



The American Civil Religion: A Critical Review of its Nationalism

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Dr. Stephen Strehle^{§*}

*Corresponding Author



§ Christopher Newport University, Newport News, United States (OA)

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Abstract

The modern concept of civil religion manifests its fundamental purpose through inculcating nationalism and diminishing loyalty to other local communities in the name of church/state separation. This article wishes to explore the roots of the modern concept in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Robespierre, and the French Revolution and their attempt to replace the church with the state. It proceeds to exemplify the new etatism or loyalty to the state through examining the Inaugural Addresses of US Presidents and displaying the many facets of the civil religion in America that promote its national identity. Some scholars fail to appreciate the intimate relation between the civil religion and nationalism and try to make this form of religion an ideal calling for the people, often centered upon their own political agenda. These scholars fail to recognize that its strict view of church/state separation loses the possibility of providing a prophetic witness outside the state or holding it accountable to a higher court. This article rejects the strict separation of the civil religion and finds true religion developing from below within the affections of the people, not from above in some civic establishment. It is these religious affections that hold the state accountable and must find expression in public.

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AUTHOR CONTACT QR LEDGER

Dr. Stephen Strehle*



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Dr. Stephen Strehle^{§*}

Affiliations

§ Christopher Newport University, Newport News, United States (OA)

Abstract

The modern concept of civil religion manifests its fundamental purpose through inculcating nationalism and diminishing loyalty to other local communities in the name of church/state separation. This article wishes to explore the roots of the modern concept in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Robespierre, and the French Revolution and their attempt to replace the church with the state. It proceeds to exemplify the new etatism or loyalty to the state through examining the Inaugural Addresses of US Presidents and displaying the many facets of the civil religion in America that promote its national identity. Some scholars fail to appreciate the intimate relation between the civil religion and nationalism and try to make this form of religion an ideal calling for the people, often centered upon their own political agenda. These scholars fail to recognize that its strict view of church/state separation loses the possibility of providing a prophetic witness outside the state or holding it accountable to a higher court. This article rejects the strict separation of the civil religion and finds true religion developing from below within the affections of the people, not from above in some civic establishment. It is these religious affections that hold the state accountable and must find expression in public.

Keywords: *American Civil Religion, American Identity, Church and State, Etatism, Nationalism, Public Religion, secularization, Sports and Religion*

* Corresponding Author

Dr. Stephen Strehle

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide a critical exploration of the civil religion in America. It starts with an examination of two leading scholars, who are associated with the concept and noted for advancing a certain version of it as representing the “better angels of our nature.” The objectivity of their analysis is subject to criticism as the study looks at the development of the concept in eighteenth-century France and its etatism. Here the study finds the civil religion rooted in an intense form of nationalism and considers its genealogy a means of criticizing the later manifestations of it, following the famous method of Michel Foucault, who criticizes present ideas or institutions based on their roots. In fact, the study proceeds to examine all the Inaugural Addresses of US Presidents as an efficient means of revealing its nature and discovers the same nationalism or patriotism in the American version corresponding to its roots. The historical analysis finds the most indelible characteristic of the civil religion in the willingness of the state to promote its power at the expense of the church or any prophetic witness outside of it that might question its authority. In this way, the study questions those who think of the civil religion as a positive good or a means of promoting their agenda. It questions the strict view of church/state separation in the civil religion and believes a genuine prophetic voice must come outside any established form of religion in the state. It prefers to find the voice within the religious existential life of the local community - a voice that must find expression in public to hold the state accountable and should no longer be condemned to silence. At the end, the study tries to illustrate the concern in the realm of sports, where the virtues of the state serve as an alternative to private religious values in the culture at large.

2. Bellah and Gorski

Robert Bellah wrote a seminal work in 1967 that described a “well-institutionalized civil religion in America.”¹ He tried to differentiate the concept from organized religion in the article and maintain the wall of separation between church and state that proved so popular with the Court in the middle of the twentieth century and his left-wing constituency ever since. At one point, he spoke of the “religious sphere” as “essentially private” or separate from the public domain in the typical rhetoric of the time, but this binary did not prevent him from saying much the opposite or recognizing a certain “religious dimension” within the public sphere that served as an indelible aspect of its existence. He believed America contained a “founding myth” that bound its society together and interpreted its experience in terms of a “transcendent reality.”² He described the religion as a certain “set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” that he witnessed in a range of public practices like the people pledging allegiance to the flag, their officials swearing on the Bible, the nation observing a day of fasting and prayer, the erection of human rights above any political order, the apotheosis of certain leaders like Washington and Lincoln to represent the nation’s ideals, and so

¹Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96/1 (Winter 1967): 1; David Noble, “Robert Bellah, Civil Religion, and the American Jeremiad,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 65/1 (Spring 1982): 90; Clayton Fordahl, “A Tale of Two Civil Religions: Ritual, Transcendence, and the Crisis of Meaning in American Politics,” *Journal of Church and State* 66 (2024): 113.

²Ibid., 3; Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 16; Sean Everton, “American Civil Religion in the Era of Trump,” *Religions* 14/633 (2023):1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel4050633>.

forth.³ Bellah saw the civil religion of America as a positive good for the most part in this early article on the subject.

Later on, Bellah became more critical in his analysis. He came to recognize certain “deformations and demonic distortions” usurping the original Puritan vision of a national covenant and found it necessary to employ “radically different traditions” in criticizing its blind spots and excesses.⁴ He continued to extol the civil religion “at its best,” but what was best began to coincide more with his left-wing ideals: his communal and socialist ideals against the individual self-interest of capitalism; his concerns about nationalism or the ethnocentric nature of the “American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality.”⁵ These ideals led him to excoriate Richard Nixon’s Second Inaugural Address in 1974 for misusing civil religion, for inciting nationalistic pride and neglecting the egalitarian impulse of the nation to help the poor and the oppressed.⁶ This type of left-wing criticism continued in his later work and caused many to wonder about the objective nature of his sociological analysis. His critics thought the civil religion of America had more to do with individualism and free enterprise, more to do with nationalism, patriotism, and military power than Bellah would care to admit from his ideological perspective.

Unfortunately, no one came to replace the stature of Bellah in the academic community on this issue or develop a different paradigm. Too many simply followed his legacy and used the civil religion as a pretext for promoting their political point of view. Philip Gorski provides an all-too-typical example of this propensity in one of the more recent and influential works upon the subject, *American Covenant* (2017). Gorski puts on the image of a moderate and claims to represent the “vital center” of society,⁷ but his work clearly favors the interest of the left: the public over “private pleasure and consumption,” “tempering the capitalist economy with the powers of the nationalist state,” “democratizing freedom,” “counterbalanc[ing] the power of the wealthy,” and promoting collective self-government and egalitarianism against individual freedom—all in the name of the civil religion.⁸ His book spends much of its time lionizing the leaders of the left like Bill Clinton and Barak Obama for restoring the prophetic and communal voice of the civil religion, while offering only muted criticism of some of their policies. It demonizes the leaders of the right like Ronald Reagan and Jerry Falwell as “religious

nationalists” without much equivocation.⁹ Gorski only escalates the rhetoric in a more recent article on the subject, where the typical left-wing vitriol one might find on some blog or MSNBC is employed against the “juvenile libertarianism,” “loud-mouthed jingoism,” and “truculent secularism” of the Trump administration.¹⁰ One might excuse some of the rhetoric as an inevitable part of human discourse in the postmodern world. One might recognize the difficulty of addressing a highly charged subject that embraces both religion and politics in an objective manner, but the subjective nature of an account does not excuse its surrender to this level of bias. Gorski leaves us with the overall impression that the civil religion has become just a ruse or a surreptitious means of conducting an extensive diatribe against one’s political opponents.

3. French Etatism

Both Bellah and Gorski point to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as establishing the concept of civil religion in the modern world but want to distance their accounts from its nationalism. This desire has problems with the very origin and purpose of the idea in Rousseau as the concept seeks to inculcate nationalism at the expense of all else. This matter is made abundantly clear in his work on *The Government of Poland* (1772) a work that is neglected by Bellah, Gorski, and those who study or follow the civil religion. Here Rousseau makes it clear that the most essential matter in founding a state is to inculcate the “love of country” as the “governing passion” of the people.¹¹ In his mind, all is subordinate to the love of the fatherland or rule of the community over the rights of individual scruples and property.¹² He encourages erecting national institutions that provide form to the passions, customs, and tastes of the collective will, that celebrate the deeds of patriots who sacrifice everything for the country, that appeal to the ethnic pride and distinctive ways of its citizens over against the manner and nature of any other population, whether good or bad.¹³ He finds ceremonies, games, spectacles, and plays most valuable in this process, transforming the hearts of the people into a united nation and establishing order, above and beyond the coercive power of external law that people feel free to bend or twist whenever their passions are elsewhere.¹⁴ He includes a primary role for education, hoping to place it in the hands of civil servants and supply them with the commission to “shape the souls of the citizens in a national pattern,” so the students might learn from the people and about the people and become instinctively a part of the culture or willing subjects of its customs and laws from an early age.¹⁵ He says this program aligns with all the great legislators of the past - Moses, Lycurgus, and Numa - who made it their primary task to create an “indissoluble body” of the people through restrictive institutions before attempting to solicit obedience from any legal standard.¹⁶

To this end, Rousseau puts forth the idea of a “civil religion” in chapter 8, book IV of his work on *The Social Contract* (1762). He thinks of religion as necessary to the foundation of the state, as a means of enjoining adoration of the homeland and its laws

³Ibid., 4–7.

⁴Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *American Civil Religion* [ACR], Russell Richey and Donald Jones (eds.) (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), 257, 266; “Civil Religion in America” (1967), 12; Noble, “Robert Bellah,” 97–98. On the other side, he can use and emphasize the concept of an “American Israel” as an important element of the civil religion - a Puritan notion that conceived of their plantation as the epicenter of divine activity in the world. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America” (1967), 7; Meranie McGuire, “The President as High Priest: A Contemporary Case of Civil Religion,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 46/2 (2022): 64; Stephen Strehle, *The Egalitarian Spirit of Christianity: The Sacred Roots of American and British Government* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 56–57, 221–22.

⁵Ibid., 263, 267–69; “Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic,” in *The Robert Bellah Reader*, Robert Bellah and Steven Tipton (eds.) (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 259; Mona Harrington, “The Constitution and Civil Religion: Revisiting Robert Bellah,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5/1 (Fall 1987): 60, 63; Rhys Williams, Raymond Haberski, and Philip Goff, “Introduction,” 1, in *Civil Religion Today: Religion and the American Nation* [CRT], Rhys Williams, Raymond Haberski, and Philip Goff (eds.) (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 1; Rosemary Corbett, “Sacrifice, Service, and Civil Religion Now,” in CRT, 50–53, 56–57, 63; Artur Remillard, “Regions and Civil Religion(s) in America,” in CRT, 79; Wendy Wall, “Civil Religion and the Problem of Origins,” in CRT, 125, 135.

