

## ***AMERICAN IDENTITIES, CIVIL RELIGION AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS***

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The US is, in the amended words of the Pledge of Allegiance, 'one nation under God'. Observers have - from Alexis de Tocqueville onwards - long drawn a contrast between the active faith of many Americans and the detached secularism that seems, at times, to govern much of contemporary Europe. Gallup polling suggests, for example, that 96 per cent of the American public believe in God or a 'universal spirit' compared with just over 60 per cent of the British people. <sup>1</sup> The differences between the US and Europe are even more striking if patterns of church attendance are considered. According to polls, 47 per cent of Americans claimed to have attended a church or synagogue service in the preceding seven days. In contrast, a 1998 study of the English churches suggested that just 11.1 per cent of population attended church at least once a month. <sup>2</sup>

### **Faith and the political process**

However, despite their hold, it can initially seem that American religious beliefs are confined to the byways of civil society. The First Amendment to the US Constitution imposed a 'wall of separation' between religion and government. From 1962 onwards, it was understood by the US Supreme Court to require a prohibition on prayer or other forms of worship in public schools. Although the judicial record is mixed, even 'moments of silence' that might be used for silent prayer have been struck down as unconstitutional.

There are, nonetheless, close associations between religious faith, the political process, and all three branches of government. Indeed, invocations of God are institutionalised. Congress begins its day with prayers and both chambers have chaplains. The Supreme Court opens its sessions with the words, 'God save the United States and this Honourable Court.' The taking of an oath ends with the affirmation, 'so help me God'. Some public holidays have Christian roots and associations. Although Jesus Christ is not cited on government occasions, there are references to God and the phrase 'God bless America' is invariably employed by presidents at ceremonies and in times of national crisis. The Reverend Billy Graham blessed successive inauguration ceremonies and his customary role has now been assumed by his son. The oath of office - which is always preceded by prayers - is administered using a bible. In some circumstances, the name of God has been invoked in support of legislation. President Lyndon Johnson cited the will of God when calling for the passage of the Civil Rights Act:

'I cannot help but believe that He truly understands and He really favors, the undertaking that we begin here tonight' <sup>3</sup>

The relationship between faith and policy making has been both deepened and widened during periods of national uncertainty and crisis. In 1952 – at the height of the Cold War - National Prayer

Breakfasts were initiated. In 1954, in an act that had considerable symbolic significance, Congress added 'under God' to the words 'one nation' in the Pledge of Allegiance. Two years later - in 1956 - Congress proclaimed that the national motto was 'In God We Trust'. A year earlier, these words had been inscribed on US banknotes. Half a century later, in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the ties between religious belief and the public policy process were reaffirmed. Although the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals held – in a June 2002 judgement - that the words 'under God' in the Pledge of Allegiance, recited on a daily basis in schools, were an 'endorsement of religion' and therefore infringed the First Amendment, the ruling was very widely condemned. Members of Congress responded by assembling on the steps of the Capitol to recite the pledge. As they did so, they placed particular emphasis upon the words that the Court had struck down. A bill to reaffirm the reference to 'One Nation under God' was passed by both chambers and forwarded to the White House in mid-October. The only dissidents were five Democrats in the House of Representatives.

Despite some activity by organisations such as People for the American Way, an overwhelming majority of the American population sees these associations between faith and the public policy process as legitimate. Although opposed by lower margins among younger age cohorts, an *ABCNEWS.com / Washington Post* poll suggested that eighty-four percent of the population disagreed with the Circuit Court of Appeals ruling. <sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as Robert Bellah has noted, public opinion dictates that those who aspire to be US president must be committed to a religious faith. Although the Constitution specifically rejected religious tests as a qualification for public office, a declared atheist could not – in practice - be elected. A 1996 study suggested that 54.4 per cent would not vote for a 'well-qualified' candidate nominated by their own party if she or he '.. happened to be an atheist'. The figure rose to over 60 per cent among Protestants, Republicans, Hispanics and southerners. <sup>5</sup>

## Civil religion

However, the ties between faith and politics extend beyond this. In many accounts, the history, purpose and destiny of the American nation itself are understood in religious or quasi-religious terms. There is, as Andrew M. Manis puts it, '.. a blending of religion and patriotism ..' <sup>6</sup> Robert Wuthnow suggests that there are '... cultural symbols that draw connections between nation and some conception of the sacred.' <sup>7</sup> Although the concept is subject to a range of different and competing definitions, these symbols and connections form the basis of the 'American civil religion'. This, Ellis M. West suggests, is:

'.. a set of beliefs and attitudes that explain the meaning and purpose of any given political society in terms of its relationship to a transcendent, spiritual reality, that are held by the people generally of that society, and that are expressed in public rituals, myths, and symbols.' <sup>8</sup>

What are the defining characteristics of the American civil religion? Firstly, as Conor Cruise O'Brien puts it, the US is often portrayed and regarded as 'a nation peculiarly blessed by God'. <sup>9</sup> In a number of accounts, particularly those that stress the role of the Puritan tradition and the early New England settlements in shaping the later evolution of the country, parallels are drawn with the history of ancient Israel. The Book of Exodus assumes a defining role. In Bellah's words: 'The

Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were the sacred scriptures and Washington the divinely appointed Moses who led his people out of the hands of tyranny.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, the Civil War brought forth a New Testament. Both the union cause and abolitionism were a realisation and fulfillment of God's will. Abraham Lincoln assumed a role as both liberator and saviour. The country's history became increasingly bound together with notions of sacrifice and martyrdom.

