



Civil Religion and the Ecumenical Endeavor

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Those who are committed to the ecumenical endeavor must contend not only with forces that are straightforwardly divisive, but also with those which purport to be unitive. For not all forms of unity are compatible with the church's quest for oneness. In fact some expressions of unity present additional obstacles to ecumenism. This is true in the case of American civil religion.¹ Civil religion functions to interpret the nation's values, institutions, and destiny in terms of a transcendent reality and, thus, offers religious legitimation to civil society. In so doing it helps to create a "higher unity" from among the diverse elements within the population. This unity comes about as "secondary"

¹There has been a considerable amount of debate regarding the definition, and even the very existence of civil religion has been doubted by some. No doubt the decision as to whether or not civil religion exists in America depends in part upon the definition that is accepted. Donald G. Jones and Russell E. Richey, "The Civil Religion Debate," *American Civil Religion*, ed. R. E. Richey and D. G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 3-18, in surveying the literature on this subject, have identified five types of civil religion which they have labeled (1) folk religion, (2) transcendent universal religion of the nation, (3) religious nationalism, (4) democratic faith, and (5) Protestant civil piety. In some cases the difference between these types is one of emphasis; in other cases it is one of substance.

Ellis M. West has sought to offer what he has called a "neutral definition" of civil religion. This definition is intended to avoid prejudicing the case as to whether civil religion does or does not exist, or whether or not it is desirable. Furthermore, it attempts to be congruent with the definitions offered by leading scholars of civil religion. This "neutral definition" is as follows: "A civil religion is a set of beliefs and attitudes that explain the meaning and purpose of any given political society in terms of its relationship to a transcendent, spiritual reality, that are held by the people generally of that society, and that are expressed in public rituals, myths and symbols"; "A Proposed Neutral Definition of Civil Religion," *Journal of Church and State*, 22 (Winter, 1980) 39. This is the functional definition which will be assumed within this essay.

For discussions which question the very existence of civil religion in America, see George Armstrong Kelly, *Politics and Religious Consciousness* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984), especially chapter seven, and John F. Wilson, *Public Religions in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).

loyalties and "sectarian" distinctions are set aside in order that national identity might be given prominence and national goals be given priority over the goals of any of the particular groups or sub-groups within that society.

The problem which civil religion poses for the ecumenical movement is this: the very affirmations by which civil religion undergirds the unity of the nation reinforce division in the church as a global fellowship. This division is not benign but potentially destructive to any real and sustained expression of the oneness of the church. For when "higher unity" is defined in

terms of loyalty to a nation, attempts of the church genuinely to live in light of the church's global reality will be constrained by the claims of the nation. Conversely, if the unity of the church is recognized as the true "higher unity," then national allegiance will be conceived as a "secondary" loyalty which may need to be set aside on some occasions so that the unity of the church might be given preeminence. However, this becomes more difficult when the origin, ordering, and destiny of the nation is believed to be rooted in a spiritual reality. For when "a political culture is assured to be linked to a sacred cosmos or ordained by a divine will, it will have a greater stability than it would have had if it were assumed to be derived from the historical efforts of mere human beings."²

I.

Religion has frequently played a prominent role in reinforcing political and national unity. Jürgen Moltmann has flatly stated, "There are no godless states and no stateless gods...ancient social doctrine holds knowledge and worship of the gods of the fatherland to be of the utmost importance in securing the prosperity and peace of the nation. To this end citizens united in a common religion."³ After Christianity moved from being an illegal sect to become the official religion of the Roman Empire it was not long before the church was seen as co-extensive with the Roman state, and the laws of God and the laws of the state were believed largely to coincide. Christianity under Constantine became an instrument by which the cohesiveness of the Empire was reinforced and, in turn, the power of the state was used to enforce the religious dominance of the church. As Rosemary Ruether has observed:

After Christianity became the established religion of the empire, Christian theologians came to imagine that the religion of the biblical God had literally captured all peoples and all lands. Christianity took the universalism of the messianic hope and fused it with the ideological universalism of the ecumenical empire. The result was a doctrine of the Church as the one Catholic faith for all people which could no longer tolerate the concessions to particularism possible for a polytheistic empire. One God, one faith, and one church, founded on this revelation, the cultural and political vehicle for which became the Roman Empire.⁴

²E. West, "A Proposed Neutral Definition," 37.

