

# Civil Religion as Utopian Ideology: A Case Study of H. G. Wells<sup>1</sup>

**Károly Pintér** | Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary

## The Concept of Civil Religion

Utopias have a controversial relationship with organized religions. As they are by definition seeking to present a social vision of a human community organized along significantly different rules and conventions than the author's contemporary society, they implicitly or explicitly challenge the norms and habits of existing societies, including the moral code and spiritual goals, which are predominantly influenced by the majority religion of that particular community. In other words, utopias have an inherent heterodox tendency, which renders them suspect in the eyes of religious authorities. The Catholic philosopher Thomas Molnar summarized this phenomenon succinctly when he described utopias as “perennial heresies” in relation to doctrinal orthodoxy: “The important utopian writers are heretics from the point of view of Christian doctrine; they want to restore man's original innocence—his knowledge and power—and, to achieve this objective, they want to abolish original sin and start with unspoiled beginnings.”<sup>2</sup>

But heretics are also motivated by powerful religious convictions. Authors of utopias might have a disparaging view of existing churches, their doctrines, and their practices, but nonetheless their alternative fictitious communities are inevitably governed by principles that must ultimately rest on some deeply held convictions about right and wrong, about social virtues and vices. Every utopian community is ruled by a more or less explicit ideology in the descriptive sense, as defined by Michael Freeden, but utopias are typically distinguished by the complete hegemony of one single ideology rather than the competition between different, rival ideologies in existing modern societies.<sup>3</sup> In fact, imaginary utopian communities usually function as mobile demonstrations illustrating the superior virtues of one particular ideology in the total organization of social life.

In such utopian models, religion, insofar as it serves any role at all, typically assumes one overarching function: to reinforce the moral code and prescribe acceptable rules of

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Molnar, *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 32.

behavior for the community. In real-life communities, religion plays a far more complex role in the lives of individuals as well as the workings of society, fulfilling a number of diverse spiritual and practical functions; however, a utopist primarily wishes to utilize religion for its integrative capacity. A religious or quasi-religious system of beliefs serving such a principal socio-political purpose is commonly described as a civil religion in social theory.

The modern understanding of civil religion was defined in the cultural context of the United States of America by sociologist Robert N. Bellah, who emphasized the distinctness of American civil religion from any of the organized religions or faiths of the country, in particular Christianity.<sup>4</sup> In the recent summary of Richard Pierard, civil religion is “the operative religion of a political community—the system of rituals, symbols, values, norms, and allegiances that determines its life, invests it with meaning and a destiny, and provides it with an overarching sense of spiritual unity.”<sup>5</sup> But Bellah readily admits that his idea of an American civil religion rests on the more general notion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau presented at the end of *The Social Contract*.<sup>6</sup> Here, Rousseau argues that gods in ancient times were endemic to a political community (state or *polis*), and their spiritual authority was part and parcel of the internal social and moral order of that community: “each State, having its peculiar cult as well as its own form of government, did not distinguish its gods from its laws.”<sup>7</sup> This situation was radically altered by Christianity, which declared the existence of a spiritual kingdom ruled by Jesus and placed it above all existing governments, thus giving rise to ceaseless rivalries and conflicts between political leaders (kings and princes) and representatives of spiritual authority (the Pope and the clergy). In Rousseau’s opinion, this is a serious political disadvantage of Christianity, as it severely restricts the political authority of governments and prevents the establishment of a good polity: “Christian law is at bottom more injurious than useful to the constitution of the State.”<sup>8</sup>

His proposed solution is to distinguish religions according to their two fundamental social functions, “the religion of man, and the religion of the citizen.”<sup>9</sup> Christianity in its pure, Gospel-inspired version (liberated from the worldly ambitions of the clergy) may fulfill the former function as it is ultimately more concerned with heaven and individual salvation than with any secular political institutions. Rousseau deems it unsuitable, however, to serve as the

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, No. 1 (1967): 5–8.

<sup>5</sup> Richard V. Pierard, “The Role of Civil Religion in American Society,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Church and State in the United States*, ed. Derek H. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 480.