Secondly, those who talk of an American civil religion suggest, the US has – in contrast with other nations – a moral imperative, purpose, or mission. This, it is said, flows directly from the country's relationship with God. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, it provided a backcloth to thoughts of 'manifest destiny'. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the themes associated with civil religion merged with both eugenicist notions and talk of overseas ambitions, Senator Albert J. Beveridge referred to the American purpose in stark terms: 'God ... has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world'.<sup>11</sup> Eighty years later, Ronald Reagan's rhetoric was more restrained, but still had an exceptionalist edge to it. As he declared in a bicentennial celebration of the US Constitution:

'The guiding hand of providence did not create this new nation of America for ourselves alone, but for a higher cause: the preservation and extension of the sacred fire of human liberty. This is America's solemn duty.'<sup>12</sup>

Survey evidence suggests that while – in the contemporary US - notions such as these are not always backed by majorities, they are endorsed by significant numbers. A 2002 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 48.3 per cent of the population felt that the US had 'special protection from God'. The assertion attracted particular backing from white evangelical Protestants, African-Americans and Latinos.<sup>13</sup> Although the young and those with post-school qualifications are less ready to embrace these notions, a 1996 study of student opinion at Winthrop University in South Carolina, reported that 27.9 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed with the assertion that the US '.. as a nation, has a special relationship with God'.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in the closing years of the Cold War, a survey conducted in Indiana found that over a third of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that the US was 'God's instrument in the fight against communism'. Only 5.3 per cent 'strongly disagreed'.<sup>15</sup>

Religions do not, however, as Ellis West has emphasised, rest only upon a belief in the guiding and determinant role of a transcendent being. They also provide a basis for – and incorporate - rituals, particular forms of 'worship' and ethical prescriptions. The American civil religion is structured around national symbols, ceremonies and monuments, all of which bind the nation to God. Cemeteries such as Arlington are hallowed grounds dedicated to both God and the American nation. 'Holy days' such as July 4<sup>th</sup>, Thanksgiving and Memorial Day are an opportunity - through both national and local festivities - for rededication. The flag and the ceremonies associated with it have a mystical significance. Indeed, the Winthrop survey of student opinion found that 57.1 per cent saw the flag as 'sacred'.<sup>16</sup> There are also 'sacred texts', most notably the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, and – in some accounts - Martin Luther King's 1963 address at the Lincoln Memorial.<sup>17</sup>

## Modes

However, although there are shared perceptions of the nation and its theistic foundations, some studies suggest that the character of the relationship between the US and faith should be understood in terms of different 'modes'. Civil religion as, for example, Martin E. Marty has emphasised, can take either a 'priestly' or 'prophetic' mode. In its priestly mode or form, civil religion stresses the role of the presidency and celebrates the symbols of national power. Both are infused with a profoundly religious character. Priestly civil religion celebrates the US as it is constituted. It already **is** – in John Winthrop's celebrated words - the 'shining city on a hill'. At times, President Ronald Reagan talked in these terms, leading some commentators to regard him as an exemplar of priestly civil religion. As Reagan asserted, 'I believe in the goodness of the American people' who are 'blessed in so many ways (because) we're a nation under God, a living and loving God'. For radical critics, the priestly mode is little more than an oppressive and inherently imperialistic ideology. It:

'. centers around the telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors. This hermeneutic mask thus conceals the true experience of American 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' <sup>18</sup>

In contrast, however, the American civil religion also has a 'prophetic' mode. Instead of celebrating the US as it is constituted, this invokes the promise of the US and stresses the gap between the principles underlying civil religion and the harsher realities of contemporary life. The 'Great Awakenings' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are said to have had a prophetic character, creating a momentum that led in its wake to significant social and political change.

Robert Bellah's seminal study of civil religion emphasises the pivotal role of these prophetic representations. Although his 1967 article – published in *Daedalus* – insisted in vigorous terms that it could take an 'idolatrous' form whereby the state was the object of 'worship' – he argued that the American civil religion should not be understood as a glorification or celebration of American national institutions. Instead, it was the generalised belief in God that existed above and beyond the individual faiths and denominations. It was underpinned by principles that '.. produce both a basic cultural legitimation for a society which is viewed as at least approximately in accord with them and as a standard of judgement for the criticism of a society that is seen as deviating too far from them'. <sup>19</sup>

Bellah's representations of American civil religion have some parallels with Samuel Huntington's notion of an American 'creed' that rests upon values such as liberty, democracy, majority rule and respect for the rights of individuals. <sup>20</sup> Both Bellah and Huntington look back towards what they regarded as the founding principles of the American nation and the national spirit that had been established on the basis of them. They stress the failure of the country to abide by, or shape its institutions on the basis of, those principles. For Huntington, the gulf between the national purpose and the realities of American life – most notably the institutionalised oppression of slavery and segregation - represented what he termed an 'IvI' (ideals versus institutions) gap. Despite this, Huntington's thinking was underscored by a degree of long-term optimism. The gap was being

progressively narrowed through successive periods of 'creedal passion' – in, for example, 1950s and early 1960s - during which reformers sought to ensure that institutions conformed more closely to the ideals and principles upon which the creed had been constructed.

