

ANDREW SHANKS

# CIVIL SOCIETY CIVIL RELIGION

# *Civil Society, Civil Religion*

*Andrew Shanks*



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**For Liam**

Völker der Erde  
... die ihr in die Sprachverwirrung steigt  
wie in Bienenkörbe,  
um im Süßen zu stechen  
und gestochen zu werden –

Völker der Erde,  
zerstört nicht das Weltall der Worte,  
zerschneidet nicht mit dem Messern des Hasses  
den Laut, der mit dem Atem zugleich geboren wurde.

Völker der Erde,  
O daß nicht Einer Tod meine, wenn er Leben sagt –  
und nicht Einer Blut, wenn er Wiege spricht –

Völker der Erde,  
lasset die Worte an ihrer Quelle,  
denn sie sind es, die die Horizonte  
in die wahren Himmel rücken können . . .

Nelly Sachs, Sternverdunkelung, 1949

## *Preface*

I present the following as a memorial to the toil of innumerable laundresses. They helped make it possible.

Or, more particularly, it was the starch they used for cotton items; and the cheap little muslin 'dolly bags' of blue fabric whitener, with wooden handles, to be dipped into the rinsing water. Reckitts' laundry products were not only completely dominant market-leaders in Britain during the Victorian era, they were also a major British export. (In 1851 the Hull-based manufacturers were able to boast that they supplied, amongst others, the Imperial Laundries of their Majesties the Emperor of France and the Emperor of All the Russias.) Maurice Reckitt, born in 1888, was the great-grandson of the firm's founder and, as a result, inherited a fortune. Towards the end of his life, in 1971, he put a large part of that fortune into the Christendom Trust, which he founded for the general purpose of stimulating Christian reflection on issues of social ethics. And over the past three years I have been one of the beneficiaries, as M. B. Reckitt Teaching Fellow in the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster University.

'My objection to our leisured classes', Reckitt once wrote, 'is that they make so poor a study – and therefore a use – of that in which they are presumed to specialize', namely their leisure. He himself was always a gentleman of leisure, and in many ways an exemplary one. He was, for instance, a great devotee of ballroom dancing and of amateur dramatics. Throughout the 1920s he combined his summer holidays with producing a popular 'ragtime' review, with scripts largely written by himself, at the Palace Theatre in the Swiss resort of Villars-sur-Ollon. He was a passionate croquet player (national champion in 1935, representing England in Test Matches against Australia in 1937 and again in 1956, president of the

Croquet Association 1967–75). His books on the subject are, I gather, major contributions to croquet literature.

The rest of his life he devoted to the cause of what he liked to call ‘Christian sociology’, by which he meant the theoretical articulation of a non-partisan form of socialism: one embedded in the life of the church rather than in that of any political party, and very directly grounded in Christian faith.

He was perhaps, in certain respects, a somewhat dilettante visionary. ‘The trouble with you, Maurice,’ a friend remarked, ‘is that you always look on life through the steam-heated windows of a wagon-lit.’ But he was a visionary, nevertheless. A prolific writer, he also became the chief moving spirit behind the Christendom Group and its journal. We find here an off-shoot of that admirable tradition of Anglo-Catholic social concern which stems from F. D. Maurice; decisively shaped by the successive influences, first of the English ‘guild socialist’ tradition (represented by such figures as A. R. Orage, S. G. Hobson and G. D. H. Cole), and then of Major C. H. Douglas’s ‘social credit’ doctrine. The Group’s title also captures its romantic, Chestertonian nostalgia for certain aspects of the European Middle Ages: in particular the church-centredness of the culture of that period, and its relative freedom from capitalist ‘plutocracy’.

In so far as it is still possible in the 1990s, my immediate predecessor here at Lancaster, John Milbank, is I think a genuine Christendom-ite. I am afraid to say that I am rather less so: as will at once become apparent.