<sup>6</sup> Bellah, “Civic Religion in America,” 5; See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, vol. 4, ed. and trans. Charles Frankel (New York: Hafner, 1947), chap. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 4:115–16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

unifying political religion of a community, because the latter should inculcate love and respect for the laws of the realm, obedience to the political leaders, and a willingness to serve the country's interests. Therefore, the smooth functioning of a state requires that "each of its citizens should have a religion which will dispose him to love his duties; but the dogmas of that religion interest neither the State nor its members except as far as they affect morality and those duties which he who professes them is required to discharge towards others." Rousseau calls this set of dogmas a "purely civil profession of faith" that should be established by the ruler of a particular country; they are not dogmas proper but rather "sentiments of sociability" guiding the citizens' public, social, and political behavior.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, they should be more than mere social norms because they should command loyalty and obedience. As Rousseau writes, "The dogmas of civil religion ought to be simple, few in number, precisely fixed, and without explanation or comment. The existence of a powerful, wise, and benevolent Divinity, who foresees and provides the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws: these are its positive dogmas. Its negative dogmas I would confine to one—intolerance."<sup>11</sup> In Attila Károly Molnár's insightful summary, this "radical republican version of civil religion" is not satisfied with subordinating Christianity to secular political power, but wishes to replace it completely with a purely secular political religion.<sup>12</sup> This social creed remains entirely indifferent to the private lives and worship practices of citizens, but prescribes binding rules for their public attitudes and behaviour, including the requirement of love and devotion to their political community. "This was Rousseau's invention, who discovered secular political religion with civil religion, and the creation of such a religion has become a favourite pastime of nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectuals."<sup>13</sup>

Rousseau's brief sketch of the desirable civil religion as a spiritual glue to keep society intact provides a perfect blueprint for a utopian approach to religion. In fact, an excellent illustration of Rousseau's model can be found in the very first literary utopia, Sir Thomas More's eponymous work, in which an entire chapter of Part II is devoted to the description of the religious diversity of utopians. In the island of Utopia, people are free to follow whatever religion they prefer and even to proselytize for it without resorting to violence or the abuse of

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>12</sup> Attila Károly Molnár, "Civil vallás," in *Forrásvidékek: Társadalomtudományi tanulmányok Némedi Dénes 60. születésnapjára*, ed. Gábor Felkai, Attila Károly Molnár, and Eszter Pál (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2002), 217; "a civil vallás radikális republikánus változatá[nak]"; my translation.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.; "Ez Rousseau újítása, aki a civil vallással felfedezte a világi politikai vallást, amelynek megalkotása azóta a XIX-XX. századi értelmiség kedvenc foglalatossága lett"; my translation.

other faiths. To do so is considered a disturbance of public peace, and the perpetrators are sentenced to exile or slavery.<sup>14</sup> King Utopus laid down only two fundamental dogmas that must not be questioned: the immortality of the soul and the existence of divine providence. Both dogmas are justified by their social utility. People tend to obey and follow the laws and norms of a community more steadfastly if they are concerned about their afterlife, if they believe that “after this life vices will be punished and virtue rewarded.”<sup>15</sup> The narrator declares with conviction that fear of a country’s laws alone would not deter people from breaking them in order to gratify their greed; they must have fear of divine punishment and hope of a life after death. Therefore, the two fundamental dogmas of Utopia function as a foundation for the numerous other social rules and norms that are enforced with a consistent severity to preserve the particular Utopian social mold.

Leland Miles was probably the first to point out the Platonic inspiration behind what he called the “minimum religion” of Utopia. In the *Republic*, and also in the *Laws*, Plato insists on recognition of the justice of God (or gods), the immortality of the soul, and divine providence (or justice) operating both in this world and the next as essential requirements of membership in an ideal community.<sup>16</sup> The Platonic inspiration behind *Utopia* is well known and explicitly acknowledged in the prefatory material attached to the book, but Plato’s influence on Rousseau’s concept of civil religion is not often discussed in critical literature.<sup>17</sup> Attila Károly Molnár, in his wide-ranging historical survey of the philosophical origins of civil religion, does not suppose a direct link, but claims that the Platonic concept of *homonoia*—the necessity of having a shared character, moral outlook, and way of thinking, as well as common habits, for the coherence of a social-political community—can be identified as the ultimate source of the idea of civil religion. *Homonoia* was seen both by Plato (in the *Republic*) and Aristotle (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) as essential for social peace and stability.<sup>18</sup> Civil religion is nothing but a deliberate tool in the hands of the political leaders or