Bellah's 'civil religion' similarly holds out the promise of 'liberty and justice for all'. However, whereas Huntington represented the creed in largely secular terms, Bellah emphasises notions of a transcendent deity. There is a shared interdenominational and interfaith belief in a God who has assigned a particular place to the American nation and inspired its founding principles. Although human sinfulness has often led to the perversion of those principles, the God of civil religion takes the role of a national spirit or *geist*, guiding the nation towards the progressive unfolding of its historic purpose and destiny.<sup>21</sup>

### **Attachments and representations**

Bellah's critique was shaped by the social and political context within which it was written. It reflected the aspirations and hopes of mid-century American liberalism insofar as it was informed by the notion of uneven but inexorable progress towards the realisation of the democratic egalitarianism and individualism that were often represented as the core of American identity. From this perspective, the beliefs and actions of those opposed to these ideals were seen as pathological.

The period of discussion that followed the publication of Bellah's original article threw up other considerations. Although widely employed, the concept of 'modes' was sometimes conflated with presidential personality and style. President Reagan's 'priestly' style was, for example, often contrasted with the more prophetic character of the Carter administration. However, the differences between types of civil religion extend beyond the personalities and rhetoric of particular presidential office-holders. Furthermore, the many different representations of America and its civil religion are not confined to 'priestly' or 'prophetic' modes. Different social groupings understand the religious foundations of the country in different ways. These understandings reflect social experience. Prophetic representations of civil religion are, for example, particularly closely associated with the African-American communities. Against a background of racism and discrimination, those representations offer the promise of equality and social justice. In 1852, Frederick Douglass – the writer and abolitionist - bitterly criticised the celebrations of independence:

'What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim'

However, Douglass saw American ideals and traditions as - at the same time - a gospel of redemption. He cited 'the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American institutions.'<sup>22</sup> A century later, the demands of the civil rights movement were also framed in terms of American identity. They understood desegregation as a shift towards the realisation of the American ideal and the fulfillment of God's will.

While not a homogeneous bloc, the 'white ethnic' Roman Catholic communities also had a separate and distinct conception of civil religion and US national identity. During the 1940s and 1950s, many of those who lent particular support to figures such as Senator Joseph McCarthy and Cardinal Spellman of New York defined 'Americanism' in a way that shied away from national symbols and iconography. Instead, they emphasised economic opportunity, the right to practise their faith and preserve distinct Catholic structures, the integrity of the family and neighbourhood, and anti-communism.

Although it was an Americanism that permitted the celebration of ties with some former homelands - such as Ireland, Poland, and Italy - many 'white ethnics' regarded their own faith in the American nation as a more legitimate and authentic form of patriotic attachment than that of the Protestant elite. As Conor Cruise O'Brien said of the McCarthy period:

'Now the tables were turned. Catholics were emerging as 100 percent Americans, and they were casting doubt on the loyalty of members of the WASP establishment, whose lack of faith put their loyalty in doubt.' <sup>23</sup>

Paradoxically, however, despite the many assertions of patriotism and faith among Catholics, there was - for many - a sense of exclusion from not only the political process but also the most 'sacred' symbols of nationhood upon which the American civil religion rested. There was a gulf between God and the iconography and institutions of Americanism that is absent in Protestant accounts. Instead, the 'white ethnic' civil religion celebrated the authentic Americanism and the religiosity of the blue-collar urban neighbourhood. In his autobiography, Patrick Buchanan, the *paleoconservative* commentator and presidential contender, has recalled his schooldays in the Washington DC of the 1940s and 1950s:

'Even though we lived in the nation's capital, I cannot recall a single "field trip" in eight years to visit the monuments or institutions of government. While we were all proud to be Americans, running the country was somebody else's job'. <sup>24</sup>

Other traditions and cultural forms have also given civil religion a particular hue. For at least fifty years after the surrender at the Appomattox Courthouse - and in some respects for longer - the white south fused the mythology of the 'lost cause' with religious symbolism. It had a separate and distinct civil religion. It had its own priests, iconography and martyrs, most notably Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. There was a particular emphasis on tribulation, sacrifice and redemption as the defeat of the Confederacy fused with Christian symbolism. As Charles Reagan Wilson records:

'.. Father Abram Ryan ... saw his young niece standing before a painting of the death of Christ, and he asked her if she knew who the evil men were who had crucified her Lord. "Instantly she replied, "O yes I know", she said, "the Yankees" <sup>25</sup>

Wilson suggests that the southern civil religion had a distinctive character until the First World War. The war effort led to a process of cultural reconciliation and although the years of the Confederacy were still represented as a heroic epoch, southerners began to celebrate Thanksgiving and fly Old Glory alongside the Confederate battle flag.

### Contemporary civil religion

At first sight, it seems that the American civil religion acquired a more homogeneous character during the latter half of the twentieth century. The *de jure* and many of the *de facto* barriers that relegated African-Americans to the social and economic margins have been dismantled. The south has progressively lost much of former cultural and economic distinctiveness as a region. Democratic Party victories and the lowering of institutional barriers have played a role in integrating the formerly separate 'white ethnic' Catholic communities. Many of these neighbourhoods - which were structured around church and priest - have long disappeared. Against this background, the Catholic hierarchy has lost much of its hold over church members. Survey evidence points, for example, to the growing numbers of 'cafeteria Catholics' who follow some but not all of the church's teachings. This trend will, almost certainly, have been exacerbated by the sex abuse scandals that led to the resignation - in 2002 - of Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston.