⁶Bellah, “Civil Religion in America” (1974), 260–62; Herbert Richardson, “Civil Religion in Theological Perspective,” in ACR, 164; Noble, “Robert Bellah,” 93–94. Of course, he expresses great appreciation for the inaugural addresses of Lincoln and Kennedy. Bellah had roots as a youth in left-wing thinking. Corbett, “Sacrifice, Service, and Civil Religion Now,” 50–51, 63.

⁷Gorski, *American Covenant*, 3, 233.

⁸Ibid., 36, 44, 82, 114, 188, 225.

⁹Ibid., 176–78, 182–83, 189–94, 200.

¹⁰Philip Gorski, “The Past and Future of the American Civil Religion,” in CRT, 19.

¹¹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland*, Willmoore Kendall (trans., intro., and notes) (Indianapolis, IND: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 4, 16.

¹²Ibid., 12; *The Social Contract*, Maurice Cranston (trans.) (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 24; David Little, “The Origins of Perplexity: Civil Religion and Moral Belief in the Thought of Thomas Jefferson,” in ACR, 188.

¹³Ibid., 11–14.

¹⁴Ibid., xxx–xxxii; Mark Silk, “The Utilitarian Context of American Civil Religion,” in CRT, 136–37.

¹⁵Ibid., 19–20.

¹⁶Ibid., 6.

through divine worship.¹⁷ He rejects the diverse loyalties of modern Europeans to their various churches, organizations, and activities as representing a threat to the state and its demand for complete devotion. He particularly belittles Christianity for its disloyalty to the state or attachment to an otherworldly realm. He wants to replace it in the affections of the people, substituting the prince for the pontiff, magistrates for priests, patriots for saints, those who pay the ultimate sacrifice to their country for the holy martyrs of old.¹⁸ The new religion is meant to replace the church with the coercive powers of the state and its religion.¹⁹ All this comes in the name of “toleration,” as it permits only a few dogmas that speak in general about God and the judgment to come, hoping to ward off orthodox bigotries and polemics that cause division in society; but its real goal is to destroy other expressions of faith and replace serious confess with the “sanctity of the social contract and the law.”²⁰

The French Revolution came to embody much of Rousseau’s vision of church and state. Abbé Sieyès wrote the most famous pamphlet of the times, *What is the Third Estate?* (1789). The work follows Rousseau’s concept of the “general will” and declares, “The Nation is prior to everything. It is the source of everything. Its will is always legal.”²¹ The Revolution made a concerted effort to destroy any allegiance to the former religious identities. Abbé Grégoire and the National Assembly offered the Jews citizenship in the new Republic as long as they underwent a process of *régénération*, as long as they limited the power of rabbis, mandated the use of French in religious rituals, broke up communication with other Jews, scattered their dwellings among the French people, and let their children learn French ways and customs under the direction of the state.²² During the Reign of Terror, the National Assembly conducted direct assaults upon the church and the synagogue, desecrating and then nationalizing religious property, eliminating the old religious symbols and titles for a new patriotic identity, and secularizing the clergy through the Civil Constitution and oath of allegiance to the state.²³ Jacobins were willing to use the most brutal tactics to develop a homogenous social order, where “there is no longer in the Republic Jews, nor Protestants, nor Anabaptists, nor Catholics; there are only French republicans.”²⁴

Maximilien Robespierre was the leader of the Jacobins and particularly looked to Rousseau as the greatest political pundit of the Enlightenment and Voltaire “as worthy of the office of preceptor

of the human race.”²⁵ Voltaire was a vicious anti-Semite and anti-Christian. He spoke throughout his later works of extirpating the Judeo-Christian tradition using the famous battle cry *écraser l’infâme*.²⁶ In due time, Robespierre established a civil religion to help carry out the program of Rousseau and Voltaire, to encourage faith in enlightened metaphysical principles and undermine the superstitions of the church, without resorting to acts of further violence. He denounced materialism by breaking a bust of Helvétius and decreed on May 7, 1794 that the “French people recognize the existence of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul.” He then announced the establishment of a new annual festival of the Supreme Being, in which he will proceed to torch a monument of atheism and proclaim the dawning of a new state religion based on reason, alienating Catholics and atheists alike. At the initial festival on June 8, 1794, some 500,000 spectators were gathered in the *Champs de Mars* to experience a couple of grandiose columns, an awe-inspiring mountain, the singing of patriotic hymns, and symbols of the Revolution like a liberty tree and statute of wisdom. Robespierre, the newly elected president of the Convention, appeared at the head of the procession of deputies, all dressed in blue regalia and bearing a bouquet of berries, grain, and flowers, causing some to grumble about the new *pontifex maximus* and wondering about his new powers.²⁷ Robespierre went on to address the sacred gathering invoking the name of God to justify the principles of the Revolution, declaring that the Creator made all of us free and equal and has given a sacred mandate to bring “our wrath against tyrannical plots” and destroy the “impious league of kings” by using the “death sentence.” He particularly encouraged the people to follow the heroes and the martyrs of liberty in giving their lives to the cause, believing that those who die for the sake of freedom will live forever with God and receive the eternal gratitude of the nation.²⁸

From its beginning, civil religion seemed little more than an establishment of a certain ideology in public that finds its principal purpose in replacing the church with a commitment to the state or someone’s concept of it. It led to the later French concept of a strict separation between church and state that developed out of the Revolution in the Third Republic and deigned to replace the church with the power of the state, except this time naming its ideals “secular” (*laïcité*) and providing them with an established

¹⁷Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 159–61; N. J. Demerath and Rhys H. Williams, “Civil Religion in an Uncivil Society,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 480 (July 1985): 55.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 160–65; *The Government of Poland*, 8–9.

¹⁹Eric Morrow, et al., “Between Public Justification and Civil Religion: Shared Values in a Divided Time,” *Religions* 14/133 (2023): 8, <http://doi.org/10.3390/rel4020133>.

²⁰Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 166; Bellah, “Civil Religion in America” (1967), 5; Clayton Fordahl, “A Tale of Two Civil Religions: Ritual, Transcendence, and the Crisis of Meaning in American Politics,” *Journal of Church and State* 66 (2024): 114–15; Silk, “The Utilitarian Contract,” 36.

²¹Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*, M. Blondel (trans.), S. E. Finer (ed.), Peter Campbell (intro.) (New York, Washington, and London: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1964), 18, 124–27, 146, 147, 151, 157, 170. See William Scott, “The Pursuit of ‘Interests’ in the French Revolution: A Preliminary Survey,” *French Historical Studies* 19/3 (Spring 1996): 823, 826. Like the National Assembly, he never renounced property rights and even contributed to the bourgeois distinction between active and passive citizens, which gave to male property owners the right to vote.

²²Grégoire, *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs*, in *La Révolution Française et l’émancipation des Juifs* (Paris: EDHIS, 1958), 5–7, 16, 17, 20, 44, 64, 71–80, 83, 86, 99–103, 108–112, 118–26, 131–32, 139, 145–55, 160, 166–67, 179, 183–90.

²³Stephen Strehle, *The Dark Side of Church/State Separation: The French Revolution, Nazi Germany, and International Communism* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 77–78.

²⁴*Discours prononcé par Balthazar Faure* (Nancy: P. Barbier, an II), 7ff. [as cited by Zosa Szajkowski, *Jews and the French Revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, INC., 1970), 402].

²⁵*Oeuvres Complètes de Robespierre* [OCR] (Paris: E. Leroux, 1910–), 10.454–56; Hector Fleischmann, *Charlotte Robespierre et ses Mémoires* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1909), 290–92; Paul R. Hanson, *Contesting the French Revolution* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 14–15; 27; John Hardman, *Robespierre* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), 14.

²⁶*Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877–85), 24.252; 42.186 [A Letter to Damilaville on July 26, 1762, where he says, “I finish all my letters by saying: Écr. L’inf. . . .”]; Norman L. Torrey, *Voltaire and the English Deists* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1967), 8; Peter Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as a Realist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 170, 239, 244–46, 252; David Friedrich Strauss, *Voltaire: Sechs Vorträge* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1870), 277, 278; A. J. Ayer, *Voltaire* (New York: Random House, 1986), 27; Charles Gliozzo, “The Philosophes and Religion: Intellectual Origins of the Dechristianization Movement in the French Revolution,” *Church History* 40/3 (Sept. 1971): 275 (n. 12). There is some controversy over the precise interpretation of the phrase *écraser l’infâme*, but the apparent meaning is to extirpate Christianity. He says in his *Notebooks* (324) that if Frederick of Prussia, his patron, was more daring he could have destroyed the religion.

²⁷OCR 10.442, 463, 464, 480; Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité en France*, 15; John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (New York and Evanston, IL: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 102; Hardman, *Robespierre*, 122–24; Lewis, *French Revolution*, 97, 101, 102. There were a number of festivals throughout the land dedicated to reason, liberty, deism/atheism, etc., and the Directory will continue to sponsor/tolerate them. Jacques-Louis David, the friend of Robespierre and director of art during the Jacobin Republic, was put in charge of this particular festival. Robespierre provided for special commissions to write hymns in honor of the heroes/martyrs of liberty. OCR 10.459–61, 464, 480; Lewis, *French Revolution*, 97; McManners, *French Revolution and the Church*, 101, 102.

²⁸OCR 10.481–83. He also speaks of the tyranny of the priesthood.

or privileged status.²⁹ In either case, the state is intended to replace the church. Sometimes the two approaches are combined or made indistinguishable through employing esoteric transcendent categories that few recognize as religious. Here the God-talk is limited to represent an “inclusive” message, making the net effect much the same in both approaches, whether one wants to label it religious or not.³⁰ Here religion becomes diluted in a desire to please as many people as possible and lacks the serious confession of individual belief. Here it is only used as a vehicle to promote the patriotic cause and not an end in itself. The basic intent is to establish some form of etatism in the affections of the people, over against traditional religious expression in the communities.