---

<sup>14</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. George M. Logan and Robert T. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 95–99.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Leland Miles, “The Platonic Source of Utopia’s ‘Minimum Religion,’” *Renaissance News* 9 (1956): 84–87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2857482>.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. John Gueguen’s observation that “More’s Utopia pursues a fundamental reformation of Platonic theology. It seeks in characteristically Platonic fashion, in dialogue, to disclose a new Plato, a corrected Plato.” John A. Gueguen, “Reading More’s *Utopia* as a Criticism of Plato,” in *Quincentennial Essays on Thomas More*, ed. Michael J. Moore (Boone, NC: Appalachian State University, 1978), 44. The famous prefatory poem, ostensibly written by a certain Anemolius, compares *Utopia* favourably to Plato’s *Republic* by claiming that the former is trying to compete with and even defeat the latter; for details, see Károly Pintér, *The Anatomy of Utopia: Narration, Estrangement and Ambiguity in More, Wells, Huxley and Clarke* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 197n6.

<sup>18</sup> Molnár, “Civil vallás,” 207–8, 210–11.

the political elite to encourage and reinforce a shared set of social, political, and ethical values and attitudes.

In the two centuries following Rousseau's era, the most spectacularly successful forms of civil religion proved to be the varieties of modern nationalist ideologies. Elemér Hankiss, who was probably the first to discuss Bellah's renewed version of the concept in Hungarian while also applying it in a Hungarian cultural-historical context, chose to translate it as *nemzetvallás* (nation-religion).<sup>19</sup> He justified his decision by arguing that this particular version of an immanent religion (as opposed to transcendent religions that believe in and worship an invisible and omnipotent deity existing outside and beyond the empirical world) focuses on the common history and fate of a certain nation, state, or ethnic group as an object of worship and invests it with religious significance or attributes. The sacralized concept of the nation, as well as its worship via various symbolic rituals, is well known in the critical literature of civil religion. Donald Jones and Russell Richey, in an attempt to provide a typology of civil religion, distinguish both the "transcendental universal religion of the nation"<sup>20</sup>—essentially Bellah's understanding of the concept—and "religious nationalism" or "the religion of patriotism." It is the latter meaning that corresponds to Hankiss's understanding, in which the nation is "the object of adoration and glorification."<sup>21</sup> The second half of the nineteenth century saw the establishment of free and compulsory public school systems all over Europe and the Western world. These proved particularly effective in propagating the religion of patriotism, the mobilizing potential of which was utilized to tragic and terrible effect during the conflagration of the two world wars.

### Civil Religion in the Utopian Works of H. G. Wells

Krishan Kumar observes that "after 1870 a spate of utopias poured fourth" in Britain.<sup>22</sup> Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century utopists all over Europe and the US were faced with two overwhelming social realities. On the one hand, their societies underwent rapid transformation due to the advance of natural sciences, the impact of the industrial revolution, and the economic supremacy of free-market capitalism; on the other hand, the dominance of nationalist civil religions both glorified the *status quo* and generated rivalries and mutual distrust among nations. Utopian responses to these realities typically gravitated toward the

---

<sup>19</sup> Elemér Hankiss, "Nemzetvallás," in *Monumentumok az első világháborúból*, ed. Ákos Kovács (Budapest: Corvina, 1991), 66.

