

Covenant and Civil Religion: Co-opting Religion and Religion Co-opted  
S. Daniel Breslauer, University of Kansas *Introduction: America as Religion Mad*

Harold Bloom has called America a “religion-mad” country.<sup>1</sup> By this he means that Americans are “mad about” religion, they consume it and are consumed by it. They have an insatiable appetite for religion, but religion also seems to devour them. He remarks that Spinoza’s ideal of a disinterested love of the divine is incomprehensible to Americans.<sup>2</sup> Americans rather think of God’s relationship in purely contractual terms. If they render to God what is God’s, then God will render unto them what is Caesar’s. Utility drives American faith. One aspect of that utility lies in the way religion often provides Americans with a sense of direction, with their purpose and the meaning of their lives. Bloom finds that use of religion in the two symbols he associates with contemporary American religion—the flag and the fetus. He calls these “our cross and our holy child.”<sup>3</sup> They guide America into war and against abortion. He traces similar crusades and issues in the American past, from the revivalism of the nineteenth century through Pentecostalism to Fundamentalism.<sup>4</sup> Certainly religious belief has shaped American life and often provided it with a sense of direction. Bloom tends to lament this influence. Other analysts, however, point to an irony in the history he brings. While religious revivals were usually conservative in their impetus and expression, they resulted in a greater religious egalitarianism and social liberalism. Robert Fogel comments that cycles of religious awakening have led Americans to progressive social programs—the 18<sup>th</sup> century revivals lay the groundwork for the American Revolution, the 19<sup>th</sup> century awakenings brought about movements for temperance, education, and women’s suffrage, the early twentieth century fundamentalism stimulated social reform movements.<sup>5</sup> The consequences of being “religion-mad” need not be as dire or as conservative as Harold Bloom imagines. The complexity of the relationship between Americans and their religions demands more attention to detail, a greater

nuance and shading than Bloom affords.

*Two Dimensions of American Religious Utilitarianism*

From the earliest colonial period onward, American political thinkers have affirmed the usefulness of religion. While Bloom and Fogel both identify that usefulness as providing a sense of purpose and direction, earlier American writers took a different view. According to this view, the civil order had its own, distinctive, plan and purpose for which it mobilized religions. An often cited passage from Benjamin Franklin addresses his view concerning the relationship of religion and the civil order. In this citation Franklin suggests that several aspects of religion are valuable to social life; insofar as a religion manifests these useful attributes it deserves respect and civil support. Insofar as a religion has mixed these qualities with less impressive traits such as superstition it should be avoided. He writes:

I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world and governed it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to men; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished and virtue rewarded either here or hereafter. These I esteemed the essentials of every religion; and, being to be found in all the religions we had in our country, I respected them all, tho with different degrees of respect, as I found them more or less mixed with other articles, which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, served principally to divide us and make us unfriendly to one another<sup>6</sup>

What does Franklin mean here? The first is that he finds in religious principles motivation for ethical actions. Although he mentions beliefs in such things as the existence of a divinity (what he means by the definite article “the” Deity is, of course, debatable), and in the immortality of the soul, these are primarily important as foundations for motivational claims—especially those of providence and reward and punishment. Franklin respects all the religions “of our country” because they contribute to good citizenship. Fear of punishment and desire for reward, whether

in this life or the next, seem useful to him because they promote moral actions. All religions are valuable to a nation, he seems to think, because they all include social elements that are essential to a well functioning civil order.

On the other hand, Franklin looks with disfavor on what he considers the anti-social tendencies of some religions. When a religion divides the community rather than unites it, when it breeds intercommunal hostility rather than friendliness, when it no longer makes morality central but some other, presumably ideological, concern paramount, then he loses his respect for religion. Franklin accords religions honor if they serve his civil purposes, but he withdraws any support if they undermine civility, if they lead to social friction. The test of a religion, it would appear, lies in how well it maintains a low profile, in how invisible it remains.

This view of religion's role in society may be called one in which religion has been coopted for the good of civil life. Religion is forced to conform to the goals and values of citizenship, it must reinforce the official morality, it must affirm popular culture. Religions that resist this coopting are delegitimated. They lose their right to honor and respect. They forfeit their social role, and by so doing they situate themselves at the margins of society. A marginalized religion is, for Franklin, a religion that refuses to accept the social bargain he proposes. Religions that do not acquiesce to being coopted for the civil culture show that they have no real stake in the community as a whole and are, therefore, irrelevant or worse.

