

## The Existence of Civil Religion in the American Public Life, Society and Politics

### وجود الدين المدني في الحياة العامة الأمريكية والمجتمع والسياسة

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#### ABSTRACT:

ملخص البحث

This paper deals with the phenomenon of Civil Religion that has attracted more attention especially after the publication of Bellah's article "Civil Religion in America" in which he claimed that Civil Religion is dead. It is a civic faith that contains sacred symbols, ideals, documents, and signs, which are part of the US public life, society and politics. The main questions explored concern its existence, and if it is dead or not. The researcher dealt with some sacramental documents, sites and songs to prove its presence in the US society and politics.

**Keywords:** sacred-civil-faith-God-symbols-nationalism-politics.

تتناول هذه المقالة ظاهرة الدين المدني التي جذبت المزيد من الاهتمام خاصة بعد نشر مقال روبرت بيلاه المعنون "الدين المدني في أمريكا" الذي ادعى فيه أن الدين المدني قد آل إلى الزوال . إنه إيمان مدني يحتوي على رموز مقدسة ومثل ووثائق وعلامات تشكل جزءاً من الحياة العامة والمجتمع والسياسة في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. الأسئلة الرئيسية التي تم استكشافها تتعلق بوجود هذه الظاهرة ، وإذا زالت أم لا. تعاملت الباحثة مع بعض الوثائق والمواقع والأغاني المقدسة لإثبات وجودها في المجتمع والسياسة الأمريكية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مقدسة-مدنية-إله-رموز-قومية-سياسية.

### 1. Introduction

Civil Religion has turned out to be a debatable topic since sociologist Robert N Bellah coined this word in his famous article "Civil Religion in America". Before Bellah, Jean Jacques Rousseau described a civic faith composed of ideas, symbols and texts that are required to any society but without mentioning the term "Civil Religion". Not only Rousseau, but other philosophers as well tackled the topic, like Hobbes Durkheim, Philip Gorski and many others more recently. In America, civil religion is not merely "patriotism", but a sum of ideals such as morality, freedom, making peace,

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unity, power, self-reliance, exploration and honesty. It is positive, when its goals, whether social or political are significant mainly those related to peace making. Nevertheless sometimes, it appears as very negative, like achieving peace via violence, which is described as the "war on terror" or when it is used to get the support of people's opinion. In this way, civil religion becomes extremely dangerous. This paper inspects the presence of civil religion in the US daily life in general and in politics in particular. This paper investigates sacramental texts, documents, symbols and songs in an attempt to prove that the phenomenon of Civil Religion is not dead but part of the American society, public life and politics. It is more than merely nationalism. Americans are bound to sacramental songs like 'God Bless America', sacred sites like the Ellis Island and sacred documents like the Declaration of Independence. Civil Religion comprises ideals. This civic faith is composed of ideals that Americans are devoted to, though they are unaware of the existence of "civil religion" but they do believe in its principles. They consider the Founding Fathers as priests and some of them as martyrs. In addition, when they hear the national anthem, they put their hands over their hearts in ceremonies and national days. For instance, they celebrate the Thanksgiving; a national and a sacred day in order to thank God after the survival of their ancestors after the harsh winter. They believe, though not all of them, in the idea of a "Promised Land" or "God's Kingdom"; a unique nation founded for many reasons but also thanks to a sacred idea of "Manifest Destiny"

## 2. Review of Literature

The investigation of the American Civil Religion in the United States has not attracted scholarly attention until the publication of Bellah's article entitled "Civil Religion in America" in 1967. Bellah and other researchers and philosophers tried to find out a theoretical framework for Civil Religion by introducing theories, which joined disciplines like philosophy, sociology, history and political science to understand the characteristics and components of this religion. This brought about an interdisciplinary concept, called "Civil Religion".