Nonetheless, there are significant differences and cleavages. The American civil religion does not have a homogeneous character. Firstly, African-American faith – and the conception of the US to which it is tied – remains separate and distinct. There is – among black Americans - a strong sense that the US is, at its core, a Christian nation. 76.8 per cent of African-American respondents – compared with 53.7 per cent of the general population - asserted in a 1995-96 survey that it was either 'very' or 'fairly important' for an individual to be a Christian if she or he was to be truly American.<sup>26</sup> However, 'prophetic' notions still hold sway and this notion of national identity is tied to the promise of America rather than its contemporary realities. A 1989 study conducted by Eric Woodrum and Arnold Bell – which was based around responses to a series of statements – found that relatively few blacks embrace civil religion in its 'priestly' or nationalistic mode.<sup>27</sup> This is reflected in the character of black politics. The civil rights movement and later expressions of African-American politics - most notably Jesse Jackson presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988 - were structured around a form of discourse that talked of reclaiming and redeeming the promise of America. In contrast with other expressions of civil religion, there is an emphasis on 'social justice' at both home and abroad. From this perspective, the US should not be engaged in military activity overseas. In the days before the beginning of the 2003 Iraq conflict, only 36 per cent of African-American Protestants supported the war effort.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, significant numbers of white Protestants also understand the US to be – at its core - a Christian or, in some accounts, a Judeo-Christian nation, but at the same time represent the character of the nation in profoundly different terms. As former US senator, Jesse Helms, reportedly noted:

'.. this nation was created in God's name and with His grace, and we have made the mistake of forgetting it.' America, he said, 'was intended to be a Christian nation ...'<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective, although the Founding Fathers believed that the federal government should not be tied to an established church, they believed that the country should be constructed around the defining tenets of Christianity.

Thinking such as this is not confined to the organisations associated with the 'religious right' or those who define themselves as Christian conservatives. A 1996 study suggested that although they constituted a minority, significant numbers believed that the country's Christian character should be codified. About a third of the population either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that a constitutional amendment should be passed declaring the US to be a Christian nation.<sup>30</sup> The proposition drew particular backing from the membership of the white evangelical denominations. Of all those asked by the General Social Survey in the 1995-96 study, the assertion that Christian faith was 'important' or 'very important' in defining American identity attracted the strongest support from members of the Southern Baptist Convention. Indeed, 61.7 per cent asserted that – to be 'truly American' - it was 'very important' to be a Christian. In contrast, the proposition gained much less support among the mainline Protestant denominations. Only 28.6 per cent of those who were members of the Episcopal churches saw Christianity as 'very important' in defining national identity.<sup>31</sup>

Thirdly, there are - set against this - other representations of American civil religion. In these accounts, although civil religion has always drawn upon Hebraic and Christian thinking, it has a broader non-sectarian character. It stands above and extends beyond the individual faiths and denominations. Observers note that even during the era when the US population was overwhelmingly white and Protestant, presidents eschewed references to the faith-specific characteristics of Christianity. This tradition was maintained. Although reference was sometimes made to Jesus Christ in, for example, the Christmas and Easter messages issued by the White House and at the National Prayer Breakfasts, presidents customarily invoked God but not Christ in their formal addresses and during periods of national crisis. In John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, references to the defining theological features of Christianity are absent:

'President Kennedy was a Christian, more specifically a Catholic Christian... But why, then, did he not include some remark to the effect that Christ is the Lord of the world or some indication of respect for the Catholic Church? He did not because these are matters of his own private religious belief and of his relation to his own particular church ...'<sup>32</sup>

The 1968 Democratic presidential contender, Eugene McCarthy, put the commitment to a generic deity in more cynical terms. In Washington, he once observed, only two kinds of religion are tolerated: vague beliefs strongly affirmed and strong beliefs vaguely expressed. In recent years, Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Democrats' vice-presidential candidate in 2000, associated himself with this conception of civil religion. Indeed, his emphasis on the importance of tolerance and the place of all faiths attracted editorial comment:

'There is a carefully calibrated blandness, too, about Mr Lieberman's prescription ... the senator's airy, almost generic soufflé of faith and policy recalls an older, nonsectarian spiritual underpinning to government that has stronger roots than the hard-edged prescriptions of the religious right'<sup>33</sup>

Those who talk of a non-sectarian civil religion have questioned the historical assumptions that are associated with notions of the US as a Christian nation. Bruce Bawer, an Episcopalian writer, denies that the Founding Fathers - who wrote the Constitution – thought in these terms. Instead, he argues, they emphasised individual reason and conscience. He argues that many were deists or believed that humanity's understanding of God was too incomplete as to allow claims that a particular form of worship should be accepted rather than another. Furthermore, there was, seemingly, an indifference towards the religious character of immigrants to the US. As George Washington recorded: 'If they are good workmen, ... they may be Mohammedans, Jews, or Christian of any sect, or they may be atheists'.<sup>34</sup>

In recent decades, this conception of the American civil religion has been strengthened by the emergence of a distinct liberal or 'progressive' undercurrent within both mainline Protestantism - and Catholicism. To an extent, it defines itself in opposition to white conservative evangelism. Its adherents' thinking is rooted in notions of God's love, international fraternity and humanitarianism. There is a sense of relativism and Biblical texts are interpreted in 'loose constructionist' terms. They are not, it is said, to be understood in literal terms but instead their ethos and spirit should be applied to the modern era. 'Progressivism' of this type leads many church activists to emphasise the obligations and duties imposed upon those – such as Americans - who have the greatest wealth and resources. There is also an emphasis upon tolerance and God's love for all, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. During the 1980s, there was backing for the nuclear freeze movement and a commitment to redistributist economics. Although not a majority within the mainline denominations, a poll conducted just before the outbreak of hostilities indicated that 38 per cent of mainline Protestants and Catholics were not prepared to back the 2003 war against Iraq. In contrast, only 23 per cent of evangelical Protestants had reservations about - or opposed - the war effort.<sup>35</sup>