<sup>20</sup> Donald G. Jones and Russell E. Richey, "The Civil Religion Debate," in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey, and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 15–16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 65.

most popular contemporary alternative: the socialist utopia, which would destroy national divisions by uniting humanity under one government (or make national governments mutually supportive and tolerant of one another) and eliminate the ills of private property and *laissez-faire* capitalism by substituting it with some combination of collective ownership and central planning. Kumar argues that “socialism was the nineteenth-century utopia, the truly modern utopia, *par excellence*,” but that by the end of the century, it was becoming a religion in its own right: “Just as the belief of the early Christians in the imminence of the Second Coming gave way to the indefinite expectation of the Augustinian Church, so the socialists of the 1880s came to place their faith in the Party and the Movement as the vehicles of regeneration in some distant future. The fervency of belief remained, but the concrete goal was displaced to a remote time which none could predict. The language of socialism became correspondingly consolatory and inspirational, couched in the terms and tones of traditional religion.”<sup>23</sup>

A key influence on a number of English socialists was a curious book, *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872), by William Winwood Reade, who adapted Darwinism for his evolutionary vision of the unceasing progress of humanity toward a bright future. Leon Stover convincingly argues that Reade’s views made a more powerful and lasting impact on H. G. Wells than those of his revered former professor, T. H. Huxley.<sup>24</sup> As “Wells was arguably... the first writer in the canon of English Literature to have been trained as a pure scientist,” he shared Reade’s conviction that science provided the key to mastery over nature, thus leading to the elevation of humanity to new levels of knowledge and power, and also to a new moral quality.<sup>25</sup> However, both Reade and Wells also saw a tragic potential in human evolution if it were to be left to follow its own course blindly, wasting its resources on various struggles and wars. Such dangers could only be overcome by a self-conscious, sustained, and united effort of the race.

With such a core conviction, Wells occupies a key position in the utopian tradition straddling two radically different epochs: the nineteenth-century optimistic spirit believing in scientific progress and the unbridled potential of the future development of humankind on the one hand, and the anxious, fretful atmosphere of the post-1918 period on the other, in which the future was suddenly transformed into a vague, looming threat full of dangerous

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 49, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Leon Stover, “Applied Natural History: Wells vs. Huxley,” In *H. G. Wells Under Revision: Proceedings of the International H. G. Wells Symposium, London, July 1986*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990), 127–130.

<sup>25</sup> Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 13.

possibilities. In Patrick Parrinder's pithy summary, "He was the first of the futurologists as well as the last of the nineteenth-century prophets."<sup>26</sup>

Wells clearly saw both sides of the evolutionary coin from the start, as he demonstrated spectacularly in his very first piece of fiction, *The Time Machine* (1895). Taking place in the far future, the Time Traveller is confronted with the degenerate descendants of humanity and comes to the speculative conviction that the decline followed the achievement of complete mastery over nature, since it deprived humanity of the challenges and intellectual stimulation necessary for further evolutionary progress. This duality is repeated with some regularity in his *oeuvre*, as he produced not only a number of utopian, but also several dystopian works during his long and productive career. The evolutionary pessimism metaphorically present in such books as *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), or rendered in an explicitly dystopian form in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), is counterbalanced by such ultimately optimistic scenarios as *The World Set Free* (1914) or *Men Like Gods* (1923).

A self-avowed socialist who nonetheless rejected the Marxist tenets of the inevitable class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat, Wells displayed a characteristically acute perception of the need for a shared utopian ethic and faith to displace the "traditional" narrow loyalties to king and country. Already in his first fictional utopian work, *A Modern Utopia* (1905)—the only formal utopia of his entire career, as Kumar notes<sup>27</sup>—he imagines a particular kind of "voluntary nobility" for the management of the World State.<sup>28</sup> Named the Samurai, the group is explicitly modelled on Plato's class of guardians in the *Republic*. The Samurai have emerged not as a spontaneous development, but as a "quite deliberate invention," a worldwide organization open to anybody who submits to living by the Rule, which is described as consisting of three parts: "the list of things that qualify, the list of things that must not be done, and the list of things that must be done"—in short, a comprehensive moral code.<sup>29</sup> Its general aim is characterized "to exclude the dull and base altogether, to discipline the impulses and emotions, to develop a moral habit and sustain a man in periods of stress, fatigue, and temptation, to produce the maximum co-operation of all men of good

---

<sup>26</sup> Patrick Parrinder, "Experiments in Prophecy," in *H. G. Wells Under Revision: Proceedings of the International H. G. Wells Symposium, London, July 1986*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Krishan Kumar, Introduction to *A Modern Utopia*, by H. G. Wells (London: Dent, 1994), xxxiii.