4. Public Religion

This concept of the civil religion is much different than one that recognizes the right of individuals or the community to express their faith in the public forum and build a political consensus from their religious ideas. Both might think of the state as an expression of religious ideals, but the latter does not establish the authority of the state and starts from below, honoring the existential and developing faith of the people. It rejects establishing any form of religious ideas as a device of the state to guarantee its place with a priori privileges. Émile Durkheim is certainly right to speak of religion as an indelible part of the *civitas*, as a necessary means of bringing society together with a “collective conscious,”³¹ lifting up the individual above the material world and representing the highest moral ideal and intellectual reality;³² but it is important to remember the origin of the community in the spiritual life of the people if one wishes to respect their liberty. It is important to find the place

²⁹Jean-François Zorn, “La Division dans la Séparation,” *Études théologiques et religieuses* 82/1 (2007): 105–107. Jean Jaurès said, “We are fighting the church and Christianity because they are the negation of human right and contain the source of intellectual bondage.” Jaurès was particularly instrumental in developing the law of 1905 and constructing the French notion of *laïcité*. He viewed the Protestants as schismatics and wanted France to develop an organic unity in accordance with the designs of the French Revolution, not the pluralism/fragmentation of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Francis de Pressensé was also instrumental in developing the law. He was son of Edmund de Pressensé, who argued for church/state separation as a Protestant, and looked to the US and Scotland on the issue. Jean Baubérot, *Histoire de laïcité en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 4, 87; “1905-2005: La Laïcité Française et les Minorités Religieuses,” *Études théologiques et religieuses* 82/1 (2007), 73; Steven Hause, “French Protestants, Laicization, and the Separation of the Churches and the State,” in *Religious Differences in France: Past and Present* (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2006), 149, 150, 159. Aristide Briand, who served eleven times as Prime Minister, was also instrumental in developing the law, helping to defend it and nurture it through the political process. Émile Combe set the stage for the law as a radical Freemason and Prime Minister from 1902-1905. He wanted to emancipate public schools from religious influence and was instrumental in the law of July 7, 1904 barring religious orders from teaching. He closed thousands of religious schools, and thousands of priests and nuns left France. Baubérot, *Histoire de laïcité en France*, 78-80. His anti-clericalism was fueled by the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906), where a Jewish army officer was falsely accused and punished for selling French military secrets to the German government. Combe and others blamed Catholics for this act of anti-Semitism, basically because of the high-profile of the Assumptionist Order and its anti-Semitic newspaper *La Croix*. The pope denounced anti-Semitism within France, ending any connection between the church and this type of bigotry. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), 116–17.

³⁰Mona Harrington, “The Constitution and Civil Religion: Revisiting Robert Bellah,” 60, 63; Flavio Hickel, “Civil Religion and Religious Independents: Examining the Beliefs of Atheists, Agnostics, and the Unaffiliated,” *Journal of Church and State* 61/4 (2019): 635.

³¹Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Karen Fields (trans. and intro.) (New York: The Free Press, 1995), xix, xxxiv, xliii, xlvii–xlix, 4, 9, 169, 224–25, 429; Herbert Richardson, “Civil Religion in Theological Perspective,” in ACR, 166; “Introduction,” in CRT, 10–11.

³²*Ibid.*, 15, 229–30, 425. Durkheim does not emphasize the ideal as much as others. The Founding Fathers thought of religion as providing the foundation for society and moral life. Sometimes the civil religion does not lead to social unity but invites a backlash and polarization in society engendered by those who feel disenfranchised. Abigail Vegter, Andrew Lewis, and Cammie Jo Bolin, “Which civil religion? Partisanship, Christian nationalism, and the dimensions of civil religion in the United States,” *Politics and Religion* 16 (2023): 286, 297; Silk, “The Utilitarian Context,” 40–41; Fordahl, “A Tale of Two Cities,” 115.

and form of religion coming from their present existential life and arising in the midst of their communities of faith, not from the state or some permanent established form of religion from the top-down. In this way, public expressions of religion represent the faith of the people and negate the power of the state to impose some form of dead orthodoxy upon them, placing everything under an eraser.

Indeed, the proponents of civil religion seem to have some sympathy with these comments. Both Bellah and Gorski want to distant their position from the coercive and excessive approach of Rousseau, Robespierre, and the French *état*, but their fundamental position and approach proceed in much the same direction. From the beginning, Bellah wants to distinguish the “religious dimension” in the “political realm” from organized religion and discount the influence of the latter in society, calling for the same separation of the church and state as the French. He says, “The principle of separation of church and state guarantees the freedom of religious belief and association, but at the same time clearly segregates the religious sphere, which is considered essentially private, from the political one.”³³ He wants to establish this civil religious dimension as some sort of “institutionalized” or “founding myth” that has permanent authority to interpret and judge “historical experience in light of transcendent reality.”³⁴ This vision becomes only darker as it grows into a collective or socialist state in his and Gorski’s work encompassing more and more aspects of society and sentencing the church to its margins. The civil religion only expands its domain and adds to the A-list those who fulfil the left-wing mission (or are interpreted in this manner) - “heroes” and “saints” like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, Frederick Douglass, and Jane Addams - everyone else on the right is discounted.³⁵

The fact is that a simple form of the civil religion does not exist as Bellah and Gorski want to portray it. John Wilson points out the difficulty of finding in American history a definitive “institutionalized, well-developed, and differentiated civil religion.”³⁶ The religion does not exist in a unified form like some orthodox creed with a list of dogmas that might be presented to the people. Martin Marty thinks many of its proponents simply make it up as they go along and pick and choose what represents their ideals, labelling whatever they believe the civil religion.³⁷ Much of this seems to be the case with Bellah and Gorski, who are clearly driven by ideological commitments.

Marty goes on to speak of two forms of the religion that are often mixed together in the accounts: One representing a “priestly” concern that brings comfort to the people through commending their place in the divine kingdom as anointed with the Spirit and chosen for a sacred mission; the other representing a “prophetic” concern that turns around and criticizes the people for failing to live up to their obligations in light of the religious calling.³⁸ Most scholars find the dichotomy helpful and particularly like to emphasize the prophetic role as most significant in preventing the apotheosizing of the nation.³⁹ Bellah and Gorski emphasize this role and use it to criticize the “deformations and demonic distortions” of the civil religion, the *bête noire* of nationalism, capitalism, militarism, and

³³*Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴Bellah, “Civil Religion in America” (1967), 4; Wall, “Civil Religion and the Problem of Origins,” 119–20; Gorski, *American Covenant*, 16.

³⁵Gorski, *American Covenant*, 31.

³⁶John Wilson, “A Historian’s Approach to Civil Religion,” in CRT, 137.

³⁷Martin Marty, “Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” 142.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 144–45; Robert Wuthnow, “Divided We Fall: America’s Two Civil Religions,” *The Christian Century* 105/3 (Apr 20, 1988): 398; “Introduction,” in CRT, 11; Morrow, et al., “Between Public Justification and Civil Religion,” 7.

³⁹“Introduction,” in ARC, 15–16; Sidney Meade, “The ‘Nation’ with the Soul of the Church,” in ACR, 60.

other right-wing notions.⁴⁰ The prophetic function allows them to criticize many dangers on the right; it just never turns around and challenges their ideological strictures or conception of the civil religion that they wish to impose on others.⁴¹ A true prophetic witness must come from below and challenge any establishment from above within the state.

5. Inaugural Addresses

Bellah's seminal work concentrated its study upon the Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents as a convenient place to start looking for the civil religion.⁴² The focus provided a helpful suggestion for revealing the hopes and dreams of the nation in the civil religion of a certain era but had limited value since it discussed only a few of the addresses that commanded its attention. To correct the problem, our study finds it necessary to search all the addresses and discuss the religious/political expressions within them as much as possible, instead of concentrating on a few cases or what suits a limited purpose.⁴³ In this way, the prescriptive analysis of Bellah and Gorski has the possibility of broadening its perspective and giving way to a more descriptive or objective point of view. The method remains within the limits of human subjectivity but hopes to exhibit more objectivity than most in broadening the understanding and escaping a pervasive bias that controls those who wish to inculcate a specific version of the civil religion.

The first observation worth mentioning concerns the God-talk. All the addresses refer to God in one way or another except the shortest of the addresses, the second inaugural address of Washington that contains very little worth noting in its two brief paragraphs. The Presidents make continual reference to divine providence⁴⁴ or the God who has protected us in the past and will protect us in the future if we continue to rely on the Almighty.⁴⁵ They speak about

the importance of faith⁴⁶ or the need to seek divine guidance and serve the divine will.⁴⁷ They sometimes assign attributes to the Almighty like power, justice, goodness, and love;⁴⁸ often mention the sacred nature of their oath before God;⁴⁹ refer to the significance of placing their hands on the Bible;⁵⁰ and quote from it now and then in parts of their addresses.⁵¹ Almost all of them ask the Almighty to bless and watch over the nation,⁵² to guide, protect, aid, strengthen, and lead it;⁵³ on certain occasions they exhort the citizens to lift up the administration in their daily lives and continue to pray that God might bring peace, unity, liberty, happiness, and prosperity to this great nation.⁵⁴

A few Presidents found it important to lead the nation in prayer. George Bush makes it a point to underscore his prayer as the "first act" of his presidency. Washington starts the precedent in his first inaugural address and prays for peace, unity, happiness, and wisdom. Polk prays for God to continue blessing the country. Eisenhower asks God to give his administration strength to serve the people and do good in a spirit of unity. Bush asks God for peace and the ability to serve the divine will through helping people. Both Reagan and Biden lead the nation in a moment of silence to honor those who have fallen of late.⁵⁵

A couple of the Presidents show some homage to the Christian faith, but most make only general references to religion. Adams thinks it is important to respect Christianity in the public square, and Harrison mentions his "profound reverence for the Christian religion"; but other Presidents emphasize pluralism and make no serious mention of the Christian foundation of the nation. Jefferson wants to banish the bigotry of sectarianism that has caused so much suffering through the years and suggests proceeding toward a more general "benign religion" that embraces all true faiths and their common belief in divine providence and the practice of honesty, truth, love, and other basic moral virtues. Clinton also finds religious or sectarian prejudice responsible for much of the evil in the world and extols religious, racial, and political diversity working together to accomplish common objectives. George W. Bush finds the "edifice of character" sustained by a variety of faiths and sacred documents like the Mosaic law, Sermon on the Mount, and the Koran. Obama goes so far as to include atheists in the mix, declaring we are a nation of all sorts of believers and unbelievers.⁵⁶

Christianity receives no credit for providing the spiritual matrix of the nation and its government. The addresses ignore the many sectarian groups who first came to this country in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and concentrate upon the leading figures of the Revolutionary War, the authors of the subsequent Constitution, and future Presidents, exalting them as the "founding fathers" of the nation.⁵⁷ In this myth, George Washington's name arises above all

⁴⁰Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" (1967), 12; Gorski, *American Covenant*, 176–78, 182–83; Fordahl, "A Tale of Two Civil Religions," 16; "Introduction," in CRT, 11; Hickel, "Civil Religion and Religious Independents," 61.

