sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity", was invented as a foundational text "for the new world colossus the United States had become. Cold War American writers made the Model into the defining document we now take it to be. They did that in part by canonizing it and in part by unexpectedly remaking Winthrop's New England Puritans . . . as the nation's true founders". In fact, Winthrop's concerns had been local, not national, designed to forge a sense of solidarity and mutual obligation often "at odds with what capitalist America would become". More to the point, Rodgers argues, "almost none of the concerns that circulated in Winthrop's text were unique to the nation that would become the United States".[59] Visions of founding a new Israel circulated throughout the early modern Atlantic world, and similarly exceptionalist narratives would be forged throughout Europe and the Americas during the nineteenth-century era of nation and empire building.

The notion of the United States as a "city upon a hill", and as a consensual, "Judeo-Christian" national community that had reached its highpoint in the 1950s and early 1960s had indeed broken down by the 1970s. But could it really be resolved by inventing a past that did not really exist, or that had existed only for white Protestants? Charles Long thought not: "The question of the meaning of American religion in its revealed or civil forms calls for new theoretical considerations. Are we ready and prepared to face this radical revolution?"[60] I think we can only conclude that Bellah was *not* ready. Instead, as we saw in *The Broken Covenant*, he believed that the answer to the social problems besetting America in the 1970s was a renewed nationalism, a restored sense of love for the nation with a confidence that the need for solidarity and cultural critique could be found within its borders and within the "myth" of civil religion. As his references to responsible men, biblical religion, dissident "Anglo-Saxon intellectuals" and sensitive boys suggests, part of putting the United States back on track involved a renewed role for white Protestant men like himself, whose social authority was under attack by rising secularism, new age religions, women's liberationists, and anti-assimilationist people of color like Larry Casuse. To some extent, this assertion of masculine prerogative was obscured by his indictment of capitalism and racism, but the clear message of *The Broken Covenant* was that the Americans who most needed reforming were young people, women, and racial minorities. In assuming the role of prophet, judge, father, sociologist, and historian, Bellah would restore balance and harmony to a society that had recognized its sin and had begun to repent, but had not yet found its way back to a vision of the Promised Land, to be found only in America.

If my critique seems too harsh, I should note that even his most sympathetic critics at the time offered a similar one, albeit without the gender analysis in my reading. Bellah's book was not so much sociology and history as a "jeremiad", and perhaps a projection of his own feelings of "despair . . . onto the population at large".[61] Bellah himself later came to accept this critique, admitting that *The Broken Covenant* was indeed a jeremiad and conceding that perhaps "civil religion" was no longer a useful term, since it "was bogging down into arguments over definition".[62] He also reflected on how his biography might have shaped his interest in civil religion. Born in 1927, he grew up in Los Angeles within a "fairly conventional Protestant and patriotic American milieu" that included membership in a Presbyterian church that included all faiths, and public schools that practiced John Dewey's progressive education and emphasized democracy. As a student at Harvard in the late 1940s, he "became alienated from American society" because it seemed to fall short of these ideals, and was drawn to the study of Japanese society "where I could feel a degree of cultural authenticity that I found missing at home".[63] Still, his experience living in Japan reminded him "of how American I was", and when he returned to the United States in the 1960s, he became deeply invested in the political and cultural concerns of the

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[59] (Rodgers 2018), p. 5.
[60] (Long 1974, p. 220).
[61] Quotes are from (Steiner 1976; Stauffer 1975), respectively.
[62] (Bellah[1975] 1992), p. x.
[63] Ibid., p. vii.

decade. In particular, he found inspiration in the Civil Rights Movement, while also being disturbed by the war in Vietnam and the centrifugal forces that seemed to be tearing the country apart.[64]

Notwithstanding his biographical reflections, Bellah's preoccupations remained the same. Although he did not use the term "civil religion", his sociological classic *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Bellah et al. 1985) diagnosed the United States as suffering from an excess of individualism that could only be overcome through a renewed commitment to republican and biblical traditions.[65] Other works were more explicitly religious, as he lamented the declining influence of mainline denominations and sought to promote a revitalized Christian faith as an antidote to the corruption and decadence of late capitalist society.[66] Those who continued to use the language of civil religion in the 1980s and thereafter have been on the political right and are quite explicit about their claims of cultural authority over and against secularists, feminists, and others who failed to recognize that the United States was a Christian nation with a sacred mission to remake the world.[67]

