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["American Civil Religion: Revisiting a Concept after 50 Years" by Károly Pintér](#)

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Part I. Subject: My aim is to find a tentative answer to the question whether any of the several interpretations has relevance for further research in the vastly different social and cultural milieus of the 2010s United States.

Part I. American Civil Religion "Discovered": Robert Bellah and His Ideas
Among historians, theologians and sociologists of religion, Bellah's thesis elicited considerable excitement but also significant controversy in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Mathisen 130–134). Much of the subsequent debate revolved around the loaded word "religion", especially because of Bellah's own equivocation concerning the exact character of the phenomenon he purported to have identified: at the outset of his original essay, while declaring the existence of a "well-institutionalized civil religion in America", he immediately adds a disclaimer of sorts, referring to it as "this religion – or perhaps better, this religious dimension" (Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" 1). In his subsequent definition, he reproduces the same duality: "This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that is not the American civil religion" (Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" 4). The apparent ambiguity of a certain extent of a public life (social interaction/political activities) that is nevertheless claimed to be a distinct national religion has incensed many commentators and provoked sharply different interpretations.

In a footnote added to the opening paragraph, Bellah briefly attempts to explain the past scholarly oversight of the existence of such an apparently obvious phenomenon as the American civil religion. Part of his argument blames the narrow scope of the Western notion of "religion", while he currently uses the term as a "Durkheimian notion", meaning that "every group has a religious dimension," a commonplace idea in Southern and Eastern Asia (Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" 19). Thus, he explicitly contextualizes his own idea in the tradition of Emile Durkheim's functionalist interpretation of religion (expounded in the Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, published in 1912), which emphasized the essential role of religion in the emergence of any human community. Like Durkheim, Bellah is convinced that a functioning political community needs unifying moral principles and common convictions about the origin and the destiny of that community, and such convictions inevitably manifest themselves in various widely held beliefs as well as public rituals reinforcing these beliefs. These beliefs and rituals emerge spontaneously and are distinct from organized religions because they fulfill a different societal function. Bellah initially appears hesitant to subsume such phenomena under the umbrella term "religion," as one of them seems tellingly relevant: "What we have, then, is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity. This there is no other word for it – ... was, however, neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian." (Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" 8).

Bellah's hesitant embrace of the term, which he explicitly acknowledges to have borrowed from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762), has had a huge impact on the subsequent fortune of the concept itself. Due at least in part to the powerful overtones of the word "religion" when applied to "beliefs, symbols, and rituals" about the nation's past and the collective future, a number of commentators jumped to the conclusion that Bellah has described manifestations of the idolatrous worship of the American nation, or, more broadly, as Will Herberg claimed, the "American Way of Life," which is the operative religion of the American people" (Herberg, "America's Civil Religion" 77). Such a reductive understanding has led over the years to a general rejection of Bellah's thesis, which was translated in Hungarian as "nematulajdonos" ("nemo's own") in the nation-religion of Hankiss 66). In fact, Bellah's argument is far more subtle than that: he repeatedly makes a clear distinction between the private faith of individuals and the various religious denominations of the country on the one hand, and the proclamation of the tenets of national civil religion by elected officials and other public figures in their role as "national magistrate[s]" (Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" 8). He does not consider civil religion a substitute for organized religions (as for instance Marxist regimes during the 20th century made aggressive attempts to suppress Christianity or other established faiths with state-promoted historical materialism), but rather observes "an implicit but quite clear division of function between the civil religion and Christianity": the latter is responsible for individual and communal devotion, the former for invoking God and faith in political contexts (8). At one point, he explicitly states that his concept of civil religion is distinct from mere religious nationalism: "the American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal values" (18). Despite all these nuanced arguments, the consistent application of the term has led many to conclude that what Bellah has discovered is nothing more than religious form of nationalism or, alternatively, a utilitarian application of religious rhetoric to bolster patriotic faith in citizens.