⁴¹Richardson, "Civil Religion in Theological Perspective," 164.

⁴²The study of Inaugural Addresses tells us more about the popular will of the people at the time or their hopes and dreams in electing a President than what the President believes on specific issues. It provides a sententious way to find what the people believe about the civil religion at least after listening to the dominant themes, the many sides, and the fundamental movement of the addresses down through the years. The study might supply some glimpse into a President's vision, but it hardly constitutes an overall assessment of what a President actually believes on the various themes or individual issues.

⁴³There are some scholars who provide an exhaustive study of the Inaugural Addresses and develop a list of the basic themes. Most studies try to develop a fair assessment, but they all have some focus in generating categories to study and find or not find the material to fit into the boxes. Our study is no different. It might be open to what is present in the addresses, but it is also looking for certain matters like nationalism or the balance of policies and missing other ways to classify and interpret the material. David Ericson "finds" the following list: civic virtue, nonpartisanship, national unity, general policy principles, cooperation with Congress, popular support, a providential supreme being, the American mission, political continuity, the president's role as defender of the Constitution and union, and federalism. Richard Kinnier lists these values: liberty, belief in God, patriotism, justice, personal responsibility, peace, prosperity, caring for others, domestic tranquility, truth/honesty, courage, equality, happiness, and lower taxes. David Ericson, "Presidential Inaugural Addresses and American Political Culture," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27/4 (Fall 1997): 728–730; Richard Kinnier, et al., "Values Extolled in U.S. Presidential Inaugural Addresses," *Counseling and Values* 48 (Jan. 2004): 129.

⁴⁴WW2 1917, 4; USG2 1873, 1; USG1 1869, 2; JBC 1857, 8; FP 1853, 3; ZT 1849, 3–4; JT 1841, 1, 5; JQA 1825, 7; JM1 1817, 8; JA 1797, 1. The references come from the online website of "The American Presidency Project." The first two or three letters are the President's initials, then an indication of the number of the address in the case of those who delivered more than one address, next the year, and then finally the page number(s) at the website.

⁴⁵AJ1 1829, 4; JM2 1821, 11. The references to God are inclusive and vague. Most think of the Almighty as active in history and attentive to their appeals. Ioana Iancu and Delia Cristina Balaban, "Religious Influences in Inaugural Speeches of U.S. Presidents," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 12/34 (Spring 2013): 105; Ericson, "Presidential Inaugural Addresses," 736.

⁴⁶DJT2 2025, 3; RN2 1973, 6; HST 1949, 8; GC2 1893, 6.

⁴⁷BO2 2013, 6; RN2 1973, 6; FDR4 1945, 2–3; FDR3 1941, 5; CC 1925, 10.

⁴⁸GB 1989, 6; GC1 1885, 5; WHH 1841, 17; JM2 1821, 11.

⁴⁹JB 2021, 1; LBJ 1965, 1; JFK 1961, 1; FDR4 1945, 1; HH 1929, 1; WM1 1897, 10; GC2 1893, 1; JQA 1825, 1.

⁵⁰JC 1977, 1; WGH 1921, 9.

⁵¹JB 2021, 5; WJC1 1993, 5; JC 1977, 1; JFK 1961, 3–4; WGH 1921, 9.

⁵²DJT2 2025, 9; JB 2021, 7; DJT1 2017, 5; GWB2, 2005, 6; GWB1 2001, 5; WJC2 1997, 6; WJC1 1993, 6; GB 1989, 6; RR2 1985, 1, 8; RR1 1981, 7; JFK 1961, 5; DDE2 1957, 1; FDR1 1933, 6; JG 1881, 8; JB 1857, 8; JM1 1817, 9; JA 1797, 6.

⁵³RR1 1981, 4, 7; JFK 1961, 5; HST 1949, 8; FDR 1933, 6; HH1929, 11; WW2 1917, 4; WW1 1913, 4–5; WHT 1909, 14; WM2 1901, 2; WM1 1897, 1; GC2 1893, 6; BH 1889, 2; CAA 1881, 2; RBH 1877, 7; JP 1845 2, 12; MVB 1837, 10; AJZ 1833, 4; TJ1 1801, 5.

⁵⁴RN2 1973, 6; DDE1 1953, 8; USG1 1869, 4; JM2 1821, 2.

⁵⁵GW1 1789, 4; JP 1845, 12; DDE1 1953, 1; GB 1989, 2; RR2 1985, 1; JB 2021, 6.

⁵⁶JA 1797, 6; WHH 1841, 19; TJ1 1801, 3; WJC2 1997, 3; GWB2 2005, 5; BO1 2009, 4. The "benign religion" of Jefferson just happens to coincide with his own. Stephen Strehle, *Forces of Secularity in the Modern World* (New York, Peter Lang, 2018–20), 1.188–89, 195–96.

⁵⁷WH 1921, 1; TR 1905, 3; JG 1881, 1–2; FP 1853, 2–8; MVB 1837, 7; JQA 1825, 1–2.

else as setting the greatest example for his compatriots and receiving the most exalted status as the father of the country.⁵⁸ Here the civil religion provides the clearest testimony to its dark side or desire to replace organized religion with a new devotion to a different set of ideal forms. The new religion creates a myth that makes no mention of the Puritans, no mention of those who served at the epicenter of the Revolution and brought the basic elements of the American form of government to these shores, no mention of their monumental contributions to democratic and egalitarian values, federal or covenant-based polity, the separation and balance of powers, natural rights and local rule or liberty.⁵⁹ It makes no mention of other groups like the Quakers who first expanded the democratic and egalitarian message on the grassroots level to include blacks and women.⁶⁰ It makes no mention of any sectarian group and prefers to replace them with people like Washington, Jefferson,

and Lincoln.⁶¹ It makes the sectarian groups appear irrelevant to corporate life and revises the history of the country to make the people focus elsewhere and replace religious patriarchs of old with a new set of saints, just like the vision of Rousseau and the French model.

Of course, this outward testimony does not prevent the underlying sectarian groups from exerting their influence. The Puritan texture is most visible in the country's exaltation of its place in the world as a "City on a Hill," bringing the light of its ideals and progress to other nations. Much like the Puritans, the Presidents often think of America as the epicenter of God's activity and burdened with a commission to lead the rest of humankind to a brighter tomorrow.⁶² The Presidents feel that God has "singularly favored" the nation, leading it "every step" along the way toward its position of responsibility in the world.⁶³ Heaven bestowed upon it the "richest blessings" of any nation, the "most perfect form of government and union ever devised," "far exceed[ing] in excellence those of other people."⁶⁴ Nixon says,

"America's record in this century has been unparalleled in the world's history for its responsibility, for its generosity, for its creativity, and for its progress. Let us be proud that our system has produced and provided more freedom and more abundance, more widely shared, than any system in the history of the world."

Clinton agrees and sees America on a "long, heroic journey,"⁶⁵ commissioned "to go forever upward" in leading the world into the future.⁶⁶ Many Presidents join the chorus and see no limit to human potential, finding nothing "we cannot do" to fulfil our dreams, "nothing stand[ing] in our way."⁶⁷ They particularly believe that our freedom and democracy are always on the march throughout the world, reconstructing civilization with an infinite potential for progress in all areas of life.⁶⁸ Lincoln feels the march of history reveals the will of God, as if truth is related to the outcome of events.⁶⁹ Obama does not "want to be on the wrong side of history," believing that the culture is always progressing in a Hegelian manner toward higher and higher forms and condemning those who are left behind.⁷⁰ Harding speaks of the "God-given destiny of our Republic"—a manifest destiny of progress that justifies America's desire to civilize those who are standing in the way.⁷¹ In this scenario,

⁵⁸TR 1905, 3; BH 1889, 2; GC1 1885, 2; ZT 1849, 2; TJ1 1801, 5; JA 1797, 4; Cynthia Toolin, "American Civil Religion from 1789 to 1981: A Content Analysis of Presidential Inaugural Addresses," *Review of Religious Research* 25/1 (Sept. 1983): 43. Adams seems to be the only one who recognized the basic principles of the Constitution were already established in some states, especially his own. JA 1797, 2. After all, he finished the first volume of *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* just before the Constitutional Convention. It enjoyed a wide circulation among the delegates. The Constitution of Massachusetts (1780) is a Puritan-based document. Strehle, *Egalitarian Spirit of Christianity*, 61; *Forces of Secularity*, 1,221

⁵⁹M. Stanton Evans, *The Theme is Freedom: Religion, Politics, and the American Tradition* (Washington, DC: Regnery Pub., 1994), 201; Strehle, *The Egalitarian Spirit of Christianity*, passim; *The Rise and Fall of Christian Civilization in the Modern World* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2026), chaps. 1–5. David Hume gives the Puritans the sole credit for the present liberties in England and its modern system of government. David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1983), 2,522–25; 4,124, 144–45, 368; 5,215–16, 256–57. The story of democracy coming to America is not difficult to tell or understand. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the churches served at the center of the communities. Town meetings and church meetings in New England were one and the same. There was no Machiavellian divide between the church and state in their mentality to separate life into separate compartments. The Reformed believed in reforming all levels of society beginning with the church and continuing throughout all of society. During the Puritan Revolution, all sides of the conflict speak of the intimate relation between the various factions' view of church polity and state polity. The factions or sectarian groups are often named after their view of polity, showing how significant the polity is to their identity. There is Catholicism, where there is one "universal" church and factions are forbidden; there is Episcopalianism, where a hierarchy of "bishops" (Gk. *episcopoi*) are in charge; there is Presbyterianism, where the presbyters or elders are elected by the people and rule as an aristocracy; there is Congregationalism, where the congregation or people rule in autonomous churches that are fiercely committed to independent local rule or liberty. At the beginning of the American Revolution, three-quarters of the country was Reformed; nine-tenths of the churches were Congregationalist in Massachusetts, the epicenter of the revolution. Strehle, *Egalitarian Spirit of Christianity*, 49, 56–57, 62; Thomas Case, *Two Sermons Lately Preached at Westminster* (London: I. Raworth, 1642), 2,13, 16; Ernest Barker, "The Achievement of Cromwell," in *Cromwell*, Ivan Roots (ed.) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), 8; Austin Woolrych, "Oliver Cromwell and the Rule of the Saints," in *Cromwell*, 52; "A Whisper in the Ear of Mr. Thomas Edwards, Minister," in *The Writings of William Walwyn*, in J. R. Michael and B. Taft (eds.) (Athens, GA and London: The University of Georgia, 1989), 176–77; Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil War in England* (Oxford University Press, 1840), 1,387; R. N. Stromberg, *Religious Liberalism in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 124; Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 1,28, 29, 70, 107ff.; Robert Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691–1780* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 109–110; Evans, *The Theme is Freedom*, 200–201; H. S. Stout, "Preaching the Insurrection," *Christian History* 15/2 (1996): 17; Howard Miller, "The Grammar of Liberty: Presbyterians and the First American Constitution," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (1976): 151–56; Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*, 310, 340, 342, 393, 394, 396; Marilyn Westerlank, *The Triumph of the Laity: Scots-Irish Piety and the Great Awakening, 1625–1760* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 137, 142–43; J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832* (Cambridge and New York: University Press, 1994) 208, 290–91. 155; Darrett Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 62, 65; Joshua Miller, *The Rise and Fall of Democracy in Early America, 1630–1789: The Legacy of Contemporary Politics* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1991), 27, 34. The notions of a "general parish meeting" and a "general town meeting" were synonymous in early colonial times. These notions have antecedents in East Anglia, a stronghold of Puritan sentiments in England, and were transplanted to America. David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 196.