³Jürgen Moltmann, "The Cross and Civil Religion," *Religion and Political Society* by J. Moltmann et al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 22.

⁴Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 233-34.

The fact was that Constantine and his successors did not really rule the entire world. By being wedded to the Roman Empire, therefore, the church sacrificed its own catholicity. In order to maintain its partnership with Rome the church was required to ignore, if not actively oppose, the peoples that surrounded the Empire. The Roman Empire may have claimed to be the *oikoumene* (Luke 2:1), but the claim was pretentious. This became manifest as the Empire shrank from encompassing the entire Mediterranean world, to Charlemagne's Europe, down to a nation. By identifying with the dominate state, the church was put into a position of becoming

increasingly provincial.

With the Reformation state-identified as well, Christianity further sacrificed its catholic and ecumenical nature. Cultural and national attachments came in some ways to have more importance to the various churches than the shared affirmation of the lordship of Jesus Christ. As in the Christendom of the Empire, so too after the Reformation and as nations came into existence, it was an almost universal assumption that religious uniformity was an essential component of national unity and well-being. As one prominent historian has put it, the church “was the guardian of the nation’s tribal cult. Church and state were separated only in the sense that they had different functions in promoting the common end of both, which was the glory of God.”⁵ The national church, while divided from the church outside its nation’s borders, nevertheless served to reinforce the unity of the people within those borders. At times this placed the national church in the unfortunate position of supporting war and conflict with other “Christian” nations, thus becoming party to the sending of Christians to kill Christians, supposedly for the sake of God and country. By identifying with the society in which it found itself, the church in one land came to be alienated from churches in other lands, thereby aggravating the division that already existed due to theological differences.

In the United States the Constitution severed the formal and official linkage of church and state. However, the importance of religion was not thereby removed; rather, it was transformed. Instead of an established church being married to the nation, the principle of religious liberty allowed religious institutions to exist without state sponsorship or interference. Yet alongside of, though distinct from, organizational religion there came to exist a religious dimension in the national life which serves the role that the church has served in other cultures, that of providing a sense of identity and unity rooted in a transcendent reality.

Part of the reason that the nation began to take on churchly functions is because the denominations failed to function as the church or at least as the church has functioned since Constantine. In America there was no one church which could offer religious legitimation and spiritual cohesiveness to the nation. The church itself was fragmented, not just from the churches beyond the nation, but within America as well. This is not to say that there was always a great deal of animosity or bitter competition between the churches. H. Richard Niebuhr has argued that it was in the nineteenth century that the Christian movement in America became increasingly institutionalized and nationalized. In earlier years,

⁵Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 30.

while there were certainly particular perspectives and prejudices which made the various religious societies distinct from one another, “yet there was a great deal of hearty cooperation and it was definitely understood that the organization of churches or societies was quite secondary to the common work of extending the kingdom of Christ.”⁶ In 1798 Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and members of other churches united in prayer for a spiritual renewal that would “unite the Christians of the nation in the communion of Christ’s earthly kingdom.”⁷ The great revivals of 1800-1801 were the product of this ecumenical longing. There was hope in the early nineteenth century that, to quote from Thomas Campbell’s 1809 “Declaration and Address,” “the Church of Christ, in this highly favored country, should resume that original unity” which was a part of Christ’s original intent.⁸

During the first Awakening there was a sense of international community among Christians since the movement was international in both origin and effect. Hence, it was natural that “American Christians became highly aware under its influence of the ecumenical character of the faith.”⁹ But when the religious movement drew to a halt the various religious societies hardened into denominations which progressively ceased to focus their efforts and attention on their common cause, but rather, entered into competition with each other. Thus, with the loss of the sense of the oneness of the churches’ foundation, destiny, and evangelistic task, sectional, racial, and cultural differences came to play a more dominant role.