Nevertheless, I certainly am grateful to have been given the opportunity of working, alongside such good colleagues, in such a stimulatingly *un*-theological Department as this. The original Christendom Group was once described, I do not know with how much justice, as ‘the rudest group in the Church of England’. The present Christendom Trustees are animated by an altogether kinder spirit. They have indeed been very generous to me.

Long may they flourish!

ANDREW SHANKS  
*Hornby*

# Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	1
1 <i>Negative Revelation</i>	21
Hannah Arendt	23
Isonomy	24
<i>Auctoritas</i>	39
<i>The Life of the Mind</i>	43
Simone Weil	49
<i>Déracinement</i>	50
‘The absolute good’	56
2 <i>Religion, Civility, Faith</i>	68
Against Confessional Exclusivism	69
Truth as subjectivity	70
Faith versus ‘religion’	78
Affinity group/open forum	87
Anticipations of Civil Theology in Christendom	93
Niccolò Machiavelli: <i>Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy</i> (1531)	94
Thomas Hobbes: <i>Leviathan</i> (1651)	96
Benedict de Spinoza: <i>Theologico-Political Treatise</i> (1670)	101
Jean-Jacques Rousseau: <i>The Social Contract</i> (1762)	103
G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831)	108



viii *Contents*

3	<i>'The Solidarity of the Shaken': Civil Theology and Historical Consciousness</i>	115
	Jan Patočka's Meta-history of Historical Consciousness	116
	The History of 'Nihilism'	126
	' <i>Nur noch ein Gott . . .</i> '	133
4	<i>The Virtues of Discernment</i>	137
	Free-spiritedness (Heidegger, Hegel, Nietzsche)	140
	Flair for Tradition (Hegel)	159
	Classical Neo-Platonism	178
	The assimilation of other-worldly	
	Platonism in Christianity	180
	Hegel's reconciliation of Christian	
	Neo-Platonism with civility	184
	Transcendent Generosity (Levinas)	186
5	<i>'Antipolitics'</i>	200
	Notes	214
	Index	244

# *Introduction*

This is – primarily – a work of civil theology. A sketch. It can only be a sketch, because it is an attempt to outline the broad scope of a discipline of thought which, I think, remains sadly underdeveloped.

Civil theology has to do with the interplay between politics and religion. So does ‘political theology’ or ‘liberation theology’. These, however, are generally names for a particular form of confessionally Christian theology. (‘Confessional’ is often used as a term for denominational theology within Christendom. Here I simply mean: theology whose chief aim is to affirm what is distinctive about Christianity – or indeed any other faith – in whatever denominational form.) ‘Civil theology’ is something else. It is a type of thinking which, in a Christian culture, emerges out of the history of Christian confessional theology; which still very largely has to do with a reflection on that history; and which, to be sure, by no means precludes a continuing Christian faith – but which, in its pure form, is nevertheless no longer premised on such faith.

Thus, civil theology and confessional theology represent two radically contrasting attitudes to history. All theology (as I use the term) is essentially constituted as a strategy for the interpretation of history: this is how it differs from mythic thinking on the one hand, and unhistoric philosophy of religion on the other. It is the interpretation of revelation: by which I mean, *any* historical event, of whatever sort, which is seen to compel a critical re-evaluation of hitherto received notions of God. Both civil theology and confessional theology have this much in common. The difference lies simply in the angle of vision. It is not so much a question of what the ultimate court of appeal is: confessional theology is no less confessional when it takes on an ‘apologetic’ form, appealing to criteria of ‘natural’ reason, than when it

## 2 Introduction

makes a more dogmatic appeal to the data of authoritative tradition (Thomas Aquinas is just as much a confessional theologian as Karl Barth, say.) But, rather, it is a question of what ultimate loyalties govern the argument. Confessional theology is governed, above all, by the theologian's loyalty to his or her own faith community. Civil theology is not.