As far as the American Civil Religion is concerned, a lack of data is available because many scholars, philosophers and Americans refuse to confess that there exist a civic faith, which influences the American culture and politics. The media rarely describes the term "Civic Religion". In fact, even university teachers are either uninformed of the concept or refuse to use such an oxymoron since it implies the utility of faith in politics or vice versa.

At the outset, this study provides a bird eye on the most exceptional definitions of the ACR as a theoretical background that helps inquest about the availability of this concept since the 16th century. It gave an inkle eye on the most central sources of Civil Religion, the Bible, Leviathan, the Social Contract...etc in a trial to demonstrate its source and discover a common description for the most debatable concept nowadays.

Jean Jacques Rousseau defines Civil Religion in 1762 as a number of universal beliefs that consist in beliefs in God, the Day of Judgment, in reward and punishment and in the virtue of tolerance. The concept deals with the main spiritual virtues of the country, which appear in national ceremonies, symbols, sacred places and even political discourse.

The term civil religion was actually coined by the French thinker Jean Jacques Rousseau as early as 1762 to depict a divine basis of any nation. This religion serves as a source of unity for societies. In order to reach unity, he referred to four major elements, which are God, life after death, reward and punishment and the respect of all religions.

However, Emile Durkheim defines it as a composition of standards and customs, which are connected to spiritual matters and practices. He drew a connection between faith and the community. For him, modern new religions replaced the ancient traditional ones. He even called for the secularization of societies as he saw no importance in the presence of traditional religions. Durkheim's type of civil religion does fit America because America has always been a nation with "the soul of the church"

On the other hand, Thomas Hobbes emphasized on the functions that Civil Religion plays in politics and the society. In his book *Leviathan* III and IV (1651), he stressed the fact that the power of the ruler comes from the authority of God or Christ. Nevertheless, he failed to see the harm Christianity might have done to republics.

Like Rousseau, his vision of Civil Religion can be understood easily. Machiavelli was described as a realist. Nevertheless, he used his imagination to claim that nations were in need of a God or a savior and a domesticated religion in politics. Otherwise, a religion guided by churches would lead to destruction.

Additionally, the central part of this research was to provide an in-depth look on the ACR on the ground. This study dug deeper on sacred objects, mottos, moments, documents, sites and texts to prove the existence of the issue of Civil Religion, which manifests as a reality.

### **3. Methodology**

This paper throws a fresh look on different texts like the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution. A close reading of some poems and songs like “America, the Beautiful” and the “Star-spangled Banner” clarifies many points ignored such as the recurrent use of God-talk or faith-talk is not a tradition but for a purpose. This method of paying attention to sacred words either directly by using the words , God, divine, heaven, the Almighty which is called ‘God-talk’ or indirectly like when political leaders describe America as “a City on a Hill” and this is called ‘faith-talk’. The researcher therefore tries to highlight the existence of such a civil faith through texts, documents, monuments and some Presidential sentences’ analyses.

The Declaration of Independence is full of religious words. It was written by Thomas Jefferson and has served as an inspiration for many countries to seek for their own independence. What attracts my attention is the way the Founding Fathers insisted on several rights which are human rights but also God-given right. They used a religious language to appeal to the king as if they wanted to say that these right , because they were given by God no power could take them away from them.

### **4. Results and Discussions**

What follows are discussions of findings about the existence of Civil Religion in the American public life, society and politics. The ACR is present in US currency, constitution, presidential speeches, songs, mottos and religious and national ceremonies. As a consequence, we exclude the possibility that Civil Religion is dead.

#### **a. Sacred Documents and Civil Religion: the Declaration of Independence**

The first two lines of the Declaration of Independence demonstrate the use of a religious language “...that they are endowed by their Creator...” (Armitage, 2007). It is a masterpiece and a proof of the very first forms of democracy in the New World. It has become as an inspiration for so many countries seeking their freedom and justice. This sacred document carries the main Values by which the nation is governed. But what makes this document so sacred and powerful?