As greater attention and emphasis was placed upon denominational peculiarities of heritage and mission, and as more stress was put upon defense and apologetics, the ecumenical vision was largely lost. It was during this time that the nation became “the primary society in terms of which individual Americans discovered personal and group identity....Denominations, races, classes, and sections would be subsumed under a single unity....Thus the unity which Christian theology localizes in Christ and the church was actually realized, insofar as it was realized at all in the American experience, in the nation.”¹⁰ But it is not the nation as a humanly devised phenomenon that was bestowed with the attributes traditionally claimed for the church. Rather, it was as the primary agent of God’s activity in history that the nation came to be held in such high esteem.

In the midst of religious diversity Americans, nevertheless, came to share a faith, not based upon the lowest common denominator from among the various religious traditions in the land, but upon the belief that America has in some sense been “chosen” by God to bear a special destiny under God. This civil religion does not, ideally at least, deify the nation as does religious nationalism, but recognizes a higher criterion by which the aims and actions of the nation can be judged. Thus “the American civil religion is not the worship of the

⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937) 176.

⁷Reinhold Niebuhr and Alan Heimert, *A Nation So Conceived* (New York: Scribners, 1963) 20.

⁸Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1955) 28.

⁹H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 177.

¹⁰John Edwin Smylie, “National Ethos and the Church,” *Theology Today* 20 (October, 1963) 316.

American nation but an understanding of the American experience in light of ultimate and universal reality.”¹¹ It is this transcendent element that makes political absolutism illegitimate even though civil religion does bestow great dignity upon the nation.

The nation brought harmony to the diverse and competing churches which the churches themselves were either incapable of producing or not inclined to promote. However inhospitable and disinclined to be tolerant they may have been, religious authorities and church members were to have toleration imposed upon them by the civil authorities. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed,

Most of the proponents of the various religious positions did not really believe in either freedom or tolerance. Freedom came to the Western world by the providence of God and the inadvertance of history. Tolerance was an absolute necessity for a community which had lost its religio-cultural unity and could find peace only if tolerance and freedom were accepted.¹²

It quickly became apparent to the churches that in order to have tolerance and freedom for themselves, they must extend it to others.

Sidney Mead has argued that the American experience has served to break down sectarianism and move the churches toward greater unity, albeit reluctantly. It has done this by providing a constellation of ideas, images, and values that virtually all citizens share with one another. Included in this constellation is “the high generality that the essential nature of Deity in his relationship with men is persuasion and not coercion.”¹³ History bears clear testimony that this belief has not always been among the most prominent elements in the life of the church. Even in America the various churches have routinely manifested the tendency to absolutize those facets of doctrine and polity which distinguish and set apart one church from the others. For it is precisely in the peculiar characteristics of a denomination that its identity is located and its justification for being is rooted, rather than in the elements that are shared with other churches. This is the reason why every church is prone to deemphasize the traits it shares with the others and neglect to explore and give prominence to what has been called “a common core of religion” or “the essence of religion.” Yet Mead points out that “in the religiously pluralistic commonwealth inclusive generalities are the only viable concepts of general application.”¹⁴ These are provided by the national faith or civil religion rather than by any particular religious heritage. The various sects and denominations may be at odds with each other in numerous ways, but in regard to America they reflect a oneness. Mead mentions that a German student who came to the United States in order to learn more about the religious situation in this country attended the services of many different churches. There was only one symbol that he found in all of them—the

¹¹Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967) 18; reprinted in *American Civil Religion*, ed. R. Richey and D. Jones, 40. All references are to this latter volume.

¹²Reinhold Niebuhr, “A Note on Pluralism,” *Religion in America: Original Essays on Religion in a Free Society*, ed. John Cogley (New York: Meridian, 1958) 43.

¹³S. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church*, 35-36.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 38.

United States flag.¹⁵ This is indicative of the nature of the “higher unity” produced by the “inclusive generalities.”

