

CIVIL RELIGION

INTRODUCTION

Civil religion as a concept originated in French political thought and was popularized in 1950 by Robert Bellah.

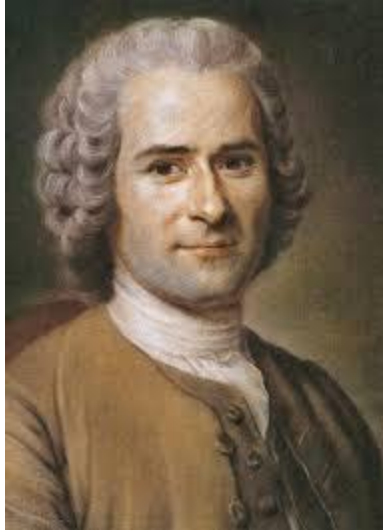


Robert Bellah

Civil religion means the implicit religious values of a nation that is expressed through public rituals, symbols and ceremonies on sacred days and at sacred places. The symbols could mean the country's flag or the picture of a national leader or party. The sacred days could mean days of high importance and days when certain events had occurred in the past. The sacred places could be monuments, cemeteries, or places of national interest. National identity and religion has had a close association since the past. This is also the case the United States and the Britain. This identification of the religion and national community has led many sociologists to suggest that secular societies can be seen as organized around characteristic pattern of civil religion.

ORIGIN OF THE TERM

Civil religion was first mentioned by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract*.



Jean Jacques Rousseau

He defined civil religion as 'a group of religious beliefs that he believed to be universal, and which he believed governments had a right to uphold and maintain'. These beliefs could be a belief in a deity; belief in an afterlife in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished; and belief in religious tolerance. He was of the view that the doctrine of civil religion should be few and simple, and precisely stated without interpretations or commentaries. Further Rousseau also believed that individuals' religious opinions should be beyond the reach of governments. According to him civil religion was to be constructed and imposed from the top down as an artificial source of civic virtue. Emile Durkheim comparatively analyzed civil religion. He stressed that the public schools are critical in implementing civil religion. Even though he hardly used the term, he was very much interested in the concept. Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined the term in *The Social Contract* (1762), to describe what he regarded as the moral and spiritual foundation essential for any modern society. According to him civil religion was kind of social cement that helps unify the state by providing it with sacred authority. According to him there are some simple doctrines of the civil religion. He said that the civil religion consisted of a deity, an afterlife, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice and the exclusion of religious intolerance.

CIVIL RELIGION IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Civil religion is a very important concept in the sociology of religion. By civil religion in the sociology of religion, we mean the folk religion of a nation or a political culture. In its social and political status, civil religion lies a little above the folk religion as it includes all the members of the society irrespective of their creed, caste and color. It takes within it the members of the whole nation and is practiced by the leaders of that society. Civil religion is usually practiced by political leaders who are common men and whose leadership is not specifically spiritual and not necessarily relating to supernatural powers but always linking god to politics. There are various activities that come under civil religion. These activities are the inclusion of God in political speeches and public monuments; special mention of scriptures and lines in political speeches and

announcements from religious texts, the veneration of past political leaders; the use of the lives of these leaders to teach moral ideals; the veneration of veterans and casualties of a nation's wars; religious gatherings called by political leaders; the use of religious symbols on public buildings; the use of public buildings for worship; founding myths and other national myths and similar religious or quasi-religious practices.

Civil religion is religious in the sense in which the eminent French sociologist, Emile Durkheim has defined religion. Durkheim was of the view that religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that is to say things that are set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. He says that cities and nations are just as susceptible to the nomenclature as are the social bodies called church. Here he lays the example of France during the French Revolution at the end of the 18th Century. According to Carlton J.H. Hayes' in Essays on Nationalism (1926) says that if we examine the history of man, the main cause of frequency and the force of human movements have been of religious emotion. This religious emotion has brought about nationalism. He wrote that human history reveals that human beings have always been distinguished by what is called a "religious sense". The term civil religion is also sometimes used to refer to ritual expressions of patriotism of a kind that is practiced many nations and is not always including religion in the conventional sense of the word. There are instances that reflect this concept like the singing of national anthem at events and gatherings, flag hoisting, holidays to commemorate important events in history or show respect to important personalities, mythological tales of founding fathers and even death of soldiers and political leaders. It is in this context of the feeling of patriotism and nationalism, sense of religion, the feeling of belonging to a distinct socio-political group that we have to understand the concept of civil religion. Civil religion is the religion of an advanced modern society with higher technology. Scholars are of the view that civil religion has been a highly visible aspect of the modern national state in the Western countries.

Relation between the sociological and political concept

The sociological and political concept of civil religion substantially overlaps. The church and the state are constitutionally joined in the Britain. The monarch's coronation is a huge religious rite celebrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. In the case of France, secular ceremonies are separated from religious observances to a greater degree than in most countries. In the United States of America, a president being inaugurated is told by the Constitution to choose between saying, "I do solemnly swear..." and saying "I do solemnly affirm..." where in after the first choice one has to mention "so help me God" after saying that line even though it is not a constitutional compulsion and in the other case if one solemnly affirms the mention of God is not required at all.