It is sacred because it carries many values like liberty, equality, justice and happiness , which are actually 'God-given' rights. Additionally, it is a very important document because it united the nation and led to its independence. In fact, it has been regarded as one of the most sacred and inspirational texts so far. This clearly chose that civil religion does exist.

#### **i. The American Constitution**

Another document that is investigated the Constitution of America as it focuses on human rights like freedom, which is a sacred value for all Americans. Another divine ideal is the preservation of human life. In some cities, bearing arms is illegal. According to Amendment 2 of the of the US

Constitution,' a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms should not be infringed' (Nisbet, 2001). Nevertheless, in many other states, bearing arms is legal and permitted.

Bearing arms during the colonial era was so important that early settlers of the Newfoundland "America" could not live without. They were convinced that it was very necessary to have a strong militia. They used weapons to take lands by force from the natives, hunt animals and chase slaves. However, with the progress of cities, the level of crimes increased. Yet, when the law of bearing arms was passed, a moral value was being preserved and protected which is human life, not threatening human safety. Likewise, the Constitution is believed to be a sacred text which is another proof of the American civil religion.

#### **b. The Dollar Bill and the American Civil Religion**

Opposed to many Banknotes, the US currency is extremely special mainly the one-dollar bill which carries the photo of George Washington and the famous phrase, 'In God We Trust'. This dollar has been referred to as 'the Almighty dollar'. This phrase 'In God, We Trust' together with the Great Seal is very sacred. The Seal is composed of an eye inside a triangle with the Motto 'e Pluribus Unum' or 'out of many, one'. The Great Seal is a religious symbol and so is the eye (Ovason, 2004). The eye refers to the Creator in the Masonic religion. In addition, the eagle is also regarded as a Divine bird. As a result, the symbols available on the American money show that the 'Almighty Dollar' is another proof of the American civil religion.

#### **c. The Statue of Liberty; a Sacred Monument**

The first thing that comes to one's mind when the Statue of Liberty is mentioned, is the United States of America. It is a symbol of freedom; a value that all immigrants to the US aspire to find beyond its shores in the Ellis Island which has become a sacred site as well. It has such a Divine image because most Americans believe that their ancestors started from that place( Blanchet, 1985). For many immigrants, it is a point to begin from as if they were accepted by God into heaven; into "God-chosen" land.

Emma Lazarus wrote a poem about the Statue of Liberty in which she describes an Almighty woman carrying a torch to welcome newcomers to the nation. A mother of Exile who would take away the pain, "... Give me your tired, your poor, .... Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming Shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door" (Trachtenberg, 1986). Newcomers to the "promised land" had many different purposes ranging from adventure, liberty, material possession and even to practicing their religion freely. They aspired to find religious and cultural tolerance. Thus, Ellis Island has become the new Eden and a sacred place; a witness of the American civil religion.

#### **d. Sacred songs "God Bless America"**

Even songs and poems are part of the American civil religion or the ACR. This song "God Bless America" is full of religious words and expressions like: The lights from above, stand beside her and guide her (Freedland, 1986). This phrase " God Bless America" has become the most useful and recurrent concluding phrase in almost all presidential speeches. Political leaders in America generally conclude their addresses by ' god bless you and God bless the United States of America'.

This phrase carries various meanings such as liberty, security and tolerance, which are the main ideals of the American civil religion. Many singers like the Canadian singer Celine Dion sang the song in many ceremonies to implant the spirit of nationalism like during the Second World War even if its words are touching and beautiful (Greene, 2012).

#### **i. America, the Beautiful and Civil Religion**

Katherine lee Bates wrote this poem in 1895 that was published Congregationalist Journal. It contains several religious words and phrases such as "... God shed his grace on thee... Sea to shining

sea" (Lynn, 2001). The poet believed that America made a lot of mistakes especially with natives but she admitted that founding and settling the new world was very exceptional. She wrote

O beautiful for pilgrim feet  
Whose stern impassioned stress  
A thoroughfare of freedom beat  
Across the wilderness!  
America! America!  
God mend thine every flaw  
Confirm thy soul in self-control  
Thy liberty in law!