Recently, some scholars have suggested resurrecting civil religion as a paradigm for understanding U.S. history and as a potent language for revitalizing the liberal tradition. Philip Gorski's *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Gorski 2017), essentially updates Bellah's argument for the present. Like Bellah, he is concerned that Americans have lost a common language, and offers civil religion, understood as a combination of republicanism and prophetic religion, as a morally superior, middle way, beginning with the Puritans and ending with Barack Obama. Cognizant of Bellah's critics, Gorski sharply differentiates civil religion from religious nationalism, on the one hand, and radical secularists, on the other. He also draws upon a more updated historiography and adds some new characters into the mix. Yet his analysis, like Bellah's, is ultimately too neat and assimilative, failing to take account of power differentials, the overlap between his three ideal types, and the profound diversity of American origins and peoples. In a particularly conspicuous example, he poses Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s "vital center" as a political ideal, never mind historical scholarship that has shown how it was used to stifle dissent and build support for the containment policy. Never mind, moreover, that Martin Luther King, Jr., another one of Gorski's "founders, heroes, saints, and martyrs of American civic life", came to view Cold War liberals like Schlesinger as obstacles to racial progress and largely responsible for the war in Vietnam.[68]

Another recent attempt to resuscitate civil religion is Ray Haberski's *God and War: American Civil Religion since 1945* (Haberski 2012). Haberski offers a nuanced and thoughtful analysis of debates about war and national identity in the post-1945 era to show that the idea of the United States as a Christian nation inspired dissent as well as support for American militarism and empire. This leads him to conclude that American civil religion is not the same as nationalism, which he defines as "exceptionalism". "The faith that sustains the nation" can lead to imperial adventure, but also "has the capacity for a moral accounting".[69] Yet in defining "the nation" in singular terms, in insisting upon its Judeo-Christian foundations, and in suggesting that the United States is the only country whose ideals provide a mechanism for self-critique, Haberski, like Gorski and like Bellah before him, is doing the work of nation-making, not history. As we have seen, there have been multiple and contested definitions of what it means to be an American from the beginning of the nation's history. If it seemed more consensual in the past, that is only because the boundaries of national belonging were narrower, with non-Christians, women, and non-whites excluded from citizenship. Not incidentally, gaining access to citizenship involved deconstructing its religious, racial, and gendered foundations and constructing a more inclusive, secular alternative that Gerstle calls civic nationalism.

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64 Ibid., p. vii.
65 (Bellah et al. 1985).
66 See, for example, (Bellah 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1992, 1995, 1996).
67 See, for example, (Neuhaus 1984). The New Right's conflation of Christianity and American identity is discussed in books like (Lienesch 1993; Lichtman 2008; Williams 2010).
68 (Gorski 2017), p. 31.
69 (Haberski 2012), p. 5.

Civic nationalism was one alternative, but there have been other imagined solidarities that have appealed to Americans. Diaspora formulations like pan-Africanism and Black Power have long resonated with many African Americans.[70] Christian internationalism, with its vision of a supranational church over and against the secularism and materialism of modernity, has been a feature of American religious life, manifesting itself in conservative and radical ways.[71] International socialism has at times appealed to many Americans.[72] Immigrants have often had "hybrid" or "borderland" identities representing their location between and inside multiple cultures and nations.[73]

Indeed, hybridity and transnational association has gained appeal in recent decades, particularly among progressives who see it as challenging the essentialist framework of the nation.[74] This development is rooted in two, not mutually exclusive developments: First, the "hard" multiculturalist critique of the United States as fundamentally compromised by its history of racial exclusion and empire, a critique that makes post-national identities appear more compelling and authentic. Second, globalization, with its language of transnational flows, interdependence, and flexibility, has "diminished the authority and prestige of the nation-state".[75] Some, including Haberski, Gorski, and Gerstle, express concern that giving up a claim to the nation-state and its disciplinary power has allowed conservatives to move into the breach, where they have monopolized both the meaning of America and its institutions at the expense of workers, the poor, and racial minorities at home and recalcitrant populations abroad. Perhaps they are right, and perhaps the use of history for nation-making ends is inevitable. But it's incumbent upon historians and other scholars to be cognizant of the power claims they are making in the stories they tell (and sell). More to the point, it's important to recognize that calls for a revival of civil religion or civic nationalism are jeremiads, not history. As Paul Kramer has argued, history must "detach itself from the rhythms, if not from the content, of public-political discourse to which it has traditionally been bound, and separate itself from jeremiads that proceed, ultimately, from an urgent sense of the United States' imminent or incipient imperial career that is not borne out by either historical or present day realities".[76]

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[70] The historiography of black internationalism is extensive. See, for example, (Blaine 2018; Plummer 2013; Guridy 2010; West et al. 2009).

[71] See, for example, (Thompson 2015).

[72] See, for example, (Barrett 2001; Avrich 1996; Denning 1997; Kelley 1990).

[73] See, for example, (Meeks 2007; Camacho 2008).

[74] For an example of this thinking, see Janice Radway's presidential address to the American Studies Association in 1998, reprinted in (Radway 1999, pp. 1–32).

[75] (Gerstle 2001, p. 357).

[76] (Kramer 2011, p. 1391).

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