

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

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The term *civil religion* refers to the idea that a nation is subject to a divine will in light of which its affairs are judged. The concept was made popular by Robert N. Bellah (1967), and its basic tenet is "that the nation is not an ultimate end in itself but stands under transcendent judgment and has value only insofar as it realizes...a 'higher law'" (Bellah, 1974: 255). Bellah stimulated a controversy which reached its zenith in *American Civil Religion* (Richey & Jones, 1974), and a good number of social scientific studies have followed, especially in response to the emergence of the so-called "evangelical right" and groups such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority.

Thomas's Q sample (reported below) is not tightly organized into a factorial structure, but contains two major components: 22 statements on the abstract issue of civil religion, taking into account the prophetic vs. priestly distinction made by Martin Marty (1974: 139-160); and 38 statements focused specifically on contemporary issues, especially the Moral Majority, with roughly equal numbers of pro and con items. Bellah's 1976 interview in *Psychology Today* was the source of many of the statements. Other sources included church publications, literature from the Ronald Reagan presidential campaign, and letters to the editor of the *Des Moines Register*.

Interviews and Q sorts have been taken from a P set composed of theologians, academics, students, and ordinary citizens, including both the religious and non- or anti-religious. Analysis will be completed during the autumn semester.

Selected Bibliography

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Politics, Religion, and America Q Sample (n = 60)

(1) We have always drawn heavily in this country upon Biblical analogies. America is the New Israel, the promised land to which God has led His people. There is nothing wrong with this, provided that it means we will be committed to subordinating politics to ethical principles that transcend it. (2) I don't think the Founding Fathers had in mind a separation of God and state, only religion and state. And when you're dealing with moral issues, you're talking about something that touches the majority of Americans. Therefore, as part of the electorate, religious people have not only a right but a responsibility to speak out on these issues. (3) Jerry Falwell preaches the Gospel. He is against homosexual rights, pornography, abortion, Communism and detente with Russia. He is for prayer in school, free enterprise, increased military spending and the family. If the things he is for were included to a greater extent, and the things he's against cut out, there's no doubt our government would be a lot cleaner. (4) For too long evangelicals have been concerned solely with personal morality while ignoring the impact of public policy choices on the moral and spiritual health of our society. For too long evangelicals have main-

tained a cautious distance from the political arena. It is time for Christians to realize that Jesus Christ is Lord of all--and that includes secular politics as well as church matters. (5) The really annoying thing about groups like the Moral Majority is that they divide us by denying their own humanness and fallibility, claiming their moral systems as absolute, godlike, thus excluding those who don't believe as they do. (6) I think there is a great hunger in America for a spiritual revival, for a belief that law must be based on a higher law, for a return to traditions and values we once had. Our government, in its most sacred documents, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, speak of man being created, of a Creator, that we are a nation under God. (7) For America, democracy (rather than any particular doctrine or creed) must become an object of religious dedication. Once indoctrination of the faith that the democratic ideal accords with ultimate reality must replace narrow sectarian proseletyzing in politics. Government agencies and public schools must teach the democratic ideal as religion. (8) If we Americans appeal to the god of civil religion, our faith is in a small and exclusive deity, a loyal spiritual adviser to power and prestige, a defender of only the American nation. But if we pray to the biblical God of justice and righteousness, we fall under God's judgment for calling upon His name but failing to obey His commandments. (9) In judging political performance on the basis of Biblically derived standards, the Moral Majority is in danger of crossing the constitutionally drawn line between church and state. They are violating Article Six of the Constitution, which says that there must not be any religious test for holding office. (10) This nation exists under divine judgment. Its purpose is to fulfill certain moral demands for justice, equality and some kind of charity toward all members of society. If it fails to fulfill these basic moral commitments, then it has no legitimate claim to our loyalty.