The divide between those who see the US as a Christian nation and those who represent America in terms of a broader, less prescribed form of civil religion is shaped – in significant part - by the cleavage between evangelism and mainline Protestantism. It is therefore also a function of the variables – such as education and region - that influence denominational membership. Whereas 63.2 per cent of those who failed to graduate from high school saw it as 'very important' to be a Christian if an individual was to be 'truly American', only 16.2 per cent of those with graduate qualifications shared this opinion. Similarly, while 50.5 per cent of non-school graduates but only 13.4 per cent of those with postgraduate qualifications believed that a constitutional amendment should be passed declaring the US to be a Christian nation.<sup>36</sup> Although less pronounced, there is also a correlation between the commitment to a Christian nation and the divide between the metropolitan regions and more rural areas. Over half (50.5 per cent) of those living in the larger cities regard it as either 'very important' or 'fairly important' to be a Christian if an individual was to be 'truly American', only 35.2 per cent of rural dwellers thought in these terms.<sup>37</sup>

## **Tensions**

The cleavages between these different representations of the US and its religious associations are becoming more pronounced. The cultural style adopted by the Bush White House is a factor in this.

In some respects, the administration has reached out towards Islam. In his inaugural address, President Bush talked of mosques alongside churches and synagogues. In the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, he stressed the peaceful character of Islam, the importance of tolerance, and the patriotic commitment of Muslim leaders to America. However, initiatives such as these have, for many, been overshadowed by the administration's overtly Christian – and in contrast with the first President Bush's Episcopalian reserve – evangelist ethos. *Newsweek* has recorded the growing use of words and phrases – drawn from the scriptures, gospel songs, and homilies – that are closely associated with Christian tradition.<sup>38</sup> The faith-based initiative – which sought to deliver assistance to those in need through church organisations – would have allocated government funding primarily to the inner-city Christian churches. Accounts of life in the White House suggest that a profound commitment to the Christian faith pervades the entire administration. David Frum – a conservative commentator who was employed as a speechwriter – recalls that the first words he heard on entering the West Wing of the White House were 'missed you at Bible study'.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Franklin Graham, who offered prayers at Bush's inauguration ceremony, tied assertions of the Christian faith together with bitter opposition to Islam:

'We're not attacking Islam but Islam has attacked us. The God of Islam is not the same God. He's not the son of God of the Christian or Judeo-Christian faith. It's a different God, and I believe it [Islam] is a very evil and wicked religion.'<sup>40</sup>

The Bush administration's implicitly Christian ethos reflects and ties together with a longer-term social trend. Although some of the political organisations associated with the Christian right lost ground during the latter half of the 1990s, the more conservative white evangelical denominations – whose members disproportionately adhere to representations of the US as a Christian nation – attracted greater numbers of worshippers, particularly during the first half of the decade. In 1996, according to the Pew Research Center, white evangelical Protestants represented 24 per cent of registered voters, an increase of 5 per cent from 1987.<sup>41</sup> At the same time – parallel to this – there was a decline in the proportion of churchgoers who belonged to the mainline Protestant denominations. The Presbyterian Church (USA) lost 12 per cent of its membership between 1990 and 2000. The United Methodist Church lost 7 per cent.<sup>42</sup>

There are, however, set against the growth of white conservative evangelicalism, other – contradictory – trends. Some have laid a basis for a shift away from religious or ideological certainty and a growth in backing for a broader or generic civil religion. Structural changes in the character of the American suburbs and the growth of professionalised occupations have been of particular significance. The suburban 'Levittowns' of the decades that followed the Second World War were constructed around the white blue-collar middle class. They were mostly, in the words of Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, '*unyoung, unpoor, and unblack*' and they defined their politics in terms of opposition to those who were young, poor and black. In doing so, they also reaffirmed their commitment to the defining tenets of Americanism, particularly self-reliance and patriotic loyalty. During the 1980s, they were drawn towards the ranks of the 'Reagan Democrats' and Republicans. However, as Zogby International, a polling organisation, has recorded, the American suburbs are increasingly being transformed:

'Today, the nation's political destiny is being shaped in the growing number of Latte Towns, whose residents often have post-graduate degrees and work in white-collar jobs ... Latte Town suburbanites have created a new form of suburban communitarianism that creates its own values conformity. Tolerance is particularly prized, and Latte Town dwellers often like their morality writ small. They do not believe that there are Absolute Truths that are timeless.'<sup>43</sup>

The growth of the 'Latte Town' may be tied to a form of denominational 'dealignment'. During the 1990s, there was a significant rise in the proportion of respondents who tell pollsters that they have 'no religious preference'. The figure had risen to 14 per cent by 2001. Most profess a belief in God but are not attached to a particular denomination.<sup>44</sup>

Immigration and religious conversion are also having an impact. By 2010, according to projections, Latinos will become a majority among Catholics although they have also joined and in some instances revitalised Protestant churches and given an impetus towards Pentecostalism. Polls suggest that – instead of recasting the American civil religion – there is a profound sense of detachment from the US and American identity. For many Latinos, their primary source of identity is not the US or 'US Latino' but instead their individual country of origin. A 2002 Pew study suggested that 54 per cent of Latinos described themselves firstly or exclusively in terms of their, or their parents', country of origin. Only 24 per cent defined themselves as 'American'. Among foreign-born Latinos, the latter figure was just 6 per cent.<sup>45</sup>