One might perhaps define civil theology as the theory proper to the practice of civil religion. I should immediately insist, though, that when I use this term, 'civil religion', I do not mean by it what Rousseau meant, who first coined the term: as Rousseau describes it in the concluding chapter of *The Social Contract*, 'civil religion' appears as a minimal deistic cult, exclusively devoted to upholding the sacredness of the legitimate political order. That is not the point at all. And neither am I using the term in quite the same sense as Robert Bellah and those who have followed him, when they speak in particular of 'American civil religion'. Instead, I am trying to imagine a possibility that has never yet been fully actualized. 'Civil religion' is not so much a distinct religion in itself as an aspect of religious practice; not necessarily in competition with confessional traditions, but infusing them, and overlapping their boundaries. Civil theology, in the sense that I intend here, does not preclude loyalty to one's confessional tradition, to one's church or whatever. But, as I have said, it is *governed* by another loyalty – one which is both broader and narrower – cutting across the confessional sort: in effect, a loyalty to whatever makes for genuine openness within the surrounding political culture.

And this then leads to a differing narrative content. All religion is about the definition of social identity – but which identity? The difference is that confessional religion (i.e. religion shaped by confessional theology) takes shape as a meditation on the identity deriving from the worshippers' membership within the worshipping community itself. And its narratives, therefore, are the narratives of that community: the tale of its foundation, the history of its development, the biographies of its leaders and saints. Whereas, by contrast, civil religion is a meditation – within the context of otherwise confessional worship – on the worshippers' other identity as *citizens*. In a religiously homogeneous political culture the distinction may not be all that marked. But civil religion flourishes in a pluralistic world, where citizenship has been most widely extended. There too, of course, one's confessional identity contributes to one's identity as a citizen; but the latter identity is altogether more complex. And the stories that make up the narrative content of civil religion are those that are judged most urgently relevant to the formation of that more complex identity, in each of its various facets. It is, in principle, a discipline of coming to terms not only with one's confessional

identity, but also with one's class identity, one's national identity, one's racial identity; with the whole historical burden of those identities, all that they morally imply, how they have to do with God.

What interests me, in other words, is the potential for religion to operate as a means of appropriating the past – generally. It is obvious how destructive unhealed communal memories are. That is: when past injustices are remembered only by the victims, not by the perpetrators; and are therefore remembered with all the more bitterness. Or when memories of guilt, unbalanced by any genuine source of pride, become intolerable. Such haunting recollections are perhaps the chief source of political violence, and of war. And, plainly, religious worship does at least provide a certain framework for the sort of conscientious commemoration that is called for in this regard: the potential context for a community to work through its most traumatic memories in a participative way, *sub specie aeternitatis* – and hence with a degree of calm objectivity, clearing the way to reconciliation. That is what would constitute a truly *critical* practice of civil religion: its narrative focus would be determined, not so much by the requirement of the confessional institutions to maintain their legitimacy, but far rather by the need for just such healing.

In actual practice, of course, the churches commemorate liturgically a whole array of events belonging to the remote past of cultures (ancient Israel, the Roman Empire) to which, outside that liturgical context, their members no longer relate in any real sense at all; whilst other, often far more immediately thought-provoking memories scarcely figure. How much time, for instance, do the churches in Britain, particularly, set aside each year to commemorate the Caribbean slave trade, and ponder its implications in the sight of God? None, or almost none. But (as the Rastafarians, who have abandoned the 'white' Christian God of their parents for that very reason, would remind us) this is a part of British history whose long-term moral consequences are by no means all finished and done with. And the same goes for the legacy of British imperialism in all its other forms too. Or when do they formally commemorate before God the various struggles that brought the British people their present civil liberties, such as these are? When do the churches commemorate the Highland Clearances and other similar experiences of cultural loss; or the history that produced the phenomenon of 'inner city' decay? There is in contemporary Britain just one major civil religious festival: namely, Remembrance Sunday. But Remembrance Sunday is a development out of Armistice Day, which began after the First World War at least in part as a celebration of what George Mosse has called the 'Myth of the War Experience': an attempt to revindicate the militaristic ethos that