(11) I don't think there is any way we can suggest that just because people believe in God and go to church they should not want reflected in those candi-

dates and those causes they support their own belief in morality and in the high traditions and principles which we have abandoned so much in this country. (12) Liberals who propound the separation of church and state have gone beyond that to the separation of moral judgment from public policy. (13) Morality can be maintained without religion. (14) If evangelical churches really want to get involved in government, they can always start paying taxes. (15) It is no doubt true that beliefs in America's blessedness in God's eyes have been used as cloaks to justify shameful policies--from our early treatment of the Indians to our involvement in Vietnam--but these beliefs are valuable in providing us with a standard and an obligation to use the political process to gain a transcendent goal, i.e., establishing equality and justice. (16) The rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God. (17) Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, the United States was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish. (18) We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people--the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. (19) The long road to salvation lies in the Bible--not the ballot box. (20) God isn't a right-winger or a left-winger.

(21) If in order to be faithful you have to support a certain stand regarding Russia, what's the next step? It strikes at the very heart of the whole notion of religious pluralism and religious and political freedom in this country. (22) Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in the absence of religious principle. (23) For 200 years we've lived in the future, believing that America would be better tomorrow than today and today would be better than yesterday. I still believe that. Together we can begin the world over again. We can meet our destiny and that destiny can build a land here that will be for all mankind a shining city on the hill. (24) No society, including ours, can operate without a belief in God, in immortality, and thus in rewards and punishments beyond

this life. (25) I have thought for a long time that too many of our churches have been too reluctant to speak up in behalf of what they believe is proper in government, and they have been too lax in recent years in interfering with government's invasion of the family itself, putting itself between parent and child. (26) Christians have a God-given responsibility to be politically active. If Christians do not throw out of office those officials who perpetuate a mistaken liberal program, the United States will crumble and the cause of God's Kingdom will be frustrated. (27) I've always believed that this land was placed here between the two great oceans by some divine plan--to be found by a special kind of people, people who had a special love for freedom and who had the courage to uproot themselves and come to what in the beginning was the most underdeveloped wilderness possible. (28) Liberals are the ones who have driven us into this current dilemma by trying to purge American life of religion and values--by creating a "naked public square" where anything goes. (29) Something is clearly wrong when Christian Voice gives its lowest possible legislative rating to a Baptist minister and a Catholic priest, while giving the highest score to a congressman who was indicted in the Abscam scandal. (30) What is supposed to be a nonpartisan movement for Jesus on the part of Christian evangelicals always seems to turn into a Republican rally.

(31) My plea to the newly political evangelical activists like Reverend Falwell is that they make careful distinctions between what the Christian certainties are--God's love for the world, His power to rule it, and His promise to redeem it--and what the proper Christian uncertainties ought to be. (32) Government must stay out of religious values, not religious values out of government. (33) The so-called evangelical right seems to be less interested in attacking public evils than in legislating private morality and, by so doing, imposing its standards and values on all citizens. This tendency I view with grave concern. (34) It's time for God's people to come out of the closet and the churches--and change

America. (35) The leaders of the Moral Majority are profoundly immature. They don't really understand the ethical and philosophical traditions of democracy or how to bring about change in a pluralistic society. (36) The radical right's crusaders seek to restrict our channels of communication by censoring anything that they view as pornographic, deprive women of equal rights by opposing the ERA, prohibit freedom of choice for the termination of pregnancies, limit the rights of children, and harass adults for nonconventional sexual preferences. (37) The ultimate end of secular humanism, in developing a permissive society where there is no authority for right and wrong, is going to be the wipeout of the family and the destruction of all the traditional values that have made the U.S. the greatest free society in the world for many years. (38) No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of man more than those of the U.S. Every step by which we have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency. (39) Evangelical political activists have already made several positive contributions. They have created an awareness of the interrelationships between political issues and Biblical beliefs, pointing to the basic moral questions that are involved in choices about defense budgets, tax reforms, civil rights, and education. (40) Society is never merely a social contract, an association of individuals who band together out of mutual self-interest. It always transcends the social and finds its meaning in the sacred.