Although estimates differ radically, the number of American Moslems has also grown. *Newsweek* talks of seven million. While about 25 per cent are of Arab origin, greater numbers are African-American or drawn from the Indian subcontinent.<sup>46</sup> There are already nearly 1200 mosques nationwide as well as Islamic schools. By the year 2010, America's Muslim population is expected to be larger than the Jewish population and Islam will be the country's second-largest faith after Christianity. Although they acknowledge strains and tensions arising from the dynamics of US foreign policy – and denials of Muslim involvement in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks - some accounts stress the degree of assimilation.<sup>47</sup> They also emphasise the spiritual overlaps between Christianity, Judaism and Islam. As *US News and World Report* has noted, Islam is also monotheistic, accepts the Hebrew Bible, and praises Jesus as a prophet. Some similar moral prescriptions emerge from all three faiths.<sup>48</sup> A survey suggests that most US Muslims are ready to accept the differences – including secularism - that mark out a pluralistic society. They are less supportive of fundamentalism. While some mosques interpreted the Koran literally, seven out of ten adopted a more flexible approach. A Zogby poll indicates that 41 per cent – a figure that disproportionately included those born outside the US - those felt themselves to be more patriotic as US citizens in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>. While a minority of Muslims regards the US as an immoral society, a majority (54 per cent) does not think in these terms. Furthermore, despite reports of hostility after the attacks, 41 per cent felt that Americans had been 'respectful and tolerant' towards Muslims.<sup>49</sup> However, other surveys paint a different picture. Kambiz Ghanaeabassiri's study of Los Angeles found that there were similarities with the Latino population. Three-quarters of the Muslims that he surveyed felt a greater sense of allegiance to another country rather than the United States.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Ideas have consequences. Civil religion - and the fusion of politics, patriotism, and faith upon which it is constructed – strengthen patriotic sentiment by adding a spiritual and transcendent dimension to it. The belief that the nation has religious underpinnings also leads to a degree of disdain for majoritarianism. For some, the perceived interests of the nation should be asserted even when those interests conflict with the popular will and extralegal actions can - as a consequence – be legitimised. As Bellah notes:

'... implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God ... The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible that the people may be wrong.'<sup>51</sup>

However, the character of contemporary American civil religion has further implications. Most studies stress its integrative role or, from a radical perspective, the part that it plays in bolstering elite domination through a process of legitimation. Both perspectives rest, despite their contrasting ideological associations, upon the notion that civil religion facilitates and encourages social integration. It is, according to Michael Novak, not only a '... a public perception of our national experience, in the light of the universal and transcendent claims upon human beings, but especially upon Americans', but also 'a set of values, symbols, and rituals institutionalized as the cohesive force and center of meaning uniting our many peoples.'<sup>52</sup> However, accounts such as these – which emphasise unity and integration - can underestimate the cleavages between the different representations of the American civil religion and the degree to which there are profound tensions between these representations. These tensions have implications for the political process. Perceptions of the nation and its religious character inform - and play a part in shaping - attitudes towards immigration, education and the role of the US in the world. Opposition to a relatively immigration policy, for example, takes a markedly intense form among those who see the US as a 'Christian' or 'Judeo-Christian' nation. Prophetic representations of the US which depict the country in terms of a progressive – but as yet unrealised - unfolding of God's will, add to the potency of demands for social justice. The different representations of American civil religion therefore have an entrenchment effect by reinforcing and 'hardening' political demands. The processes of political brokerage become less open to pragmatic adjustment and negotiation.

## TABLES

*Table 1: If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for President would you vote ... if that person happened to be an atheist (PRESATH – AJCRR96)*

	Yes	No	Don't Know	N
All	39.7	54.4	5.9	1010
Protestant	30.8	63.1	6.2	569

<b>Catholic</b>	48.4	43.6	8	188
<b>Jewish</b>	71.4	21.4	7.1	14
<b>Republican</b>	34.5	61.3	4.3	328
<b>Democrat</b>	39.2	54.3	6.5	293
<b>Independent</b>	46.2	47.8	6	318
<b>White</b>	39.3	54.8	5.9	794
<b>Black</b>	39.2	55.8	5	120
<b>Hispanic</b>	30.3	63.6	6.1	33
<b>East</b>	42.8	49	8.2	194
<b>Midwest</b>	47.8	47.4	4.7	253
<b>South</b>	29	66.1	5	383
<b>West</b>	47.8	45	7.2	180

Source: adapted from American Jewish Committee (1996) *Religious Right Survey*, [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

**Table 2: The United States is God's instrument in the fight against Communism, (GODCOM - MAS86)**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Uncertain</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>All</b>	5.3	47.6	12.6	32.4	2.1	373
<b>Male</b>	7.8	50.3	9.6	29.9	2.4	167
<b>Female</b>	3.4	45.1	15	34.5	1.9	206
<b>White</b>	4.8	47.3	11.8	33.8	2.3	355
<b>Black</b>	21.4	50	28.6	0	0	14
<b>Protestant</b>	3.4	48.3	11.4	34.3	2.5	236
<b>Catholic</b>	7.5	55	15	20	2.5	40

Source: adapted from Middletown Area Studies (1986), [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