⁶⁰Stephen Strehle, "The Priesthood of the Believers: Quakers and the Abolition of Slavery," *Religions* 14/11 (Nov. 2023).

⁶¹TR 1905, 3; WHH 1841, 10; Lloyd Warner, "An American Sacred Ceremony," in ACR, 96. Washington founded the Republic and Lincoln preserved it.

⁶²Strehle, *The Egalitarian Spirit of Christianity*, 213–23. E.g., Jonathan Edwards, , *Polypoikilos Sophia. A Compleat History Or Survey Of all the Dispensations and Methods of Religion* (London, 1699), 610–15, 621, 634, 637, 642, 665–72, 689–9, 695, 724–25, 731–35, 744. Christopher Hill finds this westward movement in Herbert, Sibbes, Ward, Vaughan, Trapp, Winstanley, and Twisse. According to Twisse, "many divines saw a westward movement, and he himself wondered whether New England might not become the New Jerusalem." *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), 139, 140. Toolin finds the theme of destiny and light to the nations in 45 of the 49 addresses she examines. "American Civil Religion," 43–44.

⁶³WM1 1897, 1; GW1 1789, 2; RN2 1973, 1–3; TR 1905, 2; JB 1857 1, 4; FP 1853, 2–3, 8; JM1 1809, 3–4.

⁶⁴JB 1857, 1; JP 1845, 2–3; WHH 1841, 19; JM1 1817, 8.

⁶⁵RN2 1973, 2.

⁶⁶WJC1 1993, 4; WJC2 1997, 6.

⁶⁷DJT2 2025, 8.

⁶⁸GB2 2005, 2, 6; GB1 2001, 2; GB 1989, 2; JFK 1961, 2; FDR3, 1941; BO1 2009, 6; RR2 1985, 2; RN1 1969, 1–23; FP 1853, 4; FDR4 1945, 2; HH 1929, 7, 11; WGH 1921, 3, 7; WM2 1901, 3; WM1 1897, 5; JM1 1809, 1–2; TJ2 1805, 4–5.

⁶⁹AL1 1861, 9; AL2 1865, 2. Cleveland also finds God "revealed in our country's history."

⁷⁰BO1 2009, 5.

⁷¹WGH 1921, 9.

America's values belong to the world.⁷² Some early Presidents speak with great pride of expanding territory, adding stars to the flag, and populating the land between the "two great oceans."⁷³ Jefferson thinks the Indians will be run over in the process if they do not stop their obstinacy toward change and adopt the superior ways of the settlers in agriculture, housing, morality, and every other area of life.⁷⁴

The only President to provide a sustained prophetic criticism of the country and its founding is William Henry Harrison. He uses the occasion to analyze the Constitution fifty years down the road and ask whether the hopes and dreams of the founders are coming to fruition. He finds the experiment successful for the most part in many significant areas, allaying some of the original fears over issues like the place of states' rights in the union, but he also finds other areas that need addressing - some coming from serious "defects" in the original document; others from a subsequent misconstrual of its provisions.⁷⁵ He expresses particular concern about the amount of power the framers invested in his own executive branch, with its control over officers in the treasury and the "whole resources of the country," with its authority over the bureaucracy of civil servants as the "sole distributor of all patronage of government," hoping to assign more of this authority to the legislature and prevent the possibility of corruption in the future.⁷⁶ His analysis represents the longest and most scholastic address in the nation's history; it also represents the most prophetic of all the addresses in challenging the founding myth of American perfection.

The other Presidents are not so prophetic but still offer an ethical point of view. They conceive of the country as performing a "spiritual" mission, serving certain ethical ideals or natural rights that unite the country together and transcend the typical underlying rationale for forging a national identity around "blood or birth or soil."⁷⁷ Carter says the nation's international affairs are dedicated to ethical principles more than the exhibition of military strength.⁷⁸ Madison speaks of following the dictates of just war theory when confronting foreign hostilities, only going to war for a just reason (*ius ad bellum*) and only conducting a war in a just manner (*ius in bello*).⁷⁹ Franklin Roosevelt wants to apply moral or social principles to the economy and move away from the self-interest of capitalism or the profit incentive in business.⁸⁰ Even a Republican like George Bush finds service to others more important and fulfilling than material possessions.⁸¹ Kennedy offers some of the most inspiring ethical exhortations. He offers aid to help mitigate the crippling poverty in foreign nations, "not because we seek their votes, but because it is right." He says, "[W]e shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival

and the success of liberty." He asks his "fellow Americans" to "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."⁸² Most Presidents stick to this script, but a few mitigate the ethical and altruistic commission under certain circumstances. A few mention the advice of Washington in his famous Farewell Address and refuse to entangle the nation in foreign affairs.⁸³ The current President might represent the biggest departure from the commission with his "America first" policy, feeling other nations have "taken advantage" or ripped us off, pouring through our borders, conducting unbalanced trade policies, and asking us for aid to support their problems and conflicts.⁸⁴

The ethical high ground becomes a particular problem for the nation when discussing the ill-treatment of African Americans. Early on, Presidents find it necessary to justify the institution of slavery as a matter of states' rights under the Constitution and a means of keeping the peace, but offering no particular ethical argument to continue the practice.⁸⁵ Even Lincoln recognizes the Constitutional rights of slaveowners in his First Inaugural Address and expresses his willingness to return fugitive slaves to their masters and sign a law pledging the federal government will "never interfere" in the domestic rights of the slave states, just to keep the peace and preserve the union.⁸⁶ After the end of slavery, the Presidents speak of "equality before the law" for all citizens regardless of one's race or the color of one's skin, often following the language of the Gettysburg Address that declares "all men are created equal."⁸⁷ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they recognize that racism is a fact of life in parts of the South and hope the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment will bring some relief to the problem with the right to vote,⁸⁸ but the Presidents are not so aggressive about civil rights at this time and express some sympathy for certain southern districts restricting "uneducated negroes" from voting, as long as the same standard of education is applied equally to all potential voters.⁸⁹ In modern times, right-wing Presidents embrace the more passive approach and dream of a colorblind society citing the words of Martin Luther King;⁹⁰ the left propose enacting a more affirmative policy of action and wish to expand the doctrine of equality to an increasing number of other people - women, gays, immigrants, and the poor.⁹¹

The addresses exhibit a tension between the left-wing interest to unite the country together for a common purpose under the collective whole and the right-wing interest to liberate individuals from excessive government power. Many Presidents represent left-wing interests in calling the country to act together and wishing to take collective action or increase government involvement as a more efficient way to resolve social problems.⁹² Lincoln thinks the union is a "perpetual" bond that exists above the Constitution and recognizes no right for a state or future generation of Americans

⁷²WW2 1917, 3. Truman wants to improve the standard of living for all people, not just Europeans. Clinton and Obama sees no clear distinction between domestic and foreign responsibility when it comes to the global economy, the environment, poverty, hunger, the arms race, the AIDs crises, etc. TR 1949, 4–7; WJC1 1993, 3; BO2 2013, 3–4; BO1 2009, 2.

⁷³FP 1853, 3; JP 1845, 9–11.

⁷⁴TJ2 1805, 3–4. Of course, other Presidents have a different opinion. Monroe discusses the problem of driving Indians off their land as the nation proceeds westward and proposes providing some recompense, treating them as a sovereign nation, giving them individual tracts, etc. JM2 1821, 1–2.

⁷⁵WHH 1841, 8.

⁷⁶WHH 1841, 9–11, 16.

⁷⁷GWB1 2001, 1–2; JC 1977, 2, 4; JFK 1961, 1–2; DDE1 1953, 3–4; HST 1949, 3; CC 1925, 5; BH 1889, 11; WHH 1841, 15. Ericson says, "More than three-fourths of the inaugural addresses (77 percent) refer to the nation's special mission in history to spread the blessings of popular government around the world." "Presidential Inaugural Addresses," 736.

⁷⁸JC 1977, 4.

⁷⁹JM1 1809, 2; JM2 1813, 2.

⁸⁰FDR1 1933, 2.

⁸¹GN 1989, 2.

⁸²JFK 1961, 2, 4.

⁸³GC1 1885, 4; RBH 1877, 2; ZT 1849, 3.

⁸⁴DJT2 2025, 1–2; DJT1 2017, 1–3; McGuire, "The President as High Priest," 66–71.

⁸⁵FP 1853, 7–8; MVB 1837, 7.

⁸⁶AL1 1861, 1–9. Lincoln says he just does not want to extend the institution into new territories. In his Second Inaugural Address, he blames the South for starting the war over their desire to "strengthen, perpetuate, and extend" slavery. AL2 1865, 2.

⁸⁷BO2 2013, 1, 5; GWB1 2001, 2; WJC2 1997, 2; RN1 1969, 5; DDE1 1953, 3; HST 1949 1949, 2; CG2 1893, 4; GC1 1885, 5; JG 1881, 4; RBH 1877, 2–3; USG2 1873, 2.

⁸⁸BH 1889, 5; USG1 1869, 4. McKinley expresses some indignation about lynchings and wants the practice confined to the courts, not mobs. WM1 1897, 6.

⁸⁹WHT 1909, 10–12; JB 1881, 4–5; RBH 1877, 4. Presidents sympathize with this type of discrimination. Immigrants who are ignorant of our ways and laws, hostile to our institutions, replacing American labor with a service class, or otherwise a financial burden to us do not belong in this country. WM1 1897, 6; GC1 1885, 4; BH 1889, 6.

