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BOOK REVIEWS

Civil Religion Today: Religion and the American Nation in the Twenty-First Century.

Edited by Rhys H. Williams, Raymond Haberski Jr., and Philip Goff. New York: NYU Press, 2021. Pp. 240. $89.00 (cloth); $30.00 (paper); $28.50 (digital). ISBN: 9781479809851.

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The concept of civil religion is, perhaps unbeknownst to some, of enduring interest for scholars of law and religion. Major constitutional debates over the separation of church and state derive from practices of civil religion, such as invoking God in the national motto ("In God we trust") or Pledge of Allegiance ("one Nation, under God"), the practice of beginning public meetings with prayer, and displaying monuments of the Ten Commandments outside public courthouses, among others. Of course, these issues have all led to landmark Establishment Clause cases that have variously attempted to articulate the appropriate relationship between religion and government. Despite the clear implications, the concept of civil religion is often relegated to academic sociology discussions. It is fitting, then, that the contributions in *Civil Religion Today: Religion and the American Nation in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Rhys H. Williams, Raymond Haberski Jr., and Philip Goff, should recapitulate this important concept and discuss its application—and critiques—in the present day.

As Haberski, Williams, and Goff acknowledge in the introduction, *civil religion* is a term with many definitions: "it can often appear to mean almost anything to anyone at any time" (3). In fact, Arthur Remillard makes a compelling case that we should not talk of a singular American civil religion and instead study "America's civil religions" (77). Academics have used the term variously to refer to the sacred beliefs that Americans have about the state, the use of religious practices in public settings, the adoption of quasi-religious expressions of patriotism, a common belief in the utility of religion, and a sense of shared religious values among the American people. Other definitions and usages abound. However, nearly all discussions about civil religion in the American context point back to Robert Bellah, whose 1967 essay "Civil Religion in America" popularized the term.[1] The contributions in this edited volume are, rightfully, no exception, as the authors make extensive use of Bellah's original and later conceptualizations of civil religion and revisit its place in society fifty years later.

[1] Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1–21.

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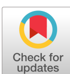

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The book has three sections. In the first, the essays address the origins and development of the concept, beginning in earnest with Bellah. (Notably, many trace the term back even earlier to philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, although Bellah imported the idea into the American lexicon.) A highlight in this section is the first chapter, in which Philip Gorski compares the concept of civil religion to its rivals: religious nationalism and liberal secularism. In an era when scholarly attention is increasingly focused on white Christian nationalism, more of these studies differentiating civil religion from sometimes closely aligned ideological traditions will be of particular value.[2] Scholars hoping to trace the origins of civil religion to the founding fathers may well find much to like in the second chapter, in which Mark Silk discusses the "General Christianity" that imbues the language of some of the framers, like Washington's Farewell Address (44). Though this topic could be in itself the focus of a several-volume study, Silk's chapter is of particular use to those who have not previously analyzed religion and politics through the specific lens of civil religion. Moreover, those hoping to identify the original meaning of the Constitution's religion clauses will again be challenged by the framers' competing visions for what a civil religion might entail and who is included in the original understanding of a religious consensus.

Toward that end, the contributions in the second section of the book return to Bellah's original conceptualization of civil religion and critique the term as overly broad and positing a consensus that was not, and is not, there. Korie Little Edwards offers an especially insightful and notable critique of civil religion for being reflective only of the experiences of privileged white elites. Little's focus on the experience of minoritized groups reflects the cultural conflicts that might rise when civil religion is used to oppress dissenters or those who have been excluded from civic life. One need not look further than attempts to assimilate Black and Native American groups into American religious culture (99) or cases surrounding Jehovah's Witnesses, an often maligned religious minority. While civil religion is still useful as a lens for sociological analysis, it is critiques such as these that will help adapt the concept to a modern, polarized, and diversifying United States. Indeed, if a civil religion is permitted by the First Amendment, determining who is represented in such a religion will be a challenge, at the very least, particularly with the growth of secularism.[3]