Franklin had a very pacific view of society. Religion was to foster friendliness and communal unity. The co-opting of religion for the social good, however, extended beyond such a benign purpose. Robert Bellah traces the call that American religions encourage sacrifice, death, and a willingness to participate in military action to the time of the Civil War. He claims

that the ideology of a “holy war” and of sacrificial redemption developed in response to the needs of that time.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the exact time or cause for this view, however, the idea represents a significant extension from the ideas of Franklin. Here religion is co-opted not merely to promote civility but also to legitimate aggression and hostility. It is not enough that religion support general unity. Religion must also affirm one type of unity over another, demand that its followers choose one social ideal over another, and sanctify political goals with spiritual reasons. Perhaps no greater American ritual expresses this than the celebration of Memorial Day. W. Lloyd Warner understood the power of that ritual and noted how it mobilized religious languages and symbols to justify and sacralize sacrifice during times of war.<sup>8</sup> Religion has been co-opted to provide a post-facto legitimation to the deaths that military engagement inevitably brings. The social, economic, and political causes of a military conflict are obscured behind the images of holiness and self-sacrifice that lift the deaths involved.

Certain American religious traditions have found this pressure difficult to negotiate. Over the course of history groups such as the Latter Day Saints, the Society of Friends, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses have found themselves losing the “respect” that Franklin held out to those religions he found useful. Michael Angrosino cautions that American pluralism and religious diversity often creates an excluded “other” that stands outside of the general consensus. Religions deemed hostile to the American ideal—either understood as a friendly unified community or as a country at war—have been isolated and rejected. He claims that Americans have been able to tolerate religious difference occurs only “by excluding ‘other’ from full participation, even as they have incorporated the professed ideal of legitimate dissent into the creed.”<sup>9</sup> Franklin’s decision to evaluate religions on their social utility often leads to a

discrimination against one or another tradition for political reasons having little to do with his original criteria. The causes in the name of which a community co-opts religion may sometimes be benign and directed to valid social goals. Those causes, however, may often be misguided, short-sighted, or malignant in their effect. Attractive as Franklin's humanistic standards for religion may be, they set a dangerous precedent as the political order co-opts religious institutions for its own purposes.

The creating of religious discontent, however, raises its own problems. By linking the legitimation of such vital and powerful concerns as war and death to religious symbolism, American civil order not only co-opts religions, but has, to a large extent, also made itself dependent upon them. Religious institutions may co-opt the political process and refuse to grant its approval to a social order unless some concessions are given. That response had already been affirmed at the founding of the nation. Because of that affirmation, Sidney Mead, examining America as "the nation with the soul of a church," (a phrase derived from G.K.Chesteron) called its religiousness "prophetic." American religion is judgmental, evaluating national conduct and criticizing it. Americans' religion, he avers, has as its purpose "reminding them of the standards by which their current practices and those of their nation are ever being judged and found wanting." To affirm this statement, Mead cites James Madison who wrote in 1784 that:

Before any man can be considered a member of civil society, he must be considered as a subject of the governor of the universe, and if a member of civil society, who enters into any subordinate association must always do it with a reservation of his duty to the general authority, muchmore must every man who becomes a member of any particular civil society do it *with the saving his allegiance to the universal sovereign*. We maintain, therefore, that in matters of religion no man's right is abridged by the institution of civil society....<sup>10</sup>

This prophetic type of religiousness has shaped American politics and influenced its development. The movement for women's voting rights combined with the temperance

movement as a religiously motivated attempts to change society. The civil rights movement of the 1960s and the anti-war movement of the late sixties and early seventies expressed religious goals hoping to transform American civil life. Michael Angrosino notes several examples of how “religious values have moved to the foreground as an impetus to political mobilization.” Religion has taken on a political role in widening the arena in which American politics takes place, creating more rather than less toleration, expanding visions rather than narrowing them.<sup>11</sup> Often the desire for religion to stand against the political order arises out of a dissatisfaction with previous behavior. Cushing Strout, for example, notes how American religions had allowed themselves to be co-opted for Wilson’s mobilization for World War I. That war, however, led to a “debacle of civil liberties” that led religious leaders to doubt the wisdom of what they had done. Religious leaders eventually renounced their former support of the war “in the same revivalistic spirit that had marked their commitment to it, conversion following conversion...”<sup>12</sup> How is American religion useful? There are really two answers—by allying itself with political aims and purposes and by shaping those aims and purposes. These may best be understood as two types of civil religion in America.

### *Civil Religion and Covenantal Religion*

The dynamics of religious utility in America has often been thought to lead to a common American religiousness, to what has been called, following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a “civil religion.” In an introduction to his revised edition of his *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, Robert Bellah comments that that book represents what might be called the “Protestant Principle” in which religion challenges social culture.<sup>13</sup> He sees in his most recent work an alternative approach in which religion confirms and supports culture. Those

two aspects of the role religions play in American life were already adumbrated by Alexis de Tocqueville and has been criticized and modified by several later analysts.<sup>14</sup> What is most striking in Bellah's formulation, however, is his conflating of two ideas—covenant and civil religion—as if they were identical. Not every interpreter has understood these ideas to be synonymous. In fact, several thinkers claim that they are incompatible.