#### 4 Introduction

had helped lead to war, by transfiguring and heroizing the memory of the resultant carnage.<sup>1</sup> In the years following the Second World War this aspect of it has, thank God, to a considerable extent been modified. Even so, it still tends to remain quite a limited commemoration: dealing with the most terrible events of the twentieth century only as they appear from a single perspective, that of our victorious armies. In so far as it is indeed purged of every last remnant of the 'Myth', it clearly can have a vital therapeutic significance. And yet its very isolation from other, complementary modes of commemoration, reviewing the same events from other angles, I think inevitably distorts it. If the following argument has any practical implications, these must first and foremost include the desirability of a drastic revision of the liturgical calendar – to make room for what is missing here.

Civil religion of this sort would be a discipline for the healing of divisive memories, so as to render possible the forging of new bonds of solidarity. But the resulting solidarity, which civil religion both helps bring about and celebrates, is one that transcends the division between believer and non-believer, or theist and atheist. And at once, therefore, the obvious question arises: what then are the proper criteria for it? Inasmuch as it is not a solidarity on the basis of shared faith, they cannot actually, in the first instance, be theological criteria at all. Thus, civil theology also differs from confessional theology in the way it pushes back towards *pre*-theology. Or another name for what it pushes back towards might be '*hierology*': a study of the properly sacred, in which questions of theology would for the time being remain bracketed; a mode of debate equally open to the adherents of all religious (or supposedly anti-'religious') traditions alike. Civil theology, one might say, is a form of thinking situated half way between confessional theology and 'civil hierology' – if such a thing could be imagined. This is primarily a work of civil theology. But, as a result, partly also a foray into the domain of civil hierology.

Civil theology is not, on the other hand, *necessarily* in any conflict with confessional theology. Obviously, there is a conflict to the extent that the latter claims exclusive access to the truth. Or again, to the extent that the demands of loyal membership in the community of confessional faith might be interpreted as tending to produce bad citizens. But these are not necessary conflicts. For confessional theology does not have to make such claims, nor does confessional faith have to have such effects.

And my basic argument here will be that there is a revelatory quality to certain aspects of twentieth-century experience which – if properly attended to – ought to compel confessional theology to drop its defences in this regard. If ever God has spoken, historically, this must be one of the clearest

cases. Yet, far from reinforcing the importance of confessional orthodoxy, of any sort, the revelation in question tends on the contrary to relativize its pretensions.

Let me reiterate, straight away, that in advocating the virtues of a certain form of 'civil religion' I do not just mean what Bellah and others describe in the United States of America – even if it does have certain elements in common, sufficient (I hope) to justify the usage of the same term. Bellah is, indeed, probably the most significant pure civil theologian of recent times. But his 'civil religion' is only incidentally about the healing of memories. Like Rousseau's, it is first and foremost about conferring legitimacy on an enlightened system of *rule*. Bellah is a Durkheimian, concerned about the sacralization of good social order.

Thus, he begins his seminal article on the subject, first published in 1967, with an analysis of President Kennedy's Inaugural Address.<sup>2</sup> For it is in his Inaugural Address that the American president appears most clearly in his ritual role as high-priest. The patron saint of Bellah's civil theology is a president, Abraham Lincoln – himself, as Bellah puts it, America's 'greatest civil theologian': a man who, although he held aloof from any particular denominational loyalty, 'in the Second Inaugural Address . . . incorporated biblical symbolism more centrally into the civil religion than had ever been done before or would ever be done again in his great somber tragic vision of an unfaithful nation in need above all of charity and justice'.<sup>3</sup> And then, behind Lincoln, there stand the Founding Fathers of the republic: none of them, perhaps, great theologians; but respecters, at any rate, of moderate and enlightened religion, who also bear authoritative witness to a remarkable experience of civil creativity – within the ruling elite. In some of his later writings Bellah restates his argument as a defence of the 'republican' element in American political culture, against its 'liberalism'.<sup>4</sup> Once again, this is in the first instance a statement about what is ideally to be expected from the government: genuine moral leadership, as opposed to a merely prudential strategy of mediating between freely competing pressure groups.