Bellah, in his subsequent reflections on the civil religion debate, was forced to protest against the misinterpretation of his essays by readers (see for instance Bellah, "American Civil Religion in the 1970s"), but soon got tired of the rather cacophonous chorus of scholarly reactions, and by the 1980s, he essentially abandoned the concept altogether (for details, see Mathisen 133–34). In a recent retrospective essay, Matteo Bertolini reassessed the case of Bellah and his most famous intellectual forerunner, and came to the conclusion that Bellah became a victim of his own success. A casual visitor to American studies in 1967 (he was a Japanese specialist by training), he was forced by the unexpected and controversial reaction to delve deeper into American social and cultural studies, and subsequently refined and modified many of his original positions, accepting some of his critics' points and gradually abandoning the original Durkheimian standpoint which inspired his definition of American civil religion. But the American civil religion debate by the mid-1970s had acquired a life on its own, and the author largely ignored Bellah's later contributions or failed to notice the changes in his original ideas, which ultimately persuaded him to simply "use the use of his own term (Bertolini 198–201). For instance, in collection of essays published in 1986 entitled *Civil Religion and Political Theology*, he contributed an essay on public philosophy and public theology in contemporary America without even referring to "civil religion" in his text (Bellah, "Public Philosophy and Public Theology in America Today"). Thus, he symbolically relinquished control over the concept, and I will take my cue from this gesture: in my essay, I do not wish to reconstruct Bellah's intellectual development vis-à-vis civil religion, but select and discuss some of the most interesting and original interpretations and applications that reflected on his original ideas, challenged and criticized them, and often expanded them by adding entirely new perspectives and contexts.

It is far from easy to present an orderly review of the extremely varied reactions, interpretations and appropriations of Bellah's civil religion concept, and in the following I have no intention to refer to each and every piece of writing that ever touched upon civil religion, especially as a good deal of literature accepted Bellah's conceptualization without questioning, or did not contribute any substance to the theoretical debate. I wish to briefly notice those approaches that appear to me the most interesting, original and potentially most useful interpretations and applications of the concept. My approach is broadly similar to the way John Hammond attempted to provide a "map" to navigate the growing body of scholarly literature by grouping essays and studies around five interlocking questions in his 1976 bibliographical essay (see Hammond 171). But unlike him, I do not believe the main differences of interpretation to be primarily determined by the disciplinary background of authors: sociologists, historians, theologians and political scientists have all discovered American civil religion as a kind of magic mirror, seeing primarily what they wished to see in it.

Part II. Making Sense of Civil Religion: The Priestly v. the Prophetic Modes
The main contours of the early phase of the scholarly debate were summed up comprehensively by Ritchie and Jones in their 1974 volume. They distinguished five distinct meanings of civil religion based on the interpretations of different scholars, ranging from folk religion through transcendent universal religion of the nation, religious nationalism and democratic faith to protestant civic religion (14–18), but the various contributions collected in the volume offer more significant reflections on Bellah's notions. Perhaps the most insightful – and subsequently most influential – essay belongs to religious historian Martin E. Marty, who perceptively mapped out the interpretative range within which various streams of scholarly opinion about civil religion could be placed. His lasting contribution to the civil religion debate is the distinction between two kinds of civil religion. One of them "sees the nation 'under God,'" that is, envisions or perceives a transcendent deity behind social and political developments (Marty, "Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion" 144). The other shifts emphasis on "national self-transcendence," which means that—even though they do not necessarily emphasize the nation as a divine concept—the latter version disregards God entirely or refers to it only habitually (144). It is the latter version that comes close to the "nation-religion" interpretation of Hungarian scholarship, while Bellah's original definition clearly belongs under the former heading. Within these two kinds of civil religion (which are unfortunately never pinned down with specific names by the author), Marty further distinguishes two different modes: the priestly and the prophetic. The priestly focuses on affirming and celebrating national institutions, values and traditions, while the prophetic is drawn towards criticism and judgement of the same. To quote Marty's witty summary, "one comforts the afflicted, the other afflicts the comfortable" (145).

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