When Bellah wrote his seminal essay on civil religion in 1968, Will Herberg stood in the vanguard of this type of criticism. Herberg thought of civil religion as a religiousness so closely tied to American patriotism and national life that the two could not be separated. This type of religion he agreed was “authentic religion” but not truly “covenantal” religion and that understanding it as covenantal was “idolatry.”<sup>15</sup> Whereas civil religion is religion co-opted by the nation for its own purposes, covenantal religion structures and structures the national order. Civil religion reflects the values and goals of the society; covenantal religion demands that political and social leaders enforce the values and goals sanctioned by the divine will. The limitations of civil religion, as Herberg sees them, derives from its being “still human, man's own construction and not God himself.”<sup>16</sup> Covenantal religion, he contends, differs from civil religion because it depends only on the will of God, not the mere mechanisms of human society. Civil religion, on this reading, is religion co-opted to serve civil purposes and, thus, lost its power. True covenantal religion, by contrast, is not “co-opted” but rather seeks to “co-opt” society, to transform society, to impose its values on the social order. Covenantal religion opposes the status quo, if it seeks to co-opt rather than be co-opted by society, then it remains an irritant, a gadfly to society. This type of religion, Herberg insists, is better for a democracy and more conducive to liberty and creativity, than mere civil religion.

Hasia Diner understands the transformation of the civil vision of Judaism in America similarly to Herberg, but without his judgmental stance.<sup>17</sup> If Jews seek to adapt to America, and if religion is a potential irritant, then the best strategy is to separate the civil and the religious. Separation of church and state, from this perspective, is a means to protect civility from the imperialism of religion. She traces how American Jews refashioned their faith so that it would conform to American views of religion. They took the dominant Protestant religion as a standard of “true religion.” More than that, they placed faith in the American Constitution as a protection for their religious life. Jews turned away from a covenantal view of religion as shaping society and constructed instead a type of civil religiousness. The reconstructed Judaism using a model of separate spheres of activity, erecting barriers between church and state, and in the case of American Jewish life, between institutions of religious life—rabbis, seminaries, and religious bodies— and those of Jewish secular life—social welfare, Jewish self-defense, and political lobbying.<sup>18</sup> Becoming American entailed emulating a secularization of the political, of making sure that “religion” was a supplement to, not a creator of, the cultural values and goals. Covenant was sacrificed in exchange for civil order.

Defendants of American civil religion as true covenantal faith, however, have also arisen among Jews. Recently Daniel Elazar has valorized covenant as the foundation of civil society. He considers American civil religion a variation on the covenantal idea found first in the Hebrew Bible and constitutive of American self-understanding from at least the time of the Pilgrims and the Mayflower. He laments that in secularized modernity the covenantal aspects of constitutional government have been undermined and diluted.<sup>19</sup> Elazar understands the essential nature of covenant to be the creation of community through balancing obligations and duties, on



the one hand, with freedom and the social good, on the other. Covenant, according to this view, consists of construing civil society on the basis of shared obligations and expectations as responses to a divinely given vision of a social order. The individualism of the modern world, however, has, he thinks, stressed rights rather than obligations, and, has separated the divine goals of covenant from the method of assuring that goal through oaths and consent. This leads to fundamental problems and a misunderstanding of communal commitment. Today individuals see themselves as recipients of rights; they look to society for personal benefits; they demand privileges. Such a view dissolves groups into a mass of disjointed and unconnected entities. It leads to fragmented identities and conflicting interests.

Civil society today, on this reading, needs a covenantal model. To be a member of a covenanted group means to share goals and values, expectations and duties, and a common vision. Under a covenant one's obligation is to "heed" the divine call rather than to merely "obey" an authoritarian rule. Elazar thinks that the original covenantal idea may well address the dilemmas of society today as it has done in the past during times "when people found themselves faced with the problems of reconstituting masses into communities and societies into commonwealths."<sup>20</sup> The religious foundation of covenant infused its creation of society with a wider vision and community building consciousness. The stripping of covenant of this component seems to have led to social disintegration. Civil religion, from this perspective, must also be covenantal. If it is not covenantal then civility itself fails. Civil society must co-opt religion, as it were, and harness it to social needs. Those who argue this point claim that American political thinking was covenantal because it built its civil order on certain Deist foundations. To be a good citizen, it was believed, one must also subscribe to certain putatively

universal religious values. Civil society must co-opt religion and use it as the basis on which to build good citizenship, patriotism, and the foundations of a moral social life. While particular religions may be allowed to flourish, none can be “established” because each and any such religion is as useful as any other in providing this basis for civility.

