From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics, by Marcella Cristi, Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001. ISBN 0-88920-368-7. 293pp. $37.95 (Canadian) Pbk only.

Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag, by Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. ISBN 0-521-62345-6 (Hbk). 0-521-62609-9 (Pbk). 398 pp. Price unstated.

Perspectives on Civil Religion, by Gerald Parsons, Aldershot: Ashgate/The Open University, 2002. ISBN-0-7546-0818-2. 294 pp. £13.99 Pbk.

With the exception of Max Weber's Protestant Ethic essays, there is no single article in the social scientific study of religion that has created so extensive a subsequent literature as Robert Bellah's 'Civil Religion in America' published in *Dædalus,* the official journal of the American scholarly fraternity Phi Beta Kappa, in 1967. Indeed, if proportion of words written *about* is laid against words originally written *on,* then Bellah's piece may in fact have pride of place even over Weber's essays. 'Civil Religion in America' created a virtual academic industry in religious studies, producing at least one free-standing bibliography and several significant bibliographic essays and anthologies simply trying to comprehend the vastness of the output (e.g., Richey and Jones 1974, Hammond 1976, Gehrig 1981).

Nevertheless, in a 1989 *Sociological Analysis* (now *Sociology of Religion*) article, James Mathisen published a twenty-year overview of the concept of civil religion that appeared to be, if not an obituary, at least a retirement address. While he certainly did not say 'civil religion is dead', his overview did seem to suggest that the career of civil religion as an analytical concept in the sociology of religion had come to a close. His assessment was further corroborated by the response by Bellah that came in tandem with the article. Bellah noted that he 'no longer used' the concept and pointed specifically to its intentional exclusion from his then-recent magnum opus *Habits of the Heart* (1985). If the decade from the late 1980s to the late 1990s is indeed the focus of attention , then Mathisen's observations can be said to have been generally appropriate to the occasion.

But concepts, like people, can come out of retirement as well. The idea of 'civil religion' did not start with Bellah's crucial essay, and part of the expansion of the literature which Mathisen charted was an extension of the application of 'civil religion' beyond the borders of the United States and the era and events of what Bellah termed *The Broken Covenant* (1975). While the revival of the concept in the US today is undoubtedly and overwhelmingly connected to the events of 11 September 2001 (universally expressed in America as 'nine-eleven'), the American scene is not the only context where civil-religion analyses

have appeared. In the remainder of this essay, I will refer to three books that have been relatively recently published that bear on aspects of the civil religion debate. All three were written prior to the events of 9/11, but are usefully considered for directions to which they point that might be more or less helpful in further work.

An especially worthwhile publication in this respect is Gerald Parsons' *Perspectives on Civil Religion*, a monograph within a five-volume series designed to be a part of the Religion Today course at The Open University, but entirely free-standing with respect to its use elsewhere. Although I will make some critical remarks about this book in the hope that a second edition might be even more useful than the current one, I want to state at the outset that I find this presentation a valuable contribution to the literature on civil religion, not merely as a review text, but as broaching new applications, both within the existing subject matter and for opening new ground. It is significant as well because it constitutes an explicit module of an Open University course programme—in fact, the only one that is entirely a free-standing monograph. Hence, civil religion has fully come out of retirement at The Open University.

The book basically is divided in two parts: the first half considers British and American rituals of remembrance, war memorials/cemeteries, and pilgrimages to these sites, in part to perform these rituals (including vicarious pilgrimages, e.g., through the media). The second half focuses primarily on the *palio* event in contemporary Siena, Italy, as evidencing a different, but equally valid, application of the 'civil religion' concept. Both of these divisions are clearly written, carefully nuanced accounts and interpretations that make the continued usefulness of 'civil religion' abundantly clear. Both sections of the book contain helpful photographs that genuinely enrich the text.

Some specific observations…

The book is more dependent on the five-fold characterization of civil religion developed by Pierard and Linder (1988) than I think most American scholars in the field, particularly, would recognize as normative. At the same time, the empirical research of Ronald Wimberley and his colleagues goes unmentioned (e.g., Christenson and Wimberley 1978; Wimberley 1976, 1980; Wimberley and Christenson 1980; Wimberley *et al.* 1976). I am not as concerned about the reliance on Pierard and Linder as I am the lack of reference to the Wimberley *et al.* studies. This work is critically important because it 'proves', as much as any survey-style research can do so, that 'civil religion' in America is not just a perspicacious insight on the part of Robert Bellah, but a 'real' set of principles that operates in the hearts and minds of the American population and can, e.g., be said to co-vary with differences in organized religion, education, region, and so on.

I don't think I have ever read a more insightful gathering together of the many strands of experience and emotion that attach to the Vietnam Veterans

Memorial than Parsons provides. He appears equally talented and careful with respect to war cemeteries. I do think, however, that he needs to put these 'pilgrimage' observations into larger context, such as the current fascination with 'religious' tourism, and as a subset of that, disaster sites in particular (see e.g., Blasi 2001). I also find him on less secure ground in his comparisons of Remembrance Day/Sunday in the UK with Memorial Day and, even worse, Veterans Day in the US. I have been in the UK quite often, by coincidence with other events, for Remembrance Day/Sunday and have lived through half a century of Memorial/Veterans Days in the US, and there is really no comparison (in the sense of similarity). The UK version is much more serious and much more widely observed. I would argue that the fact that there are both a religious establishment and a monarchy in the UK has worked toward a combining of civil and civic religion that is unknown in the US.