<sup>28</sup> H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Dent, 1994), 153.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 154, 166.

intent, and, in fact, to keep all the *samurai* in a state of moral and bodily health and efficiency.”<sup>30</sup>

Initially, *A Modern Utopia* describes neither the Samurai nor their Rule explicitly as a religious organization or a religious dogma, but both the nomenclature (for instance, order, Greater and Lesser Rule, the Book of the Samurai, the First and Second Canon, etc.) and the rather long list of requirements and forbidden activities unmistakably evoke the atmosphere of a religious society, such as that of Christian or Buddhist monks. In section 7 of chapter IX the narrative turns to the details of the underlying Utopian religion that motivates the Samurai. This religion rejects the doctrine of original sin: Utopians believe that humans are inherently good (thus reinforcing one of the fundamental claims of Thomas Molnar about the theological preconceptions of utopists)<sup>31</sup> and that they possess a natural religious impulse, which is perverted by traditional religious organizations and exercises. The Samurai believe that God is transcendental and mystical, and that religion should be a private affair between the individual and God, without the intercession of any priesthood. The Samurai worship this God in private ways, particularly with an annual exercise of departing from their own familiar world and making a solitary weeklong journey into a remote and wild part of Earth with only minimal equipment and supplies. However, as the narrator remarks, “with these things the Rule of the order will have nothing to do.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus, *A Modern Utopia* presents a similar duality of private, personal religion and public, civil faith which Rousseau would readily approve of. The Samurai voluntarily devote themselves to public service and the maintenance of the World State by following an established, written code of conduct, while they privately worship a complex and abstract God; the latter provides emotional, spiritual, and moral inspiration for the former, but the “civil religion” of the Samurai does not have a direct relationship with their transcendental beliefs, and their Rule contains no prescribed religious doctrines or activities. Private religion and public moral code are sharply segregated, and from the point of view of a utopian society, it is the content and impact of the latter that matters.

The idea of an internationalist civil religion to combat the negative effects of nationalism grew in importance in Wells’s thinking after he witnessed the carnage of the Great War, which he saw as clear evidence for his pessimistic assessment of the future prospects of human civilization. As Simon James sums up, “Wells’s political and historical

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>31</sup> See Molnar, *Utopia*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 178.



writing repeatedly insists on mankind's common biological origin making a nonsense of nationhood as an essential property.... For world peace to prevent any war occurring again in the future, patriotism and the nation state also have to be outgrown.”<sup>33</sup>

As a result, more than two decades after *A Modern Utopia*, Wells revived the idea of a worldwide voluntary elite in a manifesto entitled *The Open Conspiracy* (1928). In this non-fiction volume of related essays he essentially argued for the inevitability of the emergence of the World State (the same vision that underlay *A Modern Utopia*) and called for the formation of an international movement of enlightened and selfless individuals for its realization. In other words, he attempted to write the manifesto for an emerging Samurai order, now calling the same group “Open Conspirators.”

Whether such a scheme had any practicability is beyond my current inquiry; what interests me is the way Wells attempts to justify the need for the Open Conspiracy. His starting point is an interpretation of the role of religion in human societies. In Chapters I to IV, he opens his essay by claiming that religion is necessary for the survival of any human community. To justify this claim, he uses the same utilitarian arguments as those employed by Rousseau: “Without it [religion] morality was baseless and law unjustifiable.... No community seems ever to have been held together in wholesome and vigorous collective life by ‘enlightened self-interest’ alone.... A community where binding beliefs have decayed altogether is like a building whose mortar has been changed to sand. It may stand for a time, but it stands precariously.”<sup>34</sup> Starting from this axiomatic observation, he goes on to observe that in modern Western societies the influence of religion and the vigor of religious beliefs have been seriously weakened by the advance of scientific knowledge and industrialization, the emergence of the modern international economy, and the decline of governmental authority due to the circulation of heterodox ideas, criticisms, and doubts. He foresees a coming period of social disintegration, and—with a characteristically Wellsian prophetic gesture—presents his manifesto as an effective antidote to combat the looming chaos.