Alan Mittleman offers a variation on this theme.<sup>21</sup> Mittleman laments the way that a respect and toleration for diverse religious traditions has led to an indiscriminate valorization of diversity for its own sake. Unbridled pluralism raises more problems than it solves. For him civility depends on recognizing limits and boundaries. While pluralism represents a value in civil society, unfettered pluralism leads to the dissolution of shared values and concerns. Mittleman notes how a religiously focused society turned into a secular one. “Civil society,” he notes, “in opting away from its earlier covenantal origins spurred the secularization of society.”<sup>22</sup> If civil society does not co-opt religion then it has lost its theoretical foundation and its practical power. Mittleman, therefore, calls upon American Jews to reverse the trend that Diner describes. He suggests that they “free themselves of their uncritical infatuation with the limitless openness of modern civil society” so as to help civil society become more covenantal.<sup>23</sup> Society must be invited, for its own sake, in order to preserve civility itself, to accept the strictures of religion. It must, for its own good, place itself under the tutelage of religious traditions. It must not only be constitutional but also covenantal, not only evaluative of religions but submissive to the evaluations religions make on it. Returning of their biblical roots, Jews must show Americans how a good society is also a godly society.

This desire to give religion power in the social and political sphere is not unique to Jewish thinkers today. Studies of how religion and civil societies interact today show an

increasing desire for integrating the two, for a cooption of religion by society. What is exceptional about this model is that the arguments used are civil rather than religious ones. While Herberg argued that for religion's sake it must remain outside of the civil order, newer thinkers argue that for society's sake religion must be integrated into civility. Nancy L. Rosenblum, introducing a study of contemporary ways in which religions and democracies interact notices that the justification of integrationalist views "are not justified in strictly theological terms or in terms of religious doctrine and law....Religious challengers do not necessarily see themselves as anti democratic." Instead these groups promise a civil revival, a moral improvement in society as a whole, not a parochial religious triumph: "The most common integralist position promises general *moral regeneration* through faith."<sup>24</sup> Religion, here, begs to be co-opted for the good of society as a whole.

This difference between religion co-opting and challenging society and religion being co-opted for the good of the social order provides a distinctive difference between "civil religion" and "covenant religion." Perhaps counterintuitively, I will define "civil religion" as religion that stands separate from and in contrast to the social order; religion that challenges civil society to live up to higher goals and values, and I will define "covenantal religion" as religion that understands itself as the foundation of the social order, that identifies itself with the public welfare and the common goals and values of the community. Prophetic religion is civil religion addressing society and demanding change; covenantal religion is civil religion integrating the society and providing the "social capital" needed for a functioning community.

#### *Civil and Covenantal Religion: an Example of Each*

The relationship of Jews to American society sometimes seems to demand the

challenging approach of civil religion and at other times seems best served by a covenantal model. Jonathan D. Sarna raises the question of whether Judaism is compatible with the “civil religion” of America.<sup>25</sup> By this term he means the type of generalized American religiousness that Will Herberg criticized so trenchantly. Unlike Herberg, however, Sarna does not support his view through theological argumentation. Instead he looks at the sacred holidays of this “civil religion.” Thanksgiving Day, for example, could be embraced as a cultural expression of gratitude to the divine in which Jews might fully share. Memorial Day provides a way to emphasize that Jews no less than Christians have sacrificed their lives for the nation.

Christmas, however, raises a peculiar problem. The holiday itself developed only late in the national calendar. The holiday seems unambiguously civil and social rather than parochial and sectarian. The earliest Christians in America rejected observance of the day because the holiday was not based on any scriptural precedent. Religiously such a celebration was suspect since it was merely “one of the devices of man” and not a holy institution. Only slowly did the civil value of the holiday become clear and become established. Little by little the ideas of Christmas were generalized to include good feeling among all citizens, a sense of economic and social well-being, and patriotic fellowship. Finally in the twentieth century the holiday “gained legal recognition in all of the states and territories” of the United States.<sup>26</sup> In this way the day has been accepted as a civil rather than religious holiday. It celebrates general good will and “seasonal” feelings rather than any specifically religious message. As developed in civil practice the holiday has economic, commercial, and social rather than theological purposes.

Nevertheless, as Sarna points out, Jews have difficulty affirming that celebration. While acknowledging the need for civil unity and national solidarity, Jews are uncomfortable with a

holiday that seems to proclaim that America is a Christian nation. While satisfying the need for communal identity, the holiday also seems to contradict the claim that America “appreciates the value of religious diversity.”<sup>27</sup> The alternative of declaring Christmas a purely secular activity held another risk. To affirm the value of transforming a religious observance into a non-religious function would legitimate abandoning religious practice. Jewish identity itself, however, requires a clear affirmation of the importance of religious life. Thus accepting the secularity of Christmas would solve the problem of endorsing a clearly Christian holiday, but “at the cost of promoting manifest assimilation.”<sup>28</sup>

The only viable alternative is to oppose this attempt by a particular religion—Christianity—to co-opt the civil religion. By elevating the value of diversity over that of communal unity, Jews are arguing that Jewish values rather than Christian ones should co-opt the social order. As Herberg argued for the transcendence of biblical theology over popular religion, so the Jews whom Sarna studies argue for a Jewish understanding of American life over the popular view of America as a Christian country. Here Judaism acts to challenge the status quo, to stand against the common consensus in the name of a higher value. The anomaly of Christmas in the civil calendar draws forth this attempt to co-opt civil society.