The second half of the book, on Siena, is the book's blessing and curse. From the viewpoint of contribution to civil religion scholarship, this research and analysis is to be praised unreservedly. It shows with careful empirical documentation how the concept can be creatively and valuably applied outside the setting of the nation-state as we generally conceive it, to on-going local practice. At the same time, this much attention to a single topic makes it a monograph in itself that may bog down most text readers in a welter of detail. Regardless of how good the author's fieldwork or how insightful his analysis, these pages are simply too much about too little for a survey volume. It needs pruning and balance, either by other empirical cases (e.g., Bellah's 'Civil Religion in Japan') or some of the earlier literature—Bellah's original essay is not so long that it could not be reproduced in its entirety, profitably along with some of the empirical data from the Wimberley *et al.* surveys.

On balance, then, Parsons's book is a useful, worthwhile text that can function to open the field of civil religion study to a new generation of students in ways that are both consistent with the pathbreaking work of Bellah and alert to new avenues for future work. It can be enriched by modifications in a future edition but is worthy of adoption in its present form.

A second recent work to address the topic of civil religion is Marcela Cristi's *From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics.* If Cristi had approached her material differently, the book could, in my view, have made a significant contribution as a text in Political Religion. Instead, however, she overworks the rather facile treatment of Rousseau in Bellah's original essay until she has wrung a whole book out of what might better be a long footnote. It may well be the case that Bellah himself took 'language on a holiday', as Wittgenstein would say, by reshaping Rousseau's concept into something quite different from what Rousseau intended. So be it. If that was worthy of a scholarly article by way of critique, it should have come thirty years ago. Cristi herself quotes Bellah's own observation that, after the 1967

article was published, the phrase 'civil religion in America' took on 'a life of its own' (1974: 255); hence, while there may be some benefit to scholars to see how that differs from Rousseau's original coinage, it is relatively unhelpful to the course of civil religion scholarship today. The civil religion concept has indeed taken on a life of its own, and in its present guise, as Parsons' volume shows, it has significant analytic value. I am not even sure Cristi is correct in her observation that 'American scholars have been too much concerned with the religious dimension of civil religion, and not concerned enough with its political implications' (p. 118). But if she is, then she needs to take up that issue straightaway, not labor the past. The debate as Cristi revives it is anachronistic and obscures the central thesis of her book, which is that there is something worth studying that can accurately be described as 'political religion'. A text in political religion, which is what this book could have been if it were not so at pains to engage a peripheral comment in a thirty-plus-year-old article, would be very useful as a separate approach to the study of religion. By engaging the civil religion debate as she does, the book is turned into an essentially negative work, when it could have been written much more positively and creatively without the critical edge.

Between both the Parsons and Cristi books on the one hand, however, and Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle's *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, on the other, there is a great gulf fixed. In fairness, the volume only marginally claims to be a part of the civil religion tradition. That it is not put forward by its publisher as a work of fiction, however, would lead the reader to have certain expectations about the kind of scholarship that will be employed. Instead, what we are treated to is an exceptionally well written piece of what I would call soc-sci-fi or (since Scientology finds its origins in science fiction), perhaps the text of a 'religious' revival: namely, totemism. Put simply, Marvin and Ingle *believe in* totemism. Out of that belief and a strong dose of René Girard, they create an amazingly self-consistent interpretation of American history in the first instance, but also of human behavior more generally, rooted in sacrificial violence. Specifically: 'violent blood sacrifice makes enduring groups cohere… The sacrificial system that binds American citizens has a sacred flag at its center. Patriotic rituals revere it as the embodiment of a bloodthirsty totem god who organizes killing energy. [T]he nation is the shared memory of blood sacrifice, periodically renewed. …[R]ituals of blood sacrifice alone establish the flag's magical potency' (pp. 1, 4, 6).

Nor is this simply an opening salvo to get the reader's attention. After exhausting the flag itself, they turn to elections late in the book, specifically Clinton-Bush (the elder), almost as filler. But their style does not change. Here we are told that there are 'fertility narratives' in elections. Citing a voter's claim that the last time such an election occurred was during his or her childhood, when the election flip-flopped through the night, and the final victory

'felt like magic' (a newspaper article quote), they opine: 'Children sense the electricity in the air, the sexual tension around the anticipated mating ceremony [between candidate and nation]. Something happens at night when the children are asleep in their beds. When morning comes, there is a new reproductive outcome. This is the Christmas story' (p. 274).

So it goes from start to finish. At the end of the day, however, you believe it or you don't. It's language game, not analysis. Picking and choosing evidence to suit their faith commitments, Marvin and Ingle take the social scientific study of religion backwards a full century to produce that condition that led to the *bon mot* of James Thomson Shotwell at the 1910 meeting of the American Sociological Society, that there was a time in the sociological study of religion 'when one could not see the woods for the totem poles.' Until I read this book, I really thought we had moved beyond totemism. Not so, apparently. May their tribe not increase. This is not a study of implicit religion but a set of religious commitments posing as a study of a society.

What can we conclude? The career of civil religion is certainly not yet over. As in the past, so apparently into the future, it will be both a controversial concept in itself and will provoke research that is more or less helpful as far as advancing the field is concerned. We owe a debt to Gerald Parsons for his work and can use it as an example of how the field can move forward constructively, both with respect to areas already opened by the work that has proceeded from Bellah's analysis of the United States and with respect to new topics, such as Parsons' explorations in Siena.

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