Bates describes the divine nature of her era by using the word "God" many times and even the phrase "God shed his grace on thee" (Lynn, 2001). Her poem adds many elements to the American civil religion and clearly shows the ACR has existed since the colonial era.

#### **e. The USA; a City on a Hill**

Different political leaders and presidents have referred to the United States of America as a city on a hill though the phrase goes back to two centuries ago. J. F. Kennedy was the first president to use this phrase adopting John Winthrop's sentence. (Warner, 1990). Another catholic President who used Winthrop's phrase was Peggy Noonan. Reagan also described America as a city on a hill. In his farewell address in 1989, he said, 'the past few days when I have been at that window upstairs, I have thought a bit of "The shining city upon a hill" (Address, 1989). What can be inferred from such a description of America as a city on a hill or the Promised Land is that this land in itself is divine another element of the American civil religion.

#### **f. The National Anthem and the American Civil Religion**

The Star-Spangled Banner became the American Anthem by law in the year 1931. Its theme revolves around one of the most important values "freedom". When Americans hear it, especially on national days and ceremonies, they put their hands over their hearts, looking at the flag. They usually do the same action every day at schools throughout the nation and during sports events.

When he wrote the national anthem, Francis Scott used numerous religious words like, "Blest with victory and peace, may the heaven-rescued land Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation. Then conquer we must, for our cause, just replying to my voicemail it is just, and this be our motto: "In God is our trust," And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave! Borneman, 2004)

The song of The Star-Spangled Banner which is America's national anthem describes the flag which is called the Stars and Stripes and deals with values the American people hold sacred. Even the American flag is considered a divine object this is part of the American civil religion.