In contrast to Sarna’s stand, John Murray Cuddihy chides Jews for their theological arrogance.<sup>29</sup> Jews have, he admits, suffer greatly in the past. They require a comforting theodicy to explain the tragedies they have undergone. They have a right to be afraid of the non-Jewish world and its view of them. Although “Jews come honorably by their paranoia,” it is also problematic.<sup>30</sup> Jews seem to go on a “moral holiday” when it comes to certain issues, such as the conduct of a contemporary Israeli government. Criticism of Israeli policies or of some Jewish

positions is immediately called “antisemitism” and dismissed as irrelevant because it is the result of a suspected prejudice. Cuddihy notes that this attitude is “irritating” to non-Jews.

This way of subverting dialogue and conversation by pulling out what could be called the “trump card” of Jewish suffering has a deleterious effect on social cohesion. In this case Jews would do well to restrain their theological particularism for the sake of a wider community of discourse. Civility and acceptance of a general set of values and concerns leads to a more productive interaction with American society. In contrast to Sarna’s advocacy of a Jewish challenge to the rest of society, Cuddihy suggests the value of civility over incivility. Self-restraint for the general welfare appears more valuable here. Covenantal co-opting of religion seems preferable to intergroup conflict.

#### *The Reform of King Josiah: Coopting or Coopted?*

If covenant and civil religion represent two ways religious traditions interact with the social system, why would one or another of them be dominant? Do historical influences and pressures come into play? What explains why one set of concerns lead to civil religion and another to covenantal religion? One answer arises from examining an obscure and complicated event in biblical history—that of the religious reform introduced by the Judean king Josiah probably in 621 before the common era. The story told in II Kings, chapters 22-23 tells how this young ruler (he ascended the throne at eight years of age) acted in righteous ways and at the age of eighteen began to repair the Temple in Jerusalem. During those repairs a certain “book of the laws” was discovered, confirmed, and led to a reformation of Judean worship. Scholars have usually seen this “discovery” as part of a political program. Robert and Mary Coote, for example, understand this tale as part of a general process in which texts were produced “by

demands for legitimacy following changes in rule...”<sup>31</sup>

This narrative occurs first as part of what scholars call the “Deuteronomic History,” the narrative stretching from the book of Judges through Second Kings. Scholars suggest that the book Josiah “discovered” consisted of some version of the book we now know as Deuteronomy. The entire history of the Israelite and Judean kingdoms was then recast to reflect the theories of that book. Josiah’s new kingdom was to issue in a perfected age that would reverse the failures of the past. All that happened to the Israelites and Judeans was “understood now in terms of the ideal past that had been forfeited by the people’s failure to recognize and maintain their distinctive relationship with their God.”<sup>32</sup> Josiah was portrayed as an ideal king. He would fulfill the model of kingship given in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. The biblical text, however, has obscured this portrait. Later editors, writing with the hindsight knowledge that Josiah had failed, modified the original text so that its historical purpose was altered. What remains true is that Josiah stands as a model of the most effective union of religion and politics, of state power and religious leadership. Josiah, even in the final documents, portrays “the monarch who implements proper rule.”<sup>33</sup>

The present biblical canon contains two versions of the Josiah story – II Kings 22-23 and II Chronicles 34-35.<sup>34</sup> Although sharing much of the same narrative these two have very different views of covenant and civil religion. Understanding the meaning and context of each version will suggest those situations that call forth each type of relation between religion and the political sphere. The Deuteronomic version emphasizes the way in which religion co-opts the social structure. Josiah begins a religious reform in his eighteenth year as king by seeking to ensure that the Temple tax be used to repair the Temple. That action leads to the discovery of

what is called “the book of the law.” On the basis of that book, Josiah concludes that to avoid divine anger he must put into practice all the “words of this book.” He confirms the book by a prophet and then gathers the elders, the priest, the prophets and all the people and reads them “the book of the covenant.” Upon the confirmation of that covenant an aggressive campaign is begun against local shrines and non-authorized priests. This action culminates in a Passover celebration the likes of which “had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel or of the kings of Judah” (II Kings 23:22). What is clear here is that a new religious tradition takes hold of the government. All the leadership groups—priests, prophets, and elders agree to make this book the basis of a new coalition, a new socio-religious unity. This newly “discovered” covenant replaces previous political and religious models.