⁹⁰DJT2 2025, 4, 6; RN2 1973, 3; WGH 1921, 7.

⁹¹BO2 2013, 1, 3–5.

⁹²JB 2021, 3; BO2 2013, 3; BO1 2009, 3; LBJ 1965, 9.

to rebel against it. The “chorus of union” represents the “better angels of our nature.”⁹³ Franklin Roosevelt finds ultimate truth within the democratic “will of the people” and wants to subject “private autocratic powers” to serve the general welfare, rejecting the self-interest of capitalism or the individual incentive for profit. He wants to expand his executive power over Congress as the “perfect instrument of their wishes” to take federal “action” and get things done.⁹⁴ Most Presidents do not proceed so far with their rhetoric or policies as Roosevelt, but many sympathize with some of his concerns. They come to recognize even before the Great Depression the damage a dogmatic form of capitalism brings to the American people without some type of reform or regulations to temper its excesses. They address concerns about unsafe working conditions, overburdened and underpaid labor, unhealthy food supply, damage to the environment, risky investments, unfair monopolies, and so forth.⁹⁵

On the other side, many think like Reagan that “government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem.”⁹⁶ These Presidents wish to empower the people who built this country through reducing government control over them, letting the people spend and invest their own money, eliminating wasteful spending, trimming the size of government, and cutting unnecessary taxes.⁹⁷ In the nineteenth century, the Presidents continually complain about the burgeoning bureaucracy of civil servants, who represent little more than partisan activity and wasteful spending, receiving paternal appointments and handing out favors to expand their domain.⁹⁸ Some express concern about protecting property rights and individual freedoms against the will of the majority or the power of the government to intrude into the private sector,⁹⁹ but most seem less than concerned about this problem. In the Cold War, communism becomes the principal enemy of the country and its freedoms and finds the Presidents rejecting the extreme left-wing march toward a totalitarian state,¹⁰⁰ while retaining some balance between the interests of unity and diversity. Most wish to identify the country more with the side of freedom and individual rights than whatever constituted a “perfect union,” fearing the tyranny that comes from a large central government and living under the will of the collective whole or a planned economy.¹⁰¹

The Presidents provide the strongest identification of the nation with religion in speaking of the God-given rights of individuals as the quintessential feature of its foundation and front-line defense against the tyranny of the state. The Presidents tend to think of the nation as living “under God” and serving the divine will as the fundamental mission, although some of their addresses are more outwardly religious than others.

Perhaps, the most direct religious messages are delivered by Washington, Lincoln, and Kennedy, and deserve special mention as inspiring the nation more than others.

At the very beginning of the country (1789), Washington provides an address that reads much like a sermon or a prayer pointing to the “Invisible Hand” with heart-felt gratitude for leading the nation, overcoming every defect along the way, and bringing the blessings of liberty to the American people. He spends time exhorting the nation to look unto God with “pious gratitude” and ends making a “humble supplication” that God will continue to reward their efforts in an “equally conspicuous” manner here on out.¹⁰²

At the close of the Civil War (1865), Lincoln provides another inspiring address that sounds much like a sermon. It recognizes that both sides of the conflict “read the same Bible and pray to the same God”; it recognizes that neither side has received an answer to their prayers “fully”; but it also views the outcome of this dark moment in the nation’s history as a revelation of the divine will particularly revealing the judgment of God upon slavery and those who brought this “offense,” as if truth and justice will prevail in the end.¹⁰³ Here Lincoln so accentuates divine providence that he sounds much like Georg Hegel, a God-intoxicated philosopher who believed the march of history justified itself.¹⁰⁴

During the Cold War (1961), Kennedy provides the last example of a sermon-like address. It combines the soaring idealistic rhetoric of the “new generation of Americans” with the metaphysical ideals of a cold warrior, who will not surrender his God-given rights to the state, who will “pay any price, meet any hardship, support any friend” to promote the cause of liberty, who seeks to do what is “right” and sacrifice what is expedient for altruistic purposes in doing the “work of God.”¹⁰⁵ This sermon-like address displays the national religious ideals of the time *par excellence*, in a much more graphic form than the typical Inaugural Address that might mention God here and there or give homage to some aspect of the civil religion in a less direct manner but lacks the same passion and conviction.

None of the Presidents fail to acknowledge the Almighty in one form or another, but some mention elements that might proceed toward atheism or make their confession of theism seem less than consistent or sincere. Some place the onus for creating a good society upon human beings in the manner of an atheist or deist, preferring to rely upon the “virtue, patriotism, and intelligence of the American people.”¹⁰⁶ Adams sounds much like an enlightened philosopher when he credits “good heads prompted by good hearts” for creating the Constitution, rather than deeming it the product of divine providence or inspiration.¹⁰⁷ Some sound much the same when they address the issue of ethics, reducing it to a simple calculating

¹⁰²GW1 1789, 2, 4.

¹⁰³AL2 1865, 2–3; AL1 1861, 9.

¹⁰⁴Washington’s first address also broaches a similar idea when he states that there exists an “indissoluble union between virtue and happiness.” GW1 1789, 3. The Puritans find divine providence revealing the will of God more than other Christian groups. Ralph Wald Emerson finds nature “ancillary” to human beings, punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous. Strehle, *Forces of Secularity*, 1.150–54; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 46ff., 110. No one is more significant than Georg Hegel in developing this liberal progressive point of view in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He even says, “World history [is] the world court of judgment.” *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, H. B. Nisbet (trans.), Allen W. Wood (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 371 (340).

¹⁰⁵JFK 1961, 2–5. Of course, this assessment of inaugural speeches hardly represents the overall religious passions of the various Presidents. After all, Kennedy emphasized the strict doctrine of church/state separation in his campaign to gain support from the south and become the first Catholic President.

¹⁰⁶CAA 1881, 2; LBJ 1965, 4.

¹⁰⁷JA 1779, 2. Elsewhere, Adams claims that the American government resulted from rational inquiry and scientific reasoning and not “interviews with the gods” or the “inspiration of Heaven.” *The Works of John Adams* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1969), 4.292–93, 559.

⁹³AL1 1861, 3–4, 6–7, 9. Others like Jackson defended state’s rights. AJ2 1833, 2; AJ1 1829, 1. John Locke felt that the past cannot bind future generations to its decisions. Its laws were always subject to the consent or revision of the people. John Locke, *Concerning Civil Government, Second Essay*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, Robert M. Hutchins (ed.) (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1978), 52 (116).

⁹⁴FDR 1937, 1–3; FDR1 1933, 2–3, 5–6.

⁹⁵HH 1929, 10; WW1 1913, 2, 4; WHT 1909, 2, 12–13; GC2 1893, 4.

⁹⁶RR1 1981, 2.

⁹⁷RR1 1981, 3; RN2 1973, 4; CC 1925, 7–8; GC1 1885, 4; TJ2 1805, 2. Republicans mention the theme of lowering taxes more than Democrats. No Democrat mentions this theme in the twentieth or twenty-first century. Kinnier, et al. “Values Extolled,” 129.

⁹⁸GC2 1893, 3; BH 1889, 8; GC1 1885, 4–5; RBH 1877, 4; JT 1841, 3; WHH 1841, 9–11, 16.

⁹⁹CC 1929, 7–8; FP 1845, 3–4.

¹⁰⁰DDE2 1957, 2–3; DDE1 1953, 6; HST 1949, 2.

¹⁰¹Kinnier finds liberty the most extolled virtue. Toolin finds it in all but four of the addresses, usually as a God-given right. Kinnier, et al. “Values Extolled,” 128–29; Toolin, “American Civil Religion,” 42.

sum of the human intellect.¹⁰⁸ Here they follow the utilitarian scheme of a philosophe or deist, a scheme that moves the ethical life away from its dependence upon divine revelation and accents the abilities of autonomous human beings to figure out what is right and wrong apart from the will of God. Others proceed in another enlightened direction and consecrate their presidency to serve the will of the people in the manner of Rousseau and Robespierre, as if finding within that will of the people the “voice of God.”¹⁰⁹ Franklin Roosevelt is the most suspect of atheism in this regard. He finds the “spirit” of the people the highest justification for his actions and says, “[D]emocracy alone has constructed an unlimited civilization capable of infinite progress in the improvement of human life.”¹¹⁰ He finds the ultimate end of his policies in serving the “will of the people” and seems to marginalize the significance of what is most associated with the religious foundation of the country—the individual or inalienable rights of the people.¹¹¹

Whatever the spiritual status, all the Presidents profess or feign some sort of religious belief to pacify the spiritual sensibilities of the nation. All of them engage in God-talk, typically appealing to divine providence and asking for its blessings to sustain the country ahead. Their theology appeals to the masses containing few specifics and hoping to include as many citizens as possible in the confession and promote a pluralistic vision of society; but in doing so, they acknowledge no serious political differences between sectarian expressions of faith and marginalize the role of Christianity in developing the country. Here the civil religion fulfils its fundamental purpose since the days of Rousseau and Robespierre, presenting itself as an alternative to organized local religious expression, creating its own myth about its self-importance, and marginalizing sectarian groups like Puritans and Quakers as containing no relevant theological ideas that affect real corporate existence, except in a negative way as the source of persecution. Here the civil religion concocts a version of reality that practices the worst sort of revisionist history and pretends its “Founding Fathers” created the nation out of whole cloth, outside of any relation to the Massachusetts Bay Colony and similar religious/political/democratic plantations at the beginning of the settlement. Here the civil religion feigns a binary between church and state that has little to do with a sober account of history or reality.

Beside all the smoke and mirrors, the Presidents seem to present a vision of the country that aligns in many of its features with the original Puritan concept. The Presidents appear to follow the legacy of the “City on a Hill,” with the same manifest destiny to lead the march of democracy and freedom around the world and bring progress to all civilizations in all areas of life.¹¹² The Puritan vision provides the nation with great energy as the epicenter of divine activity in the world, but its reality is not always so bright apart from other counterbalancing ideas. In the hands of the civil religion, it often becomes a pretext for developing an extreme form of patriotism and nationalism that replaces loyalty to all else and tramples the cultural values of others. Many critics recognize the problem and complain about the Presidents spending too much time lauding American greatness and broadcasting its superior virtues as justification for their policies and dealings with others; but the rhetoric only matches the very purpose of the civil religion. Those

who want to define the civil religion in some other way outside its nationalism are just wrong.¹¹³ The Presidents might mitigate the fervor of the civil religion. They might recognize some problems in the country with extending the doctrine of equality to everyone or finding the right balance between private and public interests, but there is nothing in the civil religion to upset the applecart and provide a real prophetic criticism of the people and their institutions at least not in the manner of an OT prophet. The country remains much too confident within its religious fervor or the basic veracity of its underlying ideas and greatness to permit this type of criticism. The civil religion fulfils its basic and original mission in the work of Rousseau, promoting loyalty to the state above all else, diminishing the values of any other institution like the church, and creating an ethnocentric and nationalistic people.