However, while these “inclusive generalities” are not, on the one hand, particular to anyone denomination or even to the Christian tradition more broadly conceived, on the other hand, neither are they so inclusive as to embrace people from all over the world. Against sectarianism Mead maintains that “it seems to me that the ‘bonds of affection’ which bind all the heterogeneous people together in such a union must somehow be more cosmopolitan, more universal, more general, than the ‘bonds of affection’ which bind a particular group of these people together in a particular voluntary association, even though it be called a church.”¹⁶ Yet the problem with these “bonds of affection” of which Mead speaks is that they do not “bind all the heterogeneous people together” but only American people. They are more universal than a narrow sectarianism, but still, they are not sufficiently cosmopolitan to set aside the particularities of national identity and meaning for the sake of a unity of global dimensions.

The Christian ecumenical movement is both more and less inclusive than the unity

created by the “bonds of affection” that American civil religion affirms. For while sectarian peculiarities and denominational distinctives are minimized in order that the oneness of the church might become a visible reality rather than just a theological assertion, still this unity, at least as envisioned by the World Council of Churches, is not utterly without boundaries, but defined by a Christocentric and trinitarian confession. Yet the ecumenical movement is more inclusive than the unity produced by civil religion in that its reach extends around the world, without regard to national borders or nationalistic attachments. In short, the unity that the ecumenical movement seeks is neither more nor less than that which is inherent in the Christian faith. As W. A. Visser 'T Hooft proclaimed, “Unity grows as we realize that we share in one call and begin to fulfill our mission together....Our unity has its irremovable center in the cross. As we come nearer to that cross we come nearer to each other.”¹⁷ Unity on any other basis detracts from cross-centered unity. This includes the unity which civil religion fosters. The tolerance and harmony that the nation may have imposed upon the church was accepted by the church as a matter of political expediency, and it was promoted by the nation with a view to national interest. But insofar as true Christian unity is concerned, national identity and interest are among the matters of secondary importance which are to be subservient to the oneness that Christians share in Christ. From this perspective the unity which civil religion creates and reinforces is not a “higher unity” as Mead and Bellah would describe it but is, potentially at least, an obstacle to the highest unity.

¹⁵Ibid., 63.

¹⁶Ibid., 39.

¹⁷W. A. Visser 'T Hooft, “The Ground of Our Unity,” *The Nature of the Unity We Seek*, ed. Paul S. Minear (St. Louis: Bethany, 1958) 125.

II.

But cannot civil religion and ecumenical Christianity harmoniously co-exist? Is the unity that American civil religion fosters necessarily at odds with the unity of the church which the ecumenical movement seeks to attain? Cannot the two unities co-exist side by side? Perhaps. Clearly both Bellah and Mead believe this to be the case. As they conceive it, civil religion does not necessarily reinforce intranation unity at the expense of international unity. Bellah has suggested that a “world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion.”¹⁸ Mead seems to have a similar vision.¹⁹ But while there may be occasional hints of global inclinations and openness within the key sources and expressions of American civil religion, these are few and far between. Despite Bellah’s contentions to the contrary, it is not only the marginal and untypical expressions of civil religion that have “placed American society above universal human values” and have promoted American unity at the expense of a unity which is international.²⁰ A study of presidential inaugural addresses—one of the events where Bellah has found the clearest manifestations of civil religion—yields a national self-centeredness not conducive to either a world civil religion or the ecumenical endeavor.

Insofar as there is such a thing, the inaugural addresses of the presidents are “the sacred scriptures of the civil religion.”²¹ An examination of the content of these “scriptures” suggests that some of the leading proponents of American civil religion in theological and sociological circles have been more prescriptive than descriptive in their discussions. A content analysis of the first 49 inaugural addresses was done in a study by Cynthia Toolin in order to determine

whether in fact civil religion was detectable.²² She looked for specific references to a deity (e.g., God, Providence, Creator), for listings of republican virtues (e.g., freedom, duty), for religious content of either the Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g., the wilderness, new Israel) or references to national events interpreted religiously, and for references where religious and political concerns or symbols were employed together. Furthermore, Toolin attempted to identify the characteristics of civil religion by looking for indications of four themes that Bellah and Cherry have suggested are central to American civil religion. These themes are Sacrifice, Exodus, American Destiny under God, and America as an International Example.