The dense development of the book of Deuteronomy and the historical narratives that follow it leaves many questions unanswered. What seems clear, however, is that the final edition of the book took place during the exile as the Jewish people searched for new ways of understanding themselves and their history. The Deuteronomic author, according to one argument, was more interested in explaining the evil of Manasseh, the king who followed Josiah, than in justifying the good king. He sought to show that the exile began a new chapter in Israel’s history after a justified destruction.<sup>35</sup> The story of religious reform legitimated an attempt to create a new shape for Jewish life; it provided a model of how a new paradigm of civil religion could revitalize a community. The story of a covenantal revolution in which religion molded social life offered an example of how the exilic community could begin its history anew.<sup>36</sup> Priests, kings, and prophets seemed unable to produce a consensus. The civil order was



conflicted and in disarray. Civil religion took this opportunity to create a new political structure—one in which a book rather than any leadership group had ultimate power. In an age of doubt and disbelief, in a time of crisis in which official leadership seems unable to cope, civil religion becomes a crucial political possibility. In a time when old ideas have lost their validity and in which past certainties have become unclear, a religious revolution finds a responsive audience.

The story of Josiah's reformation as told in II Chronicles sketches a very different picture. In that account Josiah begins as a pious believer already rightly guided by priestly tutelage. He begins to follow a pious path already in his eighth year as king. By his twelfth year he has begun purging the countryside of idolatry. Only after accomplishing this task does he turn in his eighteenth year to rebuilding the Temple. The discovery of the book of law merely confirms what he has already known to be God's will. As Judson Shaver notes, the Chronicler's view of a reform prior to the discovery of the book of the law suggests that it was not the legal details of the law that were of concern but the curses that it placed on disobedience.<sup>37</sup> The effect of covenant is to motivate adherence to a previously known and acknowledged tradition. Religion is co-opted for the sake of the political vision of the king and his Levitical teachers. Even Passover does not seem to be given a new shape by the discovery of the book. It merely affirms the pattern already established by earlier "good" kings. Thus it is "nothing new."<sup>38</sup>

Some changes to the text in II Kings demand attention: first, the priests are the most prominent religious leaders throughout this text—whether in the rebuilding of the Temple or in the conduct of the celebration of Passover; secondly, the prophets lose their prominence. The book is, indeed, confirmed by a prophetic woman as in Deuteronomy. At the public acclamation of the books, however, the "men of Judah" and the priests are present but not the "elders" or the

“prophets.” This suggests that the reformation does not change the civil structure. Priests are the dominant leaders before and after the reformation. The discovery of the book merely confirms a previously existing political order. While in II Kings the covenant initiates a new coalition of leadership, in II Chronicles it merely reaffirms the primacy of the already established priestly hegemony. This satisfaction with the status quo reflects the “world of the restoration” during the Persian period when a priestly elite established control over a colony of displaced Babylonian Jews in the Persian territory of Judea.<sup>39</sup>

That community might well be termed a community of belief. The new priestly leadership created a unified colony separated from the former inhabitants of the land by its feeling of superiority, entitlement, and religious justification. In a time of intense parochial belief religion understood as social covenant becomes the tool of the dominant political system. The retelling of the Josiah story for a post-exilic Jewish community co-opts religion to solidify and justify an established leadership group.

#### *Implications of the Two Josiah Stories*

The two versions of the Josiah story have implications for the use of religion in various social situations. The same events can be recast first as civil religion, replacing a weak social order, or as covenant, confirming a dominant political system. The difference in interpretation lies first, of course, in the social and historical realities faced by the authors of each version. Nevertheless, such a simple identification of civil religion with weakened leadership and covenantal religion with a time of belief is misleading. Whether the culture is one of belief or unbelief, whether the leadership is strong or weak are matters of judgment and perception. One group in a society may experience it as weakened by disbelief; another group may experience the

same situation as one in which all that is needed is a reconfirmation of the covenantal basis of the status quo. Looking at so-called American exceptionalism, pluralism, and civil religion, Nicholas Jay Demerath suggests that the reality is messier and more complicated than theorists often admit. He claims that American religious perspectives, like those of other communities around the world, are diverse and conflicting. “At any given point,” he comments, “almost any society manifests enough cacophony to give even the most confirmed patriot second thoughts about whether there is a harmonious whole whose chorus is sweeter than the sum of its individual voices.”<sup>40</sup> The problematization of the relation between religion and the political order is extremely important. Contemporary Americans need to recognize that terms like civil religion and covenant are not transparently identical, that all social situations inspire ambiguous diagnoses, and that facile calls for a return to covenant or for an affirmation of civil “capital” through religious sentiment are misleading. William Scott Green comments that Americans need to rethink how they understand the links between power, society, and religion. He finds this especially crucial because of a dangerous complacency. New thinking about religion and politics, he claims “is especially important, primarily because so many of us think our society has solved the problem.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the ideas of both “civil religion” and of covenantal religion have misunderstood what the “religious-mad Americans” really desire?