Bellah is no nationalist. Right from the outset he was invoking the values enshrined in American civil religion against the war in Vietnam. From the perspective of his 'republicanism' with a small 'r', the sort of nationalistic piety that pervaded the official rhetoric of the Nixon and Reagan administrations is paradoxically, surely, just 'liberalism' again, in ugly illiberal disguise. And what makes him such a stimulating advocate of the ultimate potential of American civil religion is just his increasingly sharp critique of how it actually operates. This is what differentiates him from his most

## 6 Introduction

notable immediate predecessor, Sidney Mead, whose critique is directed far more at the persistence of 'sectarianism' within the denominational churches, and who is relatively unconcerned with the actuality corresponding to his ideal deistic 'religion of the Republic', at the ritual level. In the spirit of Lincoln, Bellah writes of America as having betrayed its civil religious vocation. The vocation is real enough: it has progressively taken shape through what he calls 'three times of trial'. The first was the struggle for independence. The second was the civil war, and the ensuing struggle for 'the full institutionalization of democracy' in the country; the trauma which gave rise to what is potentially the most profound festival of the civil religion, Memorial Day. (Lloyd Warner's classic analysis of Memorial Day in a Massachusetts community, in the immediate post-war years, is a colourful evocation of just how rich an experience of civil solidarity this observance, with all its weeks and months of preparation, has at times become.<sup>5</sup>) The third time of trial began with the USA's emergence as a global superpower after 1945. And the essential issue in this third time of trial, Bellah argues, is precisely whether or not the American civil religion can, once and for all, emancipate itself from the idolatry of nationalism; so that it may develop to become the harbinger of, in his phrase, a genuine '*world civil religion*'.<sup>6</sup>

But (to say the least) in the light of recent experience the prospects for this do not look very bright. And even while he holds fast to the ideal, Bellah is driven to acknowledge that in reality 'the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell'.<sup>7</sup> The covenant has been broken.

He is not unconcerned with the healing of memories. It certainly matters to him that the historic sufferings of the Native Americans should be accorded all due respect in the story-telling of the civil religion. And he is anxious that it should so far as possible accommodate the African American perspective, as well. Notwithstanding Martin Luther King's tactical use of civil religious rhetoric as a means of communication with White America, however, the fact remains that this seems seldom to have been how it works in practice. Nor is it at all easy to see it developing that way. For there are two great obstacles – the actual difficulty of which, it seems to me, Bellah fails in the end fully to acknowledge. In the first place, there is the way in which this particular civil religion remains tied to its origins, as the spiritual pilgrimage of a supposedly 'chosen' people.<sup>8</sup> It came to birth in the years following the Great Awakening, the 1750s and 1760s, with the emergence then, within each of the various Protestant denominations, of a new sense of providential destiny embracing all the American colonies together, as a single people.<sup>9</sup> But that, of course, was just a generalization of the way in which the original Puritan colonists had seen themselves, as emigrants from the 'Egypt'

of the Old World. As a crystallization of historic memory this sense of 'chosen-ness' is, effectively, restricted to those who are able in some more or less direct way to feel themselves to be the spiritual heirs of those first settlers.

And, secondly, there is a deep ambivalence attaching to the high-priestly role of the president, inasmuch as the president is not only the symbolic representative of the people as a whole – but also represents the ruling class.

In the case of a Confucian sage-ruler in ancient China – that is, in a culturally far more homogeneous world, without the modern vulgarities of rule-by-propaganda – this might not have mattered so much. But in modern conditions I think that a civil religion essentially orientated towards the healing of memories would look very different. It would not at all be about legitimating the power of those who run the state. Far rather, it would be an affirmation of the proper independence, from the state, of 'civil society'.