In his perception, all religions share certain essential features, such as the subordination of the individual self to the collective interests of the community in the name of some higher power: “a divinity, a divine order, a standard, a righteousness.”<sup>35</sup> All religions must also contain some kind of hope or promise in the form of an objective that motivates followers and persuades them to neglect purely selfish concerns in favor of collective goals.

---

<sup>33</sup> James, *Maps of Utopia*, 165.

<sup>34</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution* (London: Gollancz, 1928), 12–13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Furthermore, Wells claims that a significant minority of humanity has an inherent motivation to follow such objectives and shun mundane pleasures and problems in favor of a higher goal: “The desire to give oneself to greater ends than the everyday life affords, and to give oneself freely, is clearly dominant in that minority and traceable in an incalculable proportion of the majority.”<sup>36</sup>

Based on these assumptions, he presents his blueprint for a new religion. He singles out three aspects of a traditional religious outlook that have become obsolete with new psychological and biological discoveries about humans:

- The concept of sin and our attitudes to sin have been transformed by the recognition that most of our human motives have deep-seated biological roots: “Our former sins are seen as ignorances, inadequacies and bad habits, and the moral conflict is robbed of three-fourth of its ego-centred melodramatic quality. We are no longer moved to be less wicked; we are moved to organize our conditioned reflexes and lead a life less fragmentary and silly.”<sup>37</sup>
- The concept of individuality as the measure of all things has been challenged by the laws of evolutionary development: “We begin to realize that we are egotists by misapprehension. Nature cheats the self to serve the purposes of the species by filling it with wants that war against its private interests.”<sup>38</sup>
- The reorientation of human attitudes from the past toward the future questions the absolute authority of religious worldviews, including the influence of the past over our future: “The history of our world, which has been unfolded to us by science, runs counter to all the histories on which religions have been based. There was no Creation in the past, we begin to realize, but eternally there is creation; there was no Fall to account for the conflict of good and evil, but a stormy ascent. Life as we know it is a mere beginning.”<sup>39</sup>

In summary, he pronounces the bold judgement that religions should be stripped of all their vestiges of sacred history and posthumous personal ambitions. Instead, their shared essence should be highlighted: “The desire for service, for subordination, for permanent effect, for an escape from the distressful pettiness and mortality of the individual life, is the undying

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 22–23.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 24.

element in every religious system.... The first sentence in the modern creed must be, not ‘I believe’ but ‘I give myself.’”<sup>40</sup> Thus he arrives at the conclusion that the only worthy objective for what he considers a modern religious attitude is to strive for a “conceivable better order in human affairs” than the present one. In order to eliminate war with all its evils and to create worldwide prosperity and well-being, a politically, socially, and economically unified World State must be brought about. The rest of the book is devoted to discussing how such a project could be realized by a voluntary cooperation of enlightened and unselfish individuals, a peaceful but nonetheless revolutionary venture he calls the Open Conspiracy.

I have summarized Wells’s views on “modern religion” at length because they provide a particularly striking attempt at establishing (or at least proposing) an internationalist civil religion in the Rousseauian mold. Wells approaches religion with the appraising eye of a natural scientist, disregarding any spiritual or mystical elements of religious faith, and his functional method is predominantly interested in the use of religion rather than its meaning. In a sense, his analysis is a self-fulfilling prophecy: since he has stated as an axiom that religion is essential to a smoothly functioning, stable, and prosperous society, it is small surprise that his reasoning ultimately arrives at the conclusion that the desirable worldwide commonwealth of the future can only be brought about through the voluntary association and cooperation of individuals who have a religious devotion to such a worthy objective. Although he talks about the “essence of religion,” he is more interested in the social benefits of religion. In *The Open Conspiracy*, he attempts to sketch up a rudimentary civil faith for the righteous who are willing to devote themselves to the World State.

In one crucial aspect, however, Wells departs from the model of Rousseau as well as from his own fictitious description of the Samurai two decades earlier. In *The Open Conspiracy* there is no duality between public and private faith. In his *A Modern Utopia*, Wells still allowed for a private, individualistic, and mystical religion, a strange combination of pantheism and Protestant devotion strictly divorced from the moral code of the Samurai. In his later book, however, he refuses to make such a concession. On the contrary, he gently urges his readers to give up the idea of an individuated, anthropomorphic deity as the last vestige of an outdated concept: “The word ‘God’ is in most minds so associated with the concept of religion that it is abandoned only with the greatest reluctance. The word remains though the idea is continually attenuated. He is pushed farther and farther from actuality and His definition becomes increasingly a bundle of negations, until at last, in His role of The

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 24–25.