*Lyman Beecher’s Family and “Religion-Mad” America*

Perhaps no other cause has been so civilly divisive as that of the American Civil War, the War Between the States. Families were divided against each other, intellectually no less than physically by the issue of slavery, the Union, and the war. One family’s divisions are particularly instructive—those of Lyman Beecher and his family, particularly his son Henry Ward

Beecher and his daughter Harriet Beecher Stowe.<sup>42</sup> The differences between these people lie less in a difference between civil religion and covenantal religion, between religion co-opted and religion co-opting, than in a difference in evaluating the nature of religion itself. Lyman Beecher (1775-1865) was convinced that the nation, no less than the individual needed the guidance of righteous leaders and righteous laws. Early in his career he advocated anti-disestablishmentarianism and rejected the idea of separating church and state. This advocacy, however, soon changed. He discovered that separation of religion from social enforcement meant an increase in piety and religious honesty. Soon, as Stephen Snyder says, “he was proclaiming the disestablishment a special opportunity and blessing for the church of God and the cause of Christ.”<sup>43</sup> He emphasized the importance of doctrine and belief rather than political action. By changing individuals, religion would contribute to an ideal society. By addressing the hearts and minds of its followers the church would transform the political world and still avoid political activism. Religion would change people and thereby alter the civil structure as well. Religion, as he understood it, was an appeal to the heart and mind of private individuals.

Lyman’s son, Henry Ward Beecher (1831-1887), shared his father’s faith in religion, but chose a different tactics. He refused to remain outside the political arena. He considered religious integrity compromised if leaders did not involve themselves in issues such as gambling, prostitution, and most importantly slavery. Henry broke with his father’s model when he required the church to take a stand for abolition and against slavery. A church that did not teach the nation how to abolish a dehumanizing institution was, in his view, unworthy of its calling. The preached word alone was not enough to transform America into a godly nation. Only new laws that would rebuild the nation could succeed. More than personal revival and private rebirth,

America needed a national rebirth, a national conversion.<sup>44</sup> Henry led a revolution at the Lane Seminary that his father had founded and which was "Old School" while he espoused "New School." Succeeding in this revolution, he presented a liberal theology in which science and religion were parallel ways humanity progressed in the divine plan. He used social Darwinism to legitimate the social and political structures of his own time. Religion as he understood it was a social expression of the growth and development of humanity; it was a tool by which the divinity advanced human society until it reached the political ideal of the kingdom of God. Religion was God's means of accomplishing the highest goals of creation.

Henry encouraged his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) to follow his lead and break with his father's views. While Harriet did indeed disagree with her father, her views were also different from those of her brother.<sup>45</sup> Harriet understood religion as an intensely personal and individual experience. She located religious life in the family with women and children as the core constituency. In this way, she seemed to mirror her father's emphasis on the private nature of religion. On the other hand, as a woman, Harriet understood how her life was shaped and manipulated by the external structures of society. Religion could only flourish if allowed to by the political order. She considered political change as a necessary *precondition* for religious change. While her father trusted in religion to transform the nation and her brother advocated for a religiously transformed nation, she sought a politically transformed nation that would permit religion to work its inner transformation on individuals. Harriet conveyed these convictions in a novel that she suggested God not she had authored, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>46</sup> She hoped (vainly it turned out) that her words would cool passions and allow readers to understand how society must prepare a place in which religious faith can flourish. Religion, understood this way, is a blessing

best developed when cultivated and sustained by a supportive but non-intrusive civil order.

The thinking of these three family members suggest three alternatives for the relationship between Americans and their religion. In a way, none of these represent an “American religion” that is either a civil religion or a covenant. The three Beechers offer, instead, insight into the complexity of how Americans see the politics of their religions. At times Americans refuse to allow politics and religions to threaten each other; each is confined to its own sphere. At other times Americans call upon religion to take a political stand. As with Henry Ward Beecher they may feel that a politically inactive religion has betrayed itself, has shown itself irrelevant, has abandoned the program that God has set for it. Finally, at times Americans call upon their government to make room for religion, to provide it with living space, to remove the obstacles to its flourishing. In these cases religion is neither an independent entity nor a political power, instead it is the recipient of social forces, the victim of social engineering, the passive object upon which the political works either for good or ill. Can we ask what is “civil religion” or “covenant religion” in an age of belief? The case of the Beechers suggests that the real question is what types of belief are prevalent—are they beliefs that encourage religions either to co-opt the political or to be co-opted by it, are they beliefs that demand a separation of the two, are they beliefs that affirm either the effect of the political on religion or of religion on the political? Rowland Sherrill has remarked that the ultimate goal for students of American religion is “toward an apprehension of and respect for the irreducibly various cultural forms and shapes of American religious sensibilities.”<sup>47</sup> This investigation has taken that goal as its purpose.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