¹⁸R. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 40.

¹⁹S. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church*, 77. In fact, Mead goes beyond a global civil religion which would unite all the peoples of the world by suggesting that "the 'modern' can find a stable identity only in the context of unimaginable time, as he senses a mystical unity with all of life on its 'immense journey.' ... We find a stable identity only through an imaginative grasp that we are one with all of life in time and space, and, recognizing that there is no marked boundary between what we call organic and inorganic, that human life is the planet become conscious of itself." *History and Identity*, AAR Studies in Religion 19 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976) 17-18.

²⁰R. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 33.

²¹Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 21.

²²Cynthia Toolin, "American Civil Religion From 1789 to 1981: A Content Analysis of Presidential Inaugural Addresses," *Review of Religious Research* 25/1 (Spring 1983) 39-48.

Of the 49 addresses nearly 90 percent contained explicit references to a deity, a total of 150 references. There was, however, no unified form in these references. The earlier addresses contained references which were deistic in nature, while later ones tended to be more personal in form. Among the labels used were "Almighty Being who rules over the Universe," "the Great Author of every public and private good," "Almighty Providence," and "God Almighty." Of the public virtues which can be said to emanate to some extent from the Judeo-Christian tradition, many were found. Duty as a sacred trust was widely mentioned—with 44 addresses referring to it. Freedom was also referred to quite often, being present in 45 addresses. Freedom as a God-given right or as a blessing from God was often the form in which reference to this virtue was present. Surprisingly what Toolin calls "the more emotional virtues of the Judeo-Christian tradition" such as love and forgiveness were largely missing.²³

Explicit religious references were found in 28 of the inaugural addresses. References to Christianity and Christians, angels, heaven, Israel the cross, the star of David, the soul, prayer, and quotations from the Bible were discovered. There were also 150 references to the Constitution, many of which suggest it is a sacred book. Toolin also found that most of the addresses had references of a religious-political nature. Many of these had to do with God guiding the nation or approving of its conduct. James Madison's (1809) statement is characteristic when he refers to the "guardianship and guidance of that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of this land and whose blessings have been so conspicuously dispensed to this rising Republic."

The themes that Bellah and Cherry have suggested as important in American civil religion appeared very unevenly. The theme of Exodus—the American experience being a result of exiting from Europe to come to anew "promised land"—was not at all prominent. In fact there

was evidence of it in only two addresses, those of Thomas Jefferson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The theme of Sacrifice was present in some of the addresses, but again, it was not strong. Most of the 18 references to Sacrifice took place during times of war. There were occasional references to the war dead but not to individual martyrs. The other two themes, Destiny and National Example, tended to appear together in the inaugural addresses and not separately. This combination of themes was strongly represented, appearing in 45 of the 49 addresses. Toolin found that generally speaking the sentiment that is expressed in these presidential speeches is that the United States is the best government the world has ever seen and that because of this it is the international purpose and destiny of the nation to be an example to all other nations. Thus, Andrew Jackson (1833) stated that “The eyes of all nations are fixed on our republic.” In a similar way Ulysses S. Grant (1869) could say that “our own great Republic is destined to be the guiding star to all others,” and Harry S. Truman (1949) that “The people of the earth...look to the United States as never before for goodwill, strength and leadership.”