6. Sports

The civil religion is reinforced throughout the country with a wide array of ceremonies, parades, symbols, monuments, and memorials.¹¹⁴ Perhaps, sports provides the most important venue for these patriotic displays going all the way back to ancient Graeco-Roman times. Even Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic movement, made sure that patriotism stood at the center of the games as the “equivalent of what the ancients called the gods.” He spoke in a recorded message at the opening ceremony of the Berlin games (1936) about “patriotic piety” and stressed how significant it was for each athlete to glorify “his country,” “his race,” and “his flag.”¹¹⁵ Today no major American sporting event starts without playing the “Star Spangled Banner.” This tradition began during the seventh inning of the World Series in 1918 as a way of honoring American soldiers who were fighting abroad in WWI.¹¹⁶ Lately, football games have become a favorite venue of the Pentagon to fund flyovers, field-size flags, and tributes to the troops - all meant to inculcate patriotism and military prowess, without any serious mention of God or moment of prayer to rival or question the complete loyalty.¹¹⁷ At all sporting events, coaches and players are expected to stand in proper formation and pious devotion during the National Anthem; and those who have religious objections or want to use the time for political demonstrations are subject to discipline and ridicule.

Sports provides an important platform for the civil religion, but its relation goes beyond the mere performance of patriotic ceremonies in its arenas. Sports has a natural link to the civil religion as it also comes to embody the state or the values of the nation through the

¹¹³The emphasis upon egalitarian values and collective living also has problems. The emphasis certainly increases after the Civil War, but these left-wing concerns hardly represent the sum and substance of the “founding myth.” The civil religion has deeper roots in the God-given rights and liberties of individuals.

¹¹⁴E.g., Arthur Farnsley, “Civil Religion in Indianapolis,” in CRT, 187–88.

¹¹⁵William Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 121; John MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 140–42, 258–59.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 108; Michael Butterworth, “Fox Sports, Super Bowl XLII, and the Affirmation of American Civil Religion,” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 12/3 (Aug. 2008): 318.

¹¹⁷Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, ILL: The Dorsey Press, 1973), 94–96; Jeremy Sabella, “Postures of Piety and Protest: American Civil Religion and the Politics of Kneeling in the NFL,” *Religions* 10/8 (Aug. 2019): 3–4; Farnsley, “Civil Religion in Indianapolis,” 202–203. For example, the NBA had a policy in 1996 that a player must assume a “dignified posture” during the flag ceremony. A Muslim player on the Denver Nuggets became embroiled in a controversy when he refused to stand that year considering the flag a form of national idolatry and a symbol of oppression. For this reason, he was immediately suspended from the team without pay and later traded to the Sacramento Kings. Baker, *Playing with God*, 229–32. The action of the league appears contrary to SCOTUS rulings that allow sects like the Jehovah’s Witnesses to abstain from saluting the flag for much the same reason. Almost all would allow a person to abstain from prayer, but it appears as if etatism is more obligatory to most Americans.

¹⁰⁸USG1 1869, 2; WHH 1841, 2. Johnson rejects this view of ethics, sounding much like Kant and leaving the results to God. AJ 1865, 1–2.

¹⁰⁹GC1 1885, 12.

¹¹⁰FDR 3 1941, 2–5. The Presidents often appeal to popular support as a confirmation of their policies but hardly make it the sole criterion as FDR seems to do in this address. Ericson, “Presidential Inaugural Addresses,” 734–35.

¹¹¹FDR 2 1937, 1–3.

¹¹²See n.60.

process of secularization that envelops all of society. It provides a clear example of what happens to other institutions in the process - an example of how the civil religion tends to expand outside the government and envelop the rest of society into its communal ethos as an alternative to the church and other normative religious expressions.

Many understand this relation and use religious language to describe sports; they compare its stadia, arenas, and halls of fame to sacred shrines, its souvenirs to holy relics; its uniforms to vestments; its ceremonies to sacraments; its rules to commandments; its superstars to saints; its chants to hymns of praise, its fan-base to some cult or *communitas* of believers.¹¹⁸ They also speak of the value athletes derive from participation in sports, making it comparable to a religious or moral perspective. Those who participate in the games learn a sense of honor, fairness, teamwork, and "sportsmanship" in living by the rules and accepting the outcome of a match. They learn the value of discipline, sacrifice, and perseverance, much like some ascetic monastic figure on the road to achieving ultimate bliss.¹¹⁹ Locker rooms are plastered with slogans, extolling the virtue of hard work, contending that a "quitter never wins, a winner never quits;" "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."¹²⁰

Some think of athletics as compatible with Christian teaching, but it no longer contains any serious connection to the faith and serves these days more like an instrument of the state to mold the character of its citizens than instill any spiritual or biblical values. The attempt to preserve a relationship represents the delusions of a bygone era. T. C. Sandars coined the popular phrase "muscular Christianity" to describe the attempt during the middle of the nineteenth century. He used the term to describe a movement associated with Charles Kingsley that impelled participants toward a more hearty, robust, and manly form of the faith. Kingsley thought competitive sports was a good way to teach moral or spiritual values and mold young men, much better than forcing them to read books and sit through boring rituals. The YMCA picked up on this philosophy and began to erect gymnasiums at the end of the nineteenth century, adding swim meets, volleyball tournaments, football and baseball teams, and the new sport of basketball, invented by James Naismith, who was teaching at the International YMCA Training School.¹²¹ The YMCA kept the Christian vision of the organization for some time but eventually lost the original purpose, letting mere athletics dominate the spiritual and moral concerns, fading into another secular society, and representing much the same decline that occurred elsewhere in the relationship between the traditional religion and sports. Today, any direct relation to the Christian faith is found mainly in ad-hoc procedures that have nothing to do with the actual playing of the game, where athletes cross themselves before batting, point to the heavens after circling the bases, gather at mid-field to offer prayer, join Athletes in Action and testify to their faith.¹²² All of this is

done outside the course of the actual athletic competition. Sports follows the tendency of the modern state to lose its connection with the religion and become increasingly secular or a part of the civil religion.

Other scholars think it is heresy to try and equate sports with real religious expression in the first place. Sports has become its own civil religion with its own separate set of values. Sports has a clear focus upon worldly success, as it sets its sight on competition, glory, and financial gain here on earth. It was invented for and by males to encourage the male ego and its desire for competition and dominance. It prizes victory over others, encourages tough, muscular, and violent behavior, and promotes "hatred, jealousy, [and] boastfulness" between fellow human beings as an unavoidable by-product of its contests.¹²³ The totems of the teams abet this behavior, representing and instilling the depravity of predators through their mascots, choosing nicknames like Tigers, Lions, Hornets, Yellow Jackets, Eagles, Falcons, Pirates, and Raiders.¹²⁴ None of this really represents real religion. None of it represents the meekness and gentleness of Christ and his gospel that brings peace and reconciliation to others, that nurtures the sick and shepherds the flock, that serves in a spirit of quiet meditation and prayer.¹²⁵ None of it even displays any basic religious concerns that ask ultimate questions or seeks some transcendent reality or heavenly reward.¹²⁶ These and other problems make critics wonder about sports and view it as serving the civil religion as a substitute for genuine spirituality and inculcating alternative nationalistic values like pride and dominion. The criticisms are sometimes harsh and fail to appreciate some positive connection of real religious value in sports,¹²⁷ but the overall point remains valid for our purposes in showing the clear distinction. The critics are right to point out a clear difference between the public expression of religion in sports and what is now limited to the perimeter of society or the private self-consciousness of the individual.

7. Conclusion

This is not to say that no hope remains for those who express concern about nationalism or the process of secularization absorbing the church and other local religious communities. This does not make it impossible to bring redemption to what has become a part of the world. The Bible thinks of God meeting humans in a fallen world and transforming their devices into a more sublime image, even using a contrivance like astrology to guide the wise men and show the way to ultimate redemption. The church has followed this commission in the past during the days of the Holy Roman Empire, transforming the winter solstice into a celebration of Christ's birth, the day of the sun into a time of worship each week. The mission might look different in a pluralistic society, but many see the impetus as much the same enjoining the church to ally with those of similar faith in other religious communities and work to transform the manifestations of

¹¹⁸Joseph Price, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Study of Sport and Religion," 1/1 (2023): 17–19; "Fervent Faith: Sport as Religion in America," in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, Joseph Price (ed.) (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 8; Eric Bein-Selbo, *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 51, 85, 213; Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 29–31; Robert Higgs and Michael Braswell, *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Science* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 153.

¹¹⁹Edwards, *Sociology of Sport*, 90; Baker, *Playing with God*, 32; Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, 29; Bein-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 42–43. Others disagree and find no clear evidence that sports builds character. Bruce Ogilvie and Thomas Turner, "Sports Don't Build Character," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Thu Sept. 23, 1971): 63–64.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 117.

¹²¹Baker, *Playing with God*, 50, 55, 63.

¹²²Douglas Hochstetler, "Striving towards Maturity: On the Relationship between Prayer and Sport," *CEJ* 3/6/2 (Fall 2009): 325, 330; Edwards, *Sociology of Sport*, 122–23.

¹²³George Orwell, "The Sporting Spirit," The Orwell Foundation, <https://www.orwell-foundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-sporting-spirit/>; Higgs and Braswell, *An Unholy Alliance*, 7, 92–95, 366; William Phillips, "A Season in the Stands," *Commentary* (July 1969), <https://www.commentary.org/articles/william-phillips-3/a-season-in-the-stands/>; Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, 88–89, 192, 334; Bein-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 47. Early criticisms of sports often centered around its violation of the Sabbath - as a time of rest and worship. Baker, *Playing with God*, 15–18, 149, 154–55.

¹²⁴Higgs and Braswell, *An Unholy Alliance*, 94, 128.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 139, 262; Bein-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 221.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, x - xi, 27; Bein-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 214–16.