(41) Christians, of whatever denominational stripe, are never altogether right. Self-righteousness is the great temptation of religious people in politics. The political world needs humility as well as conviction. Christians have reason to supply both. (42) It bothers me that there are those who speak presumptuously about our putting God back in the government, rather than recognizing that God is always there, and that our task is to join in God's redemptive work. (43) America is suffering from a moral decay which,

if not stopped, will end in the fall of the country and the rise of atheistic dictatorships. Sin and its symptoms are dangerously real in this country, and these symptoms stem basically from a misguided philosophy some have called "secular humanism." (44) As Christians of diverse political orientations, we need humbly to admit that we are not always able to discern God's will--try as we will--as we face crucial policy choices. All groups of Christians must refrain from the arrogance of presumed omniscience and adopt instead an attitude of humility befitting our sinful nature. (45) Jerry Falwell is above all one thing: his own self-righteousness. But, of course, no one has The Truth, and it is the essence of our democratic pluralism that through the interplay of various partial truths we can approach the whole truth. The problem with the True Believer is that there is no room for tolerance. (46) The plain truth is that the so-called "Bible-believing" fundamentalists don't believe what is in the Bible at all; they haven't studied it enough to know what's in it. They simply use it for its emotional value in promoting their own form of fear, hostility, and bigotry. (47) This nation is a chosen instrument of God, and it carries the major responsibility of implementing God's will in the world. The internal moral decline we've experienced has caused us to forfeit this responsibility; the key to our nation's strength in the world lies fundamentally in a religious revival. We must remember that "righteousness exalts a nation." (48) Active partisan politics is the wrong path for true evangelicals. There's a better way--fasting and praying, appealing, in essence, to a higher power. (49) I deplore the ruthless tactics of "single-issue" pressure groups. When a legislator, elected to exercise his or her best judgment, receives an ultimatum to fall in line on an issue or risk defeat, that person's integrity is compromised and he or she becomes a political pawn. (50) At their best, evangelical Christians do not equate their political views with God's views. Instead, they are more apt to heed the words of Justice Learned Hand who advised that "the Spirit of Liberty is the

spirit that is not too sure it is right."

(51) What Falwell is advocating is another marriage between "blood-and-soil" religion and nationalistic super-patriotism. We know what that did to the German national church under Nazism, and if we have any sense at all, we will see through it now. Why not call the so-called "Christian principles" of the Moral Majority what they really are: fascist.

(52) America is the mightiest power which God has yet seen fit to put upon his footstool. America is great because she is good.

(53) I'm very disturbed by power groups which, in the name of God, seek rights and privileges for themselves rather than for the oppressed, the outcast, and the disenfranchised.

(54) The Moral Majority is not a group of religious fanatics who have in mind a Khomeini-type religious crusade to take over the government. They support the separation of church and state, and they want influence, not control.

(55) Evangelicals are only trying to maintain basic morality, not impose their religion.

(56) I don't question the right of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority to influence public policy on the basis of their religious convictions. In fact, what I fear more is a public policy predicated solely on pragmatic and political considerations without regard to moral and religious underpinnings.

(57) Certainly the church has a right to take a position on moral issues. But to try to tell the parishioners of any church or any denomination how they should vote, I think that violates the principle of separation of church and state.

(58) As this nation faces the threat of nuclear war, the despair of the hungry, and the worldwide depletion of raw materials, Christians must reflect upon their political choice in prayerful humility, blessed with considerable assurances that God is really in control.

(59) It must be stressed that political persuasion is not the first obligation of ministers. Preaching a political gospel may cause or aggravate splits within churches or denominations and thus hinder the effective proclamation of the gospel of salvation in Christ.

(60) When a nation is very powerful and feels it has God's blessing, it is likely to behave in a manner that is