In view of the types of civil religion references that were most dominant in the inaugural addresses and the sort of role they played, Toolin determined that

²³Ibid., 42.

page 260

three functions were served by civil religion as employed by the presidents. The first of these, culture building, has to do with the process of creating and forming a society, of laying a foundation upon which the distinctive social processes of the United States can rest. The second function, cultural affirmation, pertains to “the confirmation or ratification of society’s foundation. It validates that foundation, saying, in effect, that it is good.”²⁴ The final function of civil religion in the presidential inaugural addresses has to do with legitimation or the justification of policies and significant social acts in light of the culture building and culture affirming processes. According to Toolin this is the most important of the three since it “roots the behavior of the society in its past actions and beliefs.”²⁵

Toolin’s conclusion offers little comfort to those who believe that the national unity which civil religion undergirds is of an open ended variety which may be but a stage on the way to global unity:

From the findings concerning these themes, we can see that the American civil religion is a self-congratulatory religion—we have the supreme government, and as such we are a shining example to other nations. This theme is important to the point of minimizing the themes of the Exodus and Sacrifice....The inaugural addresses give us a very particular picture of American civil religion. We see a president addressing his citizens, in much the same way as a priest addresses his parish. The president comforts his citizens, telling them that we control our destiny, in fact, that we control our destiny because God blesses this nation’s superior form of government, which God wants all nations to imitate. To support, or legitimate, these ideas, the president draws upon our American heritage, This particular picture of civil religion is found in the inaugural address.²⁶

This conclusion is not out of keeping with other studies on the relationship of the

presidency to civil religion.²⁷ The president tends not to use religion for the purpose of national self-criticism, nor is the language of transcendence often found linked with speech which reflects internationalism or a global perspective. Rather as Merlin Gustafson's study, "The Religious Role of the President," indicates, the president usually performs a pastoral role, not one of a more prophetic nature. In fact, because of the president's pastoral role, the "voice of the more extreme groups and sects, and often the critical or prophetic voice, is muted thereby."²⁸ Thus in the inaugural addresses it is rare to find America por-

²⁴Ibid., 45.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 46, 47.

²⁷for instance Charles P. Henderson, Jr., has concluded that in "American public life politics seems always to merge with religion and religion with politics, so that the penultimate takes on pretensions of ultimacy and the ultimate disappears in the amorphous symbolism of civil religion. This confusion is uniquely apparent in presidential politics because the presidency is the ultimate office in the land....Presidential politics is clearly the arena in which the implicit religion of the people is made explicit....The presidency is the stage on which the nation's leaders play their parts, acting out their priestly and prophetic functions, piecing together those constellations of meaning which become the precarious vision of their various constituencies." "Civil Religion and the American Presidency," *Religious Education* 70 (1975) 484. Also see Robert S. Alley, *So Help Me God: Religion and the Presidency, Wilson to Nixon* (Richmond: John Knox, 1972).

²⁸Merlin Gustafson, "The Religious Role of the President," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 14 (1970) 721.

trayed in the more modest role as one nation within the community of nations, nor is the suggestion found that the pursuit of national self-interests should ever be curtailed for the sake of global interests. Rather the prevailing sentiment seems to reflect Herman Melville's well-known claim that

we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world....God has predestined, [and] mankind expects, great things for our race...and let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of the earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do good to America, but we give alms to the world.²⁹

Inasmuch as American civil religion is formed by the inaugural addresses it tends to unite the diverse elements within the nation around convictions that reinforce a sense of the nation's superiority as God's primary agent in the world, and fosters animosity toward those, both inside and outside of the nation, who do not acknowledge the special station of America and who oppose policies and pursuits which are not limited by the needs and interests of other peoples and nations.³⁰ In other words, the nature of the unity civil religion undergirds is one which is divisive in relation to those who stand beyond the borders of America and who are unsympathetic to the idea that "national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy." Thus civil religion and the ecumenical endeavor are at odds, not only because civil religion is designedly anti-particularistic, and so a threat to the distinctiveness of Christianity,³¹ but also because American civil religion is entirely too particularistic when it comes to America, and this is contrary to the ecumenical quest for the unity of the church world-wide and to the Christian obligation to "do good to all, and

especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal 6:10). For the household of faith knows no national boundaries.

²⁹Cited in Ernest Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968) 156-157.