**Table 3: General Social Survey – To be truly American ... how important is it to be a Christian? (AMCHRSTN) (1995-6)**

	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Fairly important</b>	<b>Not very important</b>	<b>Not important at all</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>All</b>	38.6	15.1	21.5	24.8	1309
<b>Protestant</b>	50	17.5	19.8	12.6	767
<b>Catholic</b>	30.8	17.7	27.9	23.6	305
<b>Jewish</b>	4.2	0	16.7	79.2	24
<b>Republican</b>	38.4	20.4	18.8	22.3	367
<b>Democrat</b>	45.9	12.1	19.8	22.2	455
<b>Independent</b>	32	14.5	25.1	28.4	462
<b>White</b>	35.5	15.4	21.9	27.2	1063
<b>Black</b>	62.1	14.7	16.9	6.2	177
<b>Other</b>	26.1	11.6	27.5	34.8	69
<b>Non-south</b>	31.2	15	23.7	30.1	855
<b>South</b>	52.4	15.4	17.4	14.8	454
<b>LT\$10,000</b>	53.6	10.1	16.7	19.6	138
<b>LT\$30,000</b>	45.6	6.8	18.5	19	399
<b>LT\$50,000</b>	34.1	18	21	26.9	305
<b>LT\$75,000</b>	27.7	18.3	30.4	23.6	191

<b>Above \$75,000</b>	29.5	10.6	24.7	35.2	227
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Source: General Social Survey, (2002), *Cumulative Datafile*, [csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin12/hsda3](http://csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin12/hsda3).

**Table 4: 'We should pass a constitutional amendment declaring the United States is a Christian nation.'**  
(AJCRR96 - USCHRIS)

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>All</b>	7.1	23.8	12	39.7	14.2	3.3	1010
<b>Protestant</b>	7.2	27.6	12.5	39.4	9.5	3.9	569
<b>Catholic</b>	6.9	22.3	11.7	44.7	11.7	2.7	188
<b>Jewish</b>	0	0	0	35.7	64.3	0	14
<b>Republican</b>	9.8	25	12.8	41.5	9.1	1.8	328
<b>Democrat</b>	6.8	26.6	8.9	34.1	18.8	4.8	293
<b>Independent</b>	5.7	20.8	12.9	42.8	15.1	2.8	318
<b>White</b>	7.2	22.8	11.6	39.8	15.6	3	794
<b>Black</b>	8.3	22.5	15.8	40	9.2	4.2	120
<b>Hispanic</b>	6.1	45.5	18.2	27.3	3	0	33
<b>East</b>	6.2	16	7.7	43.8	22.7	3.6	194
<b>Midwest</b>	5.9	20.9	13.8	45.1	12.3	2	253
<b>South</b>	8.4	30.3	13.8	34.7	9.4	3.4	383
<b>West</b>	7.2	22.2	10	38.3	17.8	4.4	180

<b>LT\$10,000</b>	10.9	36.4	12.7	25.5	9.1	5.5	55
<b>LT\$30,000</b>	6	33.5	13.8	36.7	7.2	2.8	319
<b>LT\$50,000</b>	7.2	22.8	10	42.1	15.2	2.8	290
<b>LT\$75,000</b>	4	12.7	15.1	48.4	15.9	4	126
<b>Above \$75,000</b>	9.2	7.9	5.3	39.5	36.8	1.3	76

Source: adapted from American Jewish Committee (1996) *Religious Right Survey*, [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

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<sup>1</sup> G. Gallup and D.M. Lindsay (1999), *Surveying the Religious Landscape - Trends in U.S. Beliefs*, Morehouse Publishing Company, 122.

<sup>2</sup> P. Brierley (1999), *Religion - Commentary - Researching Religion From an article written for the Economic and Social Research Council*, 11 December, [qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/topics/religion/brierley.htm#five](http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/topics/religion/brierley.htm#five).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, (1970), The war, the churches and civil religion, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, January, 134.

<sup>4</sup> ABC news.com (2002), *America Wants God in the Pledge*, July 1, [abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/pledge\\_poll020701.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/pledge_poll020701.html).

<sup>5</sup> American Jewish Committee (1996) *Religious Right Survey*, (PRESATH – AJCRR96), [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

<sup>6</sup> A.M. Manis (2002), *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict*, Macon, Mercer University Press, ix.

<sup>7</sup> R. Wuthnow (ed) (1998), *The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, London, Routledge, 153.

<sup>8</sup> E.M. West (1980), 'A proposed neutral definition of civil religion', *Journal of Church and State*, 22:1, Winter, 39.

<sup>9</sup> C. Cruise O'Brien (1988), *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 33.

<sup>10</sup> R. N. Bellah (1974), Civil Religion in America, in D.G. Jones and R.E. Richey (eds), *American Civil Religion*, New York, Harper and Row, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Ernest Lee Tuveson (1968), *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, vii.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in R.V. Pierard and R.D. Linder (1988), *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, Grand Rapids, Academie Zondervan, 276.

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<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center (2002), *Americans struggle with religion's role at home and abroad*, people-press.org/reports/print.php3?ReportID=150.

<sup>14</sup> American Religion Data Archive (1996), Do you think that the United States, as a nation, has a special relationship with God? (USGOD – REL96), [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)

<sup>15</sup> American Religion Data Archive (1986), *The United States is God's instrument in the fight against Communism*, (GODCOM - MAS86), [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

<sup>16</sup> American Religion Data Archive (1996), *Do you consider the U.S. flag to be sacred?* (FLAG - REL96), [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)

<sup>17</sup> In contrast with the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution does not, however, make reference to God.

<sup>18</sup> C. H. Long (1974), 'Civil rights - civil religion: visible people and invisible religion' in R.E. Richey and D.G. Jones (eds), *American Civil Religion*, New York, Harper and Row, 214.