The case of United States of America

The most distinct form of civil religion is found in America. Civil religion in America is used to describe the relationship between religion and national identity. The basic theory maintains that an informal civil religion binds the American people to God. This civil religion brings about an ideal of unity and mission similar to that associated with more traditional faiths, which diffuses American thought and culture with a sense of divine favor intrinsically tied to American political and social institutions and mores. If we are to construe from the theology of this faith, we believe that God has chosen the American people for a very special mission in the world. It is believed that God created the nation into being through divine providence during colonization and the American Revolution. God had tested its fortitude in the Civil War. Hence, according to the tenets of civil religion, God will ensure the spread of American values throughout the world. Civil religion as a concept goes back to the 19th century but in current form the theory was developed by sociologist Robert Bellah in 1967 in an article, "Civil Religion in America." The topic soon became the major focus at religious sociology conferences and numerous articles and books were written on the subject. The debate reached its peak with the American Bicentennial celebration in 1976. Bellah is of the view that Americans embrace 'a common civil religion with certain fundamental beliefs, values, holidays, and rituals, parallel to, or independent of, their chosen religion'. Bellah sees the United States having been united by a religious belief in the sacred character of America and a loyalty to American nation. God is also seen as being an American.

The civil religion of America is not just religious nationalism. It emphasizes on the importance of freedom, democracy, and honesty in public affairs. Speaking on the positive side, it has given the nation a vision of what it may strive to achieve and has contributed to the realization of significant social goals. However, sometimes it has also been used as a propaganda tool to manipulate public opinion for or against a certain policy or group.

"Civil religion" is understood as a phenomenon that is the result of the partial secularization of major themes in American religious history. The roots of this concept lies in the Puritan conception of the Redeemer Nation that was based on the theology of election and claimed that New England and American society would continue and carry on biblical prophecy and set an example of what is godly humanity. During the Revolutionary War some clergy built upon this idea in their sermons by claiming that patriot forces and political leaders alike endeavored to bring about a divinely ordained republic. These religious themes increasingly appeared in political forums, particularly in declarations of governors and, public rituals such as those associated with Memorial Day and Independence Day and popular hymns and patriotic songs. Alongside civil religion politically emerged in the postmillennial rhetoric of the 19th century evangelical movements and social reform efforts.

Well, we cannot ignore the importance of civil religion in shaping perceptions of the Civil War. For example Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address of 4 March 1865, shows both the strengths and weaknesses of the civil faith. Lincoln's speech was quite different than that of other speakers of that time. Lincoln did not simply assume that God is with the Union but

interpreted the war itself as a punishment on both sides for their part in the slave system. In other instances, partisans in the war used religious evidence to support their views. The "Battle Hymn of the Republic," identifies the will of God with the Civil War aims of the Union army. Likewise Confederates and Unionists made use of biblical passages to support their views regarding slavery, war and the condition of the polity.

BRITAIN AND CIVIL RELIGION

There is a close association between national identity and religion in Britain like that of America. Organizations maintain a role for themselves by involving themselves in civic rituals. In Britain, the Church of England remains the nationalized established church. It is involved in important occasions of the parliament. It is also involved in the celebration and commemoration of national values and events. The royal family is associated in most of the national celebrations and events and civic rituals. There are a number of rituals that are related to the Royal family itself. The coronation, the celebrations of the queens birthday, the Christmas speech, the Trooping of the Colour, the State Opening of the Parliament, Remembrance day and so on. Well, this view of religion and ritual in British Society was earliest seen in the article on the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. It was seen that during the coronation a national community could be affirmed. It was also understood that the basic moral values of the society was reinforced. The Coronation of 1953 was the first major televised even where a large audience could be a part of the same civic ritual.



Queen Elizabeth II with the Duke of Edinburgh in her coronation portrait, 2 June 1953

CIVIL RELIGION IN INDIA

Civil Religion is also present in India. India is no exception to the concept of Civil Religion. It has been defined as “the religious or quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions found recurrently in the history of the political states”. This regard for the civic values and traditions of the political state is expressed through special festivals, rituals, creeds and practices which honor great personages and events of the past. Civil religion is celebrated in India in a semi religious fervor. All the citizens of India despite the cultural diversity celebrate certain days and practice certain rites to mark the significance of that particular day. Sentiments like unity, solidarity and togetherness are enhanced and reflected through this celebration of civil religions. In India, on every 15th of August, the prime minister unfurls the Indian National Flag or the Tiranga in the Red Fort at New Delhi.



Indian Flag at the Red Fort

Similarly, a Republic Day Parade is held every year on the 26th of January to mark the Indian Republic day. Such celebrations bring together the citizens of India and indicating the presence of a religion that has everyone bound together despite have one's own faith in the existence of a God that is different to theirs. Civil religion serves to increase the feeling of national pride and political identity. It truly indicates 'Unity in diversity'. There are also other days like Gandhi Jayanti and Netaji's birthday that indicates our civil religion in India. It reminds them of the sacrifice made by our leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Chandra Shekhar Azad and several others who fought for our independence.

and freedom. There are also days like Shahid Diwas where we commemorate the sacrifice of our soldiers at war who died while saving the country. This kind of semi-religious fervor in celebrating political events and birth days of great persons is found in all societies at all times. Likewise, we find the same in the Indian Society.

CONCLUSION

Civil religion is found in almost all societies. It binds all the members of the society together despite the differences in caste, creed and color. It builds a sense of unity and solidarity and hence promotes nationalism. It instills a national identity through various civic rituals. Civic religion has a lot of political and social inclination. However, we should not over emphasize the sensual character of it. We should understand that for many people participation in public ceremonies and rituals reflect the pragmatic acceptance of them rather than any type of normative commitment. Well, in some cases people might not also be fully committed to the moral authority of the political leader. However, they may practice the civil rituals and participate in the ceremonies as a custom or part of their daily lives. This may reflect that people may not want to oppose public opinion or deviate from it and it might be the only reason for their adhering to the civic rituals. Their participation could also be for personal benefits or forced by political authorities.

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