³⁰Another of the key expressions of civil religion, which Bellah, Cherry, and others have discussed, is Memorial Day observances, especially in smaller towns. W. L. Warner’s study of this practice, *American Life: Dream and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957) has been an often referred to source. Quoting from a Memorial Day sermon, Warner writes, “Memorial Day is a religious day. It is a day when we get a vision of the unbreakable brotherhood and unity of spirit which exists and still exists, no matter what race or creed or color, in the country where all men have equal rights” (p. 12). However, what is not usually mentioned is the degree to which this unity is attained at the expense of enemies beyond the nation’s borders. Warner points out, “A common hatred of a common enemy, when organized in community activities to express this basic emotion, provides the most powerful mechanism to energize the lives of the towns and to strengthen their feelings of unity” (p. 29).

³¹Will Herberg’s *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955) and Martin Marty’s *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959) were among the earliest discussions of civil religion’s tendency to minimize and absorb the distinctives of Christian faith. For a more recent contribution from an Anabaptist perspective see John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984), chapter eight.

III.

In contrast to the nationalist provincialism fostered by civil religion, “the ecumenical movement is demanding from us a new theological sense, born of a global imagination.”³² This is unlikely to occur if the distinctives of the church’s faith are diluted and lost due to an inappropriate identification with the nations in which the separate churches find themselves. If local loyalties are given preeminence it will be at the expense of Christian solidarity with the church world-wide and, indeed, to the detriment of solidarity with the Servant-Messiah who meets his people in the form of victims of injustice wherever they are found. Only as the church detaches itself from the narrow unity which civil religion provides will the church be able to enact a global imagination and thereby minister to the world as it ought. As Moltmann observed, it is imperative that:

through the ecumenical process, individual churches must free themselves from the ties that bind them to nation, people, race and class. It is already clear that many individual churches find their membership of the ecumenical movement a help in achieving an attitude of critical detachment from the societies in which they live. As social bodies, the churches are not independent of the interests of the nations, societies and cultures in which they live, of course. Yet, by unreflectingly conforming to the demands of nation and society, the Church has in the past all too frequently been betrayed into glorifying war and bestowing its blessings on force of arms and the false gods of society. Nations and societies have repeatedly forced the Church to accept the role of a national religion whose task was to justify hostility to others and to sanction injustice at home. But when this happens the Church loses her identity with the crucified Christ.³³

While in the United States no church has *had* to perform the function of a national religion, there

has been wide-spread cooperation by churches with the unofficial civil religion. The themes of civil religion have often been echoed in pulpits, and Christian rituals and civil religious ceremonies have frequently been intermingled.³⁴ This has weakened the credibility of the church's witness to the God who loves the entire world. For the ministry of reconciliation and the support of one nation's animosity against another cannot walk hand-in-hand without the ministry of reconciliation becoming grossly disfigured into something that is not recognizably Christian. This is destructive both to the unity of the church and the unity of the world. Only a unity that rests upon the revelation of God in Christ is adequate to who we are as Christians and as humans. For humans are creatures who were created for a relationship with God. Thus authentic human unity cannot take place apart from divine-human unity.

³²Kosuke Koyama, "The Ecumenical Movement as the Dialogue of Cultures," *Faithfulness: Essays on Contemporary Ecumenical Themes*, ed. Pauline Webb (Geneva: WCC, 1984) 43.

³³Jürgen Moltmann, "Fellowship in a Divided World," *The Ecumenical Review* 24 (1972) 441-42.

³⁴Both C. Cherry, *God's New Israel*, 2-6, and W. Warner, *American Life*, 94-97, have discussed the civil religious content of Memorial Day sermons. On ministerial support of war efforts, see Ray H. Abrams, *Preachers Present Arms* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1933, 1969).

The unity brought about by civil religion is misguided because the "revelation" that civil religion embodies is not a revelation of God, despite whatever reference to God may be found in the source documents of civil religion, such as the Declaration of Independence or in civil religious rituals, such as the pledge of allegiance to the flag. It is a revelation of the meaning and significance of the nation that is the concern of civil religion and not the self-revelation of God. The God of civil religion is strikingly vague of character. Bellah could speak of this God as being "unitarian," "on the austere side," and "much more related to order, law and right than to salvation and love."³⁵ What is most clearly known is that this God has "a special concern for America." The specificity, such as it is in American civil religion, does not pertain to God but "to the topic of America."³⁶ Thus true transcendence is lacking, for it is not the knowledge of God but a "sacred" knowledge of the nation which is the real topic of this national faith.