<sup>19</sup> R.N. Bellah (1975), *The Broken Covenant : American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*, New York, Seabury Press, ix.

<sup>20</sup> S.P. Huntington (1982), *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 18

<sup>21</sup> To the prophetic and priestly modes, Robert D. Linder subsequently added a 'pastoral' mode which, he argues, was symbolised by Bill Clinton's presidential style. Clinton emphasised the importance of healing and the overcoming of pain. He sought to provide '... spiritual inspiration to people .. by comforting them in their afflictions'. Quoted in J. Walz (2001), 'Religion and the American presidency', in C.E. Smidt, *In God We Trust? Religion and American Political Life*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 202.

<sup>22</sup> L. S. Rouner, (1999), 'Civil religion, cultural diversity, and American civilization', *The Key Reporter*, Spring.

<sup>23</sup> C. Cruise O'Brien (1988), *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick J. Buchanan (1990), *Right from the Beginning*, Washington DC, Regnery Gateway, 63 – 64.

<sup>25</sup> C. R. Wilson (1980), *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865 - 1920*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 25.

<sup>26</sup> General Social Survey (1995-6), *Cumulative Datafile, To be truly American ... how important is it to be a Christian?* (AMCHRSTN), [csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin12/hsda3](http://csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin12/hsda3)

<sup>27</sup> E. Woodrum and A. Bell (1989), 'Race, politics, and religion in civil religion among blacks', *Sociological Analysis*, 49:4, 353-367.

<sup>28</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2003), *Different Faiths, Different Messages Americans Hearing About Iraq From The Pulpit, But Religious Faith Not Defining Opinions*, March 19, [people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=176](http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=176)

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in B. Bawer (1997), *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*, New York, Three Rivers Press, 67.

<sup>30</sup> American Religion Data Archive (1996), *We should pass a constitutional amendment declaring the United States is a Christian nation*. (AJCRR96 - USCHRIS), [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

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- <sup>31</sup> General Social Survey (1995-6), *To be truly American ... how important is it to be a Christian?* (AMCHRSTN), [csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin12/hsda3](http://csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin12/hsda3)
- <sup>32</sup> R.N. Bellah (1974), 'Civil religion in America', in R.E. Richey and D.G. Jones (eds), *American Civil Religion*, New York, Harper and Row, 24.
- <sup>33</sup> *The New York Times*, September 3 2000.
- <sup>34</sup> B. Bawer (1997), *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*, New York, Three Rivers Press, 70.
- <sup>35</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2003), *Different Faiths, Different Messages Americans Hearing About Iraq From The Pulpit, But Religious Faith Not Defining Opinions*, March 19, [people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=176](http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=176).
- <sup>36</sup> American Religion Data Archive (1996), *Religious Right Survey - 'We should pass a constitutional amendment declaring the United States is a Christian nation'*, (AJCRR96 - USCHRIS), [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).
- <sup>37</sup> General Social Survey, (2002), *Cumulative Datafile, 'To be truly American ... how important is it to be a Christian?' (AMCHRSTN - XNORCSIZ) (1995-6)*, [www.icpsr.umich.edu:8080/GSS/homepage.htm](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu:8080/GSS/homepage.htm). The differences between rural and metropolitan areas may in part be a function of age.
- <sup>38</sup> *Newsweek* (2003), March 10, 20.
- <sup>39</sup> D. Frum (2003), *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York, Random House, 3.
- <sup>40</sup> *USA Today* (2001), 'Son poised to succeed Graham', November 22, [www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2001/11/22/graham.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2001/11/22/graham.htm).
- <sup>41</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (1996), *The Diminishing Divide ... American Churches, American Politics*, [people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=126](http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=126)
- <sup>42</sup> *Christian Science Monitor* (2002), October 10.
- <sup>43</sup> Zogby International (2003), *Zogby Polls – Election 2002*, Washington DC, Zogby International, 139 – 40.
- <sup>44</sup> J. Lampman (2002), 'Charting America's religious landscape', *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 10, [www.csmonitor.com](http://www.csmonitor.com). It should be noted, against this background, that some survey data - particularly that drawn from studies conducted after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks - suggests a shift away from specifically Christian conceptions of the US. A 2002 *Newsweek* poll found that only 29 percent said they viewed the United States as "a Christian nation"; 16 percent see it as a "Biblical nation, defined by the Judeo-Christian tradition"; 45 percent see it as a "secular nation." H. Fineman (2002), 'One Nation, Under... Who?', *Newsweek*, July 8.
- <sup>45</sup> Pew Hispanic Center / The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2002), *2002 National Survey of Latinos - Summary of Findings*, Washington DC, Pew Hispanic Center / Kaiser Family Foundation, 28.
- <sup>46</sup> *US News and World Report* (2001), October 29.
- <sup>47</sup> J. Goodwell (2001), 'The uneasy assimilation', *Rolling Stone*, December 6, [www.jeffgoodell.com](http://www.jeffgoodell.com).
- <sup>48</sup> *US News and World Report*, October 29 2001.
- <sup>49</sup> Zogby International (2001), *American Muslim Poll*, 18-27.
- <sup>50</sup> J. Fonte (2001) 'Americanization now', *National Review Online*, November 8, [www.nationalreview.com](http://www.nationalreview.com).

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<sup>51</sup> R.N. Bellah (1974), 'Civil religion in America', in R.E. Richey and D.G. Jones (eds), *American Civil Religion*, New York, Harper and Row, 24-5.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in J.E. Semonche (2000), *Keeping the Faith: A Cultural History of the US Supreme Court*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 6.