Absolute, He becomes an entirely negative expression.”<sup>41</sup> Although Wells refrains from a categorical statement, his position is made sufficiently clear: the traditional, personalized concept of God, “a God still anthropomorphic enough to have a will and purpose, to display preferences and reciprocate emotions,” should be relinquished in light of modern knowledge of the world and ourselves.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, his advocacy of the building of the World State as a new object of devotion is not merely a proposal for a worldwide civil religion. Rather, it is a substitute religion for the Open Conspirators, those enlightened few who are able to recognize that “the essential fact in religion is the desire for religion.”<sup>43</sup> Utopian religion no longer tolerates rival sects or deities; the utopian project itself should become the sole object of devotion in order to help fulfill its own stated purpose—the integration and individuals and their motivation toward a concerted effort: “Religion, modern and disillusioned, has for its outward task to set itself to the control and direction of political, social and economic life.”<sup>44</sup> The heretic comes full circle by not only challenging fundamental theological tenets, but also banishing God from the future promised land.

## Works Used

- Bellah, Robert N. “Civil Religion in America.” *Daedalus* 96, No. 1 (1967): 1–21.
- Freedman, Michael. *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Gueguen, John A. “Reading More’s *Utopia* as a Criticism of Plato.” In *Quincentennial Essays on Thomas More*, ed. by Michael J. Moore, 43–54. Boone, NC: Appalachian State University, 1978.
- Hankiss, Elemér. “Nemzetvallás.” In *Monumentumok az első világháborúból*, ed. by Ákos Kovács, 64–90. Budapest: Corvina, 1991.
- James, Simon J. *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Jones, Donald G., and Russell E. Richey. “The Civil Religion Debate.” In *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, 3–18. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.
- Kumar, Krishan. “Introduction.” In H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, xxxi–xliii. London: Dent, 1994.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 30.

- Kumar, Krishan. *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.
- Miles, Leland. "The Platonic Source of Utopia's 'Minimum Religion'." *Renaissance News* 9 (1956): 83–90. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2857482>
- Molnar, Thomas. *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967.
- Molnár, Attila Károly. "Civil vallás." In *Forrásvidékek: Társadalomtudományi tanulmányok Némédi Dénes 60. születésnapjára*, ed. by Gábor Felkai, Attila Károly Molnár and Eszter Pál, 205–249. Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2002.
- More, Sir Thomas. *Utopia*. Edited by George M. Logan and Robert T. Adams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Parrinder, Patrick. "Experiments in Prophecy." In *H. G. Wells Under Revision: Proceedings of the International H. G. Wells Symposium, London, July 1986*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe, 7–21. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990.
- Pierard, Richard V. "The Role of Civil Religion in American Society." In *The Oxford Handbook of Church and State in the United States*, ed. by Derek H. Davis, 479–496. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Pintér, Károly. *The Anatomy of Utopia: Narration, Estrangement and Ambiguity in More, Wells, Huxley and Clarke*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.
- Reade, William Winwood. *The Martyrdom of Man*. London: Trübner, 1872.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Translation revised and edited by Charles Frankel. New York: Hafner, 1947.
- Stover, Leon. "Applied Natural History: Wells vs. Huxley." In *H. G. Wells Under Revision: Proceedings of the International H. G. Wells Symposium, London, July 1986*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe, 125–133. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990.
- Wells, H. G. *A Modern Utopia*. London: Dent, 1994.
- Wells, H. G. *Men Like Gods*. Wildside Press, 2009.
- Wells, H. G. *The First Men in the Moon*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Wells, H. G. *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Wells, H. G. *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution*. London: Gollancz, 1928.
- Wells, H. G. *The Sleeper Awakes*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Wells, H. G. *The Time Machine*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Wells, H. G. *The World Set Free*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1988.