Hence there are no discernible norms to which the nation is subject but instead, "the nation, and the current world view represent normative instances of universal validity that are given; those concepts take on actual religious functions and are surrounded by a religious aura," as Pannenberg has pointed out.³⁷ This being the case, the nation and its interests become the standard by which every endeavor is judged and before which every other cause is relativized. Ecumenical leaders have long recognized that "an aggressive nationalism allied with religious interests may so limit the activities of the Christian community" that basic Christian mission work is "actually impossible."³⁸ But not only is Christian mission work virtually impossible in such a situation; so too is progress toward the visible expression of the oneness of the church world-wide. Only as civil religion is denied ultimacy by Christians and national interest is demythologized can the church move toward the unity to which it has been called and bear witness to the God who "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:14).

The unity of the church is to be a sign of the future which God is bringing upon the world. So long as the church acquiesces to the present nation-bound unity of civil religion it cannot be seen as a sign of the united world which is to come. The church has been called by

God to be a vanguard fellowship which through its very life can indicate to the world that the fragmentation, suspicion, and warring that characterize the present age are neither inevitable nor permanent. By transcending the barriers of race, class, and nation in the internal life of the church a more persuasive intervention for the sake of world peace can be made than those accomplished by the most creative efforts to manipulate the political powers. To cite Jürgen Moltmann, once again “The church does not simply talk about peace; she understands herself as a testimony, a sign, an anticipation (sacrament), of that shalom which embraces God, mankind and all creation. But what the church has to say about peace is first of all stated in terms of her outward form, her organization in society, her politics.”³⁹ The church,

³⁵R. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 28.

³⁶Ibid., 28, 29.

³⁷Wolfgang Pannenberg, *The Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 162.

³⁸*The Christian Hope and the Task of the Church* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954) 45.

³⁹Moltmann, “Fellowship in a Divided World,” 440.

simply by being the church in truth and unity, and against the false unity of civil religion, demonstrates to the world what it means to be a world before God. Only in international ecumenical peace can the church effectively bear witness to the gospel of peace and inspire the imaginations of a humanity that has grown convinced that war and violence are unavoidable and necessary. The church must live against such necessity! It is futile to ask the nations of the world to live in peace if the churches throughout the world remain so identified with the nations in which they find themselves that they cannot distance themselves from national interests and loyalties so that solidarity between Christians is uncompromised. For the sake of the church’s witness a distancing must take place. There must be proper withdrawal from the world in order that appropriate involvement in the world take place. Withdrawal without involvement leads to impotent isolation. Involvement without proper withdrawal leads to assimilation and absorption.

But in order for the unity of the church to convey to the world what it truly means to the world, the church’s unity cannot be tainted with the hostility toward outsiders that is characteristic of American civil religion. As John Meyendorff has written, “The Christian Gospel is about the fate of all creation and of the whole mankind, not just about Christians and their institutions.”⁴⁰ A unified church with a uniformity of doctrine, liturgy, and hierarchical organization, with little room for flexibility or divergence of lifestyle or opinion would offer the world no new vision but would, rather, simply reflect the repression and exclusivity that is already all too evident in the world.⁴¹ Only a unity which is permeated by mutual respect and love, even in the midst of persisting differences in doctrine and polity, and which is accompanied by an awareness of how provisional our best insights and policies are is capable of being a sign of what God wants of the world. For only such a unity as this is adequate to be a sign of the unity of mankind and an indication of the future of God for the world. The narrow unity associated with civil religion stands as an unneeded obstacle in the way of the church as the church moves toward the prophetic oneness for which God created it.

⁴⁰John Meyendorff, “Unity of the Church-Unity of Mankind,” *The Ecumenical Review* (24 (1972) 31.

⁴¹Pannenberg, *The Church*, 153.