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- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 45.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 59, 171-188, 218-233.
- <sup>5</sup> See Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- <sup>6</sup> Cited in Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 173.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 177.
- <sup>8</sup> W. Lloyd Warner, "An American Sacred Ceremony," in *American Civil Religion*, eds Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 89-111.
- <sup>9</sup> Michael Angrosino, "Civil Religion Redux," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 259; see the entire article, 239-67.
- <sup>10</sup> Sidney Mead, "The Nation With the Soul of a Church," in *American Civil Religion*, eds. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 60-63; see the entire essay, 45-75.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 262.
- <sup>12</sup> Cushing Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 250-252.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xi.
- <sup>14</sup> See Michael Angrosino, "Civil Religion Redux,"; Nicholas J. Demerath, *Crossing the Gods: Worldly Religions and Worldly Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1001, especially chapters seven and 8; Martin Marty, "Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion," in *American Civil Religion*, eds. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 139-57; John F. Wilson, *Religion and the American Nation: Historiography and History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003); Robert Wuthnow, "Divided We Fall: America's Two Civil Religions," *Christian Century* 115:395-399 (1988).
- <sup>15</sup> Will Herberg, "America's Civil Religion: What it is and Whence it Come," in *American Civil Religion*, Richey and Jones, 76-88.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 87.
- <sup>17</sup> Hasia Diner, "From Covenant to Constitution: The Americanization of Judaism," in *Transforming Faith: The Sacred and Secular in Modern American History*, eds M. L. Bradbury and James B. Gilbert (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1989), 11-24.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 20.
- <sup>19</sup> See Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Civil Society: The Constitutional Matrix of Modern Democracy*. The Covenant Tradition in Politics Volume IV (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998).
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 312.
- <sup>21</sup> Alan Mittleman, "Pluralism: Identity, Civility, and the Common Good," *Modern Judaism* 21, no. 2, 125-45 (2001).
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 129.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 142.
- <sup>24</sup> Nancy L. Rosenblum, "Introduction: Pluralism, Integralism, and Political Theories of Religious Accommodation," in *Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith: Religious Accommodation in Pluralist Democracies*. Ed Nancy L. Rosenblum (Princeton: Princeton

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University Press, 2000), 15, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "Is Judaism Compatible with American Civil Religion?: The Problem of Christmas and the 'National Faith,'" in *Religion and the Life of the Nation: American Recoveries*, ed Rowland A. Sherrill (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> John Murray Cuddihy, "The Elephant and the Angels; or, the Incivil Irritatingness of Jewish Theodicy," in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, eds Robert N. Bellah and Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 23-37; note Jonathan Sarna's contribution to that volume, "Jewish-Christian Hostility in the United States: Perceptions From a Jewish Point of View," 5-22.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Robert B. Coote and Mary P. Coote. *Power, Politics, and the Making of the Bible: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 162.

<sup>32</sup> Theodore E. Mullen, *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic Historian and the Creation of Israelite National Identity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 281.

<sup>33</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 176.

<sup>34</sup> See the slightly different treatment I give these two versions in my *A New Jewish Ethics* (New York, Edwin Mellen, 1983), 11-15.

<sup>35</sup> Percy S. F. Van Keulen, *Manasseh Through the Eyes of the Deuteronomists: The Manasseh Account (2 Kings 32:1-18) and the Final Chapters of the Deuteronomistic History* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> See Mullen, *Narrative History*.

<sup>37</sup> Judson Rayford Shaver, *Torah and the Chronicler's History Work: An Inquiry into the Chronicler's References to Laws, Festivals, and Cultic Institutions in Relationship to Pentateuchal Legislation* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989), 80-82.

<sup>38</sup> See Jacob M. Myers, *II Chronicles Anchor Bible 13* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1965), 211.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Chronicler in His Age* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); Jacob M. Myers, *The World of the Restoration* (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

<sup>40</sup> Demerath, *Cross the Gods*, 236.

<sup>41</sup> William Scott Green, "Introduction: Religion and Politics—A Volatile Mix," in *God's Rule: The Politics of World Religions*. Ed., Jacob Neusner (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>42</sup> See Samuel Agnew Schreiner, Jr. *The Passionate Beechers: A Family Saga of Sanctity and Scandal That Changed America* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2003) and Stephen H. Snyder, *Lyman Beecher and His Children: The Transformation of a Religious Tradition* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> Snyder, *Lyman Beecher*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-97.

<sup>45</sup> See the excellent recent study by Barbara A. White, *The Beecher Sisters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).



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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 52-55.

<sup>47</sup> Rowland A. Sherrill “Recovering American Religious Sensibility: An Introduction,” in *Religion and the Life of the Nation: American Recoveries* ed Rowland A. Sherrill (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 19.