¹²⁷There is more of a dialectical tension in religions like Christianity than the critics seem to recognize. Higgs and Braswell make Christianity sound much too effeminate (262–63). They emasculate its material presence or earthly form for a mystical experience that lives beyond its incarnation within revelation, theology, and the body of Christ (39–40, 46–48, 210, 384).

the civil religion in the government and sports into a more sublime image. To follow this commission, the church will need to accent the prophetic nature of its calling, starting with the significance of living under God and pointing society to what is transcendent first and foremost as the ultimate purpose and judge of all human activities. It will need to renounce the tradition of Rousseau, the strict binary between the church and the state, and the establishment of etatism or any other form of religion/idolatry. It will need to let the Spirit breathe and allow the existential and religious life of the community to arise and find representation, not as wards of the state but as members of society that deserve a place and voice for their faith to speak within the public domain. In this way, patriotism will have a proper role to play in the lives of the citizens as it points to the authority of God in their communities and shows deference to a state that serves the divine will and lives under prophetic judgment. The virtues of the citizens, fans, and athletes will find a higher purpose to fulfil than any temporal and earthly reward.

One might achieve the end in various ways. I particularly suggest a couple of practical measures like offering a public prayer at sports events before playing or singing the National Anthem; like developing lessons and monuments that speak of the importance of Puritans, Quakers, and other sectarian groups in the nation's history. These and other possibilities might prove valuable in restoring the proper place of religion and fending off the present march of secularism that is establishing the godless worship of the state. Rousseau is certainly right about the power of ceremonies, games, spectacles, and education to transform the hearts of people and promote etatism; it is just that these methods might find another purpose in providing some space for the people to represent their religion and place the state under God, rather than exalt the state as the "absolute power on earth."¹²⁸

The American form of the civil religion has roots in French culture, but the state has not proceeded so far to enact the complete secularization of the public forum. It has not used the doctrine of church/state separation in a direct way or employed the nefarious means to marginalize the church like Nazi Germany, Communist Russia, and the Third Republic of France. It does not conduct meetings of the Hitler Youth during Sunday-School hours or murder priests who protest these and other incursions into the church; it does not form a "League of the Militant Godless" to conduct anti-Christian campaigns and distribute atheistic literature; it does not ban religious symbols in public schools or coerce conformity to national ideals in the name of *laïcité* or anti-clericalism. The country does not implement secularity with these direct measures or express some socialist longing for etatism or a godless totalitarian state - at least not in any explicit way. It still celebrates the private sector, the rights of free individuals, and a pluralistic vision of society, even if the power and the presence of the state has grown in recent times and replaced the former position of the church as the center of devotion in society.

The Court has moved away from the strict position of church/state separation of late. In the 1940s and 1960s, the Court followed the French position and tried to erect a "wall" between church and state that was "high and impregnable," but it had difficulty maintaining a consistent secular position in a country that was steeped in religious traditions. In fact, many of the jurists came to think that the strict position was "hostile" to religion and sought to accommodate some

of its concerns in their decisions, reducing the "wall" to a "line" in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971), a line that is "blurred, indistinct, and variable." The new metaphor recognized the inconsistent nature of their decisions that sometimes sought to accommodate religion and sometimes did not. Lately the more conservative members have expressed dissatisfaction with the inconsistency of past decisions in an attempt to favor the religious side of the equation. They have come to question the "line" and "prongs" of the so-called Lemon Test in wanting to provide the religion of the people with even more accommodation than is found under its guidelines.¹²⁹

The present direction of the Court provides an atmosphere that is more conducive to making the faith of the people an integral part of the public forum. It might make it possible for the country in the future to accommodate the suggestions of this study to offer prayer at sporting events and represent religious people as principal actors in the nation's history. Of course, the Court has never excluded public prayer from professional sporting events, but it has created an atmosphere in the past for excluding it given its policies of strict separation in the public school system—policies that exclude even the mention of prayer, while inculcating the rituals of the civil religion; policies that create a secular mentality in education and end up permeating the rest of society. Of course, the Court has not completely excluded all religious monuments in public but clearly favors inculcating the civil religious message in its displays. It clearly favors the Declaration of Independence with its emphasis upon God and inalienable rights over sectarian religious document like the Ten Commandments and its God-talk. This privileged status might change with the new direction of the Court and give way to providing more space for the community to express its religious passions in public. Those who favor this move recognize it as an expression of the democratic spirit or the voice of the people. They might consider it a sacred right but not so absolute as to infringe upon minority interests. Most recognize the problems and acknowledge that whatever place or space it might find in society the government should not follow the way of an establishment but allow for as much freedom as possible among the people to lead their own lives and participate or not participate in the actions, rituals, and ideals of the culture at large. The people should be free to participate or not participate in saluting the flag, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, or bowing their heads before the Lord God in prayer.

This balanced approach finds a tension between the right of the community to express its faith or religious passions in public and the freedom of the minority to dissent from the will of the majority. The approach rejects proceeding to the secular extreme of the Court in the 1940s that erected a wall against the meaningful participation of the religious community in shaping society to protect minority interests. It rejects the criterion of offense that the Court began to use at the time to shut down all references to religion in public.¹³⁰

¹²⁹Justices Samuel Alito, Brett Kavanaugh, Clarence Thomas, and Neil Gorsuch are the most vocal critics of Lemon. *American Legion v. American Humanist Ass'n*, 588 US 39, 53–56, 64, 69–71; *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 597 US ____ (2022), 22 (Gorsuch), https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/21-418_j425.pdf?bcs-agent-scanner=f092fda5-f4fa-a14e-a2bf-5c59e155354b; *Shurtleff et al. v. City of Boston et al.*, 596 US ____ (2022), 8 (Gorsuch), https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/20-1800_7lho.pdf?ftag=MSF0951a18.

¹³⁰The Court struck down a program in Champaign, Illinois (1948) that provided space during regular school hours for students to receive religious instruction in the faith of their choice. Students could opt out of this instruction if their parents objected to their participation, but these students would need to attend secular classes during that period. Despite the voluntary nature of the program, the Court struck it down in the name of its wall, maintaining that non-participating students would feel a sense of alienation from their classmates. By using this rationale, the Court clearly moved away from the democratic process in expressing the will of the majority toward emphasizing the "rights" of minorities or non-conforming individuals who feel excluded from the basic religious sentiments of the community. *McCollum v. Board of Education*, 333 US 203, 227–28. In fact, this argument became normative and fundamental to the Court in

¹²⁸George Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, T. M. Knox (trans.), in *Great Books of the Western World*, Mortimer Adler (ed.) (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1977), v, 80–83, 92–95, 108–11, 231 (257–62, 275–81, 329–31, 342–43, 347, 351); *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, A. V. Miller (trans.), J. N. Findlay (foreword and analysis) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 267–70 (447–52).

It respects the rights of minorities but finds this criterion unfairly picking on religion for special ill-treatment. To accept the criterion with any consistency and apply it to the rest of society, it would be necessary to let minority groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses shut down the raising of the American flag, the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance, and the erecting of a Christmas tree. In a more balanced view, it might be necessary to accept the inevitable place of some offence in society and recognize that whatever the majority wants to express in public is going to offend or exclude someone.

The problem of minority rights causes some to demand an alternative to the will of the majority that tries to include everyone in all public expressions, but this noble sentiment toward the inclusion of everyone represents a practical impossibility. Those who want all religions included in any public display typically recognize the impossibility of meeting the demand and often use it as a ruse to exclude all public displays of religion in the name of a strict doctrine of separation. Even a display that tries to include everyone, only ends up pleasing liberal or unitarian sensibilities and discounts conservative points of view that have a narrower focus. This means the problem with balancing the will of the people and the rights of the minority makes the public display of religion more of an art than a science. It means public religion must be "inclusive as possible but substantive as necessary" in balancing the concerns of both groups. The balance might lead to difficult choices. It might be necessary to discourage ministers from praying "in the name of Jesus" or invoking too much sectarian rhetoric, but it cannot proceed too far in this direction and so emasculate the force of religious language in an attempt to please everyone. It cannot engage in such vacuous God-talk as to lose its prophetic calling and exclude a transcendent deity from judging the state. Our study does not consider it an option to condemn the religion of the people to innocuous platitudes or silence and just let the state absorb their souls.

The state has the power to forward devotion to itself, and our study has placed a question mark on what it considers an excessive abuse of this power to promote nationalism at the expense of the church or the religious affections of the community. The study began with an analysis of two modern scholars, who wanted to use the civil religion for their own purposes to promote their view of the ideal state. Both failed to appreciate the varying aspects of the civil religion in the United States, ignoring the elements that did not match their agenda, especially the nationalism that withstands any serious attempt to provide a transcendent or prophetic witness to challenge its beliefs. The promotion of nationalism serves as the indelible purpose of the civil religion going back to its origin in the French Revolution and the writings of Rousseau, found in its most telling form within his work on *The Government of Poland*. This work is neglected by scholars but needs to find a more prominent place in the study of the civil religion, as it reveals more than other sources the fundamental purpose of the religion in seeking to replace local religious affections of the community with devotion to the state through various ways and means. To confirm the ongoing influence of this understanding, the study proceeded to take the unusual step of reading and interacting with all the Inaugural Addresses of Presidents, just to avoid the appearance of bias that seems to

dog past studies and their choice to analyze only a few of them for the limited purposes of the author. Through this exhaustive method, the civil religion was seen to follow the basic parameters of Rousseau's program: showing a distinct propensity to exalt the nation as the leading place of devotion for the people and source of good in the world, making only a vague reference to spirituality as the source of its strength, goodness, and success, marginating the place of the church in society, ignoring the spiritual matrix of its ideas in the work of sectarian groups like the Puritans and Quakers, and preferring to exalt a new set of "Founding Fathers" that end up replacing the saints of old. The study thought it was a mistake to follow the lead of past studies and try to fix the intense nationalism through emending or reinterpreting what remains an indelible and major component of civil religion. It thought the challenge to the state must come outside the state. It must come from below in the local communities of the people through a policy that allows them to serve as a prophetic witness and express in the public forum their belief in a transcendent reality that judges all the institutions of humankind. The policy of restricting the church to the private sphere creates the problem of nationalism. Its concept of separation does not free the people from religious oppression. It just exchanges the old-time religion for a new form of idolatry that enslaves the people to the public sphere and its many institutions.

subsequent decisions and was sure to shut down any expression of religion if carried out with draconian precision. In rejecting any civil expression or endorsement of religion, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor attempted to make offense the sole criterion. "Endorsement sends a message to nonadherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community." *Lynch v. Donnelly* 465 US 688, 695; *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow* 542 US 34; *Allegheny v. ACLU of Pittsburgh* 492 US 628–29; *Wallace v. Jaffree* 105 S. Ct. 2479, in Robert T. Miller, *Toward Benevolent Neutrality: Church, State, and the Supreme Court* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1987), 439