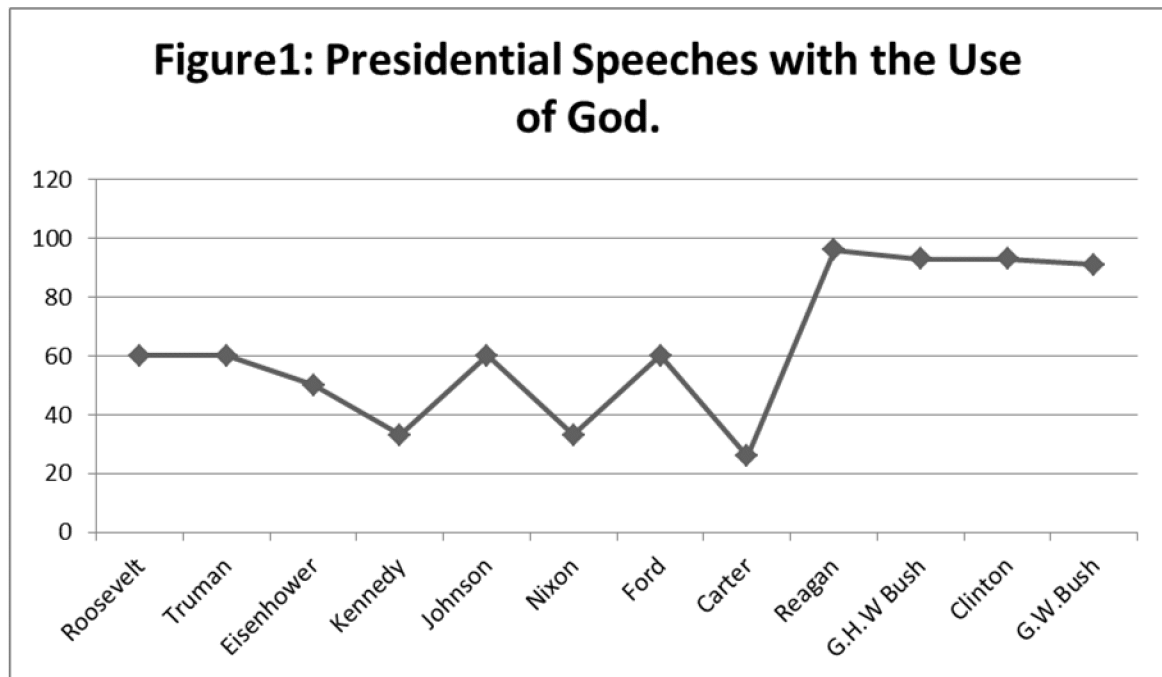
#### **g. "God-Talk" vs. "Faith-Talk"**

Presidents have always used the word "God" in inaugural addresses throughout various periods in US history. They have openly mentioned God and this is known as "God-talk". However, referring to faith or God indirectly is "faith-talk". The problem is not about the presence of faith in politics, but about its occurrence and increasing style in the most recent three decades. Since 1980, political leaders have used terms that are more religious though in a different way. They might refer to God, the Creator, Providence, the Almighty<sup>1</sup>..., etc.



Many Presidents, from Roosevelt in 1933 to Jimmy Carter in 1981 used God-talk in almost half of their addresses. Nevertheless, there were differences, for instance J.F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon and Jimmy Carter mentioned God on various occasions. Reagan also involved God 96 per cent in his speeches and like George Walker Bush, with a percentage of 91, while Clinton and George Bush (through 2006) mentioned God 93 per cent of the time.

Figure 1 describes these percentages, indicating how the White House addresses American people with overt reference to God.



**Figure 1. Use of God in Presidential Speeches**

**Source: The God Strategy: how Religion Became a political Weapon in America” (Oxford University Press, 2008)**

The above figure indicates that “God-talk” almost doubled after the presidency of Jimmy Carter to arrive at its peak with George. W. Bush, the son. The above presidents referred to God in their addresses but how many times did they do it?

First, US presidents consider religious rhetoric an imperative device in government. In addition, the employ of “God” in ceremonies such as inaugurations gives a religious dimension to the endurance of the country itself. Therefore, this has deep effects on the US civic nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

The leaders have overtly mentioned “God” since 1981. Table 1 shows the use of “God” per address.

**Table.1:** The use of “God-Talk” in presidential speeches

Presidents	The use of “God-Talk” per address
Truman	1.87%

Reagan	2.80%
G.H.W. Bush	2.20%
Clinton	1.89%
G.W. Bush	3.29%

**Source: The God Strategy: how Religion Became a political Weapon in America” (Oxford University Press, 2008)**

## 5. Conclusion

This study sought to shed light on many symbols of the American civil religion in an attempt to prove its existence in many sacred texts, documents, songs, monuments, and some political addresses. It is present in all aspects of American Life be them Social, public and/ or political through various periods of the nation's history.

The American Civil religion is composed of several values like liberty, tolerance, justice and equality. It carries many sacred symbols, texts, documents, sites and monuments. It is a religion of its own, difference from Christianity or Judaism. It is just a Civic faith that is part of public life, society, culture and politics.

The controversy revolves around its existence and whether or not it is still alive. This study is an attempt to confirm that the phenomenon exists in America. It is present in the invocation of God buy presidents, through sacred songs, and sacred texts and even the rituals and ceremonies that American people consider as divine but also national. It is a faith that is deeply rooted in politics to the extent that the most official and used motto of America is " in God is our trust". America is then regarded as the divine "Promised Land" whose mission is to save the world and spread peace to all its countries regardless of means it might use.

## Marges

<sup>1</sup> God-talk included direct references to a supreme being, including terms such as Him, Thus and Your when they were used to refer to God: see William A. Scott, Reliability of Content Analysis The Case of National Scale Coding: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 19(Autumn, 1955)321-325.

<sup>2</sup> Vanessa Beasley: « The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States “American Principles and American Pose in Presidential Inauguration “Communication Monographs 68(June.2001):169-183: Karlyn Kohrs Campell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Deeds Done In Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

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