The essays in the final section examine practical applications of civil religion, often at a local level. For those unfamiliar with the concept, these chapters will reveal the extensive debate caused by a diverse public commitment to practices of civil religion. Arthur Farnsley provides a particularly telling example, examining civil religion in the city of Indianapolis, Indiana, from a historical and planning perspective. Farnsley surveys the proliferation of war memorials and monuments, which often contain a religious tone, and, later, how sports came to embody patriotism, civil religion, and "national self-worship" in the city (196). It requires only a short intellectual extension to see how legal battles over civil religion would ensue in many similar locales; in fact, Farnsley references Washington, DC, as the capital of war memorials and monuments, which often reflect "the mores and traditions of the dominant group, in this case white Protestant Christians" (197). Putting it even more bluntly, Farnsley suggests that "[s]ome critics of Bellah's work have argued that, in the end, no realistic definition of *actual* American civil religion can be separated from conservative, nationalistic visions of individual choice, free enterprise, and especially nationalist commitment to America as an imperial, militaristic power" (195). As such, we can expect civil religion to hang like a cloud over the persistent and polarizing battles about the status

[2] See, for example, Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[3] For example, see Supreme Court cases regarding the common acceptance of religious monuments, including *American Legion v. American Humanist Association*, 139 S. Ct. 2067 (2019), and *Van Orden v. Perry*, 545 U.S. 677, 698–706 (2005) (Breyer, J., concurring).

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of monuments, public displays of religion, and the inclusivity of historical references in the country.

Ultimately, as the political and religious environment has evolved dramatically since Bellah's first articulations of American civil religion, this book provides a much-needed contemporary assessment of where this concept stands in the academic and cultural landscape. Much like the concept itself, the conclusions of this volume are mixed. As Wendy Wall notes, some see the concept of civil religion as prescriptive: a possible ideal to strive for and even a necessary one in a pluralist society (131). Admittedly, such goals will be a challenge in an intensely polarized and secularizing society. Without watering down the concept to its most basic level, garnering agreement about shared religious or patriotic values may seem like a pipe dream. Moreover, although the Supreme Court has vacillated between an accommodationist and a separationist approach when it comes to religion in society, the long-term viability of a civil religion seems tentative, at best. Thus, while even contributors critiquing the concept express some sympathy with the broader goals of civil religion, the volume speaks loudest when employing civil religion as a tool of critical analysis rather than something to be reclaimed. This analytical lens is essential for understanding the history behind some of the greatest ongoing debates about religious liberty.

Of course, every edited volume necessarily omits certain elements. Those seeking an authoritative definition of civil religion or delineation of its different forms may wish to supplement the text, as this volume focuses more on exploring different approaches to and applications of civil religion. To capture more of the controversy about civil religion, it would also be useful to examine nonreligious views about civil religion, particularly as secularism grows as a mainstay in the Democratic coalition. In the introduction to the volume, Haberski, Williams, and Goff note this as one of three major religious changes, along with the decline of Mainline Protestantism and the growth of non-Christian options, but these challenges to civil religion are addressed more in the abstract (8). As noted previously, a discussion of the legal controversies that civil religion arouses could demonstrate even further the utility of the concept in public life, especially taking into consideration the changing ideology of the courts and a different religious jurisprudence today than when Bellah first wrote about it. When civil religion is again reanalyzed, decades down the road, it is likely that these trends will only be magnified.

Nonetheless, *Civil Religion Today* is an essential volume for those who want to understand the concept of civil religion and its controversies. Its rich chapters provide renewed depth to the research area and should provoke a wealth of dialogue among scholars and practitioners in legal, political, and religious fields. The volume, though rooted in Bellah's original ideas, certainly succeeds in its goal to go "beyond Bellah" and provide a more nuanced, critical, and robust accounting of "civil religion at fifty" (12).

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