The revolutions of 1989 in Central Europe, and the collapse of the Soviet Empire, are often described as a triumph and a liberation of 'civil society'. This concept in fact re-entered political discourse in the late 1970s, as a term for that whole sphere of economic, cultural or political self-organization, independent of the state, which totalitarianism – or (to use Václav Havel's phrase for the stagnant system into which totalitarianism had by then declined) 'post-totalitarianism'<sup>10</sup> – by definition represses; but creative new elements of which were just beginning in that period to reappear, here and there in the communist bloc.

It is, however, a somewhat problematic term, due to the variety of different connotations with which it has been used historically.<sup>11</sup> Let us therefore briefly rehearse this history. When the revolutions of 1989 are described as a triumph of 'civil society' the term is being used in much the same sense as it was earlier used in the Marxist theory of Antonio Gramsci, involved as he was in the struggle against Fascist totalitarianism. That is the closest precedent – although for Gramsci the state to which civil society is potentially opposed is specifically identified with capitalism, and he shares the orthodox Marxist ideal of an eventual disappearance of the distinction between the two realms. Originally, on the other hand, through most of the eighteenth century 'civil society' was just a synonym for 'the state'. And this is also the sense in which Ferdinand Tönnies for instance at the end of the nineteenth century speaks of (civil) 'society', when he opposes it to 'community': for Tönnies, 'the state is itself society' – or, more exactly, it is 'the social reason which is implied in the concept of a reasonable thinking agent of society'.<sup>12</sup> Yet the dissident 'civil society' of totalitarian Central and Eastern Europe might precisely be described as a movement for the restora-



## 8 Introduction

tion of what Tönnies calls 'community'-spiritedness to public life. The second and contrary meaning of 'civil society', as designating an entity distinct from, and generally in tension with, 'the state', dates back to the later eighteenth century and the anti-statist polemic of people such as Thomas Paine, for whom it represents that realm of 'natural' harmony which excessive state intervention serves only to disrupt.<sup>13</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, then, goes on to draw a three-fold distinction between 'civil society', 'political society' and 'the state', where 'civil society' refers simply to the realm of domestic and economic life, governed by private rather than public concerns. And Hegel distinguishes between the two realms of 'the family' and 'civil society' (corporate economic life and the legal system) – subordinating both of these ethically to 'the state', as that which includes but also transcends them. Hegel, however, simply does not discuss the sort of *civic* initiatives which belong to de Tocqueville's 'political society' or anti-totalitarian 'civil society'.

Let us distinguish between self-conscious and un-self-conscious civil society. It is the former which is explicitly anti-totalitarian in essence: the natural habitat for the conscientious intellectual as such – whereas in the latter intellectuality is valued only in the form of professional expertise, and tends to be policed by a system of patronage. Late twentieth-century self-conscious civil society has grown up in the space which for Hegel is occupied, primarily, just by corporations and churches; but has of course acquired a degree of organizational creativity that he, in his world, could not even dream of. It is, in general, what provides a space for politics independent both of the state and of political parties: the politics, that is, of groups which do not aspire to any direct share in state power, but which are as a result set free to raise the sort of awkward and unpopular questions it is in the interest of political parties, seeking votes, to avoid. This is by no means to deny that civil society is always also open to the ugliest, most unthinking expressions of intolerant prejudice. Yet its basic virtue at least arguably remains: that it is the environment in which these may most rationally be combated.

The 1980s witnessed an experiment in what is really a quite new form of politics in Europe: an attempt to build up a new internationalism 'from below'; a cultivation of international bonds of solidarity between groups, explicitly on the basis of their common participation in 'civil society' so defined, even where the most pressing issues for each of them are quite different. This began in the form of the movement for 'European Nuclear Disarmament' (END), as a coming together of peace movement people from