Religion, derived from the Latin religionem (nom. religio), can be defined as “a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The word religio may originally derive from ligare (bind, connect), probably from a prefixed re-ligare (i.e. re [again] + ligare [to reconnect]). Literally, religion refers to the ties that bind.

Religious practices include a variety of rituals, sermons, sacrifices, feasts, initiations, prayers, music, and other aspects of a culture or society. All religions have sacred histories and narratives, which are preserved in sacred scriptures and holy places that give a meaning to life.

The concept of civil religion was first introduced by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1895), who used the term in Chapter 8, Book 4 of The Social Contract. Rousseau used the term to describe what he regarded as the moral and spiritual foundation essential for any modern society. Civil religion, in Rousseeau’s view, was intended simply as a form of social cement that helped unify the state by providing it with sacred authority.

Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Christian and Lutheran pastor who lives and works in Bethlehem, describes how the reality of empires can shape the context of the biblical stories. In his book, Faith in the face of Empire, Raheb observes, “Empires create their own theologies to justify their occupation. They create matrices of control for people and goods. (Raheb, 2014, p. 5). Early American empires, for example, created their own theologies that justified the slaughter of Native tribes who had already occupied and land these empires later endorsed a distorted interpretation of scripture that justified slavery of people who were brought to this country involuntarily.

American Civil Religion

The term American Civil Religion was coined by Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, Robert Bellah (1927-2013), who was internationally known for his work related to the sociology of religion. His 1967 article entitled “Civil Religion in America,” which was published in the Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, sparked controversial debates in the field of American sociology in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The topic of civil religion (which has also been called civic religion) became a major focus in articles and at religious sociology conferences. The debate reached its peak with the American Bicentennial celebration in 1976.

Civil religion is distinct from traditional indigenous or tribal religions, although traditional religious officials and ceremonies are sometimes incorporated into the practice of civil religion. For example, standing in the center of American history, “Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) is often seen as the greatest prophet of the American civil religion” (Marty, 1987, p. 121). In his book The Broken Covenant Bellah (1992) argues that America has experienced three periods when a large number of Americans were cynical about the American creed: the founding of the country in the late 1770s, the Civil War (1861-1865), and the civil unrest of the 1960s.

According to Wimberley and Swatos (1998, pp. 94-96), civil religion refers to the implicit religious values of a nation, as expressed through public rituals, symbols, and ceremonies on sacred days and at sacred places (such as battlefields, monuments, and national cemeteries). Civil religion may also involve founding myths and other national myths, the invocation of God in political speeches and public monuments, the quotation of religious
text by political leaders on public occasions, the veneration of past political leaders, and the veneration of veterans and casualties of the nation’s wars (Bellah, 1992).

Civil religion is not without its opponents. The most outspoken critics argue that civil religion amounts to national self-worship. At worst, nationalism can become a form of idolatry. According to Martin Marty (1987, pp. 120-121):

Modern nationalism can be an idolatry; it has taken ugly forms in some nations and [has] been used to justify terrors. Nazism in Germany, Russian Communism, and Maoism in China are forms of nationalism that bear some marks of religion, while being godless. The nationalism of even more benevolent nations can look like religion. Americans are often more respectful of the holiness of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a kind of national shrine, than they would be in a cathedral. They are more nervous about removing a national flag from their sanctuaries than they would be about removing a cross. They die for their country as they would not for their God.

American Civil Religion can be understood by considering the elements that comprise this patriotic faith tradition. Some of these elements include prayer, creed, scripture, music, shrines, holy sites, religious martyrs, and others.
Prayer
Moment of Silence

Creed
Declaration of Independence
Pledge of Allegiance (to the U.S. flag)

First High Priest
President George Washington

Religious Rituals
Salute to the American flag
Remove head-cover during National Anthem
Cover heart with right hand during Pledge of Allegiance

Holy Scripture
U.S. Constitution
Constitutional Amendments
Bill of Rights

The Epistles
The Federalist Papers

Religious Beliefs
“America is the land of opportunity.”
“My achievements are because of my own efforts.”
“You can become anything you want if you work hard enough.”

Favorite Hymns
Battle Hymn of the Republic
God Bless America

Sacred Music
Star Spangled Banner (National Anthem)

Steeple
Washington Monument

Sermons
Presidential Inaugural Addresses
State of the Union Address

Sacred Grounds
Statue of Liberty
Lincoln Memorial

Sacred Burial Sites
Gettysburg National Military Park
Tomb of the Unknown Soldier
Arlington National Cemetery

Holy Shrines
Pearl Harbor
Shrine at the site of the former World Trade Centers

Holy Days
September 11

Holy Wars
War of Independence
Civil War

Holy Crusades
The so-called War on Terror (2001—Present)
The unending Gulf War II (2003—Present)

Sacrificial Atonement
American Civil War (620,000 lives sacrificed)

Rite of Initiation
Selective Service Registration
Voter Registration

Saints (Democratic)
President Franklin D. Roosevelt
President John F. Kennedy

Saints (Republican)
President Abraham Lincoln
President Ronald Reagan

Saints (Independent)
President Thomas Jefferson

Religious Martyrs
President Abraham Lincoln
President John K. Kennedy
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Religious Indoctrination
Public School System

Religious Heresy
Conscientious Objector status

Religious Festivals
Independent Day
Memorial Day

Sacred Objects
LGM-118A Peacekeeper ICBM
AGM-114 Hellfire missile

Pax Americana
Similar to Pax Romana, this peace refers to a time of decadence among elite citizens, who disregard the suffering of those in the margins of society and at the frontiers of the empire—even though the suffering of these people makes such comforts possible for the elite.
References


This model for understanding American civil religion explains why civil religion is such a profoundly ambivalent force. Civil religion can inspire both exclusive ethno-nationalism and inclusive idealism and hospitality. The construction of an American civil religion may be credited with binding together a radically diverse nation, but the sanctification of our cherished beliefs, practices and communities may also be used to scapegoat the nonconformist and expel the other (as is being done now). At its most inclusive, American civil religion includes capacious beliefs in core A... Convinced that the influence of civil religion expands beyond the White House, the contributing scholars of this volume also explore the broader effects of civil religion upon Christian denominations and American social development. This thought-provoking work analyzes the effects of American civil religion upon American politics and Christian denominations. Focusing upon particular presidencies and specific denominations, these essays examine how civil religion has helped to define religio-political discourse, revise the way certain Christians--most notably, Baptists, Mennonites, and Pentecos